

1 Introduction to focus group research

Chapter overview

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Introduction

Focus group discussions have been in the toolkit of social scientists for some time now. In more recent decades the use of focus group discussions has increased amongst the health and social sciences as a tool to inform policy and practice. For example, focus group discussions have been used in health and behavioural research, strategic planning, health promotion, policy development and programme evaluation. The increased use of focus group discussions is partly due to a broader acceptability of qualitative methods in these disciplines, but also due to a greater emphasis on the inclusion of qualitative methods in mixed-method research designs, to respond to research issues not accessible by quantitative approaches. This more recent emphasis on integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches has been encouraged by research funding bodies and has led to a renewed focus on training in mixed-method research design for post-graduates in academic institutions.

The increased use of focus group discussions has led to a greater number and variety of researchers using the method. Focus group discussions are also being applied in a greater variety of settings than in the past. In particular,

focus group discussions are often used in international research, particularly in developing country contexts. For example, health research on issues such as family planning, HIV/AIDS and the development of social and community initiatives now often include focus group discussions in the research methodology. Despite the broader application of focus group discussions in a wide variety of contexts, much of the existing methodological literature is written with an implicit assumption that the method is being applied only in western, developed country contexts. This is reflected in the guidance given for issues such as participant recruitment (i.e. written or telephone recruitment), the location of group discussions (i.e. indoors or formal settings), or the availability of professional moderators. However, when conducting focus group discussions in developing country contexts, often a different approach is taken or researchers are faced with different issues during the fieldwork process. For example, participant recruitment is often conducted verbally and through a community leader; and groups may be conducted outdoors, where the problem of onlookers and lack of privacy need to be addressed. The existing literature provides no guidance on conducting focus groups in another language, developing a culturally appropriate discussion guide, translation of the group discussion, training a field team, the use of 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 often leads to the absence of rigorous science with inevitably poor quality outcomes. While many of the principles of focus group research remain the same despite the context, the practical application of the method will often differ. The aim of this book is, therefore, to provide guidance for researchers conducting focus group discussions in a variety of research contexts, with particular emphasis on application of the method in developing country settings.

This introductory chapter will outline the purpose of the book and its intended audiences. It will highlight the development of focus group discussions, define their characteristics, show the strengths and limitations of the method and describe appropriate applications of focus group research.

Purpose of this book

The purpose of this book is to guide readers through the procedures, practices and challenges in conducting focus group research in varying research

contexts, with a particular emphasis on applying the method in developing country settings. An underlying objective of the book is to describe the conduct of focus group research which takes into consideration the context of the research but without compromising the rigor and scientific application of the method. A second aim of the book is to encourage greater transparency in the conduct of focus group research. Often focus group methodology 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 provide a guide to good practice for using focus group discussions in international settings and give novice researchers more confidence in applying and documenting their own focus group research. 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 decisions throughout the research process. 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. This book is intended to provide a text on focus group research which embraces the application of the method in a variety of research contexts.

Structure and development of the book

The structure of this book follows the process of conducting focus group research, with each chapter addressing a different stage of the method. The

first chapters detail the planning tasks prior to fieldwork (i.e. formalities, ethics, preparation of the discussion guide and training of the field team); subsequent chapters describe the field-based activities (i.e. participant recruitment, group composition and size, location, and conduct of the discussion), the issues of data management (i.e. recording the discussion, data preparation, translation and transcription) and data analysis and reporting. The book has only limited reference to qualitative study design, as these issues are covered sufficiently in other texts on qualitative research.

This book is primarily based on the experience of the author, who has conducted qualitative research in numerous developing countries over the past decade. In addition, the book includes extracts from interviews that the author conducted with other researchers and research students on their experiences of conducting focus group discussions in developing countries. The extracts include experiences of both expatriate researchers as well as those conducting focus group research in their own country. The extracts highlight specific issues, challenges and strategies in conducting focus group discussions in developing country contexts. Learning from the experience of others is extremely valuable; the extracts highlight not only positive field experiences, but also reflections on fieldwork problems, which provide the reader with a unique field perspective on the application of the research method in practice. The quotations from these interviews are referenced by the researcher's status and country in which the research was conducted, for example (Researcher, Mozambique), (Research Student, Cambodia).

What is a focus group discussion?

A focus group discussion is a unique method of qualitative research that involves discussing a specific set of issues with a pre-determined group of people. Focus group research differs from other qualitative methods in its purpose, composition and the process of data collection. The essential purpose of focus group research is to identify a range of different views around the research topic, and to gain an understanding of the issues from the perspective of the participants themselves. The group context is intended to collect more wide-ranging information in a single session than would result from one-to-one interviews.

Focus group methodology was formally developed in the social sciences during the 1940s (David and Sutton 2004), and for several decades its primary application was in the field of market research to determine

consumer views, preferences and behaviour. The focus group method emerged due to the limitations of traditional forms of interviewing, such as the artificial nature of standard interview procedures, the influence of an interviewer on a respondent's comments and the limitations of pre-determined closed questioning on enabling spontaneous responses or identifying new issues (Hennink and Diamond 1999; Flick 2002). These drawbacks of traditional interviewing led to the development of a new approach of *non-directive interviewing*, whereby the interviewer plays a minimal role and the dynamics of a group discussion are used to gather information (Krueger 1988; Flick 2002). The context of a group discussion is thought to create greater spontaneity in the contributions of participants as it replicates everyday social interactions more than a traditional one-to-one interview. The function of non-directive interviewing is to shift the attention away from the dominance of an interviewer to focus on *generating a discussion* between participants on certain issues. The discussion element of the method gives participants greater control of the issues raised in the dialogue, as they are essentially discussing the issues between themselves rather than directly with an interviewer. It is important to recognise that it is the creation of a group dynamic that enables spontaneous issues to arise from the discussion and participants to highlight issues that are of importance to themselves. This element is less likely to occur in an interview that is more interviewer-directed. Ritchie and Lewis (2003: 171) state that, 'In a sense, the group participants take over some of the "interviewing" role, and the researcher is at times more in the position of listening in.' However, they stress that this situation does not lessen the researcher's burden, as focus groups need to be carefully managed for this to happen.

From the early 1980s, there has been a resurgence in the use of focus group discussions in the social sciences. Focus group research has provided valuable information for a wide range of research issues in the social sciences, including health and behavioural research, evaluation of social programs, shaping of public policy, developing health promotion strategies and conducting needs assessments. Focus group methodology is now embraced in the social sciences as one of the central tools of qualitative enquiry. During the 1990s, the use of focus groups in the public sphere became more prominent. Some high profile examples include the use of focus groups in 1997 by the newly elected Labour Party in the United Kingdom to gauge public perceptions of new government policies, in particular the introduction of fees for education. In the same year, focus group discussions were used to gauge public opinion on the role and image of the British royal family.

Focus group research may be defined as follows:

A focus group study is a carefully planned series of discussions designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment. Each group is conducted with six to eight people by a skilled interviewer . . . Group members influence each other by responding to ideas and comments of others. (Krueger and Casey 2000: 5)

Focus group discussions have a number of characteristics which distinguish the method. Focus group discussions are comprised of pre-selected individuals who have similar characteristics or who share some experience of the research topic. Groups typically consist of six to eight participants, but may include anywhere from five to ten participants depending on the purpose of the study. The group discussion is focussed on a specific topic and usually explores only a limited number of issues to allow sufficient time for participants to discuss the issues in detail. The aim of a focus group is not to reach consensus on the issues discussed, but to encourage a range of responses which provide a greater understanding of the attitudes, behaviour, opinions or perceptions of participants on the research issues. The discussion between participants is a key element of focus group discussions, as this situation provides the opportunity for issues to emerge that are unanticipated by the researchers. The group discussion is guided by a trained moderator who introduces each issue and facilitates the discussion in such a way that detailed information is gained on each issue. The questions used by the moderator to stimulate the discussion are carefully designed to appear spontaneous and conversational, but are actually developed through considerable reflection and piloting. A key ingredient to successful focus group discussions is the development of a permissive, non-threatening environment within the group, whereby participants feel comfortable to share their views and experiences without the fear of judgement or ridicule from others.

Strengths and limitations of focus group discussions

The strengths and limitations of focus group discussions are summarised in Figure 1.1. There are many advantages in using focus group discussions, which may be summarised under three main headings; the socially oriented nature of the research procedure, the variety of applications of the method and the group environment of data collection. First, focus group discussions replicate people's natural social interaction rather than an artificial or

Strengths	Limitations
<p>Social setting: Replicates social interaction Naturalistic setting Comfortable and enjoyable</p> <p>Application: Variable structure Wide range of applications (exploratory, explanatory, evaluative) Suitable for stimulus material Useful in multi-method research</p> <p>Group environment: Large volume of information Range of views Limited researcher influence Participants identify issues Identify new issues Spontaneous responses Considered responses Issues debated and justified Seek clarifications Study group interaction</p>	<p>Skills required: Requires skilled moderator Less controlled environment Need 'permissive environment' Risk of bias in participant selection</p> <p>Group dynamics: Some participants may dominate Participants may agree Little discussion Influence of social pressure Hierarchies may develop Less confidential Few issues discussed</p> <p>Data and analysis: Responses are not independent Not suitable for individual data Not for personal or sensitive topics Large volume of textual data Data analysis complex and time consuming Costly</p>

Figure 1.1 Strengths and limitations of focus group discussions

experimental setting as in a quantitative survey or, to some extent, an in-depth interview. Therefore, participants may find the focus group environment comfortable and enjoyable, which is likely to impact on their contribution to the discussion.

Second, the level of structure in a focus group discussion can be varied to suit its application. For example, focus group research may be relatively structured and focussed to generate data that are easily comparable between different groups; it may also be largely unstructured and broadly focussed where the research is more exploratory and the issues unknown (David and Sutton 2004). Therefore, the method has a wide range of applications from unstructured exploratory research, to explanatory research that identifies motivations for certain behaviours or attitudes, and evaluative research to assess aspects of a service or social programme. The flexible application of the focus group method lends it well to incorporation into multi-method research designs, such as explaining quantitative survey findings or conducting exploratory research prior to in-depth interviews. The group format is also suitable for the introduction of stimulus material, such as posters, products, or video extracts, to discuss participants' opinions and reactions.

Third, perhaps the greatest advantage of this method comes from the group nature of the data collection. At a practical level, a one-hour focus

group discussion can generate a large volume of data and identify a greater variety of views, opinions and experiences than the same time spent in individual interviews. Fern (1982) found that a focus group discussion generated about seventy percent of the original ideas that were identified in a set of individual interviews with the same number of people. Although a focus group discussion may identify a wide range of issues, this example also shows that the information gained in a focus group discussion is not equivalent to conducting the same number of in-depth interviews. The discussion element of the method enables participants to talk about the issues with little moderator involvement, participants are therefore able to build on the responses of other group members and debate various contributions. The comments of one participant may trigger a series of responses from others and reveal insights about an issue beyond that of a single interviewee. It is the group discussion which enables participants to reveal their own views and opinions of the topic discussed, which may uncover views, ideas or issues unanticipated by the researchers; the discussion also generates diversity of opinions amongst participants. All of these elements are important advantages of this method. Morgan (1998: 12 cited in Flick 2002: 120) states that 'The hallmark of focus groups is the explicit use of the group interaction to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group.' The interactive nature of a group discussion also influences the quality of data collected. As participants are able to react to the comments of others in the group this may lead to reflection, refinement or justification of the issues raised, which can provide a deeper insight into the issues and context in which these are discussed. The group environment also provides an opportunity for an explicit discussion of differences in opinion as they emerge in the group (Ritchie and Lewis 2003). Patton (1990: 335–6) states on this issue that focus group discussions can be a 'highly efficient qualitative data-collection technique [which provides] some quality checks on data collection in that participants tend to provide checks and balances on each other that weed out false or extreme views'. This type of social moderation of the discussion is not evident in individual interviews. A final advantage is that focus groups can be used to study group dynamics *per se*; to observe how ideas are shaped, generated or moderated in a discussion setting, or to identify influences on group consensus or conflict and the effect of dominant or passive individuals on the group dynamic (Ritchie and Lewis 2003; David and Sutton 2004). However, the most common use of focus groups is as a data collection tool rather than to study participant interactions.

As with all research methods there are also limitations in using focus group discussions (see Figure 1.1), which need to be considered before applying the method. Many of the limitations are the inverse aspects of the issues discussed as strengths of the method. The limitations in using focus group discussions relate to the skills required to conduct the groups, potential problems with the group dynamics and limitations related to the data and analysis. First, the flexible nature of focus group discussions, which enables participants to contribute freely to the discussion, also requires a skilled and experienced moderator. The moderator needs to facilitate a discussion that generates useful, detailed and varied responses on the research issues. In addition, the moderator needs to foster a comfortable and permissive environment in the group that will elicit open responses. The flexible and less controlled nature of focus group discussions can easily lead to the collection of redundant information if the moderator lacks the skills to effectively manage the discussion. Identifying skilled moderators or training them to conduct effective group discussion may be a limitation of using this method. There also exists a risk of bias in the selection of participants and in the delivery of questions by the moderator. If not carefully managed, these issues can affect the reliability and quality of the data collected.

Further limitations in the method may arise due to difficulties with group dynamics. Although group members may stimulate each other in the discussion, there is also a risk that some members may dominate the discussion, either due to an authoritarian tone or in the time spent talking. This may inhibit other members who remain quiet or simply agree with the views of a dominant participant. Clearly this situation will impact on the data quality. In other situations, participants may all simply agree with one another, perhaps due to social pressure to conform or discomfort in the group, resulting in little discussion of the issues. Poor recruitment of participants may contribute to a lack of group homogeneity and the formation of hierarchies within a focus group, which can have a negative impact on participant's contribution to the discussion. All these issues need to be carefully managed in the research design and by a moderator during the discussion to ensure quality data collection. The group setting may also afford less confidentiality than an individual interview. David and Sutton (2004) suggest that reduced confidentiality may lead participants to withhold certain information in the group, thus reducing the depth of information on some issues. Researchers need to be careful in the selection of discussion topics to counter this effect. Finally, the group discussion can only include a limited number of issues to enable sufficient time to discuss each issue in detail.

Finally, there are also limitations related to focus group data and data analysis. It must be remembered that focus group data are a product of interactive discussion with other participants, so that responses are not independent. Therefore, the method is not suitable for data on individuals or for gathering information on personal or sensitive topics. Focus group discussions also generate a large volume of textual data which can be complex and time-consuming to analyse, as data need to be analysed in the context of a group discussion whereby participants may change their views or provide contradictory opinions during the course of the discussion. Despite popular belief, focus group research is not a cheap and quick exercise; it requires a great deal of preparation, organisation, and time to collect, manage and analyse the data.

When to use focus group discussions

To clarify the appropriate application of focus group discussions, it may be useful to begin by contrasting when to use focus group discussion and in-depth interviews (Figure 1.2). The group context of a focus group makes it an ideal method when seeking a range of views on a topic, when debate and discussion on an issue is desired and for uncovering new insights or unanticipated issues. Focus group discussions are most suitable when seeking community-level information (as opposed to personal information), such as seeking information about social behaviour, cultural values or community opinions. Focus groups are suitable for provoking a discussion and are therefore useful when seeking justifications and explanations of issues or for studying group dynamics. The group context lacks confidentiality and so is less suitable for personal information or sensitive topics. Appropriate topics for a focus group discussion may be ‘community perceptions about a proposed new health clinic’, ‘men’s experiences in seeking paternity leave’, or ‘young people’s use of

When to use focus group discussions	When to use in-depth interviews
To identify a range of views and experiences	To identify individual perspectives
To provoke discussion and explanation of issues	For personal experiences and opinions
To identify new issues and generate hypotheses	For detailed, in-depth information
To seek broad information about a community	For sensitive and complex topics
For less sensitive topics	For descriptive process information
To understand group interaction and decision-making	(e.g. life course issues, migration process)

Figure 1.2 When to use focus groups and in-depth interviews