

International Focus Group Research

A practical and authoritative guide to conducting focus group discussions in health and social science research, with particular emphasis on using focus groups in developing country settings. Monique M. Hennink describes the procedures and challenges of each stage of international focus group research. This book demonstrates how to balance scientific rigor with the challenges of the research context, and guides readers to making informed research decisions. It includes unique field perspectives and case study examples of research in practice.

Topics covered include:

- Planning international field research
- Developing a fieldwork timetable and budget
- Seeking research permissions
- Translating research instruments
- Training a field team
- Developing a culturally appropriate discussion guide
- Participant recruitment strategies
- Conducting focus groups in another language
- Managing discussions in outdoor locations
- Group size and composition issues
- Transcription and translation of the group discussions
- Data analysis and reporting focus group research

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Preface

There exist a large number of books on conducting focus group discussions, however, most texts have an implicit assumption that the focus group research will be conducted in western settings. These texts provide little guidance for those embarking on focus group research in developing countries. While many of the principles of focus group research remain the same despite the context, the practical application will often differ. Existing texts provide no guidance on conducting focus groups in another language, developing a culturally appropriate discussion guide, translation issues, training a field team, seeking research permissions, using tape-recorders in culturally conservative settings and a range of other practical issues. As a result novice users of the method remain uncertain of how to apply the principles of focus group research to developing country settings. Unfortunately, this uncertainty often leads to the absence of rigorous science with inevitably poor quality outcomes.

There exists a great deal of experiential knowledge amongst those who have conducted international focus group research, there are accepted procedures and common strategies that we use for applying the method and for managing difficult situations, but little of this knowledge is published to assist those embarking on focus group research in developing countries for the first time. Therefore, this book is written in response to frequent requests from researchers and research students for advice on how to conduct focus group discussions, particularly in developing country contexts, and to respond to the common concern ‘Am I doing it right?’ The intention of this book is to document the procedures, practices and challenges in applying the method to various research contexts. Following on from this, a second aim of the book is to encourage greater transparency in the conduct of focus group research. Often the application of focus group research is only superficially reported in research documents, so there is little indication of how the method was applied in practice. It is hoped that this book will assist researchers to report the use of the method and the decisions made during fieldwork with more confidence if there is a documented guide to good practice in international fieldwork.

The third aim of this book is to demonstrate how to balance methodological rigor with the challenges of the research context. Good quality focus group research, regardless of the context in which it is conducted, should reflect certain theoretical principles and be based on informed methodological decisions. Too often methodological rigor is overtaken by the management of fieldwork challenges. This book intends to assist researchers to understand the value of embracing theoretical issues in producing quality research outcomes and in guiding the numerous decisions throughout the research design and the data collection. It also highlights some of the methodological debates to enable researchers to anticipate certain decisions and make informed choices during the research process.

This book is for those who conduct, review and use focus group research. It is primarily intended for researchers (both academic and non-government), doctoral students and their supervisors, in both developed and developing countries. It is also useful for those who review focus group research or research proposals to identify whether appropriate methodological considerations have been included; and for those who use the results of focus group research to enable them to assess the quality of a study. This book is equally applicable for researchers new to the focus group method as well as those who have used the method but only in a developed country context. The structure of the book follows a basic task-chronology, with each chapter addressing a different stage or aspect of the method. The book begins by describing the range of tasks in planning international focus group research, the subsequent chapters detail various aspects in conducting the group discussions, data preparation and analysis, and the book finishes with issues relating to reporting the findings of focus group research. At the end of each chapter is a summary of the critical issues and a list of key terms that may not be familiar to all readers.

This book is based primarily on my own experience in conducting qualitative research in numerous developing countries over the last decade. However, in developing this book I also conducted interviews with other researchers and research students on their experiences in conducting focus group discussions. These were researchers from both developed and developing countries who conducted focus group research in developing country contexts. Learning from the experiences of others is extremely valuable and extracts from these interviews are included throughout the book to provide a unique field perspective of both positive and negative experiences. It is hoped that the inclusion of these experiences will help readers to better relate the issues described to the context in which their own focus group research is conducted.

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