

# Focus Group Resource Pack

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# Focus Group Resource Pack

## Gauging Public Attitudes Towards Infant Feeding



Do Mothers Experience Stigmatisation Because  
Of The Way They Choose/Have to Feed Their  
Babies?

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## **Introduction**

This focus group will concentrate on attitudes toward infant feeding practices and will involve six to eight participants who have connections to University of Wales Trinity Saint David. The aim of conducting this focus group is to gauge social attitudes toward bottle-feeding and breastfeeding in order to explore the wider concept of infant feeding stigmatisation. This is an important area of research because infant feeding issues can cause significant distress during an already incredibly profound and emotionally challenging time (British Pregnancy Advisory Service, 2015; National Childbirth Trust, 2016). Furthermore, negative attitudes towards infant feeding practices can result in increased postpartum distress, insufficient support and conflict between mothers. (Brown, 2014; Lee, 2011). Therefore, a better understanding of social opinions toward this topic could add to the existing body of sociological focused infant feeding research and pave the way toward improved awareness, reduced stigmatisation, more positive postpartum experiences and ultimately a kinder infant feeding culture.

## **Focus Group: What Is It Used For?**

A focus group is a qualitative research method that can be used to generate hypotheses and which usually involves six to eight pre-selected participants meeting to discuss a specific topic/set of topics under the moderation and guidance of a focus group facilitator (Hennink *et al*, 2011; Punch, 2005). Hennink *et al* (2011) continue to explain that focus groups are particularly suited to exploratory, explanatory, evaluative and policy orientated research because they allow an exploration of new topics, enable the acquisition of a range of views in a single research episode and help to understand socio-cultural norms, extreme behaviour and group processes. Furthermore, focus groups are flexible and may be used as a primary, supplementary or multimethod source of data collection, whilst they can also complement quantitative and other qualitative research methods (Hennink *et al*, 2011; Morgan, 1996, p.2). However, focus groups are not well suited to collecting individual-level data, whilst extra care and ethical consideration must be afforded to exploring sensitive issues (Hennink *et al*, 2011; Morgan, p.2). Litosseliti, (2003) adds that focus groups should also be avoided if the topic is unfamiliar to the participant, does not encourage different perspectives or hinders free-flowing conversations.

### **Focus Group: Strength, Weaknesses & Ethical Considerations**

Focus groups yield a number of strengths. For example; as well identifying multiple issues, they also provide understanding of how these are discussed within a group setting (Hennink *et al*, 2011, p.136). Hennink *et al* (2011, p.156) continue that focus groups enable detailed responses, have limited researcher influence, replicate social interaction, allow information sharing in a natural setting and can be an enjoyable way to collect data. Furthermore, participants lead discussions and issues are debated and justified within the group (Hennink *et al*, 2011). Litosseliti (2003) adds that focus groups can provide rich data, empower participants and identify group dynamics such as power imbalances, consensus and disagreement. She continues that they can also be particularly useful for involving illiterate individuals/groups in the research process. However, multiple weaknesses also exist. For example, Hennink *et al* (2011, p.166) point out that focus groups require a skilled facilitator, dominant characters can take over and group hierarchies can emerge. Another limitation is that participants may not actually divulge their genuine opinions for reasons such as not wanting to lose face, feeling embarrassed and the 'deference effect', i.e. saying what they think the facilitator wants to hear (Litosseliti, 2003; Hennink *et al*, 2011). Furthermore, the success of focus groups can be character dependent, for example it may be difficult to gain information from very shy participants, whilst some group members could ramble and go off track (Litosseliti, 2003, Hennink *et al*, 2011). There are also logistical considerations such as finding a suitable venue, high costs, obtaining audio equipment, time consuming process and complex and lengthy data analysis (Litosseliti, 2003). A further weakness could be the volume of ethical considerations compared to other research methods; For instance, as well as common qualitative ethical concerns detailed by Gibbs (1997) and Hennink *et al* (2011) such as gaining genuine consent, ensuring the emotional wellbeing of participants, avoiding researcher bias etc., focus groups can also raise additional considerations. For example, confidentiality can be more vulnerable due to multiple people being involved, there is an increased likelihood of power imbalances and certain groups of people may be inadvertently excluded such as introverts and people with communication difficulties. (Litosseliti, 2003; Gibbs, 1997). However, if conducted properly and used in the right environment and for the right purpose, focus groups can be an invaluable way of discovering unique perspectives and collecting qualitative data (Hennink *et al*, 2011).

**Introduction Letter**

Participant Identification Letter



Sara O'Shea

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Ammanford

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11<sup>th</sup> December 2016

Dear Participant

My name is Sara O'Shea and I am currently enrolled on an integrated Masters in Social Studies at the University of Wales Trinity David (UWTSD).

I would like to invite you to participate in a focus group at the Carmarthen campus of UWTSD so that you can contribute towards my research project which aims to identify social attitudes and feelings towards infant feeding practices.

The focus group will involve 6-8 people attending a meeting, where I, the facilitator, will use different activities to encourage discussion about infant feeding attitudes. I have estimated that the focus group will last for about an hour but there is no time constraint.

It is important that all focus group participants respect each other's views, confidentiality and anonymity and that any information discussed in this meeting is not shared outside of the group. All participants will be anonymised and there will be no identifiable links between participants and the information that they have provided when the results are published. The only other individuals who will have access to the initial data will be the focus group Notetaker and my lecturer Caroline Lohmann-Hancock as she will be overseeing my research project, but please be assured that these people are aware of their responsibilities in ensuring the data remains confidential. I would also like to assure you that all data will be stored securely and in line with the Data Protection Act.

After I have carefully analysed the focus group data I will contact you to ensure that you are satisfied with my interpretation of your responses. Furthermore, you are entitled to view any data that you have given me and I shall provide you with a copy of the results once they have been published.

Please be assured that participation in the focus group is completely voluntary and you can withdraw at any point without reason. There are also no right or wrong answers and your opinions on this topic are very much valued and appreciated.

I would like to thank you in advance for your participation and hope that the upcoming discussions in the focus group will enhance my understanding of attitudes and feelings towards infant feeding practices.

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me in order to discuss these.

Yours Sincerely

Sara O'Shea

## **Consent Form**

### Participant Identification Letter

|  |
|--|
|  |
|--|

I, \_\_\_\_\_ understand that I have been invited to participate in a focus group with the intention of discussing attitudes towards infant feeding practices. I am aware that my participation is voluntary which means I can withdraw from the research process at any point without reason.

I agree to respect the views, confidentiality and anonymity of my fellow focus group members and will not discuss any information disclosed during the meeting with others outside of the group.

I confirm that I have read and understood the introduction letter dated 11<sup>th</sup> December 2016 which explains my rights and the research process and that this has also been communicated to me verbally. I further confirm that I have been given ample time to digest this information and opportunities to ask questions and have them answered satisfactorily. I also understand that although any information given by myself can be used in future reports, articles or presentations, my anonymity and confidentiality will be upheld by the researcher throughout.

Having read and understood all of the information relating to the research process, I hereby agree to participate in the focus group and consent to the information I provide being used in the study results.

|                          |  |      |  |
|--------------------------|--|------|--|
| Participant<br>Signature |  | Date |  |
| Researcher<br>Signature  |  | Date |  |

## **Focus Group Instructions**

The following focus group instructions have been guided by Hennink *et al* (2011, p.135-168), Punch (2005, p.171-172), Kumar (2014, p.193-194) and Gibbs (1997). Therefore, these contributors can provide the facilitator with more extensive focus group knowledge if need be.

### **The facilitator will need;**

- Pen and notepad
- Audio equipment
- Letter of introduction and consent form for each participant
- Participant identification letter cards
- Activity cards
- Activity image cards
- Felt board
- An envelope, piece of paper and pen for each participant labelled with their identification letter
- Facilitator contact cards
- Refreshments

### **General Instructions & Advice**

- Although these instructions are structured, the facilitator must take a flexible approach to the focus group and allow the participants to lead discussions. Therefore, there may not be a need for all the activities or probing questions set out below.
- If unexpected responses emerge then the facilitator should allow time at the end to explore these in activity 7.
- The facilitator must monitor the participant's wellbeing throughout the focus and group.

- If anyone appears distressed the facilitator should take a break and ensure that the individual is okay and emotionally well enough to proceed.
- The facilitator must act promptly to resolve any conflict and diffuse any hostile debate.
- If conflict does arise and cannot be effectively resolved, then the facilitator should take a break and terminate the focus group if necessary.
- The facilitator must ensure that dominant personalities do not monopolise the focus group and that all participants are allowed an input. Useful strategies include;
  - Allowing a dominant character to vocalise their view but then signal reduced interest via body language such as turning a shoulder toward them or reducing eye contact.
  - Thanking the dominant character for their input and then asking if anyone has a different opinion.
  - Monitoring the body language/facial expressions of quieter participant's so that they can be drawn into the discussion when it looks like they may have an opinion.
- The facilitator must ensure that they do not lead the participant's responses and should be aware of their phrasing of questions, reactions to comments, body language and facial expressions at all times.
- The facilitator should have a Notetaker present in case of audio failure, to note any changes in body language, facial expressions or atmosphere and to document which participant said what as this will be unidentifiable on the recordings.
- As well as the activity specific probing questions, the facilitator should also probe with general and relevant questions throughout the focus group whenever a participant makes a statement or expresses an opinion. These can include;
  - Why do you think that?
  - How does that make you feel?
  - Where did you learn that information?
  - Why do you think that is?
  - Can you explain that further?
- Although probing is incredibly important the facilitator must not over probe the participant's as this could make them feel interrogated or encourage them to provide information they think the facilitator wants rather than genuine responses.

### **Prior to the focus group activities**

- Ensure there is appropriate seating for all group members around a table.
- Make available refreshments.
- Attach all images and the first activity to the felt board.
- Welcome everyone and ask them to sit around the table.
- Introduce yourself and the Notetaker.
- Briefly explain the purpose and direction of the focus group.
- Explain the importance of respecting each other's views, anonymity and confidentiality throughout the focus group and afterwards.
- Tell the group that all opinions and views are valued and there are no right or wrong answers.
- Notify the group of their right to leave the focus group at any point and their right to access the information they have provided.
- Explain that the focus group will be audio recorded and notes will also be taken for the duration.
- Provide information on how the participants data will be stored and for how long.
- Ask if anyone has any questions.
- Request that everyone reads and signs their consent forms.
- Hand out the participant identification letter cards and explain that they are to protect anonymity and confidentiality.

### **Ice Breaking Activity**

Explain to the group that due to anonymity and confidentiality the participants should not introduce themselves or disclose identifying information. Ask that instead, could each participant describe themselves in no more than five words and then allow them to do this by going around the table in turn with the facilitator starting first.

### **Activity 1**

- Position the felt board so that all participants can clearly see the images.
- Ask the group to look at the full set of images and discuss their initial thoughts.
- Let the participant responses guide the rest of the focus group.
- Don't forget to ask general probing questions.

### Activity 2

- Replace the activity cards so that activity 2 is displayed on the felt board.
- Remove all of the images bar image 1 & 2.
- Ask the group to discuss if one feeding method is better than the other.
- Depending on responses, use activity specific probing questions such as;
  - Which baby will be happiest?
  - Which baby will be healthiest?
  - Which feeding method do you think mainstream society favours?
  - What do you think about these social attitudes towards infant feeding?
  - Where do you think these social attitudes have come from?
- Don't forget to ask general probing questions as well.
- Ask for final thoughts.

### Activity 3

- Replace the activity cards so that activity 3 is displayed.
- Replace images so that images 3, 4, 5 & 6 are displayed.
- Ask the group what they think about these images.
- Depending on responses use activity specific probing questions such as;
  - Are any of the images more acceptable than others?
  - What do you think common social attitudes would be toward these images?
  - What do you think about these social attitudes?
  - Where do you think these social attitudes have come from?
- Don't forget to ask general probing questions as well.
- Ask for final thoughts.

#### **Activity 4**

- Replace the activity card so that activity 4 is displayed.
- Replace images so that 1, 2, 7 & 8 are displayed.
- Ask the group what they think about these images.
- Depending on responses use activity specific probing questions such as;
  - Are any of these images more acceptable than others?
  - What do you think common social attitudes would be toward these images?
  - What do you think about these social attitudes?
  - Where do you think these social attitudes have come from?
- Don't forget to ask general probing questions as well.
- Ask for final thoughts.

#### **Activity 5**

- Replace activity card so that activity 5 is displayed.
- Replace images so that 9, 10, 11 & 12 are displayed.
- Ask the group what type of mothers they think the women in the images are.
- Depending on responses use activity specific probing questions such as;
  - What type of parenting skills do you think the mother in image 9 has? (repeat for images 10, 11 & 12).
  - What do you think the woman in image 9's child will grow up to be like? (Repeat for images 10, 11 & 12).
  - What kind of diet do you think the woman in image 9 provides her child with? (Repeat for images 10, 11 & 12).
  - What do you think common social attitudes towards these mothers would be?
  - What do you think about these social attitudes?
  - Where do you think these social attitudes have come from?
- Don't forget to ask general probing questions as well.
- Ask for final thoughts.

### **Activity 6**

- Replace the activity card so that activity 6 is displayed.
- Leave existing images in place.
- Ask the group what kind of infant feeding methods they associate with each mother.
- Depending on responses ask activity specific probing questions such as;
  - What do you think common social attitudes would conclude?
  - What do you think about these social attitudes?
  - Where do you think these social attitudes have come from?
- Don't forget to ask general probing questions as well.
- Ask for final thoughts

### **Activity 7**

- Use this activity to probe any unexpected responses that have emerged throughout the focus group.
- Ask the group if they have any final comments.

### **Concluding/debriefing the focus group**

- Hand out the paper, pens and envelopes.
- Ask the group to write any comments that they felt unable to verbalise during the group discussions and/or any feedback that they may have.
- Reiterate the need to ensure each other's anonymity and confidentiality.
- Inform the participants that they will be contacted prior to the results being released to ensure that they agree with the interpretation of their input.
- Ask the group if they have any queries or concerns.
- Inform the group that you are available to talk afterwards on a private and individual basis.
- Hand out the contact cards and inform the group that they can phone/email the facilitator if they have any queries or concerns after they have left.
- Inform the group of points of contact if they have any concerns that they feel unable to discuss with the facilitator or require any further emotional support.
- Thank the group for participating and inform them that they can leave.

- Mentally evaluate the group to make sure no one looks upset or concerned and approach individuals privately to check their wellbeing and offer additional support if need be.
- Tidy up the venue.
- Ensure all collected data is stored and transported securely.

### **Reflection: Pilot Focus Group**

The following reflective account will utilise Kolb's Model of Reflection which is detailed by Moon (2013, p.25).

#### **Concrete Experiences**

The facilitator conducted a pilot focus group meeting with members of her family in order to practice her moderating skills and test her focus group resource pack. The group consisted of 6 people; her partner, her 2 sisters, her mother, her step-father and her brother in law. The facilitator asked her family members to sit around the table, laid out the full set of images on the table top, followed her instruction pack and conducted all of the activities except for activity 2.

#### **Reflection**

Overall the focus group went well and the activities worked as they should. However, the facilitator did identify several important points;

1. There was little need for activity 2 because looking at the full set of images in Activity 1 stimulated discussion on what was the best infant feeding method without the need to show the infant feeding pictures on their own.
2. The group tended to agree on most discussion points.
3. There were several occasions where the conversation wandered off topic.
4. Not all people sitting around the table could see the images properly so these needed passing around.
5. The facilitator struggled to conduct the focus group and take notes at the same time.

#### **Conceptualisation**

The facilitators reflections enabled her to conceptualise how these things impacted on the focus group;

1. The fact that Activity 2 was not really needed shows the strength of Activity 1 in achieving a wider debate with less need for probing.

2. The group tending to agree on most discussion points meant there was a real lack of diversity and richness to the responses which affected the quality of data.
3. Group agreement and the conversation wondering off track could be attributed to all group members knowing each other very well, meaning they were more likely to share the same view points and talk about other more familiar topics.
4. Participants not being able to see the images properly resulted in the focus group being more time consuming and disorganised.
5. The facilitators inability to take notes effectively whilst conducting the activities resulted in a lack of recorded data and raised concerns about how the facilitator would manage to moderate on her own in a genuine focus group setting when she would also have to operate the recording equipment, provide refreshments and monitor participant wellbeing, body language and facial expressions.

### **Active Experimentation**

Following her reflection on the pilot focus group the facilitator thought about ways in which she could improve her next focus group;

1. Although there was little need for Activity 2 during this focus group the facilitator has decided to keep this activity included as each group will be different and may therefore need prompting in different areas.
2. The facilitator recognises that the familiarity between participants contributed to the lack of richness in the data and so plans to ensure that future participants do not know each other personally and have differing demographic characteristics in order to encourage a diverse discussion.
3. Following the issues with the group seeing the images properly, the facilitator has decided to invest in a felt display board and will stick adhesive Velcro to the back of each picture so that they can be displayed clearly to the group.
4. The facilitator has also decided to use a Notetaker for her genuine focus group in order to ensure that all data is recorded properly and the focus group is conducted effectively.

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## Participant Identification Form

| <u>Participant Letter</u> | <u>Participant Name</u> |
|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| Participant A             |                         |
| Participant B             |                         |
| Participant C             |                         |
| Participant D             |                         |
| Participant E             |                         |
| Participant F             |                         |
| Participant G             |                         |

### Participant Identification Cards

A

B

C

D

### Participant Identification Cards

E

F

G

H

## Activity Images

### Image 1



(Growing your Baby, 2016)

### Image 2



(Phillips Avent, no date)

## Activity Images

### Image 3



(Bessard, 2016)

### Image 4



(Kids II, no date)

### Activity Images

**Image 5**



(Willets, 2016)

**Image 6**



(Parents, 2016)

**Activity Images**

**Image 7**



(Camera Press, 2013)

**Activity Images**

**Image 8**



(Legacy Pediatrics, 2016)

**Image 9**



(Southend News Network, 2016)

**Activity Images**

**Image 10**



(Fancher, 2010)

**Image 11**



(Kendrick, 2015)

Activity Images

**Image 12**



(Silverman, 2015)

Activity 1

**Look at all of the  
images. What are  
your initial thoughts?**

Activity 2

**Look at images 1 & 2.  
Discuss if one feeding  
method is better than  
the other?**

Activity 3

**What are your  
thoughts on images 3,  
4, 5 & 6?**

Activity 4

**What are your  
thoughts on Images 1,  
2, 7 & 8?**

Activities

Activity 5

**Discuss what type of mothers you think the women in images 9, 10, 11 & 12 are.**

Activity 6

**Discuss what feeding methods you associate with the mothers in images 9, 10, 11 & 12.**

Activity 7

**General discussion  
about points raised in  
the focus group.**

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