

Focus Group

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A focus group is a sort of collective interview, directed by the researcher (moderator), which exploits the interactive potential of the situation in order to generate rich data.

⌘ There is no single use for focus groups since they can be used as a preliminary exploration of a topic for the guidance of the research or a way of evaluating a project when it is completed, for example.

⌘ Although currently a somewhat ubiquitous data-gathering approach, its origins were in the work of Robert Merton on the focused interview in the 1940s. The approach was fairly rapidly adopted by market researchers but relatively ignored by academic researchers until the 1970s and afterwards when it became increasingly accepted in academic research.

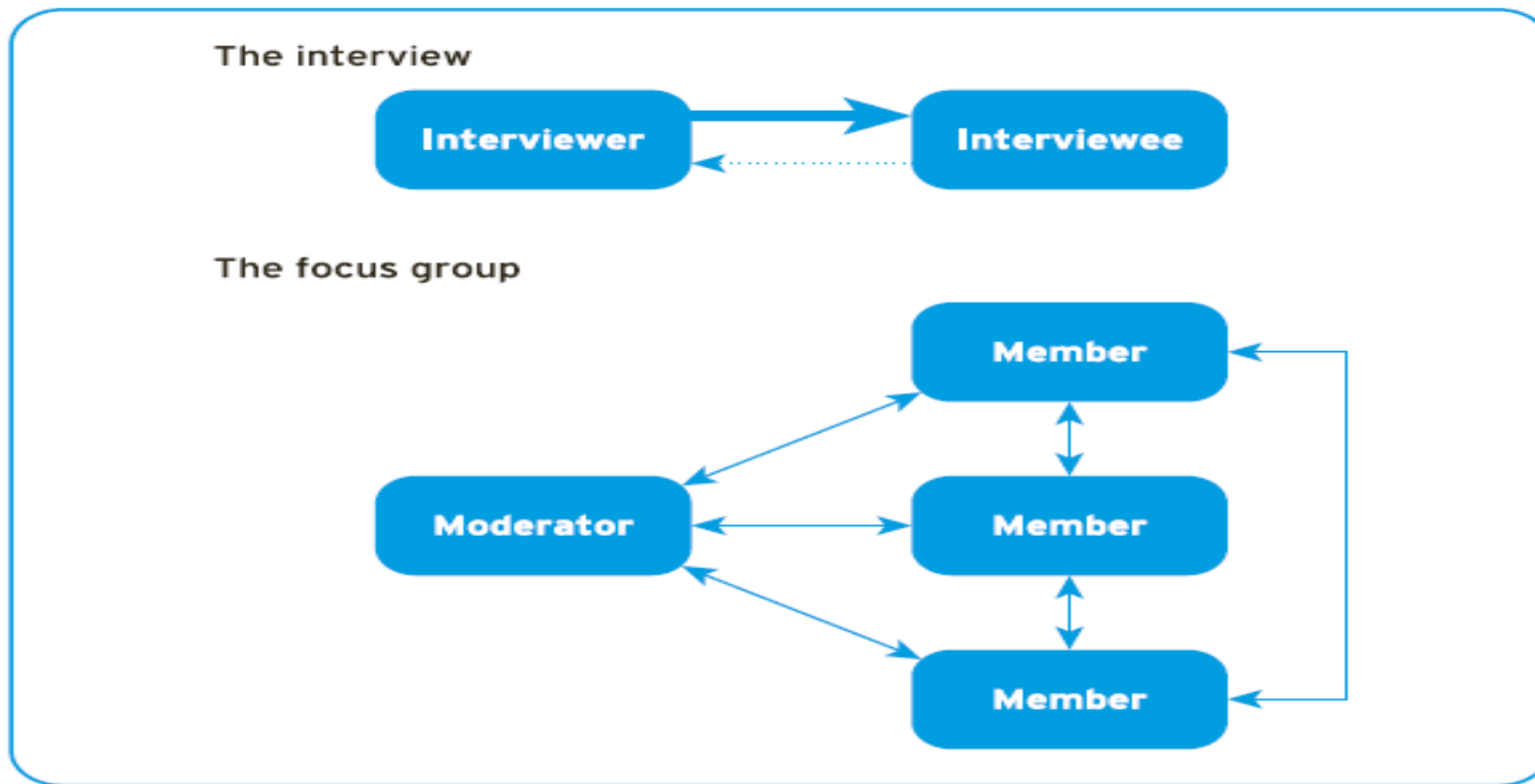
⌘ Focus groups basically consist of a moderator plus six to ten group members. It is usual to have about four separate focus groups for every category of group being studied.

⌘ The planning stage is crucial if the best quality data are to be obtained. In particular, a plan needs to be drawn up specifying the sorts of participants that each group should contain. Groups should be chosen with the quality of discussion in mind. For example, one should avoid groups in which status differentials might encourage some members to defer to their formal superiors. Planning can also include decisions about what sorts of people would provide the richest data on the topic in question.

⌘ Focus groups have a structure and unfold in an orderly questioning sequence in order to facilitate the quality of the discussion.

⌘ Moderators (group leaders) need to be socially skilled in order to ensure that the focus groups are not dominated by a few individuals.

⌘ The analysis of focus group data is a matter of choice but several qualitative data analysis methods can be used. It has recently been proposed that the discussions of focus groups can be analysed using discourse analysis approaches.



In the interview, the interviewer has the strongest control on events with, normally, the interviewee being less influential.

Typically in a focus group, the moderator has considerable control but this is impacted by the relatively greater influence of the group and the interaction between group members. The point of a focus group is to take advantage of the interaction between group members which may produce information different in certain respects from that produced by a separate interview with each group member.

Focus groups may be used in at least three different ways:

- 🌀 As an early stage of research in order to explore and identify what the significant issues are.
- 🌀 To generate broadly conversational data on a topic to be analysed in its own right.
- 🌀 To evaluate the findings of research in the eyes of the people that the research is about. That is, in discussions of research conclusions.

For the researcher, the focus group has other advantages; that is, most of the resources come from the participants.

It is probably misleading, if not wrong, to regard focus groups as an alternative to ordinary interviews. They simply are not the same thing and cannot meet the same functions. In much the same way, it is clear that focus groups do not aspire to the same representative sampling that surveys do. Indeed focus group methodology adopts a radically different approach to participant selection and recruitment. The focus group method needs to be understood in its own right and not regarded as a 'cheap and cheerful' substitute for 'better' ways of conducting research.

How to conduct focus groups

One could typify the focus group as a group interview with about six to ten similar people, conducted by a skilled moderator, and lasting up to about one and a half to two hours. The focus group is dynamic in the sense that the moderator encourages interaction between participants but controls the situation so that all participants get an opportunity to contribute. A lot of hard work goes into the planning, organisation and analysis of focus groups in order to produce good quality data. For example, the size of a focus group – usually, but not invariably, between six and ten people – is important. As has been mentioned, the consequence of having too many group members is that it is harder to get a turn at speaking and some may not like speaking to a large group of people. If there are too few members in a group then the focus group may lack stimulation, thus stultifying proceedings.

The work of the researcher can be divided into a number of components:

- 🕒 planning;
- 🕒 recruitment of participants;
- 🕒 running the focus group;
- 🕒 analysis of the focus group data.

One must appreciate that focus group methodology has no single purpose and that focus groups can be used for several, quite distinct purposes. According to Calder (1977), there are three different approaches to the use of focus groups:

🕒 The *exploratory* This describes attempts to generate information and knowledge in a field which has previously been largely under-researched. So it is a trawling approach which seeks basic knowledge and ideas in a new field.

🕒 The *clinical* This describes attempts to understand why people do what they do which are accessible to a trained analyst or expert.

🕒 The *phenomenological* This is the use of focus groups by researchers to understand things from the point of view of other groups in society. The researcher will learn how different sorts of people feel about something.

Although it is usual to speak of focus group methodology, it would be only in exceptional cases that a researcher conducts just one focus group. Normally, the researcher plans to compare several focus groups on a topic using different categories of members for different focus groups. However, advice on how to conduct a focus group can vary. The following summarises the broad strategy (Figure 4.2):

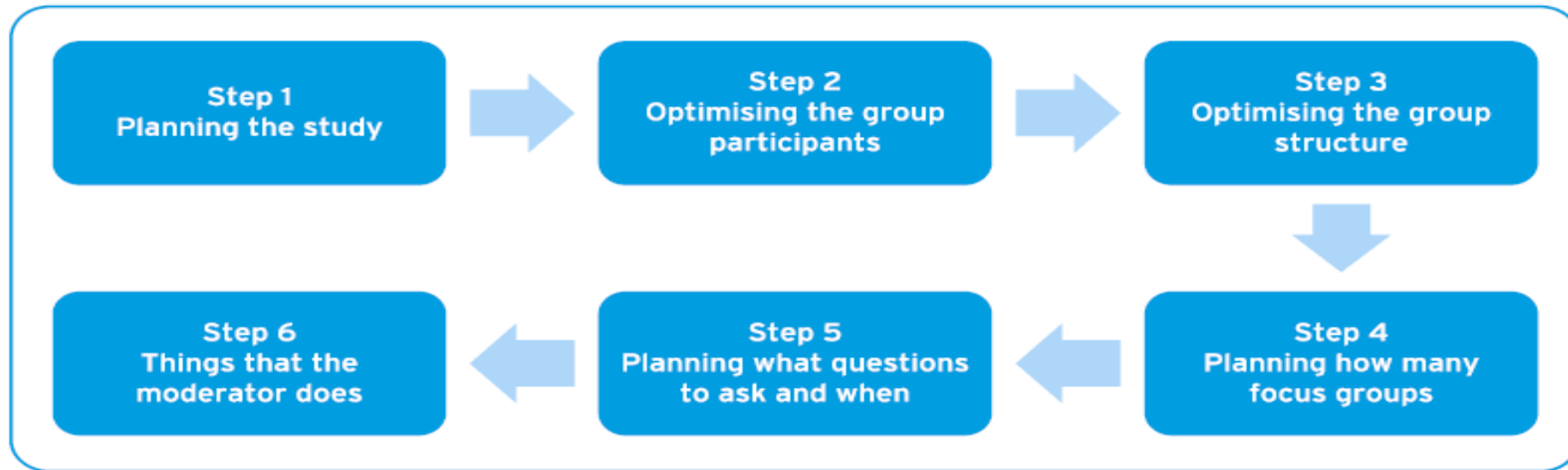


FIGURE 4.2 The steps in a focus group study

Step 1: Planning the study

The origins of a study may be at the initiative of the researcher or may be instigated by other people such as organisations commissioning research. In either case, it is important to develop a (shared) understanding of what the study is about. So there should be clarity about the following (according to Krueger & Casey, 2000):

- ⌘ The research problem that the study will attempt to illuminate.
- ⌘ The factors which led to the study being commissioned. Often, for student work, these factors will be a class exercise, a dissertation or research project as part of one's degree, or similar.

Each of these will place different demands on the study planned.

- ⌘ The specific purpose of the study.
- ⌘ The types of information which it is hoped the study will obtain.
- ⌘ What types of information are the priority for the data collection.
- ⌘ The person or persons who want the information that the study will collect.
- ⌘ What will be done with the information.

Each of these is relevant to the planning of the research in detail.

Step 2: Optimising the choice of group participants

Just what are the important characteristics of the participants in your focus groups? This is a matter not of defining sampling characteristics but of maximising the richness of the data. What sorts of participants will yield the most satisfactory information relevant to your research question? These, of course, may not be the most readily available potential participants since we are not talking 'convenience sampling'

here but purposive sampling aimed at optimising data quality and relevance.

Of course, without having details of a proposed study it is difficult to suggest groups of potentially data-rich participants. The only rule-of-thumb would be that there is likely to be a variety of particularly significant types of group members and that the more effort put into their inclusion the better.

One consequence of such a strategy is that people in the optimum categories are likely to be at a premium since they have particular characteristics. So it is important to do as much as possible to ensure that those approached actually turn up to the focus group:

🌐 Ask yourself why people would be prepared to take part in your study. What is the best way of making your request to ensure that they will take part?

What are the gains for them as individuals or as members of society?

🌐 Consider appropriate inducements though in the light of ethical considerations

☞ Contact potential group members at least two weeks before the intended date of the focus group. This gives them time to plan their attendance by putting it in their diary and rescheduling their activities if necessary.

☞ Follow up an agreement to participate with a 'courtesy' thank you letter.

☞ Remember to give participants a 'courtesy' telephone call on the day of the group meeting (or the day before perhaps) to check whether any problems have arisen. The main point of this is as a reminder.

☞ Consider the convenience of your study for potential participants rather than yourself. Make it easy for people to take part. There is little point in scheduling your focus groups at times which make it difficult for your ideal participants to attend because, say, they have to be at work.

☞ Choose the best person to make the invitations. Although it may feel natural that the researcher should invite people to participate, there are circumstances in which someone else might do a better job at recruitment. Personal contacts are often the most effective.

You will also need to put thought into the question of how you are going to recruit people with the characteristics you desire in your study. So you may wish to consider the following possibilities:

🌀 Are there any key individuals who may have access to the sorts of people that you need? For example, if you wish to study people who have survived cancer are there organisations to support cancer survivors?

🌀 Can the organisation commissioning the research help provide access to suitable groups of participants?

🌀 Would it be possible to contact a few suitable group members and then ask them to nominate others similar to themselves – as in snowball sampling?

Focus groups do not include representative samples and the choice of participants is largely to optimise the productivity of the discussion. At best participants in a focus group typify the sort of person with the characteristics specified by the researcher.

If a variety of different sorts of participant is selected for a particular focus group, they should be chosen in a way which would be expected to maximise the productivity of the group discussion – some mixes of participants could inhibit discussion or make the focus group unmanageable.

Finally, in this step, you need to think carefully about what you tell your recruits concerning the focus group before the group meets. Gibbs (1997) offers the following practical advice. Only provide focus group members with sufficient detail to allow them to decide whether or not to participate. They should not be given any indications of the questions that will be asked in advance of the meeting otherwise they may work out their own views which may be fixed and not responsive to group processes at the meeting.

Step 3: Optimising the group structures

The point of a focus group lies in the directed discussion produced by the focus group members. It follows from this that a focus group should involve all of the group members reasonably equally.

If one or two members dominate the focus group then this defeats the purpose.

Although it is the responsibility of the moderator to prevent individuals from dominating the proceedings, problems may be built into a focus group if the choice of members was not optimal. In particular, it is generally the case that a focus group with similar people of equivalent status is conducive to quality data in focus group research.. As already hinted, two obvious factors can contribute to this:

🌐 If the group is too homogeneous so that everyone shares much the same perspective on the subject matter then discussion is likely to be curtailed. For that reason, it is sometimes suggested that focus groups should be heterogeneous in terms of their membership, though there are limits to this.

🌐 If the group contains people of an apparently superior status then the group may defer to them. This may simply be that certain group members appear to be more knowledgeable than the others who 'defer' to their superior knowledge.

It is not a part of focus group methodology to simply use a single focus group. No matter how productive a single group may be in terms of ideas and interesting responses, the researcher needs to plan to run several different groups.

At a minimum, three or four groups should be run when there is no attempt to use a variety of different categories of groups. Krueger and Casey (2000) refer to this as a single-category design. It is the simplest structure for focus group research. In addition to single-category designs, they list the following designs:

🌀 *Multiple-category design* This is where the focus groups are organised into several particular types of respondents. For example, in a study of the experience of cancer the multiple-categories might be (a) cancer patients, (b) cancer survivors and (c) carers of cancer patients.

🌀 *Double-layered design* This is where the groups employed are distinguishable on two dimensions. These dimensions might be age (young and old) and cancer sufferer versus cancer survivor. This would give us four groups: (1) young cancer sufferers, (2) old cancer sufferers, (3) young cancer survivors and (4) old cancer survivors. The researcher would probably study three or four groups in each of these four categories.

Broad-involvement design This acknowledges that there are some areas of research in which a broad range of groups might feel they have a relevant voice. As a consequence, a spread of groups are identified to represent this range of interest groups. For example, the researcher may be studying neighbour disputes. Groups which might have an interest in taking part in focus groups might include: (a) mediators employed by local authorities, (b) the police, (c) people with difficult neighbours, (d) neighbours who have been taken to court by the authorities, (e) officers of the local authority and (f) the police. Of course, by including such a wide range of groups, the research adopts a broader perspective which, in some circumstances, may be beneficial.

Step 4: Planning how many focus groups Although one rule of thumb would be to have three or four groups for every category of group studied, this is not a definitive statement of numbers of groups. There are problems in stipulating the number of focus groups to run even with some knowledge about the purpose of the study in question. The 'saturation' criterion might be appropriate. This suggests that the researcher collects data until it appears that no new things are emerging out of the study. It could be argued that this is a subjective criterion. Nevertheless, it is one which is of some practical value within the ethos of qualitative research. It is a concept from grounded theory (see Chapter 8).

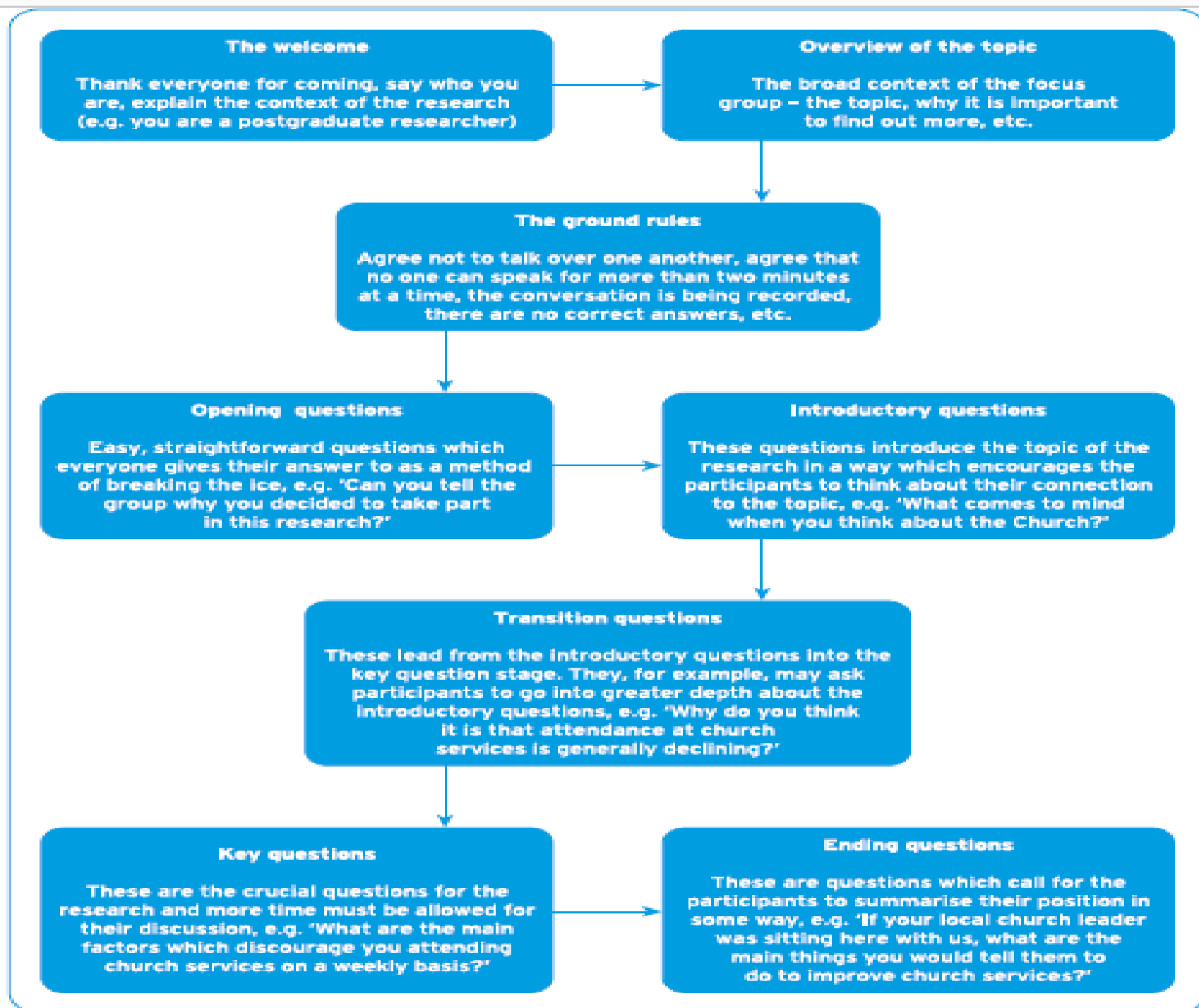
Step 5: Planning what questions to ask and when It is generally accepted that relatively few questions are required for a focus group compared with the equivalent structured interview. A researcher who finds that they have to ask a great many questions to keep the discussion going might suspect that the focus group is not going particularly well. Possibly it implies that the group dynamic is just not working or, equally, it could be a sign that the questions are in some way faulty.

There are two main issues with questions for focus groups: (1) 'what are the characteristics of a good question?' and (2) 'ideally how should questions be organised or sequenced during the course of the focus group?' The first is the easiest to address. A good question is posed in a way which communicates well and avoids causing confusion – so the basic question-framing skills that you may have from in-depth interviewing would be appropriate here. Among other things, the questions should be phrased in a style suitable for a conversation rather than writing-down.

The questions should be pitched at a level using appropriate language for the sorts of people participating in your focus group; long questions are to be avoided as should complex ones (i.e. compound questions). Complex questions really contain more than one question.

Without appropriate sequencing of questions, the focus group can become problematic. According to Krueger and Casey, the sequence consists of (1) opening questions, (2) introductory questions, (3) transition questions, (4) key questions and (5) ending questions. Jump in too soon with a key question, for example, and the participants may be inhibited by the complexity of giving an adequate response. Shy group members will not have been eased into the group dynamic and the focus group may fail to provide the quality of evidence that the researcher is seeking. The flow of the questions in Figure 4.3 can readily be seen as facilitating group processes. There are other helpful sequencing rules which can be incorporated. Krueger and Casey argue that (a) general questions should come before specific questions; (b) questions asking about positive features of something should precede questions soliciting the negative aspects; and (c) uncued questions should precede cued questions – that is, one would ask the group about their experiences of hospital before asking for their experiences of specific aspects of the hospital such as food, information, medical care and so forth. This describes one version of the process of funnelling questions.

Krueger and Casey (2000) present a model of the sequencing of questions for focus groups which can be summarised as shown in Figure 4.3. It is a useful way of illustrating the flow of a focus group session.



Step 6: Things that the moderator does There are a number of characteristics which researchers see as important in a moderator (Gibbs, 1997):

🕒 avoids expressing personal opinions;

🕒 avoids appearing judgemental.

The moderator is responsible for the efficient and successful running of each focus group whether or not they are the main investigator. It is clearly a skilled and complex role which places considerable demands on the moderator in terms of interpersonal skills but also the discipline of remaining essentially detached from the discussion. Moderators, for example, do not involve themselves in the debates. Among the many tasks of the focus group moderator are the following

on the purpose of the research. The moderator's tasks include:

- At the start of the meeting, describing and explaining the purpose and objectives of the session.
- Ensuring that members of the focus group feel relaxed and comfortable in the situation and feel, ultimately, that this was a positive experience.
- Posing clear questions for discussion.
- Controlling the discussion by asking supplementary questions designed to open up the debate or to encourage the participants to focus more precisely on the issues which are fundamental to the research.
- Ensuring that all members of the group participate and preventing the dominance of a small number of individuals. There are various ways to achieve this, including targeting some individuals with questions aimed at encouraging them to participate.
- Highlighting differences in perspectives which emerge in the focus group discussion in order that the group might engage with the nature of the differences.
- Stopping conversational drifts which steer the conversation away from the topic of the focus group.
- The moderator is responsible for recording the focus group session (either just the conversation or video) but it is usually the case that the moderator also takes notes during the course of the session.
- In circumstances where the moderator has an assistant then that assistant might take much more comprehensive notes than the moderator is in a position to, take responsibility for recording the session, and deal with logistic issues such as refreshments. The assistant can be involved more actively such as asking supplementary questions (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

How to analyse data from focus groups

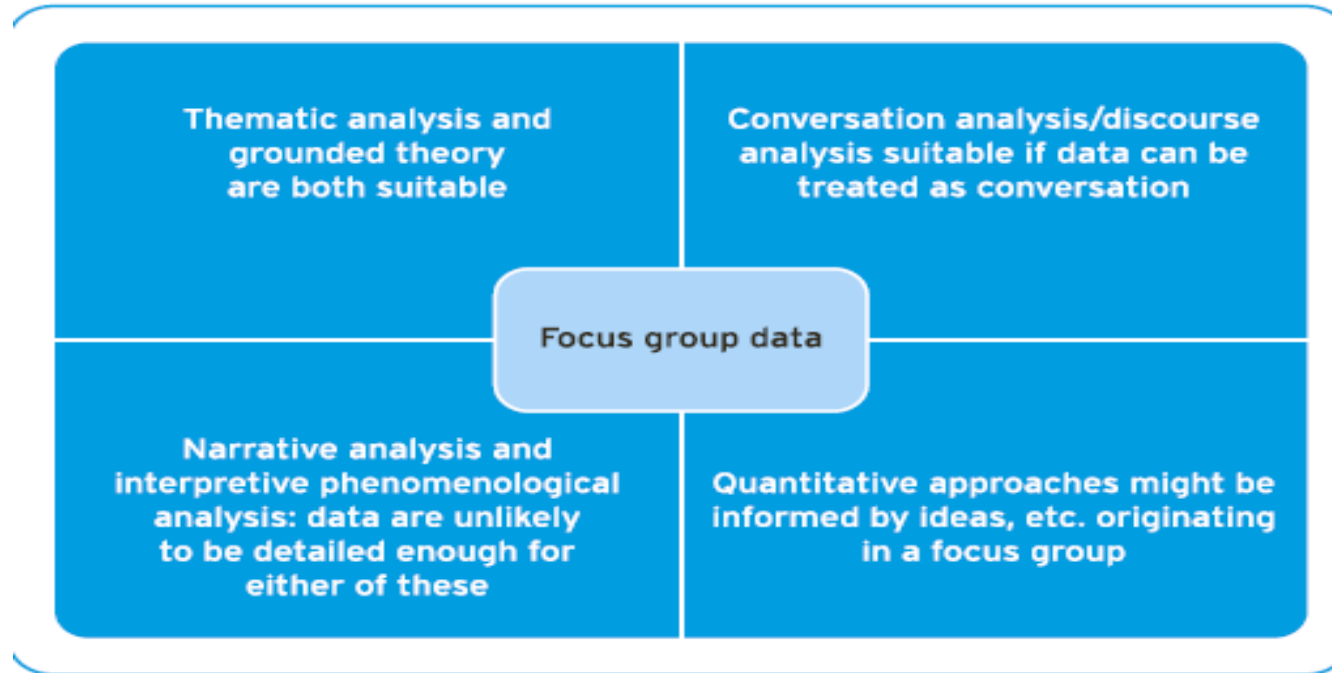


FIGURE 4.4 Ways of analysing focus group data

Remember that much focus group research is carried out for market research purposes and the sponsor's needs in terms of analysis may not be very sophisticated. Ultimately, the chosen analysis route for focus group data will largely be dependent on the particular reasons why a focus group was the preferred method to collect data

- Perhaps the focus group study was carried out to generate research ideas to be pursued in some depth at a later stage in the research. In these circumstances, the needs of the researcher may be met by listing the major and most significant themes emerging out of the focus groups and identifying any research questions that these might suggest.
- On the other hand, the researcher may have collected the focus group data to better understand how people experience the topic being discussed by the focus group. So, the researcher may wish to understand people's experience of chronic pain. The content of what is said in the focus groups on this forms the basis of the analysis. In these circumstances, the researcher may wish to conduct a thematic analysis (Chapter 7) on a transcript of the data.
- Another researcher may be interested in the focus group discussion as conversation and may study the way in which conversation is governed during the course of focus groups. The data, in this case, may need to be transcribed using the Jefferson transcription system (Chapter 6).
- Transcribed focus group data usually will be suitable for grounded theory analysis (Chapter 8) but its use in discourse analysis (Chapter 9) would depend very much on the researcher's purpose and, perhaps, whether focus group data are sufficiently conversational.

When to use focus groups

Focus groups can be used in a variety of ways. Especially for multi-method studies, they can be exploratory in the sense that they stimulate discussion on a topic and ideas are thrown up by the group. If the researcher has no knowledge base on which to build then this is a vital function. For example, it may help the researcher plan questions for a survey or even suggest hypotheses to quantitative researchers. On the other hand, a focus group can be used to evaluate people's reactions to a study just completed by the researcher. It can be a way of providing feedback on the main research's findings.