



The Essentials of Focus Groups

FACT SHEET



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The Essentials of Focus Groups

In community-based research (CBR) it is useful to understand the research data gathering method of Focus Groups. The essence of the focus group technique is to conduct interviews with small groups of people who are encouraged by the group leader/facilitator to talk about the issue(s) of interest in the research study. Focus group interviews follow an “interpretive approach”, where the aim is to gather data and observe how people interact in their social worlds. They have the advantage of making use of group dynamics to stimulate discussion, gain insights, and generate ideas in order to pursue a topic or issue in greater depth (Peat 2002, Creswell 2003). They can be used to examine not only what people think, but how they think and why they think in that way.

Instead of interviewing one person at a time, focus groups bring together a carefully selected collection of people in a session led by a facilitator. The facilitator asks key questions to learn the sentiments of the group and the reasons for their views. One hope embedded in the use of focus groups is that by using their own words and their own framework, participants’ may increase their involvement as change agents in the affairs that affect their communities. (Denzin, p. 848) This is a useful method for community-based research projects. When working within the Aboriginal community, focus groups are a tool for respecting oral traditions and story telling as a means for sharing important information.

Focus groups have four general purposes:

- To gather preliminary information;
- To help develop questionnaire items for conducting a survey;
- To test preliminary plans or ideas; and/or
- To understand reasons behind a particular phenomenon.

Focus groups are a useful technique for exploring cultural values, and beliefs about health, illness and disease. The focus group method is popular in health promotion research among different cultural groups, in that there is exploration of concepts of illness causation, prevention and health knowledge. Focus groups are similar to talking circles in First Nations and Métis traditions, thus participants may feel more comfortable with this method. Focus groups can be used in Aboriginal community-based research to seek out the ‘worldview’ of Aboriginal peoples. In Aboriginal community-based research involving HIV/AIDS, the focus group can also be used to explore the experiences and perceptions of Aboriginal persons living with HIV/AIDS (APHAs).

There are no guidelines about the number of focus groups to aim for in a research project. Many researchers aim for between three and 10 sessions when gathering data, but this is dependent on the complexity of the research topic or issue being investigated. A focus group will typically include between three to twelve participants, and a group leader/facilitator (e.g. the researcher) who will use an unstructured interview guide (topic/question list) to stimulate and guide discussion.

Focus group sessions usually run between one to two hours in duration.

This is a method that can be either formal or informal. As pointed out in Denzin and Lincoln’s Handbook (2002), focus groups alter the balance of power and reduce the distance between the researcher and the participants. The many voices in the group will serve to limit the control the researcher has over the conversation. The facilitator needs to strike a balance between moderating and directing the flow of conversation. A focus group leader should be trained and skilled at creating a relaxed atmosphere, leading group discussions and handling conflict, as well as drawing out quiet participants. Challenges of a group interview include the need to stop one person, or a small group within the group, from dominating the session. Taking steps to obtain responses from the entire group will ensure the fullest coverage of the topic.

Issues of confidentiality take on a different dynamic with a focus group. Within the group people may already know each other; setting group expectations regarding conduct and confidentiality after the session are key first steps in the process. Focus groups also benefit from being carefully composed and balanced in relation to the characteristics of respondents to prevent people from feeling isolated. It is wise to consider a balance in relation to age, gender, and ethnic status of participants. It may be necessary to have same gender, age range or special conditions in order for the atmosphere to be open and relaxed. For example, young First Nation, Métis or Inuit participants who are living with HIV/AIDS may feel more at ease in a group of peers, rather than with non-APHAs. When dealing with sensitive issues a focus group can create a supportive and validating setting for people to speak out. However, if the topic is very personal this method may simply not be appropriate. Focus groups are based on the delivery of a broad question with minimal intervention from the facilitator. The focus group sessions may be either recorded (audio-tape or video-tape) or noted (or both) and then analyzed later.

The Women’s Research Centre in Vancouver offers the following guidelines for community groups about “How to Facilitate a Focus Group” (p. 76-77):

Before you start:

- Contact potential participants, explain the research project;
- Prepare a discussion guide (perhaps 6-8 questions);
- Decide who will facilitate and who will take notes;
- Make sure you have all the tools you will need – pens, paper, tape recorder and blank tapes (if using this equipment);
- Arrange seating so that participants sit facing each other; and

OVERVIEW

The Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network is a national, not-for-profit organization:

- Established in 1997
- Represents over 200 member organizations and individuals
- Governed by a National thirteen member Board of Directors
- A four member Executive Board of Directors
- Provides a National forum for members to express needs and concerns
- Ensures access to HIV/AIDS-related services through advocacy
- Provides relevant, accurate and up-to-date HIV/AIDS information

MISSION STATEMENT

As a key national voice of a collection of individuals, organizations and provincial/territorial associations, CAAN provides leadership, support and advocacy for Aboriginal people living with and affected by HIV/AIDS. CAAN faces the challenges created by HIV/AIDS in a spirit of wholeness and healing that promotes empowerment, inclusion, and honours the cultural traditions, uniqueness and diversity of all First Nations, Inuit and Métis people regardless of where they reside.

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- Perhaps plan to provide coffee/drinks and muffins/snacks.
- If you are able to offer an honourarium, prepare envelopes to give out to the participants

During the discussion:

- Remind participants you are interested in hearing from everyone, there are no right or wrong answers and no need to argue with views being shared;
- Agree about how to maintain confidentiality beyond the session;
- Keep on topic but be open to a wide-ranging discussion;
- Don't worry about silences;
- Be supportive and ask questions to draw out more information if appropriate;
- At the close of the discussion ask for feedback – did the discussion miss anything?; and
- Thank everyone and review how you will share the results of the research.

After the discussion:

- Write up notes as soon as possible;
- Add facilitator notes such as points of clarification or context around the discussion as needed;
- Make a copy – file the original and use the copy to work with; and
- Write a thank you note to each participant.

The advantages of using focus groups include:

- They are flexible; additional questions allow probing for unexpected issues;
- It is possible to get feedback regarding certain areas of misunderstanding. They allow researchers to catch mistakes before they actually happen;
- Promote a level of candidness and honesty in the sharing of ideas which may not be possible in other settings. It is very common for people to open up when they are in groups since they may be stimulated by comments from other group members;
- Relatively inexpensive; and
- Can address feelings of intimidation speaking one on one with an interviewer/researcher.

A critical point is that the success of a focus group relies on the ability of the facilitator (the researcher) to focus the participants on the issues to be addressed. In Aboriginal CBR studies adequate training of focus

group leaders (facilitators) must be provided to ensure that the best possible data is gathered and that Aboriginal cultural context and sensitivities are acknowledged and respected, especially in regards to HIV/AIDS. The Aboriginal experience, perceptions and worldview regarding HIV/AIDS must be allowed to be expressed freely.

Conclusion

Focus groups are an effective method for gathering data in a community-based research project. They can take place anywhere, from a person's home around the kitchen table to a formal research facility, as long as there is privacy for the discussion. By carefully drawing together a group of people, who have knowledge about the issue of interest in the research project, a great deal of information from various perspectives can be gathered in a short period of time. Focus groups can be used to develop a research project, contribute to the research data and/or explore the initial findings of a research project offering insights to enhance the researcher team's interpretation and analysis of their data. Focus groups can create a space for participants to share experiences and encourage each other. As a qualitative research method it is also consistent with Aboriginal oral traditions.

Notes:

A number of sources were consulted in preparing this Fact Sheet. The Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network (CAAN) acknowledges the contribution of the following sources:

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