

## What is focused ethnographic study?

### Historical perspective

In social sciences and public health, focus group discussions (FGD) have increasingly been used to elicit information among various groups of individuals regarding a particular topic. FGD are very effective to gather information from many participants at the same time. However, in FGD, participants are 'performing' in front of others and not sharing more personal information or perspectives that is often needed in research. Thus, according to experts, we could be missing important information and perspectives if the topic is sensitive or there are hidden power differentials within the group. Thus, FGD can be helpful in research on certain topics (such as product acceptability) but other methodologies are needed to elicit perspectives in such situations. The focused ethnographic study (FES) approach has been designed for such an endeavour.

### Emergence of the focused ethnographic study (FES)

FES emerged from work by the World Health Organizations (WHO) in the area of infectious diseases and was soon applied to the area of infant and young child feeding (IYCF). In that, FES was articulated to increase the effectiveness of interventions designed to improve complementary feeding practices, by investigating complex determinants including how cultural factors interact with other determinants.<sup>[1]</sup> The idea with the approach was to create diverse interview guides for different audiences, called modules, that could be used flexibly and that would break out topics into sub-categories. Ultimately, FES is designed to address a specific set of questions for which agencies, policy-makers, program planners, and/or project implementation teams need answers in order to make decisions about future actions with respect to a social, public health or nutrition intervention.<sup>[1]</sup>

### Description of FES methodology

FES consists of different research protocols developed for interviewing key informants and respondents. Each protocol is comprised of modules designed to obtain information on one or more of the components of the cultural-ecological model on which the FES is based.<sup>[2]</sup> FES involves several phases:

- **Preparatory phase:** before the study is initiated, a review of what is currently known from published articles and reports about the topic of concern is done.
- **Phase 1:** this phase generally involves undertaking *key informant* interviews along with community observations.
- **Phase 2:** data gathered from the *key informants* in the previous phase are used to inform data collection with this second round of interviews that take place with the *respondents*.

The collection of primary data using ethnographic methods allows obtaining information on conditions and behaviors in the population that are important for various purposes, including:

- (i) identifying potential interventions that are appropriate for a given population;
- (ii) planning interventions that are appropriate for local conditions;
- (iii) identifying potential bottlenecks that are likely to affect the success of an intervention;
- (iv) informing the designing and development of communication strategies and content (especially for behavioral change communication); and/or
- (v) deciding whether a proposed intervention is likely to be feasible or effective in a given environment.<sup>[2]</sup>

## Key features of the FES methodology

In focused ethnographic studies, the **focused** stands for efficiency, for working in the most efficient manner possible; and the **ethnography** refers to the use of multiple methods for collecting the data. In other words, the aim is to put together a package of modules for data collection that is **as minimalist as possible**. Then, those modules are used, not in a focus group, but in one-on-one interviews with the people who represent the ones that we seek to reach.

### Types of interviewees

FES involves carrying out interviews that fall in two categories:

- **Key informant:** this is someone who is knowledgeable about the community and the culture of the group in which the research is being carried out. Sometimes this is an older person with many years of experience in the community. At other time it may be a health worker or other impementer with relevant knowledge and understanding. Key informants report about their own personal experience and views, but ideally, they can also discuss more generally about the experience and views of other people in the community. The primary criterion for selecting key informants is that they have personal knowledge and experience in the area of specific concern to the project. In FES, the interviews with key informants are used to tailor the respondent protocol.<sup>[2]</sup>
- **Respondents:** refers to people from which data are gathered systematically on the same topic. They are the target group for which the insights generated by the study will be used.<sup>[2]</sup>

### Quality of the interviewing

- **Open-ended questions** are used and they do not have pre-determined responses such as in survey questions. This is essential to avoid biasing or prejudicing the information exchange so the interviewee can respond with a wide range of responses and is not limited to a pre-specified categories.
- Interviewers requires a particular skillset because **the way they interact** with the interviewee can influence the responses collected. This involves taking into account gender, sensibility and sensitivity. Probing is such a skill and it involves inviting the interviewee to open up on a topic.

### Sample of the study

Generally, a minimum of 8 qualitative interviews is done with the key informants at first. Then, it takes about 30 qualitative interviews and sometimes less to reach “saturation,” which means that new information does not arise or does not change the general picture markedly. When researchers have taken care to obtain the data from a range of different areas and people in the community, reaching saturation brings greater trustworthiness in the findings and a deeper understanding of the topic of interest.<sup>[2]</sup> It then allows to derive generalizations on the particular behavior under investigation in that particular context.

### Illustrative example of FES in Kenya and Uganda

Although, in recent years, FES has been used primarily in IYCF, it can be used to investigate and develop a more nuanced understanding of people's knowledge, beliefs, and behaviours in other areas.<sup>[2]</sup> The Implementation Science Initiative (ISI) in Kenya and Uganda involves using FES to investigate the barriers to antenatal (ANC) attendance and the use of iron and folic acid supplementation (IFAS), including early disclosure of pregnancy, and male engagement.

In Kenya and Uganda, the team will use FES to tailor the implementation of an enhanced package for IFAS in health services, by addressing barriers to ANC attendance. More precisely, the FES will be used to build a picture of the behaviours, practices and beliefs and environments of importance to pregnancy from the perspectives of households and health service providers. The key outcome is to be able to generate a descriptive model of context-specific perceptions of pregnancy, health services and interaction with other members of the community. This requires examining the household utilization system that involves the household of pregnant women or women of reproductive age.

The purpose of using FES is to understand factors that affect early disclosure of pregnancy and the subsequent initiation and use of ANC and IFAS, using methods that are efficient and generate trustworthy findings. It also will be used to understand perspectives on the potential role of men related to ANC attendance and use of IFAS.

In practice, much of the data will be obtained from key informants and only expanding data from respondents when key informant data alone is not adequate. In this study the information on early disclosure and initiation of ANC will be collected from key informants whereas data on the use and provision of IFAS as well as male support will be collected respondents.

**To date, there is no existing systematic set of FES modules to study IFAS in the context of ANC.** Thus, a first step that is needed is to develop a set of modules to study IFAS in the context of ANC. Developing a set of FES modules for understanding barriers to ANC attendance and the uptake of IFAS will be highly beneficial, not only for this research, but more broadly. This is an important insight that will be generated by the Implementation Science Initiative in Kenya and Uganda.

### References

1. Tumilowicz, A., L.M. Neufeld, and G.H. Pelto, *Using ethnography in implementation research to improve nutrition interventions in populations*. *Maternal & child nutrition*, 2015. **11**(S3): p. 55-72.
2. Pelto, G.H. and M. Armar-Klemesu, *Focused Ethnographic Study of Infant and Young Child Feeding 6–23 Months: Behaviors, Beliefs, Contexts and Environments*. GAIN: Geneva, 2014.