

Griffith University Research Ethics Manual

Ethical issues in focus group research

V3.04 December 2020

Contents

[1.0 Introduction](#)[2.0 National guidelines](#)[3.0 Deciding whether to use a focus group activity](#)[4.0 Describing focus group activities to potential participants](#)[5.0 Participants and confidentiality](#)[6.0 Audio-visual recording](#)[7.0 Collecting data from non-research focus group activities](#)[8.0 Consent](#)

1.0 Introduction

The use of focus group sessions is a common data collection technique across a range of human research disciplines and it can be used effectively in qualitative and quantitative designs.

The use of focus groups can have distinct advantages (e.g. perhaps being less confronting than one-to-one interviews) but can also raise new challenges (e.g. the potential sharing of sensitive matters in front of a number of other people).

The University believes that it is important that researchers are provided with a reference point on the ethical conduct of such work. This Booklet of the *Griffith University Research Ethics Manual* is intended to assist researchers who are planning and conducting a focus group as a component of a human research protocol.

[Back to contents](#)

2.0 National guidelines

The [National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research \(2007 updated 2018\)](#) is the Australian reference for human research ethics matters. Even though the *National Statement* contains no specific chapter or section about focus group-based research it does provide some practical advice on relevant general ethical considerations (e.g. consent, privacy and social risks).

[Back to contents](#)

3.0 Deciding whether to use a focus group activity

Though research design considerations will be important in making a decision whether to include a focus group activity in a human research project, there is also an important ethical dimension to this decision.

Unlike a one-on-one interview or survey, a focus group activity includes (by definition) participants sharing information in a group. If the topic under discussion is sensitive, if the participant pool is vulnerable, or there are other risk factors ([see Commentary Inset 1](#)), a researcher should carefully consider whether a focus group activity is in fact appropriate. These issues may become even more acute if the participants are likely to be known to each other, and the issues discussed could be harmful to the participant – such as a negative impact upon the professional or personal standing of some participants.

It can still be ethical to conduct a focus group in such situations (for example there may be a useful element of individuals sharing and supporting each other in the discussion of a traumatic event they have all experienced). However, the ethics reviewers are likely to be very interested in the strategies to manage the confidentiality and risk issues associated with such an activity.

It is important that when seeking ethics clearance for a project involving a focus group activity that researchers reflect upon whether the use of such an activity is appropriate for the topic, potential participants and context. This reflection should be made transparent in the application, and the rationale for the final decision presented. Refer to [Booklet 2 of the Griffith University-REM](#) for more about research ethics review, [Booklet 9](#) for more about risk management and [Booklet 23](#) for more about privacy.

Commentary Inset 1 – Managing psychological risks in focus groups

In addition to risks that might be associated with the disclosure of sensitive personal information in front of others ([see 3.0](#)) some focus groups can involve the discussion of potentially distressing/emotive topics.

Compared to a one-to-one interview it might be difficult for the researcher/facilitator to identify if an individual participant is distressed or otherwise struggling. Factors such as not wanting to be embarrassed in front of the group can also make it difficult to identify and respectfully respond to such distress.

These factors may be another reason not to use focus groups for some topics, participant populations and/or contexts.

Researchers should carefully consider these matters, how the risks will be managed and her/his expertise and confidence to appropriately respond to distress.

When a project involves a focus group discussion of an emotive topic, especially if the potential participant pool is vulnerable, this should be discussed in the application for research ethics review, including how the associated issues will be managed and the degree to which a focus group remains appropriate and justifiable. If these matters are not addressed the ethics reviewers might be reluctant to provide ethical clearance for the project.

[Back to contents](#)

4.0 Describing focus group activities to potential participants

Some potential participants may not appreciate what a focus activity involves or may not even be aware of the term. Though it will not be necessary for all potential participant cohorts, for some it may be necessary to include in the recruitment and consent materials a brief explanation of what participation in a focus group activity actually entails.

These materials should also include a brief description of the topic area to be discussed by the focus group, so potential participants can make an informed decision about their involvement. Refer to [Booklet 21 of this Manual](#) for more about recruitment, and [Booklet 22](#) for more about consent.

[Back to contents](#)

5.0 Participants and confidentiality

As noted above ([see 3.0](#) of this Booklet) a significant ethical issue in the conduct of focus group activities is the degree to which participants reveal personal information in front of other participants.

The instructions for focus group participants, and the consent materials provided to participants, must ask them to respect the privacy of other participants. On its own such a request may not be sufficient to address a significant privacy issue ([see 3.0](#) of this Booklet), but is required for any protocol that will involve the disclosure of personal information in a focus group session.

Refer to [Booklet 22 of this Manual](#) for more about consent, and [Booklet 23](#) for more about privacy.

[Back to contents](#)

6.0 Audio-visual recording

The nature of the multiple sources of data that are available in a focus group session means that a researcher may decide to make an audio-visual recording of proceedings. One of the advantages of such recording is the possibility of not only what was said but also the tone and perhaps body language of the speaker.

The same ethical issues apply to the use of audio-visual recording in focus group work as in other human research (e.g. potential participants must be given prior warning that they will be recorded, they should be informed how the recordings will be used, and their consent for the making and use of the recording must be sought prior to the commencement of any audio-visual recording).

[Refer to Booklet 36 of this Manual](#) for more about the standard ethical considerations that apply to the use of audio-visual recording in human research.

[Back to contents](#)

7.0 Collecting data from non-research focus group activities

In some instances, a researcher may intend to collect data from a focus group activity being conducted by another party for a non-research purpose. Even though the researcher may have no control over the conduct of this focus group session, it may only be appropriate to collect data from such a session if it is being conducted in a manner consistent with the principles of ethical conduct in research (e.g. it would not be appropriate to use data from a focus group session if participants had been coerced into participating). The collection of research data from such a session will only be considered ethical if the voluntary consent of participants is obtained for the research use of their data. Such consent should be sought at the beginning of the session.

For this reason, it may not be possible to make an audio-visual recording of a focus group session unless all participants consented to participate in the research or it was possible to limit the “frame” of the recording to only those participants who had consented.

In considering an application for research ethics review for the collection of data in such a context, the ethics reviewers will need sufficient information to judge whether it would be ethical and appropriate to use data arising from the non-research focus group activity. Refer to [Booklet 22 of this Manual](#) for more about consent.

[Back to contents](#)

Contacts

There are a number of resources available to assist researchers formulate an appropriate response to a question or challenge about the design and/or conduct of a project. This includes the Griffith University Research Ethics Manual and the Human Research Ethics Information Sheet Series. These documents are available from the URL below.

Research students – The first point of contact for research students for advice on any research ethics matter is always your supervisors.

REAs – All academic elements of the University have been asked to appoint at least one member of academic staff as a Research Ethics Advisor. REAs are a local contact for advice, information and suggestions. The contact details of all the current REAs can be found on the URL below.

Office for Research – Staff in the Office for Research (see below) are available to advise with the process of lodging an application or other administrative matters, procedural or policy questions. However, you will be asked what advice you have sought or received already (e.g. consultation with the REA for your area).

Manager, Research Ethics and Integrity

Tel: (07) 373 54375
research-ethics@griffith.edu.au

Policy Officer, Research Ethics and Integrity

Tel: (07) 373 58043

Research Ethics Systems and Support Officer

Tel: (07) 373 5 2069

On the ethics web site you will find:

<https://www.griffith.edu.au/research/research-services/research-ethics-integrity/human>

- The other booklets of the *Griffith University Research Ethics Manual*
- The *Griffith University Human Research Ethics Information Sheet Series*
- Either downloadable copies of, or links to, the various application forms
- Contact information for the Research Ethics Advisers (REA) and other contacts
- Educational and other resource material
- Useful external links



Griffith University is commercialising the GUREM through licenses to other universities and research institutions. Consequently, Griffith University staff are asked not to send copies of any booklet to persons external to Griffith. For further information please contact the Office for Research (see above).