



Focus Group Discussion in Qualitative Research

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ABSTRACT

Qualitative research is a generic term for investigative methodologies described as ethnographic, naturalistic, anthropological, field, or participant observer research. There are many method of collection of data in the qualitative research method amongst them FGD is one. Focus Group is a type of in-depth interview accomplished in a group, whose meetings present characteristics defined with respect to the proposal, size, composition, and interview procedures. This paper highlights about the different aspects of FGD

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Qualitative research is research understanding phenomenon, exploring issues and answering questions. It is a generic term for investigative methodologies described as ethnographic, naturalistic, anthropological, field, or participant observer research. It emphasizes the importance of looking at variables in the natural setting in which they are found. Interaction between variables is important. Detailed data is gathered through open ended questions that provide direct quotations. The interviewer is an integral part of the investigation (Jacob, 1988). This differs from quantitative

research which attempts to gather data by objective methods to provide information about relations, comparisons, and predictions and attempts to remove the investigator from the investigation (Smith, 1983).

What is a focus group discussion?

The origin of the *Focus Group* was in sociology. Now, *FG* is used intensely in the marketing field, and also, it has been growing in popularity in aother areas. In social science, Robert Merton published the first work using *Focus Group*. Paul Lazarsfeld and others later introduced this technique in marketing (Morgan, 1988). Focus Group is a type of in-depth interview accomplished in a group, whose meetings present characteristics defined with respect to the proposal, size, composition, and interview procedures. The focus or object of analysis is the interaction inside the group. The participants influence each other through their

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answers to the ideas and contributions during the discussion. The moderator stimulates discussion with comments or subjects. The fundamental data produced by this technique are the transcripts of the group discussions and the moderator's reflections and annotations. The general characteristics of the Focus Group are people's involvement, a series of meetings, the homogeneity of participants with respect to research interests, the generation of qualitative data, and discussion focused on a topic, which is determined by the purpose of the research.

A focus group discussion is a form of group interviewing in which a small group – usually 10 to 12 people – is led by a moderator (interviewer) in a loosely structured discussion of various topics of interest. The course of the discussion is usually planned in advance and most moderators rely on an outline, or moderator's guide, to ensure that all topics of interest are covered.

A focus group discussion (FGD) is a good way to gather together people from similar backgrounds or experiences to discuss a specific topic of interest. The group of participants is guided by a moderator (or group facilitator) who introduces topics for discussion and helps the group to participate in a lively and natural discussion amongst them.

It is not uncommon for two discussion groups, groups that are identical in demographic and life stage characteristics, to have different thoughts on the same subject. What is said in one group or qualitative interview might never be repeated in a second group. This reflects the exploratory nature of qualitative investigations and the diverse nature of populations. One observation is clearly not a reliable reflection of the real world.

When focus groups are used

Focus groups are used for generating information on collective views, and the meanings that lie behind those views. They are also useful in generating a rich understanding of participants' experiences and beliefs. Suggested criteria for using focus groups include:

- ◆ As a standalone method, for research relating to group norms, meanings and processes
- ◆ In a multi-method design, to explore a topic or collect group language or narratives to be used in later stages
- ◆ To clarify, extend, qualify or challenge data collected through other methods
- ◆ To feedback results to research participants.

Morgan suggests that focus groups should be avoided according to the following criteria:

- ◆ If listening to participants' views generates expectations for the outcome of the research that cannot be fulfilled
- ◆ If participants are uneasy with each other, and will therefore not discuss their feelings and opinions openly
- ◆ If the topic of interest to the researcher is not a topic the participants can or wish to discuss
- ◆ If statistical data is required. Focus groups give depth and insight, but cannot produce useful numerical results.

Conducting focus groups: group composition and size

The composition of a focus group needs great care to get the best quality of discussion. There is no 'best' solution to group composition, and group mix will always impact on the data, according to things such as the mix of ages, sexes and social professional statuses of the participants. What is important is that the researcher gives due consideration to the impact of group mix (e.g., how the group may interact with each other) before the focus group proceeds.

Interaction is key to a successful focus group. Sometimes this means a pre-existing group interacts best for research purposes, and sometimes stranger groups. Pre-existing groups may be easier to recruit, have shared experiences and enjoy a comfort and familiarity which facilitates discussion or the ability to challenge each other comfortably.

In health settings, pre-existing groups can overcome issues relating to disclosure of potentially stigmatising status which people may find uncomfortable in stranger groups (conversely there may be situations where disclosure is more comfortable in stranger groups).

In other research projects it may be decided that stranger groups will be able to speak more freely without fear of repercussion, and challenges to other participants may be more challenging and probing, leading to richer data. Focus groups share many common features with less structured interviews, but there is more to them than merely collecting similar data from many participants at once. A focus group is a group discussion on a particular topic organised for research purposes. This discussion is guided, monitored and recorded by a researcher (sometimes called a moderator or facilitator).

Group size

It is an important consideration in focus group research. Stewart and Shamdasani suggest that it is better to slightly over-recruit for a focus group and potentially manage a slightly larger group, than under-recruit and risk having to cancel the session or having an unsatisfactory discussion. They advise that each group will probably have two non-attenders.

The optimum size for a focus group is six to eight participants (excluding researchers), but focus groups can work successfully with as few as three and as many as participants. Small groups risk limited discussion occurring, while large groups can be chaotic, hard to manage for the moderator and frustrating for participants who feel they get insufficient opportunities to speak.

When is it appropriate to use focus group discussions?

Focus group sessions should be considered as a means to explore unknown territory. They are excellent as tools for explaining consumer attitudes and for clarifying and providing a better

understanding of the subject matter. Focus group discussions are often used for:

- ◆ Understanding the marketplace and obtaining an insight into how people think and behave.
- ◆ Generating ideas for new products.
- ◆ Developing marketing or advertising themes.
- ◆ Screening or evaluating new product concepts.
- ◆ A disaster check, using prototype products if appropriate, before the introduction of a new product, or before the change of an existing one.
- ◆ Focus groups discussions should not be used as a substitute for quantitative research.

Relevant factors for conducting FGD

The venue for a focus group is important and should, ideally, be accessible, comfortable, private, quiet and free from distractions. However, while a central location, such as the participants' workplace or school, may encourage attendance, the venue may affect participants' behaviour. For example, in a school setting, pupils may behave like pupils, and in clinical settings, participants may be affected by any anxieties that affect them when they attend in a patient role.

Focus groups are usually recorded, often observed (by a researcher other than the moderator, whose role is to observe the interaction of the group to enhance analysis) and sometimes videotaped. At the start of a focus group, a moderator should acknowledge the presence of the audio recording equipment, assure participants of confidentiality and give people the opportunity to withdraw if they are uncomfortable with being taped.

The analysis of qualitative data is explored in the final paper of this series. However, it is important to note that the analysis of focus group data is different from other qualitative data because of their interactive nature, and this needs to be taken into consideration during analysis. The importance of the context of other speakers is essential to the understanding of individual contributions For

example, in a group situation, participants will often challenge each other and justify their remarks because of the group setting, in a way that perhaps they would not in a one-to-one interview. The analysis of focus group data must therefore take account of the group dynamics that have generated remarks.

Focus Group as a Qualitative Research Method

The research in management, especially in marketing, frequently considers Focus Group and other qualitative methods as exploratory tools, its results needing to be verified by a quantitative study, in a representative sample. From the point of view of a researcher in the social sciences, FG is usable alone or as a complement to quantitative research methods. Now, in the social sciences, the two main means of collecting qualitative data are the individual interview and the observation of participants in groups. Focus Group combines elements of these two approaches by interviewing participants in groups.

The application of the FG technique, allows us to collect an appropriate amount of data in a short period of time, although we cannot argue with full conviction about the spontaneity of the contributions from the participants. Nevertheless, some of the information gathered during a FG session potentially will be of great worth, because it will be collected with great difficulty through the simple observation of reality. FG permits a richness and a flexibility in the collection of data that are not usually achieved when applying an instrument individually; at the same time permitting spontaneity of interaction among the participants.

On the other hand, FG demands a better preparation of the place itself (where it will happen), as well as more elaboration of the results, since we will probably collect less data than individual interview.

Advantages

It is comparatively easier to drive or conduct. It allows to explore topics and to generate hypotheses. It generates opportunity to collect data from the

group interaction, which concentrates on the topic of the researcher's interest. It has high "face validity" (data). It has low cost in relation to other methods. It gives speed in the supply of the results (in terms of evidence of the meeting of the group). It allows the researcher to increase the size of the sample of the qualitative studies.

Disadvantage

It is not based on a natural atmosphere. The researcher has less control over the data that are generated. It is not possible to know if the interaction in group he/she contemplates or not the individual behavior. The data analysis are more difficult to be done. The interaction of the group forms a social atmosphere and the comments should be interpreted inside of this context. It demands interviewers carefully trained. It takes effort to assemble the groups. The discussion should be conducted in an atmosphere that facilitates the dialogue.

In spite of the disadvantages enumerated above (especially the subject of spontaneity and the effort required to assemble the groups), the application of this method facilitates the collection of interesting data. This data contributes to a stronger conviction on the part of the researcher or analyst, as it is a good source of information for the formulation of hypotheses or for the construction of frameworks. These in turn allow further investigation. Knowing the advantages and disadvantages of Focus Group compared to other research methods, its potential use in the research design will be shown.

The Use of Focus Group in the Research Design

The goal of a *Focus Group* is to have the participants understand the topic of interest to the researcher, irrespective of its use, alone or together with other research methods. As discussed previously, *FG* may be considered as much a stand-alone research method as one used in conjunction with other methods.

As a stand-alone method, *FG* can be used in order to explore new areas of research or to examine subjects well-known to the participants. Together with other

methods, it can be used for preliminary research, or to prepare specific subjects in a large project; or even to illuminate the results of other data. More and more, the researchers are recognizing the advantages of combining qualitative and quantitative research methods:

- ◆ **can precede a quantitative research method.** In this case, it helps the researcher to learn the vocabulary of a field and to discover the public thought, in addition to supplying indications of special problems that can arise in the next phase using a quantitative research method.
- ◆ **can be used at the same time as quantitative research method.** In this case, the objective is triangulation; that is, the use of two or more different methods, in a complementary way, for the same research subject.
- ◆ **can follow a quantitative research method.** In this case, *Focus Groups* can explore or to illuminate topics that have emerged in the analysis of the results of the quantitative research method. Finally, it can be affirmed that the objective of the *FG* application defines its role in the research design.

Conclusion

Focus Group is a qualitative research method whose application is mainly useful in the social sciences. It has been used in areas such as management, marketing, decision and information systems, among others. Its general characteristics stand out: the homogeneity of the group, the sequence of the sessions, the obtaining of qualitative data, and focus on a topic.

This research method can be used separately or in conjunction with other methods, to strengthen a research design. The three phases of a *Focus Group* are planning, conduct of the interviews, and analysis. Careful planning is fundamentally important.

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