



The Focus Group

(Resource ID: 64)

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This teaching resource is allocated to following University:

BOKU - University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences Vienna

Institution:

Center for Global Change and Sustainability

<http://sustainicum.at/en/tmethods/view/64.The-Focus-Group>



Group work



**Less than 5
students**

5 to 10 students



**Up to 3 lecture
units**



**Internet
connection
necessary**



English

In contrast to individual interviews, a focus group is a hosted and focused discussion of a group of persons. It fosters mutual exchange and the confrontation with perceptions, opinions and ideas of other panelists.

One of the most popular and most widely used method of qualitative social research is the instrument of the focus group. In contrast to individual interviews, a focus group is a hosted and focused discussion of a group of persons, which fosters mutual exchange and the confrontation with perceptions, opinions and ideas of other panelists.

Group dynamic processes lead to a more intensive debate of the participants on the object of interest. The members of a focus group have to legitimate their own opinions to other participants. They can benefit from each other by the clash of different perceptions and views. This mutual exchange leads to deeper individual considerations. Important key

aspects become more evident and more clearly than in individual interviews.

At the same time, the group situation causes emotional reactions of the participants, which would not occur in an individual interview. This provides a deep insight into the mindset of the members of a focus group.

The **starting point** of the focused interview is a real situation experienced by the participants. The researcher studies the **reactions of the people observed** in this situation. Based on the observation analysis, the researcher drafts an **interview guide** with relevant topics to be addressed. The topics will be treated in the focus group with **open questions and narrative reporting and responses**.

Steps to be taken into account when planning a focus group:

SELECTION OF PARTICIPANTS:

The selection of participants depends on the nature of the topic and questions of interest.

Participants should have a sufficient level of interest and participation with respect to the topic and questions of interest.

To facilitate the discussion of different opinions and point of views, a minimum degree of homogeneity of the participants is necessary, but also sufficiently large differences.

Homogeneity should be ensured, relating to occupation, education, socio-demographic criteria and similar, because these issues can lead to differences in understanding and comprehension.

Do not include different groups in one focus group. In most in cases the differences are too big to provide in-depth discussions. In these cases a series of focus groups is recommended.

A close relationships can develop uniformity. As a result, the number of participants will be reduced.

The upper limit is 10 people. Otherwise, a professional interview can not be guaranteed. Each additional participant reduces the talking time per person and makes longer discussions almost impossible. Forced speech pauses can also cause individuals to keep silent.

Generally speaking, the more experienced the participants are, the smaller

can be the focus group.

In the selection of participants, the use of a checklist is very helpful.

LOCATION OF THE FOCUS GROUP:

In order to avoid contact fears of the participants, focus groups are organised at an independent location.

DURATION OF THE FOCUS GROUP:

The duration of a focus group vary, depending on the intensity and number of participants.

The focus group should be brought to an end before the condition of the participants and the host are There may be cases, in which new aspects will be discussed even after 3 hours. Sometimes the discussion stands still after little more than 1 hour.

Constant prodding can result in resistance on the side of the participants.

Drinks and snacks help to loosen up the discussion and disguise the formal nature of such an event.

THE HOST:

To a large extent, the success of a focus group will be determined by the selection of a suitable discussion host. He must care for a relaxed and friendly atmosphere.

In warm-up laps the host tries to loosen the atmosphere through mutual understanding and a first careful approach to the subject. In this way, constraints of the participants are slowly degraded. Slowly the host tries to focus the discussion on the core theme.

Own views and opinions on the subject are out-of-place, since they could push the participants in a certain direction. Instead, the host should encourage the participants to give detailed statements and also to deepen individual statements, in order to obtain a detailed picture of the underlying structures.

Questions should be submitted as open as possible.

OBSERVATION ANALYSIS:

The starting point of the focused interview is a real situation, that was experienced by the participants of the interview. The researcher, who has also observed the situation, is trying to find meaningful elements and behaviour patterns of the participants. The researcher conducts an observation analysis by dealing with the situation and studying the reactions of the people observed in the specific situation.

To simplify subsequent evaluation and presentation, the group discussion can be recorded (audio and/or video). Participants need to be asked before the interview.

INTERVIEW GUIDE:

Based on the observation analysis, the researcher drafts a guide for the interview. The guide contains all relevant topics to be addressed, and the important aspects and elements of the situation. The topics will be treated with open questions and narrative reporting and responses.

EVALUATION AND REPORTING:

Audio and video recording of the discussion will help to analyse and evaluate the focus group.

An exact transcript of the entire discussion represents the starting point. On the basis of the transcript, relevant categories have to be formed. Notes and impressions of the host can help to deepen the impression.

In the case of a series of focus groups on the same subject, it is advisable to perform the evaluations separately and to present the total result in a final report. The context of each focus group must be documented separately.

IMPORTANT ASPECTS OF THE EVALUATION PHASE:

What is the true meaning behind each statement? Do all participants use the same wording?

What is the context of a statement within the discussion?

Is a statement a result of an open question, or was it made because of a statement of any other participant?

Are the various statements of the same person consistent?

Did you take into account the number and details of certain discussion

points?

Does the discussion return to the same few central key issues?

Do all participants take part intensively?

Are the statements confined to a few participants?

Did you take into account the emotional intensity of the statements? In particular, audio and video recordings are very helpful here. An altered tone, frequently changing seating positions, raising the voice, interrupting another participant may indicate emotional reactions.

Type of teaching method



Discussion / debate



Reflection

Type of teaching method

- Discussion / debate
- Reflection

Preparation

Medium

Preparation Efforts Description

-

Related Teaching Resources

No specific previous knowledge / related resources required

Necessary documents / materials

- depending on the chosen topic

Integration of stakeholders

Depending on the chosen topic

Topics of sustainability

Depending on the chosen topic

Situations appropriate for this method

- generation of ideas by external people
- interest in in-depth and comprehensive insight
- interest in behavior causative motivations

Strengths of the method

- Focus groups are suitable for the generation of ideas by external people.
- Focus groups are eligible to get an in-depth and comprehensive insight.
- Behavior causative motivations can be learned.

depending on the chosen topic

Weaknesses of the method

- As with all qualitative techniques, the focus group method is subject to the interpretation of the researcher.
- The host takes a central place and can therefore execute a strong, possibly negative influence on the course and content of the group discussion.
- Dominant participants can influence the direction and focus of the discussion or unsettle other discussion partners. As a possible result, certain aspects of the interesting topic might not be addressed.

Assessment / evaluation

None

Sources and Links

Sources:

1. Institut für Wertprozessmanagement (unknown year). *Fokusgruppen*. Universität Innsbruck. Available in German at: www.uibk.ac.at/smt/marketing/files/ubik_marketing_fg.pdf (accessed on: Dec. 16th, 2014)

2. Lamnek, S. (1995). *Qualitative Sozialforschung*. Weinheim: Psychologie Verlags Union.
3. Krueger, R. (1994): *Focus Groups*. London: Sage Publications.
4. Morgan, D. & Krueger, R. (1998): *The Focus Group Kit*. London: Sage Publications.

Links:

Please also refer to the CONSUS Method: The Participating Observation
<http://sustainicum.at/en/tmethods/view/65>

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