Focus Groups as an Instrument to Define Evaluation Criteria

The Case of Foster Care

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This article reports the results of a research project that aimed to identify the criteria upon which a foster care intervention may be considered as having been successful. The aim was to confirm the existence of shared evaluation criteria among the different groups involved in foster care and, moreover, to investigate possible differences in the meaning given to the foster care experience by the different stakeholders. The data collected from six focus groups was analysed in two ways: first, the criteria necessary to evaluate foster care were derived; second, a textual analysis was undertaken to investigate the associations and the frequency of use of some significant terms.

KEYWORDS: goal free evaluation; methodology; qualitative methods; stakeholders; text analysis

Introduction

Foster care in Italy is legally regulated by law no. 149 of 28 March 2001, which modified law no. 184/83 on adoption and the foster care of minors. The first five articles ratify the right of every child to live, grow up and be brought up in a family, usually his own. Should his family be temporarily unable to ensure the upbringing and the care-taking of the minor, the child can be granted to another family or a single person able to provide for the child's needs of support, upbringing, education and affective relations. If this is not possible, the minor's custody can be granted to a family community located possibly closest to the place where the child's biological family lives. In the case of consensual foster care, the social services intervene on the basis of consent given by the parents or by the guardian in charge of the child. If the parents' consent is not given, it is necessary to apply for judicial foster care, which is enforced by the Juvenile Court.

In the case of foster care, the law also indicates, together with the reasons why the care decision was made, the conditions with which parents and other relatives

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have to comply in order to maintain contact with the child and the estimated duration of the foster care (24 months maximum, unless the Court grants an extension). The duration is in proportion to the complexity of the interventions required for the recovery of the biological family.

Foster care is characterized by at least three features: (1) it is temporary; (2) the child remains in touch with his biological family; (3) the minor is expected to return to his biological family. Specifically regarding this last feature, the success of foster care, as underlined by the law 149/01, is connected to the possibility that the child returns to his own biological family; so the decisions regarding the length of the foster care experience, the interventions required in order for the origin family to recover its parental capabilities and the terms through which the return plan will be provided, will all have as the main target the attempt to guarantee the return of the minor back to the biological family. Foster care is particularly difficult to manage, both for the minor, the biological family and the foster family. An element that increases this difficulty is, without doubt, the double belonging of the minor. The child feels linked from an affective point of view to his own family, even if there have been repeated experiences of problematic relationships within it. However, he also feels linked to the foster family, although this family may well propose unfamiliar educational and cultural models (Cirillo, 1986). In some cases, e.g. when the biological family is perceived negatively, this may cause the minor to wish to be part of the new environment and in other cases, on the contrary, children may reject their new life context, because of demands and social expectations with which they are confronted. Therefore, the double exposure of the minor to the origin and fostering contexts constitutes the element characterizing foster care and, at the same time, a frequent cause of stress. In fact, the moment of greatest difficulty in the management of the minor in care seems to coincide with his periodic returns to his biological family.

Analysis of the elements that contribute to the success of foster care has been a topic of interest in many scientific studies. Several authors have analysed the quality of the relationship between the minor's family and the foster family, which is influenced by a great number of factors. Some of these are linked to the personal history of the child and of his biological family and some to the motivations of the receiving family and to its ability to face the burden of a minor with difficulties, through the reorganization of its own family dynamics, in order to favour the integration of the new member (Sbattella, 1998).

Other authors, assuming that every family is in constant evolution and that foster care may or may not take place depending on the family's phase of life and the dynamics active in every specific moment, focus their attention more on the necessity to assess the compatibility between the specific characteristics of the family and those of a specific foster child.

The inclusion of a new member within a family makes it necessary to modify the already achieved equilibria, to change rhythms and conditions of life, all elements that require important adjustments and the ability to adapt (Garelli, 2000). Consequently, in order for foster care to be successful, it requires considerable motivation leading to this step, as well as the capability to accept change. All this underlines the fact that matching a minor with a foster family is a very delicate

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stage in the foster care procedure, requiring careful consideration of the many factors that may ease or hinder the success of the intervention.

Once a minor and a foster family have been matched, a vital process is undertaken to prepare the actors (involving a meeting between the minor and the two families) and the actors undertake an 'accompany', guide and support function for the foster and origin families. The last stage consists of preparing the conclusion of the foster care experience and accompanying minors in the phase immediately following, in order to allow them to maintain links with the foster family.

So far, although important steps have been taken to highlight the conditions that promote or hinder a positive outcome of a foster care intervention, no evaluation criteria shared by the actors are available to assess the final outcome of foster care. Such a goal is particularly crucial if one considers that the law on foster care does not provide 'objective' evaluation criteria for fostering experiences. Therefore, the many actors involved in this process (psychologists, social workers, honorary judges, etc.) assess the outcome of the single experiences on the basis of subjective, and often inconsistent, criteria (Cassibba and Fiore, 2004); the lack of a common language makes it difficult to make comparisons between the actors and to identify shared strategies adaptable to every single case.

In order to take a first step towards constructing some shared evaluation criteria, we thought it useful to listen to the voices of the various social actors intervening in foster care. The aim was to gather these actors' reflections and hints about the criteria that should be used in the evaluation process of the results of foster care.

This research was inspired by *The Logic of Evaluation* by Michel Scriven (1980). Specifically, we intended to follow the first stage of the methodology proposed by Scriven, that is, to establish the merit criteria of evaluation, free from the explicit goals included in the programme/service to be evaluated (*goal free evaluation*) (Stame, 1998). A further choice has been to identify the evaluation criteria not based on a theoretical analysis or *benchmarking*, but starting from the problems and the experiences of the most important *stakeholders* intervening in the management of the foster care, thus following the perspective of *responsive* evaluation proposed by Robert Stake (1995).

This study is part of a wider research project, which aims to set up an 'observatory' on foster care in the city of Bari in Italy. The phase of the research described in this article involves the use of focus group methodology to identify the criteria – shared by the different social actors who have a role in foster care provision – upon which an intervention in foster care may be judged to have been successful.

Procedure and Methodology

During this research six focus groups were run by an expert moderator. The participants of the focus groups were selected on the basis of the different roles played in the fostering process: social workers in local social services, psychologists from local social services, honorary judges, foster families not linked to the child's biological family, foster families with a family tie to the biological family and experts in the planning and evaluation of family policies. We considered six focus

groups to be a sufficiently representative sample because the population was constituted of the stakeholders of the city of Bari: four groups were composed of all the psychologists, the social workers, the honorary judges and the experts in planning and evaluation who attend to foster care in the city of Bari; the two focus groups run with the foster families comprised 50 families out of an entire population of about 350 foster families living in the city of Bari.

The attempt to get the origin families involved was not completely successful (out of 25 contacted, only three were present on the day), so it was not possible to form a group with only those few parents available. For ethical and legal reasons, we did not form a focus group of foster children.

In order to achieve the aims of the research, focus group methodology was chosen since the phenomenon of foster care seems to fulfil some of the criteria, stated in the literature, defining the situation in which to utilize this technique (Corrao, 2000; Zammuner, 2003).

- The focus of the research is a new subject of which there is little knowledge (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990); although much has been written about the psychological assessment of the origin and foster families and about how to effectively match the child and the foster family, shared criteria to evaluate the outcome of the foster care are not available. In this case, therefore, discussion between the various actors involved in fostering may provide extensive information in a short time.
- A communication break has occurred among 'suppliers' and 'consumers' of a service (Krueger, 1994; Morgan and Krueger, 1993). In the case of fostering it is not rare to find that different criteria, almost always implicit, have been used by different actors to evaluate the outcome of the experience. The criteria of the origin families, the foster families and the social services do not always overlap.
- This research aims to investigate the variety of opinions of social actors with different characteristics concerning the subject of the study (Frey and Fontana, 1993; Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990). To facilitate communication among people and to collect different information, focus groups are usually internally homogeneous but different from each other. On the one hand, this facilitates the collection of information because the participants are at ease with similar people and, on the other hand, this allows for comparison between groups with different attributes. Since the professions and the objectives of the actors involved in the provision of foster care are different and numerous, it is of interest to understand how these different actors conceptualize and categorize foster care.
- The research needs to investigate topics that are sensitive and personal (Gobo, 1997). In a focus group it is possible to deal with sensitive and personal matters because interaction in small groups encourages conversation. The discussion, if it is well run by the moderator, pushes the participants to frankly express their opinions and sentiments, but also to understand their beliefs in a different way. The subject of foster care may involve the consideration of very

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> sensitive matters such as the educational responsibility of parents, the right of the state to remove a child from its biological family and the possible bias of the social and judicial actors towards economically and culturally deprived social classes.

The focus group technique seems particularly useful in two phases of the research: the identification of the evaluative criteria used by the different stakeholders and the possible construction of common criteria. With this technique, as opposed to brainstorming, the aim is not to stimulate the participants' creativity, but to make explicit their criteria of evaluation concerning a very particular subject. Moreover, in contrast to Delphi techniques, the participants of focus groups are not 'compelled' to share the group's opinions; rather the researcher observes if a common position emerges from the discussion, overcoming bias and extreme opinions (Patton, 2002).

The questions around which the six focus groups of the research were set up are:

1. the criteria upon which a fostering experience can be considered as concluded;
2. the results that should be achieved by the child;
3. the results that should be achieved by the foster family;
4. the results that should be achieved by the biological family.

The aim of each focus group was to get three shared answers for each question. Therefore the evaluators built a list of the common criteria, choosing those criteria that had been expressed by at least two groups.

The use of this methodology to construct a list of shared criteria was preferred to the possibility of organizing a group composed of the representatives of the different categories involved. The aim here was to avoid the possibility of 'power' and language disparities among the participants interfering with the free expression of each individual.

A considerable risk from this choice was that the various groups, with different cultural and linguistic competencies, could indicate similar criteria, but with different meanings. In order to reduce this risk, all the focus groups were led by the same expert moderator who had the task of encouraging the participants to make the meaning of their expressed criteria as explicit as possible so that there would be less ambiguity during the following phase of criteria analysis and integration.

The aims of this study were to verify the presence of shared evaluation criteria among the different groups involved and to investigate possible differences in the meaning given to the foster care experience by the different stakeholders. Recognizing these differences can assist those aiming to better understand the choices made by different groups with respect to evaluation criteria.

Analysis of Data and Results

The focus groups were recorded (audio-video) and then transcribed. The

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correspondence between the transcription and the recording was independently verified by two members of the research team.

The focus group transcripts were analysed in two ways: first, a common list of criteria for evaluating foster care was derived; and second, a textual analysis was undertaken using specialized software that allowed comparison of the transcripts from each group and investigation of the associations and the frequency of use of significant terms.

As has been highlighted, the focus group participants were asked to explicate judgement criteria with respect to the good management of foster care relating to four questions. A first step in this direction was the analysis of the transcript of each focus group to find the criteria and verify whether there were common choices across groups. We then integrated those criteria which, although presenting clear language differences, could easily be referred to as the same theoretical concepts.

The first question regarded the identification of criteria upon which a fostering intervention may be considered as concluded. Overall, there were 18 criteria identified by the different focus groups, fully complying with initial prescriptions (see Table 1).

Among these different criteria, four were stated at least twice by the six groups:

- the recovery of the biological family's capability to perform parental functions (six choices);
- the achievement on the child's side of an affective stability which allows him to face the difficulties involved on returning to his biological family (three choices);
- the expression of the child's will to return to his biological family (two choices);
- the existence of a good cooperative relationship between the biological and the foster family (two choices).

The second question concerns the results to be achieved by the child in order to judge the fostering experience as positive. This question presented the greatest difficulty in identifying convergences among the six groups. We believe this was because, in evaluating the results achieved by the children, the participants are more conditioned by affective factors, by professional roles and attitudes to discipline. There were 17 criteria indicated, with a relatively low number of convergences (see Table 2); only three were identified by at least two groups:

- a clearly perceivable improvement in the child's state of mind (three choices);
- the child exhibits the ability to distinguish between the role of the biological family and the role of the foster family (two choices);
- the child expresses behaviour and attitudes coherent with his age (two choices).

The third task of the focus groups consisted of identifying the criteria to evaluate the results to be achieved by the foster family. In this case, 17 criteria were expressed (one less than expected) (see Table 3), and five criteria were shared by at least two groups:

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Table 1.   Criteria upon which a Fostering Experience can be Considered as Concluded, Expressed by the Focus Groups

Criteria	Focus groups that expressed the criterion					
	Social workers	Psychologists	Judges	Experts	Linked f. families	Not linked f. families
The recovery of the biological family's capability to perform parental functions	X	X	X	X	X	X
The achievement of effective stability on the part of the child	X			X		X
The expression of the child's will to return to his family			X		X	
The existence of a good cooperative relationship between the biological and foster families				X		X
The transition to other types of custody	X					
Accomplishment of goals		X				
Definition of the duration		X				
Failure for legal reasons			X			
Foster experiences will never end					X	

- to respect the role of the biological family (five choices);
- to play a supporting function towards the biological family (three choices);
- to be an educational guide for the child (three choices);
- to show understanding towards the child and his history (two choices);
- not to consider the child as an exclusive 'possession' (two choices).

It appears evident that the convergences on the criteria are a sign of an overall agreement (although in some cases this remains problematic) on the necessity to limit the role of the foster family, in order to avoid potential dangers for the child deriving from a clash of the two families.

The fourth area had to do with the criteria used to evaluate the results achieved by the biological family. The six focus groups explicated 16 criteria (see Table 4) and, among these, four were selected by two or more groups:

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Table 2. The Results that should be Achieved by the Child, Expressed by the Focus Groups

Criteria	Focus groups that expressed the criterion					
	Social workers	Psychologists	Judges	Experts	Linked f. families	Not linked f. families
The achievement of serenity on the child's side in a clear perceivable way				X	X	X
The ability to distinguish between the role of the biological family and the role of the foster family	X	X				
The expression of behaviour and attitudes coherent with age	X	X				
The child's acceptance of his/her own experience	X					
The child's working through of the trauma						X
The achievement on the child's side of a stable personality						X
A reviewed appreciation of the biological family				X		
The child's balance from an affective, cognitive and relational point of view				X		
The child's identification with roles and figures			X			
Social integration and citizenship			X			
Adaptation of the child to reality through observable behaviour		X				

(*Continued*)

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Table 2.   Continued

Criteria	Focus groups that expressed the criterion					
	Social workers	*Psychologists*	*Judges*	*Experts*	*Linked f. families*	*Not linked f. families*
Offering the child a more stable home					X	
Giving the child an opportunity to receive an education, values and models for his behaviour					X	

Table 3.   The Results that should be Achieved by the Foster Family, Expressed by the Focus Groups

Criteria	Focus groups that expressed the criterion					
	Social workers	*Psychologists*	*Judges*	*Experts*	*Linked f. families*	*Not linked f. families*
To respect the role of their original family	X	X	X	X	X	
To play a support function towards the biological family		X		X		X
To be an educational guide for the child			X	X	X	
To show understanding with respect to child and his history			X			X
Not to consider the child as an exclusive 'possession'	X	X				
They need to help their own relatives not to forget they are parents					X	
Interaction with social workers in order to handle the fostering experience						X

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- to have overcome the problems that led to the estrangement of the children (four choices);
- to have recovered the parental role (three choices);
- to have rediscovered the value of the child (three choices);
- to show lawful behaviour towards the institutions (three choices).

At this stage of the analysis, some answers to questions were integrated since they could be considered as overlapping. This resulted in a list of 13 criteria to positively evaluate the results of a fostering experience, which provide that:

1. the child has achieved an affective stability allowing him to face the difficulties related to the return to his family;
2. there is a clearly perceivable improvement in the child's peace of mind;

Table 4. The Results that should be Achieved by the Biological Family, Expressed by the Focus Groups

Criteria	Focus groups that expressed the criterion					
	Social workers	Psychologists	Judges	Experts	Linked f. families	Not linked f. families
To have overcome the problems that led to the estrangement of the children	X			X	X	X
To have recovered the parental role	X	X			X	
To have rediscovered the value of the child		X	X			X
To show a lawful behaviour towards institutions			X	X		X
Establishing a social support network and the recovery of the biological family's parental functions				X		
The capacity of the family to get their family life organized		X				
The awareness by the biological family of the damage they have caused to the child	X					

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3. children can operate a distinction between the role of their biological family and the role of the foster family;
4. the child expresses behaviour and attitudes coherent with his/her age;
5. the existence of a good cooperative relationship between the biological and the foster families;
6. the foster family shows respect for the role of the biological family;
7. the foster family is an educational guide for the child;
8. the foster family shows comprehension with respect to the child and his history;
9. the foster family does not show exclusive 'possession' attitudes towards the child;
10. the biological family has overcome the problems that led to the estrangement of the children;
11. the biological family has recovered the capability to perform its parental function;
12. the biological family has rediscovered the value of the child;
13. the biological family shows lawful behaviour towards the institutions.

The second strategy used was to analyse the content of the transcripts of the six focus groups. This involved the use of T-lab, a set of software instruments for text analysis that allows the extraction, the comparison and the mapping of the contents present in texts of various types. Among the various possibilities offered by this software, we chose to run the text analysis as a unique *corpus*, free from codification, through:

- *associations*: relations between each of the keywords and all the lemmas of the corpus;
- *map of thematic cores*: graphic representations of the relations among groups of keywords;
- *frequency of use*: how often or scarcely certain words in the corpus are used.

A first level of analysis consisted in the identification of associations, present in the global file of the integral focus transcripts, between some lemmas, that we considered more significant, and other words used. Once we found the associations, we identified their position in the transcripts, by activating an automatic procedure in the text, in order to understand the prevailing meaning with which these terms had been used and to interpret correctly the meaning of the association.

For the purposes of our analysis, three associations appear to be particularly important. The first occurs between the lemma *affidare* (to grant custody) and the words *concludere* (to conclude) and *concluso* (concluded) (see Table 5).

This association underlines one of the more problematic knots in the management and the evaluation of foster care: its positive conclusion is linked to the return of the child to his family and to its temporary nature, while, as can be read in the transcripts, in reality such a positive conclusion occurs rarely and the children continue to live with the foster families longer than the two years required by law, on the basis of continuous extensions granted by the Juvenile Court.

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Another significant association in our opinion is between the term '*affidamento*' (foster care) and the lemmas *bambino* (child) and *crescita* (growth) (see Table 6). This highlights one more focus of attention of our groups, which is the concern for foster care to be clearly tuned to the child's needs and not serve the desire of the foster families to be parents. If the latter is the case, conflicts could arise that may have severe consequences on the good development of children.

The third important association is that which links the lemma *famiglia* (family) to the words *origine* (origin), *affidataria* (foster), *bambino* (child), building a conceptual map showing the tight links among these four terms (see Table 7). In this way, one of the strongest ideas that determined the choice of the evaluation criteria becomes clear: foster care is considered positively when a tight cooperative relationship is created between the child's two families, which allows him, on one hand, to recover from his traumas and to progress in his development and, on the other hand, to make a clear distinction between the roles played by the two families.

We then proceed to the detection of the frequency of use given to some terms within the six focus groups. Particularly significant were the excess frequency of use, i.e. the identification of those lemmas whose repetition appeared significantly correlated to their use within one of the groups (social workers, psychologists, honorary judges, foster families from outside the biological family, foster families with a family tie to the biological family, experts of planning and evaluation of intervention supporting parenthood). This relation has been measured using chi squared.

Table 5.   Lemma: *Affidare* (to Grant Custody); Occurrences: 356

Lemma	Coefficient	Occurrences	Associations
concludere (to conclude)	0,247386	47	32
concluso (concluded)	0,237146	48	31

Table 6.   Lemma: *Affidamento* (Foster Care); Occurrences: 104

Lemma	Coefficient	Occurrences	Associations
bambino (child)	0,166778	830	49
crescita (growth)	0,149786	21	7

Table 7.   Lemma: *Famiglia* (Family); Occurrences: 906

Lemma	Coefficient	Occurrences	Associations
origine (origin)	0,418724	291	215
affidataria (foster)	0,401587	212	176
bambino (child)	0,326349	830	283

The words highlighting an excess frequency of use by the parental foster families (the child's grandparents) are: *nonno* (grandfather), *figlia* (daughter), *figlio* (son), *madre* (mother), *nipote* (grandchild), *moglie* (wife) and *lira* (old Italian currency) (see Table 8). The reading of the transcript highlights the difficulties and the drama experienced by these families in the management of complex relations with their grandchildren and their children, from whose presence (real and psychological) they often have to protect their adopted grandchildren. The members of the foster families, moreover, are old, often with the only income deriving from their pension, and they sometimes demonstrate serious difficulties in the economic management of foster care.

The most interesting terms for the purpose of our analysis which show an excess frequency of use on the side of the unrelated foster families are: *origine* (origin), *equilibrio* (equilibrium), *benessere* (wellbeing), *stabilità* (stability); *superamento* (overcome) and *psicofisico* (psychophysical) (see Table 9). Such words may denote the most important problem that these families have to face: the attempt to let their foster children find again their lost equilibrium, wellbeing and stability.

The most important excess frequency of use detected in the groups of the social workers are given by the lemmas: *consapevolezza* (awareness), *adozione*

Table 8. Excess Frequency of Use: Grandparents' Group

Lemma	Chi^2	Sub*	Tot**
nonno (grandfather)	224,43	39	45
figlia (daughter)	224,41	38	43
madre (mother)	168,93	46	73
nipote (grandchild)	117,86	17	17
moglie (wife)	83,17	12	12
lira (old Italian currency)	81,82	13	14
figlio (son)	81,89	35	74

*No. of times of use of lemma in the group.
**Sum of the times the lemma has been used in all groups.

Table 9. Excess Frequency of Use: Unrelated Foster Families' Group

Lemma	Chi^2	Sub	Tot
origine (origin)	46,24	166	291
equilibrio (equilibrium)	39,89	32	36
benessere (wellbeing)	37,77	23	23
stabilità (stability)	37,77	23	23
superamento (overcome)	31,19	19	19
psicofisico (psychophysical)	24,72	19	21

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(adoption), *difeso* (defended), *danno* (damage), *valorizzazione* (development) and *rafforzamento* (strengthening) (see Table 10). The numeric consistency assumed by these terms helps us to focus on one of the pillars of the discussion occurring in this group: the necessity to strengthen the child and to defend him from the damage provoked by what he has experienced, in order to enable him to return to his biological family or, on the contrary, to experience a longer separation.

In the group of psychologists the text analysis run through T-lab shows mainly the excess use of the terms *evolutivo* (developmental), *recuperare* (recover) and *criterio* (criterion) (see Table 11). The integral reading of the text of this focus group allows us to understand the meaning with which these words are used; that is, on one hand, their attention to the child's recovery, and on the other, the problem, often present in this profession, related to the criteria upon which they evaluate the pathways of the child and the families.

In the analysis of the focus group composed of the judges of the Juvenile Court, the excess frequency of use of the lemmas: *pregiudizio*[1] (prejudice), *accompagnare* (to accompany), *prescrizione* (ordinance) and *regole* (rules) is particularly interesting (see Table 12). These are a signal of the responsibility felt by those who have to decide on the estrangement and the return of the child to the family and have to be very aware of the signals, as objective as possible, necessary to motivate such an important decision.

Finally, in the group of the experts in social intervention planning, the use of terms such as *rete* (network), *funzioni* (functions) and *sviluppo* (development) are more evident (see Table 13). In this discussion it is clear that one of the factors that most affects the successful outcome of fostering is the good functioning of the

Table 10. Excess Frequency of Use: Social Workers' Group

Lemma	Chi^2	Sub	Tot
consapevolezza (awareness)	129,91	35	51
adozione (adoption)	84,15	36	70
difeso (defended)	67,53	14	17
danno (damage)	58,54	17	26
valorizzazione (development)	50,20	8	8
rafforzamento (strengthening)	43,92	7	7

Table 11. Excess Frequency of Use: Psychologists' Group

Lemma	Chi^2	Sub	Tot
evolutivo (developmental)	46,67	16	20
recuperare (recover)	41,78	46	103
criterio (criterion)	40,12	66	171

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Table 12. Excess Frequency of Use: Judges' Group

Lemma	Chi²	Sub	Tot
pregiudizio (prejudice)	56,76	11	11
accompagnare (to accompany)	54,67	14	17
prescrizione (ordinance)	51,60	10	10
regole (rules)	51,60	10	10

Table 13. Excess Frequency of Use: Experts' Group

Lemma	Chi²	Sub	Tot
rete (network)	70,45	20	23
funzioni (functions)	49,61	17	22
sviluppo (development)	41,98	11	12

educational and protective network that should support and correct the developmental course of the child, which is primarily entrusted to the foster family.

Conclusions

Our research allows us to draw some conclusions concerning the use of the focus group technique in evaluation.

Focus groups seem to be particularly useful in those situations, especially common in the evaluation of social programmes, in which a variety of stakeholders have different interests in the programme that is evaluated and in which this difference of interests is conditioned by the subjects' cognitive models, feelings, emotions and ethical values.

Insertion into a focus group lets the participants express explicitly their points of view in a conversational climate in which different opinions are respected. The interaction with the other members of the focus group allows the most extreme positions to be balanced and shared judgements about the programme of each group of stakeholders to be better understood. In situations in which conflict is not too strong, it is possible to organize focus groups composed of representatives of different interest groups so as to verify if there is a shared opinion. In our case, this choice did not seem suitable because the relationships between the professional social workers and the families are often very tense and because the reasons for disagreement are very sensitive, such that there was a high risk of irremediable conflict.

In similar situations we consider as being more useful the technique of checking *ex post* the overlap of the criteria indicated by the different groups, if the

researchers use instruments to control the possible differences of meaning that the stakeholders ascribe to each criterion. In this way the role of the moderator is crucial in helping the group to make the criteria as non-ambiguous and operational as possible. It could be useful, furthermore, to test the focus transcriptions using a specialized software of text analysis to verify the convergence and the divergence in the use of the terms by the different groups.

Nevertheless the involvement of the stakeholders in the focus groups has some limitations. We have already mentioned our decision, based on ethical grounds, concerning the exclusion of the foster children and how it was impossible to involve biological families in the focus groups because of lack of participation. Perhaps, by using other data collecting techniques, such as the qualitative interview, the obstacles which hampered the collection of the opinions of these two important actors could have been overcome. Moreover, the groups composed of professionals, respectively intervening in the foster care process by performing evaluation functions at different phases of fostering, were able to focus more easily on the tasks assigned to them. More difficulties were encountered in dealing with foster families and running their focus group with the predetermined aims of our research.

In general, it seems to us that the willingness to participate in focus groups and the degree of engagement is influenced by the cultural background of the different stakeholders. This seems to contradict that part of literature (Vaughn et al., 1996) which suggests that the focus group is a data collection technique well accepted also by lesser educated participants because, compared with structured interviews, they may use their everyday language without feeling uncomfortable or frustrated. This contradiction could be explained because in evaluative research more than in fundamental research, inequalities in social power compound cultural differences among the stakeholders. Therefore the condition of social marginalization could be the cause of the suspicion by some groups of stakeholders about involvement in the evaluation of a social programme of which they consider themselves to be 'victims'. For example, in our case, the children's biological families were almost always very poor with a criminal background; the parents used drugs or had been in jail; moreover, they had been unsuccessfully opposed to the 'taking away' of their children by the Juvenile Courts.

Our study let us consider the usefulness of focus groups in the different steps of the evaluative research design. It is particularly useful in what Scriven (1980) considers as the initial phase of the evaluation process: the identification of merit and worth criteria. Through the focus group it is possible to identify the fundamental concepts which constitute the starting point for the determination of criteria of positive outcomes of a programme (Bezzi, 2001). Compared to methodologies based on the review and study of the literature, the value added by the use of the focus groups is in the fact that such basic criteria stem from the experience of the main social actors involved in a problem. Evaluators may take into account, from the initial phase of their research, the different definitions of the problem and compare them with each other – a particularly delicate operation for an evaluation research which aims to be not only scientifically correct, but also useful in improving the programme under evaluation (Weiss, 1972).

The use of the focus groups in the further phases of evaluation research appears possible in some steps and restricted in others. For example, we believe it will be far more complex to use the focus groups to make the criteria operational, transforming them into performance indicators. This is due either to the length of such a procedure (since the time available to the participants at focus groups is often very limited), or to technicalities which require more competence than is often available to stakeholders of social programmes.

Once the evaluator has identified *performance* indicators on the basis of general criteria indicated in the focus group and once an evaluation scale has been built with them – it may be useful to submit the results of this study to the judgement of the *stakeholders* by using the focus group technique again. This is not merely because of the need to verify the value coherence of the evaluation to the model, but also because it seems important to us, in order to improve the utility of a programme evaluation, to achieve a definition of an indicator set, and if appropriate of an evaluation scale, which is shared by most of the significant social actors involved in the programme.

If these indicators are shared by the different stakeholders, they may be utilized both to construct other data collection instruments (questionnaires, observational coding systems, etc.) and to organize again focus groups with the task of evaluating *ex post* the results of a programme. In this way, the comparison among the opinions expressed by the different groups and the construction of a shared judgement will be easier because the judgements will be expressed on the same criteria and indicators to which, moreover, the different groups give the same meaning.

Finally, focus groups may be useful at the end of the evaluation process in the formulation of proposals for improving a programme. Thus the technique that we have experimented with may be used to construct suggestions shared by all the stakeholders, with the aim of planning better the programme or of 'tuning up' its implementation process.

Notes

1. The reading of the transcript made us understand that the term 'prejudice' is here used in its juridical sense: it concerns the causes preventing the biological family from performing the parental function.

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