

DOING BETTER FOCUS GROUPS: A HOW TO GUIDE

DSAI RESEARCH METHODS SUMMER SCHOOL
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Seminar Aims

- **To develop an understanding of why focus groups might be used in a research context; what they can do and what they can not do.**
- **To understand the practical and methodological issues that need to be considered prior to the planning and conduct of focus groups.**
- **To learn about the importance of focus group moderation and the role of the moderator.**
- **To understand the strengths and limitations of focus groups.**

Contents

- ◆ **Brief History of Focus Groups**
- ◆ **Characteristics of Focus Groups**
- ◆ **How are Focus Groups Used?**
- ◆ **Moderating the Focus Group**
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- ◆ **Challenges with the Conduct of Focus Groups**
- ◆ **Focus Groups: Strengths and Problems**



BRIEF HISTORY OF FOCUS GROUPS

FOCUS GROUPS
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Brief History of Focus Groups

- ❑ Focus groups originated in market research during the 1920s.
- ❑ They were first developed as a social science research method in the U.S. by Robert Merton & colleagues as a way of evaluating wartime propaganda.
- ❑ Since the 1980s there has been increasing interest in the use of focus groups across different fields of social, cultural and policy research.
- ❑ Over the last years there has been a three-fold increase in the number of focus group studies published in academic journals.
- ❑ FGs gained and have retained a high profile as a method for guiding political campaign advertising and governments' image-management.



"HIGGINS! HAVE WE FOCUS-GROUPED RESTORING SANITY VS. KEEPING FEAR ALIVE YET?"



CHARACTERISTICS OF FOCUS GROUPS

FOCUS GROUPS
CHARACTERISTICS OF

Characteristics of Focus Groups

- ❑ The interactive quality is a key feature of focus group research.
- ❑ The unit of analysis is the group, rather than the individuals taking part in the discussion. **Focus groups are not simply means of interviewing several people at the same time**; rather, they are concerned to explore:
 - ❖ the formation and negotiation of accounts within a group context,
 - ❖ how people define, discuss and contest issues through social interaction.
- ❑ Underlying this approach is an assumption that opinions, attitudes and accounts are socially produced – shaped by interaction with others – rather than being discretely formed at the level of the individual.
- ❑ Moreover, the focus group context makes visible how people articulate and justify their ideas in relation to others.

Characteristics of Focus Groups

- ❑ The purpose of focus groups is to obtain qualitative information from a predetermined and limited number of people.
- ❑ The focus group provides an environment in which disclosures are encouraged and nurtured, but the task of the interview is to BRING “FOCUS” to these disclosures through the use of open-ended questions within a relatively permissive environment.
- ❑ This methodology does not allow for direct observation of behaviour, as would be the case with ethnographic methods; it merely enables the researcher to record their beliefs and attitudes.
- ❑ In contrast to individual interviews, focus group participants relate their experiences and reactions among presumed peers with whom they are likely to share some common frame of reference or experience.

Characteristics of Focus Groups

- ❑ Focus group members often comment on each other's point of view, often challenging each other's motives and actions (sometimes in a pointed way).
- ❑ With group interviews, agreements and disagreements are fundamental processes that influence the nature and content of responses as the discussion progresses.
- ❑ During a session, focus group members may modify their opinions, or at least their statements about them, based on the give and take of discussion as the group progresses.



HOW ARE FOCUS GROUPS USED?

GROUPS USED?
HOW ARE FOCUS

How are Focus Groups Used?

- ❑ **Focus groups are used in a number of different research contexts:**
 - ◆ ***Media and communications studies*** to explore issues of audience reception.
 - ◆ ***Consultation or evaluation*** research to examine user demands and responses to services and agencies.
 - ◆ ***Organisational research*** to look at staff or members' views and opinions.
 - ◆ More generally, in the ***interpretive study of social and cultural attitudes*** on a range of issues.

- ❑ Focus groups are, therefore, relevant to both **applied social research** with a strong policy or practical orientation, and to **theoretical research** that seeks to explore social and cultural meanings, knowledge and discourses.

- ❑ **One of the major advantages of focus groups is that they frequently throw up unanticipated perspectives and insights.**

It's so hard to
read the public
mood..



By the time you
delete all the expletives
there's almost nothing left.

When is it Appropriate to Use Focus Groups?

- ◆ Focus groups are *ideal for exploring people's experiences*, opinions, wishes and concerns.
- ◆ The method is particularly *useful for allowing participants to generate their own questions and concepts* and to pursue their own priorities in their own terms, in their own vocabulary.
- ◆ FG's enable researchers to examine *people's different perspectives as they operate within a social network*.
- ◆ Crucially, group work explores *how accounts are articulated, censured, opposed and changed through social interaction* and how this relates to peer communication and group norms.
- ◆ The strategy enables information to be gathered on perceptions, beliefs, and values of a group's participants and is *particularly well suited to addressing cultural characteristics of everyday life*.

When NOT to Use the FG Method

- ❖ When the *discussion could be come emotionally charged*.
- ❖ When the *potential for conflict between participants* is too great.
- ❖ When *detailed personal information is required* to answer the research questions.
- ❖ When *confidentiality could be compromised*.
- ❖ When *other methods* (e.g. in-depth or semi-structured interview) *would produce better quality data*.

Focus Groups and Qualitative Methods

- ◆ **Focus groups have a dual relation to interview methods**, providing both a tool in research design and a complementary method of data collection.
- ◆ Focus groups and interviews can be used **in conjunction with each other** in the body of the research.
- ◆ The difference between focus groups and individual interviews is not simply a questions of openness versus confidentiality or of generality versus detail. **The two methods produce distinct forms of data**, and it can be argued that they are premised on quite separate models of social action and meaning.



PRACTICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

CONSIDERATIONS
METHODOLOGICAL
PRACTICAL AND

Practical and Methodological Considerations

1. HOW MANY GROUPS DO YOU NEED?

This depends on a number of factors:

Are you planning to use other data gathering methods (triangulation)?

Have you already gathered data or do you already have familiarity with the topic?

One group is seen as too little, and the norm is about 3/5. When the content starts to become repetitive you know you have reached “theoretical saturation”; in other words, you have covered all the main topics and there is little to be gained by having more groups.

Practical and Methodological Considerations

2. HOW MANY PARTICIPANTS SHOULD YOU HAVE IN A GROUP?

There is no hard and fast rule here; but the norm is to have 6/10 participants.

If the topic is emotive, it is advisable to keep the numbers small so that everyone has the opportunity to speak.

If the topic is sensitive, it is advisable to have smaller groups.

In selecting/sampling for the purpose of conducting focus groups, a balance between homogeneity and heterogeneity is useful.



MODERATING THE FOCUS GROUP

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THE
MODERATING

The Focus Group Discussion Guide

- The Focus Group Discussion Guide is your **RESEARCH INSTRUMENT**, just as the Interview Schedule is for an interview-based research project.
- In general, FG Discussion Guides are far shorter than Interview Schedules: typically, 4-6 topics are chosen and a number of questions 'scripted' for each of these topics.
- The questions should be open-ended because of the intent of the FG to promote discussion.
- After selecting the topics (and questions), order them into a logical flow and develop prompts.
 - ❖ *A prompt is a question that can facilitate discussion if there is not a good response to the initial question.*
- Also develop probes for key questions.

An Example of a FG Discussion Guide:

Junior Cycle Students' Experience of Relationship and Sexuality Education

Learning about Sex and Sexual Health

- Do you think it's important for people your age to learn about sex and sexual health?
- Would you say there's a good age or time for young people to start learning about sex and sexual health?
- Where would you say people your age learn most about sex and sexual health (probe: friends, school, parents, internet etc).

School-based RSE

- Can you tell me about the kinds of sex education classes you have had in school?

- What kinds of topics have you covered/talked about?
- What did you think of the classes?
- What would you say was good/bad about the classes?
- About how many classes have you had so far?
- Do you think RSE classes are important?

Who Should Teach RSE?

- Who usually teaches you RSE?
- How do you feel about talking to teachers about sex/sexual health (probe)?

An Example of a FG Discussion Guide:

Junior Cycle Students' Experience of Relationship and Sexuality Education

- Has a person from outside the school ever talked you about these issues? If yes, what was that like?
- If you had a choice, who would you prefer as a teacher of RSE?

What Do You Need to Know?

- If you had a say in what was taught to people your age, what would you include in your classes (probe: contraception, dealing with relationships etc.)?
- What do you think about discussing these kinds of issues in class? How does it feel?

- Is there anything that might make it easier or more comfortable?
- Do people participate in discussions in your RSE classes?

RSE in Your School

- Do you think you are getting enough teaching in the area of sex education.
- Are you happy with what's being taught?
- Are there other topics you would like to be taught in these classes?
- Do you talk to your parents/friends about RSE classes?

Moderating the Focus Group

During the focus group the moderator should:

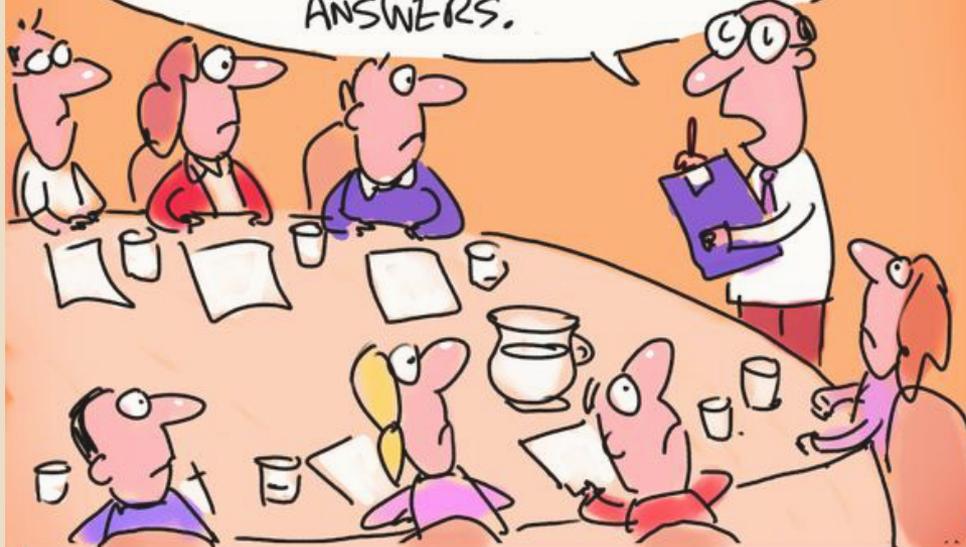
- ◆ Introduce the topic to be discussed.
- ◆ Ask questions in a fairly informal way (USE EVERYDAY LANGUAGE).
- ◆ Allow the group to develop its own dynamic.
- ◆ Use group work skills, such as probing, listening, summarising and acting as a gatekeeper for quieter members.
- ◆ Check for different or alternative views.

The moderator must be prepared to listen neutrally and with respect to views which differ from your own or which challenge your hypotheses.

Moderating the Focus Group

KUDELKA.

WELCOME TO THE FOCUS GROUP.
PLEASE LISTEN CAREFULLY AS POINTS
WILL BE DEDUCTED FOR INCORRECT
ANSWERS.



THE VOICE OF THE CUSTOMER RESEARCH PROGRAM
WASN'T REALLY PRODUCING ACTIONABLE FEEDBACK.

Moderating the Focus Group

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xjHZsEcSqwo>



CHALLENGES WITH THE CONDUCT OF FOCUS GROUPS

CONDUCT OF FOCUS GROUPS
CHALLENGES WITH THE

Challenges



Challenges

- ◆ For the researcher, a focus group is more difficult to control than an individual research interview; if the group works well creates its own dynamic, with members responding to one another rather than to the researcher, and this dynamic may lead to a more spontaneous and less guarded style of communication.
- ◆ The moderator must combine group work skill with a familiarity with the research questions; sometimes it is suggested that an excessive familiarity with the topic is unhelpful, particularly if the moderator has strong personal views.
- ◆ Particular issues of confidentiality and anonymity arise in the group setting.
- ◆ The problem of 'over disclosure' i.e. members disclosing personal details.

HOW CAN THESE CHALLENGES BE ADDRESSED?

Challenges

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out-of-focus group



FOCUS GROUPS: STRENGTHS AND PROBLEMS

STRENGTHS AND PROBLEMS
FOCUS GROUPS:

Strengths of Focus Groups

1. **They are a fairly easy method of data collection, which can be undertaken on a small scale by researchers with limited resources.**
2. **They are good at accessing respondents' own definitions and understanding, and at give them a significant degree of involvement within the research process.**
3. **They work well with other research methods – either in multi-method approaches to data collection, or in terms of refining research problems and interpreting data produced by other methods.**
4. **They generate data on the basis of social interaction and communication; in this sense, they reflect the social and cultural processes through which meanings, opinions and attitudes are shaped.**

Problems with Focus Groups

1. Researchers have less control over the data that emerge than they have with individual interviews. The potential gain to the participants, in this sense, can be seen as a loss of power on the part of the researcher.
2. Focus groups do not meet conventional standards of reliability in social research, and are an insecure basis for generalisation.
3. It follows that any claims a researcher makes in terms of developing insights into social attitudes cannot be matched by systematic claims as to the representativeness of these attitudes.
4. While focus groups seek to reproduce the interactive nature of 'real' social processes, they are not in themselves naturally occurring interactions, and offer no guarantee as to what people say, or how they interact, outside the research context.



"Geez, you're the worst focus group I've ever seen."