





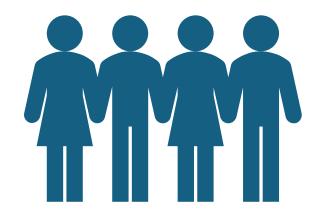
Focus group discussions

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Focus Groups



- Focus group discussion on specified topic
- Random or chosen groups
- Researcher guides discussion
- Recording and participating
- Beware of power elements

What are focus groups?

- Focus groups are a form of group interview in which reliance is place on the interaction within the group, which discusses a topic supplied by the researcher, yielding a collective rather than an individual view.
- Participants interact with each other rather than with the interviewer so that the participants' views can emerge, and the participants' agenda rather than the researcher's agenda is to the fore.
- It is from the *interaction* of the group that the data emerge, so group dynamics are important (Denscombe, 2014, p.189 cited in Cohen et al, 2017, p.532)

Focus group characteristics

- A moderator or facilitator is present to lead the discussion, steer the group as necessary and keep them focused on the discussion topic
- The 'contrived' nature of the focus groups is both their strength and weakness – they are unnatural settings, yet they are structured and very focused on a particular issue and, therefore, will yield insights that might not otherwise have been gained from a straightforward interview.
- They are economical in time, often producing a large amount of data in a short period, but they tend to produce less data than interviews with the same number of individuals on a one-to-one basis.
- Focus groups have the attraction of synergy, with several people stimulating discussion and working together on the issue in hand

Focus group uses

- Developing themes, topic an schedules flexibly for subsequent interviews and/or questionnaires
- Generating hypotheses that derive from the insights and data from the group
- Generating and evaluating data from different sub-groups of a population
- Gathering qualitative data
- Generating data quickly and at low cost
- Gathering data on attitudes, values, perceptions, viewpoints and points

Focus group uses continued

- Empowering participants to speak out, and in their own words
- Encouraging groups, rather than individuals, to voice opinions
- Encouraging non-literate participants
- Providing greater coverage of issues than would be possible in a survey

Issues when running focus groups

- Deciding the number of focus groups for a single topic (one group may be insufficient, as the researcher will be unable to know whether the outcome is unique to the behaviour of the group)
- Deciding **the size of the group** (too small and intra-group dynamics exert a disproportionate effect, too large and the group becomes unwieldy and hard to manage; it fragments). Some suggest 4-12 people and others suggest between 6-8 people
- How to allow for people not 'turning up' on the day slight overrecruitment
- Sampling is a major key to the success of focus groups

Further issues to consider

- **Sampling** every participant is the bearer of the particular characteristic required or the group has homogeneity of background in the required area, otherwise the discussion will lose focus or become unrepresentative.
- Ensuring that participants have something to say and feel comfortable enough to say it
- Chairing or facilitating the discussion so that a balance is struck between being directive and veering off point – keeping it openended but to the point

Final key points

- Having an effective and well-briefed facilitator to set the ground rules, clarify, probe, question, keep to the point, reflect back, summarise and manage group dynamics, etc.
- How to address confidentiality and informed consent (and other ethical issues), disagreements, conflicts, strong feelings, silence, non-verbal communication and complex responses
- Clear record-keeping and recording

Focus group challenges

- Do not yield numerical, quantifiable or generalisable data
- Data may be difficult to analyse succinctly
- May yield less information than a survey
- Group dynamics may lead to non-participation by some members and dominance by others (e.g., status differentials may operate)
- The number of topics to be covered may be limited
- Intra-group disagreement and even conflicts may arise
- Inarticulate members may be denied a voice
- The data may lack overall reliability
- Problem of only one voice being heard dominant member

Focus groups with children 1

- As well as being economical with the researcher's time, a focus group discussion encourages interaction between the group rather than simply a response to an adult's question
- Focus groups might also be less intimidating than individual interviews for children (Greig and Taylor, 1999, p.132 cited in Cohen et al, 2018, p.529)
- Focus groups can make children more comfortable

Focus groups with children 2

- As with interviewing children it is important to have the focus group in as close to a natural surrounding as possible
- Sometimes a child can be the facilitator of the focus group
- Focus groups with children enables them to reach consensus and/or to challenge each other and participate in a way that may not happen in a one-to-one, adult-child interview, using language that the children themselves use (Houssart and Eves, 2011, p.65 cited in Cohen et al, 2017, p. 529)

Remember

- Divide your attention as interviewer/ facilitator and share out the participants' responses – give them all a chance to speak in a focus group discussion
- Decide if you will ask everyone in the focus group to give a response to a question
- If there is more than one facilitator, what are the roles of the 'silent' facilitator, and do the participants know these roles?
- Who will be looking at whom?
- If you need to look at your watch then maybe comment on this publicly
- Decide in advance how you will pass from one facilitator to another and from one participant to another

References

• Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2017). Research Methods in Education (8th ed.). Routledge.

https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315456539

Acknowledgments

This research was funded by the NIHR (NIHR133712) using UK international development funding from the UK Government to support global health research. The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and not necessarily those of the NIHR or the UK government, the Court of the University of Aberdeen, the Board of Directors of the University of Rwanda, the Board of Directors of Addis Ababa University, the Board of Directors of The Sanctuary, or our International Advisory Board.

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