



# Focus Groups

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 research thanks to you



- Background to Focus Groups
- Research Design and Sampling
- Discussion
- Planning and Organising Focus Groups
- Lunch
- Running a focus group
- Data Management and Analysis



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# Background

[www.menzies.utas.edu.au](http://www.menzies.utas.edu.au)

- Focus-groups are a form of group interview that capitalise on communication between research participants to explore a specific set of issues.



- They ideally involve 4 to 8 participants (and a facilitator). Participants are encouraged to talk to each other, ask questions, share anecdotes and comment on each others experiences and views

# The focus group as a research tool

- Historical development
- Strengths and weaknesses



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# History

[www.menzies.utas.edu.au](http://www.menzies.utas.edu.au)

- Market research in the 1920s
- Robert Merton wartime propaganda films (quantitative)
- Market and communications research 1970s to the present



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# History – health research

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- Became popular among health researchers in the 1980s and 1990s (public health in particular)
- Also adopted by action researchers as a method that allows for participation and by feminist researchers as a consciousness raising data collection tool



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# Jenny Kitzinger

[www.menzies.utas.edu.au](http://www.menzies.utas.edu.au)

Kitzinger argued in 1994 that focus groups have been neglected by qualitative research theorists and not taken 'seriously' when compared with traditional data collection approaches such as unstructured interviewing and observation.



- She argues that the most important feature of focus groups is that an interactive group effect produces a unique form of qualitative data



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# Focus groups now

[www.menzies.utas.edu.au](http://www.menzies.utas.edu.au)

Since that time focus groups have increased in popularity among qualitative researchers but still little writing about how 'group work' should be understood or how it sits with other methods

Lower in status among academic researchers?

Information about public understandings  
and social context

Interaction among participants help  
them to clarify and explore their views

Research investigating attitudes,  
experiences and opinions

Capturing anecdotes, jokes, colloquial  
language

Relaxed and informal discussion

May be attractive to participants intimidated by the formality and isolation of one on one interviews

Can encourage participation from people who feel that they have 'nothing to say' (but who will engage in discussion generated by other group members)

- Learning about a new setting, group or issue
- Breaking down researcher/participant boundaries
- Participants getting to know each other in action research projects
- Time efficient ?



- Not suited for in-depth questioning
- Difficult to clearly identify an individual message
- Articulation of group norms may silence individual voices of dissent
- May experience difficulties in recruiting particular groups
- Complex to record, organise and analyse



- Confidentiality issues that may inhibit people from speaking or even impact negatively on their lives after the research
- If the issue/topic being explored is illegal, intimate or embarrassing participants may hold back unless the other participants and the facilitator are able to build trust (note group work can actually facilitate discussion of taboo topics)



- If generalisable results are required
- If quantitative data are required
- If your key interest is in individual perspectives
- If the participants in your project are unlikely to agree to meet together or if organising a focus group with them is too difficult (i.e. surgeons or politicians)
- If you cannot access an appropriate recording device



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- Questions?

# Research Design and Sampling



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- 'Fit' between study objectives and focus group method e.g. 'How will group work contribute to your study?'
- Will you have access to sufficient time (especially for recruitment and scheduling), resources and expertise?



- Pre-quantitative - background information
- Post-quantitative - additional detail
- Combined with other qualitative methods such as interviews or observation
- Stand-alone



- Sampling is the term given to the process of selecting research participants
- Focus groups are a qualitative data collection method and as such you are likely to use a form of purposive (theoretical) sampling or less ideally convenience sampling. Not random sampling (see page 51-2).



- Identifying and including in the study those information rich cases that will contribute to building a full understanding of the phenomena under study. Convenience sampling is choosing the easiest and most readily available people to be participants.



- Intensity sampling
- Maximum variability sampling
- Extreme case
- Typical case (qualitative profile)
- Snowball sampling
- Consider including outliers and deviant cases



- Researcher describes and justifies how decisions were made about sampling
- Carry sampling strategy into the analysis
- Think carefully to make sure that you are not imposing your own assumptions about the most appropriate sample (i.e. class, ethnicity, sexuality, age)
- Size and number of groups



- Homogeneity (like) or heterogeneity (difference)
- Naturally occurring or composed for the focus group
- Status and other issues
- Communication issues (i.e. language, disability)



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# Discussion Session

  
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University of Tasmania



- Your research?
- Experiences with focus groups?
- Questions about focus groups in your research?
- General questions about the sessions so far?

# Planning and organising a focus group



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# Ethical issues

[www.menzies.utas.edu.au](http://www.menzies.utas.edu.au)

- General research ethics, NHMRC
- Ethics committees
- Privacy/confidentiality, protection from harm, vulnerable participants
- Confidentiality and focus groups



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# Communicating with participants

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- Recruitment
- Making a time, dietary requests
- Reminders
- Transport
- Feedback



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# Venue

[www.menzies.utas.edu.au](http://www.menzies.utas.edu.au)

- 'Neutral territory'
- Easy to find
- Relatively quiet
- Free from human 'traffic'



- Consider using a small questionnaire to collect basic information about participants if appropriate e.g. age, education, occupation etc
- Notetaking
- Audio recording
- Video recording



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# Things to remember

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- Food, drink
- Other 'stuff' such as white board markers, name tags, plastic cups



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[www.menzies.utas.edu.au](http://www.menzies.utas.edu.au)

# Running a Focus Group



Non judgemental

Superior listening ability

Excellent short-term auditory memory

Bright and personable

Understands the study and the aim of the focus group

Able to communicate well with the participants



- Focus the discussion
- Encourage participation
- ‘Tease out’ the issues
- Maximise participant-participant interaction
- Bring discussion back ‘on track’
- Deal with difficult situations/individuals

Kitzinger recommends general relaxed conversation at first ('structured eaves dropping')

Then the facilitator can start asking some open ended questions and a more interventionist style (urging debate to continue, encouraging the group to discuss inconsistencies, elucidate their points of view)



- Circling, Scenarios/vignettes
- ‘Devil’s advocate’, Visual aids – e.g. film, video, photographs
- Be imaginative. Flash cards, watching a film or slides, looking at photographs, handing around objects such as a breast prosthesis or a health promotion brochure

Keep it short around 4-8 broad topics

Open ended and flexible

Start with topics or questions people are likely to enjoy talking about

Funnel down

Pre testing and refining

Involvement of stakeholders

# Data management and analysis



- Management the act of recording the data, storing it, preparing it for analysis
- Analysis, making sense of the research data to produce research findings/results



- Transcription (Full transcription?)
- Recording individual speakers on the transcripts (pseudonym or code)
- Notes taken during the group
- Demographic questionnaires
- Field notes after the focus group
- NVIVO, computers



- Often analysed using the same approaches used for interview data such as thematic analysis or discourse analysis.
- Try to draw out individual perspectives *and* group views. To do this you need to record who is speaking in the transcript.



- If using thematic analysis develop codes that acknowledge the group interaction (i.e. jokes, anecdotes, types of interaction between participants)
- Include examples of group conversations not just individual quotes taken out of context
- It is rarely appropriate to do a quantitative analysis (i.e. percentages)
- Keep the purpose and audience in mind