

Focus Groups Research

DR STUART JONES

Aims of the Lecture

- ▶ To define a focus group.
- ▶ To discuss when to use a focus group
- ▶ Comparison of Focus Groups and Interviews.
- ▶ Practical issues with focus groups.

What is a Focus Group

- ▶ A focus group is a structured discussion used to obtain in-depth information from a group of people about a particular topic.
- ▶ The purpose of a focus group is to collect information about people's opinions, beliefs, attitudes, perceptions, not to come to consensus or make a decision.
- ▶ Wilkson (2008)

What are Focus Groups?

- ▶ Group discussions/ group interviews
- ▶ Facilitated by researcher (often helped by another person)
- ▶ Getting people to think about, discuss/debate an issue (or set of issues) – related to your research question
- ▶ More than just a bunch of individuals responding to your questions
 - ▶ Allows for interaction (new data, conflicting data)
 - ▶ Allows participants to interpret each others' responses
 - ▶ Not just a series of separate conversations with you!!
- ▶ The sum should be more than it's individual parts!!!!

Examples of Studies Utilising a Focus Group.

- ▶ Schulze, B., & Angermeyer, M. C. (2003). Subjective experiences of stigma. A focus group study of schizophrenic patients, their relatives and mental health professionals. *Social science & medicine*, 56(2), 299-312.
- ▶ Reichstadt, J., Depp, C. A., Palinkas, L. A., & Jeste, D. V. (2007). Building blocks of successful aging: a focus group study of older adults' perceived contributors to successful aging. *The American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry*, 15(3), 194-201.
- ▶ Berland, A., Natvig, G. K., & Gundersen, D. (2008). Patient safety and job-related stress: a focus group study. *Intensive and critical care nursing*, 24(2), 90-97.

When to use Focus Groups.

- ▶ Gather opinions, beliefs, attitudes, perceptions, behaviours and motivations about a topic.
- ▶ Identify needs for a program or service.
- ▶ Preliminary stages of questionnaire development.

When to use Focus Groups.

- ▶ Test ideas, plans, programs, services, policies before introduction. E.g. to test an existing program in the local cultural context.
- ▶ Get feedback on a program, service, policy after introduction.
- ▶ Clarify information gained from individual interviews or written surveys (quantitative study – quantify; numbers).

Why/when might you use them?

- ▶ MAIN REASON – when you want to generate discussion/debate about your research question/ area of research
 - ▶ You do not think that individual responses will yield the kinds of data you want
- ▶ When you think that individuals may not be able to provide adequate responses on your research question
 - ▶ Haven't thought about the issues
 - ▶ The issue requires discussions
 - ▶ Might be normal/ everyday/ taken for granted issues
- ▶ When people may not feel 'safe' talking in individual interviews
 - ▶ Young people?
 - ▶ Groups that may work on basis of collective discourse

Why/when might you use them?

- ▶ Other reasons are the same as all qualitative methods
 - ▶ Lack of research in area
 - ▶ Wanting to develop theory
 - ▶ Wanting to develop a quantitative stage of study
 - ▶ Etc, etc
- ▶ REMEMBER – this is not a group counselling session – there is always a possibility of a ‘research relationship’ to stray into a ‘therapeutic relationship’ – but even more so in focus groups

Focus Groups vs Interviews

Strengths

- ▶ Group interaction: building on each others answers.
- ▶ New topics might emerge

Potential Weaknesses

- ▶ Facilitator lacks skills.
- ▶ More logistical effort.
- ▶ Complex data-analysis.
- ▶ No individual answers.
- ▶ Participants feel uncomfortable voicing their true opinions in a group

Focus Groups vs Quantitative Data (Surveys)

Strengths

- ▶ In-depth information.
- ▶ Group interaction: building on each others answers.
- ▶ New topics might emerge.

Potential Weaknesses

- ▶ Facilitator lacks skills/is biased.
- ▶ Participants feel uncomfortable voicing their true opinions in a group.
- ▶ More logistical effort.
- ▶ Findings are not generalizable.
- ▶ Time consuming.
- ▶ Expensive (financial and human resources).
- ▶ Complex data-analysis.
- ▶ Cannot determine causal effects.

Question Generation for Focus Groups.

- ▶ Good questions:
 - ▶ Short.
 - ▶ Use everyday language of the target group (avoid: jargon [e.g. protocol], abbreviations, acronyms).
 - ▶ Open-ended (no fixed answers).
 - ▶ Invitation to discussion: often begin with “how”, “what”, or “why”.
 - ▶ Developed or translated in the language of the FGD.
 - ▶ Try to avoid questions that might trigger a conflict between the facilitator and the participants.

Question Generation for Focus Groups.

- ▶ Questions can involve activities: making a list, using rating scales, drawing pictures, sorting pictures.
- ▶ Avoid leading participants towards a particular answer.

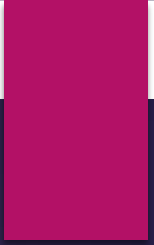


Data Management

- ▶ Data = recordings (transcripts), (transcripts of) focus group notes, notes of debriefing with facilitator/note taker. [If needed, translate data to language of analysis.]
- ▶ Analyse each FG immediately (after a week the information is 'gone').
- ▶ Write down the main points of each FGD.
- ▶ Note useful quotes.

How to Analyse Focus Groups.

- ▶ Analyse question by question.
- ▶ Look for themes.
 - ▶ Clustering the themes as for interviews.
- ▶ Look for group consensus or dissenting views.
- ▶ Compare data from all groups.
- ▶ Capture any key similarities in groups or notable differences.
- ▶ You can analyse the data using the techniques discussed in lecture 1.
 - ▶ E.g. Discourse Analysis, Grounded Theory, IPA etc.



Research Ethics Surrounding Focus Groups.

Ethics

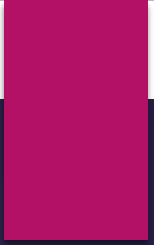
- ▶ Can sometimes be more challenging to gain ethical approval compared to individual interviews.
- ▶ Opinion of others could be considered offensive / challenging.
- ▶ So sensitive topic areas are particularly challenging.
- ▶ Clear information would need to be given (and consented to) from each participant regarding the nature of focus group and the anonymity / confidentiality.

Research ethics

- ▶ ALL research needs to consider and respond to the following ethical principles:
 - ▶ Research Merit and Integrity
 - ▶ Respect
 - ▶ Beneficence
 - ▶ Justice
- ▶ However, when thinking about using focus groups, we have some additional ethical issues to consider

Research ethics

- ▶ Data control – if 1 person wants their data to be removed, how does one do this within the context of a discussion - and make it amenable to analysis?
- ▶ Confidentiality and anonymity – a variety of things may be talked about within the group, how do you make sure none of that goes outside the group?
- ▶ Power – there may be distinct power dynamics – how do you make sure each person has an equitable voice?



Practicalities of a Focus Group

Practicalities

- ▶ Setting it up
- ▶ Deciding on composition and size
- ▶ Running focus group
- ▶ Transcribing
- ▶ Potential pitfalls

Setting it up

- ▶ Adequate physical facilities
 - ▶ Big enough room
 - ▶ 'friendly' atmosphere
 - ▶ Child-care facilities?
 - ▶ Disabled access?
 - ▶ Car parking or public transport routes?
- ▶ Relevant recording equipment
 - ▶ Good quality audio recorder – to pick up a variety of voices at different distances from microphones
 - ▶ Make sure you have pre-tested it and know how it works
- ▶ Refreshments
- ▶ Incentives?
 - ▶ Okay – consistent and in-line with what you're asking them to do

Deciding on composition and size

- ▶ Heterogenous vs homogenous?
- ▶ Heterogeneous
 - ▶ diversity of perspectives on central research question
- ▶ Homogeneous
 - ▶ May be good for sensitive issues – Kitzinger's work on HIV
 - ▶ shared experiences – good for bouncing off each other and a sense of 'safety'
 - ▶ May be good for marginalised groups – for whom individuals may feel 'powerless' within a heterogeneous group
- ▶ What's a good sized group?
 - ▶ Ideal size is 6 to 10 participants
 - ▶ Not enough discussion vs alienation of some people or too rowdy
 - ▶ Over-recruit!!! – invariably get last-minute cancellations

Running focus group

- ▶ Role of facilitator (YOU) - success depends heavily on skills of the facilitator
 - ▶ keeping discussion going
 - ▶ keeping discussion within the research framework
 - ▶ making sure people have a say – fairness and respect
 - ▶ trying to involve 'quiet' participants
 - ▶ trying to make 'ethnographic' notes on the non-verbals (HARD – so maybe take an observer along too)

Transcribing

- ▶ Takes MUCH longer than transcribing individual interviews
- ▶ Help the transcriber – ask people to go around room and either say their name or pick a pseudonym
- ▶ Level of voice is really important – ask people to speak up
- ▶ Also – ‘civility’ rules – ask people (wherever possible) not to talk over one another – if this happens it’s not transcribe-able – so ask to repeat maybe?

Some Potential Pitfalls

- ▶ Dominance by one person
- ▶ Going off topic
- ▶ Writing up – sometimes it's hard to see that there was more than 1 person in the room at the time!!!! – analysis and writing is on the basis of group discourse, not individual discourse

Starting the Focus Group.....

- ▶ Welcome the group, introduce facilitator and note keeper.
- ▶ Overview of the purpose and format of the Focus Group (incl. recording of the session).
- ▶ Informed consent.
- ▶ Ground rules.
- ▶ Participants introductions.



Focus Group Set Up



Typical Ground Rules.

- ▶ Only one person speaks at a time.
- ▶ Give everyone an equal chance to participate in the discussion.
- ▶ Respect the opinions of others; don't put down or criticise others' comments.
- ▶ Respect the privacy of others in the group by not repeating what is discussed outside of the focus group.
- ▶ Explanation of the recording, anonymity etc.

Opening Statement.... Example

- ▶ Good morning. Thank you all for taking the time to be with us today. My name is ..., and I am ... [position, affiliation]. My role is to facilitate this group discussion. My assistant's name is ... and he/she will be in charge of taking notes and making observations (if you have an assistant). The purpose of this group discussion is to talk about ...

Opening Statement.... Example.

- ▶ We / I will ask you some questions, which will take about 2 hours, and please tell us / me what you think is important. We / I want everyone to feel free to say exactly what he or she thinks, no matter what this may be. [Introduce ground rules.] Everything you say here will be kept confidential and anonymous, so none will ever know what you personally said (only what the overall combined responses are).

Opening Statement..... Example

- ▶ In order to capture all that is said we / I will record this session. Does everybody agree with their participation in this Focus Group? [get oral or written informed consent] Questions? Before we begin this session, I would like to quickly go around the group and give each person a moment to introduce him or herself. [Icebreaker/Introductory question] Tell us how you learned to do the contact investigation interview?

Ice-Breaker.

- ▶ Ice-breaker/Introductory question:
- ▶ This should be non-threatening and easy to answer, so that everyone answers. It emphasises what is shared, gets participants thinking about topic, and makes people feel comfortable which encourages conversation.
- ▶ As noted can use pictures or a small written task and explain the results.

Key Questions

- ▶ Focus of the study.
- ▶ Approximately 5 key questions
- ▶ Allow time to explore issues (new questions may arise).
- ▶ Time: 60 – 90 minutes

Closure – Wrapping up.

- ▶ Discussion is summarized by the facilitator / note keeper, and participants clarify and confirm the information.
- ▶ Any remaining questions from participants are answered.
- ▶ Participants are thanked and next steps are indicated (dataanalysis, reporting).

Tips for Successful Facilitation

- ▶ Encourage discussion:
 - ▶ Maintain a warm and friendly attitude.
 - ▶ Establish eye contact with participants (if culturally appropriate).
 - ▶ Do not judge participants responses (verbally, body language).
 - ▶ If a participant gives a vague answer: probe, e.g. “Could you say a little more about that?” or “Would you give me an example of what you mean?”

Tips for successful facilitation.

- ▶ Keep the group focused:
 - ▶ If the group is getting too far off the topic, remind the group of the original question by summarizing the responses and then repeating the question.
 - ▶ If the group is finding the question difficult to answer, rephrase the question.



Tips for successful facilitation.

- ▶ Keep individual participants from dominating the conversation:
 - ▶ Try avoiding eye contact with dominant participants.
 - ▶ Remind the group that everyone's opinion is important.
 - ▶ Acknowledge the response of the dominant participants and redirect the discussion by asking other participants for their opinions.
 - ▶ Some researchers have written that they were required to 'freeze' a participant for a set amount of time, whereafter the person is free to talk again.

Tips for successful facilitation

- ▶ Encourage shy participants to contribute.
 - ▶ Making eye contact with quieter participants.
 - ▶ Gently ask quieter participants for their opinions during pauses in the conversation by addressing them by name.
- ▶ Be aware of group pressure:
 - ▶ Probe for alternate views from the group, e.g. "That is an interesting viewpoint. Let's also explore some alternatives."
- ▶ Monitor time closely.

Responding to comments

- ▶ Do not indicate agreement: "I agree", "That's great", "Fine".
- ▶ Restrict head nodding.
- ▶ Use short verbal responses: "Yes", "OK", "Uhhuh".



Maintaining the Flow and Questions.

- ▶ Pause:
 - ▶ 5 second pause.
 - ▶ Don't rush into questions.
- ▶ Probes:
 - ▶ To obtain further information or clarification.
 - ▶ To encourage differing viewpoints.
- ▶ Be prepared to answer or postpone answering.
 - ▶ Frequently asked question: "Can we get a copy of the report?" (So know the answer, and do not give a promise that you can not keep.)

The Researcher / Facilitator

- ▶ Crucial to the success of a focus group.
- ▶ Skills include:
 - ▶ Background knowledge of topic.
 - ▶ Sensitive/respect for participants' opinions.
 - ▶ Can interpret verbal and non-verbal responses.
 - ▶ Good listener, can manage lively group discussion.

The Facilitator / Researcher – Skills to Consider

- ▶ Facilitators (and note takers).
 - ▶ Needs to have an very good understanding of the topic area in advance.
 - ▶ Basics of FGD methodology.
 - ▶ Exercises / Icebreakers.
 - ▶ Familiarize with facilitation guide.
 - ▶ Conduct actual focus groups.
- ▶ Refresh skills from time to time.
- ▶ Feedback (revise questions/facilitator guide).
- ▶ After action review after each FGDs.

The Venue of the Focus Group.

- ▶ Needs to accommodate up to 14 people (maximum).(participants, facilitator, note keeper).
- ▶ Neutral, comfortable, safe.
- ▶ Distraction free (e.g. telephones, traffic).
- ▶ Easily accessible, easy to find.
- ▶ Tables and chairs not fixed: participants face each other (circle/U-shape).
Re-arrange the venue if needed.
- ▶ Examples: health facility, classroom.

Checklist for a Focus Group

- ▶ Venue set up, refreshments available.
 - ▶ List of participants, name tags (identifiers).
 - ▶ Recording equipment set up (spare batteries).
 - ▶ Flip chart set up, markers (if needed).
 - ▶ Notepad for note taker, pencils.
 - ▶ Facilitator guide.
 - ▶ Watch/clock/phone.
-
- ▶ Afterwards: label notes, recording materials.

Summary

- ▶ Focus groups can be very good for generating discussion/debate about your research questions
- ▶ Main Adv – “more than the sum of its parts” – the added value that comes from debate/discussion
- ▶ Potential pitfalls – power, voice and group speak
- ▶ Need skillful moderator to minimise these
- ▶ If thinking about using focus groups – make an informed choice based on your RESEARCH QUESTION, rather than because they seem to be fashionable in research!!!