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# Using focus groups to evaluate health promotion interventions

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## Keywords

Focus groups, Qualitative methods, Health, Promotion

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## Abstract

Introduces focus group methodology to health professionals interested in the possibility of using the method to evaluate health promotion interventions. A working definition and brief history of the method is provided, followed by a summary of possible uses in the three types of evaluation: formative; process; and outcome. It suggests that professionals deciding if and when to use focus groups should consider the aim of their evaluation, the research participants who will be involved in the evaluation and the resources available. Practical issues such as preparing an appropriate topic guide, recruiting participants, facilitating the discussion, analysis and report writing are discussed.

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## Introduction

Health professionals planning a programme evaluation are faced with a bewildering choice of methodological tools. There has been growing interest in the use of qualitative methods in conducting evaluations (Patton, 1990; Macdonald, 1996), with many evaluation practitioners now attempting to find ways to integrate both qualitative and quantitative methods (Steckler *et al.*, 1992; Tones and Tilford, 1994; Coombes, 2000). On the wave of this recent trend, the focus group has been gaining popularity as an evaluation tool (Branigan and Mitchell, 2000). The method is not always applied rigorously or appropriately however. This paper seeks to provide the health professional reader with an understanding of the focus group method, an appreciation of its appropriateness as an evaluation tool and an introduction to the practical issues to be considered before using focus groups in evaluation. Further practical guidance can be found in Krueger (1994) and an exploration of the political, theoretical and practical issues is provided by Barbour and Kitzinger (1999).

## What is a focus group?

Many group activities and discussions are wrongly labelled focus groups. Sometimes this is a deliberate attempt to piggyback on the reputation of true focus groups. At other times, it is a straightforward ignorance of the method. An essential feature of the focus group is the use of interaction between research participants to generate data. Participants are brought together to engage in a focused discussion around a specific topic or issue and the results are used to increase understanding of that particular topic. Ideally, participants focus on one another rather than the researcher (Kitzinger, 1994).

Morgan (1998) outlines several further key features of focus groups. First, focus groups are about research. Ongoing committees, therapy sessions and any other group session whose ultimate purpose is anything other than research, cannot be regarded as focus groups. Second, groups must be focused. This requires careful preparation, assembling the

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Received September 1999

Accepted in revised form June 2000

right participants and asking them thoroughly prepared questions using an appropriate moderating style. Groups which occur spontaneously and engage in a discussion which weaves and meanders in a directionless manner are not focus groups. Third, groups should involve discussion. This excludes question and answer sessions whereby the moderator puts a question to each participant in turn. Within these limits, however, the definition has fairly wide boundaries and many things are possible.

### **The development of focus groups**

Since the 1950s, academic development of this group interview technique within the social sciences has trailed behind the rapid popularisation of the focus group approach in commercial research. Up until 1980 the focus group method was used almost exclusively in marketing research, in which context it is today viewed as one of the most important consumer research techniques available and is used pervasively.

Family planning was the first public health domain to embrace the use of focus groups, to market contraceptives (Manoff, 1985). In this case it was the large pharmaceutical companies who were providing the materials, and they were already familiar with the marketing approach to promotion. Legitimisation of social marketing approaches, qualitative research and group interviews have been slow to diffuse more widely into the domain of public health, largely because of the traditional quantitative bias of biomedicine and epidemiology. In the past, researchers using focus groups struggled with limited practical guidance, lack of clarity regarding appropriate uses, and inconsistent viewpoints on the strengths and weaknesses of these methods in health promotion (Coreil, 1995). The more recent history of focus groups in the social sciences has been one of both considerable borrowing and innovation.

### **The role of focus groups in evaluation in health promotion**

Focus groups can play an evaluative role in the three stages of a health promotion intervention, namely planning and design, implementation, and observation of the

results. Table I shows examples of the use of focus groups at each stage. This flexible range of uses for focus groups in health promotion contrasts markedly with the marketing applications of focus groups in which they have historically served as a preliminary step to be followed by quantitative research (McQuarrie, 1996).

At each intervention stage, there are three broad categories of focus group use. First, focus groups can be used as a self-contained or “stand-alone” evaluation method, providing the principal source of data. Second, they can be used to support or refine a primary method, such as a survey: for instance they could be used to refine question wording in a questionnaire by exploring respondent understanding and interpretation of questions. Third, they can be used in multi-method studies that combine two or more data gathering means. Methodological triangulation (using two or more methods to test the same hypothesis) can be used to enhance the reliability and validity of the data (Denzin, 1989).

### **Deciding if and when to use focus groups to evaluate**

The focus group method as an evaluation tool has a number of strengths and constraints, and serves as a strong methodological tool only to the extent that it is appropriately used, and rigorously implemented. The programme evaluator needs to consider the project research aims and available resources, and tie these in with the strengths and weaknesses of the method. The section below outlines several questions which must be considered before embarking on focus group research.

#### **What type of evaluation is it, and what are its aims?**

The first and most basic step is to think about the type of evaluation being undertaken, whether formative, process or outcome, and their respective objectives and aims.

Focus groups can answer certain types of questions better than others. They are particularly good at exploring concepts, generating ideas, eliciting opinions and measuring the degree of consensus on a topic. This is because group interaction is used to generate data. Group members stimulate each other to think and express opinions, which in

**Table I** Uses of focus groups at different programme stages

Programme stage	Focus groups can be used to:
<b>Planning and design</b> (formative evaluation)	Develop ideas and themes for use in mass-media productions Evaluate early drafts (concept/story stages) of mass-media campaigns Develop questions for use in an evaluation questionnaire or monitoring form Develop general ideas on the design of programmes and interventions Explore the views of prospective participants regarding a proposed intervention
<b>Implementation</b> (process evaluation)	Develop or refine specific procedures for components of an intervention Measure acceptability of a programme among the target group Explore the reasons for participation (or non-participation) in a programme Identify obstacles to effective implementation as viewed by those carrying out the programme Explore the roles of the programme implementers and the dynamics between them
<b>Results</b> (outcome evaluation)	Explore changes in attitudes following an intervention Evaluate the perceived effectiveness of an intervention and suggestions for improvement, by those participating in a programme Discuss intended behaviour changes among the recipients

turn stimulates more thought. The focus group canvasses a range of views and opinions without necessarily presenting a consensus view. Group interaction can provide valuable insights and ideas, and raise questions not previously considered by programme organisers or evaluators. Focus groups are said to engender more critical comments than individual interviews (Watts and Ebbutt, 1987). They are therefore very useful in formative evaluation.

Focus groups are also useful in process evaluations. They are also good at exploring complex behaviours and motivations, such as why people decide to attend a quit smoking session. Such decisions are often made at a sub-conscious level and are not subjected to self-analysis. Hearing other people express their thoughts and feelings on a topic can help an individual organise and make explicit their own views. They are useful for process evaluations which have, for example, the aim of identifying organisational barriers to successful implementation or ascertaining participants' views of a programme (Stewart, 2000). They can be an ideal choice in the evaluation of community development projects, which rely on participants to set the agenda and aim to be responsive to changing and ongoing needs. For example, Brown *et al.* (1997) used focus groups to explore student perceptions of the school environment, programme effectiveness and suggestions for programme improvement, as part of a process evaluation of a condom availability programme in Seattle schools. Used in this

context, the focus group can be an empowering approach to evaluation, enabling participants to "own" the evaluation process to some degree.

However, they are not very useful for outcome evaluation. The gathering of statistical data, such as how many people attended a training workshop or how many teenagers stopped smoking, is clearly not an appropriate use of the method. The focus group sample is usually small and the results not generalisable. These types of data are more efficiently and reliably gathered using quantitative methods such as surveys. Similarly, focus groups are not the best forum for measuring increases in knowledge. They may also be less effective in exploring very personal experiences, although this depends to an extent on the skill of the moderator in encouraging appropriate self-disclosure.

Where different types of data are sought within the same evaluation, the option is to use a multi-method approach. For instance, a process evaluation of an HIV/AIDS community-based behavioural change intervention in Uganda, recently undertaken by the first author, included focus groups as part of a mix of quantitative and qualitative techniques. The evaluation methodology included interviews with project field staff to explore implementation issues and a questionnaire survey among the community to measure the awareness and uptake of the intervention activities, namely drama and video shows, peer education, and leaflets. Focus groups with members of drama/video

show audiences were used to explore understanding of the HIV/AIDS prevention messages promoted by the plays.

### **Who are the research participants?**

Having established the research question, the next step is to identify the research participants. Focus groups can be used with a diverse range of groups. Kitzinger (1990) successfully undertook focus group research with pre-existing groups such as office cleaners, young male prostitutes and members of a retirement club, to evaluate the impact of AIDS media messages.

Characteristics of the target group which need to be carefully considered include the following:

- Are they a homogeneous (members very alike) or heterogeneous (mixed) group?
- Are they a “naturally occurring” group or will they need to be brought together specifically for the discussion?
- Are they “experts” or lay people as far as the topic is concerned?
- Are there any pre-existing social hierarchies within the group?
- Will they be easy or difficult to recruit?

The most basic requirement for a focus group discussion is that the topic is relevant to participants. For instance, in a comparison of attendees and non-attendees at an antenatal nutrition class, the non-attendees would obviously have little to say in a focus group about the class, although they might have some helpful insights into the reasons for non-attendance.

Focus groups work well when participants feel a comfort and freedom to share their experiences and when participants feel that their suggestions and comments will be listened to and taken seriously. It is therefore worth considering whether some of the group members might be more “powerful” than others. Within established settings such as the workplace, existing hierarchies may cause problems because, during a group discussion, the views of subordinate individuals are likely to be stifled by the opinions of the dominant. The same principle applies when bringing together the providers and recipients of a programme within the same focus group. The recipients may feel unable to criticise the programme because they do not wish to sound ungrateful. Furthermore, within established settings, the focus group may stir

up pre-existing frustrations and antagonisms unrelated to the evaluation.

Where difficult group dynamics occur they can be regarded as data in themselves. Alternatively, separate groups may be convened for stakeholders with different perspectives and interests. Although more likely to engender free discussion, such groups cannot provide first-hand observation of the dynamics between different stakeholders which might impact on the implementation process. The choice will depend on a realistic assessment of staff hierarchies and dynamics, but also on the particular aims of the evaluation. It should also be borne in mind that extrovert individuals can dominate group discussions irrespective of their status.

Any intervention that claims to use a client-centred approach has a responsibility to take account of all opinions in an evaluation. However, the target group of a health promotion intervention may have difficulty articulating their views or have problems with language, if they are, for example, recent immigrants. Conducting groups with such people can be challenging but certainly not impossible. Given the right conditions, focus groups can often provide a “safe” environment for the expression of views which individuals might find difficult to articulate on their own in an interview, or on paper in a survey. A particular benefit of the focus group is that it does not discriminate against those who cannot read or write. It proved to be a particularly useful tool in the study, described above, in Uganda, where literacy levels among rural populations are very low (62 per cent according to the Statistics Department, Uganda, 1995).

The relationship between participants and evaluators must also be considered. It is important that the moderator is able to understand the culture and language of the participants. Ideally the moderator should be neutral and non-judgemental, and this should be obvious to participants. For many small-scale or tightly budgeted health promotion initiatives, in-house evaluation is the only feasible option. Sometimes this means that the individual or organisation implementing the programme is also responsible for evaluating it. Objectivity is more difficult to achieve where evaluators have a vested interest in the success of the programme. Bias can creep into the wording of questions,

moderator handling of negative views and selective attention to transcript quotes. But equally, bias can come from focus group members who either want to agree with the moderator (acquiescence bias) or want to be regarded in a positive light generally (desirability bias).

A moderator neutral to the outcome of the evaluation can also encounter difficulties with acquiescence bias or desirability bias. It may be difficult to convince participants that the moderator is independent of the intervention and that negative views are as valuable as positive ones. While undertaking a formative evaluation of a mass media campaign for Terrence Higgins Trust, the second author found that focus group participants tended to direct their suggestions and criticisms at him, despite prior assurances that he was impartial and separate from the campaign (Wellings *et al.*, 1999). Desirability bias can be a problem in any evaluation method and is not a good reason to avoid using focus groups since sensitivity to and awareness of the problem can do much to minimise the impact.

#### **What resources are available?**

Before embarking on any research project, the available resources must be considered. These considerations should include practical requirements such as the availability of a suitable moderator, availability of an appropriate venue and the time allowed for evaluation. The resources required depend on decisions made at the planning stage about, for example, the scope and purpose of the study, the method of participant recruitment and the level of detail required in the analysis.

Despite their apparent simplicity and accessibility as an evaluation tool, focus groups can be time-consuming, fairly expensive to run and require skill and expertise. The group discussion is the visible tip of the iceberg; the brief middle stage in a long process which begins with planning, preparation and recruitment and ends in analysis and the production of a detailed report. The recruitment of participants from outside a particular project, as in the formative evaluation of campaign materials, tends to be either expensive (if undertaken by a private recruitment firm) or time-consuming (if undertaken by the in-house evaluation team). Rigorous analysis requires time and expertise and relies on accurate recording of discussions. Accurate recording,

in turn, relies on superior recording equipment and acquired transcribing skills. That said, focus groups compare favourably with other qualitative methods in terms of time and cost; they are certainly less time consuming than participant observation and are typically faster and cheaper than individual interviews with an equivalent number of people.

#### **Practical considerations**

Having decided how to fit focus groups into the evaluation, there are a number of practical aspects to be considered:

- preparing a topic guide;
- recruiting participants for the group;
- facilitating the discussion;
- analysing the results;
- writing up a report.

There are several books and articles which provide practical guidance for conducting focus groups (e.g. Kitzinger, 1995; Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990; Krueger, 1994; Morgan, 1993). The following sections look briefly at some of the main concerns to be addressed.

#### **Preparing an appropriate topic guide**

Asking quality questions during a focus group requires a good deal of forethought. There has been much discussion about the exact nature and style of questions to be asked during groups, yet ultimately this depends on the nature of the group and the specific function of the research. In general, focus group questions should be well prepared, clear, open-ended and unbiased. Care should be taken to avoid leading or biased questions even though they may seem appealing and familiar in the social setting of a group discussion. Occasionally however, leading questions can be used to provoke a reaction.

Another important issue to consider is whether to employ the topic guide format or fully developed questions. The topic guide is a list of key words or phrases which serves as a reminder or cue to the moderator. The questioning route is a sequence of structured questions written in complete sentences. They both have associated strengths and weaknesses.

The questioning route initially takes longer to prepare but ensures that the specific

questions intended by the research project are covered. This method is useful in projects using different moderators for several groups since the potential for inter-group variation is limited. Subtle differences in the language used to ask questions can produce great variations in responses. The question route offers greater control over this variation thereby allowing more efficient analysis.

The topic guide is quicker to prepare and appears more spontaneous and natural to participants, whose colloquialisms can be incorporated into the question wording. This may be more appropriate when dealing with sensitive topics. The topic guide approach works most efficiently when the same moderator conducts all the groups. The moderator needs to be aware that small differences in question phrasing may affect the responses given.

In most cases it is essential for the moderator to have some background knowledge of the topic. This enables initial moderator input to be pitched at a suitable level for the topic under discussion and allows a degree of direction to be given, if necessary, during the session.

### **Recruiting participants for the groups**

The exact nature of the research to be undertaken will dictate the sample profile of participants to be recruited. In general, groups of between six and eight individuals are considered ideal. The sample may be random (for instance, every fourth pupil on the register, to evaluate a classroom-based sex education workshop) or purposive (participants who meet criteria relevant to the evaluation, such as peer educators in a peer-led sex education programme (Stephenson *et al.*, 1998)). The recruitment process can be done internally (by research staff involved with the project) or by an external recruitment agency. Again the choice depends on the aim and scope of the project and resources available. If a project involves a large number of groups, over a short period of time or a wide geographical area, the use of an external recruitment agency is perhaps a wise choice. This can be expensive, however, and gives the evaluator less control over the recruitment process. Recruitment by research staff is a cheaper option. This can be time consuming and stressful, however, especially if the respondent target group has the potential to be unreliable (as for example with

younger age groups) or the recruitment criteria are strict, making suitable participants difficult to locate.

Regardless of choice, it is advisable for the evaluators to have some input into the way that participants are selected. For instance, they could assist in designing a screening questionnaire. The questionnaire can use selection criteria (for instance age group, gender, or whether an individual has been exposed to an intervention) to ensure that participants are suitable for the specific focus group research project.

It is common to offer some sort of incentive to the participants, which again depends on the length and type of group recruited and funds available. Monetary incentives may reduce the bias towards only those interested in the topic agreeing to participate but may introduce a bias towards those more motivated by money! During the actual discussion, the provision of refreshments can do much to relax participants and create a more informal atmosphere.

### **Facilitating the group**

There have been a number of useful texts written for facilitators regarding the actual process of successfully running focus groups (e.g. Krueger, 1998). Two of the main practical considerations are whether to use an assistant moderator, and in what depth to record group information.

Many research groups are run by a moderator team. The principal moderator is concerned with facilitating the discussion, keeping conversation flowing and taking a few notes. The assistant moderator takes comprehensive notes and operates the recording equipment as well as dealing with environmental factors (such as noise distractions) and latecomers. A post-group debriefing session between the assistant and principal moderator is a useful way to initially summarise and compare perceptions of the group findings. An additional moderator increases both the total accumulation of information and the validity of the analysis, but also increases the running costs.

Note taking during the group may be very detailed, documenting non-verbal signs exhibited by group members or smaller pieces of conversations which begin and break off and may go unheard by the principal moderator. Less detailed notes might consist of a few key ideas or questions for future

groups. The level of detail required depends again on the function of the group, topic under discussion and time available for analysis.

Krueger (1994) refers to the many roles that a moderator can assume in conducting a group. Specific roles can be used to create an ambience that influences the ways in which participants respond to one another. Some examples of moderator roles are “the seeker of wisdom”, “the challenger” and the “devil’s advocate”. The seeker of wisdom is a delicate role whereby the moderator assumes that the participants have the knowledge and wisdom that is being sought and if the correct questions are asked, they will disclose it. The challenger is a more combative approach where the moderator asks the participants to explain or justify ideas or past actions. This role requires a good sense of timing and effective group management skills to avoid causing problems with the group dynamic such as polarisation or alienation. The “devil’s advocate” tries to put forward alternative perspectives and introduce novel questions to avoid “group think” (MacDougall and Baum, 1997). Moderators tend to develop their own style and preferred role and it is generally advisable to build on existing strengths and stay consistent with an approach that seems to work.

### Analysis of results

Analysing the large amount of textual data produced by focus groups can seem daunting, particularly for the novice researcher. Very simply, analysis usually involves the categorising and coding of data into themes. These themes may be predetermined by the research question, or may arise from the data (see Strauss and Corbin (1990) on “grounded theory”). In general, analysis needs to be systematic, verifiable, focused, conducted at an appropriate level of interpretation (neither too simplistic nor too detailed) and practical (useful for the evaluation). There are several good practical guides (Bryman and Burgess, 1994; Flick, 1998, among others).

Sometimes projects run out of time, leading to hurried analysis. At other times, the analysis of transcripts is delayed due to competing priorities. Both scenarios lead to a reduction in the quality of analysis and reliability of results. Analysis is improved by using feedback from other sources and close comparison between groups. If a series of

groups is to be conducted, continual feedback avoids the danger of becoming constrained by the topic guide and blinded by the initial emerging themes. It is important that researchers remain open to entertaining or incorporating alternative hypotheses.

### Report writing

The style of the report and the depth of analysis depend on the function and nature of the groups and project. When preparing the report the researcher should consider who will read it and what they will do with the results. Reports may be oral or written or both. They may consist of raw data, such as a list of answers from members of the group in response to moderator questions. A descriptive summary might be used to highlight views on a subject, which are then illustrated by a series of chosen quotes. The researcher may be required to build on the descriptive report by including an interpretative section on what the results might mean. The key point is to tailor the report to meet the needs of the intended reader and/or user.

### Conclusion

This paper has briefly outlined the main points which need to be considered before using focus groups to evaluate health promotion interventions. Focus groups can provide rich and valid data. They can contribute to an understanding of why an intervention has (or has not) worked and provide insights into motivations for participating in programmes and barriers to effective implementation. As with any evaluation tool, the focus group method is useful only to the extent that it is used appropriately and conducted rigorously.

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