

FAQ 3: When is it good to use focus group, in-depth interviews, and observations?

What's the issue?

You have taken a decision that you will conduct a qualitative data collection, but which method do you choose? Do you want to observe a particular group or site for a long period in order to discover how meanings, representations, and behaviour come about? Or would a group where participants share and compare their experience be better? Perhaps you are dealing with specific and sensitive issues and would rather conduct in-depth interviews?

Common practice

In-depth interviews and focus groups can be used as part of a mixed methods research strategy (e.g. as a complementary method to a survey). Each one, however, can be used as a research method in its own right,

internet interests and experiences. Often, media use and content is selected, assigned significance, and interpreted through social interaction within groups. The dynamics of children's peer groups can be at least partly captured and reproduced within focus groups.

In a focus group design, social interaction between participants is the core issue. The researcher should encourage and observe discussions between individuals. Being able to collect the information needed while observing interaction amongst participants is an obvious benefit of conducting a focus group.

Since focus groups are based on social interaction, the context within which that interaction takes place is of the utmost importance. Focus groups can be conducted in informal peer group settings, and in classroom situations, as well as at home. The location of the research matters to children (and, no doubt, to adults), and should be familiar to the child. In this particular sense, focus groups are more similar to "natural groups" (i.e., pre-existing social groups, such as friends, class mates, families, etc.) than to "artificial groups" (usually assembled by marketing researchers), including people who don't necessarily know each other (and are actually not supposed to).

Researchers have pointed to a number of reasons for using online focus groups, namely, the speed, ease, and low cost of computer-mediated social research. Moreover, as already highlighted in the first age of the internet studies, being anonymous promotes self-disclosure related to sensitive issues, thus reducing difficulties of disclosure with peers in a face-to-face context. However, online focus groups raise ethical considerations: in particular, traditional ethical guidelines need to be revisited, also taking into account codes of conduct relating to online behaviour. A limitation of using online focus groups with younger children is that

children, this last procedure may prove to be particularly adequate, since children could reject other

are used to joining several focus groups per year, and who also sometimes specialize in talking about certain topics (such as media consumption). However, natural groups may also pose some challenges to the researcher because the group observed is characterized by established relationships, certain roles, and relations of power within the group that the researcher has to identify and bear in mind. Another side effect of the study of pre-existing