

Focus Group Discussion

Definition

Focus group discussion is very important method of data collection in research especially in social sciences. Focus group discussion is a planned, facilitated discussion among a small group of people designed to obtain perceptions in a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment.

Focus groups are good for initial concept exploration, generating creative ideas, testing ideas and determining differences in opinion between various groups. Focus groups are often used as a means of triangulation with other data collection methods.

Dimensions for Focus Group Discussion

Doing a focus group discussion should look at two dimensions: content and process.

Content

- Content includes the main topic or themes around which the discussion and probing takes place in a focus group.
- Facilitators must think about the topic of the focus group discussion in advance
- If for example you are going to conduct a focus group about young people in a community, then you have to prepare questions in advance, for example:
 - What is the age group that we are talking about?
 - What are the needs of this group?
- Be very realistic about the time you have available for probing!
- You have to find a balance between the questions you want to ask and the information you hope to get and at the same time give the participants the chance to express their ideas and opinions.

Process

- This includes the practical preparations for the focus group discussion: organizing the room, providing a comfortable environment
- Process includes everything that relates to the group interaction, giving all participants the chance to contribute etc (the group logistics and group dynamics.)

Strengths of Focus Group Discussions

- Focus group discussions allow members to provide mutual support to one another over difficult topics.
- It allows people to clarify their views in ways that are not always accessible in a one to one interview.
- Focus group discussions are useful for EXPLORING and going deeper into open ended questions and to look at the how and why of issues.
- Focus group discussions allow participants to express themselves in their own words, to be more critical and to come up with creative solutions.
- Focus group discussions are good for participants with problems of reading and writing.
- Focus group discussions encourage participants who may be afraid to be interviewed on their own.
- Focus group discussions can also encourage participants to contribute in a group if they feel motivated and empowered to speak up when they see safety in numbers.

Limitations of Focus Group Discussions

Sometimes participants may be afraid to speak up if they think that other participants may disagree with them. Focus group discussions can also compromise the confidentiality of the session if participants discuss the group material with people outside of the group.

What Happens in a Focus Group Discussion?

Focus groups are planned groups where a number of people are brought together to discuss a certain issue, to share experiences and information. During a focus group discussion, the **participants** will be:

- Talking
- Sharing
- Listening
- Joking
- Arguing
- Disagreeing
- Criticizing
- Supporting
- Encouraging
- Lecturing
- Empowering one another

Planning for a Focus Group

Planning is essential for good focus group discussion. It is planned that who should be involved in the discussion? How will the participants be selected? What is a good size for a focus group? A group is, by definition, limited to a small number of participants, typically between 6 and 10 or even 12.

If the group is too large, it will be difficult for everyone to have a chance to speak and it will also be difficult for the facilitators to manage a large group. If the group is too small, it might be difficult to generate a group discussion and to ensure a diversity of opinion. It is necessary to plan that where will you find participants? Planning about selection of the location and schedule the meeting is also done.

Facilitation

Ideally, two or one moderator (facilitator) and an assistant should be available to facilitate the focus group discussion. Facilitator reaches at meeting place well in time and does not talk more than participants during discussion. He does not allow one participant to dominate and avoid to add his personal opinion. He is well prepared about research topic and question and always has probing themes in mind and previously discussed with his team. He does not force silent participants to speak. Facilitator creates a set of 5-10 questions in a loose running order, with specific prompts to facilitate participant understanding and to encourage replies.

Analyzing the Discussion

Focus group discussion analysis is a process that begins when you start data collection and continues until completion of the final report. This continuous process avoids the situation of accumulating a mass of data that may be difficult to manage. Analysis begins during the discussion. Facilitators listen for inconsistent comments and probe for understanding. They listen for unclear or puzzling comments and seek clarification. They also consider asking each participant a final preference question and offer a summary of key questions and seek confirmation. Since the moderator and the observer/recorder are the key actors in gathering the information the investigator should work closely with them in analyzing the data.

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