

## SOCIAL SCIENCE METHODS: FOCUS GROUPS

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### What is a focus group?

A focus group is a conversation with a small group of individuals who can provide insight about an event, phenomenon, or other topic of interest.

### When is a focus group the appropriate method?

There are no fixed criteria dictating whether you should conduct a focus group. However, focus groups are especially useful:

- for gaining information during the exploratory phase of a research study.
- when your research question explores divergent experiences or group dynamics (e.g., interactions, customs, processes, values).
- when you are exploring real-time reactions as an ongoing event unfolds.
- when you are working with hard-to-reach or marginalized groups.

Focus groups are not appropriate for exploring individual narratives or gaining a thorough understanding of individual attitudes, as these research questions are better suited to in-depth interviews.

### How do I design a focus group study?

Before the focus group begins, you should create a **discussion guide**, or a basic script that includes opening and closing statements; topics for discussion; and any instructions or information that you plan to share with the group. Your discussion guide will be submitted for human subjects institutional review board (IRB) approval, along with your general research plan, sampling strategy, and informed consent form. The informed consent form should notify participants of the study's purpose; what they can expect during the focus group; the risks and benefits of participation; and how data will be used and protected. You may obtain signatures on these sheets while you are recruiting participants or as they arrive at the site of the focus group. In some cases, verbal consent may be preferred; be sure to check with your IRB about informed consent requirements.

Your discussion guide should contain a list of the main questions you plan to address. Compared to interview guides, focus group guides tend to be fairly brief, containing only a few questions so as to allow the group discussion to take its natural course. Your questions must be designed to inform your research.

Finally, your guide should allow for time at the end of the discussion for participants to debrief. Give participants the opportunity to raise any concerns with the discussion and provide your contact information in case any further issues arise. You may wish to conclude with a summary of the group's discussion to reinforce its central points and a reminder to participants that the discussion should be held in confidence.

## How do I recruit participants?

The first step to recruiting participants is determining who can give you the information you seek. For example, after a disaster, will speaking with any volunteers suffice, or would it be more helpful to speak to volunteers who traveled long distances to the disaster site? Keep in mind that specific is not always synonymous with better.

Your participants should be homogenous on at least one important characteristic: single parents, teenagers, or emergency room nurses are examples of groups whose similar traits will presumably yield synergy on some discussion points. However, their attitudes, experiences, and values likely differ in ways that will generate discussion, and perhaps even disagreement. Within these differences lies valuable data, allowing the researcher to compare experiences and draw conclusions. The group as a whole should not be your unit of analysis; to make it so assumes consensus among all group members and ignores potentially significant differences (Onwuegbuzie, Dickinson, Leech, & Zoran, 2009).

Group composition is also key to promoting a sense of safety and ensuring that all members have a voice. When determining who to invite, consider, for example, who may be of higher social status and thus have a more dominant voice in the conversation, or who may be left out of your chosen sampling method. For instance, if you want to conduct interviews with emergency managers, consider how the chain of command and the rank of participants might influence their ability to share freely in a group interview setting.

Finding a sufficient number of participants who meet your focus group criteria may be time-consuming, but depending on the characteristics of the individuals you wish to participate, different strategies for recruitment may yield better results. Peek and Fothergill (2009) outline three types of recruitment:

- 1. Researcher-driven recruitment** places the responsibility on the researcher for locating potential participants, asking them to take part in the focus group, and communicating with them throughout the process to ensure they have all relevant information.
- 2. Key informant recruitment** involves working with stakeholders connected to the community of interest who can facilitate contacts with potential participants. Key informants are especially useful for recruiting less visible or hard-to-reach populations.
- 3. Spontaneous recruitment** is unplanned and occurs when several participants offer to be interviewed at the same time. For instance, if participants' friends or family enter the space where you are already conducting an interview, they may offer to join the conversation and the interview may need to be turned into a focus group.

Whatever recruitment strategy you use, don't be shy about using your personal and professional networks; they can be extremely helpful in building your focus group, whether simply recommending strategies for finding participants or actively aiding in recruitment.

## How many participants should be invited to take part in the focus group?

There is no "correct" number of participants in each focus group. However, aiming for no more than 7-8 participants will help keep the conversation manageable while still providing an opportunity for differences to emerge. Peek and Fothergill (2009) found that smaller groups allowed participants to more fully discuss the topic and eliminated problems with a few individuals dominating the conversation, as is common in larger groups. Once you've decided on the appropriate number of participants, Onwuegbuzie and colleagues (2009) recommend over-recruiting by 20-50% to account for no-shows on the day of the focus group.

## How many focus groups should I hold?

To a large extent, your research plan, funding, and timeline will dictate the number of focus groups you conduct. If, for example, your research targets several population groups, you will need to hold more sessions. Even if you only target one population group, plan to hold at least 2 sessions to find patterns in your data.

## What should I keep in mind while planning my focus group?

- Ensure the focus group's location is convenient to your participants.
- To the extent possible, aim for a neutral, quiet, and private setting.
- Try to secure a small microphone to help amplify voices and to ensure a clear audio recording of the focus group, if you are planning to record.
- Your focus group should last approximately 1-2 hours, allowing time for sufficient discussion without imposing fatigue. Depending on your participants' ages or other considerations, your session may be shorter.
- Consider your participants' comfort. For example, you may wish to provide snacks or beverages. In doing so, remain aware of participants' cultural and potential dietary restrictions.

## How should the focus group be structured?

To alleviate stress on the day of the focus group, consider working with a colleague who can help you take notes or manage the group's logistics, leaving you free to facilitate conversation. Your opening statement should reiterate important points from your informed consent document. Next, you should address how the discussion will progress and give disclosures about any planned recording. Before the focus group begins, it is important to decide how you will proceed if any group member is uncomfortable with recording. One option is to ask the group member if they would instead prefer to conduct a one-on-one interview; you may also decide to forego recording. Remind participants that even though you will not disclose their information, you cannot guarantee that fellow participants will adhere to expectations regarding confidentiality. Finally, make sure participants are aware that they are not required to answer any questions they find uncomfortable, and that they may leave the conversation or take a break at any time.

After your opening statement, allow time for participants to introduce themselves. Each participant should have a chance to speak without interruption at this point. Consider giving the group guidelines for introductions rather than a broad invitation to speak at-length; for example, you may ask, "Please tell us your name, the neighborhood you live in, and one sentence about why you came to today's discussion."

## What are some strategies for effective conversations?

- Establishing trust and rapport with the group is critical to gathering useful data. Try to relate to group members by using active listening techniques, finding commonalities, and demonstrating empathy.
- Even if you are recording the group's discussion, plan to take notes. Write down your impressions of group interplay, tone of voice, body language, and other non-verbal cues.
- As with interviews, participants may lead you in new directions that provide unexpected context. Be open to changing the conversation accordingly.
- The nature of focus groups may encourage participants to share "horror stories" (Barbour, 2008, p. 82). Be prepared to gently steer participants back on-topic if these narratives are not useful to your research question.
- Don't be afraid of silence; give participants a few moments to formulate their replies. If your group is still not responsive to your question, consider rephrasing it to make it more accessible.
- Have a strategy for handling domineering or difficult group members. If you are aware that your topic is particularly contentious or emotions are heightened, consider rehearsing some de-escalation techniques.
- When possible, try to direct questions to people who have not spoken to make sure their voice is heard.
- Don't immediately panic if disagreements arise in the group. Unless your group members are engaging in personal attacks or using abusive language, light verbal debates can provide valuable insight.

## Should participants be compensated for participating in a focus group?

Researchers should think carefully about appropriate ways to thank participants in exchange for their input. Material incentives, such as gift cards, are a popular option. However, the intangible benefits of focus groups are of value as well. Focus groups allow participants to "share their stories with others and to develop a sense of solidarity with people who are going through similar experiences or have similar life circumstances" (Peek and Fothergill, 2009:49-50). This may energize participants and provide them with valuable social support as well as recognition of the importance of their story.

## REFERENCES AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

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