

FOCUS GROUP RECOMMENDATIONS AND GUIDELINES

Purpose and Utility

- Focus groups are useful for getting a quick sense of people's attitudes or feelings about a subject, as well as brief information regarding experience
 - They are not good for getting detailed personal stories and they are not "scientific." You will not know that the opinions expressed by your group(s) are representative of the wider population. Focus group responses can be significantly affected by one or two people in the group (who sway the opinions of others). You can increase confidence in responses through careful facilitation and by conducting multiple groups, including different people each time
- Focus groups should take advantage of the "group" and encourage discussion between participants (rather than having each person recite their individual response to a given question). Participants can explain their responses to one another

Logistics

- Number of participants: 6-12
- Number of facilitators: 2 – one primarily to lead the discussion and one primarily to take notes
- Length: schedule for 2 hours, 90 minutes for discussion, 30 minutes for logistics and food
- Documentation: It is difficult to analyze audio recordings of focus groups (sound is often poor, it is difficult to tell who said what), so notes are essential

Guidelines for facilitation

- Collect basic demographic data from participants (age, gender, residence)
- Provide instructions to participants, noting
 - voluntary nature
 - the need for confidentiality
 - general procedures

A possible introductory script:

Your participation is completely voluntary. You do not have to be part of the focus group and you do not have to answer any question you do not wish to answer. You may leave at any time.

Before we start, we would like to mention some commonly used guidelines for the discussion:

- *Information shared here should be treated as confidential by everyone present. We will keep the information private, but we can't guarantee that other participants will not mention something they heard here outside of the group. So, don't feel you have to talk about anything that is too personal.*
- *We will make sure that everyone has a chance to talk and may have to direct the conversation to do. Please help us allow everyone to have a turn.*
- *It's OK to ask questions and disagree with one another (politely, of course). All comments should be made to the group as a whole.*

Focus group guides

- A written guide should be prepared to facilitate the group
- The guide should be relatively short, because you will want multiple people to comment on each question and you will want people to respond to the comments made by other participants. (Short = 12 – 15 main questions)
- Prompts should be included under each question to remind the facilitator about the types of information that you are hoping to capture. Prompts are also useful to maintain the conversation

Analysis

- Analysis should be driven by the research questions and should focus on major themes and areas of controversy

Want to learn more?

Morgan, David L. Focus Groups. *Annual Reviews of Sociology*. 1996. 22:129–52

ABSTRACT: Over the past decade, focus groups and group interviews have reemerged as a popular technique for gathering qualitative data, both among sociologists and across a wide range of academic and applied research areas. Focus groups are currently used as both a self-contained method and in combination with surveys and other research methods, most notably individual, in-depth interviews. Comparisons between focus groups and both surveys and individual interviews help to show the specific advantages and disadvantages of group interviews, concentrating on the role of the group in producing interaction and the role of the moderator in guiding this interaction. The advantages of focus groups can be maximized through careful attention to research design issues at both the project and the group level. Important future directions include: the development of standards for reporting focus group research, more methodological research on focus groups, more attention to data analysis issues, and more engagement with the concerns of the research participants.