Focus groups: principles and process

Richard Redmond and Elizabeth Curtis describe the process of conducting focus groups. It is specifically aimed at students undertaking research methods modules and those planning to use focus groups as a means of collecting data. It begins with a discussion of the uses of focus groups before moving on to discuss some of the many activities associated with the planning, organising and conducting of focus groups.

Introduction

Focus groups have been used by researchers in the social and behavioural sciences for more than 80 years. In particular, they have been used in fields as disparate as psychology, sociology, programme evaluation, marketing and health sciences. Focus group research, with its underlying theoretical assumptions, is accepted as a legitimate qualitative methodology. Focus groups have been used either on their own as the primary source of data collection or in association with other methodologies. The essence of the focus group is that it is a form of group interview where the aim is to understand the social dynamic and interaction between the participants through the collection of verbal and observational data. In this sense, Krueger and Casey (2000) see the focus group as different from all other types of research because data is generated and collected through the group setting. Because of their extensive use by researchers from different fields as well as those engaged in programme evaluation, the methodology has undergone
refinement over the past few decades. In this paper, we will discuss the principles and the processes involved with focus groups as these are two of the fundamental considerations for anyone planning to undertake focus group research.

**Uses of focus groups**

Like other types of qualitative research that emphasise meaning rather than measurement, focus group research differs from quantitative research by requiring that researchers immerse themselves in other people’s lives. Thus the interview process for the focus group is that of a humanistic interview.

Barbour and Kitzinger (1999) see a particular use for focus groups in exploratory research where little is known about the topic under investigation. These authors also see focus groups having much to contribute when they are used as part of a mixed-methods approach with the purpose being to generate hypotheses which can then be tested through survey research.

Stewart *et al* (2007) make the point, however, that since focus groups are particularly suited to exploratory research they are more likely to be used early in the research project. As the focus group is a qualitative approach, the researcher may follow this up through other qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews or through other larger scale research designs such as a quantitative survey that will provide more precise data from a larger sample of respondents. Focus groups can be used in a multitude of situations but not all of these may be for research. Stewart *et al* (2007) advance seven uses for focus groups – these are listed in Box 1.

**Box 1. Common uses for focus groups (Stewart *et al* 2007)**

- For collecting general background information on a topic of interest
- For generating research hypotheses that can be tested through larger quantitative studies
- For the purposes of stimulating new ideas and creative concepts
- For identifying potential problems with a new programme or service
- For generating impressions of services, programmes or products
- For learning how participants talk about the topic of interest which can assist with the design and construction of other research tools such as questionnaires
- For assisting with the interpretation of previously obtained quantitative results
In contrast to situations where focus groups work well, Krueger and Casey (2000) advance a similar number of situations where focus groups should not be used and these are listed in Box 2. Although there are many reasons why a researcher may want to use focus groups as part of their research project, the decision to use them should be guided by the purpose of the research study (Fern 2001, Bryman 2004).

An important distinction needs to be made between a focus group interview and a focused interview. Whereas a focused interview is limited to several people being brought together to discuss their views on some general topic about which they have knowledge or involvement, a focus group interview is confined to a specific topic area where the emphasis is on interaction within the group. Bryman (2004) sees the approach as providing the researcher with the opportunity to study ways through which members of the group collectively make sense of a topic and construct meanings around it. As with all qualitative researchers, those using a focus group will be interested in not just what people say but in how they say it, the language they use and the intensity of their feelings about the topic area.

In one-to-one interviews, participants may be asked about their reasons for a particular view. In contrast, the focus group interview allows people the opportunity to probe each other’s reasons for holding a certain view. Stewart et al (2007) see this as an important aspect of the dynamic of the focus group where participants may answer a question but, on listening to others, decide to modify their answers. Alternatively, participants may change their minds and agree with views they would not have considered had they not had the opportunity of hearing the views of others.

**Box 2. Reasons for not using focus groups (Krueger and Casey 2000)**

- When seeking consensus
- When seeking sensitive information that cannot be discussed in a group
- When seeking statistical information
- When the environment is emotionally charged or there is conflict in the group
- When the locus of control is with participants and not with the moderator
- When the confidentiality of information discussed cannot be ensured
- When other methodologies can produce better quality information
Planning and organising focus groups

In planning a focus group, you should begin by thinking or reflecting carefully on the purpose of the research study. Next, organise your thoughts and ideas rationally. Some researchers find it useful to answer a series of questions regarding the study. These questions include:

- Why is the study important?
- What are the consequences of not conducting the study?
- What types of information will the study provide?
- How will the information be used?

It is insufficient merely to reflect on these questions. Instead, they should be responded to in writing and given to others to critique and provide feedback.

As already mentioned, the purpose of the research study is important when considering whether to use a focus group. Fern (2001) emphasises this and sees the purpose of the research as necessary for framing the task of the focus group and for all subsequent decisions the researcher will make about the research project. Irrespective of the type of focus group and whether or not it forms part of a mixed-methods approach or is used as the only means of data collection, careful preparation will be required so as to ensure the interview runs to plan. To field a focus group requires that the researcher give careful time and attention to how they will prepare for the session.

Planning can be deceptive. It may appear simple but can be the most complicated stage of the focus group process. For planning to be successful it is important to begin by putting your thoughts on paper and asking others for critical feedback. This encourages you to move beyond your personal experiences and take account of the views and insights of colleagues. Planning also helps to keep the study on course and allows the researcher to complete the study within the time schedule.

Interview content and interview guide

Obtaining data by interviewing requires attention to the content of the interview. The objective is to collect data that is relevant to the topic under investigation (Morgan 1997). Merton et al (1990) suggest four broad criteria for conducting the effective focus group interview. First, the interview should address a maximum range of issues relevant to the topic. Second, it should
provide data that are specific to the topic; third, it should promote interaction that examines participants’ feelings in some depth and fourth, take note of the personal context that participants describe when giving their responses to the topic.

With regard to the criterion ‘maximum range of issues’, Merton et al (1990) suggested that group discussions should include not only issues that the researcher already knows about but also those that were perhaps not anticipated beforehand. Sometimes researchers unintentionally restrict the discussion by presuming which issues are important. With reference to the second criterion ‘providing data that are specific’, Merton et al (1990) recommended that the focus group discussion provide detailed accounts of participants’ experiences. The third criterion recommends that the focus group must encourage interaction that examines participants’ feelings in some depth. The aim is to promote a discussion that is deep and rich rather than vague and general. The final criterion recommended by Merton et al (1990) stressed the importance of the context that participants give when describing their experiences – what personal factors make an individual express an experience in a specific way? Quite often individuals are unaware of their own perspectives until they interact with others. The whole point of a focus group is to create an environment that brings together a variety of these perspectives.

Having considered the research questions, the purpose of the study and the type of data required, an interview guide should be developed. The guide serves as a useful map that plots the focus group interview from start to finish (Vaughn et al 1996). The structure of the interview guide will vary depending on whether you are using a structured or semi-structured approach. For an unstructured interview, for example, two broadly constructed questions or topics might suffice; in a more structured interview, four or five questions or topics, with pre-planned probes for each, would probably be sufficient (Morgan 1997). A good guide should allow a natural progression from general questions to those that are more specific (Stewart and Shamdasani 1990). Vaughn et al (1996) suggest that the following sections should be included in an interview guide: introduction; warm-up; clarification of terms; easy and non-threatening questions; more difficult questions; wrap-up; member check; and closing statements.
Selecting participants

The research goals for conducting focus groups are often quite different from those for quantitative research. Therefore, the procedures used for selecting samples for quantitative studies are inappropriate for focus groups (Borg et al. 1993). Focus groups are carried out when specific types of information are needed from people with certain characteristics and similar knowledge about a particular topic. This is because individuals in a group are more willing to express views when they perceive that others are similar to them in some ways (Krueger 1994, Litosseliti 2003). The characteristics of focus group participants will be decided by the purpose of the research study and usually consist of biographical factors, such as age, sex, educational background and knowledge or experience with the topic under investigation. What this suggests is that individuals selected to participate in a focus group must be willing and able to contribute the required information (Stewart and Shamdasani 1990).

When deciding on a sample for a focus group, it is more important to focus on reducing sample bias rather than achieving generalisability (Morgan 1997). Such bias is only a problem if ignored – that is, if the data from a limited sample are interpreted as representing the experiences and opinions of a larger population. The shift away from generalisability also means a shift from random sampling. Random sampling is seldom used in selecting participants for focus groups. Two reasons are offered for this. First, the small number of participants involved in focus groups means that it is unlikely that such a sample would be adequate to represent larger populations, regardless of random selection. Second, a random sample is unlikely to have a shared perspective on a topic and may not even be able to contribute in a meaningful way to the discussions (Morgan 1997). That said, random sampling can occasionally be used to select participants from stratified groups. Elrod (1981) suggested that when using employees for focus groups random sampling can be used to select participants from specific employee categories (for example, secretaries, nurses, midwives, administrators).

Participants for focus groups are frequently selected using purposive sampling (Morgan 1997, Vaughn et al. 1996): the researcher selects participants based on their knowledge and expertise of the subject under investigation (Talbot 1995, Polit and Tatano Beck 2006).
Types of participants

Interaction between participants is a key aspect of a focus group, so the composition of the group must be given careful attention (Bloor et al 2001). Structuring the group to match carefully selected categories of participants is known as ‘segmentation’ (Morgan 1997). Segmented groups are linked to homogeneity in the make-up of focus groups – it is this homogeneity that permits free-flowing discussions among participants.

When should you use segmented samples instead of homogeneous groups? In selecting group participants, it is necessary to ensure that every member of the group is able to contribute. Moreover, participants must feel comfortable talking to each other and a huge disparity in social background may prevent this. It is worth remembering, however, that the objective is ‘homogeneity in background and not homogeneity in attitudes’ (Morgan 1997). If all participants in a focus group had the same views, the discussion would be useless.

In some instances selecting a heterogeneous group may be appropriate (Vaughn et al 1996). For example, when the focus group is being conducted for exploratory purposes, it might be appropriate to use a diverse group of people. The most common variables that are considered when planning to use homogeneous or heterogeneous groups are sex, age, race and social class. Another factor that must be considered is whether the group should be composed of strangers or acquaintances. As a general rule, strangers are preferred because individuals are more likely to discuss issues candidly and readily when they are among people they are unlikely to meet again (Vaughn et al 1996). The idea that focus groups must consist of strangers is without doubt a myth (Morgan and Krueger 1993). Social scientists often use focus groups that consist of acquaintances. What is important to remember is that strangers and acquaintances can produce different group dynamics. For these reasons, the researcher must make choices based on the objectives or goals of the focus group.

Duration of the focus group interview

Depending on the complexity of the subject and the number of questions to be discussed, a focus group can last between one and two hours. If the topic is specific, one hour might be sufficient; if the topic is broad and there are many questions, only limited and superficial information will be pos-
sible unless sufficient time is made available for discussion. To gauge the time required, you can plan the probable duration of the focus group by estimating the time needed to discuss each of the questions to be covered. In general, to encourage in-depth discussion of a topic, most focus groups last about two hours. This said, Krueger and Casey (2000) warn that two hours is the physical and psychological limit for people and in most cases focus groups should not last beyond this.

### Size of the focus group

Some variation exists in the literature with regard to the optimum size for a focus group. Some authors suggest six to ten participants (Morgan 1997, Bloor et al 2001) while others have reported using as few as three and as many as 14 (Pugsley 1996). As with any stage of the research process, decisions concerning the size of the sample will depend on a number of factors. The amount of information that each participant is able to contribute to a group discussion, for example, is an important consideration when deciding the size of the group. If participants can only provide a small amount of information on the topic it may be difficult to maintain a stimulating dialogue in a smaller group. In addition, if groups are too small they can either be dominated by one or two participants or make participants feel compelled to speak (Vaughn et al 1996). Therefore, small groups should only be used when the participants are expected to contribute to a meaningful discussion and interact with each other (Morgan 1997).

The size of a focus group depends on the topic, how much is known about it and how well the moderator can control the group discussion. Morgan (1998) suggests 10 to 12 participants but Krueger and Casey (2000) consider that for dealing with very complex topics or where participants are knowledgeable about the topic, this is too large a number. So, to allow participants to share their views and make their observations, Krueger and Casey suggest limiting the number to six to eight participants so the moderator can control the discussion; they also make the point that the group dynamic will be different with a large group where participants might feel unable to describe their experiences and make an effective contribution to the group.

Larger groups also have problems that could restrict their efficiency.
Managing the discussions of a larger group can be more challenging, especially if all participants are knowledgeable and involved in the topic (Morgan 1997). Sometimes small conversations between participants can occur or all participants may start to talk at the same time. Taping such discussions is difficult and can result in loss of data. So, if planning to use a large group be sure to engage an experienced moderator who will be skilled at managing the discussion without having to constantly preserve discipline.

Whatever the decision regarding the size of the group, it is important to recruit more people than are required than to cancel a session because of withdrawal. Morgan (1997) suggests over-recruiting by 20 per cent but that over-recruitment will depend on factors such as who the participants are, whether they are receiving payment for participating, and the location of the focus group interview. If, however, all recruited participants turn up for the interview it may be necessary to ask one or two people to leave. One way in which this can be done is to ask the last two people to leave (Stewart and Shamdasani 1990). If you think that you may have to turn people away it may be wise to inform them during the early stages of recruitment of the likelihood of this happening and that they should indicate their willingness to attend as soon as possible.

**The role of the moderator**

A focus group interview is conducted by a facilitator or moderator whose job it is to carry out the interview. The moderator is one of the important keys to collecting rich and valid insights from the group participants (Stewart et al 2007). While a detailed discussion of the characteristics of a good moderator is beyond the scope of this paper they include having a pleasing disposition towards the group participants, being a good listener and being responsive to non-verbal as well as verbal utterances. According to Karger (1987):

‘The best facilitator has unobtrusive chameleon-like qualities: gently draws consumers into the process; deftly encourages them to interact with one another for optimum synergy; lets the intercourse flow naturally with a minimum of intervention; listens openly and deeply; uses silence well; plays back consumers’ statements in a distilling way which brings out more refined thoughts or explanations; and remains non-authoritarian and non-judgemental.’
Questions: Beginning the focus group
It is evident that the moderator has many tasks to perform before, during and immediately after the interview. Krueger and Casey (2000) see the moderator’s role before the interview as welcoming participants, providing an overview of the topic and explaining the purpose of the interview. First names can be placed in front of participants to help identify them. The moderator outlines the ground rules, which include one person speaking at a time, and then asks the first question. This is usually an introductory question asked as a warm-up before putting more specific questions to the group. The type of question we have asked participants related to time for travelling and traffic, which while having nothing to do with the topic serves as an ice-breaker.

Questions: During the focus group
This is where the moderator gets to ask the important questions. With a topic guide or an interview schedule, the moderator asks the questions. Morgan (1998) suggests that the order of these may differ but questions usually proceed from the general to the specific with sensitive questions left to the end if there are any. Asking questions is a skill but Fern (2001) considers listening of equal importance. Depending on the purpose of the interview and the moderator’s style, either non-reflective or reflective listening skills may be used.

Non-reflective listening, according to Fern (2000), is a non-judgemental approach that requires minimal physical and psychological responses other than non-verbal acknowledgements to the participants such as “mm-hmm” and nodding the head. Minimal responses from the moderator serve to encourage participants to talk and to do so for longer. Non-reflective listening is in keeping with unstructured and empathetic moderating as it encourages everyone to participate in the discussion. Fern (2001) sees reflective listening as a way of getting shy participants to talk while more dominant participants may talk less if they feel the moderator is really listening to them. Non-reflective listening can uncover wide-ranging responses from the group, which may be the aim in exploratory focus groups.

Reflective listening is also non-judgemental and is aimed at getting to the heart of communication problems – misunderstanding. It attempts to clarify
the accuracy of what is being said. Fern (2001) discusses four types of reflective responses to increase accuracy of understanding. These are summarised in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clarifying</td>
<td>Ask the speaker to clarify what was said.</td>
<td>These type of responses point out that we do not understand what the speaker means.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paraphrasing</td>
<td>This is restating what was said. The moderator restates the essence of the speaker’s response.</td>
<td>This response means making sure you understand what the speaker intended to communicate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflecting feelings</td>
<td>The moderator mirrors feeling they think were expressed.</td>
<td>The feelings are what is important here and not the content of the speaker’s response.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summarising</td>
<td>Is about summarising the main points, feelings (or both) the speaker expresses.</td>
<td>Important for playing back the points the speaker was attempting to make because not all people communicate logically.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fern (2001) sees reflective listening as important for three main reasons. First, it is important where the group is evaluating concepts and policies. Second, it is important when it comes to writing a report and it should increase the validity of the inferences made. Third, it is necessary for evaluation and theory triangulation.

Factors that will influence the success of the focus group include the moderator’s style of questioning, personal appearance and time given to participant’s responses. Less obvious but of equal importance is the moderator’s body and non-verbal language, eye contact and general warmth towards the group (Stewart et al 2007).
The task of the moderator is to listen actively, pick up on cues from what participants say or seem to want to say, and be sensitive to what participants consider important. A moderator should talk as little as possible but since a major function of the focus group is to encourage interaction, a moderator will use prompts to encourage a view that is tentatively advanced and will probe participants to more fully express their views.

An important misconception is that the moderator has to get through all the questions. What is important is that the main topic area is covered and that everyone has at least been encouraged to discuss it.

**Questions: After the main focus group topic**

At the end of the discussion and before concluding, moderators will usually do two things. First, they will reiterate the purpose of the focus group and summarise what was said. Second, they will ask a final question such as: ‘Our purpose this afternoon was to discuss... Do you think we have left anything out?’ Many writers see this as an important question that may stimulate some additional but important discussion points (Morgan 1997, Krueger and Casey 2000, Stewart et al 2007). Following this question the moderator thanks participants and closes the proceedings.

**Summary and conclusion**

The aim of this paper was to present an overview of the principles and processes involved in conducting focus groups. This was achieved by addressing a number of fundamental and important issues. The paper also considered issues relating to the size and duration of a typical focus group.

Although we explored the processes involved in conducting focus groups, we did not include their analyses. In a paper of this size, it is not possible to do justice to all of the complex processes involved and so we concentrated on the issues relating to planning, organising and conducting a focus group.

Focus groups are a respected qualitative methodology and their application is growing. A fundamental and necessary condition for their use is that they must suit the purpose of the research. However appealing a focus group may be it is not something to be taken on lightly. Considerable planning and preparation are necessary prerequisites for successful focus groups.
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