An innovative data collection method for engaging in groupwork with migrant children for research in Delhi

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Abstract: In India, the data point to a considerable number of children running away from their parental homes and migrating to urban areas in search of opportunities. Many end up in cities like Delhi where they are exposed to a number of risks. While most of these children reach cities with dreams of making it big, the reality of living on the street is fraught with a number of challenges. Transient and often moving in groups, meeting children alone for a chat is nearly impossible and even when one manages to have an individual meeting, curiosity compels others to join in. Against this backdrop, the lived experiences of migrant children in Delhi were studied using a group method. As children feel more comfortable discussing their problems in groups than when alone with the researcher, participatory techniques such as drawings, storytelling and the like could be employed. Ethical issues about this method, particularly concerning informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality are addressed. In closing, the paper provides a careful consideration of some challenges of employing groupwork as a research method with migrant children in an urban setting.

Keywords: India; Delhi; children; migration; group work; groupwork; participatory methods

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Introduction

Research concerning children and families has a long tradition in the short history of social science research (Hill, 1997, p. 171). In earlier work, children were never directly involved in the research process (Parker, 1966; Trasler, 1960). Since children are a highly differentiated group, methods must be flexible, as approaches that can be helpful for one group of children might not be good for a group of teenagers.

Talking to people in groups for research purposes has been practised mainly in market research though more recently such 'focus group discussions' have been applied to social science research to considerable effect (Morgan, 1993; Greenbaum, 1987; Kitzinger, 1995). Groups have usually been used with children and teenagers living in residential homes or receiving some kind of adult supervision (Hill, 1997, p. 172). Focus groups are group discussions to explore a specific set of issues such as people's views and experiences (Kitzinger, 1995, p.103). In their widest sense, group discussions have remained popular as a method of data collection throughout the 1970s and 80s within particular disciplines (Kitzinger, 1995, p.104). Even when groupwork is explicitly included as part of the research it is often simply employed as a convenient way to illustrate a theory generated by other methods, or as a cost-effective technique for interviewing several people at once (Kitzinger, 1995, pp. 104–105).

In developing countries, such as India, family and environmental calamities are common reasons for children to live apart from their parents and away from home (Cashmore, 2020, p. 2). Thus, this paper will highlight one particular group of children, those who have migrated away from their home for varied social (violence and neglect) and economic (poverty) reasons. This paper examines how groupwork proved to be highly successful in gaining buy-in and thus gathering information with migrant children.

Background

The origins of the focus group are typically traced to Bogardus (1926) (see this attribution in Hogan & Greene, 2005, p. 2) who advocated the use of group interviews for their ability to stimulate people to present points

that might be neglected in individual interviews. As they were cheaper and quicker to conduct than individual interviews, much of the historical development of the focus group format took place in applied settings and particularly market research (Hogan & Greene, 2005, p. 3).

However, most of the sociological and psychological principles present today exist due to Merton and Kendall's understanding which described present group method as 'focussed interviews' which aid in understanding and interpreting results of quantitative data (Hogan & Greene, 2005, pp. 3–4; Merton & Kendall, 1953). By the mid-1980s, social scientists were taking an interest in this kind of method which they believed had the potential to contribute to their discipline as a qualitative research method.

A considerable rise in the number of publications in which focus groups were used with children and teenagers was observed between 1995 and 2005 (Agar et al, 2005; Hogan & Greene, 2005, p.3). Many researchers came to understand that children's perspectives may be different and more sophisticated than adults' accounts thereof, and therefore should be elicited directly from children (Balen et al, 2006; Gibson, 2012, p. 198). Many authors (e.g., Morgan, 1997; Vaughn et al, 1996) stress this value.

Although focus groups have been used commonly to gather information on children's views, they are also useful when children's experiences are of interest to researchers. For instance, Garley et al, (1997) and Hogan and Greene (2005, p.4) used focus groups to gather information about children and adolescents experience of living with a mentally ill parent. The findings of all the studies suggested that focus groups were an effective way of gathering data from children (Agar et al, 2005, p. 3).

Against this backdrop, this paper will capture and focus on understanding the migration journeys and lived experiences of children in urban areas using a group method. It is also important to note here that for this paper, the term 'researcher' and 'researchers' are used wherein the former term refers to the first author while the latter refers to both. Furthermore, as part of the study, groupwork was conducted with 17 migrant children who used Delhi streets as their living space and who are now looked after in a residential home run by the Salaam Baalak Trust (SBT).

Groupwork with migrant children: advantages and disadvantages

One group method is a discussion involving a small number of participants, led by a moderator, which seeks to gain an insight into the participants' experiences, attitudes and perceptions (Greene & Hogan, 2005, pp. 237–238). Such groupwork, allows children to express their views by creating a safe peer environment and replicating a format which children are familiar with (Hogan & Greene, 2005, pp. 4–6).

Children who choose to migrate are confronted with varied challenges and difficulties both during and after migration journeys. They also often leave due to experiences of violence. Therefore, including migrant (or rather runaway) children in a research study becomes very difficult. Thus, after looking at past research with children, the researcher concluded that groupwork was the best option for two reasons. Firstly, it offers flexibility with children who move frequently; and secondly, this approach encourages children who are shy to use other communication methods they feel comfortable with (e.g. drawing, role- playing). Groupwork can motivate children to voice their experiences or opinions when they hear other participants do so, either because of difference or more frequently commonality.

Thus, as a method, group discussions help to generate solidarity (Stewart et al, 2007). After making this decision, the researcher moved forward and started conducting groupwork with migrant children. The study was conducted at a residential home for children between the ages of 10-18 years, both boys and girls, who have spent most of their childhood in the streets. Furthermore, to bring more clarity and fun, participatory techniques were used as prompts in groups.

Participatory techniques were utilised because research (e.g. Hill, 1997; Hobbs, 2012) suggests such methods (i.e., drawing, mapping community) in a group generate rich data helpful in guiding further enquiries about the children's past. Thus, the process of incorporating participatory techniques in groupwork started by asking children basic questions: *'What is your name?'*, *'Who do you miss?'* and *'Who in your home did you love?'* The following group discussion was moderated by the researcher;

Sita (age 10): I miss my brother and his naughtiness but my father did not like this and beat him.

Goldie (age 14): Quiet… feeling uncomfortable and shy!

Savneet (age 13): I love my sister and miss her dearly as she is not here with me. I love our gossip sessions but my parents are fonder of her than me.

Arun (age 11): I miss sitting outside in the open and looking at the sky. I enjoyed the freedom.

Nish (age 15): I want to go to my brother but not home as I don't feel good there. Goldie: I miss my husband but due to my in laws, we are not together. They disowned me.

As is the case with Goldie, it is clear that groupwork encouraged generally shy children to speak without hesitation about their past in front of others (for similar findings see Hill, 1997). This qualitative research method made all the children feel that each of their views are respected and heard (unlike in one-on-one interviews) where children can feel left out if they are not personally interviewed; therefore, it is regarded as the best method for involving and studying children (Aldridge, 2014).

Additionally, using participatory techniques in groupwork allowed the researcher to broadly stimulate discussions and capture the different experiences of children (i.e. risks and comforts/discomforts sensed and felt at home as well as during their migration journeys). Incorporating groupwork in this way helped to understand the experiences of both genders without disturbing the power dynamics which might exist (see Greene and Hill's, (2005) study on children's views on research and consultation methods which found 'peers dilute the power dynamics compared with an individual child faced with an adult who is often a stranger').

In addition, the researchers followed many researchers in conducting same-sex group discussions, due to the fact that this helps to produce different but complementary insights (e.g. Kitzinger, 1995). The influence of a group's gender composition on responses has been frequently studied by social scientists (Tolbert et al, 1999). Additionally, researchers (i.e. Hill, 1997, p. 179; Stewart & Shamdasani, 2007, pp. 2–4) have consistently found differences in the interaction styles of men and women associated with the gender composition of the group, such as men having a greater tendency to address individual members and speak about themselves more often in mixed-gender groups than in same-sex groups. Since group discussions allow this flexibility and

increased responsiveness to a group's particular needs, the researcher was able to gather richer information on the gendered experiences of migration

Following studies of group discussions with children (Stewart et al, 2007, p.8), the researcher spent more time early in the group discussion seeking common experiences among group members before moving on to more controversial topics (as observed in the example above). Conducting the study in this way, however, generated its own complications (see section 4 for details).

These difficulties made it clear that groupwork cannot be appropriately applied in every context. As Basch (1987) and Heary and Hennessy (2002, p. 47) argue, one of the major limitations of this method is that it is not useful for testing hypotheses in a traditional experimental design. This view contrasts with that of early researchers (for example, Merton & Kendall (1953) but is consistent with current theory and practice guiding the uses of focus groups). Other researchers (Lewis, 1992; Stewart & Shamdasani, 2007, pp. 5–6) suggest groups can be intimidating, and that the presence of others may cause children to obscure or lie about their complicated experiences.

Intimidation can be explored through the example of Gaurav (age 14) and Ajay (age 13) who said different things when in the presence of others. For instance, in a boys' discussion where the topic turned to drug use:

When alone with the researcher, Gaurav (age 14) spoke of consuming different hard drugs in the streets. However, his views changed in the presence of Ajay (age 13) and others (age 10, 15, and 16). During this discussion, he shared 'I have used only soft drugs'.

Like Gaurav, many children in the group consumed drugs while in the streets. Children could feel uneasy openly talking about their use of drugs or engagement in harmful activities (Lewis, 1992). Other difficulties can include the awkwardness due to people sharing personal information if the group members do not know each other. However, since most of the children, who took part in the study knew each other or have become close to one another after spending time in homes, few such situations arose in the study.

Another disadvantage is groupwork's age limited usefulness among

children. Age and its effects on the frequency and complexity of group interaction have been examined by a number of childhood scholars, leading one reviewer to conclude that children as young as 8 are able to meaningfully participate in group sessions, if they involve participatory play (Stewart et al, 2007, p. 3). However, this aspect depended on other factors such as the dynamics, nature and other relations of the group (Stewart et al, 2007, p. 4). Selected findings of studies on age suggests the number of social contacts increases with age (Basch, 1987; Morgan, 1997; Stewart & Shamdasani, 2007, p. 3). Likewise, an individual's ability to empathize, enact leadership behaviours and carry connotation of status also increases with age especially in very diverse groups and in some cultures (Dymond et al, 1952, pp. 202–206).

However, proneness to simultaneous talking and interruptions along with risky behaviours decreases with age (Stewart et al, 2007, p. 3). For this reason, in groupwork, children should typically be no more than two years apart in age or level of development to avoid the overpowered ideas and the younger participants being overwhelmed (Gibson, 2012). To manage this, the researcher conducted discussions in age stratified groups, but it did not prove very useful as it seemed to create more pressure in bringing children in together at the same time and place. Therefore, to address this, the researcher decided to discontinue age stratified groups and included only gender when conducting group discussions.

Lastly, it is always possible that an individual's expressed opinion may be influenced by a desire to fit in with other group members. This makes it clear that groupwork is not suitable in all aspects and has certain boundaries. However, to address these and many other concerns, adjustments must be considered and should be made as appropriate after reflecting on the nature and context of the study. This means that although groupwork has proved to be powerful and is useful in childhood research, it can also face certain challenges.

In spite of this, the decision of whether to conduct or abandon groupwork in favour of other methods should only be made after considering different factors (age and gender) as was done in this study. Overall, for the researchers, after making required considerations, group work proved to be more helpful and economical in this study in comparison to other research methods. Therefore, we encourage others who wish to conduct groupwork to carefully consider their study's

objectives and make adjustments as necessary (Basch, 1987; Morgan, 1997; Stewart & Shamdasani, 2007, p. 4).

Purpose and methodology

It is well-known that the focus on child migration is relatively new in comparison to other children's issues (Whitehead, Hashim & Iversen, 2007). Child migrants have frequently been cast as passive victims and as lacking agency, subject to their parents/family's decisions for their best interests and at worst to adult exploitation. Recent research (e.g., Gibson, 2012), however, challenges this notion by revealing that there is more complexity and diversity in children's experiences.

In light of the range of migrant children's lived experiences, it was vital that the method be adaptable and appropriate to encourage them to speak. In addition, as these children encounter a multiplicity of risks and challenges along the way, sometimes finding comfort, developing friendships and their own unique ways of coping with everyday life in Delhi, it was felt group discussions was best suited for such sensitive research in comparison to other methods.

For this research, children from an SBT run residential home in Delhi helped to recruit other children. We chose this particular organisation for two reasons: firstly, it was very welcoming in comparison to other NGOs who we approached for the study. Secondly SBT has a long-standing relationship with the University of Edinburgh and has hosted a series of students internships over the years; all these making the centre an appropriate place to locate the study.

The children were of different ages, genders and came from different places of India. In order to better capture their lived experiences, the children were divided into separate groups by gender. Both the boys and girls range from 10 to 18 years in age. As explained in Table 1 below, a total of 17 children (10 in the older group and 7 in the new-to-the-centre group) as well as those who were staying in homes went through two phases with four group sessions.

Table 1
Thematic and temporal organisation of groupwork.

Characteristics	Age Group	Number of participants	Examples of Activities ()
First Phase			
School going & older children of the centre (boys and girls)	10-18 years	10	Community Mapping
New* children (boys and girls)	10-18 years	7	Community Mapping
Second Phase			
School going & older children of the centre (boys and girls)	10-18 years	10	Thought Showers and Tree
New* children (boys and girls)	10-18 years	7	Thought Showers and Tree

*Defined as having arrived within the past six months

From the table, children with different characteristics (age and gender) performed the same participatory activities in a group setting. Conducting the groupwork in two phases helped the researchers in many ways:-

The first phase acted as an orientation process, allowing the researcher to acquaint herself with the children by asking introductory/ get-to-know questions. This process also helped to familiarise children with the method, as well as gathering information about the children's experiences before migration.

- Once children were familiar with groupwork and its expectations, the second phase enabled the researcher to ask in-depth questions about the children's experiences of migration and their lived realities in the streets. Conducting groupwork in this manner helped the children to converse freely and feel comfortable.
- Next, sometimes children were shifted from one home to another and others dropped out early or joined late. Allowing some variation on who participated across the two phases allowed for a measure of flexibility while also ensuring some continuity.
- In addition, with considerable care, new children were invited to the group discussions. Reasons guiding our thinking for such a step included: firstly, the newly arrived children were busy completing

paperwork with the organisation's staff and secondly, there were times when they did not wish to involve themselves in any activity, but desired only to sit in one corner and observe the home and other children around them.

Furthermore, Hogan and Greene (2005, p. 5) and Levine and Zimmerman (1996) suggest that a child participating in a group should not feel he or she is being questioned by an adult. Rather, he or she is sharing experiences with a group of peers. Unlike an interview, the adult's role in group discussions should be to facilitate and encourage the discussion rather than formally lead it. Thus, several children's knowledge and views can be tapped at once as participants are able to bring forward issues in relation to the topic that matter to them personally (Bryman, 2004). In addition, the personal qualities of the participating children such as their levels of shyness or confidence, their age and whether or not they know the other participants must be accounted for (Greene & Hogan, 2005, p. 6).

As a group moderator, it was important to keep the conversation free flowing and to ensure that children's opinions were respected. Therefore, the researcher maintained eye contact, reiterated the child's comment and frequently added a positive reflection (for example, 'that's a really good idea') which put the child participants at ease thereby generating more reliable data (Gallagher et al, 2009). Verbal prompts such as, '*Would you like to tell me about the community?' or, 'Why did you draw this?'* were often used to allow children to speak. When used alongside participatory techniques, such queries were intended to spark conversations around their migration experiences of both journeys, and communities (Bryman, 2008; Gallagher et al, 2009; Tisdall, 2009).

Thus, the researcher's modifications to the structure of group discussions helped the participants to share information in front of other group members about their migration experiences. Allowing children to opt out at any given point was practised so that children did not feel pressured and saw that their wellbeing was being considered. In research (e.g., Hill, 1997) such freedom was regarded as a good practice. Furthermore, frequent conversations with the key informants at SBT provided background information about the children and allowed the researchers to recognise their condition and identify sensitive areas that could be avoided during discussions (Gill, 1983).

Additionally, the researcher did not force children to speak about harsh experiences but urged them gradually and comfortably to share at their own pace. Once the initial orientation process of knowing children was done and children felt comfortable around others and trusted the researchers, we proceeded with the proposed group discussions. This was typically 15-20 days after first meeting the children. However, coming to this stage was not easy and had to pass through ethical dilemmas that are dealt with below.

Ethical considerations

After seeking and receiving ethics approval from the University of Edinburgh's School of Social and Political Science, the researcher moved on to seeking permission from SBT to propose research by including them and their children in the study. In childhood studies, there is a consensus that children are disadvantaged by adults in social, cultural and legal structures (James, 1998; Morrow, 2008; Morrow & Richards, 1996).

Whilst research with children presents universal ethical challenges, the methods employed can themselves introduce specific ethical issues which may only become apparent during the research process (Morrow & Richards, 1996). For example, as traditional interview and questionnaire methods raise concerns about the power relations between adult researchers and children, group methods similarly can involve varied concerns that require ethical considerations (Gallagher et al, 2009, p. 16; Hogan & Greene, 2005, p. 4).

Therefore, as with other methods, it is vital to ensure that the researcher and the research do no harm to the participants and that the research outcomes are shared as far as practicable. Additionally, investigators must become 'street researchers' allowing themselves to be guided by the children in the ways of the street and for cultural interpretation especially in the context of child migration as Bemark (1996, pp. 147–156) and O'Kane (2008) suggest

A researcher and moderator of group discussion involving children's first task should be to obtain informed consent from participants, a fact now widely recognised in children's research (Hobbs, 2012). However, what constitutes informed consent from children can be difficult to

establish. Recognising that these children were not able to read and write properly and were not at home, alternatives were established. For instance, for this study, migrant children gave oral consent and thumb impressions (both culturally accepted in India). Furthermore, key workers at SBT gave the proof of consent for these participants and acted as their guardians, in line with Indian law.

To better acknowledge their situation, more time and effort were invested in verbal explanations of the study's purpose. Workers at SBT were familiarised with the translated consent and information forms and enrolled in communicating the aims to potential participants. Each child was also given a chance to ask questions. Before giving their consent, the children were questioned in a playful way to verify that the information had been absorbed (following Robson & McCartan, 2016).

Next, this study also made every effort to protect the participant's rights, wellbeing and safety (Gallagher et al, 2009; Morrow, 2008; Morrow & Richards, 1996). Therefore, in order to allow the children to express their ongoing consent, the researcher hung a chart in the room to gather feedback on a continuous basis. This was helpful as well as exciting for children who used three colours of sticky notes to convey their feelings on the chart, with orange representing dislike, yellow showing approval and green for confusion. In order to maintain the children's enjoyment and excitements, the researcher would explain this procedure at the start of every session. It enabled her to understand whether the children were still interested in and enjoying the discussions. Additionally, all the participants were anonymised using pseudonyms.

Thus, developing a conducive environment for children with fun activities helped to build trust and further a relationship. Since, children disclosed sensitive information (i.e. around family relationships, separation or migration) the researcher responded in two ways. First, she sensitively gave comfort through attentively listening to the affected children, aiming to reduce any sense of intrusion, distress or discomfort they had. Secondly, the researcher used the debriefing sessions where children could discuss their reactions to the sessions in detail helping to ease them out of the intense experience (Davis & Lopez-Carr, 2010; Punch, 2002; Smith, 1995).

Smith (1995) offers a number of other suggestions for running focus groups on sensitive topics such as monitoring participants' stress levels from time to time and being prepared to intervene when necessary.

Though Smith's (1995) suggestions relate to running focus groups with adult participants, the researcher's experience suggests they are equally applicable to research with children. Furthermore, the researchers shared contact details of local police, hospitals and social workers so that the children were aware and could use them whenever they were in danger (Gallagher et al, 2009, pp. 12 & 44). In terms of her own safety and risk, if the researcher felt uneasy during fieldwork, she spoke to her supervisors to consult about the situation while maintaining participant confidentiality (Hill, 1997).

To protect the confidentiality of migrant children within the group, certain ground rules were established such as not discussing the study with anyone outside the group. In addition, reflexivity was an important aspect of the study. This involved various efforts to identify the researcher's impact and either control it or document and account for it (Mathison, 2018, p. 369). It required self-awareness in relation to matters such as one's own childhood experiences, personal biases and how these impact the study (Davis, 1951; Davis, 2007; Morrow, 2008; Punch, 2012). Thus, to be conscious of her surroundings, the researcher kept a reflective diary where she stored her feelings and thoughts. By making these all explicit, she hoped to be able to recognise any potential influence on her analysis of the data and uncover any underlying assumptions. Hence, group discussions have repeatedly proved to be a versatile method of gathering qualitative data with children (Greene & Hogan, 2005, p. 16).

Conclusion

As group methods are widely accepted in research with children, it is likely to receive greater attention from researchers and to be used in an even wider range of projects. In this paper, we presented the participatory strategies of groupwork with migrant children who reside in a home run by an NGO. These strategies were deployed while always keeping in mind the particular sensitivities of migrant children. Carefully considering and then implementing each adjustment made, group discussions proved to be more versatile in comparison to other methods (Greene & Hogan, 2005, p. 16).

Hence, as a skilful moderator one must consider the dynamic of the

group discussion to help children to give open and honest answers in a supportive environment (Greene & Hogan, 2005, p. 16). Indeed, the presence of a supportive peer group may further make the focus group more appropriate than the individual interview for use with children as it helped to capture the experiences of children. Similarly, it allowed the researcher to capture both positive and negative aspects of the children's lives.

As observed above, flexibility and creativity are essential when running focus groups to maintain children's concentration and interest throughout the discussion (Greene & Hogan, 2005, p. 14). Therefore, it is important that a variety of exercises and activities are used by researchers to stimulate discussion among children who are likely to feel most comfortable when in a familiar environment. Consideration should also be given to the seating arrangements prior to the actual discussion (Hogan & Greene, 2005, pp. 9–10; Morgan, 1997). As with other aspects of group composition, it is recognised that 'homogeneity is best'. Similarly, the possibility that group discussion can give rise to strong emotional reactions is another important issue for consideration when running focus groups.

While Smith's (1995) suggestions for running focus groups on sensitive topics are useful, our experience suggests no 'fool-proof' suggestions exist. To benefit both the children and researchers involved, a sensitivity to local context and a willingness to make adjustments are needed. Flexibility and a focus on social dynamics can make such research exciting, thought provoking, and highly rewarding for all involved.

Researcher's experiences

We as researchers had a very pleasant experience throughout the study. Modifications to the research methods were made during the study period in order to ensure that data collected matched the study's purpose. Furthermore, there were times during fieldwork when those children enrolled in school were busy with their exams and studies. However, our personal inclination to work with street children and observe how they experience their lives, kept us engaged and motivated to adjust the methods as needed. It began with some difficulties in terms

of developing a bond and trust with both staff and children but in the end, rapport was built. We are still in touch with the staff in both a personal and professional capacity. We are diligently following the work of SBT and its staff, for whom we wish only the best.

Notes

Presently, the lead author is working on a PhD thesis entitled, 'Risk, refuge and resilience: A qualitative study of child migrants in the urban city of Delhi, India' from which the data used in this paper have been extracted.

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