Tips for Organizing Focus Groups

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Tips for Organizing Focus Groups

Contents

Introduction

This resource is intended to provide some basic information on purpose, design and the moderating of focus groups. When utilized appropriately, focus groups can be a very valuable and informative qualitative method of gathering data.

Purpose of Focus Groups

Before considering the use of focus groups, ask yourself the following questions:

Why do you want to use focus groups?	What research questions are you hoping to answer?	What issues need to be explored?

Have you chosen focus groups as your methodology of choice because you hope to…

- Quantify responses to specific questions?
- Reach consensus on a particular topic?
- Provide statistical projections regarding a specific intervention?
- Obtain a lot of data at a low cost?

Then

focus group methodology is **NOT** for you.

Before going any further, it is important to clarify the purpose of the focus groups. The primary purpose of focus groups is to learn about participants' attitudes, beliefs, feelings, experiences and reactions in a way that is not possible using other methods such as individual interviews, surveys or observation. Focus groups provide the emotional context and the variety of views that occur within the group context. Focus group methodology implies purposeful:

- Development of the interview guide in relation to the research questions.
- Recruitment of participants.
- Moderating of the focus groups.
- Analysis of the data.

Focus groups are…

- ✔ Usually conducted in a series of several groups with similar participants.
- ✔ Planned discussions guided by carefully structured questions designed to obtain participants' perceptions on a specific topic of interest.
- ✔ A planned and representative sample of the population but usually a sample of convenience.
- ✔ A method of answering research question(s) through the collection of qualitative data (e.g. feedback on a program, answering questions about what issues to include in a quantitative instrument).

Focus groups are NOT…

- ✗ Polls, hearings or community forums.
- ✗ Individual interviews completed in a group setting.
- ✗ Serial interviewing (the moderator asks all participants the same question and each person answers in turn).
- ✗ The administration of a questionnaire in a group setting.

When to Use Focus Groups

Focus groups are used to…

- Obtain in-depth qualitative information from a small group of people who should represent the population of interest.
- Probe the perceptions, feelings, and attitudes of participants on a particular topic.
- Obtain participant's perspective on the topic.
- Assess the needs of a population prior to program design.
- Provide data in exploratory and preliminary studies.
- Obtain information to inform program planning, how best to deliver an intervention and to gather data about participants' reactions to an intervention.
- Confirm or further explore data collected from quantitative methods.
- Generate hypotheses.
- Explore issues around the topic with a view towards instrument development.

Focus groups would NOT be appropriate when…

- Statistical projections are required.
- Confidentiality of sensitive information cannot be ensured by the researcher on behalf of participants.
- Resolving conflicts.
- Building consensus.
- Team building is required.
- Quantitative data is required (i.e. you want to collect information on the number of people who said ….).

Advantages and Disadvantages of Focus Groups

Advantages of using focus groups include:

- Probing of an issue with more depth.
- A wide variety of information can be obtained within relatively short time frame at a reasonable cost.
- Complex sampling methods are not required.
- Unanticipated but related topics can be explored by the moderator as they arise.
- Flexibility.
- High face validity (the extent to which the measurement seems to be measuring the topic being researched).
- Participants build on each other's comments.

Disadvantages of using focus groups include:

- Difficulty statistically measuring attributes (e.g. frequencies of behaviour, differences in attitudes, intensity of feelings).
- Data quality is influenced by the skills of the moderator.
- Analysis of data is usually more time consuming and challenging.
- Difficulty recruiting participants.
- Possibility of participants influencing each other.
- Generalizability is limited because sample is not representative of the target population and usually is not randomly selected.

Recruitment of Participants

Participants are…

- Recruited through purposeful selection; if the right people are not selected, the information collected may not be useful.
- Chosen based on the purpose of study and a common experience (e.g. position or workplace).
- Homogeneous (with enough variation to allow for varying opinions).

Participants may be recruited through the use of…

- Existing lists, directories, memberships (random sampling of lists removes selection bias).
- Random telephone screening.
- Ads in newspapers and on bulletin boards.
- Snowball technique whereby participants who are screened in are asked for the names of other potential participants.
- Convenience sample (sample selected because participants readily available or easy to contact).
- Purposive sample - specific participants are selected because you want a specific type of person in the group (e.g. parents of teenagers).

The use of convenience and purposive samples have a high potential of introducing hidden bias into the information collected.

When recruiting…

- Recruitment is usually done by telephone. However, 10-14 days prior to the group, potential participants should receive written information about:
    a. Topic of the group.
    b. Focus group questions.
    c. Date and time of the group.
    d. Clear directions to the location.
    e. Assurances that participation is voluntary.
    f. Session may be tape recorded.
- A screening questionnaire which incorporates the characteristics of the population of interest may be helpful (e.g. are you between the ages of 15-19?; have you ever attended a program on safer sex?).
- Individuals who are in the same line of command should not be placed together in the same group (e.g. teachers with students, managers with employees).
- If possible, ensure that people who know each other do not attend the same session.
- Depending on the topic it may be unwise to mix genders, ages, socioeconomic groups etc.
- Exercise caution when using existing groups. Established lines of communication may already exist altering group dynamics. Conversely, benefits of using existing groups can include an increased comfort level among group members.

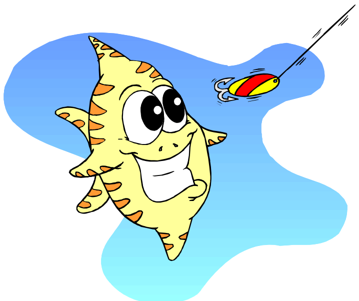
Informed Consent

What about informed consent?

- Participation in focus groups should be voluntary. Potential participants should be presented with enough information (e.g. focus group schedule of questions) so that they can decide whether or not to participate.
- Participants should be informed that their names and comments will remain confidential and their names will not be associated with comments or written quotes in a report.

For more information, see: Toronto Public Health, Planning and Policy, Education and Research. (2002). *Obtaining Informed Consent for Participation in Program Evaluation and Other Forms of Research.* [Resource]. Toronto, Ontario. Author. http://insideto.city.toronto.on.ca/health/planning/p_pgp_resources.htm

Incentives for Participants



Incentives for participation

- Incentives are not a reward for attending but rather an encouragement to attend.
- For some participants, the removal of barriers (e.g. childcare, transportation, a convenient starting time) may be an incentive for attending.
- Most common type of incentive is money - cash $20-$50 although in some situations money may be inappropriate (e.g. employees attending a focus group on worktime).
- Food, ranging from snacks to a full meal may be an incentive.

Focus Group Design

Number of focus groups	Size	Duration	Location
❖ No definitive rule for the required number of focus group sessions. ❖ Continue running focus groups until no new information emerges. ❖ If only able to conduct one or two sessions, results should be interpreted with caution (may not have identified all possible information). ❖ Complexity of the topic may influence the number of groups required (more groups may be required for more complex or diverse topics).	❖ The ideal size is 6-9 participants but may range from 6-12 participants. ❖ Groups that are too large lack cohesion. ❖ Groups that are too small are more easily dominated. ❖ Complex topics should have fewer participants to ensure all participants have an opportunity to share their ideas. ❖ Number of ideas generated is not increased by increasing the size of the group.	❖ Ranges from 1 ½ - 2 hours.	❖ A neutral environment (e.g. locations that don't have the potential to inhibit or elicit reactions from participants). ❖ Central and easy to find. ❖ Transit and wheelchair accessible. ❖ Free from audio, visual and outside distractions. ❖ Relaxed, friendly and comfortable. ❖ Free of charge, or a reasonable fee is charged. ❖ Conducive to a set up whereby chairs or tables can be arranged with participants facing each other.

How does the role of the moderator differ from the role of the facilitator?

Facilitator

A facilitator increases the ease with which people are able to response and discuss issues by providing repeated stimulation using a variety of methods.

- ❖ Learns from you, themselves and each other.
- ❖ May have bias around the knowledge provided.
- ❖ May choose to share experiences as part of the learning.
- ❖ Tangents may be okay.
- ❖ May be talkative to facilitate discussion.

Moderator

A moderator is an unbiased person who guides the group discussion according to a predetermined route of questioning which specifically relates to the research questions.

- ❖ Should not be biased around the topic of discussion. Any bias should not be evident to group members.
- ❖ May introduce bias by comments, questioning, listening etc.
- ❖ Does not share experiences or personal views on the topic.
- ❖ Listens and only asks or probes questions.

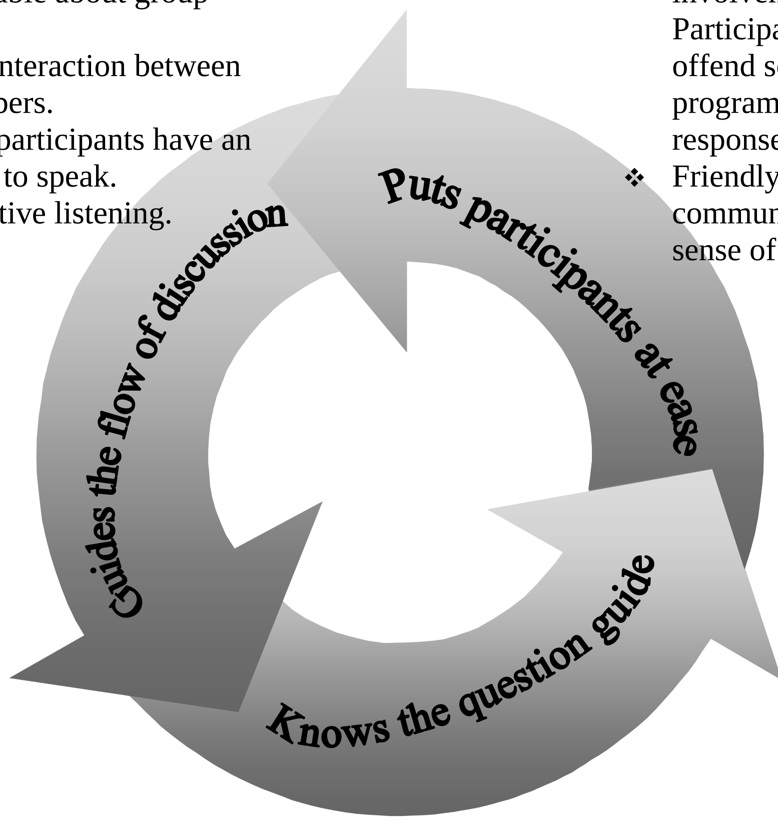
Moderators: Focus groups are moderated by an individual who…

Guides the flow of discussion

- Keeps the group focused on the topic within the limits set by the research questions.
- Effectively asks the questions.
- Knowledgeable about group dynamics.
- Stimulates interaction between group members.
- Ensures all participants have an opportunity to speak.
- Practices active listening.

Puts participants at ease

- Ability to establish rapport and trust with participants.
- Respects the participants.
- Not biased (based on involvement in the program). Participants may not want to offend someone involved in the program, which may inhibit responses.
- Friendly, open to new ideas, communicates clearly and has a sense of humour.



Knows the question guide

- Ability to think quickly.
- Understands the objective(s) of the study.
- Adequate understanding of the topic.
- Either memorizes the questions or become familiar enough with them so as not to read them.

In addition, the impact which gender, race, age, socioeconomic status and technical knowledge (in relation to the topic) may have on communication should be considered.

Steps in Moderating a Focus Group

Step 1: Creating the environment

- Arrive early, create a non-threatening, warm, friendly and supportive environment.
- Prior to group start up observe participant interaction taking note of individual(s) who dominate. If possible seat them at moderator's side. Shy participants should be seated immediately across from moderator. To accomplish this, the moderator designates the seating arrangement by setting name tents with first names only around the table or on the chairs.
- Use a co-moderator who can observe the verbal and non-verbal communication, take comprehensive notes about the discussion and who may ask additional questions or probe the response of participants.
- It is important not to be underdressed or overdressed (to enhance participant's comfort).

Step 2: Getting off to a good start

- Introduction sets the tone for the focus group. Introduce yourself, any co-moderators and the purpose of their attendance.
- Review with participants the topic, purpose and timeframe of the group.
- Outline the basic ground rules (e.g. everyone's opinion is important, one person speaks at a time, confidentiality regarding issues discussed in the focus group).
- Reassure participants that their participation is voluntary and confidential and that there are no right or wrong answers.

- State the purpose of recording (if used).
- Use only the first name on name cards or name tents.
- Offer refreshments if possible.

Step 3: Asking the questions effectively

- Utilize the five second pause following a participant’s comment and then a probe to elicit additional points of view. Remember for some cultural groups silence is not uncomfortable.
- Use probes only to obtain more information (e.g. ″can you give me an example, can you tell me more about how that felt, would you like to say more, would you explain that further″, etc.); probes used early in the focus group session can communicate to participants the importance of providing detailed answers.
- Ask questions in a conversational manner.
- Don’t pressure group to reach consensus.
- Don’t move too quickly from one question to another.
- Do not offer personal views on the topic. Moderators should not participate in the discussion other than to ask the questions.

Focus Group Questions

Effective focus group questions are…

- Key to the success of the focus group. The number of questions range from 10-12, which includes opening, introduction, transition, key and closing questions. Complexity of the topic will influence the number of questions asked.
- Developed with input from others (e.g. researchers, stakeholders and people who have characteristics similar to the participants). Pilot testing of questions is helpful.
- “What” or “how” questions. Rarely use “why” questions.
- Open-ended questions. Questions that give a “yes” or “no” response should be avoided.
- Clearly formulated, brief, and free of jargon.
- Easily understood and geared to the language comprehension of the group.
- Not leading.
- Carefully sequenced. The easier more general questions precede the more difficult ones, less intimate precede more intimate. Uncued questions (e.g. what do parents need to be effective parents?) are followed by cued questions (e.g. what things such as parenting support, knowledge, resources do parents need to be effective parents?).
- Topic specific and tangible.
- Limited to a single concept (e.g. to what extent was the program practical or in what way was program helpful, implies that practical and helpful are similar concepts).
- Structured (e.g. what did you think of the parenting program?) or unstructured (e.g. what did you think of the part of the parenting program which described behaviour management techniques? or how did you feel about the presentation by the dietitian?).

Categories of Questions

The purpose of the following groupings is to ensure that the discussion is “conversational”, gets participants talking and elicits information regarding the crux of the study.

❶ Opening Question

- All participants answer the opening question. Gives participants an opportunity to introduce themselves (e.g. tell us your name and one thing you think should be included in a physical activity program for seniors).
- Should be factual and quick.

❷ Introductory Question

- Introduces the topic in a general way (e.g. what do you think of when you think of physical activity?).
- Provides participants with an opportunity to think about past experiences or their current connection with the topic.

❸ Transition Question

- Acts as a link between the introductory and key questions.
- Moves conversation towards the key questions (e.g. have you ever attended a physical activity program?).

❹ Key Questions

- The crux of the study.
- Usually 2-5 questions.

❺ Ending Question

- Brings closure to the discussion.
- Allows participants to think back on previous comments.

  Types:

  a) Summary - the moderator provides the summary and asks the group for feedback.

  b) Final comment (e.g. of all of the ideas mentioned, which is the most important for you?).

  c) Final question - anything that hasn't been covered and should be (e.g. has anything been missed?).

Focus Group Questions and Standardized Strategies

Two types of questions have shown to be useful in focus group studies. Standardized strategies include: "sentence completion" and "conceptual mapping".

Sentence Completion

The moderator asks participants to complete one or more sentences. Participants may be given time to write down their answers and then everyone will be asked to share what they have written. For example, if the target audience was women in their first trimester of pregnancy who smoke and the purpose is to discover strategies which support them to quit smoking, the questions may look like this:

- When I first found out that I was pregnant, I felt ….
- Now as I think about quitting smoking what helped me was ….
- What got in the way was ….
- I was surprised that ….

Conceptual Mapping

Allows participants to describe an activity or agency in relation to similar activities/agencies using the participant's classification system. Participants are given a grid with six boxes and are asked to list all the organizations that perform the same function on the grids placing similar ones into the same boxes. More boxes can be added or they don't need to use all of the boxes. Each participant shares his or her answer and the moderator reproduces answers on a flipchart. Participants are also asked for the rationale for their choices. The moderator then facilitates discussion on the similarities and differences in each quadrant. In order for conceptual mapping to be effective participants must have enough knowledge regarding the organization/program/strategy being discussed.

Keeping Track of What's Being Said

How do you keep track of what's being said?

- Audio recording ensures that you have an accurate recording of the data. Also allows for extraction of exact quotes.
- Video recording.
- Verbatim hand-written account of the discussion (this method requires co-facilitation).
- Flipcharts (can be disruptive and slow down the discussion).
- Abbreviated notes.
- Any combination of the above.

After the focus group now what?

- Debrief with the co-moderator and make notes.
- Review recorded notes and add any missing information.
- Type all hand-written notes, flipcharts etc. as soon as possible.
- Transcribe the tapes verbatim and verify recorded data with written information. It is time consuming to transcribe the data. If you don't have the resources to transcribe the data, listen to the tapes and make abridged transcripts.
- It is important to transcribe and analyze the data prior to the next focus group.

Data Analysis

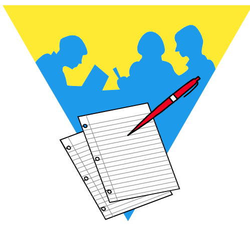
Steps in Analyzing Focus Group Data

1. Purpose of the research and the research report determines the analysis plan. Analysis should be linked to the objectives and purpose of the study. It must be systematic and verifiable and requires a careful process of examining, categorizing and tabulating.
2. Organize information into logical groupings or according to research questions.
3. Read through all summaries to get an overview. Make notes of potential trends and themes which may develop into a coding scheme.
4. Consider words, tone, context, non-verbals, internal consistency, specificity of responses and big ideas.
5. Cluster the themes across all the groups.
6. Make a notation of how many groups identified each theme. When a theme emerges in more than one group you can be more confident of its importance.
7. Elaborate on each theme providing supporting quotes from the data.
8. Pay attention to the outliers/extreme cases as they may help to verify the theme or provide an alternate point of view.

Quick Tips For Analyzing Focus Group Data

- It may be helpful to make two copies of the transcripts and notes so that one copy can be cut and/or colour coded to facilitate clustering of themes. Don't forget to label which focus group the comments came from.
- May want to consider computer applications which assist with analysis (e.g. NUDIST, Ethno graph).

Reporting Findings



When reporting remember…

- The audience.
- The purpose of the report.
- Format should include: background, purpose of the study, the research/evaluation questions, methodology (number of groups, location, description of participants, recruitment), limitations (in an appendix), questions, summary of themes, quotes to support, what data means, conclusions and recommendations.
- To make it clear to the reader which ideas came from participants and which came from the author of the report.
- To disseminate your findings.

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