

## **ELEMENTS OF A GOOD FOCUS GROUP- a quick overview**

### **1. Group size – keep it small**

Focus groups are usually pretty small to allow participation from all members. One study says that the recommended number of people per group is usually six to ten but some groups go as high as fifteen. (Gibbs, 1997,p.4).

### **2. Time – keep it short**

Researchers generally agree on fixing a period of 1 ½ to 2 hours. (Flores, Alonso 1995, p. 93, Kreuger, Casey 2003 p.64). This time allows for discussion but also accounts for potential fatigue that can set in with longer sessions.

**3. Location/set-up. – in a circle** “The place where the focus group congregates is not one of the most important aspects of applying focus group techniques. A room, with comfortable chairs, in which people sitting around a table can talk and keep visual contact with each other is considered good enough to develop a discussion” (Flores, Alonso, 1995, p. 93). To avoid negative or positive associations with a particular site, building, or location, however, neutral locations can be helpful (Powell, Single, 1993, p.501)

**4. Group composition - staying focused.** The main composition issue with focus groups is that the members have the defined characteristics that the research requires (Flores, Alonso, 1995, p. 91; Bromley, Fisher 2000 p.14). So for at least one criterion the group is homogenous, but may not be in many other ways. Usually focus group organizers avoid using participants that know each other or the moderator (Flores, Alonso, 1995 p. 91). Diversity in the group is desirable as extremely homogenous groups may produce redundant discussion (Bromley, Fisher,2000, p. 14).

**5. Design – good planning required.** The good design will include not just attention to the framing of the questions but also to strategies and tools for triggering good discussions, such as using scenarios, case histories, visualization exercises and other methods. The design will also allow for time for check ins, ground rules, possible breaks, as well as time for the consent forms and other logistics. The design phase will also consider issues such as childcare, and food. If there are focus groups being conducted in multiple languages or if there will be translation, these issues are addressed in the design phase.

**6. Facilitation process-** Focus group moderating requires skills and knowledge of the topic. (Bromley, Fisher, 2000, p. 17; Flores, Alonso 1995, p. 95). There are processes in the planning/design that can aid facilitation but a good facilitator should “be at least capable of creating a relaxed atmosphere in which people can freely talk”. (ibid).

**7. Ethics** – Focus groups are a form of social science research and face the same ethical issues of most other social science methods (Gibbs, p 8 citing Homan). All participants must sign a consent form, and that form should be clear about the scope and intent of the project and the right of participants to withdraw. During the focus groups only first names should be used. While the confidentiality by the research team should be assured, there is no way to control the confidentiality by the participants. Participants should be encouraged to keep the content of the focus group confidential but there is no way to enforce this practice. It must be clear that participants cannot be guaranteed to have confidentiality.

**8. Recording data** – Focus groups are recorded in some way, and “audio recording is usually considered less intrusive than video recording or another persons direct observation”. (Flores, Alonso, 1995, p 95). Sometimes a separate note-taker is used though a second person can act as a possible influence on participants (ibid).

**9. After focus group-** Data should be labeled with time, date and location of the focus group and compiled consistently according to the research design.

## References

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