Focus Groups as research method

Laurence Lessard-Phillips and Silvia Galandini
University of Manchester

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Focus groups - What

- **Guided** group discussion **focussing** on a specific topic/issue
- **Interaction** between participants is integral part of the data collected (beyond the one-to-one interaction between researcher and interviewee)
- Moderator shapes/guides the discussion, but has less influence than in interviews
Focus groups - Why

• Explore group dynamics: how individual experiences, opinions, attitudes, perceptions are discussed collectively and possibly shaped by social interaction (group norms)

• Elicit multiple opinions on the same topic (always taking into account the social setting in which these emerge)

• Investigate possible differences in opinions between groups
## Focus groups (FG) & other methods

| **Interviews** are aimed at gathering detailed information on individual experiences, attitudes, opinions | **FGs** seek to capture attitudes, thoughts, feelings as they emerge in a social setting/group discussion |
| **Observation** captures interactions between individuals as (and if) they happen, in a ‘natural’ setting | **FGs** *create* the opportunity for interactions to happen and *guide* the discussion so it focuses on topic of interest |
Focus groups - How

• Generally between 5 to 12 participants
• 1 moderator (+ 1 assistant)
• Approximately 1 hour
• Face-to-face (traditional) or online (more recent strategy)
• Audio or/and video recorded
Focus groups – The Moderator

• Making sure that discussion remains focused on the main topic
• Ask questions, probe, move from topic to topic
• Create the space for everyone in the group to speak
• Make sure that etiquette is respected and manage any difficult situation that might arise
Focus groups - Composition

• The right balance between homogeneity and diversity
• Participants should at least share experiences related to topic of interest
• Disagreement about whether participants should already know each other:
  - Pros: more trust, easier to discuss sensitive topics and disagree, elicit shared memories
  - Cons: harder to disagree, risk of pre-existing roles/relationships, dominant norms
Focus groups - Recruitment

• Through community groups (e.g. linking the focus groups to existing groups/activities)

• ‘Gatekeepers’:

• Leaflets in public places (e.g. community or leisure centres, libraries) to advertise the group (specific time/date/location) or collecting names of potential participants

• Using companies who recruit for you
Focus groups - Recruitment

- Using **sampling frames** to establish eligibility: who should be included in the study (i.e. the characteristics based on which individuals are included in the study)

- Sampling matrix (to help define to which group each participant can be assigned based on various characteristics)
Focus groups - Questions

• Prepare a **topic/question guide**
• Ice-breaking question to start (not relevant for the topic of interest)
• Question that directly refers to the main topic of interest (stimulate discussion)
• Discussion:
  - Open-ended questions (avoid yes/no questions)
  - Follow-up questions
  - Activity-based questions (e.g. brainstorming, listing, rating scales, sorting pictures)
Online FGs

• The discussion happens online on a secure platform (usually provided by private company)
• Participants are assigned anonymous codes
• Moderator posts questions and prompts, and participants can reply to the main questions but also comment on each other’s answers (interaction)
• Asynchronous FG (participants can post answers at any time, they do not have to be online at the same time and the discussion is open for a set amount of time – similar to a discussion forum)
• Synchronous FG (participants are online at the same time – similar to a chat)
Focus Groups: Advantages

• Explore how individual experiences and attitudes are discussed **collectively**, group dynamics

• Issues/topics that might not have emerged in individual interviews may emerged through discussion with others

• In some instances, facilitate discussion of sensitive topics
Focus Groups: Disadvantages

• Recruitment and organisation (logistics, time, incentives)
• Might be difficult to manage
• Risk of some participants leading/’taking over’ the discussion
• Ethical issues – higher risk to upset participants, prevent/manage inappropriate behaviours
Reflect on…

• Do you **really** need focus groups (or other methods)?
• What is the **main topic** of interest?
• **Who** should be invited to attend groups?
• How **homogenous** are the groups going to be?
• How to **organise** the groups?
• Ethics (sensitive topics, incentives)
References

- Erminia Colucci (2007) ‘Focus Groups can be fun: the use of activity-oriented questions in focus group discussions’ Qualitative Health Research, 17(10): 1422-1433
- Rezabek, Roger (2000) ‘Online focus groups: Electronic discussions for research’, Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research, 1(1). Available at: www.qualitative-research.net/fqs-texte/1-00/1-00rezabek-e.htm.
Other Resources

• Methods@Manchester – Focus Groups
  http://www.methods.manchester.ac.uk/resources/categories/data/focus/

• Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA) online
  http://onlineqda.hud.ac.uk/index.php

• Computer Assisted QDAS
  http://www.surrey.ac.uk/sociology/research/researchcentres/caqdas/index.htm

• National Centre for Research Methods – Training & Events
  http://www.ncrm.ac.uk/training/
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