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Metadata Sheet

Section to be filled in by authors:

Entry Title		Focus Groups
Authors: <i>[list all authors, add more row if needed]</i>		
1	Name	Jude Robinson
	Affiliation, country	University of Glasgow, UK
	Lead author email	Jude.Robinson@Glasgow.ac.uk
	SAGE Author ID	[office use only]
2	Name	
	Affiliation, country	
	SAGE Author ID	[office use only]
3	Name	
	Affiliation, country	
	SAGE Author ID	[office use only]
All author bio(s)		<p>Jude Robinson is a social anthropologist researching in the field of critical public health. Her research centres on developing understandings of how people can develop and sustain their health and well-being outside conventional health care settings. She has a particular interest in (feminist) research methodologies, visual methods and material culture, gendered inequalities, issues around social justice, alternative moralities and ‘othering’ and the health of women, children and their families living in the UK. Her past research includes collaborative projects exploring smoking and second-hand smoke with parents of young children in different settings; exploring health and health care for people with visual impairment; and exploring the links between the arts mental health and wellbeing. Her recent projects an international four city ethnography exploring perceptions of cigarette packaging (with colleagues from Canada, the United States and Australia) and working with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra on <i>In Harmony</i> with children and families in Liverpool.</p>

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Abstract	<p>Focus group discussions represent a useful way to bring people together to generate new insights and ideas about a research topic. The advantages of using focus groups include the potential to gain a rapid insight into how a topic is viewed and discussed from complementary or contrasting perspectives. Participants are invited to present their views in turn, and as they can hear and reflect on what others in the group are saying, they can also give their response to what they have heard. While this open and discursive approach to data collection can produce a consensus in the group, as people may find it easy or polite to broadly agree with what other participants have already said, it can also highlight tensions and disagreements between group members as they interact.</p> <p>As focus groups represent a dynamic and potentially provocative research method, this entry highlights the advantages as well as the limitations of including focus group discussions in a research project. Moving through the practicalities of designing and setting up focus group discussions, there are discussions around the composition of focus groups, ethical considerations, and the role of technologies to facilitate and capture group discussions in real and virtual settings. By highlighting both the opportunities and issues researchers may encounter if they are using focus groups in research, this reflective overview guides the reader through the process of moderating a group discussion through to the analysis and presentation of data.</p>
Keywords	<i>focus groups; interaction; moderation; participation</i>

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Introduction

In a focus group discussion, a group of around 6-12 people are brought together to discuss a topic for around 40 and 90 minutes. Each group has a moderator, whose role is to ask a series of questions and/or provide different prompts to all group members, and to promote

discussion and interaction between the participants as they respond. Some focus group discussions also include an additional researcher to act as an observer, and other than introducing themselves and describing their role, they do not take an active part in the discussion but watch and take notes. As in other 'talking' methods such as interviewing, the moderator (and observer) is present in the group and so are co-constructors in any resulting discussion. However, the role of a skilled moderator is to develop appropriate questions to stimulate inter group discussion *between* participants rather than participants directing responses solely to the moderator. Therefore focus group participants are both responding to and interacting with one another during the discussion and this is how new insights can be generated.

Interaction is key to understanding the difference between the data produced by focus groups compared to interviews, as participants' views may shift during the discussion, as listening to new ideas or experiences recounted by other group members, and having their views challenged, may lead them to change their minds. Effective focus groups not only elicit views and responses, but also generate them through the collective discussion. In addition, members of the group may pose questions of their own to the other participants in the group, and depending on these responses, attitudes may shift again, adding to the richness of the discussion. Focus groups can be hard to moderate and the data can be challenging for a novice researcher to analyse as it is difficult to identify single speakers throughout. Furthermore, the discussion may be wide ranging and inconclusive in parts, and speech tends to occur as fragments as people break in to contribute and may talk over one another. Despite these issues, focus group research represents a profoundly engaging, participatory and stimulating way to explore the social world and the resulting findings have the potential to be rich and illuminating.

This entry begins with a brief introduction to the theories underpinning the use of groups to research social issues, and the different ways in which focus groups have been used since the 1920s to the present. The following sections outline the principles of designing focus group research, the practicalities of organising and delivering a focus group, with a discussion of the ethics and issues in

focus groups. This entry concludes with an outline of the approach to analysing and presenting focus group data.

Focus Groups in the Social Sciences

Sociological theorists have long recognised that while people who live together in different communities tend to share many ideas and values, they behave differently in groups than they do alone as individuals (Durkheim, 1984). Therefore the data elicited through focus group discussion is qualitatively different from interview data (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005). While research studies can include both interviews and focus group discussions, researchers need to ensure that the different data they elicit remain conceptually distinct throughout the analysis and in the presentation of data. For example, in representations of the findings of research, it should be clear to any reader if a long narrative quotation is from an interview or whether it is in fact a longer single voice extract from a focus group discussion.

Interaction is key to understanding what makes focus groups such a distinctive method, as the data are co-constructed between participants and so focus group data reflect a particular representation of the social world (Kitzinger, 1994). It is useful here to reflect on Erving Goffman's (1959) theories of the presentation of self, whereby people present different views depending on the audience and the setting. As focus group discussions take place in front of others, people tend to present 'socially acceptable' views and so may be reluctant to share deeply held, possibly controversial views in front of others (Morgan, 2010; Wilkinson, 1998). However, this pattern of regulatory behaviour is true of any social interactions, including interviews, and while it is possible to argue that people may be more comfortable to disclose personal information in more confidential settings they are still likely to

represent themselves positively, particularly as the interviewer is unlikely to contradict them and there is no one else present (Robinson, 2009). Any differences between theories of behaviour in interviews compared to that in focus groups is not intended to oppose one method against another, but rather explore the similarities and differences between methods to aid researcher's decisions about their choice of method to research a particular issue.

Given patterns of human social interaction, in focus group discussions it is more likely that participants' views may coalesce around certain ideas, as agreement is easier, disagreement may be seen as anti-social, and/or the particular issue not worth arguing about (Warr, 2005). Therefore, any apparent consensus represented in focus group data may not actually reflect the views of participants (Sim, 1998). This focus on consensus may raise concerns about the authenticity of the findings from focus group research. However, with the interpretative paradigm, it is accepted that with all research (quantitative and qualitative) participants may not chose to reveal their beliefs to researchers or others, and so acknowledging this limitation does not invalidate the contribution of focus group research as it enables researchers to observe how people chose to present and articulate their views of particular topics 'in public'.

Focus groups are a participatory method, and researchers have convincingly argued that this aligns them with feminist research principles. Unlike one-to-one interviews, where the power to control the content, pace and tone of the topics lies with the interviewer, the number of participants in a focus group and their ability to pose questions and respond to others in the group leads to a shift in the power away from the moderator (Madriz, 1998; Wilkinson, 1998). This shift in power towards participants may mean that they feel empowered to express their views and so counteract the issue of presenting only what they believe are acceptable views, as empowerment is linked to openness and disclosure. Focus groups can form temporary safe and supportive environments for people to talk, and often

participants appear encouraging and supportive of participants (Dodson, Piatelli, & Schmalzbauer, 2007; Duggleby, 2005). Researchers have found that participants will discuss so-called wicked problems depending on the context and that is why the ethics, location, timing, setting and the composition of the focus groups needs particular attention (Hollander, 2004). These factors are discussed in more depth later in this entry.

Developing and Using Focus Groups

The potential of the group discussion for the social sciences was first recognised in the 1930s, with Robert Merton from the Chicago School of sociology recognizing that group discussions enable researchers to see how people debated issues and track how opinions were formed (Merton & Kendall, 1946). The focus group was seen as not only a time-efficient method, but also one that engendered dynamic and wide-ranging discussions and gave researchers opportunities to introduce ideas and scenarios to see how different people responded. Despite this early adoption and the subsequent iconic status of the Chicago school in sociology, focus group methods did not immediately become part of the research toolkit for sociological inquiry. It was some decades before focus groups were reclaimed as a core method in the social sciences (Barbour, 2012).

However, the commercial world recognised the opportunities for businesses to consult with and better understand the views of their customers, and the development of the method owes much to the initial investment made to development focus group methods in industry. To maximise the relevance of the research, marketing companies and departments developed highly stratified sampling strategies to ensure they consulted with the groups they most wanted to reach. During those decades of expanding markets, companies also took steps to include those who apparently may be resistant to their

conventional messages, the equivalent of the 'hard to reach' in social research. As the goals of business and qualitative inquiry are very different, the methodologies in the social sciences have developed to include different practices (Parker & Tritter, 2006). While the 'hard sell' does not drive academic research, there was much to learn from market researchers' observation of group composition and dynamics, what sorts of physical environments can facilitate people to relax and participate in discussions, and how groups form and how ideas coalesce. Social science researchers have also drawn on the highly systematic and effective principles market researchers have developed around warm-up exercises, role of observers and debriefing in focus group research.

The reason for this (re)adoption was partly as a desire to extend the methods repertoire but also in recognition of their contribution to human understandings. However, it took time to re-establish the method, as focus groups' antecedents in social sciences were forgotten and the method had become tainted by their association with market research and the commercial world. In the 1980s social science research became polarized into , large-scale quantitative studies and small-scale studies using in-depth interviews (Merton, 1987). Given the comparative messiness of the data generated by focus group discussions (more on this later), some were quick to term them 'quick and dirty'. They appeared as only a supportive or subsidiary method in the design of larger scale studies (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

The establishment of focus groups as an acceptable method in its own right has much to do with the work of social scientists demonstrating not only the use of the method, but also reflecting and advancing on it (Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999; Morgan & Krueger, 1993). A number of stand-out studies can be mentioned here, for example the work of Jenny Kitzinger using a variety of methods, including focus groups, to discuss media coverage of AIDs (Kitzinger, 1990; Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2000); Esther Madriz's work with low-income Latina women to discuss their fear of crime (Madriz, 1998); and Robin Jarrett's work on low-income minority groups (Jarrett, 1993). More recent studies have

looked at gendered violence in teenagers (Aubert, Melgar, & Valls, 2011); the construction of collective identity (Munday, 2006); health service provision for people with disabilities (Kroll, Barbour, & Harris, 2007); legitimacy and political values (Parker & Tritter, 2006); and stress in African American men and nationalism and identity in Australia (Plage, Willing, Skrbiš, & Woodward, 2017). These and other studies have been conducted in many different settings and countries and demonstrate how focus groups can be used to research sensitive topics with hard-to-reach groups (Zeller, 1993).

The availability of individual digital technologies has also led to the creation of virtual focus groups, whereby participants see and interact with one another via digital media; thus, groups from geographically distinct areas can be brought together for research (Liamputtong, 2011; Mann & Stewart, 2000). This development raises interesting possibilities for research whereby people from 'rare' populations can be located to discuss issues with one another, across countries and time zones. Despite the risks of equipment and Internet failure, virtual methods represent an innovative and cost-efficient means of conducting research, with no travel, refreshment, or venue costs or with preparation, but with either a video- or audio-recording of the discussion (Walston & Lissitz, 2000). A study by Christina Underhill and Murrey G. Olmsted (2003) to explicitly compare the nature and quality of data between computer-mediated focus groups and face-to-face discussions did not find significant differences between the data sets. However, ethical issues such as ensuring the security of the digital platform so that all data remains confidential to the project and for the moderator to both detect and deal with any conflict or distress remain challenging (Lijadi & Schalkwyk, 2015). While the exclusion of marginalised people who do not have access to the technology is likely, it is reasonable to suppose that technological advances and increased accessibility will enable researchers to overcome these issues and experiment with new ways of bringing people together to discuss research topics (Mann & Stewart, 2000).

While the range and scope of the use of focus group discussions in the social sciences to illuminate complex social process studies indicates potential of the method to research new areas, it is not always appropriate to use focus groups. Some topics do not lend themselves well to group discussion, and some groups are hard to convene, even virtually, in one place to discuss a topic. (Morgan & Krueger, 1993). Other limitations include the time and resources available for the research, as focus groups may take a while to convene, and should not be carried out without preparation or by a poorly trained or unprepared moderator or observer. As the role of moderator is performative and requires engagement, verbal dexterity and the ability to establish a rapport with participants, not every researcher will be drawn to this method of data collection. Focus group discussions are also challenging in terms of data analysis, as the data are messy and complex and often lack the depth and specificity required by some research questions or some funders. So researchers need to select their method carefully, and also know their own strengths and weaknesses, and work to them.

Designing a Study Using Focus Groups

Focus groups can be incorporated into a number of different study designs, and it is useful to consider how different researchers have chosen to use them either as a stand-alone method, part of a wider qualitative study or as a mixed (quantitative and qualitative) methods study (Barbour, 2012; O'Brien, 1993). Qualitative methods have developed rules of thumb for the number of participants in a study, and broadly speaking this represents an inverse ratio to the recognised 'depth' of the method. Therefore, if a study uses a narrative and/or biographic approach and in-depth interviews for example, the number of participants can be 10 or fewer if these interviews are with a recognised rare population. For more straightforward interview studies, between 18 and 30 participants are standard, depending on factors such as the duration of the project, research question, and population. These factors also

influence the number of focus groups required for a study to be considered robust and publishable, so the number of participants in a focus group study will always depend on the particular research question and the nature of the population the researcher wishes to involve. There are two factors to consider: firstly the number of participants a researcher may expect to recruit to a group and secondly the number of groups in the study (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

In terms of the number of participants in each group, it is generally agreed that 6 to 8 participants is optimal (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005; Liamputtong, 2011). Having these numbers enables the moderator to involve all participants in the research areas without risking getting bogged down in a single topic. A further danger with larger groups is that the moderator can lose momentum in the discussion as they listen to successive views on a topic and other participants can become bored and distracted and may even start talking among themselves if the discussion does not move along at a good pace. However, a pragmatic and flexible attitude to recruitment is essential as often one never knows how many people will actually turn up for the focus group, and it may be more or less than hoped for (Barbour, 2012).

It is possible to run a focus group with 4 participants, but with fewer than 4 people, researchers should consider conducting a group interview. While group interviews can include interaction between participants, either implicitly or explicitly, essentially the researcher is asking questions to all participants in turn, with enough time allotted to obtain from each participant responses to every question (Currie & Kelly, 2012). If more than 12 participants attend, then researchers should consider splitting the single group into two. This may be possible if more than one member of the research team is present and is trained to conduct a group discussion, and if there are two audio recorders and another suitable room available. Alternatively, it may be possible to ask participants to return later. Having a series of backup plans is advisable for projects involving groups when it is unclear how many people

may actually attend.

Identification and Recruitment of Focus Group Participants

If the study is large scale, or part of a large-scale study involving quantitative measures, researchers may consider working out a sampling framework for each group, based on characteristics of age, sex, ethnicity, or occupation. However, researchers need to carefully think through any sampling characteristics as locating people who match a complex set of criteria, and who can all attend the same venue at the same time on the same day, can lead to logistical problems and low attendance on the day of the focus group (Barbour, 2012; Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999; Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, & Robson, 2001). Although studies using focus groups can be large, and include tens or even over a hundred people in total, the number of participants recruited to each group necessarily remains at a maximum of around 12 and often lower. Thus, it is not possible to generalise or claim that the views of a single group or even multiple groups are representative of any population.

Therefore, in line with other areas of qualitative research, the recommendation for sampling participants for focus groups is to recruit people to a group with relatively defined characteristics, such as age or sex, or age and occupation—basically a combination that will inform the research aims and objectives of the study and enable the research team to recruit to the groups. If budgets allow, researchers can use screening questionnaires to ensure that people meet their criteria at the time of recruitment. Because most studies use fairly simple sampling criteria, recruitment can be via posters, letters of invitation and/email and any final checks of characteristics can be made on the day of the focus group (Barbour, 2012; Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999).

Researchers debate whether or not it is desirable that participants know one another prior to the

focus group discussion. Some researchers screen out people who may know one another through work, family or socially, to ensure that people do not feel inhibited in the discussion and/or collude in any sense and so can talk freely about the topics. However, critics of this method of sampling have pointed out that equally people may feel inhibited talking about anything in front of a group of strangers that they have never met before. Also there are fewer checks and balances in such a group; if no one knows anyone there, there will be no awareness of whether what people are saying has any grounding in fact (Robinson, 2012).

Researchers who accept that people within groups may have existing social relationships stress that this creates an interesting dynamic within the group, can help groups feel comfortable, and aid discussion. Recruiting 'naturally occurring groups' such as friendship groups, or work colleagues, families or action groups may be easier in terms of recruitment and also may ensure that people turn up on the day and time specified. It may also be that if the group members are used to sharing time, resources, a house or working alongside one another, the groups will have an existing bond and dynamic to assist their participation and facilitate discussion. Yet critics point out that that it is unrealistic to assume that an outsider can accurately assess the power dynamics of a group in advance; power relationships also exist within friendship groups and families, and just because people work together does not mean that they like each other, or even feel comfortable talking in front of one another (Hollander, 2004).

However, researchers may consider whether everyone should know one another or not know one another, as having some people who are friends in a group with others who they don't know can create a particularly complex dynamic. Ultimately, there is no one way to recruit to focus groups; it is about remaining flexible and responsive, as researchers can attempt to recruit people who don't know one another, only to find that some people used to go to school together or work together, for example.

However, this is not to say that researchers should not carefully consider these issues in advance. For example, for research that involves workplaces, it is pertinent for researchers to reflect on grade and levels of seniority, roles and responsibilities and also cross-cutting factors such as gender, age or ethnicity (Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999; Liamputtong, 2011).

Venue

The location of the venue is critical for focus groups, because if people find it hard to attend, then attendance will be low. The reasons people give for not attending include discovering that the venue is expensive to travel to, that they tried to attend but couldn't find it, and/or they experienced travel delays. There are good reasons to make focus group venues as local and accessible as possible: to minimise the effort and expense needed for participants to attend. If there is no budget to pay for the travel for participants, then the location should be within walking distance, close to public transport links, or in a location with plentiful free parking. Focus group discussions can be held in any room large enough to accommodate the group size and the researchers; many spaces in work or community venues may be suitable. However, following ethical conduct in research, and considering that generation of focus group data relies on people feeling relaxed and engaged, then it follows that any room should be comfortable, clean, well lit, warm, and free from outside noise and any interruptions. If plans include serving hot drinks to welcome participants, then rooms should be close to a kitchen or café; a small table is useful for serving refreshments, for siting the audio recording device, and for the administration of the consent forms.

Equipment

If possible, researchers should seek to audio-record focus group discussions, as the

conversations are fast moving so it is very hard to take adequate contemporaneous notes, particularly if only the moderator is present. Researchers may choose to invest in specialist equipment with high resolution and additional microphones, but good recordings can be made with fairly basic recording devices. Many mobile phones have excellent microphones and recording capacity. However, researchers should always test their equipment before use, and in the room where the group will take place if it is available. This provides a sense of the recording levels to set, the limits of the room, and how to arrange the room to ensure the devices pick up all voices. It is essential for researchers to carry chargers and spare batteries with them and also to make sure the recording device has adequate digital memory to record the whole discussion. It is standard practice to take at least two recording devices into a room, and have them both running concurrently, in case one device fails.

Some researchers choose to introduce video recording equipment as well, so that they can record some nonverbal interaction and identify individual speakers. While this may appear desirable, the expense and logistics of setting up the multiple cameras and synchronous audio-recording equipment, and issues of finding participants who consent to be filmed, can be barriers. The presence of cameras may be off-putting to some people, particularly if the room has been arranged to ensure the complete visibility of people to the cameras. The introduction of visual as well as audio data raises ethical issues and these visual data require additional analysis. Equipment failure is also an issue. It can be hard to set up a discussion where everyone's faces and bodies are visible at all times, so there might be missing data even with multiple cameras. However, video cameras are increasingly affordable and provide quality images, and some researchers have successfully used video recording to record focus groups discussions in some settings.

However, there is no requirement for a focus group discussion to be recorded, and in some situations it may not be appropriate or acceptable to record. For example, some institutional and secure

settings, such as prisons, may not permit researchers to bring in any electronic devices, including memory sticks or mobile phones. Some participants may fear being identified by their views, or their voices, and will not participate if there will be a recording of what they have said. If this is known in advance, moderators can consider asking a colleague to act as an observer and scribe. Regardless of whether or not this is an option, the moderator may also write as many contemporaneous and retrospective notes as they can. Focus group data are complex, as the discussion is often fast moving with multiple voices talking over one another, so it can be hard for anyone without skills in shorthand to accurately represent exactly what was said. Therefore, it is unusual for unrecorded focus group studies to include direct quotations from participants.

The Roles of Moderator and Observer

Because moderators simply ask questions or introduce areas to facilitate a discussion, it is possible to see this as an easy role, requiring little skill or preparation. In practice, though, it is often highly demanding, as keeping the flow of the discussion in broadly the right direction, allowing for divergences and detours, and knowing when to break in and when to let people talk requires confidence and a heightened awareness of the research topic (Krueger, 1998). This is why research schedules, or topic guides, are used in focus group discussions rather than ordered lists of questions, as once the discussion gets going, the moderator may have to directly intervene to keep the discussion on track or fill gaps and pauses. Yet if the moderator intervenes too often, breaking through the discussion and interrupting people when talking, there is a likelihood that participants will sit back and fail to engage fully with future questions.

The moderator's role is distinct from that of an interviewer, and rather than always leading the discussion, they are present to ensure that the discussion keeps broadly on topic, that questions or

prompts are given to encourage participants to reflect more on an area, and to move the discussion on to another area of interest. Their role is also to ensure that the conduct of participants is appropriate, for example, that language and tone remain appropriate even if the discussion becomes heated, or that no single person dominates the discussion (Liamputtong, 2011). Given that audio recording the discussion may not be acceptable to participants or allowed, and given that equipment can fail, moderators often make quick notes of the names or identifiers of participants, and map where people are sitting. It may also be possible for moderators to make some notes while people are talking or record their thoughts about the discussion. In addition, supplementary notes can be written up after the discussion. Such notes provide a useful aide memoire when the researcher is listening to the recordings and reading through transcripts. Some research projects include an observer in the group, whose role is to note the non-verbal interaction and to make notes but not engage in the discussion. Non-verbal interaction includes noting the body language of individual group members and how this may change in response to what is said, and also noting how and when they behave as a group. These data provide a valuable means of assessing agreement and consensus to particular topics as well as identifying confusion, disagreements or the rejection of ideas (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

Once the identified topics have been discussed or are nearing the time allocated for the discussion, the moderator will need to close the discussion. If the moderator has covered the substantive topics, they can move on to ask summative, closing questions to enable participants to make any final contributions. They could also conclude by asking participants if there is anything they would like to add, and if there was anything that had not been covered that they would like to have discussed? Introducing these final questions can be important, as it is always possible that something interesting or important may be raised. After these final discussions all that needs to happen is for the moderator to turn off the audio recording equipment and thank the participants for their contribution.

Focus Group Schedule

Developing an effective schedule requires extensive research into the topic in question to identify what is known on the subject and sensitise the researcher to locate the gaps or contradictions. This aids the researcher in developing questions that may open up new areas of understanding (Barbour, 2012). Therefore, to prepare for a focus group discussion, as for any insightful research, an extensive literature review, including both published academic and policy literature and grey literature should be conducted and written up before drafting any research questions. Structuring a review for wider readership requires the writer to organise their thinking into themes and headings. This additional analysis helps the researcher to determine what areas of the research topic to explore and to become an informed moderator. This is crucial to enable the discussion to flow and progress *without* the intervention of the moderator, and, importantly, for the moderator to recognise when the discussion is covering new ground in terms of the research topic, so that they know when to interject to ask further questions to develop new insights and ideas (Morgan, 1993).

A schedule or topic guide is used for focus groups. While researchers' time can be well spent thinking about how to approach a specific issue and how a question may be phrased to elicit a particular response, there is really no point to their spending time crafting very specific questions, because it is very hard to predict what the subsequent questions should be. Essentially, after the moderator asks the opening questions, every subsequent question needs to be worded to reflect what has just been discussed. For example, if researchers are interested in alcohol consumption, and the moderator starts the discussion by asking participants what they drink and when, and in that initial discussion a participant talks about only drinking alcohol with food, which is then responded to and discussed by all the participants, it does not make sense for the moderator to follow their prepared schedule and ask the next prepared question, 'Do you ever drink while eating food'? Of course, the moderator can follow the thread of conversation and ask a question about food—perhaps whether they

drink at all meals or just lunchtimes and evening meals; such a follow-up question takes the discussion deeper into an area of interest. Even if food were not the next question on the list but much later in the prepared schedule, the moderator would follow another rule of thumb—always go with the flow—and regardless of whether participants start talking about food, or parties, or binge drinking or drinking practices of friends and family, the moderator would follow the discussion. So moderators need to move between the designated topic areas on their schedule as the conversations unfold while ensuring that all areas are covered eventually.

Therefore, no two focus groups within a research project are ever the same. This represents a strength, rather than a limitation, of the method. The responsive introduction of topics makes the data harder to analyse, as focus group data does not readily lend itself to a framework analysis as the line of questioning varies from group to group. The idiosyncratic rhythm and flow of the discussion, combined with the ownership of ideas by the group and the freedom to explore topics and respond to the views of others, generates the original insights, so researchers need to devise questions that enable and encourage the full engagement of participants. While groups who are invested in a topic and who have a depth knowledge of a particular issue (e.g. a focus group to explore working practices with a group of colleagues in a workplace,) may respond well to a stimulating and involved question to begin the discussion, other groups may need time to orientate themselves to a particular topic. Participants should be able to respond to initial questions easily and gain confidence by contributing; asking ‘easier to answer’ questions at the beginning of the discussion may orientate participants to the topic and to hearing the sound of their own voice in the room before the researcher builds up to the areas they are really concerned with (Barbour, 2012; Morgan, 1993).

When developing a focus group schedule and anticipating the order of topics to be discussed, with possible prompts to aid the moderator, researchers can add indicative times to ensure that there is

time to discuss everything within the agreed timeframe. Although some topics may not be suitable to ask to some groups of people, focus groups have been used to successfully research potentially sensitive personal information or experiences, such as sex or sexuality, money, sensitive health conditions (Bloor et al., 2001). However, researchers need to take care to ensure that the research is properly conducted, and what such studies have shown the importance of group composition and introducing more sensitive issues carefully into the discussion (Zeller, 1993).

Personal Data and Mini-Questionnaires

For a reader to understand and properly evaluate the findings from a research study, it is useful to have an understanding of who took part in the study, and some basic descriptive demographic data of the participants, such as their age, sex or gender, and ethnicity. In addition, there may be other interesting and pertinent information that would be informative to include. For example, for a study on work and unemployment, information about how many participants were working and what jobs they performed as well as how many were unemployed, their previous employment and how long have they been unemployed could be included. These data are difficult to elicit as part of a focus group discussion, partly because it is time consuming to go through all the questions with each participant and because some people may feel uncomfortable talking about their age or employment status in front of other people.

An alternative method is to gather these data in advance either through a screening questionnaire at the recruitment stage or through a telephone or email conversation, and then ensure this information is correctly mapped to the people who took part in the group. Another way is to develop and administer a short questionnaire (mini-questionnaire) to all participants after the consent process at either the start or end of the group discussion. These can be self-administered, or if literacy is

an issue, with the help of the researcher. These questionnaires can include any questions that are useful to the study, so if researchers are looking at families they could include questions on family composition, or who the families consider to be in their household, and the ages of family members.

However, the questionnaire needs to be brief. If researchers chose to administer it at the start of the focus group, then the discussion does not start until everyone has completed their questionnaires, which may cause a delay. If administered at the end of the discussion, people may be anxious to leave and so leave questions blank or leave without completing it at all. In addition, researchers may be reluctant to introduce activities that may detract from the time allotted for the discussion. There are also other issues to consider here in terms of the tone of the questions on the mini-questionnaire and how these may affect the focus group data. While having participants complete the mini-questionnaires immediately after the consent process may lead to a higher completion rate, the nature and direction of the questions included in questionnaire may also raise doubts or expectations about the line of questioning in the forthcoming discussion.

Focus Group Ethics

There are limits to confidentiality in focus groups (Barbour, 2012; Robinson, 2012). While the moderator and observer can observe protocols about anonymisation of data and protect the identities of participants, the participants are not bound by these protocols and so can disclose what was said to others after the discussion has concluded. This issue is of particular concern in groups in which participants know one another and share wider social networks; in such instances, the group's ground rules need to explicitly advise participants of the limits to confidentiality, and participants should be prepared to have what they say in the group repeated outside. While this may limit the discussion, it is good ethical practice and this limitation should be taken account of in the research design. If personal,

potentially identifiable, intimate disclosures are required to inform a particular research question, then the researcher needs to consider whether this will happen in a focus group discussion or whether another method should be included.

Overdisclosure is also a risk, as intense group discussions can create a misleading sense of security and suspension of everyday reality, and participants may seek to elaborate on the incidents they recount, or opinions they hold, and start to play to an audience by ‘capping’ one story with another (Lehoux, Poland, & Daudelin, 2006; Robinson, 2009). While such rich accounts can provide very useful data and it may be tempting to let such discussions go on, if participants include deeply personal information that does not directly inform the research, then the moderator should move the discussion to more appropriate topics, even reminding the participants again about the limits of confidentiality.

Often institutional ethics requires that a focus group schedule be drafted in advance and submitted for review. However, it is advisable to clearly indicate in the ethical submission that this draft schedule will be revised not only *before* the groups take place but *between* each of the groups, depending on how the research is progressing and the initial ongoing data analysis. Building in this flexibility is crucial, as researchers need to add in topics as they arise to ensure they pursue any original lines of inquiry rather than reproduce existing knowledge or merely confirm the research team’s own hypotheses.

Audio recordings of focus groups are rarely anonymised, as participants may use their own names to identify themselves and others, and talk about places and neighbourhoods in a revealing way. This often means that researchers concerned with the storage of data may commit to erasing the audio file of the group discussion immediately after transcription, but this may be inadvisable. Focus groups are difficult to transcribe accurately, and even after an aural check, researchers may wish to go back to

the recording numerous times to check exactly what was said. In addition, the non-language communication of laughter, grunts, gasps, murmurs of assent or encouragement may not be 'heard' during initial listening, but may prove crucial to understanding the interaction and construction of the data. If researchers intend to record the discussion, then it is important to ensure that all participants explicitly give permission to be audio recorded. Many researchers include a statement in the informed consent form for participants to read and initial or check, documenting their awareness and agreement.

Organising and Delivering a Focus Group

Understanding how data are generated in discussion leads to reflections on the way in which the setting of a discussion may impact the nature and quality of the data produced. Ideally, the space should include a circle of comfortable chairs placed around a low table; the moderator and observer should sit within the circle, and not distance themselves, or make their position particularly prominent. Notices on door can prevent interruptions, although latecomers to the group should be welcomed (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

Although it is possible to keep a group of people talking for around an hour without providing refreshments and in some venues it may seem tricky to manage cups, crumbs and plates, refreshments are generally provided whenever possible. The provision of food and drink not only ensures that people can focus on the discussion rather than on being hungry or thirsty, but it also is a tangible way for researchers to express their appreciation to the participants for their participation. Furthermore, the act of offering food and drinks means participants often sit and chat before the start of the group, which helps to create a comfortable atmosphere that may assist participants to gain confidence and feel relaxed.

Informed Consent

Institutional ethical review is a requirement for all properly conducted research to ensure that the research properly follows best practices, including informed consent. Paper copies of written information and consent sheets have become standard for research. However, there is widespread evidence that many adults and young people have difficulty reading and understanding them. Sometimes the issue is as simple as someone not having their reading glasses with them, but issues of literacy should also be considered. Regardless of whether or not potential participants were given copies of the information and consent forms in advance, and even if they are provided with copies on the day and given time to read them, further measures are needed to ensure that potential participants understand what the study is about and what will happen if they take part. For example, one or more members of the research team can talk individually with participants to run through the information and ensure they can ask questions; alternatively, the moderator can start the session with a verbal summary of the main ethical considerations, and invite questions, accepting that some people may decide to leave at this point. Only after potential participants have been informed and given an opportunity to ask questions should they be invited to sign the consent form. Audio recording equipment should not be activated until all participants have consented to its use, and researchers need to inform the participants at what point in the discussion the audio recording starts and finishes.

Gifts, Tokens, and Incentives

It is often appropriate in research to offer participants additional money or gifts for participating. If travel is involved, or known costs incurred (e.g. arrangements for child care), then participants are typically reimbursed for these costs. There are ethical concerns that any additional gifts or tokens should not be such that they offer an undue incentive to take part to any person, who may otherwise have been unwilling. Therefore, the local context and acceptability of particular amounts of

money, or the nature of the gift, need careful consideration. Vouchers to stores imbued with cultural value may be acceptable, as long as researchers confirm that a particular store is accessible by all their participants and that items are available for the value of the voucher.

Funders of research may also have caveats about what they are willing to fund in terms of gifts or tokens; for example, health care funders are unlikely to approve of participants being given vouchers for fast food or supermarkets where alcohol or cigarettes could be purchased with the voucher. Although cash is generally acceptable to participants, there are concerns about giving cash to people under 18 years of age or people who are known to be engaged in highly risky lifestyle behaviours, such as people with a known alcohol or drug dependency.

Returning to the questions of whether any gift or payment represents an ‘incentive’ also relates to when and how it is given. There are concerns that if vouchers or payments are given out as people enter the room, alongside copies of the information and consent forms, they may not subsequently participate; therefore, some researchers argue that it is better to give out vouchers at the end of the session. Practically, it is difficult to administer if someone leaves the group early, particularly if they need to sign to acknowledge they have received it. Therefore giving out vouchers or payments as people arrive represents good ethical practice, as it also goes some way to establish trust. While this raises the possibility that people may feel pressured to participate since they have already accepted the token, it can be argued that they could always return it if they wanted to. Administratively it makes sense too: if people have to sign to acknowledge receipt of the voucher and are already involved in signing the consent form, then the administration of the project is complete at this early stage and the stage is now set for the group to take place.

Introductions and Ground Rules

The initial task for the moderator is to bring the group together to start the discussion. While some people may have already introduced themselves to one another, many moderators begin with introductions of everyone in the room. Moderators (and other members of the research team if present) may choose to introduce themselves in different ways, either by their first name, the organisation they work for and their role in the group, or perhaps by emphasising a particular job title or role they have to legitimise their presence and reassure participants on their professional standing. However researchers chose to do this, it can be advantageous for them to be reflective of the purpose of the type of introduction and consider its likely effect. So while emphasising professional standing may be received positively in one instance, it may be perceived as alienating and distancing in others, so honorifics and titles may need to be omitted or qualified. Researchers may also disclose personal information, particularly if they would like their participants to respond in kind. So if the focus group is to discuss housing pressures, the researcher could indicate that they live in a flat that they rent from a private landlord, omitting any details that could identify exactly where they live.

In groups, people tend to mirror one another, and so the second speaker may well structure response around that of the previous speaker. Therefore, if the researcher states their name and nothing more, then the second speaker may well do the same. So the researcher either needs to compose a short appropriate introduction or give people a clear indication of how they should introduce themselves, such as their name, where they live, whether they have children and whether they are working and/or the name of the job they do. Some researchers ask people to think of an alias that they want to be called in the group, and so avoid the need for participants to disclose their names to the group and to any subsequent readers of the transcript. This can be an effective ice-breaking activity as the names tend to be bizarre and have a story behind them, which the moderator could ask people to tell. If the moderator can get people to talk, to hear the sound of their own voices, and perhaps even to laugh and respond to

another participant, then they are helping to facilitate a relaxed and supportive atmosphere that is conducive for participatory discussion.

Ground rules should also be established to ensure that the discussion flows and to anticipate any issues (Morgan, 1998). While moderators can simply state what they think the ground rules should be, a more participatory and engaged method is to invite people to develop their own ground rules and then the moderator can add more if particular items need to be covered. Participants often raise the issue of respecting what other people say and so implicitly acknowledge that the tone of the discussion should not be defensive or aggressive. Participants may suggest ‘no swearing’, or that everyone turn off their mobile phones or set them to vibrate. If the issues of confidentiality and disclosure are not raised, then the moderator may suggest that people maintain confidentiality, and remind participants that they should not say anything in the group that they would be unhappy to have repeated outside the room. Other ground rules include asking people not to talk over one another and not to have conversations with people while others are talking.

TroubleShooting in Focus Groups

In the sometimes rapid exchange of speech that is characteristic of a successful and lively group discussion, situations can escalate rapidly, so moderators need to consider in advance how they might handle any challenging situation that may arise (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Preparation is essential to enable the moderator to address challenges quickly and effectively and to diffuse any tension. Given the uniqueness of any one study, the researcher alone or as part of a team, needs to consider issues that are likely to arise in a particular group, when discussing a particular topic, or in a particular place. The following subsections do not represent an exhaustive list of possible situations, but those that

commonly occur.

Silences and Gaps

It is common to have one or more people attend a group and not speak, or hardly speak, for the duration of the discussion. There may be a number of reasons why they may be unwilling to participate fully, including shyness or a natural tendency to listen and agree with others in a group situation rather than advance their own opinions. Silence or a minimal contribution, such as nodding or assenting, can also occur if participants find they know people in the group and do not want to disrupt the situation, or conversely if they find themselves in a room full of strangers and feel uncomfortable. However, the moderator does try to engage everyone in the discussion as much as possible to ensure multiple voices are heard and issues discussed, using indirect tactics such as nods and smiles of encouragement or direct tactics, such as asking them pointedly what they think about the topic of discussion. The latter is generally well received, and often a contribution will be made if directly elicited, so many researchers take the time to devise gentle prompts, such as, ‘Did you agree with that [name]?’ or, ‘Do you have anything to add to what [name(s)] have just said?’. However if one or more direct attempts fails to elicit a contribution from participants, there is very little a researcher can do and those participants’ views and opinions will not form part of the findings.

Dominance, Disagreements, and Interruptions

Conversely, other participants may dominate or talk too much. These two issues are not necessarily linked, as some participants are more confident and engaged than others and tend to lead the discussion without any particular issues. However, dominance can evidence itself through aggressive or overly assertive language or an abrupt dismissal of other views either verbally or non-

verbally (e.g., through snorts, gestures, unsympathetic laughter). Other participants may be understandably intimidated, constrained, or angered by such behaviour, and will look to the moderator to respond. It may be difficult to respond to a single incident as the effect tends to be cumulative. It is a fine line to draw between encouraging and supporting enthusiastic contributors and acknowledging that others need to be able to join in, otherwise only one voice will be heard. Therefore, moderators need to ensure that they detect dominant behaviour and intervene early to introduce other speakers or another topic.

Managing People Arriving Late or Leaving Early

One of the challenges of focus group organisation is to get all the participants in the room at the same time. Even in schools, hospitals or prisons, where people's whereabouts may be reasonably predicted and accounted for, people may arrive after the focus group has started. It is possible for someone to simply join the group, but unless they have read the information sheet and signed the consent form prior to this, within an ethical framework they should not be permitted to do so. If an observer or another member of the research team is present, they can discreetly deal with consent, but otherwise the moderator suspends the group discussion and consents the newcomer. It is also possible for people to join at quite a late stage, but there is a point at which it would be unlikely that they would make a substantial contribution to the topics, so the moderator can refuse participation after a reasonable timeframe.

Responding to People Who Become Distressed

There are no rules for managing distress, as instances are unique, but responding to particular incidents can be very disruptive for group participants, so strategies for addressing need to be in place

(Barbour, 2012). The moderator's initial response is to pause the audio recording immediately and acknowledge the distress. If the person indicates that they are happy for the group to continue, then the group should continue, even if the person is still crying or appears distressed. A strong emotional reaction and even tears are not uncommon in research situations, so if people feel they can still participate, they should be supported to do so. If, however, they indicate that they are unhappy and request time to compose themselves, then the group should be suspended. If a distressed person does not feel that they can continue, and an observer is present, the observer can be briefed how to help the distressed person so that the moderator can continue the group discussion. At an absolute minimum, the observer (or moderator if no one else is present) may simply help the distressed person gather their belongings and leave, but in general, participants should not leave a venue until they feel composed and ready to leave. They should be allowed to sit somewhere quiet and use a restroom to recover themselves before rejoining the group or leaving.

For some research projects distress can be anticipated, such as a project exploring the lives of people who have survived a particular trauma and/or been recently bereaved. However, distress can occur at any time, even if the topic of discussion is apparently benign. Therefore, researchers should be prepared to deal with participants in distress, by carrying tissues, locating in advance a quiet space in a building where people can recover their composure, and identifying a contact who may be present in the building and capable of taking over the role of caring for them. Leaving time for all participants to debrief at the end of the session is also good practice—researchers can encourage them to stay and talk and advise how they can seek further support.

Preparing and Analysing Data

If the audio recordings of the discussions are successful, then many researchers chose to have their data transcribed and use the resulting transcripts as basis for their analysis. The transcription of

focus group data is complicated and time consuming because not only are there multiple voices, but people may not finish their sentences, may hurry to contribute to the discussion, may interrupt, and may talk over one another. Rather than being seen as a limitation of the method (or the moderator), this can be considered a strength of the focus group method—evidence that the participants feel engaged and empowered to speak and respond at length to all questions. Such ‘unruly’ groups are to be facilitated and, to an extent, encouraged. Because focus groups can include laughter and other verbal cues (e.g., ‘Mms’ of agreement, gasps of astonishment, indrawn breaths to signify concern), transcribers need to decide in advance what they will include and what they will omit, and how they will indicate these verbalisations in the transcription. Indications of consensus are typically included. For example, if the majority of participants seem to laugh, the recording of this as [general laughter] (or [someone laughs] if the person can’t be identified) should be sufficient.

Unless there are few participants, a video recording of the group, or a small group with very distinct voices, transcribers may struggle to identify individual voices throughout the transcript. It is therefore conventional for the transcriber to simply identify individual voices as far as possible within the series of interactions. , As voices may not always be distinct and identifiable, attempts to represent an ‘individual’s views’ from focus group data are impractical and potentially misleading if a comment is wrongly attributed.

If the moderator or observer transcribes the data themselves, they can use their notes (i.e., the observer’s contemporaneous notes or the moderator’s later notes) to annotate the transcript. These additional data are crucial to aid interpretation and to understand interaction. If a person is speaking, but the observer notes that others immediately sat back in their chairs, folded their arms, or generally indicated disagreement or discomfort with what is said (and this interpretation is further evidence by the subsequent discussion), then this can be noted in the transcript. Alternatively, if people were

leaning forward, talking over one another, perhaps smiling, or even if the room was completely still when a participant recounted a particularly difficult experience, then this should be noted on the transcript. Such notes enable a richer reading and interpretation of the data. If transcripts are prepared by a professional transcriber, then these additional notes can be added when the moderator or the observer completes the aural checks of the transcripts.

The principles of analysing focus group data broadly follows the principles of thematic analysis, and requires the development of an interpretative coding framework that captures the expressed thoughts, ideas and experiences of participants in a way that can be combined into themes that meaningfully inform the research field. Initial themes and codes are identified after reading and re-reading the transcripts of the audio data. Generally, the researcher allocates codes by considering the written data word by word, line by line, and later combines these codes into themes. However, it is not necessary to transcribe recordings, particularly if time and money are an issue. Repeatedly listening to all of the recordings, making notes and then transcribing particular sections of interest or quotations is a perfectly acceptable way of approaching data analysis (Barbour, 2012). When discussions are not audio recorded, the researchers assemble all of their notes (and those of the observer if present) and develop their coding framework based on these data, following the same principles of coding. However, in such cases, researchers take additional steps to ensure that they are familiar with all the material before homing into particular areas of the discussion that seem to be meaningful. There is a tendency for some researchers, particularly inexperienced researchers, to remember and record, and therefore privilege, areas of data that confirm their existing thinking. However, any analytical approach needs to consider the views of all participants on all of the topics.

Regardless of whether or not the researcher is working from transcripts, notes, and/or audio recordings, the development and application of codes should be carefully considered. Researchers will apply existing codes, perhaps based on a priori ideas underpinning the research and/or as part of the

funding of the project. Along the way, though, researchers will also consider allocating codes that are derived from the data generated by the research (i.e. in vivo codes). It is these in vivo codes that may represent additional contributions to knowledge in the research field (Barbour, 2012). As codes are developed over the total coding process and as the analysis develops, codes will be refined, combined, separated, and discarded, and will only be finalised once the coding has been completed. Throughout the analysis, the coding framework remains flexible and contingent on the data.

Depending on the research design, researchers may decide to code groups of transcripts by participant characteristics or code the transcripts of a single group and then match common themes across groups (Barbour, 2012). At later stages, researchers can then look at similarities and differences among groups and pick up new lines of inquiry. However, analysts need to also consider developing codes that capture how particular ideas and concepts were discussed through the interaction of the participants (Morgan, 2010). Were ideas accepted uncritically or were they qualified and contested by participants? Did people immediately take a concept or idea and apply it to their own lives, suggesting a deeper connection, or was there simply general assent that could indicate acceptance, but not real engagement? This is where the audio recordings are useful, as a careful listening of tone, pace, and the non-verbal cues can aid interpretation.

Presenting the Data

As scholars have often commented that given the importance of interaction in focus groups (Kitzinger, 1994; Morgan, 2010; Munday, 2006), it is surprising that many published studies include single extracts from group discussions as though from an individual narrative, essentially ignoring the issue of interaction, that is, how any focus group data are co-produced by all participants. Therefore,

focus group data is often presented as embedded interactions in context, with relevant data from a series of speakers included and the speakers indicated sequentially. The question from either the moderator or a participant that prompted the discussion is included to show the extent to which participants may have simply responded to a cue or to which the ideas expressed are the participants' own response to a broader question.

When presenting the themes developed from the coding, it is important that the interaction remains at the center of analysis. While what was said remains of interest, of equal importance is an analysis of how topics were discussed and how ideas, views, and opinions were expressed. In line with the principles of interpretative research, the data should be neither overstated or understated, so it is not about the number of times an issue was mentioned in a group discussion that gives it salience, but the significance it may have had for one or more of the participants (Hollander, 2004). As mentioned earlier, consensus can be illusory in focus groups and a product of the method, so agreement is not necessarily indicative of shared opinions (Sim, 1998).

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