Utilising a dual moderator approach in focus groups to evaluate maternal health programmes in diverse communities.

Rohit Sagoo QN, PhD Candidate, University of Bedfordshire, UK

Background

Methodological Approach

- Used focus groups to explore lived experiences in maternal health
- Captured rich, nuanced insights from mothers and expectant mothers
- Recognised challenges: trust, comfort, and ethical sensitivity

Innovation: Dual Moderator Approach

- Adopted dual moderation to enhance inclusivity and safety
- As a male researcher, I addressed power and gender dynamics
- Female co-moderator supported trust and open dialogue

PhD Context

- Applied within SWPP evaluation (Luton, Bedfordshire, UK)
- Developed structured, ethical focus group guidelines
- Emphasised positionality, cultural sensitivity, and participant safety

Rationale for Dual Moderator Approach

- Recognised as a robust method to capture **diverse perspectives** and deepen discussion (Prince & Davies, 2001)
- Enhances **data richness, safety, and participant support** in sensitive maternal health research (Aquino et al., 2018; Tiruneh et al., 2021)
- Dual roles:
    - One moderator facilitates discussion
    - One observes **group dynamics and unspoken tensions** (Ely et al., 2009)
- Strengthens:
    - **Inclusivity and balanced participation** (Perdok et al., 2016)
    - **Engagement and safe space for disclosure** (Humphries et al., 2025)
    - **Depth of probing and dialogue** (Rolls et al., 2019)
- Particularly valuable in maternal health:
    - Navigates **intersectionality and complexity**
    - Enables exploration of **emotional, social, and structural experiences** (Brahm et al., 2015; Aoyama et al., 2017)

The Study Aim

- Starting Well Partnership Programme (SWPP)
- Community-based maternal & early years intervention
- Focus on:
    - Deprivation
    - Ethnic diversity
    - Early intervention programmes

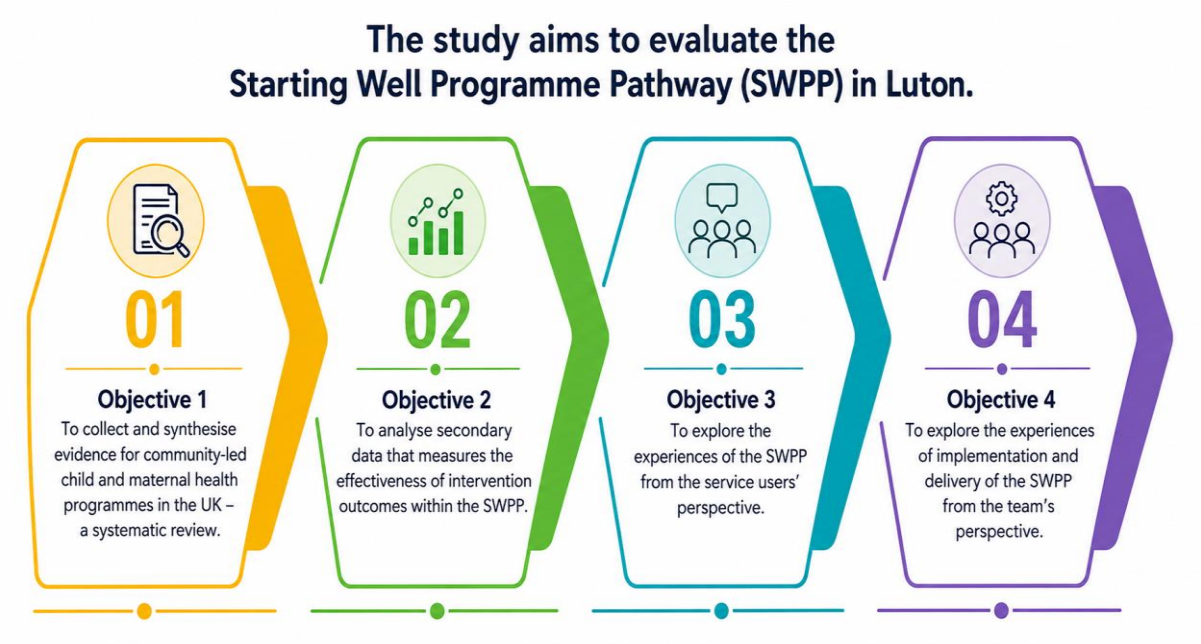
Study Design & Methods

Methodological Positioning

- **Qualitative design** (PhD Objectives)
- Philosophical stance:
  - **Critical realism** → acknowledges lived realities
  - **Pragmatism** → focuses on actionable findings
- Participatory, community-centred approach

Methods Overview

- Data collection:
  - Focus groups (n=5)
  - Semi-structured interview (n=1)
- Participants:
  - Mothers & expectant mothers (n=19)
  - Practitioners & volunteers (n=10)
- **Purposive sampling** targeting underserved groups



The Dual Moderator Model

- Two roles:
  - **Lead moderator** → guides discussion
  - **Co-moderator** → observes, supports, manages dynamics
- In this study:
  - Female co-moderator with community rapport
  - Male researcher → reflexive positionality

Why Dual Moderation Matters

From my PhD study:

- Builds trust and comfort
- Reduces power imbalances
- Enhances inclusivity in diverse groups

From wider literature:

- Prince & Davies (2001): improves facilitation depth
- Rolls et al. (2019): enhances probing and flow
- Humphries et al. (2025): increases engagement
- Tausch & Menold (2016): moderates group dynamics

What Dual Moderation Enabled: Participant Voices

Theme 1: Trust & Safety

“I felt safe and welcome in this new world. I didn’t know many persons here. I felt really supported every time I was coming.”

Service User, Focus Group 5

Theme 2: Breaking Isolation

“Knowing that I’m not alone... Having all the mums around and getting that support — knowing that I’m not alone in what I’m going through.”

Service User, Focus Group 1

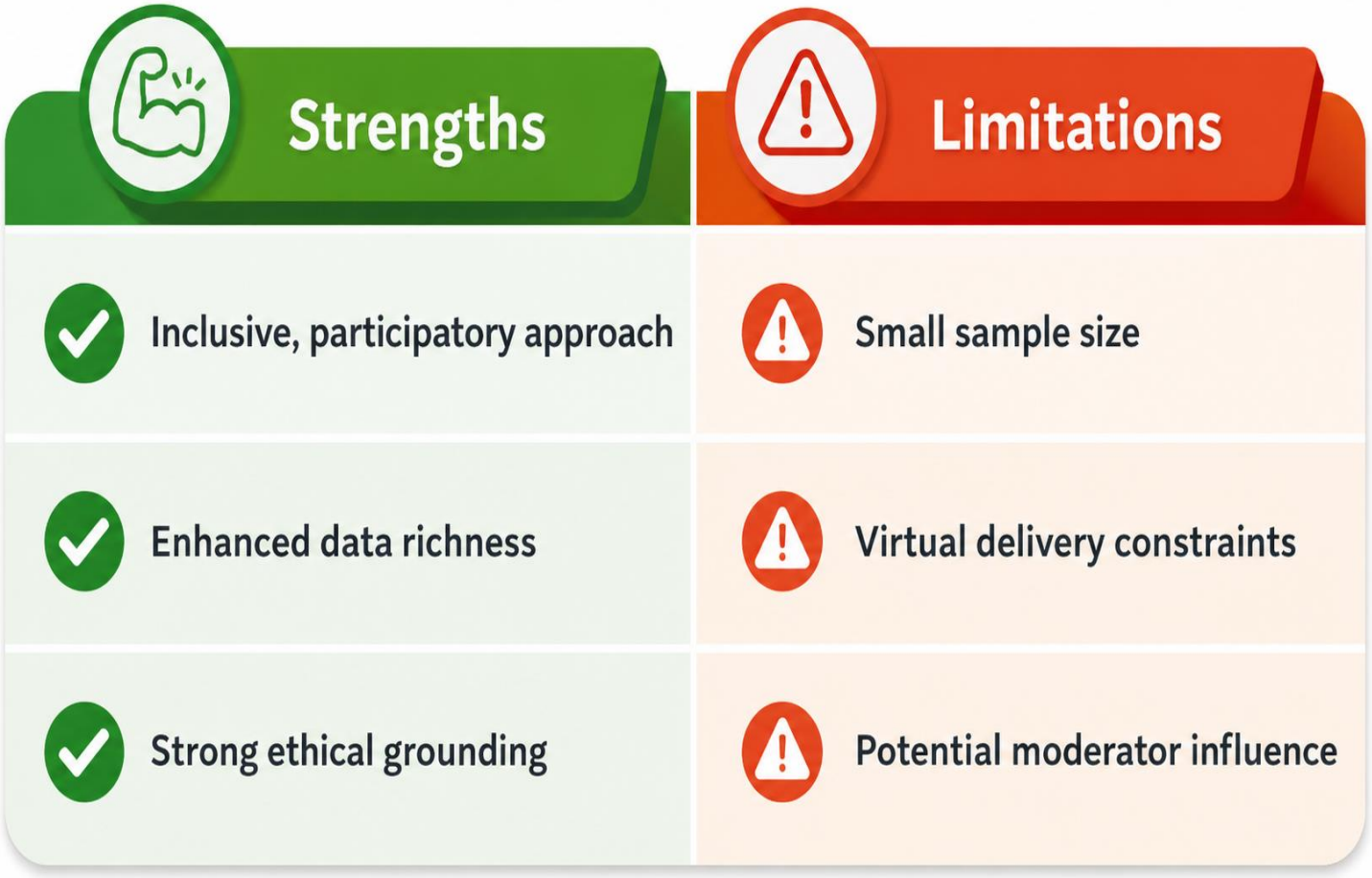
Theme 3: Depth of Disclosure

“I don’t think I would have made it through this, or to 30 weeks, without this support — because you get very short meetings with your midwife.”

Service User, Focus Group 1

Reflections on Practice

- Dual moderation requires advanced coordination; we held briefings before each session and debriefs after, which shaped how I interpreted the data.
- As a male researcher in a female-centred space, my co-moderator's presence was not just methodological; it was an ethical necessity that made the work possible.
- Language access was a limitation I would address differently in future work; non-English speaking participants were largely excluded, which narrowed who could be heard.
- Transparency about the moderator roles, the dynamics between us, and how observations feed into analysis is something I document explicitly; replication depends on it.



Implications for Research & Practice

- Dual moderation should be:
  - Embedded in **maternal health research**
  - Used in **ethnically diverse populations**
- Supports:
  - Equity
  - Cultural safety
  - Better programme evaluation

Key Takeaways

- Dual moderation is not just methodological; it is an **ethical practice**
- Enhances:
  - Voice
  - Trust
  - Depth
- Particularly critical in **sensitive, intersectional research contexts**

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