

Conducting Focus Groups

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Research Question

- Phases
 - Planning
 - Recruiting
 - Moderating
 - Analysis
- Products of these phases
 - Lists, reports, papers, tables

What Focus Groups Are – and Are Not

- Focus groups are:
 - qualitative research
 - a flexible method that can serve as a stand-alone method or as part of a larger study
 - focused: a detailed conversation
- Focus groups are not:
 - a collection of individual opinions
 - an opportunity for survey research
 - quick, easy, or cheap

Myths about Focus Groups

- Anyone can run a focus group
- Focus groups are not suited for sensitive topics
- Focus groups produce conformity

When to Use Focus Groups

- Exploration
 - Identifying a problem
 - Planning
- Confirmation
 - Feedback on program implementation
 - Assessing whether a program has achieved goals

When Not to Use Focus Groups

- When you want to measure individual difference
- When participants in each group may be in conflict
- When the group will be left with the impression that you will address commitments you do not intend to meet

(Ray Maeitta, ResearchTalk 2009)

Typical Focus Group Studies

- Theoretical research questions
 - How do race and ethnicity affect experiencing counseling services?
- Evaluation of a program or product
 - Will a handbook on preparing healthy foods help people cook better meals?
- Generating items for a follow-up statistical survey
 - What are teenagers eating habits and attitudes?
- Assessing community needs
 - What are the most urgent needs for residents of a local Indian reservation?

Planning

- Determining number of sessions and size of groups
- Determining demographic background and group composition
- Determining where to conduct group and how to set up room
- Determining recruitment and incentives

Determining Number and Size of Groups

- Are focus groups your only method?
- What are your resources (time, money)?
- How available is your population?
- Use smaller groups when deeper discussion is the goal (4-8 people)
- Use larger groups when the goal is numerous brief suggestions (8-12 people)

(Ray Maietta, ResearchTalk 2009)

Group Composition

- Homogeneous groups provide compatibility and comparison
- Groups can be homogeneous along lines of key demographic characteristics (gender, race, ethnicity)
- Groups can also be divided according to other characteristics (political affiliation)
- Homogeneity facilitates comparing evolving group dynamics

Example: Study of Exercise Habits

	Age: 15-18	Age: 18-25	Age: 26-50
Women	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Married students •Single students •Married non-students •Single non-students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Married working •Married nonworking •Single working •Single nonworking
Men	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Married students •Single students •Married non-students •Single non-students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Married working •Married nonworking •Single working •Single nonworking

Participant Recruitment

- Purposive sampling drives focus group research
- What access do you have to the population?
 - Can you work with a key contact?
- Should you use a recruitment company?

Transcribing and Note Taking

- Consider transcribing *and* audio recording
- Transcription should be verified against notes

Funnel Approach to Questioning

- **Degree of awareness**
 - What do you know about pedestrian safety?
- **Uninfluenced attitudes**
 - What do you think contributes to pedestrian safety?
- **Specific attitudes**
 - Do you approve or disapprove of crosswalks?
- **Reasons for these attitudes**
 - Why do you think you feel this way?
- **Intensity of these attitudes**
 - How strongly do you feel about this?

(David Stewart, Prem Shamdasani 1990)

Guidelines for Questions

- Positive questions before negative questions
- Uncued questions before cued questions
- Participant categories before other categories

(David Morgan 1998)

Issues in Moderating a FG

- Clarity
- Cultural constraints
- Language constraints
- Using parallel and similar questions
- When questions might change

(David Morgan 1998)

Developing Questions

- Determine your ice breaker question
 - Make this a substantive issue, rather than just a throw-away question
- Determine 3-4 main sections of your focus group guide
- Create 2-3 questions within the main sections

Moderating the Focus Group

- Control Your Reactions
 - Head nodding
 - Short verbal responses
 - Comfortable pauses
 - Probe when needed
 - Listen
- Challenges with People
 - Experts and dominant talkers
 - Disruptive participants
 - Shy participants
 - Inattentive participants
 - Harmful advice
 - Personal disclosures

Moderating the Focus Group

- When Discussion Gets Off Track
 - Anticipate situations
 - Know the boundaries
 - Communicate the boundaries
 - Interrupt when needed
 - Refocus the discussion
 - Help the participant (perhaps later)

(David Morgan 1998)

Analysis

- List deductive codes
- Identify emerging codes
- Look for dimensionality in responses
- Move from descriptive to interpretive coding
- Consider context, actions, and consequences
- Identify 5-9 primary codes
 - This happens over the course of analysis