

**Title: Guideline - Focus Groups as a Data Collection Method****1.0 PURPOSE**

This guideline outlines the ethical considerations for researchers at Lakehead University who conduct studies using focus groups as a data collection method. It is intended to be used in conjunction with the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS 2 2022) and all relevant institutional policies. It serves as a resource to assist researchers in developing their Research Ethics Board (REB) applications and to guide them on best practices.

Please note that all research involving human participants must receive formal approval from the Lakehead University Research Ethics Board (REB) prior to starting any research activities, including participant recruitment or data collection.

**2.0 DEFINITIONS**

- **Focus Group:** A qualitative research method in which a trained facilitator brings together a small group of individuals (typically 6-12) to discuss a specific topic of interest. The purpose is to gather qualitative data from human participants regarding their beliefs, perceptions, ideas, opinions, etc., about this *focused* topic (Eaton 2017).

**3.0 FOCUS GROUP GUIDELINES**

This section outlines key ethical considerations for group-based research.

**3.1 Consent and Confidentiality**

Consent shall be free, informed, and ongoing. Researchers must provide prospective participants with full disclosure of all information necessary to make an informed decision to participate.

While researchers are obligated to protect the data they collect (e.g., secure storage of recordings and transcripts (TCPS2 2022)), they cannot guarantee confidentiality among participants in a group setting. This limitation must be stated clearly in the participant information letter and reiterated verbally at the start of the session.

*Example wording for researchers to include in the information letter:*

“Due to the nature of group settings, confidentiality cannot be fully guaranteed. All participants will be aware of each other’s identities and the information shared during the session. However, out of respect for everyone’s privacy, we ask that all participants keep what is shared in the group strictly confidential and not discuss it outside the group setting.”

*Example wording to restate verbally at the start of the session:*

“I want to remind everyone that today’s discussion is being conducted in a group setting. While we as researchers will keep your information secure and confidential, we cannot control what other participants may choose to share outside this session. We ask everyone to respect the privacy of others and not repeat or share what is said here.”

### **3.2 Recording Focus Group Sessions**

*Online (e.g., Zoom)*

- Researchers may use Zoom’s cloud recording feature, which can generate an AI-produced transcript. These transcripts often attribute comments to individual speakers, which can assist with accurate data analysis.
  - Lakehead University researchers must use their Lakehead University Zoom account to ensure best security practices.
- If privacy is a concern, participants can be encouraged to:
  - Keep their cameras off,
  - Use pseudonyms for their display names, and
  - Avoid sharing identifiable details during the session.
- Researchers can clarify whether participants will be asked or required to turn their cameras on, and ensure this expectation is clearly communicated in advance and reflected in the consent process.
- If video and/or audio recording of the focus group will occur, ensure that all participants have provided free and informed consent. This is often addressed on the consent form as a specific, stand-alone item.

*In-person*

- A single recording device may not capture each participant clearly, making it challenging to distinguish speakers in the transcript. To help with clarity and possible data withdrawal requests, researchers can:
  - Ask participants to state their name or pseudonym before speaking
  - Use multiple microphones or strategically place recorders in the room
  - Take detailed field notes to support transcription accuracy
  - Use video recording
- If a participant does not consent to being recorded and the focus group is conducted **in person**, it may be possible to position the camera in a way that excludes them from video recording, provided this does not compromise their participation.

### 3.3 Data Withdrawal Considerations

The TCPS 2 2022 affirms a participant's right to withdraw their consent and request the withdrawal of their data at any time, unless the data has been anonymized or it is impossible or impracticable to remove it from the research.

#### *Different Approaches*

- *Withdrawal not possible after the session:* Some researchers find that once a group conversation is recorded, individual comments cannot be disentangled without compromising the integrity of the transcript and losing contextual meaning. In these cases, researchers explain in the consent materials that withdrawal is only possible up until the point of data collection (i.e., once the session begins, withdrawal of one's data is no longer feasible).
- *Withdrawal possible after the session:* Other researchers allow participants to request that their contributions be removed after the group discussion. This approach works best when:
  - Participants identify themselves before speaking (name or pseudonym) in the case of in-person focus groups
  - Transcripts are structured to attribute remarks

Either way, researchers should state their approach **clearly** in the information letter, consent form, and verbal briefing.

#### *Example wording if withdrawal is not possible:*

“You may withdraw from participation at any time during the session. However, because this is a group discussion, we cannot remove individual comments after the session without impacting the overall meaning of the conversation. This means your contributions will remain part of the dataset.”

#### *Example wording if withdrawal is possible:*

“You may withdraw from participation at any time during the session. If you decide after the session that you would like your comments withdrawn, we will remove them from the transcript wherever they are identifiable. Please note that removing your contributions may affect the flow of the conversation, but your wishes will be respected.”

## 4.0 RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

In addition to this guidance, researchers are strongly encouraged to consult external resources for practical training on conducting focus groups. The University of Calgary's

[\*Research Assistant Training Manual: Focus Groups\*](#), authored by Dr. Sarah Elaine Eaton (2017), is highly recommended. This manual provides an invaluable, comprehensive guide on the logistical and procedural aspects of focus group research, including:

- Practical checklists for preparing for a focus group session, including necessary supplies.
- Step-by-step instructions for setting up a physical space to facilitate an effective group discussion.
- A template for taking field notes during a session.

**Working with Indigenous Communities and want to employ Sharing Circles as a research methodology? Please see our Guidelines for Sharing Circles.**

Questions?

For further questions about the ethical review process, please contact the Lakehead University Research Ethics Board at [research.ethics@lakeheadu.ca](mailto:research.ethics@lakeheadu.ca).

## 5.0 REFERENCES

- Eaton, S. E. (2017). Research assistant training manual: Focus groups. University of Calgary. Retrieved from <http://hdl.handle.net/1880/51811>
- Panel on Research Ethics. (2022). Tri-council policy statement: Ethical conduct for research involving humans (TCPS 2, 2022). Retrieved from [https://ethics.gc.ca/eng/policy-politique\\_tcps2-eptc2\\_2022.html](https://ethics.gc.ca/eng/policy-politique_tcps2-eptc2_2022.html)

## 6.0 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

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