Focus group interviews in nursing research: part 1
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Abstract
Focus groups are used by researchers in the social and behavioural sciences to explore phenomena and are accepted as a legitimate qualitative methodology. The primary goal of focus groups is to use interaction data resulting from discussion among participants to increase the depth of the enquiry and reveal aspects of the phenomenon assumed to be otherwise less accessible. This article, the first of three articles on focus groups, examines the nature of focus groups, issues regarding planning focus groups, selecting participants and the size of the groups. This article is aimed at students who are undertaking research modules as part of their academic studies or writing a research proposal as well as at novice researchers who intend to use focus groups as a means of data collection.

Key words: Focus groups, Qualitative research, Research methodology

Introduction
Focus groups have been used by researchers worldwide to explore a range of phenomena in the social and behavioural sciences for more than 80 years and they are accepted as a legitimate qualitative methodology (Brajtman, 2005; Oluwatosin, 2005; van Teijlingen and Pitchforth, 2006; Redmond and Curtis, 2009). Focus groups can be used on their own as the primary method of data collection or with other methodologies (Stewart et al, 2007). Within a focus group, a moderator works with a group of people with some common interests or characteristics who interact with each other. The moderator uses the group dynamics and interactions to gain information about a specific or focused issue. The group is ‘focused’ as it involves a collective activity such as debating, talking to one another, asking questions of one another and commenting on others’ experiences and points of view on an issue.

The primary goal of this method is to use the interaction data generated during discussion between participants to increase the depth of the enquiry and reveal aspects of the phenomenon assumed to be otherwise less accessible (Freeman et al, 2001; van Eik and Baum, 2003; Duggleby, 2005; Lambert and Loiselle, 2008). In essence, the focus group is a form of group interview where the aim is to understand the social dynamic and interaction between the participants through collecting verbal and observational data. In this sense, Krueger and Casey (2000) see the focus group as different from other types of research because data is generated and collected in a group setting.

Group interactions may highlight members’ similarities and differences and give rich information about their range of perspectives and experiences. Unfortunately, they are often used inappropriately as an ‘inexpensive’ substitute to individual interviews (Hollander, 2004; Barbour, 2005; Lambert and Loiselle, 2008), and group transcripts are often analysed for the content of ‘individual’ discussion (Hydén and Bülow, 2003; Lambert and Loiselle, 2008). To reach the full potential of this method, attention to interaction analysis and the unique insights
obtained about the phenomenon during this process is crucial (Freeman, 2006; Lambert and Loiselle, 2008) because focus group data is the product of context-dependent group interactions (Hollander, 2004; Duggleby, 2005; Lehoux et al, 2006; Lambert and Loiselle, 2008). In nursing, focus groups have been used to explore a range of issues including clinical practice (Aveyard, 2002; Doman, 2004) educational, and managerial and professional perspectives (Williamson and Webb, 2001; Gillespie, 2002). They can also be used to investigate the views of patients, carers or lay people (Carter et al, 2002).

The nature of focus groups
Being qualitative in nature, focus groups emphasise meaning rather than measurement and require the researcher to immerse themselves in other peoples’ lives (Redmond and Curtis, 2009). Therefore the interview process for the focus group is that of a humanistic interview. Focus groups are useful in exploratory research where little is known about the topic under investigation (Barbour and Kitzinger, 1999) or when used as part of a mixed methods approach (Redmond and Curtis, 2009). Generally, in exploratory research, they are more likely to be used early in a research project (Stewart et al, 2007) and the researcher may follow this with other qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews, or larger-scale research methods such as a quantitative survey that will provide more precise data from a larger sample of respondents (Redmond and Curtis, 2009). Stewart et al (2007) give seven uses for focus groups (Table 1) but these need to be considered in light of situations where focus groups should not be used, as set out by Krueger and Casey (2000) (Table 2).

Although there are many reasons why a researcher may choose to use focus groups, the decision to use them should be guided by the purpose of the research study (Fern, 2001; Bryman, 2004). One cause for concern among researchers choosing this method is the aspect of consensus. While Krueger and Casey (2000) identify that focus groups should not be used to form consensus, often nominal group technique is referred to within the literature (Carney et al, 1996). Nominal group technique is a structured variation of a small group discussion that is designed to reach consensus by asking individuals to respond to questions posed by a moderator and then asking participants to prioritise the ideas or suggestions of all group members. This process is favoured and used to prevent a single person dominating the discussion; it encourages all group members to participate and results in a set of prioritised solutions or recommendations that represent the group’s preferences.

The researcher needs to be clear regarding the distinction between a focus group interview and a focused interview. Focused interviews involve several people being brought together to discuss their views on a general topic that they have knowledge of or involvement in, while a focus group interview is confined to a specific topic area with an emphasis on the interaction within the group (Redmond and Curtis, 2009). Focus group interviews give the researcher the opportunity to study the ways in which members of the group collectively make sense of a topic and construct meanings around it (Bryman, 2004). However, as these groups are a qualitative research method, their focus will broaden beyond what people say to how they say it, the language they use and the intensity of their feelings about the topic area. The approach gives the researcher the opportunity to investigate participants’ reasons for holding a certain view; this is an important aspect of the dynamic of the focus group, where participants may answer a question but, after listening to others, decide to modify their answers (Stewart et al, 2007); participants
may change their minds and agree with views they would not have considered had they not had
the opportunity to hear the opinions of others (Stewart et al, 2007). The purpose is to understand
rather than infer, to determine the range rather than generalise, and to gain insight into how
people in the groups perceive situations rather than make statements about the population
(Krueger, 1994). Consequently, sampling in focus groups is purposeful because the researcher
selects participants based on the purpose of the study and because they have knowledge or
experiences that are helpful; they are, as Patton (1990) states, ‘information rich’ cases.

Planning and organising focus groups
When planning a focus group, researchers should reflect carefully on the purpose of the study, as
this frames the task of the focus group and all subsequent decisions the researcher will make
about the research project (Fern, 2001). Regardless of the type of focus group and whether it
forms part of a mixed method study or is the only means of data collection, careful preparation
will be required to ensure the interview runs to plan (Redmond and Curtis, 2009). The researcher
has to give careful attention and enough time to prepare. This covers the duration of the
interview, the selection of participants, the size of the group, preparing the environment,
conducting the focus group, supporting participants during the interview and their role as
moderator. These issues form the focus of the second article.

Participants
Focus groups are carried out when specific information is needed from people with certain
characteristics and similar knowledge about a particular topic. This is because individuals in a
group may be more willing to express views when they perceive that others are similar to them
(Krueger 1994, Litosseliti 2003). The characteristics of focus group participants will be decided
in line with the purpose of the research study and usually consist of biographical factors, such as
age, sex, educational background, and knowledge or experience of the topic under investigation.
It is essential that the people selected are willing and able to contribute the required information
(Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990). When deciding on a sample for a focus group, it is more
important to focus on reducing sample bias than on achieving generalisability (Morgan, 1997).
However, bias is only a problem if ignored—that is, if the data from a limited sample is
interpreted as being representative of the experiences and opinions of a larger population. Focus
group participants are frequently selected using purposive sampling (Vaughn et al, 1996;
Morgan, 1997), where the researcher selects participants based on their knowledge and expertise
of the subject under investigation (Talbot, 1995; Polit and Tatano Beck, 2006). Therefore, no
claims should be made that findings can be generalised to the larger population from which the
sample is selected. On a practical level, it is worth considering that peer leaders or established
leaders may have an exaggerated effect on a group discussion or dominate it.

Size of the focus group
Variations exist in the literature over the optimum size for a focus group. Bedford and Burgess
(2001) and Cronin (2001) suggest between four and eight participants, Morgan (1997), Bloor et
to twelve, while others state ‘approximately ten’ (Kitchin and Tate, 2000) or as many as fourteen
(Pugsley, 1996). While the number of people in a group can range from four to twelve, what a
researcher must consider is what the most workable size is, which depends on the background of
the participants, the complexity of the topic, and the expertise of the moderator (Krueger, 2006). Larger groups tend to work better with topics that do not evoke strong feelings and smaller groups are more advantageous when sensitive aspects are the focus or when the participants have considerable expertise in or experience of the topic (Krueger, 2006). Decisions on the size of the sample will also depend on the amount of information that each participant is able to contribute to a group discussion. If participants can only provide a small amount of information on the topic, it may be difficult to maintain a stimulating dialogue in a smaller group. In addition, if groups are too small, they can be dominated by one or two participants or make participants feel compelled to speak (Vaughn et al, 1996). Small groups should therefore only be used when the participants are willing and able to contribute to a meaningful discussion and interact with each other (Morgan, 1997).

The size of a focus group also depends on the topic and/or how much participants know about it, and the moderator’s ability to control the discussion and their experience of conducting focus groups. To allow participants to share their views and make their observations, Krueger and Casey (2000) suggest limiting the number to six to eight participants so the moderator can control the discussion. In addition, group dynamics will be different in a large group, as participants may feel they are unable to describe their experiences and make an effective contribution. Managing larger group discussions can be challenging for any researcher, especially if all participants are knowledgeable and involved in the topic (Morgan, 1997). Sometimes, small conversations between participants can occur or all participants may start to talk at the same time. Researchers planning to use a large group would be advised to use the services of an experienced moderator who will be skilled at managing the discussion without having to preserve discipline constantly. Whatever the decision regarding the size of the group, it is better to recruit more people than are required than to cancel a session because people have withdrawn. Morgan (1997) suggests over-recruiting by 20%, but this will depend on factors such as who the participants are, whether they are being paid for taking part and the location of the focus group interview.

Conclusion
The use of focus groups as a tool in nursing research is becoming increasingly popular and the guidance for preparing focus group research has been cited in this paper. Focus groups generate distinct data through group interaction and explore topics that may not be easy to explore in one-to-one interviews. A fundamental condition for their use is that they must suit the purpose of the research. Researchers can derive many benefits from using focus groups. One is that focus groups are an economical, fast and efficient method of obtaining data from multiple participants, and potentially increasing the overall number of participants in a qualitative study. However, they should not be used as a shortcut to individual interviews should these be required. Another advantage of focus groups is their socially oriented environment. However appealing a focus group may be, they cannot be taken lightly as considerable planning and preparation are needed if they are to be successful. The research question and research design ultimately guide how the focus group is constructed. Focus groups should include enough participants to yield diversity in the information generated, yet should not be too large because this can create an environment where participants do not feel comfortable sharing their thoughts, opinions, beliefs and experiences.
Key points

- Focus groups explore topics that may not be easy to explore in one-to-one interviews, and data is generated and collected in a group setting.
- Focus groups are useful in exploratory research where little is known about the topic under investigation.
- They are an economical, fast and efficient method of obtaining data from multiple participants, but need considerable planning to be successful.
- They must suit the purpose of the research and should not be used if individual interviews are what are required.
- Several factors need to be considered when deciding focus group size.
- Participants are often frequently selected using purposive sampling because of their knowledge of a topic. Findings cannot therefore be generalised.

References