



How to moderate successful focus groups

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What is a successful group? (Online or face to face)



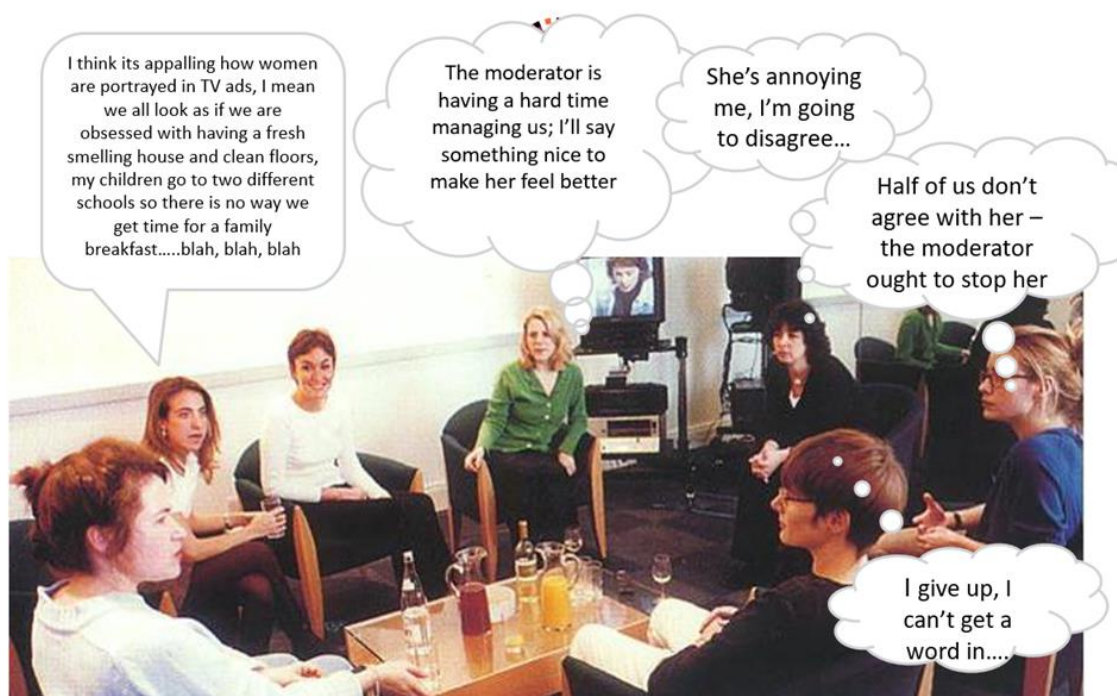
- Participants are psychologically and physically comfortable in the situation
- They can have meaningful discussions with the moderator and each other
- You meet the research objectives and avoid major biases
- Participation is reasonably balanced; everyone feels heard
- People are interested and stimulated by the experience
- You discover both individual and group views
- Any tensions and disagreements are managed constructively
- Moderator and participants can learn something new (insights)

Groups will often have some participants who talk more than others, but if people are able to disagree – and able to put their own view, this is not a problem. Some groups are very lively and give the impression of having generated a lot of useful data, but relatively quiet groups can offer as much insight.

What is the secret of success?

Realising that a lot goes on under the surface and taking steps to manage it. Research participants do not just sit there, totally focused on answering your next question. They will be thinking about who you are and what you want from them, whether you are evaluating or judging them in some way....whether they like you, want to impress you, or feel they can relate to you.

They will also be thinking about each other – who they like, trust, feel comfortable with – or not. There may be elements of social desirability bias and impression management – and it's a skill to be able to notice all this while you are asking questions and listening to the answers.



Notice types of contributions and manage them

Participants settle into roles in groups, which can include

- Being useful, helping to add or create information
- Emotional e.g. group comedian, release tension, seek compromise
- listening/not listening to others
- demonstrating their social superiority
- showing their topic knowledge

Manage the contributions

Show appreciation for useful comments *“Thank you, that is very helpful”, “this is a useful discussion”, “very interesting”* but do not focus the praise only on the person who said it. Otherwise you will encourage them to talk more, to the detriment of others.

Allow some role playing - unless it starts to annoy others in the group. Then you might remind the group of the task and the time: *“Can I just remind you that we have a lot to get through before the end – can we focus a bit more?”*

Make it difficult to not listen: *“George, what is your view on what we have just discussed?”*

Use this **simple method for interrupting anyone who is dominating** (for whatever reason) and bringing in a quieter person.

The image shows a sequence of four photographs of a woman in a light blue button-down shirt, illustrating techniques for managing a dominating participant. Each photograph is accompanied by a speech bubble above and a text box below.

- Image 1:** The woman has her hand to her forehead and is making a 'stop' gesture with her other hand. The speech bubble says: *Thank you, **PETER***. The text box below says: **Emphasise the name to stop the person**.
- Image 2:** The woman is smiling and giving a thumbs-up. The speech bubble says: *You have some interesting points*. The text box below says: **Offer the recognition they seek**.
- Image 3:** The woman is pointing her index finger upwards. The speech bubble says: **AND.....**. The text box below says: **Use 'and' because 'but' would discount**.
- Image 4:** The woman has her hands clasped in front of her. The speech bubble says: *Now I need to check with others what their views are*. The text box below says: **Remind that others need to be heard.**

If you have a **respondent who becomes upset** for some reason, respond empathically. *“I am sorry, this seems to be difficult for you.”* And then ask what they need: *“What do you need right now? Would you like to take some time? Would you prefer to leave? Is there anything I can help with at the end of the group?”*

For troublesome situations in general (group not working as needed) you can use **Meta-Commenting**. This is stopping the content of the group to comment:

“I notice we keep straying off topic”

“You are not saying very much about this idea.”

“This seems to be hard going for some reason.”

Then wait, in silence, until someone in the group tells you what they think is happening. Very often it's a simple problem; they thought it was meant to finish 10 minutes ago, the idea is too similar to all the others, they misunderstood something.....

Manage conflicts constructively



Most research group conflicts can be managed by a 'let's agree to disagree' type of summary, which can be verbal, or can be formalised using diagrams or lists. Often you don't need to have everyone agree – it's a finding that they don't.

Pains versus Gains (from Gamestorming) is illustrated here.

Should you want to go for a compromise, three columns of **Plus, Minus, and Interesting** are helpful, since the 'Interesting' one has potential to take the discussion into a more constructive zone. You can even label it 'How can we?..... (deal with the minuses)'

Another technique is to use **“I could live with it if.....”** Ask everyone to write down under what circumstances they would be prepared to accept the idea and use that as a starting point for negotiation.

Set up the group well to avoid problems

[See 'How to start a group or interview'](#)

Reduce any anxieties, explain what will happen, motivate them to participate, warn them you may have to intervene, and model how you want the group to behave.

If you start with serious and formal language, they will do the same. If you crack a joke or two, they will get the idea that they can be light-hearted.

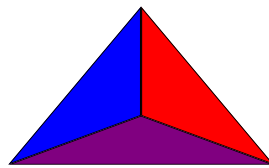
For serious or sensitive groups, you can acknowledge that some parts may be difficult.

Models for Group Processes

The physical structure of the room and seating can affect how people talk and what they are willing to say. Imagine the difference between a group held in a boardroom and one in a pub. Clearly the questions you ask affect how people will respond, but what many people don't see is that there is a third factor that affects what you get from groups: group process.

STRUCTURE

Physical characteristics



CONTENT

Questions, topics, etc.

PROCESS

What happens between the people in the group

Process includes:

- Who talks to whom and how much? Degree of disclosure
- Eye contact
- Types of interactions, involvement and intimacy felt by the group
- Likes and dislikes within the group, defence mechanisms and conflict
- Ways of decision-making within the group
- Patterns of response to questions and situations

The group has an 'unconscious' will, which can get in the way of the content. This is because groups trigger unconscious feelings and associations about previous experiences or authority, need for emotional space, rivalry, etc.

The moderator's job is to manage both the task and the process. A moderator who is fixated on the task can end up with a compliant or rebellious group without having any idea why, while a moderator who is too people/process oriented will have enjoyable and interesting groups, but be unclear as to whether all the research objectives have been covered properly.

An understanding of how groups develop and change helps moderators manage process by making the right interventions at the right time.

The Tuckman Model of the group life cycle: summary

(Adapted by Joanna Chrzanowska)

Stage	Underlying Processes	What you notice/ what happens	Moderator's task
Forming	People feel separate, dependent, anxious, relatively powerless Who am I here? How will I fit in? What are the risks?	Awkwardness Caution Light social chit chat	Empower & make safe by explaining the task, modelling behaviour, and encouraging interaction. Behave as you would want them to
Storming	Share of voice, demanding attention Challenges to moderator and others 'Pecking order' Opting out or rebelling	Challenge moderator or each other; play up Question the task Emphasise individuality Dominant & passive emerge Testing behaviours	Signal strongly that you value all opinions equally. Accept negative views but look for the positive too Stop potentially dominant respondents becoming overbearing Look for fight or flight responses
Norming	Sense of harmony, cohesion & support Norms emerge Group takes off	People take turns in speaking without you having to ask The energy feels more positive and harmonious	Notice and reinforce norms Deal with any implicit rule breaking Time to make plans and set agendas
Performing	Individuals are subservient to the group Roles are flexible and task oriented	Concentration and flow Everything seems easy High energy Group works without being asked	THE time to introduce difficult issues, stimulus material or projectives
Re-adjustment: Performing uses energy, so after a while the group slips back into one of the other stages before it can perform again			
Mourning or Adjourning	Completion of the task and disbanding of the group May be a sense of loss and anxiety Need for closure	If you haven't completed it, people may not want to go If someone leaves early, the process feels incomplete	Signal that the end is coming Summarise to give a sense of achievement Ask if there is anything else they want to say and thank them

Please note you do not have to believe in any specific model, just as long as you acknowledge there are stages in group process. Hence an alternative is offered here. You will note they have strong similarities.

Will Schutz's FIRO Model (Fundamental Interpersonal Relationship Orientation)

Described as a theory about the interpersonal underworld of a small group and developed into a personality test.

Stage	Issues/ Signals	Moderator's task
Inclusion (Forming Norming)	Do I belong? Do you? Do I want to? Do I deserve to? Do you? May try to impress, shock, set out personal boundaries. Anxiety about when to join in	Make everyone feel equally welcome and valued People use different strategies when looking for security and power in groups Make it easy to join in - Show Approval and Appreciation
Control (And conflict) Storming/Norming)	Individual strengths and weaknesses are forced into the open. People are more vulnerable Squabbles over trivial matters Frustration masks anger Need for leadership to resolve these issues, otherwise there is only surrender which does not lead to authentic openness	Stay aware that underneath the 'difficult behaviour' people are anxious and wanting to belong, while being afraid they may end up powerless in the group. Resolve conflicts rather than avoid them – at the very least acknowledge them Make sure everyone has a voice
Openness (Performing)	Build trusting relationships Facades drop away A more intimate atmosphere Disagreements can be respected or come from affection (teasing)	Use this time for the key issues of the research Show 'Affection' Be aware that the group may cycle back into Control after a while

Schutz, W.C. (1958). *FIRO: A Three-Dimensional Theory of Interpersonal Behavior*. New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston

Group Process Online

Meetings online demand more focus because they have fewer non-verbal cues for social interaction.

It is harder to pick up subtle emotional signals and respond empathically.

The 'constant gaze' of faces online can be stressful and increase pressure to perform.

See also the reasons for [Zoom fatigue](#)

Online meetings, training, and research are all influenced by group processes and dynamics. These are often less obvious online because there is less chance for 'emotional contagion' – picking up on mood and atmosphere through sensing non-verbal cues from others. (Despite the name, emotional contagion is useful for group leaders because it increases empathy, smooths social interaction – and sets alarm bells ringing if something is going wrong in a group.)

Being stared at by a screenful of people can be stressful. Although the brain knows they are not staring in a threatening way it can still feel intrusive. And there can be more social pressure to perform when being looked at by others. While the online environment differs, people bring reactions and behaviour shaped by years of face-to-face encounters.

Online groups have the same inner life as face-to-face ones, including:

Set the group norms you want consciously at the start.

Allow people to express dissenting opinions to avoid groupthink.

Use decision-making tools to account for all opinions.

Most of the 'difficult roles' reveal underlying needs for appreciation, validation or security.

Group norms – both formal and informal. What is acceptable behaviour in the group, the type of language that is used, and the patterns of interaction between individuals.

There are conformity pressures which are both good and bad. They keep groups working together with common goals and minimise distractions, but too much conformity can lead to **groupthink**.

Roles that people play in that group. These can be formal work roles or positions, or less formal roles, that people adopt according to cognitive style and personality.

Status is 'social worth'. A complex mixture of some or all of: approval, respect, power, admiration, and prestige.

Status is important because it gives people **influence**, even if they don't have actual power. They have credibility and trust. They can affect people's opinions, shape the framework of a discussion, recommend products and ideas – and be heard.

Hierarchies and Power

Power often goes with status, but technically it is about having control of critical resources. A stereotypical example is the accountant who may not enjoy high status but can turn the money tap on or off. High power-low status people may struggle to build effective teams because they direct rather than influence people to do what is needed.

20 common mistakes in moderating research groups

1. Rushing the introduction because 'it's not important'
2. Answering respondent questions about the moderator's opinion
3. Setting or allowing rigid response patterns in the group to form
4. Remaining the focal point of the discussion and not encouraging respondents to talk to each other.
5. Leaving it too late to control more dominant respondents and encourage quiet ones to talk
6. Not summarising what respondents have said
7. Confusing the questions 'what do you think about that?' with 'what do you feel about that?'
8. Using a series of closed questions
9. Using phrases like 'would you say that.....' (Except when checking the meaning of what a respondent has said)
10. Putting several questions into one
11. Following the one question - one answer principle - not looking around the room to see who else agrees, disagrees, or wants to comment
12. Using marketing or research language and not listening to respondents' language
13. Not allowing enough time for respondents to think before they answer
14. Saying you will come back to a respondents' point later and not doing it
15. Spending too much time on the warmup and too little on unravelling the key issues
16. Asking people to answer questions or do tasks that go beyond the limits of their memory/ their competence
17. Not stopping long enough to probe key issues or 'fat' words in enough detail
18. Avoiding conflict; not managing difficult behaviour in the group
19. Not noticing respondents' levels of physical and psychological comfort or discomfort / dissonance between what they say and their facial expression/body language
20. Having so many questions that there is not time to explore or consider the significance of new learnings