

Overview

A focus group, (also called group discussion or group depth interview), can be best described as an interaction between one or more researchers and one or more respondents for the purpose of collecting research data. During the focus group, one person (normally the researcher) will act as 'facilitator' to guide the topic for discussion.

Focus groups are most commonly used to:

- a) Learn how a group of people talk about a topic of interest
- b) Generate research questions or hypotheses
- c) Stimulate new ideas
- d) Judge the potential for problems with a new service or programme
- e) Obtain general background information about a topic of interest
- f) Interpret previously obtained quantitative results
- g) Inform the content of a questionnaire – exploratory research

Focus groups should not be used:

- a) For personal or embarrassing issues
- b) When representative samples are required

Advantages and disadvantages of focus groups

Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants can react to and build on the responses of other group members 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The small number of respondents limit generalisation to the wider population
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus groups allow the researcher to interact directly 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Results may be biased by particularly strong group members.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They allow for the collection of rich data in participants own words 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The open-ended nature of responses may make interpreting results difficult.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They provide data from a group of people more quickly than interviewing people 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The researcher as interviewer may influence the responses of the group
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They are suitable for use with children 	

Source: Oates, C (2002) *The use of focus groups in social research*. In Burton, D (eds) *Research training for social sciences*. Sage Publications. London.

Planning and running a focus group

To work well, focus groups need to be carefully planned. The following points should be considered before planning or undertaking a focus group.

Size, length and number of focus groups

The ideal group is between eight and twelve participants. The number of focus groups needed depends on a) the issue and b) the amount of diversity required amongst participants. On average, focus groups will last between 60 and 90 minutes. Anything shorter and you are unlikely to get the information you need, any longer and participants' concentration is likely to be affected. The minimum number of groups recommended is two, while the maximum very much depends on the type of research being carried out. Ideally, focus groups should continue to run until 'data saturation' has

Focus Groups

a 'how to...' guide

occurred (i.e. the topic is exhausted). When selecting groups it is important to bear in mind group characteristics (i.e. what they have in common and how they differ) in order to compare and contrast views between subgroups.

Topic plan

During a focus group, a facilitator normally follows a structure guide or 'topic plan' that guides the discussion. Topic guides or plans should always be prepared in advance in order to ensure that the same questions are asked of each group and to help prevent the discussion straying into unrelated areas. Researchers often include a list of possible 'probes' on their topic lists to facilitate discussion, and it can also be useful to have worked out in advance alternative ways of asking a question to aid understanding.

Topic plans should also include details of how to explain ice-breakers and exercises.

Recruitment

Focus groups are different from 'public meetings' in that a pre-determined number of people are selected and invited along. It is normal practice to invite more people than you actually need to ensure the group's size. For example, you would invite 12 people to ensure that between 8 and 10 turn up on the day.

Focus group participants should all share a particular characteristic: they are of a similar age, for example, or they are users of a particular service.

Particular care needs to be taken when groups include disabled people or people from particular religious groups. For example, there may be a need for a sign language interpreter if a deaf person is included in a group, and the group dynamics may change if there is a visually impaired person in a group. It is always worth getting specialist advice in these cases.

Locations of focus groups

It is essential when considering the location of any focus group to bear in mind the needs of possible participants. Quiet space is essential for recording data. Venues should always accommodate the needs of group members. In most cases you will need to organise seating, refreshment and ensure that there is disabled access. We can offer advice on possible suitable venues.

Recording focus groups

Where possible, focus groups should always be tape recorded to ensure that all information is recorded accurately. Where tape recording is not possible, an additional person should attend the focus group along with the facilitator to take notes. Participants should be asked in advance for their permission to tape record the group, and issues such as confidentiality, data protection, right to withdraw, and consent will need to be explained. Likewise, participants should be informed what will happen to the information and how they can find out about the findings, for example by using [Involve](#). It is normal practice to give participants a summary of the findings.

Always ensure you take a flip chart and pen to record information. Using flip charts to record the main points has an added advantage of helping a group to concentrate during an event.



Analysis of data

Before conducting focus group interviews it is important to consider how you are going to record and analyse the data collected. If you have recorded the interview you need to decide if you are going to note the main points or transcribe the interview verbatim. In terms of analysis, one of the advantages of focus groups is that you can use quotes to support your analysis.

Costs

Focus groups should not be considered as a cheap option for eliciting views from the general public. Costs could include hiring the venue, transcription costs, providing refreshments, paying travel expenses etc. Incentives are sometimes given to encourage participation and compensate for participants' time. However, in some research areas it is considered unethical to offer incentives and researchers have to rely on the good will of the public. The council policy on this matter is that incentives, i.e. gift vouchers or tickets to a council event, can be offered to compensate for participants' time, but this should be considered on a project by project basis. In no circumstances should cash be given.

Level of difficulty / training required

Effective focus group facilitation is a specialist skill which requires appropriate group work, leadership and facilitation training.

Ethical considerations

As with all types of research, researchers need to consider the ethical issues associated with carrying out the research. For further details on the ethical issues involved in research, see the guideline on 'ethical issues in research'.

What next?

If you would like to know more about this topic then please get in touch:

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