

Using Focus Groups in Research

When Focus Groups May be Appropriate

Though research design considerations will be important in making a decision whether to include a focus group in a research project, there is also an important ethical dimension to this decision.

Unlike a one-on-one interview or survey, a focus group activity includes (by definition) participants sharing information in a group. If the topic under discussion is sensitive, if the participant pool is vulnerable, or there are other risk factors, a researcher should carefully consider whether a focus group activity is appropriate. These issues may become even more acute if the participants are likely to be known to each other, and the issues discussed could be harmful to the participant – such as a negative impact upon the professional or personal standing of some participants.

It can still be ethical to conduct a focus group in such situations. In the ethics application researchers should address strategies to manage the confidentiality and risk issues associated with such an activity.

It is important that when seeking ethical clearance for a project involving a focus group that researchers reflect upon whether the use of such an activity is appropriate for the topic, potential participants and context. This reflection should be made transparent in the application; the rationale for the final decision presented and be reflected in the PIS and the consent form.

Researchers should also ensure they use appropriate language in the ethics application and documents such as the information sheet and consent form. Referring to a focus group as an interview may mislead potential participants and make the ethics application confusing.

Management of the Focus Group

The role played by a researcher in an interview can be substantially different from that needed in a focus group.

A focus group facilitator needs to be able to elicit information from all participants while keeping the discussion on track and dealing tactfully with participants who may derail or dominate the discussion. The facilitator should be alert to the possible need to interrupt the discussion if the conversation moves into risk areas'. They should also be alert to signs of participant distress.

The researcher does not need to act as the focus group facilitator but may still play a role in explaining the project and re-consenting participants before the discussion starts.

There is also the need to record the discussion and if this is done by audio and/or visual recording methods there may be technical issues that need to be monitored throughout the session.

For reasons such as this, the researchers need to show evidence in the ethics application that they have considered all the possible roles that are needed during the session and have adequate personnel on hand with the necessary expertise to support the process.

Structuring the Questions / Interaction in a Focus Group

Researchers should be mindful that the dynamics of a focus group are very different from a one on one interview. The focus group structure, questions / interaction need to evidence an understanding of these dynamics.

Describing focus group activities to potential participants

Some potential participants may not understand what a focus group involves. Though it will not be necessary for all potential participant cohorts, for some it may be necessary to include in the recruitment and informed consent materials a brief explanation of what participation in a focus group actually entails.

These materials should also include a brief description of the topic area to be discussed by the focus group, so potential participants can make an informed decision about their involvement.

Participants and confidentiality

A significant ethical issue in the conduct of focus group activities is the degree to which participants reveal personal information or opinions that may be contrary to others, in front of other participants.

This issue may represent a higher level risk if the focus group is being conducted in a workplace where unequal power balances may make individual staff members vulnerable.

The ethics reviewers will want evidence that the researchers have considered whether the focus group structure may lead to a participant making themselves vulnerable, and if so, how the researchers will limit that vulnerability.

At the least, the instructions for focus group participants, and the informed consent materials provided to participants, must ask them to:

- uphold the principles of respect and respectful behaviour in groups
- respect the privacy of other participants and
- commit to the confidentiality of the focus group discussion.

The researcher should also be ready to intervene if it seems likely that information will be disclosed that may increase the vulnerability of the participant(s) and have developed strategies for protecting participants, for example, asking participants to reflect before speaking.

On their own these measures may not be sufficient to address a significant privacy issue but are required for any protocol that will involve the disclosure of personal information in a focus group session.

Participant right to withdraw from the Research and withdrawal of their Data

Ideally participants have the right to remove themselves and any data they have already contributed to the research if they so choose. Within a focus group discussion physical withdrawal may still be possible but the removal of data provided up to that point may be less able to be achieved because of the lack of ability to identify people within a recording and the potential for any removal of data to compromise the understanding of other data. Researchers should consider whether withdrawal of data will be possible and if not this must be conveyed to potential participants in the information sheet and consent form. It should also be restated before the recording device is turned on and participants given the chance to leave if they want.

Audio and Visual Recording

The nature of the multiple sources of data that are available in a focus group session means that a researcher may decide to make an audio and / or visual recording of proceedings.

Use of audio and / or visual recording in focus group work requires that:

- potential participants must be given prior warning that they will be recorded
- they should be informed how the recordings will be used, including whether it is proposed that identifiable data may form part of the research publication
- their consent for the making and use of the recording must be sought prior to the commencement of the recording. As above, if withdrawal of data is not possible once recording commences this should be restated
- if imagery is being collected and will be used, a photographic / film release consent form may be needed.

The Design of the Focus Group and Evidence Required in the ethics application and Attachments

The ethics application should show evidence of consideration of / for the:

- need for focus group participants to be asked to agree to show respect for the different views that may be expressed and to respect the confidentiality of the discussions in the focus group
- appropriate number of focus groups in the project
- appropriate number of participants for each group
- personnel required to run the focus group and their expertise
- appropriate structure of the questions / discussion topics
- challenges of managing multiple people during the session, who may have a variety of roles, e.g. student participant, translator, teacher, and if necessary having sufficient research personnel on site to effectively manage the group and meet the aims of the focus group. Focus groups which include

- vulnerable people may require particular areas of expertise to be covered by the research team members present
- Location to ensure some degree of confidentiality, especially if it is work related or participants have been recruited through a workplace

Human Research Ethics Guidance Documents available from Research Services

- Guidance for Researchers New to Human Ethics Review
- Guidance Human Research Ethics Protocols for Coursework Masters
- Guidance on Choosing the most appropriate PIS and Consent
- Guidance on Completing the Project Description
- Guidance on Creating Research Project Flyers
- Guidance on Data Storage and Retention Questions
- Guidance on Ethics Review Exemption
- Guidance on Issues with Informed Consent in Research
- Guidance on Levels of Risk and the Ethical Review Process
- Guidance on Making an Amendment to an Approved Project
- Guidance on Organisations in Research
- Guidance on Questions Related to Cultural Sensitivities
- Guidance on Questions Related to Restrictions on Publication of Results
- Guidance on Receiving and Responding to Ethics Committee Assessor Comments
- Guidance on Research Projects Seeking to use Western Sydney Staff as Participants
- Guidance on Reimbursements
- Guidance on The use of 'Opt Out' or Passive Consent in Human Research
- Guidance on Writing Participant Information Sheets and Consent Forms
- Guidance on Research Involving Young People
- Guidance on Research Projects and DFAT Advice
- Guidance on Using Focus Groups in Research

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