

FAQ 34: What are some good approaches to conducting focus groups with children?

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What's the issue?

Using focus groups in social research is relatively new and was first understood as a utility method in the preparatory phase of quantitative studies, or to foster the interpretation of qualitative data (see Hoppe *et al.*, 1995: 102). In the late 1990s focus groups were still under-represented in the social sciences, even though they can look back on a long tradition in market and medical research, but the fields of application have now been expanded (see Gibbs, 1997: 1–3). Today, focus groups are an integral part of the methodological canon and well used to take advantage of group dynamics, tensions between the participants, and to gain more information compared to single interviews. However, they should not be regarded as a substitute for questionnaires or single interviews. They are ideally used in the course of method triangulation, for example, along with (qualitative or quantitative) questionnaires and single interviews.

Methods that are used for adults cannot be used in the same manner with children. Thus, when conducting focus groups with children, there are some other factors that need to be considered in addition to the traditional issues related to conducting focus groups mainly because of cognitive, linguistic, and psychological differences between children and adults (Gibson, 2012).

Common practice

The most important thing in successfully conducting focus groups is to create a trusting atmosphere between the participants themselves and between them and the moderator (the researcher that conducts the focus group). It may therefore be helpful to start with warm-up questions or an entry scenario. For children, an activity where they each create their own name tag and say something about themselves could be useful to establish a warm atmosphere and a sense of trust of the researcher and of the rest of the group. Once the discussion has started, the moderator should hold back as far as possible, to allow the participants to talk freely. Materials provided for discussion should also match the children's cognitive abilities – for conducting effective focus groups with children, a moderator, as well as having knowledge of interviewing skills and group dynamics, also needs experience of working with children, together with knowledge of their developmental processes.

In the implementation of focus groups, the participants are to be seen as experts and should be treated with respect. Children and adolescents particularly enjoy this status and are usually happy to hand over information. In this context it may be helpful to inform the participants about the research aims and to establish the ground rules at the beginning. A pleasant conversational setting will facilitate the implementation, as well as providing some food and drinks and relaxed and comfortable chairs or seating areas. When conducting focus groups with pupils or in school facilities a setting should be provided that is not reminiscent of a classroom (see also Bauer *et al.*, 2010: 18). Sometimes an unfamiliar setting may provoke anxiety, especially for younger children. Moreover, participants should be provided with a reward as appreciation of their help. When dealing with older teens the reward could be offered as a form of material compensation after the focus groups have taken place, but it should not be confused with payment for information. Younger children may receive small gifts.

In order to facilitate evaluation and to gain additional information, it is highly recommended to record the focus groups on video. The use of modern video and audio-recording devices does not require extensive technical training, but it opens up the visual level for analysis and interpretation. Furthermore, the use of name tags or badges may also be helpful in order to assign names later on. To put children at ease about recording the focus groups, it might be useful to allow them to familiarize themselves with the recording devices, possibly even recording themselves or their peers, and then playing it back to them so that they understand how they sound (Porcellato, Dughill, & Springet, 2002).

Questions to consider

Related to the research design and the research question as well as to the age of the children and adolescents, it has to be decided whether the focus groups should be homogeneous concerning sex, or a mixed group, and whether the moderator should be a woman or a man, or two researchers of different sexes together. Hoppe *et al.* (1995) suggest homogeneous groups when working with children. A second key issue in the organization of the groups is what age range should be represented. Most of the time it is best to avoid large age discrepancies (see Hoppe *et al.*, 1995). Morgan *et al.* (2002: 12–14) suggest more possibilities and opportunities for increasing the involvement of children or to break their potential reluctance, for example, helpful figures as alternative personalities (e.g. hand puppets; see Paus-Hasebrink *et al.*, 2004), role-playing scenarios, games, or pen-and-paper exercises.

With respect to the number of participants in children's focus groups, it is good to aim for 4–6 children per group and for children aged between 6 and 10. The number may be increased to 8 or more with older children, depending on the research question and aims. The duration of focus groups with children under the age of 10 should not be more than 45 minutes, while this may be extended to 60 minutes for older children (Gibson, 2012; Heary & Hennessy, 2002).

Consent for participation from the children's parents must be obtained prior to the focus groups. The assent of the children should also be sought. Both should include an explanation of the procedures, and information about how the material provided will be used, together with information about the recording of the interview. Participants should also be allowed to leave the focus group before it ends, and given that minors may be involved, it is important that parents are aware of this and can be accessed if necessary.

A further ethical consideration for focus groups with children is the identification and monitoring of the participants' stress levels. This is usually a role held by the assistant moderator who also takes notes and assists the focus group without being an active participant. Their role needs to be explained to the children to ensure that the children do not feel observed or suspicious.

Pitfalls to avoid

A focus group is not to be understood as an extended form of an interview. It is therefore not your role to ask questions directly to all participants; rather, you must take care to engage all participants equally, and to avoid leaders in a group dominating the conversation. To realize this, strong moderation may be required, but ideally the participants will start a real conversation and discuss the topics amongst themselves.

As previously stated, it is a good idea to record the focus group on video. If this is not possible for technical or legal reasons, the co-researcher could take detailed notes, as otherwise it will not be possible to assign the voices of the individuals in the evaluation.

Example of a study: Youth – Media – Violence

This study (see Bauer *et al.*, 2010) on violence in new media focused on the experiences of adolescents with cybermobbing, violent computer games, and videos with violent content. It asked for forms, methods, and the framing conditions of the reception of violence in school and media as well as communication about violence. A focus group design therefore seemed particularly useful. However, the researchers chose a slightly different variation and used a workshop design. The workshops consisted of 8–10 students from one class, and were mixed groups in order to reflect the class dynamic. The students were carefully selected in cooperation with the teacher. In the workshops, which lasted 5–6 hours, the researchers used techniques such as mind-mapping, and watched videos containing violence with the students, in order to discuss them later. Three researchers were present, one working as moderator and two as observers, who focused on the verbal and non-verbal interaction and on crucial phases of the discussions. This study can therefore be regarded as an innovative, extended form of a focus group setting, nevertheless drawing on its basic methodological principles. It is important to note that these basic principles should always be considered, but scientific methods are subject to change, and may and need to be adapted to the specific research questions.

Example of a study: Using focus groups to discuss sensitive topics with children

This study (see Hoppe *et al.*, 1995) focused on the attitudes and beliefs of children towards HIV and AIDS. Focus groups were used as a preliminary, explorative tool to identify the knowledge about the topics and to generate hypotheses. In the group discussions, two moderators (male and female) were used. The questions were carefully developed in cooperation with an advisory board consisting of parents, AIDS experts, and teachers. In the discussions, rules of discussion were established and a focus was put on an easy warm-up phase. After the discussions, children were allowed to ask questions themselves, which is good practice, especially when dealing with sensitive topics. The study is therefore a good example of a classical focus group design, and features all the important aspects of focus groups, as outlined above.

References and further resources

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