



LIHS Mini Master Class

© Alexandru Nicusor Matei 2013 CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Tips for running effective focus groups for research

Dr Karen Vinall
Dental Public Health

Karen Vinall © University of Leeds 2014. This work is made available for reuse under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/) Licence.



Aims for today

- Questions to think about before you start
 - Your research question
 - Your participants
 - Carrying out the focus group

Are focus groups appropriate to your research question(s)?

- What is the research question?
 - Is the aim to provide idiographic (single cases) or nomothetic (general rules) description?
 - Does your question concern what/how/why/under what circumstances?

What assumptions are you making?

- how robust? Chronic, periodic, momentary?
- How stable over time? What could cause it to change eg over life course?
- How common? Variations – all or nothing or more or less?
- Are you assuming ‘ordinary’ people will be able to talk about your research question?

What are the limitations of focus groups for answering your research question?

- Are you taking verbal accounts to be

- » Direct testimony (evidence)

- » Indirect indicators

- » Irrelevant

Be consistent – non-symmetrical accounting (eg treating one group of respondents' accounts as 'testimony' and another group as 'stereotype')

Ideal size

- Need to think about transcription (6-8 ppl ideal)
- Mix of people (who will talk in front of who)
 - Might want to keep like with like– talk more
 - Different stakeholders to get a more rounded impression of whole area of research interest
 - Deliberately conflicting opinions to get them to talk about the issues (NB how are you going to handle conflict- do you need additional training?)

Right length

- Set out timeframe before so that people can plan their time usually 45-90 mins
- Think about your participants:
 - Population group-can they be comfortable for that length of time
 - Do they work - is it legitimate to take time out of someone's day, will this limit who you get
 - Data saturation (are you going round in circles)
- More than one focus group to produce valid results usually 3-4 (data saturation when you're not hearing anything new)

Getting them started

- Questions: Stewart and Shamdasani suggest two general principles:
 - Questions should move from general to more specific
 - Question order should be relative to importance of issues in the research agenda
- Vignettes
- Provocative statements (some research questions may want to tap into strongly held feelings sometimes best to avoid this as could lead to internal conflict in group)
- Newspaper clippings
- Statistics and figures

Rolling with it or reigning them in?

- Depends on your research question...
- Most focus groups are to facilitate new, fresh ideas not to answer a question set out by the researcher –don't interview them
- Start with broad areas then focus in on your topics of interest
- Some participants come to focus groups with a drum to bang – is this useful for your research or not?

What to do with the data

- Always audio record you will miss important points in a group discussion without this – NB ethics?
- Think about your analysis approach upfront?
- Different types of discussion needed?
 - Content analysis – how often something is discussed?
 - Thematic analysis – what are the things discussed?
 - Interpretative Phenomological analysis – **who** said **what** under **which** circumstances
 - Discourse analysis – the language used to describe?

After the focus group

- Don't stop recording too soon!
 - You can often get some very interesting material at the very end
 - Ensure you have enough space on your recorder so that you can just let it run whilst the group disperses and leaves
 - Make sure everyone knows you are still recording

Key points

- Is a focus group the best way to address my research question(s)?
- Am I inviting the right people?
- Not too many (5-10ppl min/max)
- Not too long (45-90 mins)
- What are you going to get them to talk about?
- How are you going to analyse the discussion?

Further Information

- Silverman D. Doing qualitative research. London: Sage Publications, 2000.
- Kitzinger J. The methodology of focus groups: the importance of interaction between research participants. *Sociol Health Illn* 1994; 16:
- Morgan D L. The focus group guide book. London: Sage Publications, 1998.
- Bloor M, Frankland J, Thomas M, Robson K. Focus groups in social research. London: Sage Publications, 2001.
- Stewart D W, Shamdasani P M. Focus groups. Theory and practice. London: Sage Publications, 1990.