

How I Learned to Conduct Focus Groups

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The use of focus groups may provide researchers with important insights into research questions via participant discussion and interaction. As a human services practitioner and researcher, I became interested in learning how to conduct focus groups in order to apply these steps to my research and gain valuable insights about the human experience that the focus group interaction aims to bring to light. In this review, I will highlight the steps that I took to learn to conduct focus group research and through my experience I hope that readers gain familiarity and clarity into this unique qualitative research approach. Key Words: Focus Groups, Qualitative Research, and How-to-Guide

When first exploring how to conduct focus groups and how they would be useful to me as a human services practitioner and researcher, it was important to understand what kind of qualitative information focus groups yield. Focus groups can be useful when discussing sensitive topics such as research on sexual practices; “some researcher argue that focus groups are not suitable for eliciting experience with regard to sensitive topics, but this is a questionable assumption” (Barbour, 2007, p. 18). Also, focus groups are helpful in collection of information regarding opinions and beliefs, encouraging discussion about a particular topic, and providing opportunities for the facilitator and participants to learn more about a topic (Sharken Simon, 1999). However, focus groups may not be as useful when the research question requires accessing narratives, attitudes, or reluctant participants.

When deciding whether to conduct a one-on-one interview or focus groups, I learned that there are several aspects to consider before making a decision. Ultimately, your decision will likely be based on weighing the pros and cons of each approach and which will be most helpful in gathering the information necessary to answer your research questions. Specifically, defining what the purpose of the focus group will be will help guide the kinds of questions that you will ask as a researcher (Sharken Simon, 1999). In addition, planning and considering a timeline prior to carrying out your focus group is helpful, Sharken and Simon believes that six to eight weeks prior to running your focus group is a reasonable amount of time to begin planning. During that time, thinking about who the target participants are, how they will be recruited to participate in your focus group and developing the questions is a productive way to begin the process. In addition, gathering your materials and locating a site are important components that need to be decided ahead of time. Specifically, the setting in which your research will take place is a factor to consider when deciding whether to conduct focus groups or use another qualitative research approach. According to Barbour (2007), it is important to be flexible in regards to where you will conduct your focus groups and not limit your options in regards to possible research settings. You may not always have access to the

ideal research location but at times modifications can be made to make a site appropriate and comfortable for the process.

Sharken Simon (1999) outlined a timeline that is helpful in organizing yourself and ensuring that your focus group runs as smoothly as possible. Six to eight weeks prior to the start of the group, she suggests that you write the purpose statement, identify the participants, and gather the contact information of participants. Then four to five weeks before the start of the group, it is important to select a facilitator, develop the questions, develop a script, and reserve the research site. Also, three to four weeks before the focus groups takes place, send out invitations and follow up with phone calls one week later. Two days prior to the focus groups, Sharken Simon suggests that you should gather your materials and call participants to remind them that the group is coming up. After conducting the focus group, send letter to research participants and transcribe notes from the session approximately two days later. Then after the transcription is complete, participants are mailed a summary of the session and an analysis of the session and write-up is completed by the researcher.

Also, when deciding the participants that will be included in your focus group, it is important to consider several important points. Sharken Simon (1999) suggests that the process of participant selection consists of five parts: (a) determining how many participants are needed and how many to invite, (b) reviewing the purpose statement and make a list of key characteristics that are desirable in participants, (c) using the list of attributes made, brainstorm possible participants and categories of participants, (d) refining the list by looking for “two characteristics in common” in prospective participants, and (e) securing names and contacts, finalizing the list, and sending the invitations. Furthermore, it is important to match a moderator to the group; if participants do not feel comfortable with the moderator they will be less likely to generate a genuine and insightful discussion.

The size of the focus groups is as important as its composition. I learned that focus groups should consist of six to twelve participants because less than six may not generate sufficient discussion and more than twelve participants may make it difficult to follow the discussion. Sharken Simon (1999) offers that after determining how many participants you will need, then you can decide how many people to invite to your focus group. You should invite more participants than you will need and provide special accommodations such as child care and transportation or other incentives to improve attendance.

The selection of a group facilitator is crucial when considering how to make the most of the focus group discussion. The facilitator should be an individual that is skillfully able to manage outspoken group members, keep the discussion on track, and ensure that all focus group participants have an opportunity to provide their input if they desire. It is helpful to know that at time having two group facilitators takes the pressure off of a single individual; one facilitator can moderate the discussion while the other takes notes.

It is important to carefully consider the types of questions that you will ask your participants. Since focus groups are limited in their duration, it is important to narrow down your list of questions to four or five (Sharken Simon, 1999). It was interesting to note that there are usually two types of questions: warm-up questions and the more serious research questions. It was very helpful that Sharken Simon stressed that focus

groups questions should initially be more open-ended and progressively get more specific. In addition, eliminating questions that may not provide you with information regarding your research questions is important and those that may be too difficult for research participants to answer. It may be helpful to go through your list of questions and try to answer them yourself before deciding to use them in your focus group discussion.

Having a pre-developed script prior to the start of your focus group will help the focus group run more smoothly. The development of a script helps to increase the reliability of your group and that facilitator stays on track and on time (Barbour, 2007). Since focus groups usually last one to two hours, it is important not to go over a two hour time limit. The process of writing a script consists of various components that will help the group generate dynamic discussion. Initially, the facilitator welcomes the group, introduces the purpose of the group, and make introductions. Sharken Simon (1999) goes on to suggest that after asking your list of prepared questions that you have carefully outlined, it is important to bring closure to the group by thanking the participants, allowing them to provide input, and providing them with an overview of how the qualitative data obtained will be useful in the research, and providing an explanation of when the entire process will be completed.

With regard to conducting the actual session, having your materials ready is an important part of the success of the group. Some suggestions for materials include: notebooks and pencils, flip chart, focus group script, list of participants, markers, name tags, refreshments, and a clock. Once the facilitator begins the discussion, Sharken Simon (1999) suggests that the facilitator try to get as complete answers from the participants as possible and know how to manage conflicting opinions without allowing a full-blown argument to ensue. Once the focus group is completed, it is necessary to summarize each meeting and transcribe the notes as soon as the session is over; it is most important to transcribe the notes as soon as possible in order to increase accuracy and decrease errors in memory (Barbour, 2007). Then, an analysis of all of the summaries of each focus group conducted is carried out to draw out common themes that were generated in the discussions and how these themes or problems will be addressed.

Overall, I hope that this concise review of how I learned to conduct focus groups is helpful to other researchers in providing them with a guide to the planning, organization, and process of conducting a dynamic and engaging focus group that will generate lively discussion and provide useful qualitative information regarding individual's experiences that will help provide answers to important research questions.

References

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