

# Focus Group Discussion

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**T**his paper introduces focus groups and their methodology. It gives practical advice about the different aspects of conducting focus group discussions: composition of groups, running groups, and analyzing results.

Focus groups are a form of group interviews. They are conducted to obtain detailed information about a particular topic or issue. Focus groups were originally called as focus interviews and were developed after World War II to evaluate the audience responses to radio programmes. They were found to be useful, simple and a convenient way to collect information from several people simultaneously. Focus groups are useful in exploring people's knowledge and experiences. They can be employed to examine what people think, how they think and the reasons behind their thinking. They have become a popular method in assessing patients' beliefs and attitudes about health and illness and are commonly employed in health service research.

## Rationale

The rationale behind the method is that the group process can reach and clarify areas which are not usually ac-

cessible in individual interviews. It allows participants to explore issues in their own language and vocabulary, generating and exploring issues and themes which are important to them. Different forms of communication can be employed: anecdotes, news, jokes, arguments, etc. Different attitudes, which are not often elicited by direct questioning, can be picked up through such groups. Focus groups are particularly useful in eliciting information from people who cannot read or write and from people who are intimidated by formal interview and data collection techniques.

## Advantages

The advantages of focus groups include: (i) Many people can be interviewed simultaneously within a short time span (ii) They encourage participation from people who are reluctant to be interviewed on their own (because they may be intimidated by the formality and isolation of a one to one interview) (iii) They can encourage contribution from people who may feel they have nothing to say but engage in the discussion generated by other group members. (iv) The responses and the opinions are obtained in depth (v) Focus groups are less expensive (vi) Researchers can directly interact with respondents, which al-

lows for clarification and probing (vii) Focus groups provide real life data (viii) Focus groups can be used to elicit cultural beliefs, attitudes and group norms (ix) They can be used to discuss embarrassing topics which people are uncomfortable in usually talking about (x) Focus groups are very flexible and can be used with wide range of topics, individuals and settings (xi) The process can be used to allow people to become involved in the decision making process.

## Planning

Focus group requires a lot of planning. When preparing for the focus group discussion several aspects of the process have to be kept in mind: who will participate? What questions will be asked? Where will be the discussion held? And who will conduct the sessions?

**(a) The Moderator and the recorder:** Focus groups require two people to conduct: a moderator and a person who helps record the discussion. The moderator plays a key role in the success of a focus group. Leading a focus group requires combined skills of an ethnographer, a survey researcher and a therapist. The moderator should be alert to dynamics of the group. He/She should watch for dominant members of the group and encourage shy participants. The

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moderator needs to have a good balance between encouraging lively discussions and maintaining a focus on the topic to be discussed.

The person recording the process (recorder) assists the moderator. The session should be recorded on audio/video-taped and recorded verbatim on paper.

**(b) Development of a discussion guide:** Approximately 10 questions can be used for the discussion. The questions should be clearly planned but it should appear to be presented spontaneously during the interview. The following needs to be considered while constructing the questions:

- (i) The discussion can be opened using a case vignette or a common example.
- (ii) Open-ended questions should be used. There is a need to avoid using closed questions (where yes and no answers are possible).
- (iii) Rarely employ "Why" questions because it tend to imply a rational answer.
- (iv) Questions should be arranged in a logical sequence.
- (v) Allow for unanticipated questions and discussion.

The same questions employed as a discussion guide should be used in all groups, if more than one group is being studied.

**(c) Selection of participants:** Most focus groups rely on purposive sampling, with researchers selecting

participants based on the project and on the potential contribution of participants. Alternately participants can be selected from a large group that should be able to give insight in to the topic. In selecting people, the moderator should aim to invite people who will give the highest quality of information. The ideal number of people in a group is 4 to 8.

Many groups with people from different backgrounds will provide a range of beliefs, attitudes and experiences. Socio-economic status, ethnic background, educational and occupational class and gender are important in selecting participants. While homogeneity within each group will bring together shared beliefs and experience, heterogeneity within groups will highlight diverse views on the topic. Heterogeneous groups will have to be carefully monitored as hierarchy within groups can bias the discussion by not allowing an equal platform for all members to express their views. Groups with people known to each other (e.g. those who work together) can be useful as they can challenge contradictions between beliefs expressed, attitudes held and manifest behavior. Communication difficulties between participants (e.g. hearing impaired, elderly, etc) should not rule out group work, but must be considered as a factor.

**(d) Time, date and location of focus group:** The venue and the time are chosen according to the participants'

convenience. If the participants need to travel; it may be necessary to reimburse travel costs. The average time to conduct the discussion is between 90-120 minutes. Generally refreshments are offered on arrival or at the end of the session.

**(e) Invitation to the participants:** The moderator needs to have an agreement for the method of inviting the participants. The invitation can be through verbal or written invitation or by one of the more modern methods of communication i.e. telephone, or email. The reasons and process of the focus group should be explained to the participants and informed consent obtained.

**(f) Equipments needed:** A tape or video recorder with a microphone is required to record the discussion. The advantage of video taping the discussion is that it allows the research team to easily make note of the important quotes and comments made during the session and also to observe the nonverbal communication of the participants. The use of audio-tape recorder would also require the person helping with recording the focus group to note down nonverbal information.

### **Conducting groups**

The moderator needs to ensure that the room is comfortable and the seating allows the participants to see and interact with each other (e.g. seated in a circle). The microphone should easily accessible to all participants. If

the discussion is being video-recorded, it should be positioned to provide the widest angle possible. The moderator starts the session by introducing the members to each and thanking the group for their time. The objectives of the discussion are restated and the participants are assured about confidentiality. A brief explanation about the usage of data collected is helpful.

The moderator should explain that the aim of the discussion is to encourage people to talk to each other rather than to address themselves to the researcher. The moderator can start with a vignette describing the issues. The discussion guide developed for the session should be used to move on to the different aspects of the issue under discussion. The researcher may take a back seat at first but can later adopt a more interventionist style; urging the debate to continue, encouraging the group to discuss the inconsistencies and explore issues in depth. Differing opinions should be used to explore disagreements and to clarify differing stands.

The moderator should encourage all the participants to speak whatever is on their mind. The discussion session should last for approximately one to one and half hours. If the discussion exceeds the expected duration the moderator can seek permission from the participants to extend the session. The moderator should give enough time for feedback. The moderator should summarize the key issues and the action

that will be taken as a result of their contribution at the end of the session. Finally, the moderator should thank the group for their participation.

### Analyzing data

The moderator and the assistant should listen to/view the tape and transcribe the discussion verbatim. The original transcripts are highlighted using different colours. Every line and paragraph should be coded for relevant themes. The themes are identified in response to the key questions. As the themes are developed, the researcher gives a working definition for each code. Rarely used codes are omitted and sometimes new codes are developed. This is an ongoing process until saturation is reached i.e. no more new codes or categories emerge. The researcher should draw together and compare discussions of similar themes. The consensus and the differing individual opinions should both be highlighted. The issues related to the group dynamic should also be incorporated in the report. The quotations will help to illuminate the general meaning of what was said. The focus group reporting should be in a descriptive form which highlights the different beliefs, attitudes and practices. Numbers and percentages are not appropriate for the focus group research. Recent computer programmes which analyze such qualitative data, have been developed and are used in research.

### Disadvantages

The disadvantages of the method include: (i) Some participants may feel inhibited

in expressing their views while others may dominate the session (ii) It requires a carefully trained interviewer (moderator) who is knowledgeable and can manage such groups to facilitate the discussion.

### Conclusion

Focus groups are a good starting point for health service research. Focus groups have become a central approach in sociological, anthropological and educational research. Focus groups are not an easy option and the data they generate can be cumbersome and complex. Yet the method is basically straightforward and need not be intimidating. Focus groups are very useful in eliciting beliefs, attitudes, experiences and behavior—both the consensus and the minority opinions.

### Further reading

- \* Bernard, H.R. (1994) Research methods in Anthropology (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition) Sage Publications, London, p 224–229.
- \* Stommel, M., Wills, C.E. (2004) Concepts and principles for advanced practice Nurses, Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, London, p282–284
- \* Owen, S. (2001) The practical, methodological and ethical dilemmas of conducting focus groups with vulnerable clients *Journals of Advanced Nursing*, 36, 652–58.
- \* Kitzinger, J. (1995) Qualitative Research: Introducing focus groups, *BMJ* 311, 299–302.