



The SAGE Encyclopedia of Lifespan Human Development

Focus Groups

Contributors: Mukhles M. Al-Ababneh

Edited by: Marc H. Bornstein

Book Title: The SAGE Encyclopedia of Lifespan Human Development

Chapter Title: "Focus Groups"

Pub. Date: 2018

Access Date: March 30, 2018

Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc.

City: Thousand Oaks,

Print ISBN: 9781506307657

Online ISBN: 9781506307633

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781506307633.n331>

Print pages: 890-891

©2018 SAGE Publications, Inc.. All Rights Reserved.

This PDF has been generated from SAGE Knowledge. Please note that the pagination of the online version will vary from the pagination of the print book.

A focus group is an investigative tool for social research based on a structured and focused discussion with a small group of people, run by a facilitator (moderator) to generate qualitative data through a set of open-ended questions.

The focus group technique is a qualitative research methodology popularly used in social research in a wide range of sectors. A researcher uses a set of open-ended questions on a specific topic to generate qualitative data. The focus group is an efficient way of gathering data about particular opinions or attitudes by covering a large number of people in the same group. This entry explores the methodology and processes of focus groups as well as the analysis of data from focus group research.

Background and General Practice

Focus group discussions cover a precise topic rather than broad generalities. Such discussions are held by a relatively small amount of people. Since the 1980s, the focus group technique has become an increasingly popular investigative technique for organizations looking to gather feedback on the needs of employees and consumers.

Focus groups contribute to the measurement of life-span development by providing a forum that generates feedback concerning quantitative measurement items. This feedback provides insights into the wording of the items and response options and identifies potential gaps in the content.

In addition to small group interviews, focus groups may be a set of planned series of discussions carefully designed to obtain members' perceptions on topics of interest in a controlled environment. Moreover, focus groups can be defined as an interaction among individuals who have some common interests conducted by a moderator in a way to obtain information about a specific topic. Based on the previous definitions, a focus group is defined as an investigative tool for social research based on a structured and focused discussion with a small group of people, run by a facilitator (moderator) to generate qualitative data through a set of open-ended questions.

In many studies, focus groups have been used as the research methodology because of their ability to generate items for questionnaire development. Focus groups enable the researchers to attain in-depth insights into the topic to collect specific information and opinions from a small number of people. The primary goal of such focus groups is to develop and formulate a set of appropriate questions to be asked in the subsequent questionnaire; therefore, the nature of a focus group is exploratory. The focus group is also considered to be a more effective tool when used in conjunction with other data collection methods as a form of triangulation. Focus groups are a relatively low-cost research tool compared to some other methods, and they do not require a lot of preparation and arrangements.

Focus Group Structures

Ideally, focus group research comprises a minimum of three groups. Many researchers have recommended that focus groups include between 4 and 31 participants. However, there is no solid rule for focus group sizes. Small groups of four to six participants may be productive because they encourage members to take part in the discussion. Groups are most often composed of eight respondents. Although large focus groups are more difficult to control and have difficulty achieving equal participation in the discussion, larger groups may produce

wide-ranging ideas and a competitive environment. Focus groups are most productively conducted with a comparatively homogeneous group because participants may feel more free to contribute their opinions in relatively homogenous groups.

The ideal length of sessions is between half an hour and 2½ hours per focus group. The venues for group sessions must be accessible and convenient to all participants and far from possible disturbances and noise. For seating arrangements, the best type of seating is a circular arrangement, with chairs placed around all sides. Some focus groups run on the participants' own time; and therefore, a financial incentive is generally offered to participants. The facilitator (moderator) plays an important role in the success of focus groups. Moderators can encourage participants to share their experiences using methods including displaying personal interest in the research topic, showing curiosity and openness to new insights, being overtly friendly with participants, showing a sense of humor, and being a willing listener.

In some cases, focus groups preferably should be facilitated by someone other than the researcher to avoid bias. In other cases, focus groups in exploratory research should be run by the researcher because the researcher still does not have a clear vision and stable opinion on the topic, so the group is less subject to potential researcher bias. Opinions vary as to the number of questions to be posed in focus groups, ranging from 4 to 12 questions. Eight questions are often considered ideal. These questions are to be in sequence from general to specific, including engagement questions, exploration questions, and exit questions.

Analyzing Focus Group Data

Focus groups interviews generate large amounts of information. For example, a 1-hour interview can take 5–6 hours to transcribe, with a resulting transcript of 30–40 pages. Data analysis of interview transcripts aims to reduce the amount of data. Thus, transcripts are often analyzed by (a) coding consensus, (b) co-occurrence, and (c) comparison. The content of the focus groups is initially coded independently by investigators to convert data into analyzable units. Then, transcripts are classified into categories or themes; paragraphs are sometimes assigned codes based on the researcher's key questions. Each transcript is independently coded by one or two investigators to check reliability of coding. Disagreements among investigators in the descriptions or assignments of codes can be solved by discussions and the appropriate refinement of codes. The end result is a list of codes finalized via group consensus, resulting in a list of themes and issues.

Data analysis consists of a number of stages, including examining, categorizing, and tabulating the data. The first stage of data analysis is familiarization, which can be achieved by listening to tapes and reading the transcripts in their entirety several times to understand the major themes. The next stage involves identifying a thematic framework by writing short phrases, ideas, or concepts to develop categories and descriptive statements. The third stage, indexing, comprises sifting the data, highlighting and sorting out quotes, and making comparisons both within and between cases. The fourth stage, charting, involves lifting the quotes from their original context and rearranging them under the newly developed appropriate thematic content.

See also [Ethics in Research](#); [Information Processing](#); [Interactions, Interpersonal](#); [Mixed-Method Study](#); [Participant Observation](#); [Qualitative Methods](#); [Survey Research](#)

- focus groups

- transcripts
- moderator
- data analysis
- discussion groups
- group interview
- coding

Mukhles M. Al-Ababneh

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781506307633.n331>

10.4135/9781506307633.n331

Further Readings

Barrows, C. W. (2000). An exploratory study of food and beverage training in private clubs. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 12(3), 190–197. doi:10.1108/09596110010320751

Eliot & Associates. (2007). Guidelines for conducting a focus group. Retrieved December 2, 2015, from http://cp0.ipnshosting.com/~focusgro/documents/How_to_Conduct_a_Focus_Group.pdf

Gibbs, A. (1997, Winter). Focus groups. Retrieved December 28, 2015, from <http://www.soc.surrey.ac.uk/sru/SRU19.html>

Greenbaum, T. (2003). The gold standard? Why the focus group deserves to be the most respected of all qualitative research tools. Retrieved July 20, 2016, from http://www.quirks.com/articles/article.asp?arg_ArticleId=1125

Krueger, R. A., & Casey, M. A. (2000). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research* (3rd ed.

). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Marczak, M., & Sewell, M. (2007). Using focus groups for evaluation. Retrieved June 8, 2011, from <http://ag.arizona.edu/fcs/cyfernet/cyfar/focus.htm>

Morgan, D. L. (1988). *Focus groups as qualitative research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Prince, M., & Davies, M. (2001) Moderator teams: An extension to focus group methodology. *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, 4(4), 207–216. doi:10.1108/EUM0000000005902

Ruyter, K. D. (1996). Focus versus nominal group interviews: A comparative analysis. *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, 14(6), 44–50. doi:10.1108/02634509610131153

Stewart, D. W., & Shamdasani, P. N. (1990). *Focus groups: Theory and practice*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.