13.4: Focus groups

Learning Objectives

- Define focus groups and outline how they differ from one-on-one interviews
- Describe how to determine the best size for focus groups
- Identify the important considerations in focus group composition
- Discuss how to moderate focus groups
- Identify the strengths and weaknesses of focus group methodology

Focus groups resemble qualitative interviews in that a researcher may prepare a guide in advance and interact with participants by asking them questions. But anyone who has conducted both one-on-one interviews and focus groups knows that each is unique. In an interview, usually one member (the research participant) is most active while the other (the researcher) plays the role of listener, conversation guider, and question-asker. **Focus groups**, on the other hand, are planned discussions designed to elicit group interaction and “obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, nonthreatening environment” (Krueger & Casey, 2000, p. 5). In this case, the researcher may play a less active role than in a one-on-one interview. The researcher’s aim is to get participants talking to each other and to observe interactions among participants.
There are numerous examples of focus group research. In their 2008 study, for example, Amy Slater and Marika Tiggemann (2010) conducted six focus groups with 49 adolescent girls between the ages of 13 and 15 to learn more about girls’ attitudes towards’ participation in sports. In order to get focus group participants to speak with one another rather than with the group facilitator, the study’s interview guide contained just two questions: “Can you tell me some of the reasons that girls stop playing sports or other physical activities?” and “Why do you think girls don’t play as much sport/physical activity as boys?” In another focus group study, Virpi Ylanne and Angie Williams (2009) held nine focus group sessions with adults of different ages to gauge their perceptions of how older characters are represented in television commercials. Among other considerations, the researchers were interested in discovering how focus group participants position themselves and others in terms of age stereotypes and identities during the group discussion. In both examples, the researchers’ core interest in group interaction could not have been assessed had interviews been conducted on a one-on-one basis; thus, the focus group method was the ideal choice in each instance.

The preceding examples come from the work of academics who have used focus groups as their method of data collection. But focus groups have proven quite useful for those outside of academia as well. In fact, this method is especially popular among researchers. Market researchers use focus groups to gather information about the products or services they aim to sell. Government officials and political campaign workers use them to learn how members of the public feel about a particular issue or candidate. One of the earliest documented uses of focus groups comes from World War II when researchers used them to assess the effectiveness of troop training materials and of various propaganda efforts (Merton & Kendall, 1946; Morgan, 1997). Market researchers quickly adopted this method of collecting data to learn about human beliefs and behaviors. Within social science, the use of focus groups did not really take off until the 1980s, when demographers and communication researchers began to appreciate their use in understanding knowledge, attitudes, and communication (Morgan, 1997).

In some ways, focus groups require more planning than other qualitative methods of data collection, such as one-on-one interviews in which a researcher may be better able to the dialogue. Researchers must take care to form focus groups with members who will want to interact with one another and to control the timing of the event so that participants are not asked nor expected to stay for a longer time than they’ve agreed to participate. The researcher should also be prepared to inform focus group participants of their responsibility to maintain the confidentiality of what is said in the group. But while the researcher can and should encourage all focus group members to maintain confidentiality, she should also clarify to participants that the unique nature of the group setting prevents her from being able to promise that confidentiality will be maintained by other participants. Once focus group members leave the research setting, researchers cannot control what they say to other people.
Group size should be determined in part by the topic of the interview and your sense of the likelihood that participants will have much to say without much prompting. If the topic is one about which you think participants feel passionately and will have much to say, I think a group of 3–5 makes sense. Groups larger than that, especially for heated topics, can easily become unmanageable. Some researchers say that a group of about 6–10 participants is the ideal size for focus group research (Morgan, 1997); others recommend that groups should include 3–12 participants (Adler & Clark, 2008).

The size of the focus group is ultimately your decision as the researcher. When forming groups and deciding how large or small to make them, take into consideration what you know about the topic and participants’ potential interest in, passion for, and feelings about the topic. Also consider your comfort level and experience in conducting focus groups. These factors will help you decide which size is right in your particular case.

It may seem counterintuitive, but in general, it is better to form focus groups consisting of participants who do not know one another than to create groups consisting of friends, relatives, or acquaintances (Agar & MacDonald, 1995). The reason for this is that group members who know each other may share some taken-for-granted knowledge or assumptions. In research, it is precisely the knowledge taken-for-granted that is often of interest; thus, the focus group researcher should avoid setting up interactions where participants may be discouraged to question or raise issues that they take for granted. However, groups should not be so heterogeneous that participants will be unlikely to feel comfortable talking with one another.

Focus group researchers must carefully consider the composition of the groups they put together. In his text on conducting focus groups, Morgan suggests that “homogeneity in background and not homogeneity in attitudes” (p. 36) should be the goal, since participants must feel comfortable speaking up but must also have enough differences to facilitate a productive discussion (1997). Whatever composition a researcher designs for her focus groups, the important point to keep in mind is that focus group dynamics are shaped by multiple social contexts (Hollander, 2004).

Participants’ silences as well as their speech may be shaped by gender, race, class, sexuality, age, or other background characteristics or social dynamics—all of which might be suppressed or exacerbated depending on the composition of the group. Hollander suggests that researchers must pay careful attention to group composition, must be attentive to group dynamics during the focus group discussion, and should use multiple methods of data collection in order to “untangle participants’ responses and their relationship to the social contexts of the focus group” (p. 632).

In addition to the importance of group composition, focus groups also require skillful moderation. A moderator is the researcher tasked with facilitating the conversation in the focus group. Participants may ask each other follow-up...
questions, agree or disagree with one another, display body language that tells us something about their feelings about
the conversation, or even come up with questions not previously conceived of by the researcher. It is just these sorts of
interactions and displays that are of interest to the researcher. A researcher conducting focus groups collects data on
more than people’s direct responses to her question, as in interviews.

The moderator’s job is not to ask questions to each person individually, but to stimulate conversation between
participants. It is important to set ground rules for focus groups at the outset of the discussion. Remind participants
you’ve invited them to participate because you want to hear from all of them. Therefore, the group should aim to let just
one person speak at a time and avoid letting just a couple of participants dominate the conversation. One way to do this
is to begin the discussion by asking participants to briefly introduce themselves or to provide a brief response to an
opening question. This will help set the tone of having all group members participate. Also, ask participants to avoid
having side conversations; thoughts or reactions to what is said in the group are important and should be shared with
everyone.

As the focus group gets rolling, the moderator will play a less active role as participants talk to one another. There may
be times when the conversation stagnates or when you, as moderator, wish to guide the conversation in another
direction. In these instances, it is important to demonstrate that you’ve been paying attention to what participants have
said. Being prepared to interject statements or questions such as “I’d really like to hear more about what Sunil and Joe
think about what Dominick and Jae have been saying” or “Several of you have mentioned X. What do others think about
this?” will be important for keeping the conversation going. It can also help redirect the conversation, shift the focus to
participants who have been less active in the group, and serve as a cue to those who may be dominating the
conversation that it is time to allow others to speak. Researchers may choose to use multiple moderators to make
managing these various tasks easier.

Moderators are often too busy working with participants to take diligent notes during a focus group. Researchers may
recruit a note-taker who can record participants’ responses (Liamputtong, 2011). [9] The note-taker creates, in essence,
the first draft of interpretation for the data in the study. They note themes in responses, nonverbal cues, and other
information to be included in the analysis later on. Focus groups are analyzed in a similar way as interviews; however,
the interactive dimension between participants adds another element to the analytical process. Researchers must attend
to the group dynamics of each focus group, as “verbal and nonverbal expressions, the tactical use of humour,
interruptions in interaction, and disagreement between participants” are all data that vital to include in analysis
(Liamputtong, 2011, p. 175). Note-takers record these elements in field notes, which allows moderators to focus on the
collection.

Focus groups share many of the strengths and weaknesses of one-on-one qualitative interviews. Both methods can
yield very detailed, in-depth information; are excellent for studying social processes; and provide researchers with an
opportunity not only to hear what participants say but also to observe what they do in terms of their body language.
Focus groups offer the added benefit of giving researchers a chance to collect data on human interaction by observing
how group participants respond and react to one another. Like one-on-one qualitative interviews, focus groups can also
be quite expensive and time-consuming. However, there may be some time savings with focus groups as it takes fewer
group events than one-on-one interviews to gather data from the same number of people. Another potential drawback of
focus groups, which is not a concern for one-on-one interviews, is that one or two participants might dominate the group,
silencing other participants. Careful planning and skillful moderation on the part of the researcher are crucial for
avoiding, or at least dealing with, such possibilities. The various strengths and weaknesses of focus group research are summarized in Table 13.1.

### Table 13.1 Strengths and weaknesses of focus group research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strengths</th>
<th>Weaknesses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yield detailed, in-depth data</td>
<td>Expensive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less time-consuming than one-on-one interviews</td>
<td>May be more time-consuming than survey research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Useful for studying social processes</td>
<td>Minority of participants may dominate entire group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allow researchers to observe body language in addition to self-reports</td>
<td>Some participants may not feel comfortable talking in groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allow researchers to observe interaction between multiple participants</td>
<td>Cannot ensure confidentiality</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Key Takeaways

- In terms of focus group composition, homogeneity of background among participants is recommended while diverse attitudes within the group are ideal.
- The goal of a focus group is to get participants to talk with one another, a conversation the researcher moderates.
- Like one-on-one qualitative interviews, focus groups can yield very detailed information, are excellent for studying social processes, and provide researchers with an opportunity to observe participants’ body language; they also allow researchers to observe social interaction.
- Focus groups can be expensive and time-consuming, as are one-on-one interviews; there is also the possibility that a few participants will dominate the group and silence others in the group.

### Glossary

- **Focus groups**—planned discussions designed to elicit group interaction and “obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, nonthreatening environment” (Krueger & Casey, 2000, p. 5)
- **Moderator**—the researcher tasked with facilitating the conversation in the focus group

### Image attributions

- target group by geralt [CC-0](https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Social_Work/Book%3A_Scientific_Inquiry_in_Social_Work_(DeCarlo)/13%3A_Inte…)
- workplace team by Free-Photos [CC-0](https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Social_Work/Book%3A_Scientific_Inquiry_in_Social_Work_(DeCarlo)/13%3A_Inte…)

2. Slater, A., & Tiggemann, M. (2010). "Uncool to do sport": A focus group study of adolescent girls’ reasons for


