

## Strategies to Overcome the Unique Challenges Faced in Conducting Focus Groups in Extension

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## **Abstract**

Focus groups are commonly used in extension. Extension professionals can encounter unique challenges when conducting focus groups. Extension literature is replete with best practices for conducting focus groups, but there is a lack of systematically documented practical challenges and strategies for overcoming them. We share the challenges we have faced over the past 13 years while conducting focus groups with different participant groups in extension globally and strategies that can be used to overcome or navigate these challenges. The ideas presented in this paper can provide valuable assistance to extension professionals who utilize focus groups for research and evaluation purposes.

## **Introduction**

Focus groups are a qualitative research and evaluation method used to collect personal experiences, perceptions, and values from a group of ideally 8-12 people through a facilitator-moderated discussion (Grudens-Schuck et al., 2024; Hall, 2020). Focus groups are a commonly used data collection method in the U.S. Cooperative Extension System and other extension systems globally for research and evaluation purposes. Focus groups can be used to investigate and understand human interactions, beliefs, and attitudes in multiple disciplines (Lachapelle & Mastel, 2019; Mwaijande et al., 2009). Focus groups are best used for collecting information from a homogenous audience on a topic of common interest to the group (Grudens-Schuck et al., 2004; Krueger & Casey, 2000; Larson et al., 2004).

Focus groups have been used for various purposes in extension, such as evaluating educational material (Nordstrom et al., 2000), identifying the needs of specific population groups (Archer, 1993; Duncan & Marotz-Baden, 1999; Foote et al., 2004; Malek, 2002), bringing together stakeholders from diverse backgrounds to exchange unique perspectives (Lamoureaux et al., in press), assessing perceptions in agriculture (Holz-Clause & Jost, 1995), engaging youth (Archer, 1993; Scott et al., 2015), demonstrating techniques (Straka et al., 2009), designing programs or conferences (Culp et al., 2015), or understanding gender and place-based gaps in extension service dissemination (Witinok-Huber et al., 2021).

The extension education literature is replete with best practices for conducting focus groups. However, there are no known studies in extension that documented the challenges and obstacles faced in conducting focus groups, strategies to overcome them, and practical lessons learned. In disciplines parallel to extension, conservation biologists (Nyumba et al., 2018) and disaster researchers (Rivera, 2019) have conducted reviews of documented methodological issues they encountered while conducting focus groups in their respective domains. Both groups of researchers highlighted a notable deficiency in transparency when reporting methodological details, obstacles, and limitations. Extension researchers also outlined transparency issues in their studies. Additional methodological issues identified within extension include challenges with the crucial role of the moderator or facilitator in their trainings (Gamon, 1992), the composition and segmentation of the group (Allen et al., 2004; Archer, 1993), having appropriate questions (Archer, 1993), and inviting people of the same culture to participate in the planning and facilitation process (Malek, 2002). Outside of extension, further obstacles recently documented include ethical challenges such as consent, confidentiality, and anonymity (Sim & Waterfield, 2019), sample selection and stratification to achieve saturation and representation (Hennink et al., 2019; Rivera, 2019), presence of dominant voices by several focus group members

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(Smithson, 2000), issues of digital skills and access with virtual focus groups (Howlett, 2022; Poliandri et al., 2023; Turney & Pocknee, 2005), and power asymmetries and data sovereignty (R. Witinok-Huber, personal communication, January 2, 2024).

When recruiting for and conducting focus groups, extension researchers and evaluators face unique challenges such as geographic distribution of stakeholders, hard-to-reach audiences, budgetary constraints to compensate for participation, political and cultural considerations, and power dynamics restricting honest feedback. Nevertheless, as extension education, evaluation, and community, economic, and agricultural development professionals, we have successfully used focus groups in our research and evaluation work. Since focus groups are one of the most commonly used data collection methods in extension, it is crucial to share challenges encountered and strategies used to overcome them with the extension community. Sharing the challenges encountered during our focus groups, along with the strategies we used and potential strategies that could be employed to overcome them, can help future focus group studies in extension and related fields. In the following section, we share the challenges faced while conducting 11 of the several focus groups conducted for our research and evaluation work in the last 13 years, as well as present strategies to overcome these challenges. These 11 examples represent cases where we encountered challenges and used strategies to overcome them.

### **Background Information Leading to the Proposed Idea**

We belong to different disciplines including extension program development and evaluation; extension administration and leadership; nutrition, family, and consumer sciences; community, economic, and agricultural development; and geography and other social sciences. We have systematically documented our experiences conducting focus groups with diverse stakeholders representing agriculture, environment, natural resources, nutrition, community development, and organizational development extension programs in a cloud document that we keep updating whenever we face new challenges and use strategies to overcome them. We have been presenting these experiences at conferences, actively engaging in discussions with our peers during our presentations and documenting our learnings from those discussions. Participants in our focus groups included farmers in Asia and Africa, Latin America, the Midwestern United States, Latinx parents of young children, private seed company employees, U.S. federal government staff, extension educators, state-level organizational development staff, local community program partners, and college students. We present the context of each project, format used for the conducting the focus group, challenges faced, and strategies to overcome the challenges in Table 1.

**Table 1. Strategies to Overcome Challenges Faced in Conducting Focus Groups in Extension**

<b>Participant Group, Project Context, and Format of the Focus Group</b>	<b>Challenges Faced</b>	<b>Strategies Used</b>	<b>Potential Strategies</b>
<p><b>1. Farmers from some countries in Africa and Asia</b></p> <p><u>Project Context:</u> Research study conducted in Iowa with farmers from 17 countries to explore the perceptions and insights about extension systems in their countries. The farmers visited Iowa for the World Food Prize Event.</p> <p><u>Focus Group Format:</u> In person</p>	<p>Communication challenges due to different English accents of the participants.</p>	<p>- Provide participants with the written questions before or during the focus group so they can follow the questions.</p>	<p>- Co-facilitate with someone from the community.</p> <p>- Allocate 2-3 times more time than you think you will need.</p>
<p><b>2. Farmers from Latin America</b></p> <p><u>Project Context:</u> Research study with small-scale producers in Honduras accompanying the impact evaluation of a national agricultural intervention aimed at increasing farmers' productivity.</p> <p><u>Focus Group Format:</u> In person</p>	<p>Distrust about the use of focus group data.</p>	<p>- Clearly and honestly explain how the focus group data will be used.</p> <p>- Include a community member as an intermediary.</p>	<p>- Partner with a cultural liaison from the community who understands language and cultural nuances.</p>

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Restricted open sharing of information due to power dynamics.

- Understand how power is perceived in the community and design the focus group respecting local power structures.

- Ensure a mix of participants, considering gender, ethnicity, and other factors, to encourage open discussion and minimize power imbalances.

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### **3. Undergraduate students**

Challenges with showing up on time.

- Plan for more time in the schedule than needed for conducting the focus groups.

Project Context:  
Research study conducted with undergraduate students in the College of Agriculture, Health, and Natural Resources to determine students' interest in Study Abroad Programs.

Restricted honest feedback due to power dynamics

- Share the focus group's report with participants before sharing it with the person commissioning the focus group.

Focus Group Format:  
In person

- Train peers to conduct focus groups.

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Focus groups challenges and strategies

<p><b>4. Agriculture private sector employees and federal government employees</b></p>	<p>Participants shifted the discussion from the focus group topic to something they wanted the evaluator to convey to their supervisors. (This experience was similar to what Franz (2011) termed as ‘unfocus’ within a focus group.)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Restate the purpose of the focus group and try to bring the participants to answering the focus group questions.</li> <li>- Tell participants that you will convey their message or concerns to the administrators, but this time must be used for focus group questions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Document participant concerns or feedback as ‘needs’ data for administrators.</li> </ul>
<p><u>Project Context:</u></p>			
<p>Formative evaluation of a pilot field day conducted to train field staff and farm specialists on the use of a wetland identification tool and healthy soil practices.</p>			
<p><u>Focus Group Format:</u></p>			
<p>In person</p>			
<p><b>5. Extension educators at different geographic locations</b></p>	<p>Scheduling and logistical challenges because of geographic distances.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Start planning for the focus group very early.</li> <li>- Work with a local community person that has knowledge about the program and people and can facilitate exchange between stakeholders to plan logistics.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Offer to travel, or to cover participant travel expenses.</li> <li>- Find a venue that is mid-point to all the participants.</li> <li>- Organize multiple focus groups in different geographic locations.</li> </ul>
<p><u>Project Context:</u></p>			
<p>Research and evaluation project to identify the characteristics of organizational development programming and understand its impact on communities and organizations.</p>			
<p><u>Focus Group Format:</u></p>			
<p>In person</p>			

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<p><b>6. Parents with young children</b></p>	<p>Children of the participants had to be in the room during the focus group as childcare was not scheduled for that day.</p>	<p>- Work with the family resource center supervisors to ensure childcare is provided for the duration of the focus group.</p> <p>- Be flexible in this situation (empathy builds trust).</p>	<p>- Schedule focus groups when childcare is available for the duration of the focus group.</p>
<p><u>Project Context:</u> Research and evaluation study conducted with Latino parents of young children to assess the impact of a 10-month nutrition education and Bailoterapia dance exercise program. The focus group was conducted in Spanish and a translator was involved.</p>			
<p><u>Focus Group Format:</u> In person</p>			
<p><b>7. Farmers in the Midwestern United States</b></p>	<p>Cultural differences between farmers and evaluators (e.g.: rural vs urban, gender, age, race, culture)</p>	<p>- Build the capacity of people in the community and local extension educators to serve as facilitators.</p> <p>- Use culturally appropriate or context-based terminology.</p>	<p>- Organize a breakfast club or coffee break before or during the focus group to bridge understanding between cultures.</p> <p>- Host focus group on the farm.</p>
<p><u>Project Context:</u> Evaluation of a project that promoted farmers' adoption of agricultural conservation practices in the Lower Fox River watershed.</p>			
<p><u>Focus Group Format:</u> In person</p>			

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### **8. Community partners**

#### Project Context:

Research and evaluation study conducted with Latino parents of young children to assess the impact of a 10-month nutrition education and Bailoterapia dance exercise program. The focus group was conducted in Spanish and a translator was involved.

#### Focus Group Format:

In person

One of the community partners forgot the focus group day and time despite an email reminder.

- Use multiple modes of contact and multiple and timely reminders.

There was loud background noise during the focus group session, making it challenging to hear participants' responses. The moderator had to carry the audio recorder to each participant as they spoke to ensure each participant's voice was clearly recorded.

- Request a quiet place for the focus group and check to confirm the suitability of the location provided.

- Bring a microphone to pair with audio recorders.

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<p><b>9. Farmers and extension professionals in Liberia</b></p> <p><u>Project Context:</u> Liberian smallholder farmer research study looking at gender- and place-specific gaps in extension information and resources access. Developed through a collaboration with the Liberian Ministry of Agriculture, Cuttington University, United States Agency for International Development, University of California Davis, and the University of Idaho.</p> <p><u>Focus Group Format:</u> In person</p>	<p>Information and communication were limited in rural Liberia due to language barriers, rural and remote locations, and lacking internet, postal services, and online presence.</p> <p>Poor community perceptions of government entities and international groups.</p> <p>Limited resources for national extension professionals (e.g., moto fuel, transportation)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Partner with the Ministry of Agriculture including extension providers.</li><li>- Engage local community and farmer groups (meet people where they are at).</li><li>- Work with national universities and multilingual student interns.</li><li>- Co-create the process (and outcomes when possible).</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- More frequent communication with extension staff and other community partners.</li><li>- Discuss relevant local studies with researchers/practitioners prior to convening groups.</li><li>- Obtain grant funding for results sharing and follow-up prior to action.</li><li>- Be explicit about expectations, challenges, and opportunities to all involved.</li></ul>
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## Focus groups challenges and strategies

### Attendance conflicts:

Farmers' working hours may have prevented them from attending focus groups.

- Schedule times that work for most.

- Provide appropriate remuneration for time and effort.

- Provide food, childcare, and other necessary accommodations.

- Provide multiple times/days per community.

### Women-specific challenges:

Sometimes women were interrupted or needed to leave part way through to care for children, cook, or attend to market duties.

Women frequently didn't speak when in mixed gender groups or were less vocal.

- Allow extension educators to lead the engagement process.

- Understand the local power dynamics and social norms.

- Have gender-specific focus groups.

- Co-create processes and outcomes with local staff/partners.

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<p><b>10. Food recovery organizations in California</b></p>	<p>Participants of organizations of different scales and scopes.</p>	<p>- Separate focus groups by types of organizations (gleaners vs. food banks).</p>
<p><u>Project Context:</u> Needs assessment study on food safety issues, with California food banks and gleaner organizations.</p>	<p>Some food rescue organizations were hard to classify as food banks or gleaners since they worked with both types of organizations.</p>	<p>- Hold separate and joint focus groups to see if new elements emerge in separate and joint discussions.</p>
<p>(Gleaner Organizations are the organizations dedicated to the recovery of surplus food from farms, food producers, wholesalers, retailers, or other sources, with the aim of redistributing it to those in need or for other purposes such as composting or animal feed)</p>	<p>Discussion diverted from original questions to reflect complex dynamics within the food system.</p>	<p>- Ensure the researcher retains the flexibility to deviate from the original research questions if discussions shed light on cross-sectional issues pertinent to research.</p>
<p><u>Focus Group Format:</u> In person</p>	<p>Representatives of food banks and gleaning organizations had different positions within their organizations.</p>	<p>- Sample consistently across organizations of different scales and scopes to ensure representation and incorporate critical perspectives.</p>
	<p>Views of other actors of the food system were missing.</p>	<p>- Involve different stakeholders representing the food system, such as regulators, farmers, volunteers, and the local community.</p>

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<b>11. Low-income farmers market shoppers, vendors, and community partners in California</b>	Power dynamics due to different participant roles.	- Accommodate smaller groups (2-4 individuals) to allow for a more private interaction.	- Check with focus group participants about their comfort level with being placed in a certain focus group and adjust the group composition accordingly (gender, professional roles, etc.).
<u>Project Context:</u> A community-based study to identify barriers and possible interventions to increase access to farmers markets for low-income shoppers and people of color.	Complexity of planning logistics.	- Hire bilingual Spanish interpreters to create a more inclusive atmosphere and help participants communicate ideas in their native language.	- Allow ample time for planning and preparation.
<u>Focus Group Format:</u> Virtual	Language barrier.		

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### Educational Importance and Implications

Like any other qualitative data collection method, conducting focus groups can be a time-consuming endeavor, especially for extension evaluators and researchers who work in diverse and unique contexts. To use this method effectively in order to collect valid and usable data, having strategies to overcome common challenges is necessary. Extension professionals' expertise lies in understanding the intricacies and power dynamics of their local communities and stakeholders, enabling them to make context-specific recommendations that cater to the diverse needs of their extension programs. Given the critical role focus groups play as one of the primary methods for research and evaluation within their distinct subject matter domains, our cross-disciplinary and versatile strategies gleaned from our extensive experience in extension education, research, and evaluation hold particular significance for extension professionals. These strategies can be used by extension and outreach professionals and researchers as appropriate during their focus groups. It is vital for extension researchers to continually contribute to this list of challenges and strategies as we learn together. By doing so, we can collectively enhance the effectiveness of focus group methodology in extension.

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