

GUIDELINES for conducting a FOCUS GROUP

What is a Focus Group?

The Focus Group (here in after FG) is a method of targeted interview within a small group aimed at encouraging a discussion about specific topics.

It is a classical tool to have a good quality research.

Basic principle: the social interaction created during group interviews, is an effective reproduction of the process through which people form their own opinion.

How long does a FG last?

Each FG session is usually organized in two sessions of approximately two /three hours . Don't plan more than three FG sessions.

It is necessary that the whole group speaks about each proposed topic .

Important: don't take breaks nor stop the dynamic and the discussion all along one session.

How many participants in one FG?

INV groups will be composed by nine people, in order to enable each participant both to speak enough and to talk about his/her ideas and also to get many and varied perceptions.

Who are the participants?

INV FGs will be composed by social professionals chosen according to their experience and suitable features, in order to provide meaningful perceptions which are shared with the social workers belonging to the same service and to other similar services.

Should the discussion be recorded?

During every session the assistant moderator must accurately transcribe all discussion and each session must be recorded on audio support too.

Should we use a grid of questions?

The moderator is external to the group and leads the discussion through a grid with open questions.

Focus group participants won't have a chance to see the questions they are being asked. So, to make sure they understand and can fully respond to the questions posed, questions should be:

- Short and to the point

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- Focused each on one dimension
- Unambiguously worded
- Non-threatening or embarrassing
- Conceived in such a way that they cannot be answered with a simple "yes" or "no" answer (use "why" and "how" to make the questions)

How should the grid be designed?

- The grid must be flexible
- The grid needs be reshaped both in its form and content during the FG, according to the specific context;
- The grid can be enriched with further questions or new themes that will emerge from the discussion.
- Use a track of open questions; the track should be less structured as possible; the track should contain themes, issues, topics to deal with the group.
- The order of topics should look like a sort of funnel: from more general themes to more detailed topics; most important topics to be tackled in the central part of the discussion.

Questions

There are three types of focus group questions:

1. Engagement questions: introduce participants to and make them comfortable with the topic of discussion
2. Exploration questions: get to the meat of the discussion
3. Exit question: check to see if anything was missed in the discussion

Who conducts a FG?

The focus group is conducted by a team consisting of a moderator and assistant moderator. The moderator facilitates and leads the discussion; the assistant takes notes and runs the tape recorder.

The moderator

The moderator of FG has the task to introduce the theme and lead participants to discuss the most interesting topics. He/she ensures that participants could not digress, circumvent or misunderstand the meaning of the questions.

He/she has to avoid any kind of competitiveness in the group. A good moderator must create confidence and a comfortable atmosphere, encourage all and be patient, avoid any hierarchical, aggressive or authoritarian attitude. He/she has to make easy the relations, the discussions, the understand and must create a good atmosphere in group.

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A good moderator don't need to talk too. His work consists to encourage the participants to talk; he must prevent someone could dominate the group and the discussion.

The focus group moderator:

- Can listen attentively with sensitivity and empathy
- Is able to listen and think at the same time
- Believes that all group participants have something to offer
- Has adequate knowledge of the topic
- Can keep personal views and ego out of the discussion
- Can appropriately manage challenging group dynamics
- Fixes the rules for cellular phones and for breaks

The assistant moderator

The assistant moderator must be able to do the following:

- run a tape recorder during the session
- take a synthetic but complete note of body language (proxemics and kinesics of the participants) or other little subtle but relevant clues
- not participate in the discussion
- He/she asks questions when invited

If it is necessary and required by moderator he/she makes an oral summary of the discussion so far.

Both moderator and assistant moderator are responsible for welcoming.

RULES AND TIPS TO DRIVE AN EFFECTIVE FG

1° Create a spirit of cooperation within the group. Team work will be more effective and more enjoyable if everyone feels that other members of the group help and encourage him.

2° Dedicate sufficient time to prepare the session of FG at home alone and then together with the assistant moderator. This means that you must be clear in your minds what the working session want to achieve as a result.

Therefore it is necessary you anticipate every kind of problem that may arise during the FG.

3° It is necessary to explain to the participants that working in group is sharing the experiences of each and learning from others.

4° Avoid the suggesting questions or already contain the answers and ensure that the questions have been well understood. Be careful not to affect the participants with your opinions.

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5° Because it is necessary to record the meeting, in order to have a faithful and accurate account to be reviewed, explain to the participants that the meeting will be recorded and that the views of each will remain confidential.

Little practical advices

At the beginning

Sitting in a circle helps participants to feel all on the same level and everyone can see the others; moderator and assistant moderator must sit in the circle as well.

- At the beginning both the moderator and the assistant moderator must introduce themselves telling their name and something about their work and life. Then each participant must introduce her/himself. Five minutes each is the maximum time available
- At the beginning of the session, moderator should explain objectives and working methods: why we make a FG, what will happen and how long it will take.
- Explain that it is very important they tell their real opinions; FG isn't an exam neither a competition.
- Tell participants that it is very important to listen to the others in order to get excellent results.
- Remember to the participants that everyone is invited to talk but it's necessary to speak one person at a time, with no overlap.

During the meeting

- Try to use open questions or give at least two possibilities: "Is it ok for you or not?", "What do you think: is it clear or not?"-
- Ask if everyone agrees and if there are other opinions.
- Involve the whole group during the discussion, use the glance to embolden people that don't speak.
- Allow everyone to reach his/her own conclusions during the discussion.
- Although there is always little time, it would be better not to move from one to another stage of the discussion too quickly.
- Things to avoid:
 - to show your point of view or what is your interest;
 - to speak too much and to lead the conversation;
 - to contradict participants;
 - one or more participants monopolize the discussion

At the end

- Don't forget to thank people and recall next appointment, if any.

Immediately after the focus group

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Moderator and Assistant Moderator:

- Draw a diagram of seating arrangement
- Check tape recording
- Take note of themes, hunches, interpretations and ideas
- Compare the focus group to other groups
- Label and file notes, tapes and other materials

Data analysis

The focus of the report should be put on topical subjects treated in FG.

The method to be followed is based on careful reading of texts written and transcribed according to a deductive approach starting from single opinions to building general concepts and categories.

Text analysis follows a decomposition and segmentation process of the sentences, by reducing them in pieces to which same codes for equal meanings are attributed .

Then through a gradual integration and selection process of codes linked to similar meanings, go on and construct more general concepts.

Following an inductive approach and integrating and selecting the concepts, next step are interpretative categories that include them and suggest uniformity of meaning.

These categories will allow to formulate generalizable interpretations of wider situations and contexts.

Focus Group Analysis Tips

When you analyze focus group data, remember to consider:

- Since a variety of words and phrases are used, it will be necessary to detect the degree of similarity among these responses.
- Take into consideration the context in order to interpretate the sentences

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