



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 placed 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, topics and 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 over-recruitment
- **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 open-ended 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

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- 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.
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