

INTRODUCTION TO FOCUS GROUPS

I. WHAT IS A FOCUS GROUP?

A. *“People, assembled in a series of groups, who possess certain characteristics and provide data of a qualitative nature in a focused discussion”*

B. . History –

1. Developed during World War II, to identify ways of increasing troop morale;
2. Initially used in market research, to test products and develop ad campaigns
3. Often used by education, medical, social, human services professionals to do strategic planning, needs assessment, program evaluation

C. Focus groups involve people

1. Size must be small enough so everyone can share insights, yet large enough to provide diversity of perception

2. Best 6-8

D. Participants are homogenous and strangers

1. Informed of common factors at beginning of session
2. Can’t always be strangers, but should not be close friends, work groups or spouses because of undue influence on opinions or other pressures

E. Focus groups conducted in series

1. Need multiple groups with similar participants to detect patterns
2. Solo groups may result in “cold” group, or atypical group
3. Typically 3-5 groups, each with different people

F. Environment

1. Permissive, encourages different points of view
2. No need to reach consensus

G. Focus groups are a data collection procedure

1. Goal is not therapy, consensus, plan, decision-making
2. Purpose is to determine perceptions, feelings, and manner of thinking

H. Focus groups generate qualitative data

1. Information obtained through open-ended questions
2. Respondent choose the manner in which they respond
3. Subjective observations from moderator and assistant moderator

I. Focus groups have a focused discussion

1. Use a questioning route
2. Topics predetermined and sequenced

II. WHY DO FOCUS GROUPS WORK?

A. Natural human tendency that attitudes and perceptions are formed and shaped in groups

B. Weakness of surveys, even interviews is that they assume individuals really know how they feel, and that opinions exist in isolation from the social environment

- C. Permissive environment gives license to disclose more honestly than in other forms of questioning;
 - 1. Goes beyond presentation of the public self
 - 2. Moderator avoids judgment, encourages alternative explanations, expresses interest in negative comments
- D. Self-disclosure occurs more readily with like people
 - 1. Commonality of group is emphasized by moderator
 - 2. Avoidance of any subtle status differences in selection
- E. More natural environment because participants are influencing and influenced by others – as in real life

III. VALIDITY OF FOCUS GROUP RESULTS

- A. How much confidence can you have in focus group results
- B. Validity – degree to which procedure really measures what it is supposed to measure
 - 1. Face validity – do the results look valid?; focus groups have high face validity
 - a. Know whether respondents actually understood question
 - b. Know more about what their answers meant
 - 2. Predictive validity – degree to which results are confirmed by future findings
 - 3. Convergent validity – degree to which results are confirmed by findings using other methods

IV. GENERALIZABILITY OF FOCUS GROUP RESULTS

- A. Should focus group results be used in making decisions or drawing conclusions about entire populations?
- B. Results of focus group are based on only 20- 100 people out of a much larger population
- C. Must be careful to specify what population the focus group sample actually represents – then can make cautious generalizations

V. ADVANTAGES OF FOCUS GROUPS

- A. Combine participant observation of group process with in-depth interviewing to assess attitudes and experiences
- B. Allow moderator to probe, clarify responses
- C. Yields believable, easily understood results
- D. Get at deeper feelings, hidden attitudes

VI. PARTICIPANTS IN FOCUS GROUP

- A. Composition of focus group
 - 1. Homogeneity but sufficient variation to allow for contrasting opinions
 - 2. Homogeneity usually in terms of occupation, past use of program or service, educational level, age, gender, education, or family characteristics
 - 3. Choose homogeneity factors most relevant to the discussion

4. Avoid mixing individuals of different life stages and styles
 5. Careful about mixing gender if feel men (or women) may dominate
 6. Latinos – tend to respect older members; oldest does most of talking; tend to find a group leader
 7. Avoid couples – usually one speaks, other is silent
- B. Size
- a. Ideal 6-9, 7-8; can be 4-12; at 10, tend to get more superficial
 - b. Mini-groups easier to recruit and host and more comfortable for participants, but total range of experiences is smaller
- C. Selection process
- a. Beware of participants picked by memory
 - b. Beware of participants because they've expressed concern about topic
 - c. Beware of participants who are clones of selector
 - d. Randomization may be a good approach (ie., from list)
 - e. Can also use nominations (ask neutral parties for names – only use few names from each nomination source)
 - f. Snowball samples – get suggestions about other participants from those who have already been through screening; those with targeted characteristics will know people with similar characteristics
 - g. Avoid existing groups, because have influenced each other in unknown ways; also have pre-established, subtle forms of communication that observer might miss
- D. Location
1. Groups should be held in neutral location (ie., not church, hospital, where environment might influence responses)
 2. Informal setting best – restaurant, private home

VII. NUMBER OF GROUPS NEEDED

- A. Based on theoretical saturation of data – when no new information is being obtained
- B. Avoid one-groupitis
- C. In focus groups, first two groups provide a great deal of new information; third and fourth, less so
- D. First group goes for breadth, next one zero in on missing information, increasing depth
- E. In pairs of groups, 80% of value is in second group; in three groups, 60% of value is in third group
- F. Rule of thumb – evaluate after third group

VIII. GETTING PEOPLE TO ATTEND FOCUS GROUP

- A. Personalized invitations
 1. Make participants feel needed
- B. Establish convenient meeting times
- C. Contact potential participants by phone 10-14 days before session
 1. Over-recruit by 10-25%

- D. Send personalized written invitations after initial phone call (about 1 week before session)
- E. Phone each person day before session
- F. People more likely to attend if they believe study is important – invitation should include statement as to why study results may be beneficial to certain specific parties
- G. Incentives helpful in attendance
 - 1. Monetary – between \$20-\$50 for two hour period
 - 2. Immediate payment of cash is preferred
 - 3. Refreshments also create positive atmosphere; sometimes little gifts

IX. DECIDING ON A FOCUS GROUP

- A. Determine purpose of group (*Discussion Question: What is purpose of this group?*)
 - 1. Why should the study be conducted?
 - 2. What type of information will focus group produce?
 - 3. What are the most important things we want to know?
- B. When to use focus group
 - 1. When you need exploratory or preliminary study
 - 2. Understanding gaps exist
 - 3. Purpose is to uncover factors relating to complex behaviors or beliefs

X ASKING QUESTIONS IN A FOCUS GROUP

- A. Types of focus group questions
 - 1. Opening questions: - participants get acquainted and connected
 - a. Round robin that everyone answers briefly (10-20 seconds)
 - b. Designed to establish characteristics shared in common
 - c. Should be factual, not opinion-based
 - d. Typically not analysed
 - e. *Who you are, where you're from, what you most enjoy doing, one thing you'd like us to know about your child – one thing your child does that makes you smile*
 - 2. Introductory questions – begin discussion of topic
 - a. Introduce general topic of discussion
 - b. Get participants to reflect on past experiences
 - c. Establish participant connection with the overall topic
 - d. *When you hear the words “transition to adulthood,” or “adult” and “child” what comes to mind?*
 - e. *Think back questions: “What was the moment you changed from child to adult?” “How did your other children make the transition from child to adult?”*
 - 3. Transition questions – move into key questions
 - a. Move discussion into key questions
 - b. More depth, elaborations on introductory questions
 - c. *What were specific signs your child was now an adult?*
 - 4. Key questions – obtain insights into central concern of study

- a. 2-5 most important questions of study
 - b. Developed first
 - c. Key questions 1 per page, with cues listed underneath, for note-taking of key points
 - d. Usually begin about one-third to one-half way through group
5. Ending questions
 - a. All things considered: to get participants to state their final opinion, after having heard all discussion: *“Jot down on a piece of paper one phrase or sentence that best describes your position on the topic;”* *“Of everything we discussed, what is the most important point about the transition to adulthood?”*
 - b. Summary: moderator provides short oral summary of key questions and big ideas; participants asked *“Is this an adequate summary?”* *“Did I correctly describe what has been said?”* and fill in missing pieces
 - c. Final question: Moderator gives short overview of purpose of study, then asks *“Have we missed anything?”* (leave about 10 minutes of time for discussion)
 6. Importance of open-ended questions
 - a. What did you think?
 - b. How did you feel?
 - c. What did you like best?
 - d. Where did you learn that?
 - e. False open-ended: How satisfied were you? implies gradations
 - f. Avoid dichotomous questions
 7. Avoid why questions
 - a. Confusing – own desires vs. influences of others
 - b. Makes people feel need to justify themselves
 - c. People feel they need to provide a logical, reasoned answer, where whole point of focus group is to get at attitudes and feelings
 8. Uncued and cued questions
 - a. Cues too early can limit or restrict views of participants (ie., transition indicated by driving, graduating from high school, getting job etc.)
 - b. Cues may restrict participants to certain categories, rather than allowing them to develop their own categories
 - c. Prompts after uncued questions can lead to additional discussion
 9. Probes
 - a. Technique to elicit additional information
 - b. *Would you explain further; Can you give me an example; Would you say more?; Can you describe what you mean?*
 - c. Not everything is worth a probe – can take up too much time
 - d. Excessive probing can also stifle group discussion – becomes two-way conversation between moderator and respondent
 - e. Early probing can be beneficial by communicating amount of detail sought of moderator: *“I agree”* – *“Tell me more”*
 10. Follow-up questions

- a. Probes spontaneous, follow-up questions written into questioning route
 - b. If-then style: 1) What are needs within our community?" F/U: "Which of these is most important?"
11. Standardized strategies
- a. Sentence completion: "The most important difference between adults and children is..."
 - 1. Participants first jot down comments, then discuss
 - 2. Gets all participants to provide information
 - 3. Minimizes me-too tendency
 - 4. Each question is addressed and discussed before moving on to next
 - b. Making lists
 - 1. List the three most important signs of transition to adulthood
 - c. Drawing a picture –
 - 1. draw an adult; a child
 - 2. Compare and contrast
10. Tone generally should be conversational, not Q&A

XI. PREPARATION OF QUESTIONS

- A. Identify potential questions through group process
 - a. List all potential questions, including variations – brainstorming
 - b. Identify critical questions
 - c. Question route revised several times (6-10)
- B. Make sure questions are clear
 - a. Unidimensionality
 - b. Length
 - c. Wording
 - d. Be careful of words with multiple meanings: ie., "hard"
- C. Number of questions
 - 1. Usually way too many (72 cited as outrageous number)
 - 2. Maximum number of issues that can be addressed in a group is one to three
 - 3. Typical question routes contain 6-10, 8-14 questions
 - a. 5 minute questions at beginning to introduce topic (4-6)
 - b. 10 minute questions areas of central concern that drive study (4-6)
 - c. 15 minute questions must be very important (0-2)
 - d. In 2 hour period, plan for 90 minutes of questions
- D. Provide adequate information about purpose of study to participants before discussion begins to avoid tacit assumptions
- E. Use "think back" technique: "When your other kids were reaching adulthood..."
- F. Arrange questions in a focused sequence
 - a. From general to specific (funnel down to key questions)
- G. Pilot test focus group interview
 - a. First pilot test should emphasize logical sequence and adequacy of probes
 - b. Second pilot test – selected representatives of target group

- c. Third pilot test – first focus group interview; revise question guide if necessary (usually questions are not changed)

H. Changing the question:

1. If question clearly does not work (produces silence; participants say they don't understand; responses do not answer question)
2. Change the question if saturation has occurred – modify question to build on what you have learned
3. Change question to build on past responses: Answer to original question about direction of university was “greater diversity”; changed question to ask what people meant by diversity