Preparing for and conducting focus groups in nursing research: part 2

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Abstract
Focus group interviews are widely used in health research to explore phenomena and are accepted as a legitimate qualitative methodology. They are used to draw out interaction data from discussions among participants; researchers running these groups need to be skilled in interviewing and in managing groups, group dynamics and group discussions. This article follows Doody et al’s (2013) article on the theory of focus group research; it addresses the preparation for focus groups relating to the research environment, interview process, duration, participation of group members and the role of the moderator. The article aims to assist researchers to prepare and plan for focus groups and to develop an understanding of them, so information from the groups can be used for academic studies or as part of a research proposal.

Key words: Focus groups, Qualitative research, Research methodology

Introduction
Focus groups are a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher (Plummer-D’Amato, 2008). They have been widely used in research and can be used on their own or in association with other methodologies (Stewart et al, 2007). Within focus groups, a moderator or facilitator uses group dynamics and interactions as a means to gather data on a specific issue. The essence of focus groups is that they are a form of group interview that aims to create an understanding of the social dynamic and interaction between participants, through the collection of verbal and observational data. Focus groups are therefore different from other types of research as data is generated and collected through the group setting (Krueger and Casey, 2009). Focus group interviews are widely used to collect data in nursing research. They are particularly useful for exploring peoples’ knowledge and experiences, as they examine not only what people think but also how they think and why they think that way. Focus group interviews tap into the different forms of communication people use in daily interaction, including anecdotes, teasing, jokes and arguing. Gaining access to these forms of communication is beneficial as peoples’ attitudes and knowledge are not fully evident in responses to direct questions. Everyday forms of communication may tell us as much, if not more, about what people know or experience. Focus groups therefore often reveal levels of understanding that can remain untapped when other data collection techniques are used. Planning and preparation of the environment and the researcher’s role in the process is essential. This article addresses the steps novice researchers or students need to consider before running a focus group and will assist them in the process of conducting focus groups. It follows Doody et al’s (2013) article Focus Group Interviews in Nursing Research: Part 1, which addressed the theory of focus group research.

Preparing the environment
It is essential that researchers consider the importance of using an environment that is conducive to focus group interviews (Plummer-D’Amato, 2008). General aspects
such as the venue, equipment used and the role of the researchers need to be considered. A summary of factors to consider is listed in Box 1. Through addressing the factors listed in Box 1, researchers can create a relaxed, comfortable environment that facilitates discussion and data collection in a safe environment in which all participants are aware of the process and what is expected of them.

**Box 1. Environmental and conduct aspects for consideration in focus groups**

- The room should be of an adequate size, not too small to make it feel overcrowded, or too large, which will make voices echo.
- The temperature should not be too hot or too cold.
- There should be adequate lighting.
- Seating should be comfortable.
- Ensure all participants in the group can see each other (circle formation is advised).
- There should be a ‘do not disturb’ sign on the door.
- Ensure the location is away from excessive external noise.
- Telephones in the room should be unplugged.
- Ask participants to switch off their mobile phones, or, if anyone has to keep theirs on, to please put it on vibration mode.
- Record interviews with a tape recorder that has a high pick-up, multidirectional microphone that you have tested before the interview.
- Let participants know they can use each other’s names but, when transcripts are typed from the tape afterwards, they will be anonymous, and group code numbers or pseudonyms will be used.
- Tell the group that the moderator will take notes during the interview and that this is a reminder of follow-up questions, not notes about participants.

**The focus group process**

Obtaining data through focus group interviews requires the researcher to pay attention to the content of the discussion, as the objective is to collect data relevant to the topic under investigation (Morgan, 1997). Merton et al (1990) suggest four broad criteria for conducting effective focus group interviews (Box 2).

**Box 2. Criteria for conducting effective focus group interviews: Merton et al (1990): 12**

- The interview should address the maximum range of issues relevant to the topic; sometimes researchers unintentionally restrict the discussion by presuming which issues are important. The discussion should include issues the researcher already knows about and issues that have not been anticipated.
- The discussion should provide data specific to the topic and give detailed accounts of participants’ experiences.
- The discussion should promote interaction that leads to participants’ feelings being examined in some depth—the aim is to promote a discussion that is deep and rich, rather than vague and general.
- The moderator should take note of the personal context that participants describe when responding on a topic. The context in which participants
describe their experiences is important—these are the personal factors that make an individual describe an experience in a certain way. Often, people are unaware of their own perspectives until they interact with others. The whole point of a focus group is to create an environment that brings together a variety of these perspectives.

To conduct effective focus group interviews, researchers should consider the questions they wish to ask. These questions depend on the research question, the purpose of the study and the type of data required (Redmond and Curtis, 2009). With these aspects in mind, an interview guide should be developed by the researcher to serve as a road map, plotting the course of the focus group interview from start to finish (Vaughn et al, 1996). The structure of interview guides varies depending on whether an unstructured, structured or semi-structured approach is used. For example, unstructured interviews may include two or three broadly constructed questions or topics, which may be sufficient; in a more structured interview, there may be four or five questions or topics, with pre-planned probes for each (Morgan, 1997). A semi-structured approach will include a number of open-ended questions or topics to stimulate discussion, and the researcher will be free to probe responses and ask specific questions related to the responses that may not have been planned (Redmond and Curtis, 2009). Regardless of the interview style chosen, a good interview guide should allow a natural progression from general questions to those that are more specific (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990).

Vaughn et al (1996: 41) suggest that an interview guide should include: an introduction; a warm-up; clarification of terms; easy and non-threatening questions; more difficult questions; wrap-up; member check (providing members with an opportunity to verify their feelings/ideas); and closing statements. When drawing up the interview guide, the researcher should ensure that the questions are guided by the research question, the purpose of the study and the data required (Redmond and Curtis, 2009). While there are similarities to conducting individual research interviews, within focus groups interviews the essence is the group discussion and interaction. This group discussion facilitates an understanding of the social dynamic and interaction between participants through the collection of verbal and observational data.

**Duration of the focus group interview**

The duration will depend on the complexity of the topic under review and the number of questions to be discussed. Focus groups usually last 1–2 hours and their duration usually relates to whether the topic is specific or broad and the number of questions to be asked; only limited and superficial information will be collected if sufficient time is not made available for discussion (Plummer-D’Amato, 2008). In general, to encourage in-depth discussion of a topic, most focus groups last about two hours (Redmond and Curtis, 2009). To gauge the time required, the researcher can estimate the time needed to discuss each question to be covered and, if group members already know each other, less time is required for introductions. However, the researcher must remain aware that two hours is the general physical and psychological limit for people and, in most cases, focus groups should not last longer than this (Krueger and Casey, 2009).
Participation and group dynamics
Interaction between participants is the key aspect of a focus group, so its structure and composition must be given careful attention (Bloor et al, 2001). Structuring the group to match carefully selected categories of participants is called ‘segmentation’ (Morgan, 1997). Within the focus group interview, the researcher must ensure they give each member of the group the opportunity to contribute. Moreover, participants should feel comfortable talking to each other but a disparity in social background or status may prevent this (Redmond and Curtis, 2009). It is worth remembering that the objective is ‘homogeneity in background and not homogeneity in attitudes’ (Morgan, 1997). This is because, if all participants in a focus group interview had the same views, the discussion would have little value. In some circumstances, selecting a heterogeneous background may be appropriate (Vaughn et al, 1996). For example, when focus groups are being conducted for exploratory purposes, it might be appropriate to use a diverse group. The most common variables that are considered when planning to use homogenous or heterogeneous groups are sex, age, race and social class (Redmond and Curtis, 2009).

Another factor that must be considered is whether the group should be composed of strangers or acquaintances. As a general rule, strangers are preferable because individuals are more likely to discuss issues openly and willingly when they are among people they are unlikely to meet again (Vaughn et al, 1996). If participants know each other, this can potentially disrupt the dynamics of the group and inhibit participants’ responses (Plummer-D’Amato, 2008). For these reasons, the researcher must make choices based on the objectives or goals of the focus group within the overall study.

The role of the moderator
The role of the moderator is to carry out the focus group interview. The moderator is key to collecting rich and valid insights from the group participants (Stewart et al, 2007). Certain characteristics are important in a good moderator. These include having a pleasant disposition towards the participants, being a good listener and responding to nonverbal cues as well as to what is said (Redmond and Curtis, 2009). The moderator has many tasks to perform before, during and immediately after the interview. Krueger and Casey (2009) see the moderator’s role before the interview as welcoming participants, providing an overview of the topic and explaining the purpose of the interview. First names can be placed in front of participants or they can be given stickers with their names written on them. The moderator needs to outline the ground rules and say that only one person should speak at a time, then ask the group the first question—an introductory question—as a warm-up before asking more specific questions. The introductory question can be related to general matters such as the weather, travelling to the venue and traffic; while these have nothing to do with the topic under investigation, they make good icebreakers. As the focus group interview progresses, the moderator will ask questions based on the interview guide, which creates a focus on the topic of importance (Krueger, 2006). Morgan (1998) suggests that the order of these can vary but questions usually proceed from the general to the specific, with sensitive questions left until the end. Continuously directing the participants’ attention toward the topic of interest is usually necessary (Krueger, 2006).
While asking questions is a skill, listening is equally important (Fern, 2001) and, depending on the purpose of the interview and the moderator’s style, either or both non-reflective or reflective listening skills may be used. Non-reflective listening is a non-judgmental approach that requires minimal physical and psychological responses including non-verbal acknowledgements to the participants such as ‘mm-hmm’ and nodding the head or looking at someone to encourage them to say more (Fern, 2001). Minimal responses used by moderators encourage participants to talk freely and to do so for longer. This is in keeping with unstructured and empathetic moderating, as it encourages everyone to participate in the discussion (Redmond and Curtis, 2009). Reflective listening is a way of getting timid or reserved participants to talk, while ensuring the more dominant participants feel the moderator is really listening to them, so they may talk less (Fern, 2001). Reflective listening is also non-judgmental, and is aimed at getting to the heart of communication problems and misunderstandings by attempting to clarify what is being said. Fern (2001) discusses four types of reflective response to ensure the moderators’ understanding of what participants say is accurate (Table 1).

**Table 1. Four types of response used in reflective listening Fern (2001): 82**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clarifying</td>
<td>The moderator asks the speaker to clarify what was said.</td>
<td>This type of response shows that the moderator does not understand what the speaker means.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paraphrasing</td>
<td>This is restating what was said. The moderator restates the essence of the speaker’s response.</td>
<td>This response means making sure the moderator understands what the speaker intended to communicate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflecting feelings</td>
<td>The moderator mirrors feelings they think were expressed.</td>
<td>The feelings are what is important here, not the content of the speaker’s response.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summarising</td>
<td>This is about summarising the main points, feelings or both that the speaker expresses.</td>
<td>Important for playing back the points the speaker was attempting to make because not all people communicate logically.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Factors that influence the success of the focus group include the moderator’s style of questioning and personal appearance, and the time given to participants’ responses. Factors of equal importance but given less attention are the moderator’s body and other non-verbal language, eye contact and general warmth towards the group (Stewart et al, 2007). The task of the moderator is to listen actively, pick up on cues in what participants say or seem to want to say, and be sensitive to what they consider important. A moderator should focus on encouraging interaction rather than on talking and use prompts to encourage a view that is tentatively advanced and probe participants to allow them to fully express their views (Plummer-D’Amato, 2008). An important misconception is that moderators have to get through all the questions; in
reality, the important issue is that the main topic area is covered and that everyone has been encouraged to discuss it (Redmond and Curtis, 2009). For this to occur, moderators should not present themselves as experts, nor make assumptions; they should strike a balance between keeping quiet and knowing when to intervene to clarify what participants say and encourage interaction. At the end of the discussion and before concluding, moderators usually do two things. First, they will restate the purpose of the focus group and summarise what has been said. Second, they will ask a final, open question such as: ‘Our purpose this afternoon was to discuss. Do you think we have omitted anything?’ This is an important question that can stimulate additional and important discussion points (Morgan, 1996; Stewart et al, 2007; Krueger and Casey, 2009). Following the final question, moderators should thank all the participants for their time and contribution and finish the focus group.

**Conclusion**

The literature on focus groups in nursing research is growing and guidance on conducting focus groups has been detailed in this paper. However appealing focus groups may be, they are not something that can be undertaken lightly, as considerable planning and preparation are prerequisites for their success. A fundamental, necessary condition is that they must suit the purpose of the research, with the research question and research design ultimately guiding how the focus group is constructed. While focus groups generate distinct data through the process of group interaction, the contexts within groups can affect whether participants disclose certain information (Drahota and Dewey, 2008; Lambert and Loiselle, 2008). The questions used in focus group interviews are intended to disclose a range of feelings or thoughts; while the moderator tries to prevent participants from feeling pressure to conform, in some situations, the group might speak with one voice (Krueger, 2006). Skilful moderators make running a focus group look easy, as they smoothly move from one question to another, encouraging people to share their views freely in a supportive and non-threatening environment, encouraging the airing of diverse perceptions and viewpoints.

**Key points**

- In research using focus groups, a moderator uses group dynamics and interactions to gather data on an issue.
- Moderators need to be skilled in interviewing and in managing groups, group dynamics and group discussions. They should be able to listen actively, pick up on cues from participants and be sensitive to what group members consider important.
- The interview should address the maximum range of issues relevant to the topic, so the discussion is not restricted.
- The moderator does not have to get through all the questions; the important issue is that everyone has been encouraged to discuss the main topic.
- Focus groups require considerable planning, which will include the environment, the questions, the interview duration, participant selection and the moderator’s role.

**References**


