Focus Group Discussions

Occupational health as a medical speciality has relied for years on quantitative research with the strongest evidence being provided by random controlled trials. But there is general recognition that compared to other specialities, we have relatively few well-designed robust studies to form a wide evidence base for practice. Against this background, there is growing use of qualitative research in occupational health. Whereas quantitative research can help us determine associations, qualitative research provides insight into participants’ views and attitudes. It is a method of obtaining a lot of data quickly and is often used before a large qualitative study to refine the questions to be posed. One of its key tools is the focus group.

This book is one in the series ‘Understanding Qualitative Research’. It deals, over six chapters, with the design and conduct of focus group discussions, how to write the methods and the results and how to assess the research. The book describes a focus group as ‘an interactive discussion between six and eight participants, led by a trained moderator and focussing on a specific set of issues’. The aim of such a group is to gain a broad range of views over a 60–90 min period in a comfortable environment where participants are free to express their views. It describes how the aim is not to produce consensus but allow for exchange of views.

Focus groups have been used extensively in marketing and in the political arena but increasingly they are used in public policy and behavioural research. The book also clearly outlines what qualitative research and focus groups in particular cannot deliver and highlights the ongoing challenge of assessing quality in such research. The book includes an excellent range of case studies from across the world, which demonstrates focus group methodology and finishes with an overview of the evaluation of qualitative research, thus providing a steer on the critique of research design, its methodology and results.

Overall, the book is useful for anyone contemplating using qualitative research and using focus groups. Thus, it may appeal to MFOM candidates and occupational health researchers and academics. For the general occupational physician, it is an interesting read and can provide a guide to reading and understanding qualitative research.

Rating
★★☆☆ (Reference only for general occupational practitioners)
★★★☆ (Buy and keep for anyone conducting or planning to conduct qualitative research)

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