

# CONDUCTING FOCUS GROUPS

*for* BUSINESS *and* MANAGEMENT STUDENTS

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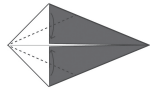
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# 2

## UNDERSTANDING FOCUS GROUPS

### INTRODUCTION

The aim of this chapter is to introduce the reader to the different types of focus groups that can be used in business and management research and to provide an overview of the purpose that such focus groups can address. In this chapter, we document the extent to which focus groups are compatible with different epistemological and ontological traditions so that you can assess whether the philosophical standpoint adopted and the arguments to be developed are consistent with the types of data to be used. First, we discuss how considerations of philosophical approach will influence the researcher's choice of focus group. We present the different structures of focus groups with examples from student projects. We then consider what criteria should be taken into account when assessing the quality of a research inquiry.

### UNDERSTANDING FOCUS GROUP VARIATIONS

A researcher new to the idea of conducting a focus group might be unaware that such a method of collecting data can take different forms. Without reflection, the focus group might simply be seen as a quicker way to gather data rather than interviewing each participant individually (Ghauri and Grønhaug, 2005). However, careful consideration of focus groups will be underpinned by the epistemological understanding of the researcher, which in turn will affect how the focus group is imagined and structured. There is no single correct way to design a focus group but there are several preliminary decisions to be made to ensure that the method is in alignment with the overall research project.



## PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH

As indicated above, both the choice of focus groups as a method for collecting data, and how they might look in action, are guided by philosophical assumptions. Saunders et al. (2016: 124) define research philosophy as 'a system of beliefs and assumptions about the development of knowledge'. Generally, focus groups are associated with a qualitative and inductive approach, with few participants, and favoured by researchers working within a broadly defined interpretive worldview. This does not necessarily preclude their use within other philosophical assumptions. For example, those working with a positivist understanding of epistemology might attempt to use focus groups to generate objective data, although this would resemble a structured group interview rather more than a focus group. We define philosophical assumptions below.

### Defining philosophical assumptions

Ontology can be defined as the study of being and social reality, and is rooted in the Greek word *on* which means 'being' or 'that which is' and *logos*, which translates as the study, or science, of something. The fundamental questions researchers ask about ontology are, 'What can be said to exist, and is there just one or are there multiple realities?'. The underlying assumptions of a researcher adopting a realist ontology include a belief that what is being studied exists independently as an external reality. A world distinct from the researcher is present and can be discovered. On the other hand, taking a constructionist view of reality indicates that the researcher believes that reality is not objective and exterior; rather it is given meaning by people, including researchers themselves, and there is no single reality. Here, the phenomena under study are created through the interactions and discourse of social actors.

Epistemology means the study of the nature of knowledge: how we know what is knowledge, what is considered acceptable knowledge, how it is acquired, and how best to go about the process of inquiry. The term comes from the Greek word *episteme*, which means 'knowledge'. It is important for undertaking any kind of project that researchers ask themselves what kind of knowledge they think can be generated through their research. In general, there are two broad approaches to knowledge. First, an objective or positivistic approach in which the researcher adopts the view of the natural sciences, which in turn leads to generalisations and quantifiable observations, appropriate for statistical analysis. Positivists believe that it is possible directly to study and understand reality. The researcher seeks to find causal relationships, and is careful to remain at a distance from the research process. The second approach is subjective, where the researcher prioritises understanding over causal explanation, privileging sense-making and meaning. From this perspective, the management researcher does not accept that there is a single ready-made world available out there for discovery, but attempts to understand the process of symbolic world-making. Here, the

researcher does not occupy a position of neutral observer, but reports their own interpretation within the understanding that everyone sees the world differently. Another way of expressing the difference is the contrast between defining the world as it is or the world as perceived (Moses and Knutsen, 2012).

It follows from the above description that focus groups fit best within the underlying assumptions around a subjectivist epistemology, which in turn tend to lead to a qualitative methodology. However, as we discussed in Chapter 1, focus groups can also be part of a mixed methods design, for example as a precursor to a questionnaire. On their own, focus groups are not seen as staples of quantitative research - they do not offer the opportunity for large samples, or generalisability, nor do they readily lend themselves to statistical analysis. In common with other qualitative methods such as unstructured interviews, focus groups have the ability to provide insights into process rather than outcome (Barbour, 2007). A frequently cited quote from Morgan sums up this valuable aspect: 'focus groups are useful when it comes to investigating *what* participants think, but they excel at uncovering *why* participants think as they do' (1988: 25). Such insight is possible because of the interactive nature of focus groups, which privilege the interaction generated as members of the group articulate, explain and challenge each other. Participants expose the reasoning behind their own opinions, allowing the moderator to explore and record such interaction. For example, a focus group with employees attempting to find out what kind of infrastructure would encourage more recycling at work might reveal a consensus on what the bins should look like, but further probing might yield data that underlay that group assessment. In this case, it might be that the normative understandings drawn upon by group members reveal a common perception that recyclables end up in mainstream rubbish further down the line anyway, so the organisation's attempt to increase recycling is just another waste of employee time. Thus a focus group which is positioned to generate quite surface-level information on the design of recycling receptacles could actually offer much more in-depth understanding of the norms underlying employee behaviour, which are rarely articulated. As Bloor et al. (2001: 4) note, the access that focus groups provide to group meanings, processes and norms is the reason why they are so popular in academic research.

However, these unique features of focus groups are not without problems and they can be challenging for all researchers. This is because participants may not be consistent, and may display frequent changes of opinion as they listen and respond to the views of others. Of course, this is totally interesting and absorbing from a research perspective if the researcher is gathering data on how people think about a topic and form their attitudes, like in the employee recycling example earlier, but is not helpful if one is attempting to pin down attitudes as fixed or permanent. What participants articulate within a focus group is exactly that - it is context-bound and responsive to an initial agenda set by the moderator, then shaped and affected by the other participants.

In addition, any researcher expecting a clear 'group view' to emerge at the conclusion of the discussion may well be disappointed. Each focus group is made up of

individuals and whilst there may or may not be a general consensus, it is important to take into account the interchanges between participants, rather than hoping for a united front. To have this expectation in mind would not enable full advantage to be taken of the focus group's interactive features. Further, the researcher might take note of emerging differences between participants, perhaps based on demographics or experiences, which can usefully lead to further questions or subsequent focus groups or other research methods. In Box 2.1, we offer an example of how philosophical assumptions might underpin a student research project.

### **Box 2.1 Understanding your epistemological approach**

Annie is studying for a masters degree in Management and for her dissertation she is delighted that she has negotiated access to several firms that operate in the same industrial sector. Building on her first degree in Operations Management, she wants to know how these firms combine their performance management systems with sustainability reporting. Like many students, she has been introduced to ontology and epistemology for the first time in her research methods module and is beginning to work through the debates to find her own position as a researcher. She starts from a realist ontology and has an expectation that she will find the answer to her research question. Having conducted a pilot focus group, she realises that there is no single answer to her question and that there may be multiple realities at play here. She therefore shifts to a constructionist ontology to enable a range of voices and opinions to come through in her findings. By conducting focus groups with the managers in these different firms, Annie is able to access their subjective interpretations of these specific management practices and understand how and why they are implemented in different ways.

Having outlined these philosophical positions, it is probably fair to say that in practice, the differences between them are not always so marked. There is often some blurring of boundaries, not so much in the actual underlying beliefs about the different ontologies and epistemologies, as these are basically distinct, but in the choice of methods used in a particular research design. What can happen with focus groups is that they may actually operate more like structured group interviews if the underlying philosophical assumption is based on a realist ontology and objective epistemology (i.e. there is an observable exterior world which can be measured and in turn produce quantitative data, leading to law-like generalisations). For example, a researcher adopting a realist ontology and objective epistemology might use a focus group to surface opinions and attitudes in a factual way, often as a precursor to a quantitative study. Like a structured individual interview, a group interview will make use

of a fixed protocol (i.e. a set of questions, asked in the same order), thereby providing consistency across the data collection, and perhaps assigning numerical values to the resulting data. Coule (2013) offers an insightful methodological critique of how focus groups have been used by researchers who accept the deployment of qualitative data collection methods whilst retaining key characteristics of positivism. She emphasises that how the focus group is positioned in relation to theories of knowledge will inform its aims, characteristics, analysis and role of reflexivity. By being explicit about one's epistemological position, the role of the focus group in producing a particular kind of knowledge will also be clear. Such transparency will ensure that a focus group method is not adopted unthinkingly, but used with critical reflection on the knowledge generated. For example, as a contrast to the focus group informed by realist/objectivist assumptions which produces objective data, a focus group designed from an interpretive stance would aim to access intersubjective meanings and produce rich, complex data in an attempt to account for behaviour in everyday contexts and situations.

Thus, the reasons for using focus groups within a specific research agenda will vary, but the emphasis can be on process as well as the actual outcome. Focus groups might be used at any stage of a research project (beginning, middle, end) in combination with other methods, or stand alone, depending on the purpose of the research (see Chapter 1). In Table 2.1 we identify the most frequently cited contexts for choosing focus groups that are applicable to business and management, and illustrate how these might look in a research project.

**Table 2.1** Structure and purpose of focus groups

<i>Level of structure</i>	<i>Type of focus group</i>	<i>Purpose of focus group</i>
Unstructured	Exploratory	Introduce a new topic for research, or obtain general background information about a topic, or generate survey questions
Semi-structured	Theoretical	Generate data to inform theory development
Semi-structured	Impression gathering	Gather impressions of products, services, brands, organisations
Semi-structured	Diagnostic	Diagnose problems and/or success factors for a new product or service
Semi-structured	Explanatory	As an interpretive aid to examine survey findings

Developed from Stewart and Shamdasani, 2015: 44-45; Bloor et al., 2001: 17

## DIFFERENT TYPES OF FOCUS GROUP STRUCTURE FOR DIFFERENT PURPOSES

As outlined in the previous section, focus groups can be structured in several ways according to purpose. We next consider the different structures aligned with the purpose of the focus group, starting with the unstructured format.

## Unstructured focus groups

Unstructured focus groups tend to be led more by the participants than by the moderator, although there will be a topic guide, which may be as brief as an opening question or statement to set off the discussion. Such focus groups might be located within an interpretivist stance with the aim of accessing and understanding meanings, if the aim is to explore a new topic, guided by the participants themselves. An unstructured format could also be used to obtain data seen in a more objective way, for example by market researchers who want to gather opinions and attitudes in order to find out further information about a phenomenon.

## Exploratory focus groups

For a research project which is intended to investigate a new topic, or a relatively under-explored area, the use of exploratory focus groups would be appropriate. For a new topic, perhaps where limited research has been done, the emphasis is very much on discovery. Hence, the research protocol, or list of questions or themes, would be fairly brief compared to focus groups for other research purposes. This is not to say there would be no guide at all for the moderator, but it would be minimal and open-ended to encourage as much discussion as possible by the participants. Indeed, the researcher might not know what to ask anyway and simply start with a basic question. Morgan and Scannell (1998: 45) offer an example which illustrates this rather elusive approach to focus groups. The research topic was aimed at understanding caregiving and nursing homes, and at the time very little was known about the transition of caring from home to an institutional setting, hence the choice of focus groups as the research method. There was a basic opening question to start each group ('When you think about your caregiving, what kinds of things make your life easier and what kinds of things make it harder?') which was sufficient to prompt a long and relevant discussion, without further intervention from the moderator. In this manner, the researchers learned a huge amount about this unique situation, expressed in the participants' own words, which allowed them to understand the stress inherent in the transition of caregiving. So a choice to use an exploratory focus group design would be based on the researcher being interested in learning what matters to the participants, what kind of language they use to discuss the topic and how they feel about it.

Another way of looking at exploratory focus groups is put forward by Bloor et al. (2001) who suggest that such focus groups be used in the early stages of a project to inform the later stages which might employ different methods (e.g. a survey). As with the example above, the situation would be one where relatively little is known about the topic, where prior research is lacking, to access the everyday language of the research participants or where the target group (e.g. adolescents) holds knowledge which is concealed from others. They make the point that if this research design is



to be followed, sufficient time must be allowed to analyse the focus group data so it becomes meaningful to the remainder of the project. This combination of various methods would be an example of using a mixed methods design (see Chapter 1). An example of using exploratory focus groups from the consumer behaviour field is provided in Box 2.2.

### **Box 2.2 Designing an unstructured focus group for exploratory purposes using visual techniques**

Marta is studying for a masters in Marketing with a specific focus on consumer behaviour. She is interested in how people make consumption decisions in their everyday social contexts and wants to focus on the under-explored consumer segment of teenage boys. Her research objective, which is informed by an interpretivist stance, is to explore perceptions around the influence of peers on boys' choice of clothing. She decides that exploratory focus groups would be a good way to investigate this objective, as very little is known about the topic. She realises that conducting research with teenagers is likely to be challenging, particularly in terms of ethics. She has completed a thorough ethics application and received written authorisation to participate in the research from schools, parents and the teenagers themselves. She is also uncertain about how to phrase questions, for example the appropriate language to use. As a way of overcoming this uncertainty, and to encourage the articulation of feelings in the focus groups, she plans to incorporate a simple comic strip scenario, as a form of completion technique (Malhotra, 2010). Completion techniques require participants to complete a partial situation. Marta plans to ask the boys to complete the second scene in a comic strip, using drawings and/or speech bubbles, to show how they would react to friends making fun of their chosen jacket. By utilising this approach, Marta will be able to access the boys' reactions to peer disapproval and use the comic strips as a focal point to prompt further discussions as they arise, for example around clothing for other purposes such as school and sport. She will use the focus group data to address her research objective of how boys perceive peer pressure and the influence of peers on consumption decisions.

### **Semi-structured focus groups**

In academic research, most focus groups will come under this heading of semi-structured, although such a design can serve different purposes. Here, focus groups follow an outline of themes and questions to be delivered by the moderator but there remains flexibility to explore unanticipated themes or follow new trains of thought if they still relate to the original research design. Some researchers refer to

this semi-structured approach as moderately structured groups (Morgan and Scannell, 1998) but still emphasise the need to match this design with the project's goals. It should not be seen as a default position for focus group design, or some kind of compromise, but needs to be clearly articulated within the project or dissertation.

### Using semi-structured focus groups to generate data to inform theory development

The first use of focus groups within a semi-structured format is to generate data which will enable the development of theory. Here, the researcher is intending to design their focus groups to produce data which they will then analyse to make a contribution to a particular theory. Focus groups can be used as a single method here, or as part of a multi- or mixed methods design. The discussion guide will draw upon extant literature centred on a specific theory or theories and contain a number of questions and themes, but retain an openness which allows for emergent themes to be explored. An example of this focus group design is given in Box 2.3.

#### **Box 2.3 Designing a semi-structured focus group to generate data to enable theory development**

Helen is studying for a masters in Environmental Management and is keen to investigate how environmental tasks are performed in a household setting. Most research on behaviours such as recycling and energy reduction have been focused on the individual as the unit of analysis but Helen sees merit in situating such research at a household level, to reflect the context where many environmental behaviours are located. She has read widely around household decision making and has identified a gap in how this practice relates to recycling. Drawing upon the household decision making literature, Helen decides that interviewing all members of a household about how they perform recycling tasks will enable her to collect data to explore this phenomenon. Thus, she chooses focus groups as her only method and plans to carry out focus groups with different types of households (e.g. couple, family, shared, student). She aims to build a theory of how recycling is negotiated and performed between the members of different households, developing a conceptual framework in an inductive approach.

### Using semi-structured focus groups to gather impressions

The next use we have classified under semi-structured focus groups is for the purpose of gathering impressions. Here, the aim of the focus group is to offer the

researcher an understanding of how participants, usually in a defined target group, perceive something which might be novel to them, and this approach can be used across business and management research. For example, in human resource management researchers might use such a focus group to find out what employees think about potential policies or solution strategies (Krueger and Casey, 2015). Often with this semi-structured or moderately structured design, questions take a funnel format, in that questions move the discussion from a broad view, to a focus on three or four central topics, then finally to more specific and detailed concerns (Morgan and Scannell, 1998). We discuss structure and moderator role in more depth in Chapters 3 and 4. In Box 2.4 we offer an example from international business.

### **Box 2.4 Designing a semi-structured focus group for impression gathering**

Ren is studying for a masters degree in International Business and wants to use his dissertation to explore the feasibility of launching a traditional Chinese dried food product which would be new to the UK mainstream market. In a multi-methods design, he has already arranged access to interview some grocery retailers to see if they would be interested in trialling the product. However, he feels that a focus group with a convenience sample of male and female food shoppers would contribute to his understanding of how the product might be accepted or not in a different culture, and therefore aid in answering his research objective of evaluating the market for this new product. Ren intends to ask shoppers at a local supermarket if they are the main preparer of household meals and, if so, whether they would be willing to participate in a focus group. He thinks that shoppers might possibly be confused about the food and how to prepare it, and how it might be incorporated into their usual repertoire of meals. Ren has prepared one or two broad introductory questions to start the focus group about favourite meals, food preparation and knowledge of dried products, with central questions to follow around usability, expectations, similarity and so on, and then several questions to cover specifics such as health properties, in case these do not arise naturally. He has also brought along samples of the dried product for participants to look at and handle. Ren is planning, with participants' permission, to audio record the focus group so that he can capture participants' initial vocal reactions to and impressions of the product as they encounter it for the first time, and he intends to note their facial expressions too as part of his data collection. This will enable him to consider any changes, for example to the packaging design or labelling information, as raised by the participants, which may influence the success of the product trial in a new market.

## Using diagnostic semi-structured focus groups

The third kind of focus group we have included under a semi-structured design is that of the diagnostic focus group. As its name suggests, this focus group is intended to probe how a particular target audience responds to a new product or service, or a change in organisational structure or practice, particularly whether there are any problems or notable factors which account for its failure or success. A famous example from the marketing literature recounts how sales of a new product (boxed cake mix) failed to make an impact on the target market of housewives in America in the 1950s. Analysis of diagnostic focus group data revealed that women were not purchasing the product because they felt they should be putting more effort into cake making for their families than merely mixing pre-prepared powder with some water. The manufacturer removed the powdered egg from the box and replaced it with the instruction to 'add an egg'. This created the effect of actually making the cake more like baking from scratch and was therefore acceptable to the target market at the time (Morgan, 1998). We provide an example from a masters project in Box 2.5.

### **Box 2.5 Designing a semi-structured focus group to diagnose problems and/or success factors**

Rani is interested in how large service organisations approach the development of their employees and as part of her masters in Human Resource Management project she wants to investigate the introduction of a new mentoring scheme in the global accountancy practice where she worked previously. Informally, she has heard mixed reports about the scheme from her old colleagues and thinks that there is scope for a research inquiry which will offer multiple perspectives of this phenomenon. Her approach to the research is informed by a constructionist ontology and a subjective epistemology, and she thinks that employees' interpretations of the scheme will be context dependent (e.g. be influenced by their position and status). Rani's objective in using diagnostic focus groups is to access and understand culture-dependent meanings with the aim of explaining employee behaviour. Rani intends to use the diagnostic focus groups with employees from different parts of the organisation who have already been mentored. Commensurate with her philosophical stance, she plans to bring together employees who work in similar positions, so that issues of power or fear of disclosing information are minimised. She is careful not to be overly structured in her approach, as she really wants to facilitate a flexible discussion. She anticipates the data will allow her to present a complex and rich picture of the new mentoring scheme.

## Using semi-structured explanatory focus groups

The final design under semi-structured focus groups is that of an aid to examine quantitative or other results from a previous piece of research. This is not in terms of *validating* previous research, but to provide a means of interpreting or critically reappraising survey results. This can be done in the context of interpreting a survey carried out by another researcher or with your own survey results. Harrison (2013: 2157) describes explanatory designs as 'most often conducted when qualitative data are needed to help explain or build on initial quantitative data'. An example of using a focus group in this design is given in Box 2.6, where we also mention the use of online focus groups - this is examined in more detail in Chapter 3.

### **Box 2.6 Designing a semi-structured focus group as an explanatory aid**

Sam is studying for an MBA and for his dissertation he is keen to survey higher education institutions to find out how they approach and manage joint ventures in international markets with other similar institutions. From his own experience of working in a university, he is aware that the market for such ventures is expanding and he is looking to understand the best way to establish and maintain a successful relationship. From his literature review, he has identified several topics which relate to his central research question, and has devised an online questionnaire to provide enough data to allow statistical analysis. He is happy with his questionnaire but on discussing the results with his supervisor he realises there are questions around managers' responses to the more personal aspect of the relationships in joint ventures. His quantitative data suggest this is a key aspect to the success of a joint venture so to explore this result further, Sam decides to run a synchronous (i.e. all participants contribute at the same time together) online focus group with a sample of the survey respondents to ask them specific questions about the importance of building relationships and how this actually occurs.

## **CRITERIA TO ASSESS THE QUALITY OF RESEARCH**

For research involving focus groups, which is likely to be based on interpretive rather than positivist assumptions, we can use assessment criteria which are designed for qualitative research inquiry. These include dependability, credibility and transferability, which respectively parallel the more positivist criteria of reliability, validity and generalisability. For those who wish to use focus groups in a more positivist way, we first briefly outline these three assessment criteria.

## Reliability

Reliability refers to replication and consistency of findings. Research is viewed as reliable if the measures used in data collection yield the same results as on other occasions, if similar observations are made, and there is transparency in how sense is created from the raw data (i.e. the focus group transcripts).

## Validity

Validity can be explained as the degree to which a method really measures what it is supposed to measure. Internal validity refers to the extent to which findings can be attributed to intended interventions during the study, rather than to any flaws in research design. Focus groups are considered to be valid if they are used to research a problem that is suitable for focus group inquiry. Certainly, focus groups have a basic face validity, which means their findings look reasonable and believable. Discerning predictive validity, which indicates confirmation by future behaviour or events, is a little more difficult but has been demonstrated in studies which use mixed methods, for example comparing survey results and focus group findings, where the latter have demonstrated greater predictive validity.

## Generalisability

Generalisability is also sometimes referred to as external validity, and means the extent to which findings are applicable to other settings. Krueger (1994) suggests that it is acceptable to make cautious generalisations if the focus group research has been carefully designed, conducted and analysed. So for example, concepts deriving from a study using focus groups might have relevance to other settings.

For researchers who are engaged in qualitative research based on interpretive assumptions, we now outline the three parallel criteria which can be used to assess the quality of such research.

## Dependability

Dependability for a research inquiry relates to the process of how the research focus emerges and develops. A researcher would be looking to ensure transparency in their account of how the research progresses, making sure to keep a record which documents all the modifications made to the research focus over time. This serves to produce a dependable account which enables other people to understand and evaluate the emergent research.

## Credibility

Credibility parallels the criterion of internal validity and indicates that there is equivalence between how the research participants' socially constructed realities have been represented by the researcher and what the participants themselves intended. Saunders et al. (2016) suggest a number of means to achieve such a match including: researching over a length of time to allow trust and rapport to develop, and to collect enough data; reflecting on the research process by discussing ideas or findings with another person; analysing data thoroughly, including any negative cases to present the optimum explanation of what is being studied; checking key elements of the research process (data, analysis, interpretations) with participants; and being careful to question one's own existing expectations about the research findings by continuously challenging these during data analysis, so that the participants' social constructions take priority.

## Transferability

Transferability is the criterion which corresponds to generalisability or external validity, and involves the researcher making a clear and detailed description of the research as a whole. By providing such a full picture of all the elements of the research, including questions, design, context, findings and interpretation, the researcher allows others to judge whether the study may be transferable to a different setting.

For researchers who wish to delve more deeply into variances within broadly defined qualitative management research, there are more nuanced criteria for evaluation, contingent on particular philosophical assumptions (Johnson et al., 2006). In terms of choosing between the different types of criteria informed by positivist and interpretivist viewpoints, we suggest that you select the most appropriate set of criteria for your epistemological position.

## SUMMARY OF FOCUS GROUP STRUCTURE AND PURPOSE

In this chapter we placed focus groups within the context of the researcher's philosophical assumptions. Such assumptions influence the choice of focus group and the kind of data it is intended to generate. For example, a researcher in search of objective data, who is informed by a positivist epistemology, may use a focus group as a precursor to a quantitative study. A researcher informed by a subjective approach to epistemology will seek to understand the realities of participants through focus groups and prioritise multiple meanings and interpretations. Hence, the focus group encounter in each of these contexts will not be the same and will generate different kinds of knowledge.

We also presented in this chapter the various ways in which focus groups might be structured to serve a particular research purpose, each illustrated with an example from the broad business and management field. We discussed how a research inquiry can be assessed using the appropriate criteria.

Thus, the researcher has several choices in how they design and use focus groups to answer a specific research question, building on their philosophical and epistemological considerations. Once that choice is made, the researcher can then turn their attention to the basic components of focus groups.