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DESIGNING AND CONDUCTING FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH

THERE IS NO definitive correct way to conduct focus group research. Each study is shaped by the specific research question, theoretical framework, study context, and characteristics of the study participants. In addition, practical realities, such as the time-frame and funding of a study, and unique field challenges influence the methodological decisions of a study. Therefore, focus group research can vary. Despite some variability in application, there are some general guidelines and important considerations in conducting focus group research that can improve methodological rigor and therefore the quality of data produced.

This chapter provides guidance on planning and conducting focus group discussions. It describes tasks in preparing for focus group research, such as training the field team, recruiting participants, developing questions for the discussion guide, and ethical considerations. The chapter then focuses on conducting focus group discussions, describing the role of the moderator in conducting the discussion, managing group dynamics, and promoting an interactive discussion. Finally, a brief overview of approaches to analyzing focus group data is given. Each of these tasks is described concisely; however, further readings are provided for additional guidance.

Planning Focus Group Research

Training the Field Team

A focus group team typically consists of a moderator and note-taker. However, some studies may have a larger field team including several moderators, particularly when both male and female moderators are needed, or transcribers. Often members of a field team conduct multiple tasks, where possible.

Regardless of the size of a focus group team, training is essential. However, this task is often overlooked when planning focus group research. Training all team members on the goals of the study, fieldwork protocols, and specific tasks they will conduct is important to ensure consistency in all field tasks. Not all team members will be familiar with the methodological approach of focus group discussions or they may have used a different application of the method (e.g., market research or participatory approaches, see chapter 1), it is therefore necessary to brief team members on how focus group discussions are conducted in academic research. Training becomes particularly important in international research where moderators may have been recruited for their language skills and thus not be familiar with how to conduct qualitative research or focus group discussions in particular.

The content of the training sessions is guided by the research skills and experience of team members recruited. Training often includes a briefing on the study objectives, focus group research, and ethical issues, and then more detailed training on the research instrument itself, strategies for group moderation, transcription, and (if needed) translation protocols. It is useful to train team members on all the different fieldwork roles, not only the specific tasks they will conduct. This enables team members to interchange roles if needed and maintains consistency between these roles. For moderating a group discussion, training needs to include strategies for developing rapport, impartial moderation, managing group dynamics, fostering discussion, effective listening, probing, and pacing a discussion. For the role of note-taking during the group discussion, training needs to include objective note-taking and strategies for paraphrasing main points, noting key phrases, recording body language, and structuring written notes. In addition, a note-taker is usually responsible for operating the recording device. For transcribing the recording of the group discussions, training is needed on developing a verbatim record of the discussion; structuring transcripts; and translation protocols (if needed).

It can be extremely valuable to include role-play activities as part of the training sessions. This may involve practicing group moderation skills (particularly probing); note-taking; and verbatim transcription. Observing role-play is a useful strategy for providing tangible feedback on improving skills. Figure 2.1 shows a field team in Burkina Faso listening to the recording of a focus group discussion and practicing verbatim transcription. For further instruction on training field teams see Hennink (2007).

Focus Group Size and Composition

A focus group discussion typically includes six to eight participants. It needs to be "small enough for everyone to have an opportunity to share insights and yet large enough to provide diversity of perceptions" (Krueger & Casey, 2000, p. 10). With fewer than six participants less diversity is captured in the group discussion and with greater than eight participants it becomes difficult for a moderator to manage a productive discussion.

Photo: M. Hennink

Figure 2.1. Field team training on verbatim transcription in Burkina Faso.

The size of a focus group is also influenced by the purpose of the study, the topic of discussion, and the type of participants. A group of six participants may be suitable if the research topic is intense or participants have much experience on the topic, whereby each participant is likely to have a lot to contribute to the discussion. The drawback of a smaller group is the limited diversity of experience shared; even six participants have a limited pool of experience and contributions. A small group of participants also loses some of the interactive dynamics of a group discussion (Smithson, 2008) because there are fewer people to respond to issues raised. In addition, smaller groups are more easily affected by group dynamics. For example, if there are one or two dominant participants it has a greater impact in a smaller group and the issues discussed are more likely to reflect the views of those dominant members (Ulin, Robinson, Tolley, & McNeill, 2002; Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, Robson, 2001). Small groups can be well justified when study participants are children. Gibson (2007) recommends a group size of four to five participants who have only a 1–2 year age range when conducting focus groups with children. Larger focus groups of eight participants are more common and are suitable where the topic of discussion is broad, or where participants may have less specific experience on the research topic. In these situations each participant may contribute less to the discussion, justifying a larger number of participants to capture diversity in views and experiences. Whichever group size is desired, it is usually advisable to overrecruit participants to account for any attrition.

Group composition refers to the characteristics of participants in a focus group. Group composition can have a significant effect on the group dynamics during a discussion and therefore needs careful consideration. Effective group composition can create a comfortable, permissive environment that fosters productive discussion. Poor group composition can quickly create an uncomfortable environment where participants become reluctant to contribute to the discussion thereby reducing the quality of data generated.

Two aspects of group composition are important for developing a positive group environment: homogeneity between participants and their level of acquaintance. Homogeneity is desired because participants are more likely to share their opinions and experiences with others who they perceive are similar to them, whereas they will be reluctant to contribute if they believe others in the group differ from them in terms of status or knowledge. Homogeneity among participants therefore fosters an open productive discussion, which contributes to better quality data. Conradson (2005, p. 133) states that group homogeneity involves "bringing together people who have enough in common to allow the development of a productive conversational dynamic."

Group homogeneity is generally sought in the socio-cultural backgrounds of participants or their level of experience with the study topic (not in their opinions of the discussion issues). Perhaps the most common strategy to achieve homogeneity is to segment focus groups by gender and age group (e.g., by conducting separate group discussion with participants who are young women, older women, young men, and older men). This stratification makes sense for many studies and often no further homogeneity is needed. Stratifying groups by these characteristics is also advantageous for data analysis, whereby issues raised can be compared by age and gender of participants to identify any patterns. It is common practice to conduct separate focus groups by gender, because it remains unclear how a mixed-gender group composition affects participant's contributions to the discussion (Fern, 2001; Morgan, 1997). It is also advisable to avoid a group composition with participants from vastly different socioeconomic groups, life stages, or levels of authority because this can quickly create a hierarchy in the group, which can inhibit some members from contributing to the discussion. Although group homogeneity in demographic characteristics is desirable, too much specificity (beyond age and gender) makes participant recruitment challenging and leads to too many groups. Group homogeneity can also be achieved among participants who share the same intense experience (e.g., women who experienced multiple births or people with a severe illness). Sharing similar experiences often creates a strong shared identity among participants that overrides the need to create homogeneity through demographic characteristics.

The level of acquaintance between participants can also influence group participation. Focus groups may be held among a group of strangers or with participants who are familiar to one another. Both types of group composition can be effective. However, one needs to be aware of the potential effects that the level of acquaintance can have on a group discussion. Recruiting a group of strangers for a focus group discussion is often a preferred strategy because there are fewer issues to manage. Among strangers there is greater anonymity, which may increase a participant's willingness to contribute to the discussion. A group of strangers may also provide more detailed contributions to the discussion because they need to provide more context or explanation of their views, whereas a group of people who are familiar with one another may already know a participant's viewpoint and reasoning on certain issues, and therefore less detail is given. The main drawbacks of recruiting a group of strangers are the potential for non-attendance and the longer time needed to develop group rapport compared with participants who are already acquainted. It is also advisable that the moderator and note-taker are not familiar to participants because they may be associated with particular points of view that influence participant's contribution to the discussion. In some study contexts, recruiting a group of strangers is difficult, for example conducting focus group discussion in urban slums or high-density neighborhoods where most people know one another. In these situations familiarity can be reduced by ensuring that close neighbors or family members are not present in the same focus group discussion (see Hennink 2007 for further guidance on recruiting participants in international focus group research).

Focus groups may also comprise participants who are well acquainted, such as members of the same social network, therapy group, or exercise class. For example, Koppelman and Bourjolly (2001) conducted focus group discussions among women with severe psychiatric disabilities who were part of the same mental health women's group, to facilitate their comfort in discussing living with their conditions. The advantage of recruiting a group of acquaintances is that less time needed to build group rapport because participants are already familiar to one another. Group attendance may also be greater because participants may know others attending the group discussion so there may be less attrition. One of the main issues with pre-existing groups is the level of shared knowledge participants have about each other. This can be an advantage in that other group members will add detail to a point made by another speaker, thereby increasing the depth and potential accuracy of information gathered. However, there is also the risk of overdisclosure and reduced confidentiality if the speaker preferred that the additional details were not shared with the group. Familiarity among group members can also lead to participants providing overall less detail in their contributions simply because others in the group already know their perspectives or because of a concern that group members may share their views with others in their shared social network. Therefore, the lack of anonymity among acquaintance groups may reduce the depth of information provided compared with a group of strangers.

Recruiting Participants

In qualitative research the purpose of participant recruitment is different from quantitative studies. Quantitative research typically seeks to measure issues and extrapolate the study findings to the general population; therefore, a large sample size and random selection of participants is required. However, the aim of qualitative research is entirely different. The purpose of focus group research is "not to infer but to understand, not to generalize but determine the range, and not to make statements about the population but to provide insights about how people in the groups perceive a situation" (Krueger & Casey, 2009, p. 66). This not only requires a small number of study participants so that issues can be explored in depth, but also necessitates identifying participants with specific characteristics to best inform the research issues rather than selecting them randomly. Furthermore, focus group research seeks not only normative views but often actively seeks the perspectives of "outliers" or deviant behavior to enable the full range of behaviors or perceptions on the research issues to be captured. This requires a different approach to participant recruitment than that used in quantitative studies. Therefore, recruiting a large sample or seeking random selection of participants is not appropriate for focus group research, and does not improve the quality of a study.

Qualitative research uses purposive (or nonrandom) methods of participant recruitment. Participants in qualitative research are selected "on purpose" because they have specific characteristics or experience that can best inform the research issues. These are often referred to as "information rich" participants. For example, a study on the experiences of young parenthood may seek to recruit adolescent parents because they are "information rich" on the experience of being very young parents. Selecting participants with specific characteristics requires a non-random method of participant recruitment because people with the required characteristics are unlikely to be evenly distributed in the population and likely to be missed if random selection was used. Purposive recruitment also begins to theorize about which dimensions (e.g., demographic, experiential, or geographic) may influence different perspectives on the research issues, so that these can be built into the participant recruitment structure. For example, conducting separate group discussions in rural and urban areas begins to anticipate potentially fruitful differences that may arise on the research issues during data analysis. Purposive recruitment adds strength to focus group research; it enables recruitment to be focused and deliberate, and should not be seen as haphazard or conducted without principles or procedure (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2011).

Purposive recruitment is iterative, whereby it can evolve during the research process. Initially the study population is defined at the outset of the study and then refined it in an iterative way during data collection. The study population is first defined during the research design process, where the research question, academic literature, and theory help refine the most appropriate study population. At this stage segmentation of the study population may be identified, whereby separate focus groups are conducted with different types of study participants, such as service users and non-users, or different types of participants (e.g., patients, doctors, and health insurers). It is important that the study population be clearly defined at the outset, to determine who is eligible to participate in the study and to identify the most suitable method of participant recruitment. As data collection begins and one learns more about the research issues, other types of study participants may be identified to include in the study. This may involve broadening or narrowing the original study population or adding specific subgroups of participants who may provide useful perspectives on the research issues but were not considered at the outset of the research. For example, a study on encouraging cycling to work may initially recruit only those who cycle to identify their perspectives, but during data collection it is revealed that workplace policies and infrastructure (e.g., cycle racks, lockers, showers, and so forth) are strong motivators for cycling to work and therefore decide to recruit workplace managers to the participant pool to explore the workplace policy issues on cycling. In this way, the participant pool expands in an inductive way informed by data collection, to add specific types of participants who may add valuable perspectives on the research issues.

Qualitative research typically includes a small number of study participants to achieve depth of information and variation of perspectives. The number of participants to include in a study is guided by the principle of saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This is the point at which information collected begins to repeat itself. After reaching the point of saturation, any additional data collection becomes redundant, because the purpose of qualitative research is to uncover diversity and context, rather than a large number of participants with the same type of experience. For example, if conducting a study on men's motivations for getting health screening and after the second focus group discussion 10 different motivations for health screening have been identified in detail, and in the third focus group discussion the same motivations are repeated, then the point of information saturation has been reached, whereby no more new information is being identified. Further data collection is now redundant because the diversity of motivations among men has been identified and additional data collection would provide no further understanding of the issue. Repetition of issues is therefore an indicator of saturation. It is also important to check that there is diversity in the study population so that issues are captured among rural men, urban men, older and younger men, and so on. If the study population is segmented (e.g., by older/younger or urban/rural participants), it is good practice to conduct at least two groups, but preferably more, with each sub-group of participants to assess saturation within each sub-group. Including diversity in the study population and allowing saturation to be reached through the iterative process increases the validity of data collected.

The number of focus groups to conduct is therefore determined through an iterative process until information saturation is reached. This process can only begin after data collection is initiated, which can be problematic because researchers often need to indicate the number of focus group discussions to conduct in the research proposal (before any data collection). It is therefore necessary to predetermine the number of focus group discussions needed to reach saturation on the study topic. This can be done by considering the nature of the study topic (broad or narrow); the type of research (exploratory or specific); the diversity or segmentation of the study population; and the resources available for the study. If the study is exploratory and the topic is broad more groups may be needed to capture diversity of issues and reach saturation. If the study population is segmented, more groups are needed to reach saturation. Given the range of influences in estimating saturation, the number of focus groups can vary widely between studies. Ritchie and Lewis (2003) suggest that many studies have less than 20 focus group discussions. However, what is more important than the actual number of study participants, is how the number of participants is determined and justified for each study (Hennink et al., 2011).

There are many strategies for purposive recruitment of participants in qualitative research. Some effective strategies for recruiting focus group participants are summarized in the table below. For further details on each strategy see Hennink et al. (2011). No single recruitment strategy is completely ideal; each strategy has strengths and limitations. Often several recruitment strategies are used in a single study or different recruitment strategies are used for different types of study participants. For example, different recruitment strategies may be used in rural and urban study sites or for younger and older participants.

Participant Recruitment Strategies

Community Gatekeepers	Community gatekeepers facilitate access to the study population. They may be social or religious leaders, service providers, or familiar and respected members of the study community. Community gatekeeper may be asked to contact eligible study participants and refer them to the study or to attend an informational presentation about the study. Gatekeepers provide trusted access to the study population, therefore their involvement in participant recruitment can significantly increase participation.

Formal Services	Identify whether the study population regularly uses any formal services or networks (e.g., health services, religious groups, or support groups) from which they may be recruited. These services can then be used to provide information about the study in flyers posted at the venues, by giving a presentation about the study, or by asking service staff to refer eligible people to the study. Alternatively, people can be intercepted as they exit a service to invite their participation in a focus group discussion.
Informal Networks	Identify whether the study population is associated with any informal networks, such as social or recreation groups (e.g., sports clubs, youth groups, language classes). These networks can be used to inform potential participants about the study and invite their participation in a focus group.
Advertisements	Develop an advertisement about the study to place in newspapers, magazines, community bulletin boards, or other prominent locations likely to be viewed by the study population. This strategy is most useful for "hard to reach" study populations and requires significant incentives for people to attend the group discussion.
Research-based	In mixed-methods research, focus group participants may be recruited from the pool of study participants recruited for another part of the study. For example, if a study includes a quantitative survey then focus group participants may be recruited from survey respondents. One advantage of this method is that information from the survey can be used to refine the purposive selection of participants with specific characteristics.

Ethical Issues

Ethics are a set of moral principles that researchers abide by to protect study participants from harm by researchers or the research process. Codes of research ethics are comprised of informed consent, self-determination, minimization of harm, anonymity, and confidentiality (see the *Declaration of Helsinki* (World Medical association 2008) and *Belmont Report* (National Comission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Behavioral Research (1978) for fuller descriptions of each). It is critical to consider ethical issues that may arise in focus group research when planning to use this method. Even though ethical approval may have been granted at the beginning of a study, attention to ethical issues does not stop there. The study still needs to be conducted in an ethical way and ethical challenges need to be managed. Focus group research requires continual assessment of ethical issues because of the evolving nature of data collection. This means that researchers need to remain continually mindful of ethical issues that may arise as the study evolves. In addition, focus group research poses ethical challenges because of the intense interaction with study participants and the group nature of data collection, as described next.

"Self-determination" refers to participants' right to determine whether they wish to participate in the study and their right to refuse participation without any negative consequences. This requires "informed consent," whereby focus group participants are provided with sufficient, relevant, and accurate information about the study, in a comprehensible format, so that they can make an informed decision on whether or not to participate in a group discussion. Participants should be provided with information about the study, what their participation will involve, any potential risks or benefits from participation, and how data will be used and safeguarded. They should also be informed that if they participate in the study they do not have to answer any questions if they prefer not to, and that they are free to leave the discussion at any time. Seeking informed consent is often done initially during participant recruitment and reinforced again during the moderator's introduction at the beginning of the group discussion. Central to informed consent is that participation is voluntary and not coerced. In some communities, participation in the group discussion may be authorized by others, such as household elders or a community leader. It should not be assumed that a participant has consented to participate in the group discussion and individual consent should always be sought. Seeking written consent is common; however, oral consent may be more appropriate in some circumstances, such as among a study population with low literacy. Researchers also need to seek consent for recording the group discussion and in doing so describe why a recording is needed, and how it will be used and safeguarded.

There is a responsibility to minimize any potential risks to participants from their involvement in the study. Harm can take many forms: physical harm, such as violence from others finding out what was disclosed in the discussion; social harm, whereby a participant's reputation in the community is damaged from their association with the study; psychological harm, such as embarrassment or judgment from others in the group; or economic harm, through loss of wages while attending the group discussion. Researchers have an obligation to reduce any such harm to participants and inform them of any potential risks from participating in the study. Care also needs to be taken in the provision of incentives to participants, to ensure that the incentive is not coercive whereby a participant may undertake some risks to be involved in the study to receive the incentive.

Finally, it is the researcher's responsibility to keep confidential the information discussed in the focus group and to maintain anonymity of group participants. It is difficult to ensure complete confidentiality in a focus group discussion because the information is discussed in a group setting and one cannot ensure that participants will not disclose the content of the discussion with others outside the group. This is particularly problematic when focus groups are conducted among acquaintances who share the same social or professional network. There is also the risk of overdisclosure whereby participants who are familiar to one another may reveal information about others in the group that they themselves would not have disclosed. This puts the onus on a moderator to reinforce issues of confidentiality to the group and encourage participants not to divulge what was discussed outside the group. Researchers can, however, restrict who listens to the recording of the discussion and store data securely to maintain confidentiality of the information discussed. The dynamic nature of a focus group discussion also means that the discussion may flow into other topics that were not outlined by the moderator in the introduction and participants need to be made aware of the fluid nature of the discussion. In addition, confidentiality can be difficult to maintain because researchers use quotations from study participants when reporting the study findings. This tradition underscores the need to ensure anonymity of data by removing any identifiable information from the transcript of the group discussion and ensure that quotations are reported in a way that does not disclose the identity of individual participants. The names of participants, if these were collected, should always be kept secure to protect the identities of participants and participants need to be informed how their identity will be protected.

Developing the Discussion Guide

A discussion guide is a pre-prepared list of topics or actual questions used by a moderator to guide the group discussion. A discussion guide can seem deceptively simple; however, it requires considerable forethought to develop an effective guide that fosters productive discussion and elicits useful information to meet the research objectives. Designing a discussion guide is one of the key tasks in preparing for focus group research.

A discussion guide has several functions. Its main purpose is to remind the moderator of the topics and questions that need to be covered to meet the research objectives. Although the questions on the discussion guide are structured in a logical sequence, the actual discussion may proceed in a more haphazard manner as the moderator follows issues raised spontaneously by participants. Therefore, "the moderator uses the guide as a resource to maintain the balance between the researchers focus and the group's discussion" (Morgan, 1997, p. 48). The discussion guide thus becomes a checklist to ensure that all topics were covered by the close of the discussion. The discussion guide also assists the moderator to manage the group discussion by providing effective "warm-up" questions to build rapport and "closing" questions to signal the discussion is coming to an end. It can also include prompts, instructions, and reminders for the moderator (e.g., a reminder to cover ethical issues, indicate where to do a group activity, or to thank participants and provide gifts at the end). A further function of the discussion guide is to introduce some consistency