

The Focus Group Interview and Other Kinds of Group Activities



Why being clear about what is and what is not a focus group interview important?

With the rise in popularity it's become in vogue to call many different kinds of groups "focus groups." On the other hand, researchers and evaluators generally have very specific ideas regarding what is needed for useful and trustworthy data collection by the use of focus group interviews. One reason for being very clear about what is and what is not good practice in conducting focus group interviews is that this type of interviewing has very definite strengths and weaknesses. Being very clear about what is needed to produce good data from focus group interviews helps to capitalize on strengths and compensate for the weaknesses of this data collection technique.

Not every group can be a focus group. There are two very distinct characteristics of the groups used in the focus group interview process. One: unlike many other groups, the purpose of a focus group is data collection. Two: focus groups use group interaction to elicit information from the group members. The group work associated with conducting focus group interviews should not be confused with other kinds of group activities such as decision making or program planning. Other kinds of groups which might be used in Extension work are discussion groups, delphi groups, community forums, town meetings, or brainstorming groups. A discussion of some of these and other kinds of groups are presented later in this text.

Part of the reason for the confusion between the focus group interview and other possible group activities is probably due to the shortening of the term "focus group interviews" to "focus groups" as this data collection technique is commonly discussed. Unwittingly the emphasis often shifts from a type of "interview" as a data collection technique to something one does with or to a group.

How some authors have defined focus groups (or the focus group interview):

Morgan:¹

"The hallmark of a focus group is the explicit use of the group interaction to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group."
(p. 12)

Kotler:²

"Groups of eight to twelve target consumers, usually (but not always) a relatively homogeneous group, ...brought together to discuss a specific set of issues under the guidance of a leader trained to stimulate and focus the discussion." (p. 226)

¹David L. Morgan. Focus Groups as Qualitative Research. (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1988).

²Philip Kotler, Strategic Marketing for Non-Profit Organizations, 3rd Ed. (Englewood cliffs, N. J.: PrenticeHall, 1987).

Patton :³

“A focus group interview is an interview with a small group of people on a specific topic. Groups are typically six to eight people who participate in the interview for one-half to two hours.

The focus group interview is indeed an *interview*. It is not a discussion. It is not a problem-solving session. It is not a decision making group. It is an *interview*.

The participants are typically a relatively homogeneous group of people who are asked to reflect on questions asked by the interviewer. Participants get to hear each other’s responses and to make additional responses beyond their own initial responses as they hear what other people have to say. It is not necessary for the group to reach any kind of consensus. Nor is it necessary for people to disagree. The object is to get high quality data in a social context where people can consider their own views in the context of the views of others.”

Krueger:⁴

1. The group(s) themselves:

! Seven to ten people per group.

! Selected because they have certain characteristics in common that relate to the topic of the focus group. (Also similar in terms of status and/or power-CDC).

! The group interview is conducted with different people for a series of at least three or four group interviews. This is done with similar types of participants so themes and patterns in perceptions can be identified.

2. The facilitator:

! Conducts a carefully planned, focused discussion.

! Creates a permissive environment that nurtures different points of view without pressure to vote, plan, or reach consensus.

! Encourages group members to respond to one another’s ideas and comments. (p. 16).

3. The purpose:

The purpose of the group is to produce qualitative data to “provide insights into the attitudes, perceptions, and opinions of participants..”(p.19). “Other types of group process used in human services (Delphic, planning, therapeutic, sensitivity, advisory, etc.) may also have one or more of (the features of focus groups), but not in the same combination as those of focus group interviews.” (p. 16).

“Brainstorming techniques resemble the freedom and spontaneity of focus groups, but differ. ...in that brainstorming is often directed at solving particular problems ... focus groups have a rather narrow purpose for which they work particularly well--that is to

determine the perceptions, feelings, and manner of thinking ... (of participants). Focus

³Michael Quinn Patton. How to Use Qualitative Methods in Evaluation. (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1987).

⁴Richard A. Krueger. Focus groups~ A practical guide for applied research. Second Edition. (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1994).

groups are not intended to develop consensus, to arrive at an agreeable plan, or to make a decision about which course of action to take (p. 19).”

Other Types of Group Activities Often confused with Focus Group Interviews

As you can see from the preceding definitions, focus groups are a special kind of group. They are used for data collection. The goal of a focus group is not necessarily to reach consensus (although that may happen). Focus groups do not vote on decisions, plan programs or select a specific course of action.

Advisory Groups/Task Forces - Generally these are longer term groups used to advise and recommend. A task force usually has a more restricted charge and is appointed for a more limited time period than an advisory group.

Brainstorming - Used to generate and select alternative solutions.

Community Forum - A public meeting where residents may be invited to express opinions about community problems and needs.

Delphi Groups - Successive rounds of questionnaires are used to collect data from experts who form a panel. Each questionnaire is followed by a summary of the replies received from the previous round. Often used to estimate the impacts of trends or develop scenarios of future outcomes.

Hearing - A formal technique where differing opinions or testimony is solicited.

Nominal Group Process - Individual ideas are gathered (usually through some type of brainstorming) and combined. Generally round robin feedback is used from each individual on ideas and then they are prioritized by voting.

Panel - A discussion by a group of experts or persons with different perspectives on a problem or topic.

Study Group - Designed to look at a problem or issue in depth often relying on outside references and resources.

What does it take to do a focus group?

Because we often work with groups, the true resource level needed to produce a defensible report using the focus group interview technique can be deceiving. For

example, Krueger estimates the conceptualization of a study, drafting of questions, and working through the initial logistical arrangements can take between six and 66 hours of research time. Recruiting of participants can take between five to more than 15 depending on how “willing” the prospective interviewees are and how easy they are to identify and reach. Analysis using transcripts where a fairly rigorous analysis is needed or the results are complex can require at least six days for a minimum of three groups to produce a first draft. This does not include the clerical time needed to transcribe the interviews. An experienced researcher may be able to prepare a the first draft report with less rigor in a day or so. For a final, polished report add at least one to three days of researcher time and additional clerical time.⁵

Other resources needed include an assistant moderator, clerical support for reminder letters and thank you notes, honoraria, room rental and refreshments. Perhaps most elusive is a moderating team with the experience, skill and judgement to do a good job with the topic.

Focus Group Interview References

1. Philip Kotler, Strategic Marketing for Non-Profit Organizations, 3rd Ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1987).
2. Richard A. Krueger. Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research. Second Edition. (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1994).⁶
3. David L. Morgan, Ed. Successful Focus Groups: Advancing the State of the Art. (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1993). Especially Chapter 8 “Quality control in Focus Group Research” by Richard A. Krueger.
4. David L. Morgan & Richard A. Krueger. The Focus Group Kit. (Thousands Oaks, CA :Sage, 1998). consists of six volumes, roughly 100 pages each. Each volume concentrates on a specific topic related to focus groups.
5. Michael Quinn Patton. How to Use Qualitative Methods in Evaluation. (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1987).

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⁵Handout used at presession to the 1992 American Evaluation Association Annual Meeting.

⁶This is the best single reference on focus groups for not for profit organizations and human service agencies.