

Focus group discussions

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Short description

Focus Group Discussions falls under qualitative research. It serves to better understand local practices, perceptions, common attitudes, opinions or ideas. It involves gathering people from similar backgrounds or experiences together to discuss a specific topic of interest. It is a useful methodology to highlight aspects from the perspective of a specific social categories. However, participants might feel intimidated to express their opinions in front of other group members.

Tags/ keywords: Method, group, discussion, dialogue, collectivity.

Details

- It is important to define the group and the objectives of the discussion: each meeting is designed to be addressed to a specific social target (school teachers, households, farmers, waste collectors, etc.) and it is directed to a certain aim (understanding perception, practices, conflictual situations, etc.).
- A trained moderator (interviewer) leads a structured discussion of various topics of interest. The moderator must pay attention to providing each participant with an equal opportunity to express him/herself and, at the same time, should not take over the interviewees' space for their interaction. The researcher needs to be flexible and free of biases and prejudices.
- The discussions must be organized in familiar spaces and/or in neutral places to avoid conflictual situations. While during in-depth interviews respondents usually feel obligated to offer food and drinks, focus groups allow the researcher to reciprocate their collective hospitality providing for food and drinks.
- Each discussion can involve a small group of usually 5 to 10 people. Participants must be selected carefully to avoid the creation of conflictual situations or one of the group members being afraid of talking freely.

- In focus group discussion participants are free to talk with other group members; unlike other research methods, it encourages discussions with other participants and the moderator must carry also the responsibility of observing the interactions and power dynamics occurring during the discussion. In this regard, focus groups offer depth and variety to the discussion that would not be available through quantitative surveys or individual interviews.
- Focus group discussions are not static. The moderator can bring any changes to better facilitate the discussion, in particular if any new critical topic that the researcher had ignored emerges from the discussion (and better if there is 2 people, one facilitator and one person to take notes etc.). This dynamism reduces the formality of the activity and allows for breaking down the walls between the moderator and the interviewees.
- For this same reason, it is advised to record (video/audio) the session instead of writing notes during the discussion. Transcribe and analyse the discussion soon after.

Steps

1. Identify the group and the objectives of the discussion
2. Identify the moderator
3. Prepare in advance a list of questions and topics but allow them to be asked according to the priorities expressed by the interviewee in order to stress their view point
4. Select the right space and provide for food and drinks
5. Conduct the Focus Group Discussion
6. Transcribe, Analyse and Interpret Responses

Futher reading/(re)sources

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