



# TIPS FOR ONLINE FOCUS GROUPS

Katie Rakow, King's College London

Developed from the experience of moving in-person focus groups to online participation, using Microsoft Teams, during the Covid-19 pandemic.

These are **additional** steps to those one would normally take when running a focus group.

## SECTION 1: KEY PRINCIPLES

- BEFORE planning an online focus group (OFG) satisfy yourself that it is a better form of data collection when compared to alternative options (e.g., online interviews).
- BEFORE recruiting participants, ensure that the platform that you plan to use is sufficiently secure to maintain participant confidentiality and is GDPR compliant. Participants need to know what they are signing up to in terms of privacy, anonymity and confidentiality.
- Remember your participants' wellbeing. You never know what is happening in their lives. Remember to help them feel comfortable about *not* participating now that it is online. Throughout the whole process, sensitively check with each participant to ensure that they are okay and still willing to participate.

## SECTION 2: CHECKLISTS – QUESTIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

### CHECKLIST A – BEFORE PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT

- A1. Check with your University's IT and Ethics Committee for their recommendations.
- A2. Be confident that participants' data will be encrypted.
- A3. Write out the steps that you and your participants need to follow to ensure that their data will be treated appropriately, from recruitment to data anonymisation and destruction. (See Checklist B.)
- A4. TEST the entire process outlined below BEFORE you communicate anything to your participants.
- A5. AFTER testing, update your Participant Information Sheet, Consent Form and any other recruitment communication. Remember, you may need to seek ethical approval for changes to these documents.

### CHECKLIST B - 10 QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- B1. How do you make sure that your participants can enter the "room" (i.e., the OFG "Chat" area)?
  - A) How do participants using an email address from your university enter the "room"?
  - B) How do participants using an email address that is *not* from your university enter the "room"?
- B2. How do you know when the participants have *entered* and *left* the "Chat"?
- B3. How can you ensure that only participants who have read the Information Sheet and signed the Consent Form join the OFG?
- B4. How can you prevent other participants from knowing who will be in the OFG until they have actually entered the "room" (i.e., joined the "Chat")?

The image used on page 1 has been released under Creative Commons CC0.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

- B5. To what extent can you protect participants' anonymity from other people outside the OFG (as you would do when conducting the group in person)? i.e., How can you confirm that only OFG participants can hear the discussion and see who is participating?
- B6. To what extent can you control who records the OFG and what is recorded?
- B7. To what extent can you control who can access the recording? When and where is it accessible and for how long? What safeguards can you put in place?
- B8. How can you encourage a discussion rather than having separate concurrent interviews?
- B9. How can you facilitate discussion without using non-verbal cues (e.g., if cameras are off)?
- B10. How can you ensure the OFG is about your participants and not you?

## SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

### Before the OFG

- Test the platform with others to answer Questions 1 to 10 in Checklist B. e.g.,
  - What can the platform record on audio, text and video?
  - Can audio be recorded independently of video?
  - Who can download each form?
  - When and how can each type of recording be deleted?
 (See Section 3 for Microsoft Stream features to consider).  
 Confirm your understanding from these tests with IT specialists at your university.
- It is recommended that participants complete the requisite consent form in ADVANCE of the OFG. Therefore, check this BEFORE the OFG, and if not, send them a reminder.
- Email participants a secure and private calendar invitation with a unique Meeting Link (e.g., Microsoft Teams). For example, Microsoft Office calendar invitation: set the invitation to 'private', and under 'response options', deselect 'allow forwarding' and select 'hide attendee list'. To control who can enter, leave and record, make sure you amend your Meeting Options in the invitation.)
- Include in the Information Sheet and Consent Form:
  - how the OFG will be recorded (e.g., video as well as audio).
  - agreement that participants will a) not record the OFG in way (e.g., handwritten, audio or video); b) respect other participants' privacy and anonymity; c) consider their setting and what they are sharing on screen.
  - a request that participants consider what they say and make visible, because there is always the possibility that a non-participant can see, hear or record any part of the OFG.
- In the Information Sheet *and* email invitation:
  - highlight the fact that they cannot join the OFG if it has already started.
  - request permission to introduce one another on camera, even if participants need to switch off their camera during the OFG. (If a participant does not have a camera, agree how they will share a photograph of themselves in a way that they will feel comfortable during the introductions.)
- Arrange small OFGs (e.g., no more than 4 participants).
- Make sure you are well prepared and that you have a neutral background so that participants are concentrating on the topic and not distracted (e.g., by your surroundings).

### On the day (immediately before OFG commences)

- Check that that all participants have read the Information Sheet and signed the Consent Form.

- Email a reminder to participants about the OFG details (e.g., date, time). Include in the reminder that they cannot join the OFG if it has already commenced. If they have not yet signed the Consent Form, remind them about the Information Sheet and Consent Form.

### Before you start the OFG

To build rapport and trust:

- Confirm who is in the “room”.
- Allow time (e.g., 10-15 minutes) to address technology issues.
- Introduce one another on camera or with a photo to include those who do not have cameras.
- Agree expectations of how participants will interact.
- Confirm with participants that only they can hear and see the OFG. Remind each participant to respect the privacy of other OFG participants.
- Confirm their agreement that they will not record the OFG in any way (e.g., handwritten, audio or video).
- Confirm with participants that they are happy for you to start the recording.

### During the OFG

- Monitor who is in the “room” throughout the OFG. If someone logs in, even if they had originally been invited, stop the discussion. Politely ask them to leave and confirm that they have logged out before you continue. Participants need to be confident that they are in the “room” with those who have publicly confirmed their agreement to the conditions under which the OFG is taking place.
- Stop the OFG if you think that anyone else can hear or see the OFG at any point. Confirm agreement with participants before continuing.
- Perhaps use the “Chat” function to post key questions or set an interactive task. If this involves another platform (e.g., Padlet) make sure it is secure, that your participants are the only ones in the space, and that their responses cannot be connected to them.
- Confirm with participants when you end the recording.

### After the OFG

- Thank participants for attending and then ask them all to sign out of the “room”. You should be able to see a log that they have left. This will limit the risk of a recording being shared with anyone other than you, the researcher.
- As soon as the recording has been generated, download it to a secure area (as specified by your university) and delete the recording from an online access (e.g., Microsoft Stream).

## SECTION 3: ADDITIONAL NOTES FOR USERS OF MICROSOFT TEAMS.

- The system cannot be set to record audio only (i.e., without recording a video).
- Recordings can be made by the meeting organiser (but can also be recorded by others in the “Chat”, depending on how the Meeting has been set up).
- Once recording commences, no-one else can record on the system.
- A transcript is generated alongside the audio-visual recording and can be accessed from Microsoft Stream but cannot be downloaded. It can only be copied and pasted.
- A link to the video in Microsoft Stream can be shared and therefore the video and transcript can be viewed until the video is deleted.
- Recordings can be deleted, but only by the person who recorded the event.
- Notes entered on the “Chat” can only be deleted by the author, i.e., the individual who entered them.