UNIT 12 : FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

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12.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVE

After going through this unit, you will be able to -

- understand about focus group discussion as a method of conducting research
- explain the necessary steps for conducting a Focus group discussion
- know about the ways to prepare questions for the Focus Group discussion

12.2 INTRODUCTION

In a research, it is very necessary for the researcher to understand the cause behind a particular action or situation. Often surveys, interviews or question schedules fail to address this issue. In such cases the

researcher needs to listen to the opinion of his/her subject in a small, open and safe group setting. Focus group discussions serve this very purpose, more specifically in qualitative research. Focus group discussion is a form of interview that occurs in a group setting and can reveal detailed information and deep insight about a particular situation. In a well-executed focus group, participants are put at ease and this allows them to answer the questions thoughtfully and meaningfully. These discussion create a comfort level for both the researcher and the participants that eventually paves way for a meaningful research.

Although Focus group discussion can produce meaningful results, yet very few researchers conduct this method of data collection because there are many hidden structures behind it all. In this unit, an attempt shall be made to simplify this method of data collection and provide necessary information about Focus group discussion like its characteristics, significance, advantages, disadvantages so on and so forth.

12.3 FOCUS GROUP: MEANING AND DEFINITION

In simple terms, a focus group is a small group of six to ten people who are led through an open discussion by a skilled moderator. The main goal of the moderator is to carry forward an open and spontaneous discussion among the participants so that all the participants can express maximum number of ideas and opinions.

A focus group discussion is a good way to gather people from similar experiences and backgrounds and discuss a specific topic of interest. These kind of interviews were originally called “Focussed interviews” or “ Group-depth interviews”. This technique of interviewing was developed after World War II. Since then, it has become an important method of data collection in social science.

According to Kruger, “Focus group discussion is a carefully planned discussion design to obtain perception on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment.”

Focus group discussions are defined as semi structured group discussions, which yield qualitative data on the community level by facilitating interaction between participants.

12.3.1 Characteristics of Focus Group

- A focus group discussion usually consists of six to ten participants.
- The moderator engages the participants in small talks and gradually builds rapport amongst them.
- The moderator does not join the conversation between the participants.
- In a focus group interview, the participants should talk no more than about an hour.
- Recording the focus group discussion is a must.
- In a focus group discussion small issues should be discussed and bigger issues must be avoided.
- The moderator should always maintain impartiality particularly in facial expression and verbal comments.
- In a focus group discussion the participants are always explained the purpose and outcome of the discussion.
- Focus group discussion is a voluntary process where conversation flows among the participants.
- This type of discussion is relaxed, comfortable and often enjoyable for participants as they share their ideas and perception.

12.3.2 What Focus Groups Can and Cannot tell you

As a method of data collection, focus group can be fun and useful but often an inexperienced moderator may be led astray by focus group discussion because opinions of the participants can often be misleading and subjective. Therefore if a researcher strictly relies on such a discussion as a research strategy, then he/she should have a clear idea about what focus groups can and cannot tell him/her. These can be pointed out as follows-

- **What focus groups <u>can</u> tell you?**
  - Give an idea on how some people think or feel about a certain issue
  - Give an insight on why people hold certain opinions
  - Help improve the research planning and research design

- ❍ Gives a scope for evaluating the problem at hand
- ❍ Gives an insight for developing the research strategy

➢ **What focus groups <u>cannot</u> tell you?**

- ❍ Valid information about an individual
- ❍ A definite information about how things have changed over time with regards to a particular issue.
- ❍ Information that the researcher can apply generally to other groups of people as well
- ❍ Cannot provide random samples for the study

12.4 STEPS FOR CONDUCTING A FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

Generally there are four distinct step used to conduct focus group discussion. These are-

- Question designing
- Selection and preparation of participants
- Organizing the interview
- Analyzing the data

These are discussed below-

- **Question Designing :** The first and foremost task of the researcher or moderator in a focus group discussion is to design the questions to be addressed during the discussion. Generally eight to twelve questions are prepared by the researcher. The questions should be simple, short, open-ended and to the point because the participants wont have a chance to see the questions. Generally three types of questions are used in focus group discussion- engagement questions (introduction of participants to make them comfortable with the topic of discussion), exploratory questions (in order to gather as much information as possible) and finally exit questions (to verify whether anything important was left out during the discussion).
- **Selection and preparation of participants :** Ideally in a focus group discussion the participants do not know each other but should have a common background and must be comfortable with one another. So we can say that in order to get maximum information out of a focus group, the

researcher should select a homogenous group of participants. In this regard some important criteria's that are focussed on are gender, age, position in society, economic background etc. On the basis of these criteria's the researcher includes or excludes an individual.

The selection process is arranged using a number of ways, such as-

- Nomination (individuals with knowledge about the research area nominate people who they think would make good participants)
- Random selection (participants from a large but defined group can be randomly selected until the researcher attains the desired number of required participants)
- All members of a group (in some cases all members of an existing group can participate in a focus group discussion, for instance the owners of an MNC)
- Similar position (here the researcher selects people on the basis of their roll, position, job title or condition)
- Voluntary participants (in case where the selection criteria is broad)

After selecting the focus group, the researcher must contact all the participants and confirm their interest and availability. On the basis of that he/she should organize the time and location of the focus group discussion and inform everyone concerned. The participants should also be informed about the duration of the interview and the issues to be discussed. Efforts should be made to make them feel easy and comfortable.

- **Organizing the Interview :** An ideal focus group is conducted by a moderator with the help of an assistant moderator. Generally the researcher plays the role of the moderator and carries forward the different discussion in the focus group. The assistant moderator takes notes and records the entire focus group discussion. The first thing a moderator should do in the beginning of the discussion is to take consent of all participants. He/she should create a friendly and easy environment for all the participants to open-up and put forward their views. He also addresses the purpose of the discussion, sets ground rules and tries to adequately cover all issues within the time limit of the focus group. After the participants leave, the

moderator and assistant moderator check the notes and recording device used, label them along with date, time and name of the group.

- **Analyzing the data :** Analyzing the data gathered is the most important and critical job for the moderator. At first all information gathered from the participants must be boiled down to select the ones useful and essential for the research. The researcher then may use different methods to analyse these information, such as-labelling them under different columns, identifying categories and sub-categories of issues or summarizing different view points on the same issue. Once these findings are systematically organized they are ready for presentation.

12.4.1 Characteristics of a Moderator

The researcher or moderator is the most important person involved in the focused group interview. He/she conducts the whole framework of the discussion, selects the participants, facilitates the discussion and analyses the information gathered from the discussion. Hence it is very important to understand the characteristics or role of the moderator in the focus group discussion. These are discussed below-

- He or she should be a person who can listen attentively with empathy and sensitivity.
- The moderator should be able to listen and think at the same time.
- The moderator should have adequate knowledge of all the topics discussed in the focus group.
- The moderator must treat all participants equally irrespective of their status, qualification and experience.
- The moderator must act neutrally and keep personal views and ego out of the discussion.
- In order to open up, the participants must feel easy and relate to the moderator. At the same time he/she should also be able to give authority so as to smoothly conduct the discussion.
- The moderator must be capable enough to appropriately manage any problematic or sensitive issue arising during the course of the discussion.

- The moderator ideally does not join the conversation and avoids asking leading questions or using non-verbal cues to get preferred responses.

12.4.2 : Designing Questions for Focus Group Discussion

Generally the questions for focus group should be simple, short, open-ended and to the point. A list of six to ten questions should be prepare by the moderator that cover the topics to be discussed. Generally open-ended question are preferred in these discussions, which move from general to specific. A chronological approach is always preferred with regards to questioning. Moreover the respondents should be asked about positive aspects of a particular situation first rather than focussing on the negatives. Below are given examples of how to design a set of questions for focus group discussion.

- **Questions for a focus group on Fair Skin.**

Engagement Questions-(to make the participants comfortable)-

- What is your favourite fairness cream?
- Do you think bollywood heroines should be fair skinned?

Exploration Questions-(meat of the discussion)-

- Who in particular has influenced your grooming habits?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of regular use of fairness products?
- What is your grooming regime?
- Do you think fairness products harm the skin?
- What do you feel about your own skin colour?

Exit Question

- Is there anything else you would like to say about why you do or do not use skin fairness products?

12.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

Focus group discussions are often used as a tool of research so that the researcher can familiarise himself or herself with the situation at hand. The most important objective of a focus group is to find solution to

different problems through flows of voluntary discussion. Group attitudes and beliefs can also be investigated through such a discussion. This is difficult to achieve through any other technique of data collection.

Generally a researcher employs the use of focus group discussion in the beginning of studying the problem. This helps him/her to generate ideas at the exploratory stage of the study. Moreover focus groups are very useful when the researcher aims to investigate complex ideas and behaviours. The open-ended questioning of a focus group helps the researcher to arrive at the depth of the problem. At the same time the different opinions of the participants can help the researcher to explore differences and commonalities about the situation.

Focus group discussion can help the researcher to develop the framework for conducting further research. His understanding of quantitative data will also depend on the analysis of the results of these discussions. However the researcher must always be aware that the participants might not be entirely honest and truthful about their opinions. At the same time misinterpretation and biased findings can be very damaging for further research. Therefore the results of focus group discussion can be most fruitful only when the researcher is experienced, intuitive and does not take the opinions of the participants for granted.

12.6 ADVANTAGES OF FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

- The researcher can take advantage of the fact that people naturally interact and are influenced by others
- During the discussion participants often agree or disagree with others and thus create more energy and more data.
- Focus group discussion can provide more scope to understand perceptions, attitudes and experiences of the research subjects.
- Data can be provided more quickly and at lower cost than individual interviews
- The researcher can directly interact with the respondent as well as gain information from non-verbal responses during the interview

- This type of interview is very flexible in nature and can involve a wide range of individuals, settings and topics.
- The data analysis process is very easy to conduct and the results can be easily understood.

12.7 DISADVANTAGES OF FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

- Focus group discussions are more difficult to manage than one on one interviews. Therefore the interviewer must be an experienced person
- The discussion may be inhabited by unexpected conflict, power struggle and other group dynamics among the participants.
- One or two person may dominate the whole discussion while ignoring or intimidating the other participants.
- Focus group discussion require trained moderator who knows about group dynamics otherwise he/she may knowingly or unknowingly misinterpret the responses of the participants
- The participants may not always be honest or sure about their responses about a particular issue.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1 : What is a focus group?

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Q2 : What is the main goal of a moderator?

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Q3 : Mention one definition of focus group discussion.

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Q4 : Mention four characteristics of focus group discussion.

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Q5 : What can focus group tell you?

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Q6 : What can focus group not tell you?

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12.9 LET US SUM UP

- In a research, it is very necessary for the researcher to understand the cause behind a particular action or situation.
- Focus group discussion is a form of interview that occurs in a group setting and can reveal detailed information and deep insight about a particular situation.
- In simple terms, a focus group is a small group of six to ten people who are led through an open discussion by a skilled moderator.
- The main goal of the moderator is to carry forward an open and spontaneous discussion among the participants so that all the participants can express a maximum number of ideas and opinions.
- A focus group discussion is a good way to gather people from similar experiences and backgrounds and discuss a specific topic of interest.
- The moderator engages the participants in small talks and gradually builds a rapport amongst them.
- The moderator does not join the conversation between the participants.
- As a method of data collection, focus group can be fun and useful but often an inexperienced moderator may be led astray by focus group discussion because opinions of the participants can often be misleading and subjective.

- Generally there are four step used for conducting focus group discussion. These are- **Question designing, Selection and preparation of participants, Organizing the Interview, Analyzing the data.**
- The researcher or moderator is the most important person involved in the focus group interview.
- The moderator should be a person who can listen attentively with empathy and sensitivity
- The moderator should have adequate knowledge of all the topics discussed in the focus group.
- The moderator must treat all participants equally, irrespective of their status, qualification and experience
- The moderator must act neutrally and keep personal views and ego out of the discussion
- Generally the questions for focus group should be simple, short, open-ended and to the point.
- Focus group discussions are often used as a tool of research, so that the researcher can familiarise himself or herself with the situation at hand.
- Focus group discussion can help the researcher to develop the framework for conducting further research.



12.10 FURTHER READING

1) Ahuja, Ram (2001). *Research Methods,* Rawat Publications, New Delhi.

2) Chattopadhyay, Krichnadas & Sudarshana Sen (2013). *Rudiments of Social Research,* Levant Books, Kolkata.

3) Kothari, C. R. (2004). *Research Methodology – Methods and Techniques*, New Age International (P) Ltd, New Delhi.

12.11 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1 : A focus group is a small group of six to ten people who are led through an open discussion by a skilled moderator.

Ans to Q No 2 : The main goal of the moderator is to carry forward an open and spontaneous discussion among the participants so that all the participants can express a maximum number of ideas and opinions.

Ans to Q No 3 : According to Kruger, "Focus group discussion is a carefully planned discussion design to obtain perception on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment."

Ans to Q No 4 : Four characteristics of focus group discussion are-

- A focus group discussion usually consists of six to ten participants.
- The moderator engages the participants in small talks and gradually builds a rapport amongst them.
- The moderator does not join the conversation between the participants.
- In a focus group interview, the participants should talk no more than about an hour.

Ans to Q No 5 : The focus group can tell the following points-

- Give an idea on how some people think or feel about a certain issue.
- Give an insight on why people hold certain opinions.
- Help improve the research planning and research design.
- Give a scope for evaluating the problem at hand.
- Give an insight for developing the research strategy.

Ans to Q No 6 : The focus group cannot tell the following points-

- Give valid information about an individual.
- Give a definite information about how things have changed over time with regards to a particular issue.
- Provide information that the researcher can apply generally to other groups of people as well.
- Cannot provide random samples for the study

12.12 MODEL QUESTIONS

A) Short Questions (Answer each question in about 150 words)

Q1 : Explain the concept of focus group discussion.

Q2 : Explain the process of designing question for focus group discussion with example.

Q3 : What are the essential qualities for a good moderator?

B) Long Questions (Answer each question in about 300-500 words)

Q1 : Briefly discuss the steps for conducting focus group discussion.

Q2 : Discuss the significance of focus group discussion.

Q3 : What are the advantages and disadvantages of focus group discussion?

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