The Focus Group Method

Five Articles from *Research Design Review* Published in 2018

Margaret R. Roller

Research Design Review – www.researchdesignreview.com– is a blog first published in November 2009. RDR currently includes more than 200 articles concerning quantitative and qualitative research design issues. As in recent years, the articles published in 2018 generally revolved around qualitative research. The five 2018 articles included in this paper pertain to the focus group method. Two of these articles discuss the key differentiating attribute of focus groups, i.e., participant interaction and engagement, and the important role this attribute plays in the integrity of the research. It is the interactive component of the focus group method that raises questions concerning mode, which is the subject of two other articles in this compilation. Specifically, these articles address the strengths and limitations of the in-person and online asynchronous focus group modes. The fifth article in this paper discusses the concept of saturation in the context of determining the "right" number of focus groups to conduct for a particular study. Saturation has been discussed before in RDR, with the emphasis being on the idea that saturation alone is an inadequate measure by which to derive the number of events and, in fact, as a sole measure, saturation jeopardizes data quality.

www.rollerresearch.com

rmr@rollerresearch.com

January 2019

Table of Contents

(Organized by publication date)

Seeking Interaction in the Focus Group Method 1
March 28, 2018

Credibility & the Online Asynchronous Focus Group Method 3
April 26, 2018

Beyond Saturation: Using Data Quality Indicators to Determine the Number of Focus Groups to Conduct 4
May 30, 2018

The Social Environment & Focus Group Participants' Willingness to Engage 7
September 29, 2018

Limitations of In-person Focus Group Discussions 9
November 20, 2018

Seeking Interaction in the Focus Group Method

There is an article that ran in *Research Design Review* back in 2013 having to do with the interactions that ensue in focus group discussions. Specifically, this article addresses the idea that participants' interactions have a significant impact on the outcomes of focus group discussions and yet this "facet of the focus group method…is largely ignored in the analysis and reporting of group research." This article goes on to give an example of a way to think about the interaction effect in the focus group method.

Missing from this article is the question of whether – or the extent to which – interactions even exist in the discussions being analyzed. It seems self-evident that a "discussion" would involve two or more people exchanging ideas and thoughts – that is, an interaction. And yet, one of the most difficult skills to teach in focus group training is how to ignite an interactive environment where participants engage with the moderator as well as with each other. Moderators-in-training are coached on various skills and techniques to spur thoughtful discourse in face-to-face* focus groups and how to create an "engaged discussion environment," but there remains a certain reticence among trainees to exercise these newly learned tactics.

Instead, many moderators gravitate to an approach best described as a series of one-on-one interviews. The moderator asks a question and then goes around the table asking for a response from each individual. As each group participant completes a response, the moderator simply resets her or his brain and moves on to the next person. In the end, the moderator has fulfilled the job of hearing from each participant but has actually learned very little.

The purpose of a focus group discussion is to bring together similar (in some cases, divergent) types of people (in terms of demographics, psychographics, product/service use, etc.) and learn about each of them related to the subject matter but also about their collective attitudes and opinions that open the door to new discoveries. It is this interactive journey that the moderator hopes to achieve in a focus group discussion, a journey that takes the moderator to remote and otherwise hidden points of discovery that are only accessible by the exchange and engagement of the participants.

The question has been raised by moderators-in-training if the techniques utilized to stimulate interaction don't in fact serve to slant the discussion, introducing unwanted bias in the outcomes. For instance, if the moderator attempts to fuel an interactive discussion by asking participants to comment on what others have said – "So John, what do you think about David's idea to reduce the price of prescription drugs?" – does this actually push participants into opinions they may not have had otherwise?

Yes, maybe so. But maybe not. Either way, the moderator is learning how ideas and attitudes percolate among people in the target population segment and, importantly, how their ideas and attitudes may or may not shift over the course of the discussion *as a direct result of* the interactive environment. This is important learning. This is learning that does not happen in an in-depth interview. This is the journey that the moderator is seeking and is nurturing throughout the discussion. In the end, it is the reason we conduct focus group discussions in the first place.

* The skills and techniques required of online discussions are unique from the face-to-face mode.

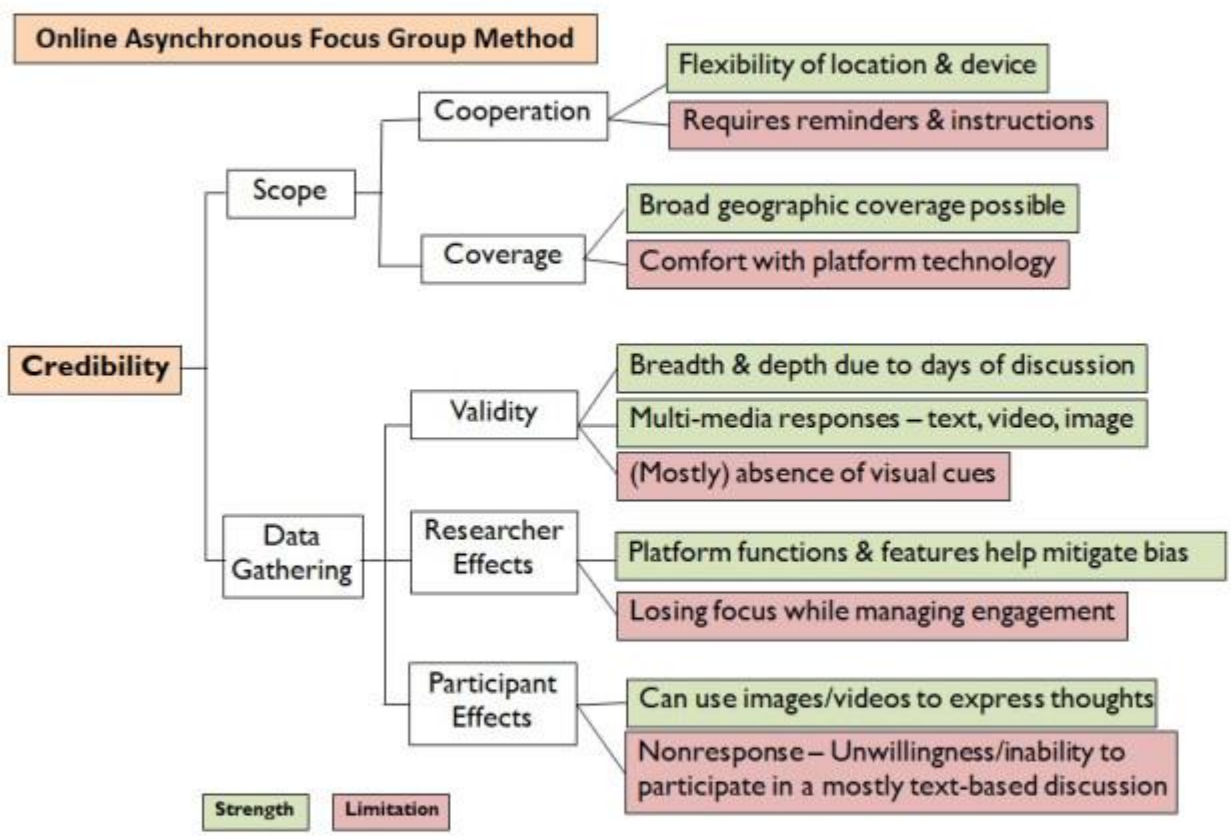
Image captured from: https://forrestbrown.co.uk/news/chatbots-look-whos-talking-now/

Credibility & the Online Asynchronous Focus Group Method

The Total Quality Framework (TQF) offers researchers a way to think about basic research principles at each stage of the qualitative research process – data collection, analysis, reporting – with the goal of doing something of value with the outcomes (i.e., the usefulness of the research). The first of the four components of the TQF is Credibility which pertains to the data collection phase of a qualitative study. A detailed discussion of Credibility can be found in this 2017 *Research Design Review* article.

This article – and in similar fashion to the companion articles associated with the other three components of the TQF – explains the chief elements that define Credibility, stating that "credible qualitative research is the result of effectively managing data collection, paying particular attention to the two specific areas of Scope and Data Gathering." Although a great deal of the discussions thus far have been centered on traditional qualitative methods, the increasingly important role of technological solutions in qualitative research makes it imperative that the discussion of Credibility (and the other TQF components) expand to the digital world.

The online asynchronous focus group ("bulletin board") method has been around for a long time. It is clearly an approach that offers qualitative researchers many advantages over the face-to-face mode while also presenting challenges to the integrity of research design. The following presents a snapshot of the online bulletin board focus group method through the lens of the two main ingredients of the TQF Credibility component – Scope and Data Gathering. This snapshot is not an attempt to name all the strengths and limitations associated with the Credibility of the online asynchronous focus group method but rather highlight a few key considerations.



Beyond Saturation: Using Data Quality Indicators to Determine the Number of Focus Groups to Conduct

The following is a modified excerpt from [Applied Qualitative Research Design: A Total Quality Framework Approach](#) (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, pp. 130-131).

Qualitative researchers are routinely faced with the decision of how many in-depth interviews (IDIs) or focus group discussions to conduct. This decision often revolves around time-cost-benefit trade-off considerations fueled by the tension between neither wanting to conduct too many nor too few IDIs or focus groups.

When it comes to the focus group method, the decision of how many group discussions to conduct is based on any number of factors and will vary depending on the situation for each study. However, a few of the critical factors that the prudent researcher will think about when considering the number of discussions at the outset for any focus group study are the:

- **Geographic range of the target population**, e.g., whether the target population for in-person groups is located in one city or spread across the U.S.
- **Depth of the discussions**, i.e., the number of topics/issues and questions expected to be covered to satisfy research objectives. For example, fewer group discussions may be necessary if the primary research objective is to learn mothers' preferences for shelf-stable baby food, while a greater number of groups may be needed if the objective is to understand mothers' preferences across all types of baby food and, specifically, to investigate the priority they place on nutritional and organic foods.
- **Homogeneity or heterogeneity of the group participants**. Using the example above, more groups will be required if the mothers of interest range in age from 25-40 years as well as in income level and if there is reason to believe that attitudes and behavior vary across these demographic characteristics.
- **Variation in results that is expected** to occur across the different focus groups that will be conducted. If there is little variation expected from one group to another (e.g., if group participants are highly homogeneous, or the attitudes among participants in New York are not expected to be different than those in Dallas), then only a few focus groups may suffice. If there is a great deal of variation expected, then many focus groups will be required to fully measure the range of experiences, attitudes, and knowledge the participants will have to impart in the discussions.
- **Project schedule** and amount of available time to complete the study.
- **Research budget** that is available to fund the study.

It is this assortment of factors that cause qualitative researchers to generally disagree on the optimal number of focus groups. Krueger and Casey (2009, p. 21) state that "the accepted rule of thumb is to plan three or four focus groups with each type or category of individual." Kitzinger (1994) and her colleagues conducted 52 group discussions concerning the media coverage of AIDS among broad, diverse population groups across England, Scotland, and Wales; and Peek and Fothergill (2009) reported conducting 23 discussions with Muslim American students due, in part, to the need to segment groups by gender. Yet others, such as McLafferty (2004) use the concept of saturation (i.e., conducting group discussions only to the point when no new information is being gleaned) as their "guiding principle" when determining if the appropriate number of groups have been conducted.

Although the considerations listed above may assist the researcher during the research design phase to establish the number of groups to conduct, it does little to help evaluate the set-upon number when in the field. To be clear, it can be expensive and disruptive to the research process to cancel or add group sessions to a focus group study that is underway (particularly, when conducting in-person discussions that require reserving and making arrangements with brick-and-mortar facilities); however, it is important for the focus group researcher to assess all the components of his or her research design – including the number of group discussions – throughout the process.

The question of how many group discussions to conduct raises a host of issues associated with data quality. Similar to IDIs*, the researcher's assessment of the number of focus groups to conduct while in the field goes way beyond the concept of data saturation and takes into account quality concerns such as the degree to which:

- All key constructs have been covered in all discussions.
- The moderator clearly understands the feedback and responses obtained in each discussion.
- Research objectives have been met.
- Variations in the data can be explained.
- Reflection reveals that the moderator maintained objectivity throughout all discussions.
- The data inform the subject matter.
- Triangulation confirms or denies the researcher's initial hypotheses.
- The discussions have divulged a story that explains the research question for each of the population segments or sub-groups.
- Opportunities for further research have emerged from the discussions.

An important additional component to this assessment, that is *unlike* that for IDIs, is the interactivity or group dynamics within the discussions. Specifically, the researcher needs to carefully consider the degree to which participants in all groups equally shared their experiences and thoughts during the discussions. If, for instance, one or more focus groups were dominated by a small number of participants who were outspoken on the issues, the researcher should be cautious when assessing the value of these discussion groups (in terms of the credibility of measurement) and consider these dominant-participant groups in the determination of the number of groups to conduct.

* See "Designing a Quality In-depth Interview Study: How Many Interviews Are Enough?"

Krueger, R. A., & Casey, M. A. (2009). *Focus groups* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Kitzinger, J. (1994). The methodology of focus groups: The importance of interaction between participants. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, *16*(1), 103–121.

Peek, L., & Fothergill, A. (2009). Using focus groups: Lessons from studying daycare centers, 9/11, and Hurricane Katrina. *Qualitative Research*, *9*(1), 31–59.

McLafferty, I. (2004). Focus group interviews as a data collecting strategy. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, *48*(2), 187–194.

Image captured from: https://asure-chan.deviantart.com/art/Saturation-395888724

The Social Environment & Focus Group Participants' Willingness to Engage

The following is a modified excerpt from [Applied Qualitative Research Design: A Total Quality Framework Approach]() (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, pp. 148-150).

Beyond discussion guide development and the effects of the moderator, there is another critical component that threatens the quality of data gathered in the focus group discussion method: the participants themselves. The participants in a group discussion face a more daunting social environment than in-depth interviewees, an environment in which participants are typically expected to meet (in-person, on the phone, or online) and engage with a group of strangers. At the minimum, participants in a dyad find themselves among two other individuals they have never met (the moderator and other participant); and, in the opposite extreme, participants in an online asynchronous group may be one of 10 or 12 or more people who have been asked to join the discussion.

As with the in-depth interview (IDI) method, focus group participants in any mode (i.e., in-person, phone, or online) may threaten the integrity and credibility of group discussion data by their unwillingness or reluctance to divulge certain information, leading them to say nothing or to make an inaccurate statement. For instance, in some focus group studies, what people do *not* know (or have not done) is a central part of what the study is exploring (e.g., recruiting people who have not been involved with a local nonprofit organization to learn about their awareness and perceptions of this organization). When this is the case, the moderator must use rapport-building skills not only to help participants feel comfortable with the moderator but, importantly, to also make participants feel comfortable with each other so that less aware or knowledgeable participants are not afraid to comment. Establishing rapport in the socially more complex research environment of the group discussion is essential to creating an atmosphere where participants feel free to express their doubt or lack of awareness, where they are comfortable admitting to the moderator and to the other participants, "I am not aware of any urgent care medical facilities in our city" or "I don't recall seeing or hearing anything about that organization." Participants' lack of knowledge on any topic of interest is an important research finding, but it is one that is unlikely to be detected accurately without the support and rapport fostered by the moderator. By capturing the "I don't know" response, when it is an accurate reflection of a participant's position on an issue, the moderator has added to the credibility of the final outcomes.

What about the participant who *does* know the answers to the moderator's questions but is unwilling to share that information? This may happen if the participant believes that the questions being asked or the topic area is of a highly personal or sensitive nature, or a subject matter governed by certain social norms—such as alcohol use, racial profiling, church attendance, and healthy eating—that may pressure the participant to respond in a socially desirable (or acceptable) manner. As with the IDI method, rapport building plays an important role in creating a trusting environment (whether it is in-person, on the phone, or online) in which group participants feel safe in speaking about sensitive issues or in simply saying, “I would prefer not to talk about that.”

It is because of this necessity to create an environment in which participants are willing to engage with the moderator and with each other that the ability to quickly build rapport with group participants and then maintain it throughout the discussion session is a necessary skill of all moderators.

Image captured from: https://www.bu.edu/research/articles/an-app-for-understanding-schizophrenia/

Limitations of In-person Focus Group Discussions

The following is a modified excerpt from [Applied Qualitative Research Design: A Total Quality Framework Approach](#) (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, pp. 116-119).

The interactive, dynamic aspect of the focus group discussion method is its greatest potential strength as well as its greatest potential liability. This is especially the case in the face-to-face, in-person mode where the close physical proximity of participants can unleash any number of factors that will threaten data quality if left unchecked.

One of the most important factors is the **caliber of the discussion**; specifically, the extent to which all participants have a fair chance of voicing their input. This is critical because the success of the group discussion method hinges on generating a true discussion where everyone present participates in a dialogue with the other group members and, to a lesser degree, with the moderator. A true participatory discussion, however, can be easily jeopardized in the social context of the in-person focus group (as well as the online synchronous discussion mode) because one or more participants either talk too much (i.e., dominate the discussion) or talk too little (i.e., are hesitant to express their views). In either case, the quality of the data will be compromised by the failure to capture the viewpoints of all participants, leading to erroneous interpretations of the outcomes.

The potentially negative impact that the face-to-face group interaction can have on data quality is an important consideration in qualitative research design, yet this impact—or, the effect of group interaction on the research—is often overlooked when conducting the analyses and reporting the outcomes. Researchers who have explored the **role of interaction** in focus group research include Grønkjær et al. (2011) and Moen, Antonov, Nilsson, and Ring (2010). Grønkjær et al. analyzed the "interactional events" in five focus groups they conducted with Danes on the use and perceptions of alcohol and determined, for example, that "disagreements between participants can function as a catalyst to keep the focus group discussion going" (p. 26). Moen et al. used an interaction "template" contrived by Lehoux, Poland, and Daudelin (2006) to analyze focus groups conducted with patients and physicians concerning their perceptions of multiple medicine use. Interaction effects, and specifically the Lehoux, Poland, and Daudelin template, are discussed more fully in this *RDR* post.

An important aspect of the interaction effect is the **influence the moderator has on group dynamics**. In addition to the many factors associated with interviewer bias and training in the in-depth interviewing method, there is also the issue of how the moderator manages the group interaction and how this management affects the direction of the outcomes. For instance, in their group discussions concerning alcohol use in Denmark, Grønkjær et al. (2011) emphasized the importance of the moderator's "continuous assessment of the interactions between various participants" (p. 25), while maintaining the status of moderator and resisting the urge to speak as a health professional by interrupting the interaction with expert knowledge.

Another limitation with many in-person focus groups is the **low level of cooperation** that is often achieved when recruiting people to attend a particular session. This may be because people are reluctant (or too shy or socially self-conscious) to agree to spend 90 minutes or 2 hours interacting with complete strangers, or because face-to-face focus groups are held at a central location, mandating that all participants attend at the same place and the same time. There may be people in the target population who are invited to participate in a group discussion but who refuse (despite the offer of a cash incentive payment) because of scheduling conflicts or the inconvenience of traveling to a central facility. The logistics can be particularly troublesome for people with disabilities, health issues, or no means of transportation. Linked to this lower level of initial cooperation is the reality that people who do agree to participate in an in-person discussion may not actually show up due to unexpected scheduling conflicts, transportation difficulties, or just a last-minute unwillingness to venture from home or office to travel to the location of the group session. In the end, the researcher must seriously consider the idea that the people who elected to attend the in-person focus group may differ in significant ways from those who chose not to cooperate with the research.

Grønkjær, M., Curtis, T., de Crespigny, C., & Delmar, C. (2011). Analysing group interaction in focus group research: Impact on content and the role of the moderator. *Qualitative Studies*, *2*(1), 16–30.

Lehoux, P., Poland, B., & Daudelin, G. (2006). Focus group research and "the patient's view." *Social Science & Medicine*, *63*(8), 2091–2104.

Moen, J., Antonov, K., Nilsson, J. L. G., & Ring, L. (2010). Interaction between participants in focus groups with older patients and general practitioners. *Qualitative Health Research*, *20*(5), 607–616.

Image captured from: https://www.seton.com/reflective-warning-signs-swerving-car-symbol-vc1687.html