

Best Practices for Planning & Facilitating Anti-Oppressive Focus Groups



EVIDENCE
BRIEF

This Evidence Brief summarizes best practices for planning and facilitating anti-oppressive focus groups and highlights specific equity considerations.

DEFINITIONS OF KEY TERMS

Focus Group: A research interview method that occurs in a group setting, with the goal of generating data through conversations between the participants and moderator and through interactions between participants. Focus groups can be used to gain new knowledge, evaluate programs, and/or obtain a rich understanding of opinions, beliefs, perspectives, and lived experiences on a specific topic.^{1,2}

Eligibility Criteria: The basis through which you determine who should participate in your focus group.

Recruitment Strategies: The collection of approaches you use in order to spread the word and generate interest in participating in your focus group.

Focus Group Guide: A series of questions and prompts the moderator uses to generate and direct the conversation during the focus group.

Social Location: The set of identity factors that determine how we relate to others, specifically in terms of power and privilege. These factors can include race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, age, education, and economic status.

Research Ethics: The extent to which research protocols have considered and abide by best practices in terms of maximizing participant safety and minimizing the potential for harm.

SUMMARY OF EVIDENCE: PRACTICES TO PLAN & FACILITATE ANTI-OPPRESSIVE FOCUS GROUPS

BEST PRACTICE: MEANINGFULLY ENGAGE PARTICIPANTS

Any research or evaluation project should **meaningfully engage members of the population being studied at every stage of the process** – from planning (Part A) and facilitation (Part B) through to data analysis and reporting. This exposes the research team to issues specific to a particular population and leads to greater understanding and sensitivity. Focus groups are no different; meaningful stakeholder engagement will “enhanc[e] the rigour of study results... It is only through culturally sensitive modifications to the traditional focus group method that the voices of the participants from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds can be heard.”²

PART A: PLANNING

01. Determine whether you a) need and b) can manage a focus group.

a) Whether or not you need a focus group will be determined primarily by your research question; the more complex and nuanced an issue, the more value there is in a focus group, because you can expect participant interaction to be *generative* – participants will gain insights and ideas through the wisdom and experience brought forward by others, which will enhance their contributions. If there is no added value to bringing people together (online or in-person), then you can usually choose a simpler option for getting feedback from participants, such as a survey or individual interviews.

b) Whether or not you can manage a focus group will be determined by the financial and human resources available, as well as the needed expertise required to support every stage of planning and facilitation. Focus groups are generally more resource-intensive than other data collection options – from recruiting participants to conducting groups to analyzing the data. Remember that choosing your data collection method always requires a cost-benefit analysis; the ‘best’ option isn’t always the most rigorous, but one that better **balances your data collection aspirations with your capacity**.

02. Choose your eligibility criteria.

When determining eligibility, consider the following questions:^{2,3}

What roles or life experiences provide a person with relevant perspectives on the research question?

Example: if you are interested in literacy supports, relevant perspectives could include those of youth, parents, teachers, and literacy experts.


Are there eligibility restrictions we need to impose for the sake of feasibility and relevance?

Consider whether age, location, language, current/former participation in a program, or other factors could impact upon feasibility and relevance.

Example (feasibility): even when children undoubtedly have relevant perspectives on literacy programming, the additional considerations required to accommodate for their needs might make their inclusion unfeasible.

Example (relevance): prospective focus group participants living beyond a certain geography would likely have a different set of socio-economic circumstances and would be less capable of speaking to the experiences and gaps within it.

What shared factors would either contribute to, or detract from, focus group synergy? Because a focus group is valuable due to the interaction between participants, consider what factors will **maximize comfort and safety and facilitate interactivity**. An ideal focus group should contain *homogenous strangers*: people who don’t know each other personally, but who have shared experiences or subjectivity, such as gender, age, race, religion, employment roles, family roles, etc. There is no objective set of demographic variables that should be shared between participants. Consider variables that are most relevant based on the context and the research question. If you determine that the group of people you would like to hear from include those that would not be ideal in a group together, you can decide to keep your eligibility criteria open but conduct separate focus groups (*see #4 below*).



Equity Consideration: When developing your eligibility criteria, consider how marginalization and oppression factor into the relevance of different perspectives. For example, if you are interested in knowing more about the literacy supports needed by a particular community, your eligibility criteria may be specific to those from low-income backgrounds, because poverty restricts access to equitable education and supplemental supports.

03. Design appropriate recruitment strategies.

When designing your recruitment strategies, consider the following:

a) Methods: You can hand-select individuals from your target population (should you feel confident in selecting those best suited to the focus group) OR you can issue a call-out to which people can respond.

b) Eligibility Criteria (see #2 above): The particulars of your eligibility criteria often lend themselves to outreach.

Example: if your eligibility criteria includes parents and caregivers in a specific geographic region, you may look for a social media group dedicated to this population where you can post information about your focus group.

c) Diversity: Your recruitment strategies should factor in your desired level of diversity. Ideally, you will seek maximum diversity within the boundaries of your eligibility criteria, since **diversity enhances the rigour and reliability of your data collection.**


Example: if your eligibility criteria includes parents and caregivers in a specific geographic region, you might want to recruit parents with children of a variety of ages who live in different neighbourhoods of the region.

d) Cost/Benefit: Consider your resources and choose outreach methods accordingly. If you are finding that your current outreach methods are not successful, you can always expand your approach to include other strategies.

e) Appeal: No matter how effective you are at outreach, people will not want to participate in your focus group if there is no incentive for them to do so. Factor this into the design of your outreach materials by communicating the benefits of participation to your target population, including **accommodations** and **incentives** to maximize accessibility (see #7 below).

f) Likelihood of Previous Relationships: Because homogenous strangers are the ideal composition for focus groups,^{2,3} consider how to maximize the likelihood of attracting those who are not previously acquainted. Note that having participants know one another is not necessarily detrimental, as long as appropriate ethics procedures are in place to protect **confidentiality** (see #8 below).

Example: if you recruit for your focus group on literacy within an after-school program, you may find the right demographics of participants, but they are also more likely to know one another.



Equity Consideration: When designing recruitment strategies, consider selecting forums based on accessibility to different audiences. For example, while social media groups are often a great way to spread the word, they may be inaccessible to those without a reliable internet connection and/or the necessary digital literacy skills. By diversifying your recruitment strategies, you will facilitate maximum diversity among your participants.^{4,5}

04. Determine the a) size and b) number of focus groups you need.

a) The **ideal number of participants** for a focus group is generally eight.³ At a minimum, aim for six participants; at a maximum, aim for 10.³ If there are too few participants, the focus groups will lack the interaction between participants that sets these groups apart from other research methods. With too many participants, the groups can become difficult to moderate and there is the risk of not having all participants engaged and contributing.^{1,2,3,6}

b) You may choose to split your participants based on a particular criteria (for example, parents in one group, teachers in another) in order to maximize comfort and safety, as well as the quantity and relevance of participant interaction. The **number of focus groups** will vary based on the purposes of the research and on the number of groups that have pertinent knowledge of the topic being explored.²

Equity Consideration: When determining how to group participants, consider how experiences of marginalization – by virtue of race, gender, sexual orientation, age, immigration status, and otherwise – impact participant safety, both real and perceived. Remember that the goal of a focus group is to maximize openness and honesty of dialogue, and this is impossible if participants don't feel safe.

05. Develop your focus group guide.

The focus group guide will comprise a series of questions and prompts that the Moderator will use to generate and direct the conversation.^{1,2,7} This guide can help to:²

- ensure important discussion topics that lend towards answering the research question are covered
- support the Moderator in facilitating conversation

- keep the conversation on course towards answering the research question
- maintain consistency of data collected, which also contributes to more efficient analysis

The focus group guide should be:^{3,6}

a) Relevant: When you review your research question, consider the relevance and ask what someone would need to know in order to provide an answer.

b) Open-Ended: Avoid questions that can be answered with a 'yes' or a 'no'; instead, use 'why' and 'how' questions that inspire description.

c) Unbiased: Avoid asking leading questions; let the participants share with you how they feel about a particular topic or issue without implying a preferred position.

d) Focused: Don't try to cover too many topics or issues; otherwise, you won't be able to explore the issues in great detail. When in doubt, always return to your research question.

e) Clear: Ensure that questions are simple and not worded ambiguously.

f) Nonthreatening: Questions should not force intimate and personal disclosure on the part of participants.

Example: instead of asking, "What are your personal experiences with accessing literacy programming?", ask "What do you know about existing literacy programming?"

g) Curious: Don't ask too many questions for which you have an anticipated response – the best answers are ones that may surprise you!

h) Nudging: Prepare prompts to inspire those participants who can't immediately think of answers based on the initial question.

The focus group guide is just that – a *guide*. The Moderator will need to pursue conversational

threads that will contribute to relevant knowledge, even if/when this diverges from the guide. These diversions can often lead to richer, more in-depth information about your topic and make the focus group even more generative.

Equity Consideration: When developing your focus group guide, consider your research question from the perspective of **equity**. Ask yourself how the answer might change depending upon a person's **social location** and, if so, how that can be uncovered during the focus group.

06. Select your focus group staff.

Ideally, a focus group will include both a **Moderator** and a **Notetaker**^{3,2,8} to maximize the efficiency and effectiveness of data collection; while the Moderator is focused on facilitating by advancing and enriching the conversation (see also *Part B*), the Notetaker is able to make observations that both make easier the eventual process of data analysis and that can add to its context and/or depth.

The Moderator will:

- cover all areas of discussion outlined in the focus group guide (see #5 above)
- pursue ideas/insights that diverge from the guide but that contribute towards answering the research question
- facilitate both individual sharing and collaborative dialogue
- manage personalities and dynamics so that participants have relatively equal time to share, and cruelty and/or abuse is not tolerated

- keep the conversation moving at an appropriate pace so as to adequately cover all areas of concern within the time limit

The *ideal* Moderator will:

- have experience with facilitating group conversation
- understand their **social location**
- have an anti-oppressive awareness and approach that they can apply towards group dynamics to ensure full and equal participation
- be capable of building rapport and otherwise generating an environment of trust
- be a stranger to participants, to mitigate unease or fear around open and honest disclosure
- be removed from the researcher, to mitigate interest/investment in a particular conclusion
- feel safe to participants

The Notetaker will:

- manage the audio-recording device during the focus group
- take notes during the session, both in case of recording device failure as well as to note non-audio observations that can make data analysis more efficient and effective
Example: the Notetaker might keep an order of who has spoken, to speed up the process of determining who said what during the session, or might make note of body language, to provide context and depth to participant commentary.
- support with logistical matters, such as distributing consent forms, setting up refreshments, etc.

The *ideal* Notetaker will:

- understand their **social location**
- be observational and attentive
- be organized and detail-oriented
- be non-intrusive
- feel safe to participants

Equity Consideration: While ‘safety’ is an important consideration when selecting a Moderator and Notetaker, there is no universal criteria for what makes someone ‘safe’. Consider the topic of conversation and the eligibility criteria for focus group participation, and determine what safety factors (i.e. shared experiences along the lines of race, gender, ability, sexual orientation) are most relevant. The Moderator and Notetaker should both understand their **social locations**, particularly in relation to focus group participants.

07. Attend to accessibility needs.

Accessibility is the extent to which what you are offering can be availed of by *all*. When considering the accessibility of your focus group and how to maximize it, factor in the following aspects:^{5,4}

- **Financial:** Are there any costs that participants might incur (or conversely, income they might lose) by virtue of participation?
- **Time-Based:** Are participants likely to have competing or conflicting commitments at this time of day (i.e. work, childcare)?
- **Geographic:** If the focus group is in-person, are there barriers to participants in accessing the location?

- **Digital:** If the focus group is online, would participants have trouble accessing the connection and the privacy they need to support their full participation?
- **Linguistic:** Are participants lacking fluency and literacy in the same language that the focus group is being run in?
- **Physical:** Are there impediments to participants with mobility issues, or sight/sound disabilities?
- **Intellectual:** Are there concepts or vocabulary being assumed as the baseline knowledge of focus group members that some participants might not possess?

Remember that people may have competing accessibility needs (for example, a focus group scheduled in the evening might work for some participants but not others), and that some best practices for accessibility may be out of reach. **Maximizing accessibility is a matter of judgement.**

In fact, even if you have made every best effort to maximize general accessibility, everyone’s needs are different. **Accommodations** enhance accessibility and enable you to be responsive to the particular circumstances of individual participants.

Consider the following when implementing accommodations:

a) Scope/Logistics of Possible

Accommodations: Think about the accessibility aspects identified above and consider what accommodations a participant might need that haven’t been accounted for in the general design of the focus group.

Example: if your focus group will be conducted orally in English, might some participants require interpretation/translation in ASL or another language? If so, how will you provide this in the event that someone requests it?

b) Budget: Because accommodations are responsive to participant need, and therefore impossible to fully determine in advance, your budget should be flexible within the range of costs of your possible accommodations.

c) Advertising: Make sure that prospective participants know, *before* registering for the focus group, that accommodations can be made available, and make the process for inquiring about and arranging these accommodations very clear. Ensure that participants are not made to feel as though you are doing them a favour by providing accommodations; ultimately, **accommodation measures benefit you by expanding the diversity of your participants.**

d) Implementation: Be mindful of respecting participant privacy and group dynamics when administering any accommodations, when possible and relevant.

While most accessibility measures are necessary, they merely *remove barriers to* – rather than *encourage* – participation. **Incentives** are ways to motivate participation. Remember that participants in your focus group are helping you to answer your research question, so **it is both practical and ethical to incentivize their participation** (note additional point on ethics below).

Consider the following when implementing incentives:⁹

a) Appeal to Participants: The most fungible and valuable option is always a cash incentive. However, if this is not possible, consider issuing gift cards, holding a raffle, or providing refreshments during the focus group session.

b) Budget: Unlike accommodations, incentives should be assumed for all participants.

c) Advertising: Participants should know, *before* registration, what incentives are offered so that they can make an informed decision about their participation.

d) Implementation: Be mindful of observing proper documentation and accounting for the distribution of incentives. For example, you should require signatures from participants prior to incentive disbursement.

e) Ethics: Incentives should not be so significant that they function as an inducement to participate.

Equity Consideration: Enhancing the accessibility of your focus group improves the quality of your research project. By maximizing the diversity of possible participants, you are maximizing the diversity of perspectives, and, particularly, facilitating inclusion of those perspectives that are often marginalized.

08. Adhere to research ethics.

A focus group requires more from participants than other data collection methods (for example, an anonymous online survey). As with all research, **ethical standards must be followed to ensure that participants are not harmed or exploited.**⁷ Abiding by best practices for research ethics is necessary for a) **moral**, b) **institutional**, and c) **practical** reasons:^{10,11}

a) Research participants should **not be negatively** impacted by virtue of participating in your research project.

b) Most educational and academic institutions will only support research that has been vetted by their ethics boards; **ethical research is a pre-condition** for much institutional support, as well as publication in an academic forum.

c) Ethical research is **the most rigorous research**, since ethical conditions are ones under which the data collected from research subjects is the most reliable.

The following are the **four ethical guarantees** that should be made available to all focus group participants:^{7,10,11}

i) **Anonymity:** Outside of the research team directly involved in data collection and the co-participants in the focus group, no one should know of an individual's participation in your research project.

ii) **Confidentiality:** Participants should be assured that the perspectives and experiences they share during data collection will not be attributed to them. Participants need to be informed about the limits to maintaining confidentiality due to the presence of other participants.

Ways to ensure **anonymity** and **confidentiality**:

- review ground rules with participants (see #10 below)
- separate identifiers, such as names, from collected and published data
- destroy all data at a specified date after the research is concluded

iii) **Voluntary Participation:** Participants should be confident that their participation is voluntary, at every stage of the process. Voluntary participation includes the ability to withdraw from participation *at any time* and assurance that there will be no negative consequences as a result of withdrawal (incentives should still be made available and withdrawal cannot impact their relationships with the research team or anyone else).

Ways to ensure **voluntary participation**:

- communicate the voluntary nature of participation in multiple ways and at multiple stages
- make sure that the behaviour of the research team, Moderator, and Notetaker complements, rather than contradicts, the message of the voluntary nature of participation

iv) **Consent:** Participants must consent to their participation, based on awareness of all pertinent knowledge, including and related to the possible benefits and risks of participation, anonymity, confidentiality, and voluntary participation; how the research will be used; how data will be handled and destroyed; and incentives for participation.⁷

Ways to ensure **consent**:

- communicate, at multiple stages and in multiple media, pertinent knowledge about their participation
- have documentation of participant consent as a pre-condition for participation

Equity Consideration: Research ethics as a separate and intentional process accounts for the fact that, by nature, **research participants are vulnerable to harm**.⁷ While ethical considerations may feel like added work without any added value to your research project, they fulfill the important function of ensuring that your research is not contributing to harm for the very people your research often exists to support.

09. Ensure that all of the logistics are in place.

Explore the following questions and adapt these considerations to create a checklist of logistical details for your focus group.

a) Participants:

- Do we have the final list of participants?
- Have all important details been shared with them?

b) Staff:

- Have we designated a Moderator and Notetaker?
- Are they comfortable with their respective roles?
- Have all important details been shared with them?

c) Space:

For an in-person focus group –

- Is the venue confirmed and appropriately set up?
- Have measures to increase physical accessibility been instituted?

For an online focus group –

- Has the meeting link been created?
- Are meeting settings appropriate?

d) Materials:

- Do we have the following printed and/or ready for use (depending on needs)?
 - » list of expected participants
 - » focus group guide (see #5 above)
 - » ground rules (see #10 below)
 - » consent and other ethics forms (see #8 above)

- » bus tokens and other accommodations (see #7 above)
- » refreshments, honoraria, and other incentives (see #7 above)
- » forms and records related to accommodations and incentives (see #7 above)
- » recording device
- » paper, pencils, markers, and other stationary

PART B: FACILITATING

The following practices will primarily support the work of the focus group Moderator.

10. Develop ground rules.

Unlike with other data collection methods, participant experience in focus groups is determined not just by the researcher's protocols and behaviours but by those of their co-participants. In this way, researchers are not able to fully control for all research ethics principles (see #8 above), such as anonymity, confidentiality, and participant safety. However, this risk can be mitigated, although not eliminated, by developing **ground rules**.

Ground rules are a **set of expectations for focus group participants**, developed by the research team independently or in consultation with participants at the outset of the focus group, that **outline ideal behaviour during and after the focus group**, as well as **possible consequences for failure to comply**. Ground rules hold focus group participants accountable to the Moderator and to one another.

Common ground rules include:

- Engage respectfully, openly and honestly.
- Make space for others to contribute.
- Observe the confidentiality of co-participants.

Equity Consideration: As ground rules are meant to facilitate an equitable and safe experience for all participants, they should include recognition of how participants are differently-situated and how this impacts upon relationality. Consider the social locations of the Moderator, Notetaker, and individual participants. For example, will your focus group tolerate expressions of racism, homophobia, transphobia, etc.? If not, how will you collectively deal with the possibility of it happening? Ground rules are ultimately about mutual respect and accountability.

11. Actively build rapport, while maintaining distance and authority.

Successful focus groups require that the Moderator balance rapport, mutual respect, and openness to encourage individual sharing and collaborative dialogue.⁸ The ideal Moderator (see #6 above) will remain sufficiently distant from participants to maintain a sense of anonymity and confidentiality, but will also strive to develop trust and create an authentic connection with participants to foster comfort and safety.

12. Follow the focus group guide, while being responsive.

Adhere to time constraints and ensure that the series of questions and prompts you've developed to explore your research question (see #5 above) is followed, but allow participants to guide the conversation and explore important conversational threads to facilitate generative contributions and discussion. Moderators should feel comfortable paraphrasing, rephrasing, and/or summarizing questions or comments that may be complex or ambiguous to facilitate shared understanding.

13. Demonstrate active listening, while remaining neutral to participant comments.

Active listening requires that you **listen attentively to understand, respond to, and reflect on what is being shared**. Remain engaged with focus group participants, but be careful not to show support or disdain for their comments, either verbally or with body language, as this could influence the way some participants respond and compromise their comfort and safety. Avoid adding insight to participant comments, or making conclusions about the intended meaning of their contributions (for example, by finishing their sentences).⁸

14. Support and encourage open and equitable participation.

Guide the conversation as needed, ensuring that everyone has an opportunity to participate. This requires being attentive to both the more assertive *and* quieter participants to ensure that no one is dominating or being excluded from the conversation.⁸

Moderators may consider the following approaches to managing different types of focus group participants:³

a) The Self-Appointed Expert: Participants who assume a level of knowledge on a topic may take up more space in a discussion than others. Interject by thanking the person for their contribution and asking what others think.

Example: “Thank you. What do others think?” or “Let’s have some other comments.”

b) The Rambler: Some participants may intentionally or unintentionally take up time and space in sharing their experience or perspective. Stop making eye contact with the person, glance at your watch or the clock to indicate a concern for time, or interject when they stop to take a breath to create an opportunity for contributions from others.

c) The Shy Participant: Some participants may be reluctant to engage. Make eye contact with the person, smile at them, and consider calling on them directly.

d) The Participant Who Talks Very Quietly: Participants who are hesitant or reluctant may be difficult to hear in the context of the wider group. Ask the person to repeat their response more loudly.

Remember to return to the ground rules as necessary to hold participants accountable to one another.

HOW DID WE COMPILE THIS EVIDENCE?

We based this Evidence Brief on years of experience supporting youth programs across Ontario in the design of focus groups for their research and evaluation purposes. We also searched YouthREX’s online Knowledge Hub, Google Scholar, and Google, including the following key terms: “focus group methodology”, “focus group best practices”, “focus group equity”, “focus group low-income”, “focus group marginalization”, and “focus group anti-oppression”.

ENDNOTES

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