

Focus groups

Have a look at the notes here. Remember to read around this subject as these are only my notes.

Focus groups

- Organised discussion with group of individuals
- To gain information about views/experiences on a topic
- Good for getting several perspectives on the same topic
- The role of the moderator is very significant.
- As you will find out – the moderator who is leading and running the group
- The moderator needs to be skilled

What are focus groups?

- It is an organised discussion (Kitzinger 1994)
- A collective Activity (Powell et al 1996)
- Interaction (kitzinger 1995)
- Powell et al define a focus group as
- A group of individuals selected and assembled by researchers to discuss and comment on, from personal experience, the topic that is the subject of the research. (1996: 499)

Hence they are a form of group interviewing but it is important to distinguish between the two. Group interviewing involves interviewing a number of people at the same time, the emphasis being on questions and responses between the researcher and participants. Focus groups – interaction within the group based on a topic

Ethical issues

1. Ethical considerations for focus groups are the same as for most other methods of social research (Homan 1991).
2. For example, when selecting and involving participants, researchers must ensure that full information about the purpose and uses of participants' contributions is given.
3. Being honest and keeping participants informed about the expectations of the group and topic, and not pressurising participants to speak is good practice.
4. A particular ethical issue to consider in the case of focus groups is the handling of sensitive material and confidentiality given that there will always be more than one participant in the group.
5. At the outset moderators will need to clarify that each participant's contributions will be shared with the others in the group as well as with the moderator.

Participants need to be encouraged to keep confidential what they hear during the meeting and researchers have the responsibility to anonymise data from the group.

Why use focus groups

- They draw upon respondents' attitudes, feelings, beliefs, experiences and reactions – not feasible with other methods in this way
- They are more likely to be revealed in social gatherings and interactions of the focus groups
- Individual interviews aim to obtain individual attitudes, beliefs and feelings for individuals

Focus groups elicit a multiplicity of views and emotional processes in a group context

- The individual interview is easier for the researcher to control than a focus group in which participants may take the initiative.
- Compared to observation, a focus group enables the researcher to gain a larger amount of information in a shorter period of time.
- Observational methods tend to depend on waiting for things to happen, whereas the researcher follows an interview guide in a focus group.
- In this sense focus groups are not natural but organised events.

Focus groups are particularly useful when there are power differences between the participants and decision-makers or professionals, when the everyday use of language and culture of particular groups is of interest, and when one wants to explore the degree of consensus on a given topic (Morgan & Kreuger 1993).

Role of focus groups

- Focus groups can be used at the preliminary or exploratory stages of a study (Kreuger 1988);
- During a study, perhaps to evaluate or develop a particular programme of activities (Race et al 1994);
- Or after a programme has been completed, to assess its impact or to generate further avenues of research.
- They can be used either as a method in their own right or as a complement to other methods, especially for triangulation (Morgan 1988) and validity checking.

Focus groups can help to explore or generate hypotheses (Powell & Single 1996) and develop questions or concepts for questionnaires and interview guides (Hoppe et al 1995; Lankshear 1993).

- They are however limited in terms of their ability to generalise findings to a whole population, mainly because of the small numbers of people participating and the likelihood that the participants will not be a representative sample.

Examples of research in which focus groups have been employed include developing HIV education in Zimbabwe (Munodawafa et al 1995), understanding how media messages are processed (Kitzinger 1994 & 1995), exploring people's fear of woodlands (Burgess 1996) and distance interviewing of family doctors (White & Thomson 1995).

Potential – advantages of focus groups

1. Kitzinger (1994, 1995) argues that interaction is the crucial feature of focus groups because the interaction between participants highlights their view of the world.
2. The language they use about an issue and their values and beliefs about a situation. Interaction also enables participants to ask questions of each other, as well as to re-evaluate and reconsider their own understandings of their specific experiences.
3. Another benefit is that focus groups elicit information in a way which allows researchers to find out why an issue is salient, as well as what is salient about it (Morgan 1988).
4. As a result, the gap between what people say and what they do can be better understood (Lankshear 1993).
5. If multiple understandings and meanings are revealed by participants, multiple explanations of their behaviour and attitudes will be more readily articulated.

6. The benefits to participants of focus group research should not be underestimated.
7. The opportunity to be involved in decision making processes (Race et al 1994), to be valued as experts, and to be given the chance to work collaboratively with researchers (Goss & Leinbach 1996) can be empowering for many participants.

If a group works well, trust develops and the group may explore solutions to a particular problem as a unit (Kitzinger 1995), rather than as individuals.

8. Another advantage of focus groups to clients, users, participants or consumers is that they can become a forum for change (Race et al 1994), both during the focus group meeting itself and afterwards.

For example, in research conducted by Goss & Leinbach (1996), the participants in the research experienced a sense of emancipation through speaking in public and by developing reciprocal relationships with the researchers.

9. In another study (Smith et al 1995), patients in hospital were invited to give their views about services and to provide ideas about improvements.
10. In this instance change occurred at the management level as a direct result of patients' input.

Limitations of focus groups

1. Although focus group research has many advantages, as with all research methods there are limitations.
2. Some can be overcome by careful planning and moderating, but others are unavoidable and peculiar to this approach.
3. The researcher, or moderator, for example, has less control over the data produced (Morgan 1988) than in either quantitative studies or one-to-one interviewing.
4. The moderator has to allow participants to talk to each other, ask questions and express doubts and opinions, while having very little control over the interaction other than generally keeping participants focused on the topic.
5. By its nature focus group research is open ended and cannot be entirely predetermined.
6. It should not be assumed that the individuals in a focus group are expressing their own definitive individual view.
7. They are speaking in a specific context, within a specific culture, and so sometimes it may be difficult for the researcher to clearly identify an individual message.
8. This too is a potential limitation of focus groups.
9. On a practical note, focus groups can be difficult to assemble.

It may not be easy to get a representative sample and focus groups may discourage certain people from participating, for example those who are not very articulate or confident, and those who have communication problems or special needs.

10. The method of focus group discussion may also discourage some people from trusting others with sensitive or personal information.
11. In such cases personal interviews or the use of workbooks alongside focus groups may be a more suitable approach.

Finally, focus groups are not fully confidential or anonymous, because the material is shared with the others in the group, but you must try to ensure that the group do not talk about what is discussed outside of the focus group.

Organising a focus group

1. **Requires more planning** than other types of interviewing as getting people to group gatherings can be difficult and setting up appropriate venues with adequate recording facilities requires a lot of time.

The recommended number of people per group is usually **six to ten** (MacIntosh 1993), but some researchers have used up to fifteen people (Goss & Leinbach 1996) or as few as four (Kitzinger 1995).

2. Numbers of groups vary, some studies using only **one meeting** with each of several focus groups (Burgess 1996), others meeting the same group **several times**.
3. Focus group sessions usually last from one to two hours.

Neutral locations can be helpful for avoiding either negative or positive associations with a particular site or building (Powell & Single 1996).

4. Otherwise the focus group meetings can be held in a variety of places, for example, people's homes, in rented facilities, or where the participants hold their regular meetings if they are a pre-existing group.
5. It is not always easy to identify the most appropriate participants for a focus group.
6. If a group is too heterogeneous, whether in terms of gender or class, or in terms of professional and 'lay' perspectives, the differences between participants can make a considerable impact on their contributions.
7. Alternatively, if a group is homogenous with regard to specific characteristics, diverse opinions and experiences may not be revealed.
8. Participants need to feel comfortable with each other.

Meeting with others whom they think of as possessing similar characteristics or levels of understanding about a given topic, will be more appealing than meeting with those who are perceived to be different (Morgan 1988).

9. Once the types of participant have been decided, locating them is the next challenge.
10. Recruitment of participants can be time consuming, especially if the topic under consideration has no immediate benefits or attractions to participants.

It is likely that people with specific interests will have to be recruited by word of mouth (Burgess 1996), through the use of key informants, by advertising or poster campaigns (Holbrook & Jackson 1996), or through existing social networks.

SUMMING UP

1. Usually I would begin by having some kind of theme or activity to get people to know each other – you all know each other here, but to give you an example
2. Get people to introduce themselves to each other, initially with their names – first names only – no surnames or titles, as this might give some people more status than others.
3. You could in pairs try and come up with the top 5 favourite advertisements and top 5 least favourite advertisements and why
4. Then you need to have some discussion based on the activity

Discussion

- Once this has been achieved, you then can have a series of questions – like an interview schedule to get people discuss the topic in hand, for example, whether you feel that ads persuade you to buy the goods you see or not.
- You can use pointers etc., to try and bring you back to the topic in hand.
- The other thing you need to note is how you are going to record the information
- I would use a tape recorder and transcribe the material afterwards and look for themes and patterns – here I have a tape recorder for this purpose.
- Then you need to know how to code the patterns etc.
- You should not really have more than about 10 people in your group, otherwise it becomes too large, and some people will not contribute.

Issues

- Who is going to be in the group
- Is it representative of a particular population
- Where is it taking place
- If people know each other, are there any hierarchies which mean that some views are given more prestige than others
- They should all be there for the same purpose – rather than for conflicting purposes.
- You need to try and get a discussion going about the topic in question

Virtual focus groups

- These have been conducted using the internet and various online forums.
- Both one to one and one to many communications have flourished on the internet
- Virtual focus groups are not a replacement of it in the traditional form
- But they can provide some useful information.
- Online conversations are continually developing, and collapse spatial distance and immediacy.
- They allow virtual communities to participate in a focus group.
- The distinguishing feature of the focus group is the use of group interaction to produce data – but this might be limited (or indeed enhanced) through the use of the chat facility in relation to the group.
- Sometimes people might be more willing to speak up in a virtual group, or indeed to respond with the chat facility – compared with an actual group.
- It may be harder for just one person to dominate a virtual focus group.
- The internet is an appropriate setting for discussion to take place – but make sure you choose an appropriate place to conduct the focus group. Some platforms will work better than others.
- Make sure you keep a record of the conversations but also remember to anonymise contributions so that participants cannot be identified.

Problems/Advantages with virtual focus groups

- There may be problems with anonymity and the participants may know each other which might have implications in relation to participants who are seen as having more/less authority than others.
- They may be cheap to do but I have found that online focus groups often don't work as well as a focus group conducted face to face.
- There are often several discussion threads and it may be difficult for the moderator to continue different threads at the same time.

- Contributors are not subject to interruption and can revise their contributions prior to submission – which means that participants might be less willing to express their opinions and may wait to see what others write before responding.
- Groups may be larger in size than a traditional focus group
- They can encourage discussion about sensitive topics
- Data is ready transcribed
- But limits the research to Internet users and there can be online difficulties (slow connections etc.).
- Rapport may be difficult to establish
- There are no non-verbal cues
- For the focus groups – the ethics forms still need to be completed.

For the ethics forms see my website <http://www.mediaandculturalstudies.co.uk/ethics/>