Tips for Conducting Focus Groups

When developing the research design for your proposed research project, it is important to think about how the design can not only answer your research question but also how you will ensure that the project is conducted ethically. The National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research, 2007 (updated 2018), ("The National Statement") provides values, principles and themes to guide researchers and promote ethically good human research.

This guide provides information to consider when planning the focus group, conducting the focus group (what to do on the day); and how to manage any problems that may arise whilst undertaking the focus group. This is not an exhaustive list of what you may need to think about, and you will need to independently give considerable thought to your specific research design, methodology and participant groups.

Planning the Focus Group

1. The Team

   Things to think about:
   
   • Who will be involved in conducting the focus groups?
   • What experience, skills and/or training will the facilitator require prior to conducting a focus group?
   • Will the facilitator be acting in a professional role, e.g. counsellor, a psychologist?
   • Will you have a facilitator and a monitor?
   • Will you be asking people outside of the research team to undertake this work? For example, will you ask a teacher to conduct a focus group within a designated class?
   • What is the relationship between the facilitator, research team members and prospective participants?

2. The Participants

   Participants in focus groups are often members of small communities or groups, and the information they provide may be sensitive. Therefore, participants may be easily identifiable. For these reasons, care should be taken to ensure participants are not identifiable by the information they provide unless they have agreed to be identified.

   Refer to Chapter 3.1: The elements of research of the National Statement for guidelines on conducting research using this method.

   Things to think about:
   
   • Who will you need to invite to participate in order to gain the particular experiences, needs, or perspectives you wish to capture?
   • Is it important to have a gender balance? If so, how will you achieve this?
How will you protect the identity of participants when disseminating information and storing material?

Will you be working with any vulnerable groups? See also the National Statement:
- Chapter 4.1 Women who are pregnant and the human fetus
- Chapter 4.2 Children and young people
- Chapter 4.3 People in dependent or unequal relationships
- Chapter 4.4 People highly dependent on medical care who may be unable to give consent
- Chapter 4.5 People with a cognitive impairment, an intellectual disability or a mental illness
- Chapter 4.6 People who may be involved in illegal activities

Will you be working with any culturally sensitive groups? See also the National Statement:
- Chapter 4.7 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples
- Chapter 4.8 People in other countries

3. The Time and Location

Things to think about:

- How long is the focus group expected to take?
- When do you plan to conduct the focus group? Will this be suitable to the proposed participant group?
- Where do you plan to conduct the focus group?
- Will the venue be accessible to the proposed participant group?
- Will there be parking available?
- Will you need to seek permission to use the venue?
- Will there be a cost to using the venue?
- Will the proposed time and venue be safe for you and the participants?

4. Recruiting Participants

Things to think about:

- What are the selection and exclusion criteria for participating in the focus group? Have you accurately described this in your Participant Information Sheet?
- How will you make contact with the proposed participants? Directly, or via a third party?
- If using a third party, what is the process to seek permission to recruit participants through them? When will you commence seeking this permission?
- Do you need to seek ethical clearance outside of the University, e.g. Education Queensland, Queensland Health?
- How will you store the personal information of participants, and who will have access to this?

5. Prepare the Focus Group Questions & Guidelines

Things to think about:

- What experiences, needs or perspectives are you trying to capture from the focus
group?

- Are you (or other facilitators) familiar with some of the critical issues affecting the community represented by participants? It is necessary for you to have a base awareness of sensitive issues so that you do not offend or insult participants unknowingly.
- Brainstorm some issues that may be sensitive in the communities where you will be conducting the focus group.
- Clearly outline what guiding questions you will use within the focus group and ensure these are relevant to your research question.
- Allocate a time for discussion of each question, and note this in the Focus Group Guide (for use during the Focus Group session).
- Develop your focus group guidelines (rules) for participants. Sample ground rules may include:
  - Only one person talks at a time
  - No side conversations: It is important to hear what everyone has to say, and this also interferes with the recording of the session.
  - Confidentiality is assured. What is shared in the room must stay in the room?
  - There are no right or wrong answers to questions - just ideas, experiences and opinions, which are all valuable.
  - It is important for us to hear all sides of an issue – both the positive and the negative.
  - It is important for women’s and men’s ideas to be equally represented and respected.
  - You may also wish to ask participants if they would like to add anything else prior to commencing the focus group session.

6. Prepare the Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form

Chapter 2.2 General requirements for consent of The National Statement outlines information that should be communicated to participants. Things to think about:

- Use everyday language in a conversational style. This means, include what an acronym stands for in full in the first instance. Avoid discipline-specific jargon.
  - Essentially, if a 5th grader can read and understand the information sheet, then it has been written using everyday language.
- Include a brief paragraph on what your research is about, and why this research is important to either this participant and/or the wider community.
- Include the scope of the project. For example, is this research relevant to people residing in South-West Queensland, teachers in Queensland public schools, mothers and babies across Australia, etc.
- Outline what a focus group is, remembering that a community member may not know what this term means.
- Include, step-by-step, what participating in the focus group will require of the participant.
- Include any alternatives to participation.
- Outline how this research will be monitored.
- Outline what services are available to participants who may be adversely affected by the research.
- Include contact details of the USQ Ethics Office to receive complaints about how the
• Contact details (include phone and email) of the researcher/s
• Outline how a participant’s privacy and confidentiality will be protected. State whether a participant or their information will be identified.
• Outline the participant’s right to withdraw from further participation at any stage. Include what the implications of withdrawal may be and whether it will be possible to withdraw data about themselves.
• State the source and amount of funding for the research.
• Declare any financial or other relevant declarations of interest of researchers, sponsors or institutions.
• Outline if there is any payment to a participant.
• Outline the likelihood and form of dissemination of the research results, including publication.
• State the expected benefits to participants and/or the wider community.
• If the data is being transcribed by someone outside of the research team, this information needs to be clearly outlined, including how confidentiality and security of data will be managed.

**Conducting the Focus Group (On the day)**

1. **Establish rapport**

   Welcome participants to the focus group. Let them know that you are there to learn from them, and appreciate the time commitment and contribution that they will make.

   Introduce your role as the facilitator/researcher with an appropriate level of professionalism (balance between too casual and too formal).

   Include an ice-breaker activity, if appropriate, to introduce group members to each other and increase feelings of being comfortable to share ideas, etc.

   Outline the process if someone needs to take a break.

   Point out any facilities that the participant may require, for example, emergency exits, toilets, and water dispenser.

2. **Read the Participant Information Sheet**

   Although the Participant Information Sheet would normally be sent out ahead of time to a participant, it is always good practice to ensure that everyone has actually read the information and understands what they will be agreeing to.

3. **Answer any questions raised by a participant**

   Provide an opportunity for participants to ask any questions about participating in the focus group. You may need to hold any questions on the specific research until after the focus group session.

4. **Obtain written consent**

   Ensure all participants have agreed and signed their consent form. Store these safely during the session.
5. Record the session

Re-confirm with participants that the session will be recorded, and commence recording. Ideally, focus group discussions will be recorded using both tape recording equipment and the hand-written notes of a note taker (not the facilitator). Hand-written notes should be extensive and accurately reflect the content of the discussion, as well as any salient observations of non-verbal behaviour. It would normally be the role of the note taker to monitor the tape recording equipment and play a key role in keeping track of time.

6. Follow the Focus Group Guidelines

Read through the Focus Group Guidelines and seek participant consent to follow these. It is helpful to have these clearly displayed throughout the focus group session and refer back to these if required.

7. Guide the Discussion

Using the Focus Group Questions developed, guide the group discussion to elicit the information that you wish to capture.

Show participants you are actively listening and interested in what they are sharing, while remaining as impartial as possible. For example, phrases such as ‘Thank you, that is helpful’ may be preferable to “I can’t believe it! You really think that?!”. If a participant sees that you have an opinion, they may change their responses so that they seem more socially desirable, rather than reflect what they truly believe or feel about a topic.

Allowing silence may encourage a participant to elaborate on their response, or give them a chance to think about what they want to say.

Clarifying questions and probes allow participant clues as to how specific you would like their answers to be. Keep the questions short (rather than making big leaps or using double-barrelled questions) to avoid assuming that you know what a participant wants to say. Always allow a participant to finalise their response, i.e. do not finish a participant’s response for them.

Avoid leading questions, such as ‘Don’t you think...’” Rephrase to “What are your thoughts about .....”.

Manage the time during the focus group. Participants love to talk about their experiences, and your role as facilitator is to structure the interview to elicit a complete response, while also ensuring good time management.

8. Thank participants for their contribution

9. Make arrangements for payment to participants (as required)

10. Confirm contact details of the researcher and any referral agencies (as required).
Managing problems that may arise

Someone dominating the conversation

Focus groups, ideally, allow researchers to collect the opinions and ideas of a variety of people. If someone is doing a lot of the talking, this may prevent others from contributing their thoughts, and limit the usefulness of the focus group. It is important to notice when this is happening and do what you can to ensure all participants have an opportunity to express their ideas, opinions, etc., even if they seem reluctant at first, or indicate that what is being said by others reflects what they would have said.

If someone is dominating the conversation, try:

- respectfully acknowledging their contribution, e.g. “Thank you, Tim, I really appreciate your comments”.
- make direct eye contact (if culturally appropriate) with other participants, while asking “I’m very interested in hearing how other people feel about this issue”, or “It’s very interesting to obtain a variety of perspectives, and I would like to hear from other people as well”.

Men and women are participating at different levels

This situation is similar to someone dominating the conversation to the exclusion of others. Therefore you may be able to apply the same strategies outlined above.

If men are dominating the conversation, try:

- respectfully thank the man who has just contributed
- suggest “It would be great to hear from some of the women present, as well”
- make direct eye contact with the women (if culturally appropriate), and even ask individual women direct questions.

If women are dominating the conversation, try:

- use the same strategy above, however, thank the woman for contributing, and directly target a male participant to contribute.

No-one is responding to a question

When no-one is responding to a question, it is helpful to understand why this is. Are people feeling uncomfortable about starting the discussion? Have you asked a question that was difficult for the participant to understand? Was the question politically sensitive (i.e. something that people may be afraid to answer honestly because it might make other people angry)? Are people tired of talking about the topic or have no more to say about it?

To encourage participants to respond, try:

- include an ice-breaker at the beginning of the session
- rephrasing the question in a different way
- if you feel the question is too sensitive, move to a different question or topic and come back to this topic later
- ask participants “Is there anything else that you would like to share (pause). If not, we
can move on to our next question”

- be quiet for a moment to allow participants to think about what they might want to say or digest something that another member may have contributed.

**The group discussion moves away from the topic under discussion**

Sometimes, the group discussion starts to stray from the topic of the focus group.

To encourage the group to stay on topic, try:

- Orient the group to the time allocated for discussion of each item at the beginning of the session.
  - “Thank you for that interesting idea. Perhaps we can discuss it in a separate session?”
  - “To further explore the specific topics that are the focus of this discussion, with your permission, I would like to move on to another item.”

**Group members are having side conversations**

Side-conversations among group members can be disruptive, make other group members feel uncomfortable, and make it hard for others to hear what is being said.

To encourage the group to be on topic, try:

- Include information in the Focus Group Guidelines, indicating that it very important not to have side conversations because it interferes with an individual’s full participation in the group, and poses a challenge for the recording of the discussion.
- Respectfully remind people of the Focus Group Guidelines.
- This disruption may signal it is time to take a quick break. Give members five minutes to use the restroom, etc, and re-convene to complete the discussion.

**A group member provides information relevant to, or answers; a question not yet asked**

At times, participants may skip topics or move ahead of where you are in the focus group questions. You do not want to interrupt them; rather, let them finish their thought and remain an interested listener.

If a question has already been answered, you will still want to ask the question to the remainder of the group. Try:

- Acknowledge that relevant information may already have been shared
- Indicate that you want to ensure the group has an opportunity to explore the issue more fully.

**A group member indicates they are uncomfortable answering a question**

If a participant is not comfortable answering a question, this must be honoured. Under the National Statement, (Refer Chapter 2.2: General requirements for consent), a participant who elects not to participate in any way need not give any reason for their decision. The facilitator should do what they can to ensure that the participant who declines to participate will not suffer any disadvantage as a result of their decision. Try:

- Thank the participant, and acknowledge that they are not required to answer any specific question.
- Enquire if it would be okay to move on to the next question.
- If the participant wishes to withdraw from the focus group session entirely, thank them for their contribution, and acknowledge this is their right to do so. If appropriate, ask the participant to meet with you after the session so that you can ascertain if they require any additional support and/or referral.

**Group members start leaving**

It is important to keep participants engaged fully in the discussion for the entirety of the focus group session. Try:

- Let people know in advance what the anticipated time commitment will be.
- Reiterate the time commitment prior to the focus group session commencing.
- Emphasise that it is important for members to stay for the entire discussion.
- Ask the group at the beginning of the session if anyone needs to leave early so that you can change the order of the questions to ask the most important ones before people leave.

**References**

Facilitator Tool Kit: A guide for helping groups get results ([www.quality.wisc.edu](http://www.quality.wisc.edu))
