

Focus Groups

Miriam Kramer, EPI

Jennifer Massey, Queen's University

John Pollard, York University

Sybil Wilson, Niagara College

What is a focus group?

“Focus groups are group interviews. A moderator guides the interview while a small group discusses the topics that the interviewer raises. What the participants say during their discussions are the essential data in focus groups. Typically, there are six to eight participants who come from similar backgrounds, and the moderator is a well-trained professional who works from a predetermined set of discussion topics” (Morgan, 1997).



What is a focus group?

“A carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment. It is conducted with approximately 7 to 10 people by a skilled interviewer. Group members influence each other by responding to ideas and components in the discussion.” (Krueger, 2000)



What is a focus group?

- A rich, wide-ranging discussion which is grounded in the perspective of the participants
- Used in marketing research, policy and program evaluation, needs assessments, qualitative research, and assists with survey development
- Not meant to replace surveys, focus groups gather a range of experiences around a particular topic but do not explain how many people feel the same way
- Appear relatively straightforward, but require a certain rigour: designing questions, recruiting participants, ethics, trained moderator, analyzing data

What is a focus group?

- Discussion guide – about 12 questions - pre-scripted or conversational?
- Moderator – main tasks are **topic coverage** and **traffic control**
- ‘Ice-breaker’ question to begin, track topics throughout
- Degree of moderator involvement – how to probe - moderator bias?
- Create an environment where participation is possible, handling ‘monopolizers’
- Give everyone a chance to have one final comment on topic of interest

What is a focus group?

“Every group has its own dynamic and you need to acknowledge the participants’ priorities if you want to hear what they have to say. Put simply, it is your focus, but it is their group”
(Morgan, 1997).



Why conduct a focus group?

Selecting/designing an instrument

Factors to consider: “Why am I doing this”?

- Purpose of the assessment
- Type of assessment outcomes
- Methodology
- Resource availability
- Audience expectations
- Focus group versus interviews

Why conduct a focus group?

In-depth understanding

- Rich descriptive details
- Understand and explain the way in which individuals make meaning of a situation, experience, or concept
- Unpack embedded ideas



Why conduct a focus group?

Mixing Methods

- Focus group data to design quantitative instrument
- Focus group to explain quantitative data



How Do I Conduct a Focus Group?

Logistical Nuts and Bolts

Who?

- Determine inclusion and exclusion criteria
- Participants with the same characteristics or different?
- Friends or strangers?

How many?

- How many groups? –exploratory (3-4) or detailed (8-12) – minimum of two!
- How many people? Ideal size is about 7-8; maximum is 10; over recruit for no-shows

How Do I Conduct a Focus Group?

Logistical Nuts and Bolts

Where?

- Quiet, confidential, comfortable location
- Seated so everyone can be seen
- Acoustics are important
- College or university board room, library, hotel, research centre, etc.
- Do you need a viewing room (do your clients want to observe)?
- What kind of audio/video equipment is necessary?

When?

- Time of day (who's your target population and when is good for them?)
- Date within research project: you will need (ideally) about a month's time to pull it all together.
- You should take this into consideration when planning your research timeline.

How Do I Conduct a Focus Group?

Timeline

At Least One Month Prior to Groups

- Undergo any necessary **research ethics** processes and protocols (at least one month in advance, depending on ethics review guidelines and calendar)
- Figure out **honoraria** amounts
- Find and book **location** (at least three weeks in advance; will need to solidify location before recruiting so you can ideally invite participants to groups at a particular location)
- If necessary, find and book a group **moderator**
 - Main tasks are **topic coverage** and **traffic control**
 - Important for them to be viewed as objective as possible; must not directly be involved in the project/service that is being investigated or reviewed.

How Do I Conduct a Focus Group?

Timeline

At Least Three Weeks Prior

- Draft **recruitment screener** and find a **recruiter**
 - Consider inclusion and exclusion criteria
 - Hire marketing firm or staff/assistant
 - Important that they are not directly involved in the program/service that is being researched
- **Recruit**
 - How are you going to recruit (e.g. posters, email, flyers, phone calls, website, mixed, etc.



How Do I Conduct a Focus Group?

Timeline

Two Weeks Prior

- Continue recruiting in earnest
- Draft **discussion guide**:
 - What are the research questions?
 - Includes moderator introduction and ice breaker
- Order **food and drinks**
 - Appropriate to audience and time of day
- Have **honoraria** ready

Several Days Prior

- Gather **supplies**/make sure facility has: audio/video recorder, name tags, wipe board, paper, pens, sign in sheets
- **Confirm participants** and recruit more as necessary: one to two nights before

How Do I Conduct a Focus Group?

Timeline

Day/Night of Groups

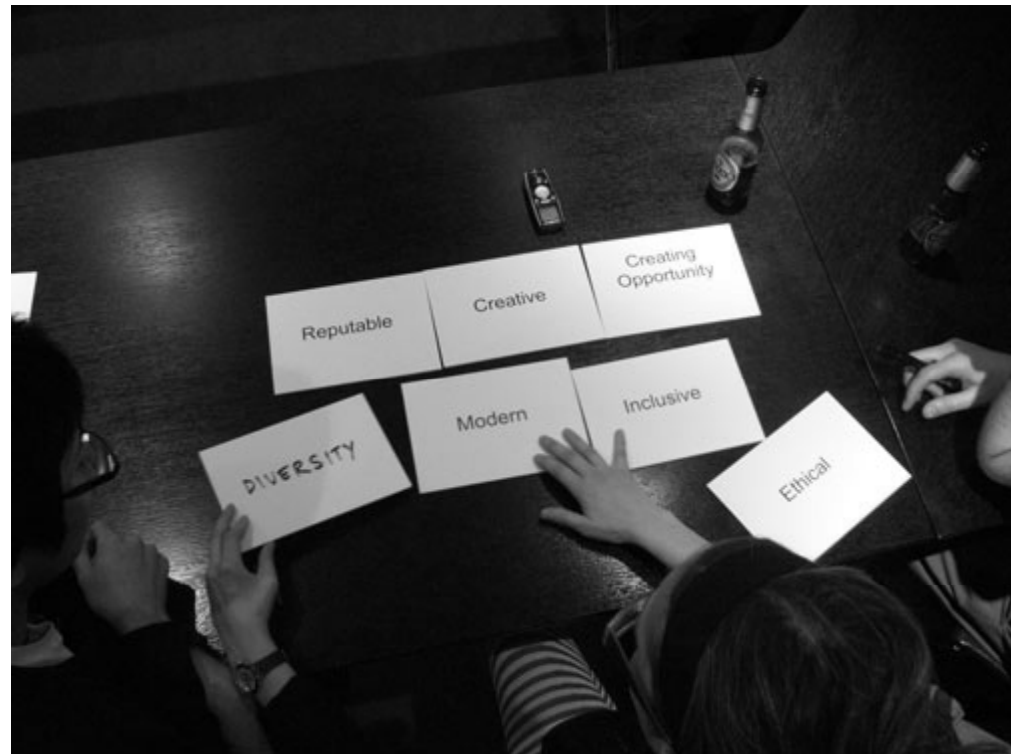
- Get final confirmed list; sign in sheets; informed consent
- Meet and greet participants; check identification and sign informed consent
- Conduct focus group—GOOD LUCK!

After the Groups

- Listen/View recordings
- Transcribe groups
- Produce report
- Evaluate yourself
 - Did you get the research you were looking for?
 - Did you ask the right questions?
 - Are you/your client satisfied?
 - What can you do better for next time?

Challenges of Focus Groups

- Recruitment
- Participation
- Confidentiality
- Recording



Challenges of Focus Groups

Recruitment

- Recruiting participants
- Selection
- Representative sample



Challenges of Focus Groups

Maintain participation of group members

- There might be a dominant voice in the group
- Some members of the group might need encouragement to speak
- Silence might require the moderator to do additional probing



Challenges of Focus Groups

Confidentiality

- Cannot guarantee confidentiality of information among group members
- No guarantee that signing a Statement of Confidentiality means that group members will not talk about the issues outside of the focus group setting



Challenges of Focus Groups

Recording

- Locating the recording device so it captures all voices in the group clearly
- If recording with videotape, a challenge is for the technician to be unobtrusive so as not to distract participants
- Transcriptionist may have difficulty distinguishing voices of individuals consistently



Challenges of Focus Groups

What other challenges can you think of?



Questions?

Miriam Kramer
Senior Research/Policy Analyst
Educational Policy Institute
207-20 Maud Street
Toronto, ON M5V 2M5
Phone: (416) 848 0215, ext. 227
Fax: (416) 849 0500
E-mail: mkramer@educationalpolicy.org
Web: www.educationalpolicy.org



Jennifer Massey
Coordinator – Assessment, Evaluation & Outreach
Associate Vice Principal & Dean of Student Affairs
Queen's University
300 Gordon Hall, 74 Union Street
Kingston, K7L 3N6
Phone: (613) 533 6000 ext. 74022
Fax: (613) 533 6447
www.queensu.ca/studentaffairs/assessment.html



Sybil Wilson, Ph.D.
Articulations Facilitator
Niagara College
St. Catharines, L0S 1J0
Phone: (905) 227-2652
E-mail: sywilson@niagaracollege.ca



John Pollard
Project Manager, Focus Groups and Qualitative Research
Institute for Social Research (ISR)
York University,
4700 Keele Street
Toronto, M3J 1P3
Phone: (416) 736 5446
Fax: 416-736-5749
Email: isrnews@yorku.ca
Web: www.isr.yorku.ca

