

Clip 11: Focus groups and group interviews

Why might it be useful to distinguish between focus groups and group interviews?

Well, focus groups have a purposeful interest in intergroup dynamics. That is, the researchers will in some respect be directed towards how people interact with each other. So focus groups are not simply means to increase the number of respondents. Instead, they should be used when the research questions have some interest in the way some individuals discuss things in groups. And this is why they are popular with market researchers, pollsters and audio researchers in media studies because they are interested in how ideas about particular cultural products are established and maintained and the mechanisms by which those products are perceived and understood. All of which happens socially.

Now, it's probably true enough to say that many studies claim to use focus groups. However, in many cases these would be more accurately considered to be group interviews, because group interviews are essentially interviews with groups of people about an issue with little direct interest in how that group works. So if you are using focus groups to increase the number of respondents for reasons of efficiency you are probably actually doing a group interview. If you are doing this then I'd urge a degree of caution. Whilst there are contexts which group interviews might be desirable, you should always think about how that group context could impact on data with reference to your research questions and dare I say consider whether a group interview is the most appropriate of data collection. After all, as focus interviews and group interviews are likely to utilise forms of nonprobability sampling merely increasing the group of respondents will not make the study any more generalizable in fact in some instances it might make the process of translating researcher findings more problematic.