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Introducing focus group discussions

Global Health and Social Science website

Learning objectives

- At the end of the session you should be able to:
- discuss the rationale for using focus group discussions in qualitative research
- identify the various steps in the planning and implementation of the focus group discussion
- use guidelines to review focus group discussions.

Focus group discussions

- Purpose
- To understand how people feel or think about an issues product, service or idea in a comfortable and permissive environment
- Allows research to obtain information about attitudes and behaviours sparked through interaction

FGDs: Key definitions

- ‘A focus group provides something more than the sum of its parts, it provides more and richer information and evokes information that relates to emotional processes, inner reasons and less overt determinants of behaviour’ (Folch, Lyon & Trost, 1981)
- ‘Subjects tended to disclose more about themselves to people who resembled them in various ways, than to people who differ from them’ (Jourard, 1994)

Examples of using FGDs in health research

- Providing information for developing interventions
 - e.g. Developing HIV education in schools (Matthews et al, 1995)
- Assessing process and effectiveness of interventions
 - e.g. understanding declining subscriptions to Health Insurance Schemes in Guinea-Conakry (Criela and Waelkens, 2003)
- Perceptions/ experience of disease and health services
 - e.g. perceptions and experiences of ante-natal care services in Zimbabwe (Mathole et al, 2004)

Examples of using FGDs in health research

- Norms of community health seeking behaviour
 - e.g. care seeking for TB in China (Xu et al, 2004)
- Exploring attitudes and needs of health staff
 - e.g. Attitudes towards HIV risk amongst health staff in Ghana (Awusabo-Asarea and Marfo, 1997); Perceptions of Chinese Health Staff of China's evolving healthcare market (Lim et al, 2004)
- Developing theoretical frameworks for development and evaluation
 - e.g. developing a theoretical framework on post-partum care with Tanzanian midwives (Lugina et al, 2002)

Sampling in focus group discussions

- Degree and type of homogeneity - how far do people have to be the same?
- Power-relations and their effect on interactions
- Naturally occurring vs. created groups - Should group know each other?

Some advantages of FGDs

- Encourage participation from those who are reluctant to be interviewed on their own
- Encourage contributions from people who feel they have nothing to say
- Don't discriminate against people who can't read and write
- Enable group analysis/discussion - empowering
- Generates a lot of information in a short time
- Enables an exploration about how knowledge and ideas develop and operate within a given cultural context - i.e. how people think as well as what they think
- Can 'break the ice' in discussing taboo subjects

Some disadvantages of FGDs

- Produce information on norms and socially acceptable behaviour rather than private views/behaviour
- Can minimise dissent and create false impression of agreement
- Can exclude less powerful e.g. due to language, disabilities
- Can raise ethical issues around disclosure

Roles and skills for FGD moderators/facilitators

- A moderator is not a teacher or a judge.
- A moderator does not agree or disagree with what is said - there are no right or wrong answers.
- Aims to facilitate discussion, keep discussion on track, probe for deeper understanding

Roles and skills for observers and recorders

- **Recorder**

- Note questions asked and main responses/ discussion points
- Note non-verbal reactions – e.g. laughter, disagreement, agreement

- **Observer**

- Check recording equipment
- Alert facilitator to issues
- Assess quality of discussion for feedback to facilitator

Skills and abilities for FGD moderators

- Ability to put others at ease.
- Ability to listen to other people.
- Ability to encourage people.
- Awareness of non-verbal reactions.
- Knows when to probe.
- Does not lead the participants
- Discourage dominant group members.
- Stimulates group interaction and encourages expression of diversity of views
- Is relaxed and friendly.
- Responsive to the situation
- Is non-judgemental and creates a permissive environment

Sociograms: Capturing group interaction in FGDs

- Carried out by observers
- Draw a diagram of the seating positions of the FGD participants (use a different colour or symbol for the moderator and observer)
- At different points within the FGD record who is speaking and who they are speaking to (Normally 2-3 minutes)
- If participants or the moderator are speaking to the whole group draw a short arrow
- If participants or the moderator are speaking to one person draw an arrow from them to the person they are addressing
- Track group interaction through time

Steps in Carrying out FGDs

- **(1) Arrangements:**

- recruit participants
- process of consent
- where, when - try to identify a location and a time that is convenient for participants
- Normal practice is to provide refreshments and travel costs
- avoiding disturbances
- ensure equipment - have spare batteries ect
- think carefully about the seating arrangements

Steps in carrying out FGDs

- **(2) Introduction**

- Introduce self (moderator), observer, recorder
- Introduce ground rules - confidentiality etc (can be useful to develop these with participants)
- Objections to recording, process of analysis and efforts to ensure confidentiality
- Why you have been brought together (purpose)
- There are no right or wrong answers
- I would like everyone to participate in the discussion
- Any points of clarification?

Steps in carrying out FGDs

- **(3) Warm up**

- Introductions - allow everyone the opportunity to speak
- Always think about non-threatening questions/topics at the beginning

- **(4) Discussion**

- move from the general to the specific
- (possibility of PLA techniques, or use of cards);
- not trying to reach consensus but explore differences and inconsistencies

- **(5) Closure**

- summarising, recapping and identifying themes
- asking for further points
- thanking participants

Steps in carrying out FGDs

- **(6) Feedback**
 - opportunity to speak to participants individually
- **(7) Debriefing**
 - name of the group and date marked on the tape;
 - moderator, recorder and observer meet to discuss impressions;
- **(8) Topic Guide Review/analysis**

Observation checklist

Observation check-list

- Did the moderator introduce self?
- Did moderator introduce other team members?
- Asked participants to introduce themselves?
- Addressed issue of confidentiality?
- Introduce the topic?
- Did moderator ask permission to record?
- Was moderator talking a lot?(Sociogram?)
- Did moderator encourage the group to talk?
- Did moderator try to understand what participants were saying?
- Was moderator judgemental about topic?
- Did moderator give participants idea they gave wrong/right answers?
- Open ended questions used?
- Probing questions used?
- Could moderator deal with participants who were dominating?
- Could moderator deal with shy respondents?

YES	NO

Comments:

Preparing an FGD topic guide

- Do not try to cover too many issues.
- Outline key issues and probing questions
- The sequence of the topics moves from the general to the specific
- Be flexible, it is not a must to go from one question to the next
- Be prepared to adapt the topic guide after the first focus group discussion (ITERATIVE)
- Use open ended questions and avoid judgemental and leading questions
- Use simple language
- Do not have several parts to each question

Practical tips for recording and transcribing

- Mark your tapes – date, respondent type, method type; or download files and store
- When transcribing, add reference information that assures confidentiality: Details of respondents, interviewer, recorder, place/ date of interview/ FGD: e.g. F1-23 = female, interview No.1, age 23yrs
- Who to transcribe?
- Transcribing leave a wide margin on the right hand side for comments/notes on key themes
- Time for transcribing = at least 2x interview (very time consuming undertaking a FGD – useful to give ppt a number)

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