

Focus Group: Reviews and Practices

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Abstract

The focus group has become increasingly popular as a tool for social and market research across a wide range of sectors. The focus group technique is a type of qualitative research methodology, generally defined as a structured discussion with a small group of people, run by a facilitator or using a moderating team, to generate qualitative data on a precise topic of interest, using a set of open-ended questions. This paper explores definitions of and approaches to focus groups and outlines their value as part of an initial exploratory qualitative research phase. Advantages and disadvantages of focus group research are also discussed, along with some of the logistical considerations involved, in light of the researcher's own experience and recommendations from the literature.

Keywords: focus group technique; research methodology; advantages; disadvantages; research; definitions;

1. Introduction

Krueger and Casey (2000: 5) have defined the focus group as a:

'carefully planned series of discussions designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment'

Moreover, focus groups are viewed:

'as a type of a group interview where a small group of individuals are gathered together for the purpose of discussing one (or sometimes more) topic of interest.'

(Barrows, 2000: 193)

And another authority defines focus groups as:

'a group of interacting individuals having some common interest or characteristics, brought together by a moderator, who uses the group and its interaction as a way to gain information about a specific or focused issue.'

(Marczak and Sewell, 2007)

The focus group technique is renowned as an investigative tool for social and market research. Since the 1980s and 1990s, the focus group technique has become increasingly popular as an invaluable research vehicle across a wide range of sectors, and one of the most widely used qualitative research tools in many businesses as a means of gathering feedback on an organisation's or employees' training needs (McClelland, 1994); however, only very recently has such a technique been used in hospitality establishments (Barrows, 2000). The focus group technique is a type of qualitative research methodology, defined as a structured and focused discussion with a small group of people, run by a facilitator (moderator) or using a moderating team (Prince and Davies, 2001, Marczak and Sewell, 2007) to produce qualitative data through a set of open-ended questions. The term *focus* has an important meaning – it emphasises that the group will discuss a precise topic of interest rather than broad generalities (Boddy, 2005).

2. Focus Group as Exploratory Qualitative Phase

'When qualitative data are collected first, the intent is to explore the topic with participants at sites.'

(Creswell, 2003:212)

Focus groups are used in some studies as one of the research methodologies because of their ability to actually generate items for the development of a questionnaire (Nassar-McMillan & Borders, 1999; Nassar-McMillan and Borders, 2002; Constantine and Bourne, 2005; Kim *et al*, 2005). This approach is commonly used, according to the literature (see, for example, Lankshear, 1993; Hoppe *et al*, 1995; Laflin and Hyatt, 1999; Nassar-McMillan & Borders, 1999; McNeill, Sanders and Cville, 2000; Trocki, 2000; Nassar-McMillan and Borders, 2002; Prince and Davies, 2003; Constantine and Bourne, 2005; Kim *et al*, 2005; Deshpande, 2007; Tracey and Barham, 2007). Groups also enable the researcher to ‘drill’ more deeply to attain in-depth insights into the researched topic (Barrows, 2000), as well as to collect a certain amount of information (Krueger, 1994; Gibbs, 1997; Barrows, 2000) and opinions (Hines, 2000) from a small number of people in a short time. The primary goal of focus group sessions in these cases is not to generalise, but simply as a step to help develop a set of questions to be asked in the subsequent questionnaire. Therefore, the focus group in such a case is exploratory in nature, aimed at developing and formulating an appropriate questions list for use in the questionnaire survey from the findings. By doing so, such a stage is potentially very useful (Threlfall, 1999) and produces very successful results—particularly in the absence of research on specific topics or when the topic has been minimally researched (Nassar-McMillan and Borders, 2002)—and can be helpful in lucidly defining the survey items (Morgan, 1997). This approach is the most common type of focus group, ahead of ‘clinical focus groups’ and ‘phenomenological interaction-centred focus groups’ (Hines, 2000: 10).

‘Generally unexplored or new topic areas benefit from focus group inquiry, allowing the researcher a glimpse at the phenomenon to gain valuable information on language or behavior specifics... This method provides useful perceptual information as a precursor for focus of expanded research.’

(Threlfall, 1999: 103)

3. Advantages and Disadvantages

In terms of the advantages of focus groups, they can cover a large number of people in the same group (Wall, 2001), as an efficient way of gaining a large amount of information (Krueger, 1994; Gibbs, 1997; Barrows, 2000) and particular opinions or attitudes (Hines, 2000) in a short time, and are a most effective tool when used in conjunction with other data collection methods as a form of triangulation (McClelland, 1994; Threlfall, 1999). Above all, the major advantage of focus groups, which other research tools such as surveys cannot offer, is that they enable the researcher to ‘drill’ more deeply to attain in-depth insights into the researched topic (Barrows, 2000).

However, this can cost quite a lot of money. It has been argued that a focus group is a relatively low-cost research tool compared to some other options (Dreachslin, 1999; Leitão and Vergueiro, 2000; Wall, 2001), and that focus groups do not require a lot of preparation and arrangements (Threlfall, 1999, Davies, 2007). However, adding up the time taken over question development, pre-testing and recruitment and screening processes, plus the costs of moderation fees, accommodation for participants if needed, meeting room and hotel rental, translation and transcription, tape and video equipment hiring, incentive costs, hospitality for respondents, and travel and accommodation for the facilitator, the total cost can reach approximately US\$1000 per participant for a one-hour focus group interview in both the US and Europe (Davies, 2007). Moreover, the analysis process of the focus group output can be slow, complicated and time-consuming, along with the relatively high cost of software programmes involved, so that the total cost tends to be US\$2,000 for a full edition (Schmidt, 2001), which is exorbitant for many students and researchers. A further limitation of focus groups is related to the fact that they are rarely used as a sole method of data collection (McClelland, 1994) owing to their small sample: therefore, such a group may not be representative (Gibbs, 1997; Wall, 2001; Davies, 2007), and its outcomes cannot be generalised to the whole population (Gibbs, 1997; Jinks and Daniels, 1999; Threlfall, 1999; Barrows, 2000).

Based on the literature, (Evmofofopoulou(2007) has illustrated advantages and limitations to focus groups over and above those mentioned here. As a researcher, having conducted focus groups in my academic and professional work, it was found that focus groups were relatively expensive and very time consuming, and cumbersome in terms of the recruitment and analysis process. However, focus groups as an exploratory data collection method proved to be an effective and efficient way to gather information from a small number of people, providing useful and quality output and yielding valuable insights when group interaction was well-organised and lively. It also aided greatly in developing questions, and hence a reliable and valid questionnaire, from the findings of focus group when used as preliminary tool.

4. Number and Size of Groups

Although there is no iron-clad rule about how many focus groups are enough (Evmorfopoulou, 2007), Krueger (1994) argues that focus group research should comprise a minimum of three groups.

In terms of group composition, the literature is mixed with respect to opinions on ideal focus group size. Ultimately, there is no rule: different researchers have noted ranges in size from 4 (Krueger, 1994; Seggern and Young, 2003; Boddy, 2005), 5 (Morgan, 1988; Ruyter, 1996) or 6 (Prince and Davies, 2001) to 12 participants; from 6 to 8 participants (Leitão and Vergueiro, 2000, Evmorfopoulou, 2007); and from 7 (Marczak and Sewell, 2007) or 8 (Greenbaum, 2003) to 10 participants. According to Boddy, groups are most often composed of 8 respondents (Boddy, 2005), although focus groups have been conducted with 10 to 23 participants (Braithwaite *et al*, 2004), and as many as 31 in one focus group (Gloet, 2002). Eight to 12 participants is common practice in the USA (Falco *et al*, 1998 cited in Prince and Davies, 2001), while 5 or 6 is widely utilised in the UK and other countries (Marketing News, 1995 cited in Prince and Davies, 2001).

Merton, Fiske and Kendall (1990: 137) reported that:

'the size of the group should manifestly be governed by two considerations...it should not be so large as to be unwieldy or to preclude adequate participation by most members nor should it be so small that it fails to provide substantially greater coverage than that of an interview with one individual'

Dreachslin (1999) points out that a large focus group may produce wide-ranging ideas, but may also produce a competitive environment to those vocal and dominant members when they expect that a focus group must be completed within a specified time frame. Additionally, a larger focus group would be difficult for an inexperienced facilitator. Dreachslin(1999), Jinks and Daniels (1999) found that a larger group was difficult to control, having had difficulty achieving equal participation in the discussion.

Moreover, Ruyter (1996) stated that, relatively speaking, 'middle-sized' groups provide the best results with respect to the quality of ideas and the satisfaction of group participants. However, the researcher has embraced the acknowledgment in Prince and Davies' (2001) research that 'small-sized' groups of 4 to 6 may be productive since they encourage members to take part in the discussion: consequently, a considerable number of different ideas maybe generated on the topic under discussion within a certain time limit.

More importantly, it is recommended that, ideally, focus groups be conducted with a comparatively homogeneous group (Dreachslin, 1999) in order to elevate the equality of contributions to discussion among participants (Gibbs, 1997; Boddy, 2005). However,

'too much homogeneity can limit the range of perspectives or, at worst, render the results invalid.'
(Dreachslin, 1999: 228)

And:

'If a group is too heterogeneous, whether in terms of gender or class, or in terms of professional and 'lay' perspectives, the differences between participants can make a considerable impact on their contributions. Alternatively, if a group is homogenous with regard to specific characteristics, diverse opinions and experiences may not be revealed.'

(Gibbs, 1997)

5. Length of Focus Group Sessions

Opinions on the ideal length of sessions fluctuate between half an hour to two-and-a-half hours per focus group (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990). The general view favours slightly longer groups, as exemplified by Nielson (1997, two hours) or Schmidt (2001, two to three hours), along with others who indicate one-and-a-half to two hours (Leitão and Vergueiro, 2000, Greenbaum, 2003, Evmorfopoulou, 2007) or from one to two hours (Gibbs, 1997) as ideal. Obviously, one's priority is the minimal time available to get the maximum amount of information on the topic being discussed.

6. Setting and Site

The venues for group sessions must be accessible and convenient to all participants and far from possible disturbances and noise; care should be taken to create an inviting, comfortable, relaxing, and productive atmosphere, conducive to conversation and to trust, and to positive feedback from participants in the sessions.

Seating arrangements are an important matter to take into account, and the best option must be decided upon as part of planning a focus group. The best type of seating is a circular arrangement, with chairs placed around all sides, rather than using rectangular or boardroom tables or a hollow square set-up. This allows for everyone to see everyone else, thus encouraging them to listen to and engage with one another. Before the sessions begin, the meeting room should be set up for the exact number of attendees, so that there is no room for anyone who might arrive while the session was in progress, which might spoil the flow of conversation and negatively affect the dynamics of the group.

7. Incentives

Some focus groups run on the participants' own time, as opposed to their paid working hours; therefore, a financial incentive is generally offered to participants. However, in some cultures, this practice may be inappropriate, if it runs counter to the norms stemming from local tradition (Masadeh, 2009). Some other considerations might be provided instead, such as a taxi service for participants, refreshments for interviewees and providing a summary report on the focus groups.

8. Facilitator

The facilitator plays an important role in determining the success of focus groups. To this end, the researcher must select someone with personality traits considered to be the cornerstone of successful moderation. Prince and Davies (2001: 208) argue as follows:

'Moderators who display an intrinsic interest with the research topic, overt friendliness, a sense of humour, an insatiable interest in people, a curiosity and openness to new insights, and a willingness to listen are more likely to encourage participants to share their experiences.'

Also:

'moderators will need to possess good interpersonal skills and personal qualities, being good listeners, non-judgmental and adaptable. These qualities will promote the participants' trust in the moderator and increase the likelihood of open, interactive dialogue.'

(Gibbs, 1997)

Morgan (1988) suggested that focus groups preferably be facilitated by someone other than the researcher in order to avoid bias. In contrast, Hamaydeh (2006: 144) argues that focus groups, when approached as an exploratory tool, are not subject to potential researcher bias because the researcher still does not have 'a clear vision and stable opinion' on the topic at hand. Moreover, Nassar-McMillian and Borders (2002) indicate that it is necessary for the researcher to run a focus group because s/he is knowledgeable about the subject, so the researcher can help the group maintain its focus and thus keep the sessions on track.

9. Pretest

Prior to the commencement of the actual focus groups, the group discussion questions are usually subject to a pre-test with the target population who do not participate in the actual focus groups, in order to establish the key considerations about validity. These include those addressed by Dreachslin (1999: 228):

- 'Is the meaning of the question clear?
- Do the questions use terminology that is understandable to the participants?
- Does each question ask only about one topic?
- Do the questions reflect any hidden bias or 'lead' the participants?'

Repetitive questions should be identified and weeded out; furthermore, some changes to and modifications of the draft questions may be deemed necessary.

Opinions vary as to the number of questions to be posed in focus groups. For example, Eliot & Associates (2007) and Eliot (2007) state that the ideal number is eight; Kreuger (1988) recommends that focus groups should consist of less than ten questions (about five or six), while Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) suggest that most focus interviews should consist of fewer than 12 questions. Furthermore, CEISMC (2007) stated that in focus groups, the number of questions necessarily depends on the length of the session, indicating that focus groups should involve approximately ten per hour.

Questions in the focus group are to be in sequence from broad or general to narrow or specific, as recommended by Eliot & Associates (2007):

- *Engagement questions*: begin the session with a question or two that put the participants at ease and create a comfortable environment open to participation.
- *Exploration questions*: penetrating, well-constructed group members' questions that get to the heart of the discussion.
- *Exit questions*: ask if there is anything more or any further comments regarding the topic, and check if we had missed anything.

10. Conclusion

Focus group research is highly valued as a qualitative research tool, most notably for its ability to generate in-depth insights into a topic in an efficient and timely manner. Despite some of the limitations and logistical hurdles involved, this research technique is seen as effective and even less resource intensive compared to other methods. The author's own experience in using focus groups as part of an initial qualitative exploratory research phase yielded valuable results, generating valid and relevant questionnaire items for a subsequent phase of research. As noted, special care must be taken to ensure the appropriate configuration of participants, facilitators, length, setting, and so on, to ensure the quality and validity of focus group data. There is no strong consensus on the precise characteristics of an "ideal" focus group—indeed, the literature seems to suggest that the research topic itself will help dictate the nature of focus group research, making it a flexible and unique tool for gaining in-depth understanding—and gathering diverse opinions and perspectives—on a wide range of subjects.

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