

## Topic Page: [Focus groups](#)

Definition: **Focus Group (sociology)** from *The SAGE Glossary of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*  
A qualitative research tool that collects and analyzes data from group interviews. A trained moderator guides the interview in an interactive setting to explore a particular topic by gathering the experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of a selected group of people.



Image from: [Focus Groups in Encyclopedia of Business in Today's World](#)

Summary Article: **Focus Group**  
from *Encyclopedia of Survey Research Methods*

A focus group is a qualitative research method in which a trained moderator conducts a collective interview of typically six to eight participants from similar backgrounds, similar demographic characteristics, or both. Focus groups create open lines of communication across individuals and rely on the dynamic interaction between participants to yield data that would be impossible to gather via other approaches, such as one-on-one interviewing. When done well, focus groups offer powerful insights into people's feelings and thoughts and thus a more detailed, nuanced, and richer understanding of their perspectives on ideas, products, and policies.

This entry begins by describing the historical background of focus groups. The entry then discusses issues that researchers might consider in choosing to use focus groups, including their strengths and limitations. Next, the entry describes the types of focus groups; the steps taken to prepare for focus groups; and the analysis of, and reports pertaining to, the data gathered. Finally, the entry addresses some ethical considerations in relation to focus groups.

### **Background**

Focus groups first appeared in academic research in the 1920s. At that time, scholars such as Walter Thurstone used group interviews to develop survey instruments. During World War II, Robert Merton and Paul Lazarsfeld used them to develop propaganda and other war time materials for the U.S. government. Between the 1950s and 1980s, focus groups became increasingly prominent in marketing and yet were rarely used in academic research. Marketers began to refer to them as *group depth interviews*, in which professionals trained in probing sources of behavior could work to uncover customers' psychological motivations.

In the 1980s, focus groups became more prominent in scholarly circles. This renewed attention was due both to work in social marketing (researching public health concerns) and the emergence of scholarly articles and books on focus groups as a method in the mid-1980s and 1990s by David Morgan, Richard Krueger, and others. Today, focus groups are common for academic research, product marketing, evaluation research, and quality improvement. In these arenas, they are used to help identify problems, to assist in the planning process, to aid the implementation of ideas and programs, and to assess data and outcomes.

### **Considerations for Choosing Focus Groups**

Focus groups thrive in marketing because they provide a useful format to learn about people's reactions to concepts. These group conversations are most appropriate when participants, as a group,

are asked to respond to stimuli and then share and compare their responses with and against others in the group. Focus groups provide insight into individuals, such as how they think and feel (as well as how often and deeply they think and feel) about ideas or products, when and under what conditions their thoughts and feelings lead to behaviors, when complicated or contradictory thoughts and behaviors emerge in response to topics or products, and how diverse groups view a specific idea or product. Moreover, this method allows researchers to assess more subtle feelings people may harbor about topics, to test pilot ideas, to shed light on previously collected data, and to aid in the construction of future large scale quantitative survey studies. In all of these instances, it is important to allow data to “emerge” freely from participants and to listen for the deeper understanding of the range of ideas.

In other situations, focus groups are not an appropriate choice for researchers. Group interviews should be avoided when participants are not comfortable with each other or with the topic, when a project requires rigorous statistical data, when consensus or emotionally charged information is desired, or when confidentiality is necessary. Additionally, focus groups should not be used when the act of holding a group, and soliciting opinions and reactions on a potentially sensitive issue, implies a commitment to a group of participants that cannot be kept (i.e., those who use this method have a special obligation to be sensitive to the suggestive “force” of this method as well as the communities with whom they work).

Relative to other qualitative methods, focus groups most closely resemble open-ended interviewing and participant observation. As in open-ended interviews, focus group moderators approach groups with a protocol of questions and encourage participants to focus on an identified topic. Unlike open-ended interviews, however, focus group moderators can be flexible with how the questions are asked and should use the conversation (as opposed to the individual interview) as the unit of analysis. Like participant observation, focus groups afford the opportunity to observe interaction among individuals and require that moderators surrender some power, at least, to the group. Unlike participant observation, though, focus groups produce large amounts of data on the researcher’s specific interest in a short period of time. Two criteria, then, help researchers discern if focus groups are a good methodological choice for them relative to these closely aligned approaches: Would the research project be better off with the additional individual-level data acquired from interviews (than the group-level conversation data from focus groups)? Would the research project be better off with the contextual information afforded by naturally occurring events witnessed during participant observation (than the focused, yet less naturalistic, data gathered during a focused group conversation)?

## **Strengths and Limitations**

As with all research methods, focus groups have both strengths and limitations. Strengths of this approach include how groups provide for exploration and discovery (to learn more about ideas or people who are poorly understood), context and depth (to discover the background behind thoughts, experiences, and differences), interpretation (to uncover how things are as they are and how they got that way), and sharing and comparing across participants (to offer and sharpen ideas and perspectives through the group process). In all of these instances, researchers benefit from listening and learning from a conversation across individuals.

The limitations of focus groups are similar to those of other qualitative methods and stem from the inherent flexibility of the group interview format. Focus groups have been critiqued for not yielding generalizable findings (as they typically employ small samples—three or four focus groups—that rarely

are selected using probability sampling techniques). Focus group procedures can be viewed with suspicion, as questions are not asked the same way each time with regard to ordering or phrasing, and responses are not independent (and thus the unit of analysis becomes the group). Focus group data can be nettlesome, as the results are difficult to quantify and conclusions depend on the interpretations of researchers.

## Types

Many focus group experts acknowledge that these group conversations can take several forms. Perhaps the most common type is a *full group*, in which a group of 6 to 10 participants (who are recruited because they share at least one commonality of relevance to the researcher) are gathered together and led by one moderator (possibly with the aide of a facilitator who helps with procedural aspects of the focus group) for 90 to 120 minutes. Other types of groups involve at least one derivation from this approach. *Two-way focus groups* allow for one group to watch another focus group and to discuss the observed interactions and conclusions.

*Dual moderator focus groups* feature two moderators in which one guides the conversation and another makes sure that all desired topics are covered. *Dueling moderator focus groups*, unlike dual moderator groups, feature two moderators that encourage these two leaders to intentionally take opposite sides on the issue under discussion (and then watch the conversation that emerges as a response from the group). *Respondent moderator focus groups* invite one or more of the participants to act as the moderator on a temporary basis in order to add another layer of perspective to the conversation. *Client participant focus groups* enable one or more clients of the group to engage in the discussion, either covertly or overtly, to add their desired perspective to the discussion. In addition to these takes on the standard format, focus groups can also feature fewer participants (*mini-groups* are composed of four or five participants), *teleconference focus groups* encourage interaction over a telephone or network, and *online focus groups* rely on computers and Internet networks to facilitate a conversation between participants.

## Preparation Steps

Focus group preparation involves the following steps. First, researchers must decide what kind of people should be studied, how many groups should be conducted, what type of group plan should be adopted for each group type (e.g., per group recruited on at least one variable of interest to the researcher), and how participants will be recruited or sampled. Although it is rarely used, a probability sampling design can be used to sample participants. Often recruitment is done via telephone. It is recommended that at least three to four groups per group type be conducted.

Deciding upon how large an incentive should be offered is an important decision as offering too low an incentive will increase recruitment costs (because many people will refuse), possibly to the level where it would have been cost-effective to start out with a larger incentive in the first place. In deciding about the amount of incentive, consideration should be given to travel time and travel cost for the participants to come to the focus group facility.

Second, researchers should decide on a moderator. Moderators should not be of an age, ethnic background, or gender that might inhibit group members from participating in the conversation; must be comfortable with the reality that participants will have varying levels of comfort in speaking in front of the group; and must be mindful of their nonverbal behaviors (so as not to affect the group conversation).

Third, researchers should decide upon the desired level of structure for the group and on the scope of the protocol (also called a questioning route, topic guide, or discussion guide). Generally speaking, the focus group protocol should feature 10 to 12 questions for a 90-minute group.

Fourth, basic logistical issues of recruitment and compensation of participants must be considered. Participants should be selected on a variable of interest to the researchers, and efforts must be made to ensure that these individuals possess the desired background knowledge or experience to yield valuable data for the project (while also not having so much experience that they will silence other members of the group). Researchers should create careful screeners that outline the desired characteristics of group members. Researchers can also attempt to overrecruit participants for each group and then, after the participants have arrived to the location, selectively tell potentially problematic group members that the group is overen-rolled (and thank such members and send them home with any promised compensation). While it might seem wasteful to pay an individual for not participating in the group, it can be far more costly to keep that individual in the group if there is a risk that he or she will threaten the group dynamics. It also is a good policy to invite one or two more people to participate than may be needed because of no-shows.

Fifth, moderators should attend to the best practices of facilitating the session. Sessions should be held around a round (or oval or rectangular) table. The moderator should be in a position to see all participants to help control the flow and content of the conversation, and if the session is being video recorded, the recording device should be behind the moderator. Name cards (with first names only) can be placed around the table to assign the participants to specific places and to facilitate the recognition of names through the conversation and during potential transcription.

Sixth, focus group data can be obtained in a variety of ways. Full transcription is the most costly but the most accurate means of generating a record of the group conversation and lends itself to myriad ways of content analyzing it. Other options include tape-based coding (in which researchers take notes from audio- or videotapes searching for pre-established themes); note-based coding (in which researchers rely on their field notes; in such instances the same researcher and moderator should be employed to ensure consistency across the field notes); and memory-based coding (recommended only for experienced moderators who have a strong sense of what they are looking for in group conversations).

## **Data Analysis and Reports**

Most of the focus group analysis in the field of marketing is impressionistic and strives to understand and explain the motivations behind people's attitudes, responses, and feelings. Scholarly research advances a few more systematic approaches to analyzing data. The *grid technique* encourages scholars to create a table to summarize the responses of each group per question in order to compare answers per item across groups. Basic *coding techniques* advise researchers to note all mentions of a given code (derived from the research questions or topic of interest behind the project), whether the code was mentioned by all participants, and whether the code appeared in all of the groups conducted. *Indexing* is a procedure in which all extracts of data that are important to a theme, topic, or hypothesis are marked (and then the coder assigns index codes that allow researchers to attend to both themes in the data as well as the context of such themes).

Although there are no hard and fast rules, focus group reports generally include the following types of information: (a) a cover page, (b) an executive or top line summary, (c) a table of contents, (d) purposes and procedures, (e) results and findings, (f) summary of conclusions, (g) recommendations, and (h) an

index. Most reports also feature a balance of direct quotations from the participants and a summary of the discussion.

## Ethical Considerations

There are several ethical considerations with focus groups. One consideration involves judging if participants are at risk. Researchers can protect participants by providing them with a statement of informed consent (e.g., clarifying that participants are over 18 years of age and aware that they are participating in a study). Another ethical risk involves attending to basic privacy issues. Researchers can protect the privacy of their participants by restricting access to information that reveals their identities, for example, protecting identifying information, referring to participants only by their first names or pseudonyms, protecting access to the transcripts and tapes of the focus groups, removing or modifying identifying information on transcripts, protecting them against the sponsor of the group, and encouraging the moderator to remind participants not to overdisclose during group discussions. Yet another risk lies in the discussion of potentially stressful topics. Researchers can protect participants against stress by emphasizing how participation is voluntary, setting boundaries for the group conversation, preparing an information sheet with experts and sources in case the discussion raises issues the participants want to pursue in greater detail, and trying to include someone on the research team who has experience with germane areas of stress.

*See also*

Content Analysis

## Further Readings

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- Greenbaum, T. L. (1998). *The handbook for focus group research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
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- Morgan, D. L. (1988). *Focus groups as qualitative research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

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