

Knowledge Synthesis Methods

14. Focus groups¹

Summary of method

Structured discussion of an issue by a small group six to ten of people, led by a skilled moderator. The group is purposively selected usually to involve different stakeholders and/or potentially differing perspectives. The joint discussion allows participants to consider and react to arguments put forward by other participants so it allows examination of group dynamics and opinion formation.

Focus groups are regarded as an appropriate method for evaluating attitudes, knowledge and experiences, although features of the focus group method should be reported to allow better interpretation of results (Orvik *et al.* 2013). Focus groups can also be used to gather information from a specific group, to build scenarios in a choice experiment method for instance, or test questions or issues for a quantitative survey.

Orvik A, Larun L, Berland A, Ringsberg KC (2013). *Situational factors in focus group studies: a systematic review*. *Int J Qual Methods* 12:338–358.

Key references

There are many free online resources providing guidance on how to conduct focus groups. For example, Slocum (2003) provides detailed guidance on how to run focus groups.

Freeman (2006) provides a useful summary of advice on best practice for focus groups in research, arguing that best practice differs according to the underlying assumptions about the nature of knowledge being sought.

Freeman, T. (2006). *“Best practice” in focus group research: Making sense of different views*. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 56(5), 491–497.

Slocum, N. (2003). *Participatory Methods Toolkit. A practitioner’s manual*. United Nations University, King Baudouin Foundation and the Flemish Institute for Science and Technology Assessment.

Available from: http://archive.unu.edu/hq/library/Collection/PDF_files/CRIS/PMT.pdf Accessed 29/01/2017.

¹ A guidance note from Dicks LV, Haddaway N, Hernández-Morcillo M, Mattsson B, Randall N, Failler P, Ferretti J, Livoreil B, Saarikoski H, Santamaria L, Rodela R, Velizarova E, and Wittmer H. (2017). *Knowledge synthesis for environmental decisions: an evaluation of existing methods, and guidance for their selection, use and development – a report from the EKLIPSE project*.

Examples of application

Saynajoki E-S, Heinonen J, Junnila S (2014). *The Power of Urban Planning on Environmental Sustainability: A Focus Group Study in Finland*. Sustainability 6 (10), 6622-6643.

Focus groups	
Cost	Staff time: 2 days per focus group FTE Travel expenses and venue costs for group members
Time required	Event itself 0.5 to 1 day for each focus group. A series of focus groups probably 2 weeks to 1 month, to allow for selecting group members and settings
Repeatability	Low
Transparency	Low to moderate. Reporting of methods tends to be poor (Orvik <i>et al.</i> 2013)
Risk of bias	High. The method exploits group dynamics, so it very subject to social biases, as well as the bias from group member selection
Scale (or level of detail)	Good: local/regional More problematic: national/EU-level as it then depends on how well representatives represent their constituencies
Capacity for participation	Moderate to high. Breadth could be good, if a representative sample of stakeholders/participants but depth depends heavily on the ways in which the process is organised and facilitated
Data demand	Stakeholder analysis, and analysis of the context (what is the problem, what is the political context), visualisation tools like maps and data about issues at stake
Types of knowledge	All types of knowledge can be captured. Tacit
Types of output	Descriptive accounts, judgements, information about interests, concerns and values
Specific expertise required	Excellent process organisation and facilitation skills

Strengths	Weaknesses
Low cost and quick	High risk of bias
Allows detailed evaluation of opinion and attitudes at local/regional scale	Not necessarily representative or accurate
The structured process allows involvement of a range of stakeholders	Important groups can be excluded if disenfranchised, because it is face to face
Can be accommodated to evolving circumstances	Risk of conflict; challenging to handling differing views

