

Focus groups in research

A focus group is a group discussion about a research topic or question involving multiple participants. Focus groups can be a convenient way of exploring the views, experiences or opinions of multiple of people at once, and the dynamics of a group conversation can facilitate different insights into a topic than might be revealed in a one-on-one research interview. The methodological drawback of focus groups is that they can be difficult to organise and sometimes facilitate. The group setting also raises some unique ethical issues. Conducting focus groups therefore requires careful planning not only around the logistics of bringing together multiple people in a research setting, but also the ethical concerns this form of data collection presents.

This guidance note will help you address these ethical issues. It has been informed by the guidelines set out in the [National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research](#) (NS). It is essential that you familiarise yourself with the National Statement as early as possible in the research design process and incorporate its principles into your project planning.

Much of the ethics advice for research interviews is also applicable to focus groups. The information provided here is designed to be read in addition to advice about conducting research interviews; please see the guidance note on interviews in research for details about:

- risks associated with certain focus group topics;
- informed consent;
- participant recruitment;
- focus group locations;
- payments to focus group participants; and
- managing and storing focus group data.

Privacy and confidentiality

The ethical principle of respect for participants entails protecting the privacy and confidentiality of individuals and, where relevant, their communities (NS 1.11). By their very nature focus groups present a challenge for respecting privacy and confidentiality. Focus groups are always considered to be at least a low risk research activity (i.e. not negligible risk) because participants are identifiable to the researcher(s). Importantly, focus group participants are also identifiable to each other, and this limits our ability to safeguard participants' privacy and confidentiality. Research participants are not duty-bound to act in accordance with the values and principles of the National Statement, nor do they necessarily have any knowledge of what they are. Any time we conduct a focus group there is therefore always a risk that participants will infringe on the privacy and confidentiality of other participants.

This risk can be managed as follows:

Prior to participation

You will need to inform participants that due to the nature of a group discussion, the confidentiality of the information they share in the focus group cannot be guaranteed. They should therefore think carefully before revealing information that they would not wish others outside the focus group to know. There is sample text provided in the RMIT Participant Information and Consent Form (PICF) to help you phrase this. Discomfort may be experienced, however minor it may be, the risk level of a research project will be at least low. You should refer to the relevant research methods literature for advice on minimising participant discomfort during interviews.

During participation

It is always good practice to verbally remind participants of the main points in the PICF at the commencement of any research activity. In the case of focus groups, be sure to draw participants' attention to the clause in the PICF regarding privacy and confidentiality, and remind them that they should consider their contributions to the discussion in light of this.

Withdrawal of participant data

An important element of respecting research participants is respect for their capacity to make their own decisions, including not to participate in research. To this end, the National Statement (2.2.6(g)) stipulates that participants must be informed of their "right to withdraw from further participation at any stage, along with any implications of withdrawal, and whether it will be possible to withdraw data". Because a focus group is a discussion involving multiple participants, it is generally not possible to remove one participant's data while still maintaining the overall integrity of the data collected; put simply, a group conversation may not make much sense when one person's contributions are deleted. For this reason, you need to inform participants before the research begins (i.e. in the PICF) that it is generally not possible for them to withdraw their data once the focus group has been conducted. You should also verbally remind participants of this in person at the beginning of the focus group session.

Other research activities conducted in a focus group setting

Often researchers will use a focus group setting to conduct other research activities beyond simply discussing a topic. "Hackathons," whereby participants create research data by working together in groups to solve a problem, are commonly incorporated into focus groups. Focus groups are also sometimes embedded within a workshop format whereby participants might hear from speakers and may also participate in other activities such as completing surveys. If your focus group activities will entail participants doing more than simply discussing a research topic then you must inform them in

the PICF of exactly what they will be asked to do. You should also provide them with a detailed running sheet of the activities so they know how their time will be spent and can make an informed decision about whether they wish to participate.

Further information

For further advice on this topic or other human research ethics matters, please email humanethics@rmit.edu.au. A Research Governance and Ethics Coordinator will assist you and may connect you to one of the CHEAN or HREC members in your discipline who can offer expert ethics advice.