Engaging in group research with migrant children: Innovative data collection method for migrant children in Delhi

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Abstract: In India, data point to a considerable number of children leaving or running away from their parental homes in rural villages and migrating to urban areas. Many end up in cities like Delhi where they are exposed to a number of risks and vulnerabilities. While many of these children reach cities with dreams of 'making it big', the reality of living on the street is fraught with challenges and danger. Against this backdrop, this study looked at the lived experiences of migrant children in Delhi using a group method- an innovative approach that is increasingly being used in research with children. Innovative techniques such as drawing, storytelling, and the like were used to initiate discussions with and among migrant children to help explore their pre- and post-migration experiences. At the end of the group sessions, many children reported that they felt heard and listened to, that their voice mattered, and that they had developed a sense of self-worth. It also produced rich data that yielded deep insights into the lived experiences of migrant children living on the streets of Delhi. Hence, it can be concluded that groupwork is an effective way of gathering data from migrant children. However, there are some of the issues and challenges with using groupwork as a research method with migrant children in an urban setting, which need to be considered in each context.

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

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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). However, in earlier work, children were never directly involved in the research process (Parker, 1966; Trasler, 1960). As children are a highly differentiated group, whatever method is used must be flexible, as approaches that can be helpful for one group of children might not be good for another (such as younger children versus teenagers).

Focus group discussions are a research method used to explore a specific set of issues, such as people's views and experiences (Kitzinger, 1995, p. 103). Group discussions have been a popular method of data collection in particular disciplines since the 1970s and 1980s (Kitzinger, 1995, p. 104). Talking to people in groups for research purposes is practised widely in market research, although more recently focus group discussions have been used in social science research to considerable effect (Morgan, 1997; Greenbaum, 1987; Kitzinger, 1995). Groups have also been used with children and teenagers living in residential homes or receiving some kind of adult supervision (Hill, 1997, p. 172).

However, 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 looks at one particular group of children, those who have migrated away from their home for varied social (violence and neglect) and economic (poverty) reasons. The research examines how groupwork proved to be highly successful in gaining buy-in and thus gathering information from migrant children.

Background

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

that might be neglected in individual interviews. As group interviews are cheaper and quicker to conduct than individual interviews, much of the historical development of the focus group format took place in applied settings, 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 the group method as 'focussed interviews' that aid in understanding and interpreting the 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, Schumm, & Sinagub; 1996) stress the value of focus group in this regard.

Although focus groups are commonly used 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 from children and adolescents about their experiences of living with a mentally ill parent. The findings of all the studies suggest that focus groups are an effective way of gathering data from children (Agar et al., 2005, p. 3).

Against this backdrop, this paper aims to understand the migration journeys and lived experiences of children in urban areas using a group method. As part of this study, groupwork was conducted with 17 migrant children who formerly used the streets of Delhi as their living space and who are now looked after in a residential home run by the Salaam Baalak Trust (SBT). In this paper, the term 'researcher' and 'researchers' are used, wherein the former term refers to the first author while the latter refers to both. We have used pseudonyms for all study participants to ensure their anonymity.

Groupwork with migrant children: Advantages and disadvantages

Children who choose to migrate are confronted with various challenges and dangers, both during and after their migration journeys. In addition, they often leave their homes due to experiences of violence or neglect. Therefore, including migrant (or rather, runaway) children in a research study can be difficult because they prefer to stay under the radar. Groupwork – which usually involves a discussion with a small number of participants led by a moderator who seeks to gain insight into the participants' experiences, attitudes and perceptions (Greene & Hogan, 2005, pp. 237–238) – allows children to express their views by creating a safe peer environment and replicating a format that children are familiar with (Hogan & Greene, 2005, pp. 4–6).

Thus, after looking at past research with children, the researchers concluded that groupwork was the best option for gathering data from children in this study 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 that they feel comfortable with (for example, drawing, storytelling, and role- playing). Groupwork can also motivate children to share their experiences and opinions, particularly when they hear other participants do so either because of differences or commonalities.

Group discussions can also generate solidarity among the participants. A deeper understanding of the benefits of group discussions enabled the researcher in this study to initiate groupwork with migrant children (Stewart et al., 2007). The study was conducted at a residential home for children, among children of both genders, aged between 10-18 years, who had spent most of their childhood in the streets of Delhi. To bring more clarity and to make the discussions more fun, participatory techniques were used.

Research (e.g., Hill, 1997; Hobbs, 2012) suggests that participatory methods (drawing, community mapping) in a group can generate rich data that is helpful in guiding further enquiries about children's past experiences. The process of incorporating participatory techniques in the groupwork in this study started with asking children basic questions, such as: *'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 (age 14): I miss my husband but due to my in- laws, we are not together. They disowned me.

In the above example, the groupwork encouraged generally shy children, such as Goldie, to speak without hesitation about their past in front of others (for similar findings see Hill, 1997). This qualitative research method can make all of the children feel as if 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).

In addition, using participatory techniques in groupwork allows the researcher to broadly stimulate discussions and capture the different experiences of children (risks and comforts/discomforts sensed and felt at home, as well as during their migration journeys). Incorporating groupwork in this way helps to understand the experiences of both boys and girls without disturbing the power dynamics that might exist (see Greene & Hill, 2005, who found that 'peers dilute the power dynamics compared with an individual child faced with an adult who is often a stranger').

Reviewing studies by other researchers that involved same-sex group discussion and producing different but complementary insights (e.g., Kitzinger, 1995) helped the authors to feel more confident about the group composition. The influence of a group's gender composition on responses has been frequently studied by social scientists (Tolbert, Graham, & Andrew; 1999). Researchers (i.e., Hill, 1997, p. 179; Stewart & Shamdasani, 2007, pp. 2–4) have also consistently found differences in the interaction styles of males and females 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. As group discussions allow this flexibility and increase responsiveness to a group's particular

needs, the researcher in this study was able to gather richer information on the gendered experiences of migration among children living on the streets in Delhi.

Following studies of group discussions with children (Stewart & Shamdasani; 2007, p. 8), the researcher spent more time early in the group discussion seeking common experiences among group members, before moving on to more personal 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 (e.g., Merton & Kendall, 1953), but is consistent with current theory and practices guiding the use of focus groups. Other researchers (Lewis, 1992; Stewart & Shamdasani, 2007, pp. 5–6) suggest that 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 group discussion with boys, when the topic turned to drug use, the following was observed:

> *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 group discussion, he shared 'I have used only soft drugs'.*

Like Gaurav, many children in the group consumed drugs while in the streets. Children may feel uneasy talking openly about their use of drugs or engaging in harmful activities (Lewis, 1992). Other difficulties can include awkwardness with sharing personal information if the group members do not know each other. However, as most of the children who took part in the study knew each other or had become close to one another after spending time in the children's home, few such situations arose in this study.

Another limitation of groupwork is the age of the child. 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 eight are able to meaningfully participate in group sessions, if they involve participatory play (Stewart & Shamdasani; 2007, p. 3). However, this aspect depended on other factors such as the dynamics, nature and other relations of the group (Stewart & Shamdasani; 2007, p. 4). Selected findings of studies on age suggests that the number of social contacts increases with age (Basch, 1987; Morgan, 1997; Stewart & Shamdasani, 2007, p. 3). Likewise, an individual's ability to empathise, enact leadership behaviour, and carry connotations of status also increases with age especially in very diverse groups and in some cultures (Dymond, Hughes, & Raabe; 1952, pp. 202–206).

However, proneness to simultaneous talking and interruptions, along with risky behaviours, decreases with age (Stewart & Shamdasani; 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 overpowering of ideas and younger participants being overwhelmed (Gibson, 2012). To manage this, the researcher conducted discussions in age- stratified groups, but this did not prove useful, as it seemed to create more pressure by bringing children together at the same time and place. Therefore, to address this, the researcher decided to discontinue age- stratified groups and consider 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 always suitable and has certain limitations. However, to address such 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 is powerful and useful in research with children, researchers need to be aware of its limitations in order to minimise the effect of these.

In spite of this, the decision of whether to conduct or abandon groupwork in favour of other methods should be made only after careful consideration of the benefits and limitations of such methods (age and gender, time and resources and so on), as was done in this study. 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

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

In light of the range of migrant children's lived experiences, it was vital that the method used in this study was flexible and appropriate to encourage children to talk. In addition, as migrant 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, it was felt that group discussions were best suited for such sensitive research, in comparison in other methods.

For this research, children from the Salaam Baalak Trust helped to recruit other children. SBT was very welcoming of the study, in contrast to other non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Delhi. Moreover, SBT has a long- standing relationship with the University of Edinburgh and has hosted a series of student internships over the years; all of these factors made SBT an appropriate place to locate the study.

The children who participated in the study were of different ages and genders and came from different places in India. In order to better capture their lived experiences, the children were divided into separate groups according to gender. All of the children were aged from 10 to 18 years in age. As explained in Table 1, a total of 17 children (10 in the group of longer term residents and 7 in the new-to-the-centre group),

as well as those who were staying in homes, went through two phases of the study 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 including the following:

- The first phase acted as an orientation, allowing the researcher to acquaint herself with the children by asking introductory/ get-to-know you questions. This process also helped to familiarise the 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.
- Sometimes children were shifted from one home to another and others dropped out early or joined late. Allowing for some variation in 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. The reasons guiding 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 that 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 rather than lead the discussion. Thus, several children's knowledge and views can be tapped at once as participants are able to bring forward issues in relation to the topics that matter to them personally (Bryman, 2004). In addition, the personal qualities of the participating children such as their level 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, repeated the child's comments, and frequently added a positive reflection (for example, 'that's a really good idea') in order to put the child participants at ease, thereby generating more reliable data (Tisdall, Davis, & Gallagher., 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; Tisdall et al., 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. Children were also allowed to opt out at any given point, so that they did not feel pressured and saw that their wellbeing was being considered. In research (e.g., Hill, 1997), such freedom is 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).

In addition, the researcher did not force children to speak about difficult experiences, but encouraged them to share at their own pace, gradually and comfortably. Once the initial orientation process of getting to know the children was done and the children felt comfortable around others and trusted the researchers, the proposed group discussions were proceeded with. This was typically 15-20 days after first meeting the children. However, coming to this stage was not easy and ethical dilemmas had to be dealt with (as discussed in the next section).

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 seek permission from SBT to conduct the research by including them and their children in the study. While 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, similarly, group methods can involve concerns that require ethical consideration (Tisdall 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 with the participants as far as practicable. In addition, the investigators must become 'street researchers', allowing themselves to be guided by the children in the ways of the street and in terms of cultural interpretations especially in context of child migration, as Bemak (1996, pp. 147–156) and O'Kane (2008) suggest.

One of the first tasks of a moderator involving research with children is to obtain informed consent from the participants (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 this

study, migrant children gave oral consent and thumb impressions (both culturally accepted in India). Furthermore, key workers at SBT gave proof of consent for these participants and acted as their guardians, in line with Indian law (Indian Majority Act, Section 3 [1]).

To better acknowledge their situation, more time and effort were invested in verbal explanations about 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, children were questioned in a playful way to verify that the information had been absorbed and understood (following Robson & McCartan, 2016).

In addition, every effort was made to protect the participant's rights, wellbeing and safety (Tisdall et al., 2009; Morrow, 2008; Morrow & Richards, 1996). In order to maintain the children's enjoyment and excitements, the researcher would verbally ask children at start of every session about whether or not they liked participating in the groupwork. This enabled her to understand whether or not the children were still interested in and enjoying the discussions. In addition, in recording the results, all of the participants were anonymised using pseudonyms.

Thus, developing a conducive environment for children with fun activities helped to build trust and relationships. Several of the children disclosed sensitive information (around family relationships, separation, or migration) during the groupwork process. The researcher had to sensitively comfort them by listening attentively, aiming to reduce any sense of intrusion, distress, or discomfort in the process. The researcher also used debriefing sessions in which the children could discuss their reactions to the sessions in detail to help them ease 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 participant's stress levels from time to time and being prepared to intervene when necessary. Although 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 researcher shared the contact details of local police, hospitals and social workers so that the children were aware and could use them whenever they were in danger or felt the need (Tisdall et al., 2009, pp. 12 & 44). In terms of her own safety and risk, if the researcher felt uneasy during fieldwork, she kept in regular contact with her supervisors and SBT staff, 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 on the children and ensure that such effects were minimised or controlled, while at the same time documenting for the whole process (Mathison, 2018, p. 369). This required self-awareness in relation to matters such as one's own childhood experiences, personal biases and how these could impact on the study (Davis, 1951; Davis, 2007; Morrow, 2008; Punch, 2012). Thus, to be conscious of her surroundings, the researcher kept a reflective diary, in which she recorded 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.

Discussion and conclusion

As group methods are widely accepted in research with children, this method is likely to receive greater attention from researchers in the future and be used in an even wider range of research projects. In this paper, we presented the participatory strategies of groupwork with migrant children residing in a residential home in Delhi run by SBT. These strategies were deployed while always keeping in mind the particular sensitivities of migrant children. Carefully considering and then implementing each step, group discussions proved to be more versatile of gathering qualitative data with children, compared to other methods (Greene & Hogan, 2005, p. 16).

As a skilful moderator one must consider the dynamics 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 make focus groups more appropriate than individual interviews for use with children, as they can help to capture the experiences of children. Similarly, groups allow the researcher to capture both positives 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 helps to yield the best results. There is a possibility that group discussion can give rise to strong emotional reactions is another important issue for consideration when running groupwork.

While Smith's (1995) suggestions for running focus groups on sensitive topics are useful, our experience suggests no 'fool-proof' approach exists. 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.

At the end of the group sessions in this study, many children reported that they felt heard and listened to, that their voice mattered, and that they had developed a sense of self. It also produced rich data that yielded deep insights into the lived experiences of migrant children living on the streets of Delhi. Hence, it can be conclude that groupwork is an effective way of gathering data from migrant children.

Researchers' experiences

Research with migrant children was a very rewarding 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. However, our personal inclination to work with street children and observe how they experience their lives, kept us engaged and motivated us to adapt the methods as required. Although some difficulties were experienced in terms of developing bonds and trust with both staff and children, in the end, rapport was built. We are still in touch with the staff of SBT in

both a personal and professional capacity, whose work we are diligently following and, for whom we wish only the best.

Notes

1. Presently, the researcher is working on a PhD thesis entitled, 'Exploring the Lived Experiences of Migrant Street Children in Delhi: Understanding Gender and Space in Street Situations' from which the data used in this paper have been extracted.
2. The researchers report no conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this paper.
3. The researchers received no financial support for the research, authorship, or publication of this paper.
4. The data used in the paper are part of PhD fieldwork that has been approved by the University of Edinburgh's Ethics Committee.

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