# Focus Group

## Transcript

Video: https://youtu.be/IL02k3TnnUc

Full resource, see: https://www.ncrm.ac.uk/resources/online/all/?id=20852

Welcome to this online tutorial on the focus group method.

Focus groups are a qualitative method. They are used to obtain a wide variety of views or opinions in social research from social actors or different groups including, for example, citizens, community members and groups, customers, policymakers, politicians, business leaders or experts. With focus groups, participants are selected based on their knowledge or experience of the topic or issue to be explored. The interactions which participants have during a focus group are crucial for providing insights into their different views or their different perspectives.

What do we need to think about when designing our focus groups? First of all, we need to consider the number of participants we would like to have in each of our focus groups. This can vary typically from anywhere between 4 and 12 participants in each focus group, however, it's not to say that you can’t also go beyond this number. This will then mean you need to consider different factors such as the number of moderators you have available to run those larger focus groups and we'll come back to this point on moderation in a few minutes time.

Participants in focus groups will typically be strangers, however, there can be instances where we're running groups with those who already know each other or have a pre-existing relationship, such as coworkers in an organisation or students at the same university. Focus groups will often involve some kind of payment and/or incentivisation for participation. They can also be a singular data collection event or conducted in a series over time. Additionally, we need to think about how focus groups can function as an open and supportive space in which participants can talk about and open up about sensitive issues and life experiences.

The number of focus groups in one study will also depend on a variety of factors, including the research question at hand, the scale size of our study and the resources we have available, access to participants and also the level of comparisons that we're drawing on both within and across our focus groups and this relates to the importance of group composition where we need to have insurance that participants have enough in common with each other to engage in a focus group discussion, but also they need to have varied perspectives to allow for debate or differences of opinion.

Focus groups are conducted in a semi structured manner. The focus group guide usually involves questions which are open-ended and exploratory, but also they're flexible. So, although we'll ask the same questions or cover the same topics in each focus group, there's space, room and time for us to explore different points, issues, questions that participants might want to surface and discuss as long as they're relevant to the research question and focus. Icebreaker activities can also be used to encourage discussion and introductions at the beginning, help with voice recognition for the purposes of transcription. The focus group agenda will typically consist of engagement questions, exploration questions and exit questions, however, moderators may also want to draw on focusing exercises or stimulus material to help focus and concentrate the group's attention on the particular topic or issue at hand, but also to make it engaging and to keep their attention. There are a variety of different examples of focusing activities that we can draw on, some of them mentioned here on the slide, but this isn’t an exhaustive list. However, you might want to consider activities such as card sorting, polls or votes, coming to a consensus, engaging in a debate, problem solving, providing feedback on products and their design using timelines, mind maps, whiteboards and many others.

Another important factor in the design of our focus groups is how we can consider building rapport both between moderators and participants, but also between the participants themselves in each focus group, and essentially rapport is a way of building trust. So, icebreakers, introductions and examples of those focusing activities and questions might be needed at the beginning of a focus group as well.

Effective moderation is key to running a successful focus group discussion. The number of moderators used for each focus group will vary, so this can range from one to two or depending on the different tasks moderators are engaging in, the size of the focus groups, and also the delivery of different activities and material. Moderators can also play an important role in taking notes, recording the discussion, which are useful insights to accompany your transcription of the focus group recording.

The moderator needs to be able to build rapport amongst participants, encourage group interactions, ensure participants talk amongst themselves and respond to one another, but also keep the discussion on track and ensure everything is covered in terms of questions, activities and also that the focus group keeps to time. Moderating styles will vary considerably and they can range from just being passive and removed to being more engaged and interactive, and this will depend on the different dynamics of each focus group which will necessitate different levels of involvement from the moderator also as they manage different types of participant.

A note taker, as I said, could be useful to record observations which accompany your audio recording of the discussion. They can take notes on a variety of aspects, group dynamics, group interactions, participants’ responses to questions, body language, analytical insights and also feedback on moderation skills.

Focus groups can be delivered in a variety of styles, online and also in person. Online focus groups can be run synchronous or asynchronous depending on the platform that you have availability to. The benefits of online focus groups, they can widen the pool of available participants geographically, however, we need to be aware of the risk of selection bias and a digital divide.

The principles and purposes of online focus groups remain the same as focus groups run in person, however, we can't directly transfer what we would do in person focus groups to the online context. We need to think about the various methodological, practical and ethical challenges and considerations in running qualitative data collection in online spaces. There are also additional ethical concerns with regard to data privacy and confidentiality online.

As I mentioned, online focus groups can be synchronous or asynchronous. Examples of asynchronous focus groups include text based discussions on chat forums or on mobile phone platforms or social media tools such as WhatsApp. Synchronous online focus groups can be facilitated through audio visual conferencing technologies such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams.

When we're moderating online focus groups, we have more work to do to foster group interactions as these can often be disrupted by the detached and remote nature of online communication which, for example, makes it more difficult to read body language and to foster a group setting and group atmosphere.

The analysis and interpretation of focus group data requires care because focus groups generate different data to that which we might glean from, for example, individual, qualitative interviews. We have to ensure that we analyse data within the context of each focus group discussion and avoid separating out individual statements or views from the focus group. The focus group as a unit of data has to be analysed in a way which recognises the context in which perspectives are shared and generated. The level of analysis that you want to use for focus group data can also vary. This can be from a more superficial analysis, which maybe produces a descriptive narrative of accounts, or a more in-depth analysis which draws on various qualitative data analysis approaches such as grounded theory, thematic analysis, framework analysis, to really delve into the content, but also the meaning of the data and the interactions within the data.

In qualitative research, reflexivity is now a key principle. So, we need to, as researchers, reflect on the context and means of data creation and construction in our focus group research. We should consider the influence of moderators on the focus group, moderator positionality and how the focus group discussion was created and shaped. When designing our focus groups, we must also be mindful of key ethical considerations including consent, anonymity, confidentiality, privacy and right to withdraw.

Also, when we're conducting focus group research on sensitive topics or experiences or where there are potentials for vulnerabilities or distress, additional mitigations must be taken to ensure safety and wellbeing of our participants.

So, to summarise this online tutorial, focus groups are really beneficial for helping us to address a variety of questions and insights in social research. However, they are not the same as conducting group interviews or conducting multiple individual interviews in one setting in a quick and efficient way. They're a different qualitative method entirely and they generate a very different type of data where we're creating those insights through different perspectives, different views and the interaction that our participants have and the way that they construct those together. They're also really beneficial for exploring the views of marginalised groups, citizens, people's lived experiences, expert knowledge, community membership or, for example, the dynamics of political processes and decision-making or customer experiences and journeys. They are flexible, the way that we use them is varied and their utility goes beyond merely exploring what people think to also helping us explore why they think as they do. They provide a unique insight in social research which goes beyond those insights provided by other qualitative methods, such as individual interviews or surveys.

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