

## Article

## Conducting the Focus Group of Novice Nurse Qualitative Researchers: A Literature Review

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### Abstract

*This study aims to provide a guideline description of how to conduct an effective focus group for the novice nurse researchers. The qualitative research is increasingly popular in health care. The focus group is one of the main methods used for data collection in this research type. However, conducting the focus group can be complicated and challenging for the novice nurse researchers as how to obtain substantial, meaningful data for further understanding of the topic.*

*This study uses literature review of previous studies to draw on significant recurring themes. Related journal articles that appeared during 2007–2016, relevant grey literature included, were investigated using three health-related databases namely CINAHL, Science Direct, and PsycINFO. The searches, which yielded 142 articles, were the results of using the following keywords of “pioneer qualitative researcher” or “novice nurse qualitative researcher”, “moderator” or “facilitator”, and “focus group”. Titles and abstracts were also incorporated into the searches based on the predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria. A total of thirty five full articles were obtained for subsequent thorough reviews which resulted in ten main focused articles. The final review, conducted on the ten main focused articles, involves six published studies from related literature and four official papers obtained from searching grey literature related to the topic. Two themes were identified including the planning and preparation for the focus group and the characteristics of an effective moderator in the focus group. It is necessary that the novice nurse researchers have essential characteristics of a competent moderator in conducting the focus group. It is suggested that a successful focus group moderator undergo prior trainings and adequate practices, have good teamwork, and closely adhere to the instructional advice of their mentors.*

**Keywords:** focus group; novice nurse researcher; qualitative researcher

## Background

Qualitative research has long been widely used in nursing as it can greatly contribute to the body of knowledge in this area. It is important due to the evidence-based data that it provides, which can be used to enhance the nursing practices, thus, improving the quality of the nursing care and services. The focus group is one of the main methods for data collection in qualitative research, which is used to clarify and explore relevant experience of participants on a particular topic.<sup>1,2</sup> The purpose of the focus group in nursing research includes providing data and/or comments from the individual experience to collective views in order to enhance the discussion part of research, which can lead to useful explanation and/or elaboration on certain nursing practices. However, there are a number of challenges or difficulties in conducting the focus group regarding how to obtain rich data during the dynamic discussion among participants as with what the group thinks and feels about a topic. The moderator's main responsibility is to lead the discussion eliciting useful responses from the participants.<sup>3,4</sup>

Since the process of conducting the focus group is fairly complex, it can be challenging especially for the novice researchers who lack previous experiences in qualitative research using this method of data collection. Challenging issues involve planning and preparing participants and facilities as well as self-preparation pertaining to characteristics of a good moderator. Proper trainings and personal readiness are necessary if they desire to improve their skills when taking this leading role. A number of studies show that success in conducting the focus group is mostly attributed to the characteristics of an effective moderator. This present study, therefore, addresses this important issue.

## Aim

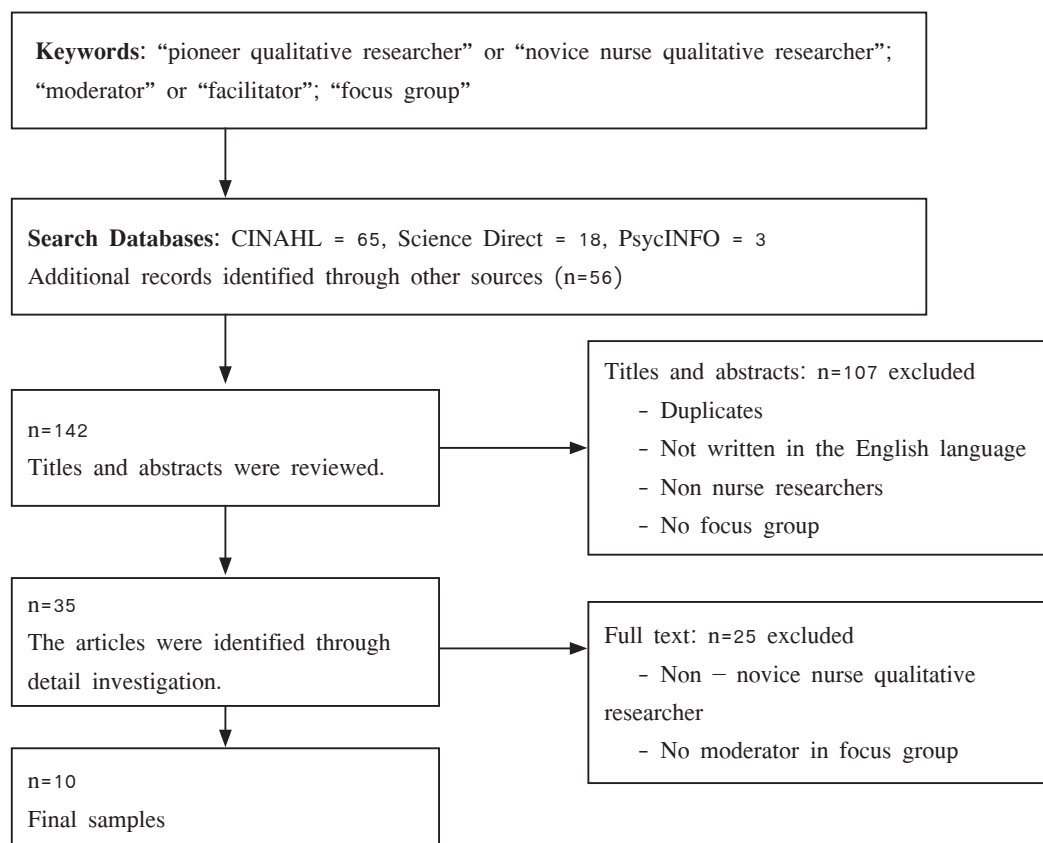
This study aims to provide a practical guideline description of how to conduct an effective focus group for novice nurse researchers. Through using literature review method and thematic analysis for an in-depth understanding of evidence-based data, the analysis of literature is based on the following research question, "what are the guidelines or suggestions for a novice nurse researcher to conduct an effective focus group?"

## Methods

The findings in this study were obtained from using the research methodology called "literature review". It is referred to as a synthesis of research results, information and knowledge, insights, and empirical data on a particular topic.<sup>3</sup> Prior to conducting the search, two of the authors reviewed relevant databases and search terms. Focusing on recent issues published during 2007 and 2016, three health-related databases namely the Cumulative Index of Nursing and Allied Health Literature (CINAHL), Science Direct, and PsycINFO were investigated using the keywords search. Related grey literature was also included through searching keywords with the Google search engine. The following keywords used within the database search both individually and in combination included "pioneer qualitative researcher" or "novice nurse qualitative researcher", "moderator" or "facilitator", and "focus group". The inclusion criteria used in selecting relevant articles as primary source were those research written in the English language and those that focused on the novice nurse qualitative researchers as moderators in the focus group, whereas the exclusion criteria referred to those articles written in other languages and had no relevance to the novice nurse qualitative researchers as moderators in the focus group.

The flow chart of the article selection process in this study is shown in Figure 1. The search finally yielded 142 articles. Both titles and abstracts were also examined based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria. A total of thirty five full articles were retrieved and assessed for eligibility, resulting in 10 articles being selected as the most

relevant to the topic. To summarize, the literature review and analysis in this study involved six formal academic published articles and four grey-literature papers. Thematic analysis was undertaken to extract related themes after the completion of the literature search.



**Figure 1.** Flow chart of the article selection process

## Results

The primary results drawn from data in both formal academic literature and related grey literature pertaining to the focus group in nursing research

are shown in Table 1 and 2 respectively. The main findings from selected articles reveal suggestions on how to effectively conduct the focus group.

**Table 1.** Primary findings from formal academic literature search

Authors	Type of articles	Purpose	Key content/ findings
Plumer-D' Amato <sup>5</sup>	Discussion paper	To highlight factors involving in planning and conducting the focus group.	A good focus group moderator must have adequate knowledge of the topic, can guide discussion well, and allows all participants to freely express their opinion on the topic.
Doody, et al. <sup>6</sup>	Discussion paper	To develop an understanding in the process of the focus group.	The moderator should create relaxing and friendly atmosphere as well as a comfortable environment when conducting the focus group.
Jayasekara <sup>7</sup>	Discussion paper	To present an overview of the focus group in nursing research.	The moderator plays a major role in achieving success in the focus group if he or she does not show bias and interrupt participants during discussion, which in a way can limit the findings.
Doody, et al. <sup>8</sup>	Discussion paper	To assist novice nurse researchers to prepare and plan the focus group.	An effective moderator should be a good listener, who understands group dynamics and demonstrates good communication skills.
O'Connor and Murphy <sup>9</sup>	Discussion paper	To describe how a novice researcher conducted a focus group.	Challenges in conducting a focus group include the interference of sounds recorded during the discussion and competence of a field note taker. The moderator should prepare a high-quality microphone for clear recording.
Shaha, et al. <sup>10</sup>	Literature review	To describe how to control the factors of the focus group with nurses.	The moderator must gain the trust of the participants and know the topic in depth so as to lead the focus group discussion efficiently.

**Table 2.** Primary findings from grey literature search

Authors	Website	Purpose	Key content/ findings
Pawi, et al. <sup>11</sup>	www.researchgate.net	To discuss on the challenges in conducting a focus group interview.	A skillful moderator needs to know the topic in depth or should be an expert in the subject of discussion. It is also important for a moderator to encourage all participants to respond.
Wilson, et al. <sup>12</sup>	IJNSS. journalhosting. ucalgary.ca	To describe how a novice researcher conducted a focus group.	To conduct the focus group, it is important to keep the atmosphere relaxing, comfortable, and non-judgmental. This will help participants feel safe to present their opinion and related experience.
Webb and Doman <sup>13</sup>	www.junctures.org	To discuss the experience of conducting a focus group.	Regarding a challenge of recruiting a nurse as research participant, the moderator is suggested to make an appointment for a formal meeting prior to the actual interview and motivate him or her to participate voluntarily.
Pagatpatan, et al. <sup>14</sup>	www.researchgate.net	To present the experience of novice nurse researchers.	For a successful communication during a focus group interview, a moderator should be a native speaker of the language the group uses.

## Two additional major findings and discussion

In addition to the primary results mentioned above, two important themes emerged from the coding of data namely the planning and preparation for the focus group, and the characteristics of an effective moderator in the focus group.

### Planning and preparation for the focus group

For novice nurse qualitative researchers, the planning and preparation stage is reported in literature as an important element for a successful focus group.<sup>2</sup> The planning and preparation stage refers to that of the moderator and the field-note taker themselves, the questions to ask the participants, the materials, the script, the environment as well as other supportive equipments that will be used during the discussion.<sup>11,15</sup> Poor planning and preparation of these can interrupt or even stop the discussion from flowing smoothly causing participants to feel uncomfortable, thus limiting the data gained during the interview.<sup>5,16</sup> In summary, a moderator should take into consideration the following five factors involving the success of a focus group.

#### Selection of participants

While participants in a focus group vary depending on the purpose of each study, it is preferable that, first, they have the previous experience or prior knowledge on the topic.<sup>6,17</sup> Second, they should be of a homogeneous background including age, gender, social status, occupation, and types of experience that pertain to the topic since these factors may influence group discussion. For example, there should be a separation of participants between registered nurses and nurse aids as they have different kinds of experience. If these two groups are combined, chances of sharing ideas, opinions, and/or experience can be limited. However, the heterogeneous groups could be used for exploratory purposes in which varieties of groups are preferred.<sup>7</sup> The differences of research outcomes can be found

when data are obtained from homogeneous versus heterogeneous groups as well as from those groups whose members are familiar or intimate versus those who are strangers to one another.<sup>8,11</sup> Moreover, it is important to make sure that the participants are not in conflict with or incompatible with one another.

#### The size of a focus group

The size of a focus group depends on the complexity of the topic and the skills of a moderator.<sup>6,7</sup> The proper size of a focus group should be six to twelve participants per group.<sup>1</sup> The large group is better than the small group because a large number of participants generate more opinion. However, the smaller group are perhaps more beneficial when sensitive issues are concerned, or when there are a limited number of participants who have experience on the topic.<sup>15</sup> In summary, the size of a focus group can vary according to the research objective, can be flexible, and should be large enough to create useful group discussion. However, the large size of participants is challenging particularly when a novice nurse researcher needs to lead the unrelated discussion back to the topic. In this regard, a good moderator should prepare himself/herself well in advance by studying the scope and relevancy of the topic, and practice until they are skillful of leading a discussion. They are suggested to rehearse with the assistant moderator as a successful focus group discussion normally results from a good collaboration between group leaders. Other factors that can influence the group size include the purpose of research, the complexity of the topic, and the available budget. Moreover, most researchers suggest that the appropriate number of focus group be from three to six since these are the optimum number if a researcher desires to reach data saturation that is sufficient in identifying all relevant themes of the topic.<sup>1,18</sup>

#### Duration of a focus group

The focus group duration depends on the

complexity of the topic, the number of the interview questions, and the size of the group. The discussion usually lasts one to two hours, and the recommended duration is two-hour maximum considering the physical and psychological limits of participants.<sup>9</sup> Beyond this, the impact can be evident in children who tend to lose their attention easily and quickly, and in the elderly who can become wearied and lose interest soon enough causing the discussion to pause or stop earlier than expected. In addition, participants may run out of opinion on the topic, or the session can become tiresome if it goes over the time participants may allow. On the other hand, the limited duration of less than 45 minutes may not be adequate as the participants may just start to explore the topic, thus, the data gained could be too little or even incomplete. In conclusion, a flexible duration of approximately an hour up to less than two hours is recommended.

### **Preparing the environment**

Favorable or poor environment can differently affect the quality of data gained from the participants. Conducive environment for conducting a focus group is recommended as having an appropriate size, adequate lighting, and proper temperature. The seating should be arranged in a circle format to ensure that all participants can see one another. What is most important is that the moderator should keep the atmosphere relaxing, comfortable, and non-threatening. Likewise, the venue should be of a safe place where disturbances from external noises are minimal to none.<sup>5,8</sup> The room should be large enough for the group size, and light refreshments should be prepared for every one as participation incentives and as a creation of a friendly atmosphere.<sup>9,11</sup>

### **Essential equipment, materials, and the focus group scripts**

The materials that are essential for a focus group include 1) the audio recorder(s) for voice recording, 2) the consent forms and participants' information sheets, 3)

name tags for all participants and moderators, 4) a timer or a clock, 5) coffee, pastry snacks, or refreshments, 6) sign-in sheets and the list of participants, 7) flip charts and markers, and 8) a notebook and a pen.<sup>3,4,17</sup> Most importantly, the microphone which is used as voice amplifier should be of good quality for both clarity in voice recording and for thorough hearing during discussion.<sup>9,15</sup> This is necessary especially for those elderly participants or aged patients with hearing impairment.

The focus group scripts serve as a guideline or an outline for the moderator to follow. It is suggested that he or she start with explaining the purpose of the study and why the focus group is necessary, then the moderator is to review the group discussion rules and other information that participants need to know prior to the group discussion. The focus group scripts can contribute to the reliability of both the research and the data obtained especially when more than one group is involved because the outlined scripts can ensure that all groups are conducted in the same pattern and manner.<sup>16</sup> The normal scripts for introducing group discussion include 1) welcoming statements, 2) overviewing the research topic and its objectives, 3) stating ground rules, and 4) starting the first question.<sup>9,12</sup> It is also important that questions be listed in the way that they run from more general to more specific, or in the order of importance. The research team is also advised to brainstorm ideas when developing lists of questions based on the purpose of the study. In addition, the open-ended, rather than yes-no questions, are recommended as they are likely to elicit useful, and, perhaps, sufficient information from the group discussion.

### **The characteristics of an effective moderator in the focus group**

Conducting the focus group is a complex process, thus, it can be challenging for novice

researchers when it comes to data collection. The focus group is usually conducted by a teamwork of at least a moderator and a note taker. This article focuses only on the moderator, whose role requires the following four important characteristics;

### **The effective listening skill**

A moderator must be a good listener as well as a fast thinker simultaneously so as to be able to summarize main points gained from listening to a long dialogue or streams of discussion during the interview.<sup>16</sup> A moderator is required not only to focus on the discussion, but also to observe the level of participants' interaction closely and listen with sensitivity and empathy.<sup>1,19</sup> Participants' body language such as crying or laughing also usually conveys certain meanings that may clarify doubtful, obscure, or hidden issues. This also includes manners or gestures that are related to the content of the discussion, during which the moderator must not join in the emotion, nor must he or she share any feelings such as sympathy.<sup>3</sup> While listening attentively, a good moderator is suggested to request that other group participants show no emotional feelings either. If this emotion issue interferes with group dynamics, the moderator should react properly and promptly reminding participants of the rule of mutual respect and other related etiquettes, if necessary. In addition to listening, a moderator is advised to be a fast decision maker especially when a participant dominates the discussion, he or she should exercise leadership making the next move of conversation properly inviting other participants to share their opinion.<sup>3,4,16</sup> He or she may start by thanking that individual for sharing valuable information, and then may use eye contact to induce talks from others. It is equally important to keep eliciting talks from various participants as well as maintaining the level of listening while gaining control of the direction of the focus group.

### **Flexibility**

The moderator is advised to anticipate that the participants may incline to divert from the expected answers or thought patterns in response to questions. It is important to believe that all participants have a valuable idea on the topic, and a moderator keeps personal opinion to him/herself, or if necessary it is expressed with impartiality, confidentiality, and cautions. Gestures such as head nodding, and/or responses such as "yes," "I agree," and "OK" should be strictly avoided.<sup>1,16</sup> This is because they may convey the acceptance of the answers with the possibility of limiting new ideas or opinions that may come later from other participants in a group.<sup>11,16</sup> A good moderator is preferred to have a flexible, non-judgmental, non-biased attitude towards anyone in the group.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the moderator is advised to consider providing short breaks of five to ten minutes in between for the participants who are recovering patients, children, or the elderly, as they may become easily tired, weakened, or nervous during the group discussion. Then, they can have some snacks and refreshments, rest, or use the restroom. The discussion can resume after that. A short break during discussion should help create a relaxing atmosphere.<sup>3</sup>

### **Communication skills**

The communication and group leadership skills of a moderator are essential as they are the key to success in conducting the focus group.<sup>10,20</sup> It is suggested that the discussion start by a moderator welcoming all participants, introducing himself or herself and the team. He or she then requests the participants to introduce themselves and to put the name tags on, followed by remarks on the purpose of the discussion, a warm-up introductory question aiming to create a friendly atmosphere, and ending with words of appreciation for coming to share their experience.<sup>9,13</sup> After that, light refreshments and food may be served to promote more talks, to create lively



discussion as well as vibrant communication within the focus group.<sup>21</sup>

Communication skills of a moderator also involve how to deal with interruptions while someone else is providing opinions.<sup>16</sup> In this regard, the moderator is advised to show some gestures as signals for the interrupters notifying that they will be given an opportunity to speak in the next order.<sup>20</sup> As for those reserved or timid participants who may remain quiet mostly, the moderator should keep smiling, showing politeness as well as the respectful eye contact before inviting their sharing an opinion perhaps by throwing questions directly at the individuals.<sup>3</sup> What is usually overlooked, but is as equally important as other factors, is that successful communication also depends on whether a moderator is a native speaker of, or can speak, the language the group uses. This helps prevent miscommunication between the moderator and the participants.<sup>14</sup> Also, it is advisable that a moderator understand group dynamics or the way the participants interact with one another since these may signal a significance of the particular issue being discussed. When the moderator takes notice of this, he or she may desire to invite more clarification or elaboration so as to induce them to generate more rigorous data. A good moderator should be skilled at creating discussion and encouraging participation of talk rather than doing most of the talking.<sup>6,16</sup>

### **Topical expertise**

An efficient moderator is the one who has in-depth knowledge of the topic or is an expert in the matter of discussion.<sup>11</sup> This also includes the scope or focus of the issue with true awareness of what is relevant and what is not. When the discussion is digressing from the main points of the topic, a skillful moderator considers re-directing the talks. With questions prepared in advance, the talent of a good moderator should also be at directing the discussion at a pace that allows all questions in the outline to be addressed completely.<sup>3</sup> The moderator's

experience in handling group dynamics also means the building of confidence in participants enough to reveal any hidden, unaddressed dimensions of the issue at a proper time.<sup>5,11</sup> This trust could be achieved through continual care and understanding that can ultimately bring about the active interaction among members, ensuring quality data at its maximum. In other words, topical expertise is an important characteristic of a good moderator as it helps with taking control of the process as well as the data content.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, it is essential for a moderator to receive trainings on techniques of leading discussion and preparing oneself emphasizing the in-depth prior knowledge on the topic.

### **Conclusion**

The focus group is an important method for gathering data in qualitative nursing research and is used especially when exploring detailed, in-depth information of opinions or unique experiences of the participants in the forms of group interviews or group discussion regarding health care services or practices. As it involves people and specific health topics, it is rather complex, can be sensitive, and requires a number of skills and preparation. Particularly, it can be very challenging for a novice nurse moderator when planning and conducting the focus group. Thus, most previous studies suggested that a moderator receive some prior trainings, several practices, have good teamwork and professional support of his assistant. Novice nurse researchers are also advised that they understand the group dynamics and any limitations that certain types of participants may have with the purpose of generating quality data. Other recommendations involve the avoidance of sensitive topics such as sex-related matters or sexual behaviors. They should also practice how to elicit responses in the way that it stimulates thinking and/or opinion sharing, inducing participants to explore new dimensions in health care,



thus, generating meaningful information to be used in data analysis, which can subsequently become beneficial for the development of new intervention research as well as other emerging useful guidelines for the improvement in nursing care practices.

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