**FOCUS GROUPS AND RELATED TECHNIQUES**

**by Simon Moss**

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| **Introduction** |

Qualitative researchers often conduct interviews with individuals to collect data. However, rather than interview each individual separately, some researchers instead conduct focus groups. Specifically, they might

* organize a group of participants—often comprising 6 to 10 people—to attend a joint meeting
* facilitate a discussion about a topic that is relevant to all these participants
* repeat this procedure with several other groups of participants
* analyze the answers to appreciate the perspectives or opinions of these participants

This document presents a series of guidelines to help you conduct focus groups effectively.

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| **Step 1: Decide on whether you should conduct focus groups** |

**Interviews versus focus groups**

After you have clarified your research questions—the issues you want to explore—you need to decide whether you should organise focus groups to collect data. For example, rather than conduct focus groups, you could

* interview people individually, in person, over telephone, or even over email
* interview pairs of individuals, called dyadic interviews
* observe people
* collate texts, such as dairies or documents, or
* apply many other methods

Despite this diversity of possibilities, the most common decision that researchers need to reach is whether to conduct interviews, focus groups, or both. To help you reach this decision, the following table outlines the relative merits of focus groups and interviews.

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| Benefits of focus groups | Benefits of interviews |
| **Sharing and extending**: Each participant can extend the suggestions or perspectives of other participants. The answers of participants might thus explore issues in greater depth | **Greater feelings of security.** Participants tend to feel more confident to express their opinions and perspectives when only one, rather than many, other participants are listening. Therefore, focus groups are not suited to topics that revolve around very personal, private, and sensitive issues. Specific demographics, such as people who are very reserved or have been diagnosed with cognitive impairment, may feel especially overwhelmed by focus groups. |
| **Comparing**: Participants may express or recognize disparate opinions and perspectives. These disparate positions can generate richer and more nuanced insights about some issue | **Potential to articulate more extensive answers:** During focus groups, participants might not feel they are granted enough time to extend their answers. During interviews, participants can articulate their answers in more depth. Hence, their answers might be more comprehensive—and include a narrative that clarifies their perspective in greater detail. These extended answers can be more nuanced and informative |
| **Conversation and networking**: The participants might appreciate the opportunity to share their perspectives. Sometimes, after the session, the participants might exchange business cards | **Logistics:** Interviews are often easier to arrange than focus groups. To conduct focus groups, researchers need to arrange a time that is available to several participants—often participants who are the same on some vital characteristic, such as level of management. |
| **Opportunity to reflect.** Participants are granted some opportunity to contemplate their answers while the other participants are speaking. This opportunity is especially valuable to participants who experience cognitive problems | **Ethics**. Focus groups tend to raise more ethical concerns than interviews. To illustrate  participants might regret the information they share—but they can withdraw this information from the memories of other participants |
| **Redressing imbalances in power**. Participants sometimes feel more empowered when they are not interviewed alone. During interviews with only one participant, the researcher guides the interview and thus occupies a position of power. This position of power might stifle the responses of this participant |  |

Roughly, as this table indicates, relative to interviews, focus groups tend to be preferable when you are striving to explore the complications and nuances of some issue or initiative. Interviews tend to be preferable when you want to understand the lived or private experiences of individuals. Many PhD and Masters by Research candidates, however, will conduct both interviews and focus groups.

**Costs**.

The costs are comparable for interviews relative to focus groups. Specifically

* you might need to arrange a larger room for focus groups but a room for a longer period for interviews
* often, to attract participants, researchers offer a fee of $10 to $200 for each person, depending on their availability.
* transcription costs tend to be similar, if not slightly greater, for focus groups
* some researchers like to engage an experienced moderator for focus groups but seldom engage an experienced interviewer for interviews

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| **Step 2: Determine which participants are eligible** |

Once you have clarified your research question, and decided that you do want to conduct focus groups, you need to decide which individuals are eligible to participate. That is, who are your participants? Typically, the research question will guide this decision. The following table illustrates how the research question will tend to govern the choice over which participants are eligible.

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| Research question | Corresponding participants |
| How can an organization improve an initiative the managers implemented? | The employees who were the targets of this initiative |
| How should a specific field or discipline support members better? | Members of this field or discipline |

Nevertheless, when choosing which participants should be eligible, researchers often strive to fulfil two criteria: negligible sampling bias and theoretical sampling. The following table defines and illustrates these two criteria.

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| Definition of criteria | Illustrations |
| **Negligible sampling bias**: minimize the extent to which the sample of participants differ to the population of interest on some key opinion or attitude | For example, suppose a researcher wanted to study an initiative that is intended to promote motivation in employees. In this example   * the key opinions or attitudes revolve around motivation or attitudes to the organization * the sample, therefore, should not comprise only the particularly motivated or satisfied employees * if the sample was biased—and included only motivated participants—many vital insights or perspectives might be overlooked |
| **Theoretical sampling**: the researcher attempts to recruit the people who are most likely to be able to answer the key questions insightfully rather than seek a random sample of individuals | In the previous example, the researcher would   * not merely recruit a random sample of employees but * strive to recruit people with informed opinions about the intervention—such as people who participated in the intervention or withdrew from the intervention |

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| **Step 3: Clarify how you will segment the focus groups** |

After you decide who is eligible to participate in your focus groups, you need to segment these groups. That is, researchers generally conduct more than one focus group. You will thus need to decide how the focus groups differ from each other. For example, perhaps

* you might conduct three focus groups; these groups might comprise employees who do not supervise anyone, supervisors, and managers respectively
* you might conduct two focus groups: one focus group comprising men and a second focus group comprising women
* or, you might comprise six focus groups; each focus group might comprise one management level and one gender. For example, one focus group could comprise female managers

So, how should you decide how the focus groups differ from each other, called segmentation? Should each focus group comprise one gender, age category, management level, vocational field, political orientation, or ethnic background? The following table outlines the principles you could apply to reach this decision.

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| Principle | Justification |
| In each focus group, the participants should be **homogenous**—that is, the same—on characteristics that affect their priorities or how they like to discuss issues | * To illustrate, junior employees and senior managers might not prioritize the same issues in an organization. * Therefore, if the focus group about an organization included both junior employees and senior managers, the conversation might be stilted rather than seamless * Likewise, educated and uneducated individuals might differ on how they like to discuss some matter; educated people might likely to demonstrate they can analyze a topic systematically and academically * If a focus group comprised educated and uneducated individuals, these participants might not be as willing to listen to one another, compromising engagement |
| Despite this homogeneity, focus groups should comprise individuals with diverse opinions or attitudes towards the issue | * To illustrate, the focus group might comprise both conservative and progressive individuals * Otherwise, the opinions and attitudes might not be diverse enough—and, therefore, the answers of one person might not ignite more extensive thoughts in other people |

In practice, however, you cannot segment focus groups on too many characteristics; otherwise, you would have to arrange too many focus groups. Consequently, some researchers

* facilitate a focus group that is diverse, rather than homogenous, on many characteristics
* after the focus group, contemplate which characteristics most affected the priorities of participants or the how they like to discuss issues
* the researcher might then segment the subsequent focus groups only on these characteristics

**Strangers versus acquaintances**

When you segment the focus groups, you should also decide on whether the participants should be strangers or acquainted with one another. Usually, focus groups comprise strangers because

* individuals may be more willing to share personal information to strangers, because their disclosures are not as likely to be consequential
* acquaintances have sometimes developed shared assumptions and perspectives; consequently, the answers are often skewed towards these assumptions or perspectives, diminishing the diversity and nuance of the responses

Nevertheless, in some instances, researchers might accept, or even prefer, the focus groups to comprise acquaintances. To illustrate, when researchers convene focus groups to discuss an initiative in an organization, they might need to accept that participants will be acquaintances or even friends. Too many employees might be familiar with each other to limit the focus group to strangers.

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| **Step 4: Determine the extent to which the researcher will guide the conversations** |

Sometimes, researchers significantly guide the conversations, called structured focus groups. On other occasions, researchers do not significantly guide the conversations. The following table clarifies how researchers might closely guide or not guide the conversations.

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| How to guide conversations closely | How to refrain from guiding conversations closely |
| Ask each focus group the same questions | Modify the questions you ask each focus group depending on the conversation |
| Intervene as soon as the conversation strays from the key topic. You might say “That’s interesting, but I want to return to the issue of…” | Do not intervene even if the conversation strays from the key topic |

So, when should you guide the conversations closely? When should you refrain from guiding the conversations closely? The following table might help you answer this question.

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| Benefits of guiding conversations closely | Benefits of not guiding conversations closely |
| Participants answer the questions that are relevant to you | Participants discuss the issues they perceive as important—instead of only the issues that you perceive as important |
| This option is beneficial whenever you want to answer a specific question—such as which of two alternatives participants would prefer or how to improve a specific initiative | This option is beneficial whenever you want to explore a broader issue and the boundaries of this issue are ambiguous |

**The funnel approach**

As the previous table implies, structured focus groups, in which researchers guide the conversation quite closely, generate benefits and drawbacks. Consequently, many researchers apply a compromise, called the funnel approach, that integrates the features of structured focus groups and unstructured focus groups. In essence

* the first part of the focus group is not especially structured
* the focus group becomes more structured over time

Nevertheless, to apply this approach successfully, researchers need to shift their style of questions seamlessly and at the right time. This approach, therefore, demands some expertise and is discussed in more detail later.

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| **Step 5: Decide on the size and number of focus groups** |

You now need to determine the number of participants in each focus group and the number of focus groups. In general

* focus groups comprise between 6 and 10 participants
* researchers organize between 3 and 5 focus groups.

**Size of focus groups**

Nevertheless, these practices, although prevalent, are not mandatory and depend on the circumstances. The following table outlines some of the principles that researchers, while deciding on the size of focus groups, should apply.

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| Principle | Justification |
| If the participants do not greatly value the topic or may not listen respectfully to one another, choose larger focus groups—perhaps 9 to 12 individuals | If these focus groups are too small, the participants might not be enthusiastic enough to generate fluid conversation. Instead, only a few people—such as experts or extraverts—might dominate or even derail the conversation |
| If the participants are likely to value the topic greatly and to listen respectfully to one another, choose smaller focus groups—perhaps about 5 to 7 participants | If these focus groups are too large, the enthusiasm of participants might generate several parallel conversations. The researchers might not be able to manage and record these overlapping conversations |

**Number of focus groups**

Typically, researchers conduct between 3 and 5 focus groups. However, they might need to organize more focus groups if

* the researchers do not guide the conversation very closely—because more focus groups might need to be convened to explore the diversity of issues that participants might raise
* the participants differ on many characteristics that could affect their priorities or how they like to discuss issues, because greater segmentation might be necessary

Regardless, at the very least, researchers should convene more than one focus group. If researchers conduct only one focus group, they cannot ascertain the extent to which the specific dynamics of this group skewed the responses. They cannot ascertain whether they have reached saturation—the point at which they have collected most of the key insights

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| **Step 6: Recruit the participants and organize the focus groups** |

**Organize the venue and invite participants**

Once you have chosen the number of participants in each focus group and the number of focus groups, you are ready to organize these groups. To achieve this goal, you could apply a range of practices to organize the venue and then to invite participants. The following table outlines a few practices that will help you organize enough participants.

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| Practice | Justification or illustration |
| Choose a quiet venue in which individuals can sit in a circular arrangement | * Circular arrangements promote more cohesion than rectangular arrangements (Zhu & Argo, 2013) |
| Organize snacks, tea, and coffee to be served immediately before the focus group starts | * Warm beverages have actually been shown to promote camaraderie (Ijzerman & Semin, 2009) |
| Organize name tags for each participant |  |
| Determine who might be interested, in principle, to participate in a focus group on this topic | * you might email a large number of potential respondents to seek their interest * or you could also approach specific people, teams, or organizations individually * describe the topic broadly, such as “to understand initiatives that promote wellbeing” rather than specifically; otherwise, participants might prepare their answers, compromising the degree to which the responses of one person will stimulate the insights of other people |
| If people express interest, you might then ask a few questions—in person, over the telephone, or over email—to assess the suitability and to segment participants appropriately. | You might ask   * basic demographic questions, such as their age category, education level, or job * a question that assesses whether they listen to you * a question that gauges their availability * a question that gauges whether they realize the conversation will be recorded   You might then convey the details—such as the likely duration and schedule—and then clarify whether they are still interested |
| If they are still interested in participating, email or text the person as soon as possible | * thank these participants * specify the date, time, and location * indicate they do not need to prepare |
| Send a reminder email or text the day before |  |

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| **Step 7: Design the schedule of questions** |

**Design the introduction**

Before you ask the questions, you should start with a short overview in which you

* Welcome the participants and thank everyone for their time and contribution
* Specify your name and position
* Outline the topic briefly—and why you are interested in this topic
* Perhaps indicate why these participants were invited—because they had experienced some initiative, for example
* Ask each person to specify their name and role or some other relevant detail
* Set a few ground rules.

In particular, when setting ground rules, remind everyone

* that no answer is correct or incorrect but merely an intuition, perception, or insight
* to listen respectfully to every answer, regardless of whether they agree
* to respond to one another rather than merely wait for the moderator or facilitator to ask questions

**Design the questions**

If you do plan to utilize the funnel approach, you are likely to ask five classes of questions in turn: opening, introductory, transition, key, and closing questions. The following table defines and illustrates these questions. Each question should be short, unambiguous, and specific. Refrain from questions that encompass multiple issues.

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| Class of questions | Examples |
| **1 Opening questions**: ask simple questions that participants can readily answer—primarily to promote their confidence. At this time, do not ask controversial questions that could provoke division. | * “Tell me about why you chose to work at this organization” * “Tell me about your experiences with universities” |
| **2 Introductory questions**: Ask questions that prompt individuals to start contemplating the issue. | * “When do you feel most motivated at work?” * “After you enrolled at university, what differed from your expectations” |
| **3 Transition questions**: Ask questions that shift the discussion towards the key issues you want to discuss. | * “Why are you sometimes less motivated at work?” * “After you enrolled, what were some of the main disappointments you experienced” |
| **4 Key questions**: Most of the session should revolve around these key question—the main concerns or issues you want to discuss. | * “Think back to when you participated in the initiative called Empower. What were the main benefits and problems of this initiative” * “How do you feel the university could have prevented these disappointments?” |
| **5 Ending questions**: These questions are designed to close the interview. | * “Would you like to discuss anything else about this initiative?” * “Would you like to discuss anything else about your experience at the university?” |

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| **Step 8: Seek ethics approval** |

Before you begin the study, you will need to seek approval from an ethics committee—sometimes called an institutional review board. The ethical principles that apply to most research applies to focus groups as well. However, focus groups are also unique because participants listen to the answers of one another—and, therefore, these responses are not anonymous. Hence, if asked about how you will manage these sensitivities, you could include some of the answers that appear in the following box.

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| **Limited confidentiality in focus groups**  In the invitation to focus groups, as well as at the beginning of focus groups, participants will be informed they will obviously hear the responses of one another. To be able to participate, they will need to sign a confidentiality form—attached to the consent form—and will be instructed not to disseminate the comments of specific individuals. Nevertheless, they will be informed that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.  In addition, participants will be informed that, after 20 to 30 minutes, a short break will be organized. This break enables individuals to withdraw inconspicuously if they choose. Participants will also be informed they can contact the researcher later if they would like to withdraw specific comments. |

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| **Step 9: Prepare for the moderation** |

To facilitate or moderate a focus group, you need to be mindful of several key practices. You might even organize some mock focus groups, perhaps with colleagues or friends, to entrench these practices. The following table illustrates some of these practices.

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| Practices to entrench | Clarifications or illustrations |
| Develop rapport with participants | * Attempt to cultivate a warm, relaxed atmosphere * Plan topics you could broach as people arrive * Yet, your style or manner should also resemble the demeanor of your participants * Remind participants the conversation will be recorded; indicate they may be mindful of the recording initially but not after a few minutes |
| Attempt to be mindful rather than distracted | * Practice your introduction and the questions several times in advance * Engage in some mindfulness exercises before you begin, such as watching your breath * Transcribe any worries or concerns before you start the focus group * Respect every answer. Replace thoughts like “This answer seems useless” to “This answer might later seem more valuable than I realize now” |
| Record the audio—and perhaps video—but also transcribe some notes | Your transcriptions could include   * some of your initial musings, impressions, hypotheses, or insights * quotes that appear to be significant   Nevertheless, do not restrict your notes to only some participants; otherwise, other participants might feel their answers are not as significant |
| To elicit more detailed answers, probe and pause occasionally | Probes include   * “Can you provide an example?” * “Can you tell me more?” * “Can you explain this notion in more detail”   After you ask a question, you can pause for a few seconds. These pauses might feel awkward initially but often prompt greater contemplation in participants. |
| Encourage answers without endorsing responses | * Nod your head and lean forwards to exhibit interest and to encourage a participant to elaborate * Refrain from overt, or even inadvertent, approval of some position. Articulate neutral phrases like “I see”, “thanks”, or “go on” rather than approval like “excellent” or “good” * Do not divulge your personal opinions or attitudes to the topic |
| Attempt to equate the level of responding across participants | * Subtly encourage the more reserved participants to speak more. You might say “I felt that you had some thoughts about this issue. What do you think about…” * Subtly discourage the dominating participants from extending their answers. You might say “I see. So what do other people think about…” |

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| **Unfocussed discussion groups** |

Although not as common, some researchers advocate and conduct unfocussed group discussions in lieu of focussed groups (Mackay, 2012). Indeed, this practice has been utilised in Australia, since the 1970s, primarily in market research and social research (Mackay, 2012). Specifically, unfocussed research is designed to foster a setting that is more natural and familiar to participants, ultimately to uncover perspectives that closely mirror the prevailing feelings, thoughts, and opinions of people in every say life. To foster this setting, researchers tend to apply the features that appear in the left column of the following table (see Randle et al., 2014).

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| Features of unfocussed group discussion | Features of focus groups |
| The sample comprises 5 to 8 members of existing groups—such as friends, colleagues, or neighbours | The sample usually comprises individuals who are not familiar with one another |
| The discussion is conducted in a setting in which the participants would often meet | The discussion is conducted in a setting that is often unfamiliar to the participants |
| Besides introducing the topic, the facilitator seldom intervenes or directs the conversation, enabling the topics to unfold naturally | The facilitator tends to guide the conversation with specific questions |
| The facilitator does not limit the duration of these discussions | The facilitator tends to limit the duration of these discussions, often to about 90 to 120 minutes |
| The facilitator may record audio but never video, because recording the video might seem invasive | The facilitator will often record both audio and video |

**Benefits and drawbacks of unfocussed discussion compared to focus groups**

Randle et al. (2014) conducted both focus groups and unfocussed discussions to explore the benefits of each approach. Unfocussed discussions generated many benefits (see also Nancy, 2011). For example, these discussions

* explore topics in greater depth, because the topics are more relevant to the individuals
* explore topics the researchers might have overlooked otherwise
* tend to evoke a more positive emotional tone—perhaps because the issues that anger these individuals might have been discussed in the group before
* increase the extent to which participants seem engaged, rather than weary, from the outset, perhaps because the setting is natural. In focus groups, participants need some time before they feel comfortable
* enhance the degree to which participants might occasionally dispute the answers of another individual, ultimately improving the accuracy of responses

Nevertheless, because of some drawbacks, unfocussed discussions might not always be suitable. For example, when the discussions are unfocussed

* the participants might not discuss the proposed topics to a sufficient extent—an acute problem if an organization had commissioned research about a specific issue
* the participants might conceal some truths from one another, because they will need to interact in the future. However, in general, participants often discussed more personal matters in the unfocussed discussion (Randle et al., 2014).

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