Government of South Australia

SACE Board of SA

STAGE 1 AND 2 PSYCHOLOGY

SUPPORT MATERIALS

How to conduct a Focus Group

Introduction

Up until the 1970's, focus groups were mainly used by market researchers. However, in the last 15 years sociologists and psychologists have made use of focus groups to promote awareness and facilitate behaviour change (see Wilkinson, 1998, p. 181).

Focus groups are a method of conducting group interviews for the purpose of collecting data for research. Focus groups can provide researchers with the opportunity of talking to people to find out what people say, think, and feel, and what they have done, and what they know about certain topics or issues of concern in society. The raw data collected in focus groups are the respondents' words. Analysing the data obtained from focus groups helps us to learn about and understand, other people's perspectives and experiences on various specific topics. The information gained can also be used for further research and more detailed evaluation of the issue, product, service, or topic in question.

Because focus groups generally involve working with small numbers, they are particularly well suited to providing opportunities for all participants to contribute to the discussion. Focus group participants usually have an interest in the topics under discussion, and generally find the experience of participating in the focus group to be interesting and pleasant.

Why use focus groups?

Advantages of focus groups

Focus groups:

- are a highly efficient method of collecting qualitative data—information from up to eight people in one session represents a significant gain over information from a single person in a one-session interview;
- are an excellent way of getting information that cannot be gathered through traditional methods using surveys and questionnaires;
- involve many participants which can provide insights that a single person may not have;
- reliably control and limit extreme views of individual participants through group dynamics;
- add richness to the understandings of the research topic because of their capacity to gain access to different perspectives;
- gather information that can be used to develop ideas around specific issues for future research;
- offer participants the opportunity of an enjoyable experience;

Disadvantages of focus groups

Focus groups:

- can be time-consuming because each of a number of participants may have something to say. Consequently, the number of questions asked can, or may need to, be limited due to time constraints. Within the half hour framework of the focus groups in the SSABSA-approved research programs, it should be possible to ask approximately three questions.
- require some skill to facilitate;
- can be difficult to run if notes have to be taken by the moderator (this problem is solved by having a moderator and one, or more, assistants);
- introduce possible conflict amongst participants, which may require skilled handling by the moderator to resolve.

Focus groups are used in three major ways:

1. as an adjunct to other methods—as part of a multi-method research design;
2. as a primary research method—on people's views and understandings;

3. as a form of action research—aim of empowering participants and promoting social and political change (Wilkinson, 1998).

The focus group method chosen in psychological research depends on the research question. The focus group questions have been developed to encourage discussion in the topic being studied. Students can use the focus groups as a primary research method or as an adjunct to other methods as part of a multi-method research design. The method chosen depends on the level of research undertaken by the student.

Step One—Research questions (see Krueger, 1998a)

The research questions are already written for each of the SSABSA-approved research programs; therefore, students and teachers will not have to formulate their own research questions. However, there are a few crucial points about the formulation of questions for focus groups that may be worth knowing. The main aim is to:

1. clarify the issue or problem or issue to be addressed;
2. identify potential questions;
3. write a first draft of questions;
4. test questions in a pilot study;
5. share results;
6. read (and re-read) to understand the content (see Krueger, 1998a).

Drafting questions—the main aim of the focus group is to stimulate conversation

Key issues:

- Wording

  Formulate questions using a direct, forthright and open-ended style. Research questions should be worded in language that is appropriate for the intended audience—avoid jargon, acronyms and technical words. Make sure the meaning is clear and can be transmitted orally. easy to ask and that Limit lengthy background information as this often confuses audiences and encourages unnecessary digressions. Limit each question to the main (general) issue of the topic. For example, if the main issue is aggression, do not focus exclusively on the relatively limited issue of (say) terrorism.

- Presentation

  Trying the questions out in a pilot study is a good way to see how they are received. A good moderator can ask what may seem a ‘blunt’ question in a way that gets an audience to respond. Good questions need to be well thought out and well presented—there is an ‘art’ to good presentation of questions.

- Time

  Allow sufficient time for each question—again a function of the pilot study.

- Categories of questions

  There are several types of questions that are used in focus groups and many of these will not be used in the focus groups conducted in schools mainly because of time constraints. However, dispensing with factors such as opening and introductory questions is advisable if the participants already know each other and feel connected.

  The following is a list of the types of questions that are formulated especially for focus groups, and how these questions fit in to the overall group discussion:

  1. Opening question—helps participants get acquainted and feel connected;
  2. Introductory question—opens the discussion of topic;
  3. Transition question—moves smoothly and seamlessly into key questions;
  4. Key question—yields insight into areas of central concern in the study;
  5. Ending question—helps researchers determine where to place emphasis, and bring closure to the discussion (see Krueger, 1998a).

Step Two—Identify and train moderators and assistants

Moderating the focus group

The focus group process that schools will be using will not involve audio recording of the sessions. Therefore, schools will need a moderator and, at least, one moderator’s assistant to keep a record of what has been said. Teachers may moderate the group(s) or train students to do this task. If class numbers are large the teacher may need to recruit help from outside the class to run the group(s).

Since the purpose of the focus group is to encourage conversation that will generate a wide range of points of view about an issue, the moderator needs to be able to 'handle' a group of people. It is important that the moderator does not try to participate in the discussion by presenting his/her own point of view or arguing. The moderator's role is to listen and not to provide answers. Holding back personal views requires self-discipline and awareness, which is sometimes difficult.

Neutrality is impossible. Each moderator has particular qualities that may affect the group discussion and factors such as gender, language, race, age, socio-economic characteristics, and 'expert' knowledge need to be taken into consideration. Ensure that any perceived differences in power relationship between teachers and students are minimised as they may inhibit student's ability to communicate. Particular attention should be paid to this 'problem' when a teacher moderates a focus group—teachers need to be aware that their role as a teacher can affect the discussion. Students may be used to teachers asking 'exam'-type questions (i.e., 'closed') 'questions, which have a right or wrong answer. Questions need to be 'open' and asked in ways that encourage discussion. After all, the moderator's goal is to elicit participants' perceptions, feelings, attitudes, and ideas about a selected topic, not to act as, or be, the 'expert'.

A skilled moderator's job is to quietly or unobtrusively control the group discussion. The discussion will inevitably move into areas that are not relevant to the topic and the moderator's job is to subtly bring the discussion back on track. The moderator also has to have a good sense of timing and be able 'wrap up' one topic and move onto the next with ease (see Krueger, 1998b).

A good moderator:

- has a genuine interest in people and shows respect for other people's views;
- is curious about the topic and the participants;
- moderates, does not participate;
- is attentive and listens actively;
- lets people share views and is prepared to hear unpleasant views;
- never belittles or makes fun of other people's views;
- remains emotionally detached from the opinions expressed in the group;
- always thanks their participants (even if they disagree with them).

Getting the most from participants

How your participants feel will affect the quality of the conversation and, consequently, the results. Each participant has a background, experience and views about various issues. A good moderator listens attentively and is sensitive to the views expressed by other people, regardless of how different they may seem. Never belittle or make fun of other people's views. Be sensitive. Guide discussion, do not engage in discussion, or force the outcome of a group discussion. Moderators can show interest, or lack of it, not only with words but also with body language. Remember that the group does not have to reach a consensus, or come to a conclusion. Always remember to thank your participants for their time and sharing their views with you (even if you do not agree with them).

Here are some more important tips to get the most out of participants:

- inform your participants about the issue(s) under discussion before they come to the group;
- do not exceed 30 minutes duration;
- ask the right questions, in the right way. The 'right' question is usually open-ended and framed in a way that invites criticism and response. It is better to 'fish' for information in a direct way because indirect 'fishing' can make people feel like they need to explain and justify rather than offer opinions. Do not ask "Why?"—ask "What about . . . ?"
- keep the discussion on course;
- acknowledge, receive, and comment on, all responses in a non-attitudinal way .Do not be offended; do not come back with any kind of retort;
- encourage interaction and cooperation by creating an open atmosphere. Do this by (i) being informal; (ii) using first names; (iii) holding the group in pleasant surroundings with comfortable chairs (rearrange the furniture if you have to); (iv) making sure the group feels safe physically and psychologically (give positive reinforcement to participants by validating all their ideas no matter what the others think); (v) following up diverse trains of thought and opinion; and most importantly, (vi) making it fun.

Step Three—Recruit participants

Although recruitment will not be an issue for you, because the students will be the participants, it might be useful for students to have some understanding of where one might recruit participants for research if they are working in the wider community.

There are a number of ways that people can be recruited to the focus group:

- through organisations or groups that relate best to the issue you wish to have discussed;
- inviting interested people to a focus group via the local paper;
- randomly selecting people who fit the category of interest, and invite them via a letter to a focus group.

Whenever the invitation to join a focus group is issued by correspondence, be sure that the major issues involved are clearly stated. Ensure that the correspondence:

- sets out the proposed program;
- indicates the length of time that the participant will be required to give;
- lists the types of support people may have to attend to (i.e., transport and child care);
- outlines the nature of the research project to all potential participants (usually by way of the information sheet). NB: Participants must indicate their 'informed consent' by signing an accompanying Consent Form.

How many people are needed to run a focus group?

An ideal focus group consists of:

- a moderator;
- at least one assistant;
- between 6-8 participants.

Successful focus groups can be run with as few as three participants, but do not attempt to gather data with more than eight participants.

What if there are a large number of participants?

There are several ways of dealing with large numbers of students. Which solution is chosen depends on the number of students there are, and their level of competence. It also depends on the facilities available at the school. Conducting several groups on one topic is highly desirable as it is more likely that common themes will be identified. Also, where the composition of groups varies, differences between groups may be highlighted. For example, groups of youths may identify common needs, whereas groups of elderly people are likely to identify different needs.

- Are there enough participants to run more than one group? If there are enough participants to form a number of groups of roughly equal number (no more than eight per group), then teachers can run more than one group simultaneously. Teachers need to make sure that they have a skilled moderator to run each group and at least one assistant for each group. Teachers also need to make sure that they can separate the groups from each other so that they do not disturb each other.
- Are there enough participants to run one group, but not enough to run two or more groups? 'Extra' participants can be enlisted as assistant moderators, although this is a skilled job and requires a mature attitude (see STEP TWO above). The assistant moderator's job requires someone who has the ability to take brief notes (again, see STEP TWO above). It is also possible for one or two extra people to be given other responsibilities, such as 'technical assistant' and 'facilitator' (see Research Program Procedure). If the teacher is running more than one group, discussion might be stimulated if the groups are different in some way. These differences—e.g., age; skills; talents; background, gender, etc.—can be used to advantage in the research program when it comes to formulating research questions.

What if there are only a few participants?

- Make the most of minimal numbers. Although the ideal number of participants for a focus group is between 6-8, it is still possible to run a successful group discussion with a minimum of 3 participants. Small groups are easily managed and the contribution from each person is greater than is possible in larger groups.

OR

- Recruit others. Other students in the school, who may have an interest in the topic, could be enlisted as participants. However, if this course of action is chosen, teachers need to make sure that all participants have signed a Consent Form.

OR

- Consider tele-conferencing. Some schools have access to teleconferencing. This can be a good solution, but again make sure informed consent is gained from all participants.

Step Four—Organise the setting and the equipment

Setting

Teachers will need to allocate space(s) in which to conduct their focus group(s).

- Each group will need a separate, quiet place (with few, or no distractions) so that the discussion can take place uninterrupted.
- The room(s) will need to be able to accommodate a maximum of 8 participants, and one moderator and at least one moderator's assistant (be considerate to other classes by keeping noise levels to a minimum).

Time

How long does a focus group discussion last?

Ideally teachers should allow as much time as possible for the group to have a structured discussion. In the 'real' world this can be anywhere between 1 to 3 hours. However, SSABSA-approved research programs require a discussion of 30 minutes only to generate sufficient information for analysis.

- Half an hour should allow enough time to answer 3 or 4 questions at the most.
- Attempting to ask more than 4 questions will generate 'too much' information and it will make the analysis more difficult and time consuming.

Equipment

The best way to conduct this kind of focus group is to have each question written up beforehand on separate pieces of butcher's paper, or on individual overheads, or similar media. Putting up the question under discussion will help keep participants on track. Make sure one question at a time is displayed, otherwise participants might be tempted to rush ahead and answer future questions.

Resources

There are three options:

- Teachers might like to write out each question on a separate overhead (one overhead per question). If so, each focus group room will need an overhead projector.

OR

- Teachers might like to write out each question on a large sheet of butcher's paper (one sheet for each question).Each focus group will need some way of displaying the questions one at a time. Making a large flip chart will work well because one question at a time can be displayed, and then flipped to the next question. All participants must be able to see the questions. Use tape to stick the butcher's paper up on the wall, or use bulldog clips to hold the sheets on a board. Write with thick, highly visible, coloured markers.

OR

- Teachers might like to write out each question on a whiteboard. Whiteboard markers and an appropriate eraser will be needed.

Step Five—Conduct the focus group and record the data

Collecting the data

Comments made by participants in the focus group are the data for the analysis so it is important to write down participants' responses to questions. This is the job of the assistant moderator. The final report is based on the analysis of participants' comments (see STEP SEVEN below).

Make careful notes of the focus group discussion

Assistant moderators should devote their time to taking notes and capturing the important aspects of the discussion. This procedure consists mainly of trying to capture direct quotes that people make, as well as key points and/or key phrases. Moderators should not be afraid to ask people to wait a minute while they jot down what is said. Ensure that the notes include:

- key points in the discussion;
- notable quotes;
- observations such as silent agreement, obvious body language, and indicators of group mood. Ironic or contradictory statements can also be noted as these observations can provide insight into the nature of the discussion;

- the question number and identification of the focus group. A simple notation such as Q1; FG2, will suffice. Comments must match up with questions, and the relevant group.

Notes are written up in front of the participants in the focus group (see STEP FOUR, Resources section above). In this way participants can observe what is being recorded and, if necessary, they can amend, revise, or verify those comments. This process will also help stimulate discussion and feedback. This is not the time to edit participant's comments. Attempts should be made to capture exactly what is being conveyed (this is like 'brain-storming').

Summarise each question and seek confirmation

At the end of each main question, the moderator should offer participants a short (2 to 3 minute) oral summary of the responses. The advantages of summarising at the end of each question are:

- it happens close to the time comments were made—this does not rely so much on memory;
- it encourages participants to verify/check whether the summary is accurate and complete and to make any changes required;
- it encourages participants to move onto, and focus on, the next question.

Step Six—Prepare data and conduct the analysis

Qualitative analysis of focus group data differs from more traditional methods of analysis. Data generated from discussions in focus groups is rich and complex and is not reduced to numerical summaries but analysed on different levels, depending on the requirements of the project and the people involved. The basic premise on which much qualitative analysis relies is that language (and thus the ways in which we talk about various issues and phenomena) actually constructs our social world.

'Doing' qualitative analysis is a challenging task and there is no real 'recipe' or strict rules that are followed. Much of the interpretation of the data relies on the analyst's ability to identify recurring patterns and organise the talk generated in the focus group.

The analysis can be undertaken in terms of overall themes (that is themes that occurred in every question or in every focus group) or in terms of themes that arose in response to individual questions.

The first stage of the analysis (often the most difficult) is to systematically reduce a large amount of text to a few meaningful categories that encapsulate people's experiences, attitudes, beliefs, thoughts, and feelings about the issue of concern. As soon as is practical, after all the focus groups have been completed, students should meet (with the moderator and the assistant) to arrange the data in some meaningful way.

1. In order to facilitate the analysis there has to be some initial organisation of the notes. Initially, notes can be organised in accordance with answers to particular questions, and/or in accordance with prominent themes (organisation may change as analysis progresses). A good way to start might be to gather all responses to Question 1 together, and then all the responses to Question 2 together, and so on. If there is more than one focus group, teachers could organise the data into all the responses from group one, and then all the responses from group two, and so on.
2. Display the grouped responses (say all responses to Question 1), together in some way. Teachers could pin them up around the room or place them on the floor or on a large table (it is up to teachers—there is no right or wrong way).
3. Everyone should read through the answers a few times for the sake of familiarisation.
4. Identify common (i.e., central) themes, general sentiments, opinions, ethnic values, etc., and thus create some categories or themes. For example, the answers to a particular question might be focused on themes such as 'biology', 'socialisation', 'gender', 'male and female roles', 'equality and discrimination,' 'social change,' 'class,' or 'socio-economics'.
5. Identify differences and similarities in comments made. Look to see if these categories are mutually exclusive. Perhaps they overlap in some way.
6. Also look for what is not spoken about. Just because something is not discussed does not mean it is not important—what is not said can be equally, and sometimes more, important than what is said.. Sometimes issues that participants do not feel able to speak about can be discerned by (i) successful or failed attempts to change the subject, (ii) periods of silence, or (iii) laughter.
7. Analysts (i.e., students) are not expected to be mind readers—what the student says in the focus group is to be taken literally, not figuratively or symbolically.
8. Write a descriptive summary of each category/theme.
9. Offer interpretation for each theme or question.

A good analyst needs to:

- be open to new ideas;
- be able to step outside of their personal experience;
- express ideas from the vantage point of others;
- make sense of information without being trapped by detail stay focused on objectives and recognise which data is relevant and which is not (see Krueger & Morgan, 1998, p.26).

Step Seven—Presentation of findings (report writing) (see Morgan & Krueger, 1998)

There are a few fundamental things that need to be covered in the report, and the findings of the study need to be communicated in a logical way, keeping in mind the purpose of the study and the audience. The following sequence for writing up a qualitative report may be helpful:

- cover page—title, researcher's name and date;
- summary—brief and succinct description of why your focus group(s) was conducted. Also includes a brief outline of the major findings and any recommendations;
- purpose and procedures—brief description of the focus group interviews, participants, where the focus groups were held. A list of the questions that were asked in the focus group(s) can go in an Appendix. Also, provide a brief outline of the procedures or method of analysis.
- results or findings—usually organised around key questions themes or ideas. These form the basis of the study. It is not necessary to cover all the questions that were asked, and the report is often best organised in terms of themes. Start with those themes that make most sense to the analyst.
- summary or conclusions—in this section themes are tied together and issues are discussed that cut across specific themes.
- recommendations are not necessary, but can include 'suggestions' or 'ideas for future research'.
- appendix.

Once again, qualitative content analysis is interpretative—successful analyses depend on the competence of the student, and will involve some degree of pre-knowledge of the topic, as well as an empathic ability. Nevertheless, the overall picture presented in the report will be one that indicates the focus group's general thoughts and feelings about the topic. The representative comments that are used should relate plainly and directly to the issue of concern, and should be presented in a structured way so that they fall under specific headings that exemplify the central themes.

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