

LET'S GET TOGETHER

Focus Group Research

Ever been a member of a book club and then written a general review of a book? Then you've taken part in a focus group!

Using focus groups is a qualitative research technique which seeks to configure a 'framework of understanding' for a specific group of people on a specific topic of concern. A focus group is not a group interview – it is a group of people gathered together to discuss an issue of concern or study. Emphasis is on the interaction of participants in the group. It is a technique used when group interaction and discussion is the best way to gather the data. Participants are allowed to respond to specific questions by the researcher and also to build on the reactions or opinions of others. Sometimes these groups are broken down into two different types of interaction: complimentary (sharing experiences, concerns, needs) and argumentative (questioning, debating and challenging others' opinions).

Multiple understandings and meanings tend to be held by participants and these can be unpacked providing the researchers with different views and perspectives – this tends to be called "importance of difference." The importance of difference among participants offers the researcher an insight into how people understand certain phenomena, how they might disagree, how they negotiate these difference and clarify them.





KEY IDEAS

Participants should usually have something in common so that maximum interaction within the group can be achieved and individuals dominating or withdrawing can be avoided – this, however, may not always work. Focus groups can work with homogenous groups (like-minded people with something in common which is of interest to the researcher) and (less common) heterogeneous groups – that is to say people of contrasting background, beliefs, lifestyle, cultural practices, etc. which can work when aiming to have a wide range of responses.

The choice of group size is crucial for the success of the focus group method. The ideal size for each group is defined to suit the needs of the research. Generally, it is recommended that there should be six to 10 participants per focus group; but some sessions may have 12, other designs might work better with three. Some researchers argue that less than six in a group might show low levels of involvement and discussion. Sessions should last until “saturation” is reached – that is to say topics, ideas and opinions become repeated.

If you are thinking of researching using focus groups you may want to think about how these groups are set up and undertaken. Factors such as the clarity of purpose, choice of environment, choice of participant, skill of the researcher, choice of theme and question will all have a bearing on the results you discover.

When using focus groups or any research technique it is important to understand its relevance for your own research/study. At a more detailed level, it is key to provide arguments about the rationale behind using focus groups (or any other method), to provide scholarly sources that describe what the method is about, to provide details of the structure of samples (e.g.: of the focus groups), the logistics and profile and recruitment of participants and the analysis of the data gathered in an organised way.



KEY READINGS

Bryman, A. (2012). *Social research methods*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Citizens Advice (2015). *How to run focus groups*. Available from: bit.ly/2Q3Wm7U.

Jensen, K. B. (2002). *A handbook of media and communication research: Qualitative and quantitative methodologies*. London: Routledge.

ACTIVITIES

1. Why not use one or two of these questions and try conducting a focus group together – what themes/questions are you going to ask? Try some of these topics:
 - a. Do you think that capital punishment is justifiable?
 - b. Can technology be considered evil?
 - c. Do you trust the news?

2. Now evaluate your session:
 - i. How did the discussion develop?
 - ii. Is there anything you might do differently next time?
 - iii. Would the results have been different if the make up of the focus group had been different?