Conducting Focus Groups –
A Brief Overview

www.methods.manchester.ac.uk/

- Theory of the methodology

- Practical implementation

- Hands on practical

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Changing Peoples Behaviour Group www.ccsr.ac.uk/cpb/

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The University of Manchester

CCSR is an interdisciplinary research centre in the School of Social Sciences at the University of Manchester.

- Rated 6* in the 2001 RAE
- Recognised for ESRC 1+3 postgraduate training

Our two main research groupings are:

- Social Statistics
- Population and Places

We are the home of two cross-disciplinary research groups:

- Confidentiality and Privacy Group (CAPRI)
- Manchester Social Networks Group (MSNG)

We also work closely with the Institute of Social Change, and host a range of projects:

- 1991 and 2001 Samples of Anonymised Records
- Quantitative Methods in the Social Sciences network
- Economic and Social Data Service Government
- an ESRC Regional Training Centre
- POPGROUP population forecasting software

News

New CCSR working paper: 'Sacrificing their Careers for their Families? An Analysis of the Penalty to Motherhood in Europe'

2008-2009 CCSR Short Courses - book online

CCSR's informal lunchtime seminar series

Autumn 2008 Seminar Series

Upcoming Events   All Upcoming Events

- 13 Oct : Study Group on Ethnicity, Religion and Migration
- 14 Oct : Simulation of Policy Change on the UK Gender Pay Gap
- 14 Oct : Local Conflict and Community Development; Projects in Indonesia: Part of the Problem or Part of a Solution?
- 21 Oct : Introduction to mixed models in longditudinal data analysis
- 21 Oct : Studying place effects on health by synthesising individual and area-level outcomes using a new class of multilevel models
- 28 Oct : Female Labour Force Participation and Household Composition in Taiwan

Publications   All Publications

- Quality assurance of census-based 2001 population estimates in England and Wales
- Voter Engagement in British South Asian Communities
- Ghettos of the mind: the empirical behaviour of indices of segregation and diversity
- Electoral Participation of South Asian Communities in England and Wales
- Strategic voting and constituency context: modelling party preference and vote in multiparty elections

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Changing People's Behaviour Research Group

The Changing People's Behaviour (CPB) research group at the University of Manchester comprises academics working in social science, economics, public health, psychology, environmental change, decision sciences and law.

This interdisciplinary group's work is focused on sharing research expertise and evidence in the field of behaviour change. In particular the work involves examining people's attitudes, intentions, motivations and behaviour and how these may change over time across the different areas of people's lives. Reviewing what has been shown to be effective in changing behaviour such as, for example, education, information, financial rewards and penalties, is a core area of interest, as is the ethics of different policy interventions.

Whether in relation to social attitudes and behaviour, such as, discrimination, anti-social behaviour, unhealthy eating, smoking, civic participation, volunteering and levels of recycling, changing people's behaviour is at the heart of much social research and government policy making. For example, certain types of people are more likely to modify their lifestyle following a diagnosis of ill health and certain types of people are more likely to recycle than others following an awareness raising campaign. However, why do some people change their behaviour in response to interventions and others do not? What underpins behaviour change?

The group includes: Prof Iain Buchan (Northwest Institute for Bio Health Informatics), Dr. Sarah Coterill (Institute for Political and Economic Governance), Dr. Mark Elliot (Centre for Census and Survey Research), Prof Aneez Esmail (Equalities Office and Medicine), Dr. Jane Green (Politics), Dr. Kingsley Purdam (Centre for Census and Survey Research), Dr. Dan Rigby (Economics), Dr. Paul Upham (Tyndall Centre for Climate Change) and Professor Jin Bo Yang (Decision Science Research Centre, MBS).

Selected readings for reference…

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This session is about the practical challenges of running a focus group…..

What are they?

Why use them and when?
Different opinions on focus groups?
Why are you using them?

Has anyone ever been in a focus group or moderated one? It will be valuable to draw on peoples experiences!

- A small group discussion focused on a particular topic and facilitated by a researcher/moderator

- "In focus groups, the goal is to let people spark off one another, suggesting dimensions and nuances of the original problem that any one individual might not have thought of. Sometimes a totally different understanding of a problem emerges from the group discussion" (Berg 2001: 115) (Tonkiss 2004).

- Useful for allowing participants to generate their own questions and concepts

- Crucially, group work explores how accounts are articulated, censured, opposed and changed through social interaction and how this relates to peer communication and group norms (Barbour and Kitzinger, 1999:5)

Aims and advantages of focus groups

- The **group** rather than individuals is the centre of out attention. Importance is placed on the **group context** for exploring the way social and cultural knowledge and meanings are produced. Hence, one of our interests is to understand how people articulate and justify, modify and negotiate their ideas in relation to others in the group.

- The researcher is particularly interested in what these group interactions imply about norms, meanings and values.

- Focus groups are thus ideal for the study of **normative understandings** that groups draw upon to reach their collective judgements.

- Focus groups can also yield data on uncertainties and ambiguities in meanings.

- The focus group thus places communication and interaction between group members (rather than between members and the moderator) at the centre of the research process.

- The role of the researcher is thus less important than in the one-to-one individual interview and the idea is that the focus group uncovers participant's own understandings and language.

Some Common Applications of the Focus Group Method

Many applications….

- Market research – for example in eliciting product user feedback or audience response to a product or advertisement.

- Frequently used by political parties to explore voting intentions and preferences within particular groups.

- Focus groups are often used to evaluate service provision and understand the experience of service users. So for example you may wish to carry out a focus group with hospital patients to discuss their experiences of treatment and how to improve services.

- Equally, focus groups can be used for purposes of participation and consultation. So… property developers or planners may carry out a focus group of local residents to assess their views and opinions regarding a new local development or facilities in their local community.

- Focus groups can be used to operationalise, test or pilot key concepts, questions or ideas.

- Focus groups may be used in a process of triangulation to complement other research methods or to inform the development of other research tools eg survey questions.

- Focus groups are also good ways of exploring issues, themes and contradictions that may have become apparent through other methods.

- You may use them to engage hard to reach groups who are unlikely to respond to a survey

Running a focus group

- Participants and incentives - *how do you get people to attend?*

- Question Schedule and Introductions

- Venue

- Moderator

- Note taking/recording

- Analysis

Role of the Moderator

Moderator's guide should include:

- Introduction and introductory activities (brief review of research goals, their right to leave, informed consent. Also demographic questionnaire).

- Basic rules of the focus group

- The questions

- Introductory exercise

You must try to 'bring out' more quiet/passive voices and 'bring down' more dominant or loud voices, without becoming a key player within the group.

Don't want too much control, very important. As too much interference will profoundly affect the group.

Avoid simultaneous discussions within the group

Make sure background noise is minimal.

Venue should be quiet and neutral

Ask participants not to talk over one another and encourage expression of different opinions

Your role is to facilitate and stimulate discussion, but not be a major part of it.

Make sure gatekeepers don't coerce individuals into participation and are aware of selection criteria

You will need to remind people before the event as non-attendance is high.

Some Limitations of focus groups…..

Not simply about getting people to agree about an issue

Not about generisable findings beyond the participants but about developing an understanding of the participants views.

They should be avoided where group conversation may create further conflict between already divided groups.

The group context can both encourage and inhibit discussion. It depends on the composition of the group and the topic in question.

There can be a tendency for atypical behaviours or extreme views to go unreported or under reported.

Group Composition

The composition of the group is one of the keys to the success of the focus group.

A key issue is whether to use pre-existing groups or to assemble a group of strangers based on key sampling criteria typically: gender, age, religion, shared experience of the topic/issue, class, status.

Often focus groups are a relatively homogenous group of people who don't know each other. This was seen as avoiding the pitfalls of established relations of power, which may lead some voices to be silenced.

For example, in her research of groups at risk from HIV/AIDS Kitzinger (1994) found that homophobic comments from straight men blocked out a discussion of risks for gay men.

There are several benefits to using pre-existing groups – not least because these established relations of power may be exactly what you are looking to observe.

Pre-existing groups can provide a very useful, ready-made sampling frame. So, for example, you may want to use a pre-existing workgroup, family group, health group, social/cultural group, support group or friendship group. Such groups will have their own internal pre-existing dynamics.

Sensitive Issues

- So groups of friends or same status individuals (patients, crime victims etc) may provide a relaxed environment.

- Those who hold strongly competing views (sexuality, religion for example) may cause extreme discomfort for one another, which may affect relations outside of the focus group context.

- There could be a risk of over disclosure, where individuals reveal more than they would like to the group, which again, may have serious implications beyond the group

- Can you promise confidentiality…of others…NO

Over disclosure

- People may get carried away in the heat of the moment. For example talking of sexual relationships/drug use and so on in front of friends. Work habits in front of employers etc…

- Can never be sure where a conversation will go

- Must ensure no harm comes to participants

Moderators checklist

- Ensure that everyone has had a chance to contribute

- At the end summarise and review key points

- Writing up - do it straight away

- What if only 3 or 4 people turn up! - carry on or reschedule?

- Incentives - give out at the end

Case Study – CC Focus Groups

We will hold a deliberative group discussion with around 15 residents in each case study area who have <u>some familiarity</u> with the Contract but who go beyond those representatives that are most directly involved.

The target participants will vary in each case, but is likely to include community organisations that were peripherally involved and individual residents who attended one-off events. We will work with the case studies to identify those people.

We will issue personal invites where possible, emphasising the independence of the discussion and research focus, and offer incentives or 'thank yous' of £20 per person for attending.

The focus groups will take place in a neutral local venue and will be facilitated by the lead researcher for the evaluation.

We will devise prompt questions and a structure for the discussions, on which we will consult with the client.

The lead researcher for that particular case study will support the focus group.

Discussion will be structured around: people's experiences of the Contracts process; impacts on local communities and citizens; perceptions of service delivery; relationships with local elected members; and levels of awareness of different neighbourhood governance structures and approaches.

Quick Practical

- I want you to experience either moderating of being a participant in a focus group!

- We need:

  two moderators

  note takers (often this would be done by moderator)

  participants

Practical Reflections

Challenges…..

Demands on the moderator?

Demands on the participants?

Top Tips

- Know the subject and issues that might be raised

- Remind people a week and also the day before

- Manage the discussion and those not contributing

- At the end review and summarise key points on flip chart

- Writing up - do it straight away

- Incentives - give out at the end

- Be a realistic about what is generisable from a focus group and how you write up the findings