

Focus Group Script

In this video, I will survey the focus groups as a method of data collection. I'll briefly discuss the history of focus groups, discuss planning effective focus groups, and provide an overview of questioning strategies for focus groups.

So, what are focus groups all about? Richard Krueger and Mary Anne Casey, two notable scholars in the field of focus group research, say that "Focus group interviewing is about listening. It is about paying attention. It is about hearing what people have to say. It is about being nonjudgmental. It is about creating a comfortable environment for people to share." Therefore, focus group research should be done in a qualitative way. If you are familiar with the qualitative interviewing, many of the same principles will apply, with some

One essential question about focus groups is concerned with its function. Are focus groups a data collection method or are they a methodology? The answer, of course lies with who you ask. Generally speaking, focus groups are a data collection method that can be used with a variety of theoretical underpinnings for various study designs, including program evaluation, phenomenology, and action research. So we'll call it just that: a data collection method.

Focus groups began around the time of World War II for two reasons. For one, the US military found that people tended to give up more information about themselves and their friends and families when they were having conversations in groups. Second, the government wanted to understand citizen's perspective of post-war propaganda. Most focus group work left the academy after the post-war period, but focus groups remained in business settings for product development and testing. When qualitative methods saw a huge explosion in usage in the 1980s, focus groups returned to the scene.

Now we'll talk about some best practices for good focus groups.

This probably goes without saying, but good focus groups should provide for a comfortable environment. You should consider what a comfortable environment means to your group of participants in particular. If you are doing focus groups with recovering alcoholics, a gameboard café that serves beer may not be the best choice. The location should also be easy to access in terms of transportation availability and childcare. Always consider the constraints your participants have, whether they be time or economic. Participants should also have something in common, along with the knowledge that they have this phenomenon in common; everyone in the room may look different, and be of different ages, but they should know why they were asked to participate before they arrive. The moderator should also not have a position of power over the participants, as this can affect how honest the participants are willing to be. Finally, scholars disagree on the ideal number of individuals should be in a focus group, but that number ranges from 4 to 10 people, depending on the author.

How we decide to compose our focus groups can affect what kind of conversation the group has. Homogeneous focus group composition guarantees that the topic being discussed is

relevant to the participants. The biggest risk of homogeneity is that groupthink can arise from likeminded individuals. Non-homogenous groups allow for more diverse options, but risk conversations going off-topic or marginalizing one or more participants. Ultimately, you, as a researcher must consider all possible outcomes before deciding group make-up, and the sensitivity of the topic may sway you against non-homogeneous groups.

As with any research study, the first thing you want to do is determine the purpose of your study. As researchers, we often jump into thinking about the participants or the data collection method first, because we are used to figuring out the problem-solving aspect of research first; dissertation writing trains us to be this way. Challenge yourself to take a step back and think about what you want to know. That way, when you write your research questions, you can align them to the purpose and your focus group protocol, so that your protocol can answer your research questions and, thus, fulfill the purpose of your study.

Next, you should consider whether or not focus groups are the best data collection tool for you. Often, researchers are better off doing a standard interview than a focus group. Here are some things you should consider. Are you looking for a range of experiences or ideas, or are you looking to narrow down a phenomenon to just one type of experience? You might want to conduct a focus group if you want to understand the same phenomenon, but from different perspectives, or if you want to uncover what is driving the opinions of participants. Finally, one of the most common reasons for choosing focus groups is to raise the total number of participants in a qualitative study.

Focus groups aren't recommended if you want consensus, if you are trying to educate your participants, if you don't really care about the opinion of the participants but want to appear to care, if you need statistics rather than qualitative data, if the topic is overly emotional, or you can't ensure confidentiality. The last two are very important, because for sensitive topics, like addiction or loss, focus groups may not be the best choice. For members of a focus group, their confidentiality cannot be ensured; there is a greater risk of their true identity being discovered.

Once you decide that you do want to pursue focus groups, you should consider how many. Kreuger and Casey recommend planning three to four focus groups per type of participant to get to the point of saturation. They define saturation as the point when you have heard the range of ideas and aren't getting new information. This may come before you finish the third focus group, so as a researcher, you must decide when to finish collecting data.

Next, you should consider your design options. A single-category design consists of multiple focus group meetings individuals that fit into one category. Multiple-category designs consist of multiple focus group meetings with groups of different types of people. For example, you might have a focus group with three groups of individuals in their 20s and two groups of individuals in their 40s. The double-layer design adds an additional element to the multi-category design by adding a criterion. As in the previous example, you might interview a group of individuals in their 20s, in which each of the groups are from different cities, adding a geographic element.

There are many other design types, which you can find in the recommended reading section of this presentation.

Finally, you should write up your data collection plan before you proceed with data collection. Institutional Review Boards require a lot of information before they approve a study, so hopefully, this step takes care of itself. Remember that when you are conducting qualitative research, you should be collecting a trail of evidence that includes a research journal and self-reflective memos.

Now we'll talk about conducting focus groups.

All focus groups should have a questioning route they take use to guide their conversations. You might think of a questioning route in the same way you think about interview protocols. Generally, questions should start easy, have a questioning plan with a sequenced focus, and move from general to specific.

Good focus group questions are conversational, and they shouldn't sound like they are being read off of a piece of paper. If it sounds like you are asking your participants research questions, then you need to re-think your strategy. Good questions should use the participants' words, so as the group progresses, if you are using a different word than your participants, shift into their lexicon, so you stay on the same page. Good questions are also clear, short, and open-ended.

There is a sequence in which you should question your participants. Begin with introductory questions; these questions should introduce the phenomenon to the participants that you are exploring on that day. Transition questions move the conversation along to get to the key questions. Transition questions should explore what the participants introduced and drive them towards key questions. Key questions are the main driver of the focus group. There are usually two to five key questions in a focus group. Think of key questions like the ones that are most closely linked to your research question as these are the questions that you will be spending the most time analyzing. Finally, ending questions bring closure to the focus group.

We draw our conversations about focus groups to a close with a brief discussion of emerging methods.

Virtual focus groups are a relatively new means to gather data. These groups can be synchronous face-to-face meetings or asynchronous message boards. Virtual focus groups are great because they virtually eliminate the need to meet in person. There are some considerations that should be taken seriously. Confidentiality is already an issue with focus group research, but it can be worse in virtual environments. We do the best we can to keep our participants safe by encrypting our data, but we all know that anything can be hacked, as we've seen with famous hacks such as the Panama Papers and the Sony hack. Great care is necessary to protect the identities of our participants.

In this presentation, we looked at how to use focus groups. This video is only meant to serve as a survey. There are many more areas to explore, like data analysis, virtual research ethics, mixed-methods designs, working with protected groups, and advanced group moderation. If you are considering using focus groups for data collection, you should consider exploring all of these topics.

Thank you for watching.