

## Introduction to Focus Groups

Prof. Edwin van Teijlingen

[vanteijlingen@bournemouth.ac.uk](mailto:vanteijlingen@bournemouth.ac.uk)

# Outline Focus Group Research

- Its origin
- Underlying philosophy
- Why and when (not) to use it?
- Some practical issues / examples
- Strength & weaknesses
- Its place within qualitative methods

# Focus group research in family planning and reproductive health care

Edwin van Teijlingen, Emma Pitchforth

### Introduction

This paper discusses how to conduct focus groups in family planning and reproductive research and follows a four-part series outlining the general principles of qualitative research.<sup>1-4</sup> Originating in market research and through development as a more general social science research method, focus groups now have wide application in many areas of research including health and health care.<sup>5</sup> Focus groups are often regarded as a quick and convenient way to collect data from several people simultaneously,<sup>6</sup> but this is an oversimplification. Our paper considers the reasons for choosing to use focus groups and the strengths and weaknesses of the focus group method. Moreover, it highlights some of the practical issues in planning and conducting focus groups, as well as particular considerations in the analysis and presentation of focus group data.

### Use of focus groups

Qualitative methods have a wide range of possible use in family planning and reproductive health care research and focus groups in particular offer great flexibility.<sup>1,7</sup> Focus groups can stand on their own as a research method or can

### Box 1: Strengths and weaknesses of the focus groups method

#### Strengths

- Nobody has to speak on every issue
- Responses are prompted by group members
- Exposes participants to a range of opinions
- Deliberation in group discussion (i.e. the more extreme first answers may be moderated)
- Cost-effective compared to one-to-one interviews
- Semi-structured research environment
- Opportunity for follow-up and probing by facilitator and group
- Helps develop theory

#### Weaknesses

- Expensive
- Getting participants together/organising meeting is time consuming
- Can be dominated by group members with strong personality, opinion or just 'loud' voice
- Needs a skilled facilitator
- Compared to conducting interviews there is less time for each individual to express ideas
- Risk of ending up with conformity: minority views might not be expressed, or not be presented as strongly, as they might be in an interview

source of data and this distinguishes it from other group

Focus group concept dates back to World War II. Sociologists investigated how military propaganda films were being received by audiences. They learnt that, with proper prodding, people can identify the exact reason certain scenes, lines, or phrases make them think or act in a certain way.

F. Luntz (1994) <http://www.pollingreport.com/focus.htm>

# Origins in marketing

- Focus groups are often regarded as a quick and convenient way to collect data from several people simultaneously.

(Kitzinger J. Introducing focus groups, *BMJ* 1995; **311**: 299-302).

- BUT this is oversimplification!

# Origins in Marketing

- Focus groups used to test new products on potential buyers/users, or try ‘new’ policies on electorate, etc.
- Would you buy a new pen?

# Underlying philosophy I

- Focus group relies on group discussion.
- Allows FG participants to disagree or agree with each other.
- Provide insight into how group thinks, about range of views/ideas, and inconsistencies that exist in a particular community in terms of beliefs, experiences and practices.

## Underlying philosophy II

- People formulate ideas in reaction to others in group, not just the researcher.
- The group makes FG discussion different from one-to-one interviews with people, i.e. there is a synergetic effect.
- Not just economies of scale, i.e. interviewing several people at the same time 'for the price of one'.



# When to use Focus groups

- Focusing on the ‘why’ question.
- Preparing for quantitative studies
- In parallel with quantitative studies:
  - explain / examine in-depth meaning findings of quantitative studies.
  - as part of triangulation.

## Example Focus Group research

Women described in a study using focus groups the conflicts they experienced in trying to put healthy food on the table, but also ensuring that they produced a diet that was eaten by the rest of the family.

Mackie, LJ, Wood, RC & Gregory S. (1993) Women defining health: food, diet & body image. *Health Educ Res* 8(1) 35-41.

# When Focus Groups

Macnaghten and Myers suggested:

“focus groups work best for topics people could talk about to each other in their everyday lives-but don't.”

**Macnaghten P, Myers G. Focus groups, In: Seale C, Giampietri G, Jaber F, Silverman D. (Eds) Qualitative Research Practice – Sage: London, p.65.**

# When to use it I

## Searching for meaning

- Quality rather than quantity
- Explorative studies of 'new' topics
- How do midwives, health visitors, etc. learn about 'new' dietary guidelines?

## When to use it II

**In preparation for quantitative studies, find:**

- right/best questions to ask;
- best order to ask questions;
- options to add to multiple choice questions;
- etc.

## When to use it III

### **Prepare quantitative studies / example**

- Focus groups to find issues /options /choices for Discrete Choice  
Experiment's questionnaire on rural maternity care. E.g. women's preferences for: location of maternity care, provider, time, etc.

**(Tucker, Farmer, Kiger, Ryan, *et al.*)**

## When to use it IV

### Interpret quantitative studies

- Help explain the statistical findings from a study with a large data set.
- Reasons why students report relatively low use of web-based health promotion interventions designed & aimed at them?

**(Douglas, Brindle *et al.*)**

# Triangulation I

- Triangulation may help validate findings.
- Originally this meant using three methods at the same time but it can be used to describe any study using more than one technique on the same population.

**Mason J. *Qualitative Researching (2nd edn)*. London: Sage, 2002**



## Triangulation II

- Use focus groups in conjunction with other (qualitative) methods.
- For example, use a questionnaire study on large sample of population, do interviews with sub-sample and focus groups with (other) sub-sample of the same population.

# Focus Group composition I

- **Small group of people (8-15) to discuss interactively under guidance of facilitator (pre-specified) issues or topics.**
- **Composed of six to nine participants, according to Iowa State University web site:**  
<http://www.extension.iastate.edu/communities/tools/assess/focus.html>

## Focus Group composition II

Select Focus Groups groups with:

- common factor (parents of pupil in year 7; attending antenatal classes in Southampton; etc.)
- But which is diverse within a group with regard to other characteristics that might affect opinions, views, experiences, such as mix of ages, genders, jobs, locality, prior knowledge).

Additionally, you should avoid:

- People of extremely different rank, socioeconomic status, antagonistic viewpoints.

## Loud and quiet ones I

One person should not be allowed to dominate discussion. Some have group members write their ideas down without consulting others before discussion starts to eliminate bias and bring out many different viewpoints.

## Loud and quiet ones II

Facilitator must create a relaxed, informal atmosphere where people feel free to express their opinions.

For example, ask: “What does the rest think about ..”

# Sampling qualitative methods

- Purposive / theoretical sampling
- Criterion / quota sampling
- Random sampling
- Convenience sampling
- Snowball sampling

# Focus group composition I

- People who know each other:  
friendship groups; work or class mates; same ward/club/street; etc.
- People don't know each other but are similar: mixture of first year, second & third students; pregnant women & new mothers in same group; etc.

## Focus group composition III

As with all qualitative research exact number of FGs may fluctuate.

You need at least one focus group for every sub-group want to analyse separately (e.g. male /female social workers, male /female nurses, etc.)

Preferably more than one focus group for each sub-group to avoid bias.



## Focus group composition II

People who are similar in same group and run various groups in same study to avoid major confrontation.

Different people together to have widest range of opinion to encourage debate.

# The start of a group

- Especially people who do not know each other well, have a quick introductions so that group members can begin to form a relationship with rest of group and with you.
- Also helps to make them feel at ease
- Help identify individuals on tape for transcribing.

## Sensitive topics I

Focus groups have been used with young people in sexual health studies.

(Wight 1994; Hyde *et al.* 2005; Roberts *et al.* 2005).

Focus groups promote self-disclosure through mutual support.

(Kitzinger 1995; Kreuger & Casey 2000).

## Sensitive topics II

A male researcher facilitated focus groups with young men and female researcher facilitated women groups.

Using single sex groups is common in sexual health research or interventions.

(e.g. Low *et al.* 2003; Roberts *et al.* 2005).

## Sensitive topics III

Perhaps present FG participants with:

“a brief questionnaire, or the opportunity to speak to the researcher privately, giving each one the opportunity to record private comments after the group session has been completed.”

Kitzinger, J. Qualitative Research: Introducing focus groups *Brit Med J* 1995; **311** : 299-302

# Vignettes

**Regularly used in qualitative research, the additional advantage for Focus Groups is that you can leave vignette on the table people can pass it round, pick it up, etc.**

# Example vignette 1

**How easy is it for  
you and your family to eat  
more vegetables & fruit?**

## Example vignette II

What is your reaction to this picture?





# Importance of facilitator I

- Facilitator must direct the discussion without being a part of it.
- Facilitator should be skilled and experienced in conducting such research.

**Nyamathi A, Shuler P. 'Focus Group Interview: a research technique for informed nursing practice', *J Adv Nurs* 1990;15: 1281-1288.**

## Importance of facilitator II

Although familiarity with the topic  
may be equally important in good  
focus group facilitator

**Peterson-Sweeney K. The use of focus groups in pediatric and adolescent research. *J Pediatr Health Care* 2005;19:104-110.**

## Importance of facilitator III

1. Facilitator should ask a series of open-ended questions from general to specific.
2. Facilitator should allow discussion to lead in new directions as long as it the focus group topic.

# Importance of facilitator IV

1. Facilitator's questions should not stop members from expressing their opinions, experiences, and suggestions.
2. Remind participants that we are interested in the range of views, and that we don't expect them to reach agreement (on the contrary).

# Observer / note taker I

- Someone to keep track of anything that may influence the analysis, e.g. specific group responses, any non-verbal messages;
- Assist moderator if necessary, point out questions that are 'missed' or suggest other sub-topics for discussion
- Observer should not be too obvious to group, but able to communicate with moderator.

## Observer / note taker II

- Note taker might write down every first two or three words a person expresses to help transcribing of the recording.
- Observer should not be a line manager/ person known to group.
- Student's supervisor or fellow researcher could act as observer.

## Prior to meeting

- Tell participants time and place, if possible remind them day before.
- Arrive early to ensure the place is ready.
- Arrange seating to encourage a group discussion (in a circle).
- Set up and test equipment

# Start Focus Group I

- Not all participants may arrive at same time (on time);
- Small talk is ideal at this point.
- Should few participants turn up, be prepared to start with as little as four. Remember participants will have given up their normal activities.



# Start Focus Group II

Open the FG session:

- Welcome & thank participants;
- Explain why participants were chosen;
- Stress session will be confidential;
- Ask permission for recording.

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# Start Focus Group III

## **Set "ground rules":**

- The group discussion around certain questions;
- Session lasts for around xx minutes / xx hours;
- For tape recording: “Please, only one person speaking at any one time (as much as possible)”.



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## Start Focus Group IV

- FG participants introduce themselves for tape (nor necessarily by name).
- Ask for any questions.
- Put participants at ease with an easy question on something they have in common. For example: "As I've explained, I am interested how people decide whether to ask for the GP or the practice nurse at their local surgery?"

## Finishing Focus Group

- Final few minutes of FG should be used for any extra questions raised during session. Observer could raise question or check notes are correct.
- After formally closing the discussion thank people for participating and ask for informal feedback (keep listening!).

## Location:

- Where: clinic, interviewee's home, or neutral ground (e.g. community centre, cafe or university);
- Safety of interviewer
- Privacy of interviewee / noise / etc.
- Create relaxed atmosphere in comfortable setting to develop trust.

## Recording

- Audio or video or by hand
- Use good microphone.
- Test equipment before interview; bring spare batteries for recorder and microphone and plenty of cassettes/discs.



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# Recording not always possible

Although it has effectively become customary that qualitative interviews and focus groups are audio recorded for research purposes (Oliver, 2003), two prison governors did not permit recording equipment in their establishments due to security concerns. This is not uncommon in prison-based research and has been noted elsewhere (Noaks and Wincup, 2004; Schlosser, 2008). Where audio recording was prohibited during interviews, elements raised by participants were jotted down in the form of key words and phrases and written up in more detail after the interview had finished.

Woodall, J. (2012) Social and environmental factors influencing in-prison drug use, *Health Education*, 112(1): 31-46.

## Transcribing I

- word-for-word with pauses and hesitations (i.e. verbatim),
- text only (without pauses, etc)
- or key points only (comprehensive language for transcription needs to be agreed).



## Transcribing II

- one-hour tape usually takes about four hours, or longer if slow typist.
- as soon as possible to recall exact details.
- If transcribed by third person, consider issues of confidentiality and check transcript—typist unfamiliar with topic may hear words differently!

# Transcribing Focus Groups

Transcription of focus group interviews normally takes longer than that of one-to-one interviews. It generally takes five to six hours per hour of recording. Especially when people start speaking before others have finished, or several talk at same time.

# Focus group identifiers

- **Identify individual participants in group.**
- **Identify focus group not the individual.**

Generally: “When devising your identifier always ensure an appropriate balance between giving the reader as much information as possible about the participants and their context, and maintaining anonymity.” **(Pitchforth *et al.* 2005).**

- N-Vivo; Ethnograph; Nu\*dist; Atlas, ...
- Computer-based programmes don't analyse, certainly don't do thinking for you!
- “software packages can help with analysis but should not be viewed as short cuts to rigorous and systematic analysis”  
(**Pope *et al.* *BMJ* 2000;320:114-16**)

# Mixed methods (qualitative)

= In-depth Interviews

The vast majority of the female IDI and FGD participants stated that the husband's primary role during delivery was to bring them to a hospital or a health facility. Approximately half of the couples explained that they prefer to have



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Barriers to and attitudes towards promoting husbands' involvement in maternal health in Katmandu, Nepal

Britta C. Mullany\*

*Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Baltimore, MD 21205, USA*

- You can only guarantee anonymity and confidentiality as a researcher, i.e. for your own part of the study.
- Ask people to be sensible in what they say (i.e. during the FG as it may go elsewhere) and what they tell others after FG group. The latter is important if people know or are likely to meet each other again.

# FG in Low-Income Countries I

Online Access available from: <http://www.nphss.org.np/jhprospect>

View Point

## Health Prospect Journal of Public Health

Open  Access

### Doing Focus Groups in the Health Field: Some Lessons from Nepal

van Teijlingen E<sup>1</sup>, Simkhada P<sup>2</sup>, Stephens J<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Padam Simkhada: Senior Lecturer, SchARR, University of Sheffield, UK; Visiting Professor, MMIHS, Nepal

<sup>3</sup>Jane Stephens: Director, Green Tara Trust, UK

#### Summary

This paper addresses two research issues, one related to the running of focus groups and one more generally, on the link between researchers and local health officials. The objective of this article is to alert potential focus group researchers of some of the challenges related to conducting focus groups in rural areas. Our view-point article highlights the key issues of our experience in conducting focus groups in Nepal. Furthermore, it reflects on likely reasons why the challenges occurred and, where possible, offers some solutions to improve the running of focus groups.

#### Introduction

Most health, public health and medical researches in Nepal are either quantitative or clinical. A review of the published health literature found that 78% of papers were based on quantitative research. (1) Unsurprisingly, Nepal, like many developing countries, lacks capacity in qualitative research. This paper centres on one particular qualitative method namely, focus group research. Widely used

ise parallel groups for other community groups e.g. men, mother in laws, teenage girls at the same time, but usually there will still be people wanting to listen in excepts these peoples. Another option we tried was to call the focus groups workshops, since running workshops suggest 'serious' learning and this gives local people in the group a legitimate reason to shush bystanders away.

# FG in Low-Income Countries II

- How do you run FGs when privacy /confidentiality are not high priorities on poor people's agendas?
- How to keep outsiders away in open-air FGs?
- How do you manage community expectations?

## Managing Expectation

Often unrealistic expectations arise between researchers and programme implementers from industrialised countries and colleagues, policy-makers, communities and/or research participants in developing countries. In our experience, local collaborators have often assumed that firstly, we have access to large sums of money and secondly, that money we do have can be used as per the community wishes. So, in a rural group discussing, the needs and focus of the community can rapidly move to people's perceived need for physical items or cash that are needed to be provided from outside sources, rather



## Focus group strengths I

- Not everybody has to speak on every issue;
- Responses prompted by group members in their own words;
- Exposes participant to a range of opinions;
- Greater insight as to why certain opinions are popular or not so widely held;
- Can help with questionnaire design.

## Focus group strengths II

Deliberation/ extreme first answers may be moderated;

Cost effective compared to one-to-one interviews;

Semi-structured research environment;

Opportunity for follow-up/probing facilitator & group;

Can be used with ‘illiterate’ groups/ children.

Help develop theory.

# Focus group weaknesses

Expensive;

Getting people together time consuming;  
strong personality, opinion, ‘loud’ voices;

Needs a skilled facilitator;

Less time for each to express ideas;

Conformity: minority views might not be  
expressed or not strongly.

# Questions?

Prof. Edwin van Teijlingen

[vanteijlingen@bournemouth.ac.uk](mailto:vanteijlingen@bournemouth.ac.uk)