

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION: BASICS



WHAT is a focus group discussion?

The focus group discussion (FGD) is a commonly used method in qualitative research and evaluation. It involves a small group of participants who possess certain characteristics, usually between 6 and 12 in number. The group is guided by a facilitator (also known as a moderator) who introduces topics for discussion and helps the group generate ideas and information amongst themselves in a natural and 'lively' way. The ideal duration of an FGD is between 60 and 90 minutes.

Like in-depth interviews, FGDs promote self-disclosure among participants and provide information about people's perceptions, attitudes, beliefs and opinions. Unlike in-depth interviews, FGDs do not provide a lot of data on each individual's unique experiences. Instead they provide a range of insights in a more natural environment where participants are influencing and influenced by others.

FGD have 3 key features that set them apart from other types of group discussions and meetings:

- Their main purpose is the systematic collection of data for research or evaluation
- They are focused on a topic or topic areas.
- They rely on a natural discussion between participants

FGDs provide qualitative data in the form of recordings and transcripts that are managed and analysed in a similar way to other quality methods such as in-depth interview.



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WHY use focus group discussions?

FGDs are useful for a range of research and evaluation situations. For evaluation they are helpful in evidencing anticipated outcomes and identifying unintended outcomes. They can also shed light on program processes such as issues of non-participation, differences in program experiences among and between categories of people and participant satisfaction. FGDs can be used for evaluation on their own or combined with other methods such as in-depth interview, participant observation or survey. For example, FGD may help with interpretation and application of survey results.

There are a number of advantages of FGD as an evaluation method:

- FGDs provide large amounts of concentrated data in a short amount of time and enable the learning of a range of opinions and experiences of a group.
- People may be more comfortable in sharing their opinions, perceptions and feelings with a group they share characteristics with (e.g. new mothers) than on their own.
- They generate very different data from interviews and surveys so can be useful for combining data sources.

A major strength of FGD relies on allowing the participants to agree or disagree with each other so that it provides an insight into how a group thinks about an issue, about the range of opinion and ideas, and the inconsistencies and variation that exists in a particular group, category of people or community in terms of beliefs and their experiences and practices.

WARNING

- Successful FGDs take considerable energy and time
- Just gathering people doesn't mean a focused discussion will take place
- If sensitive information is likely to be shared, consider the risks for participants
- Considering potential conflict and confrontations based on the people and topic
- Remember that each FGD contributes n=1 to the study sample
- For any topic at least 3 FGDs are required to compare and contrast data as a general rule

HOW to use focus group discussions

There are 4 main stages to consider when planning to use focus group discussions for evaluation: **1.Planning, 2. Recruiting, 3.Facilitating, and 4.Analysis and reporting.** Here we provide some initial points to consider at each stage.

1 Planning

The first step is to identify the purpose of the FGD and how this fits with your evaluation question and other methods.

Once you have decided FGD is the right method, consider whether you are doing single category groups (e.g. young women) or multiple categories (e.g. Young women and older women).

Identify how many FGD you need (a minimum of 3-4 in each category) and whether you have the budget and time to do them.

Once you have decided on categories and numbers of groups:

- Decide on date, time and appropriate location that considers participant comfort
- Construct the question guide and test it by piloting
- Consider ethics and participant risks
- Develop recruitment information and strategies and consent forms
- Ensure you have all equipment (including for recording) you need, and it has been tested

2 Recruiting

Each FGD is characterised by homogeneity but with sufficient variation among participants to allow for contrasting opinions. For example, 3 different group categories for a program evaluation might be 1. People who completed the program, 2. People who dropped out of the program, 3. Staff of the program. It is recommended a check list is used to ensure all recruitment issues are considered. It might include the following as examples:

- Set the FGD time and date and book the location
- Consider and arrange participant incentives
- Articulate clear specifications for participation- e.g. gender, age, program experience
- Decide who will recruit (e.g this is often program staff rather than evaluation team)
- Invite participants and provide information, including consent forms
- Arrange reminder calls and provide practical information such as parking.

3 Moderating

FGDs require 2 moderators – a moderator and an assistant. It is important that the roles are clearly defined from the beginning. Some basic suggested tasks are outlined here:

| THE MODERATOR | THE ASSISTANT |
|--------------------------|--|
| Sets the tone and mode | Welcomes participants and provides name cards |
| Asks questions | Handles environment and logistics (e.g. seating) |
| Directs questions | Audio records discussion and takes notes |
| Keeps discussion flowing | Takes notes |

A skilful moderator is a key ingredient of a successful FGD. The skills are similar to that of an effective interviewer (see INFORMATION SHEET- QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW:BASICS). Additional skills required are the ability to: create a relaxed and comfortable environment, make sure everyone has a chance to contribute by effectively handling dominant participants and encouraging quiet people to contribute, cover all topic areas and keep to time, effectively close and summarise the discussion.

4 Analysing and Reporting

Write up of FGD ideally includes:

- a full transcript based on audio-recording of the discussion;
- comprehensive notes of the discussion including a diagram of the seating arrangements noting names and mood throughout the FGD
- a 20 minute debrief immediately following the FGD that includes an oral review by the moderator and assistant

Analysis and reporting needs to be planned from the beginning remembering that increasing the number of FGDs, increases the time required for analysis proportionately (e.g. doubling the number of FGD, doubles the time required for analysis).

As for all qualitative data, careful and systematic data management and analysis is critical (see INFORMATION SHEET: QUALITATIVE EVALUATION METHOD: DATA MANAGEMENT AND ANALYSIS)