

Designing and Conducting Focus Group Interviews

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Characteristics of Focus Group Interviews

- **Participants**
 - ≡ Carefully recruited
 - ≡ 5 to 10 people per group, 6-8 preferred
 - ≡ Similar types of people
 - ≡ Repeated groups

- **Environment**
 - ≡ Comfortable
 - ≡ Circle seating
 - ≡ Tape recorded

- **Moderator**
 - ≡ Skillful in group discussions
 - ≡ Uses pre-determined questions
 - ≡ Establishes permissive environment

- **Analysis and Reporting**
 - ≡ Systematic analysis
 - ≡ Verifiable procedures
 - ≡ Appropriate reporting

Moderator Skills

Select the right moderator

Exercise mild unobtrusive control
Adequate knowledge of topic
Appears like the participants

Use an assistant moderator

Handles logistics
Takes careful notes
Monitors recording equipment

Be mentally prepared

Alert and free from distractions
Has the discipline of listening
Familiar with questioning route

Use purposeful small talk

Create warm and friendly environment
Observe the participants for seating arrangements

Make a smooth & snappy introduction

Standard introduction

1. Welcome
2. Overview of topic
3. Ground rules
4. First question

Use pauses and probes

5 second pause
Probes:
"Would you explain further?"
"Would you give an example?"
"I don't understand."

Record the discussion

Tape recorders
Written notes

Control reactions to participants

Verbal and nonverbal
Head nodding
Short verbal responses
(avoid "that's good", "excellent")

Use subtle group control

Experts
Dominant talkers
Shy participants
Ramblers

Use appropriate conclusion

Three Step Conclusion

1. Summarize with confirmation,
2. Review purpose and ask if anything has been missed,
3. Thanks and dismissal

First Steps With Focus Group Studies

1. Decide whether focus groups are appropriate
2. Decide who to involve
3. Listen to your target audience
4. Put your thoughts in writing

Bulleated Outline

Welcome

Introduce moderator and assistant

Our topic is ...

The results will be used for ...

Your were selected because ...

Guidelines

No right or wrong answers, only differing points of view

We're tape recording, one person speaking at a time

We're on a first name basis

You don't need to agree with others, but you must listen respectfully as others share their views

Rules for cellular phones and pagers if applicable. For example: We ask that your turn off your phones or pagers. If you cannot and if you must respond to a call, please do so as quietly as possible and rejoin us as quickly as you can.

My role as moderator will be to guide the discussion

Talk to each other

Opening question

Beginning the Focus Group Discussion

The first few moments in focus group discussion are critical. In a brief time the moderator must create a thoughtful, permissive atmosphere, provide ground rules, and set the tone of the discussion. Much of the success of group interviewing can be attributed to the development of this open environment.

The recommended pattern for introducing the group discussion includes:

(1) Welcome, (2) Overview of the topic (3) Ground rules and (4) First question. Here is an example of a typical introduction:

Good evening and welcome to our session. Thanks for taking the time to join us to talk about educational programs in the county. My name is Dick Krueger and assisting me is Tom Olson. We're both with the University of Minnesota. Sara Casey, who is with the local extension office, asked us to help the staff get some information from county residents about your perceptions of local extension efforts. They want to know what you like, what you don't like, and how programs might be improved. We are having discussions like this with several groups around the county.

You were invited because you have participated in some extension programs, so you're familiar with what extension does, and you all live in this section of the county.

There are no wrong answers but rather differing points of view. Please feel free to share your point of view even if it differs from what others have said. Keep in mind that we're just as interested in negative comments as positive comments, and at times the negative comments are the most helpful.

You've probably noticed the microphone. We're tape recording the session because we don't want to miss any of your comments. People often say very helpful things in these discussions and we can't write fast enough to get them all down. We will be on a first name basis tonight, and we won't use any names in our reports. You may be assured of complete confidentiality. The reports will go back to the county extension staff to help them plan future programs.

Well, let's begin. We've placed name cards on the table in front of you to help us remember each other's names. Let's find out some more about each other by going around the table. Tell us your name and where you live.

Recorder (Assistant Moderator) Skills

- Help with equipment & refreshments
- Arrange the room
- Welcome participants as they arrive
- Sit in designated location
- Take notes throughout the discussion
- Operate recording equipment
- Do not participate in the discussion
- Ask questions when invited
- Give an oral summary
- Debrief with moderator
- Give feedback on analysis and reports

Asking Questions that Yield Powerful Information

- **Use open-ended questions**
 - What did you think of the program?
 - How did you feel about the conference?
 - Where do you get new information?
 - What do you like best about the proposed program?

Be cautious of phrases such as "how satisfied" or "to what extent"
- **Avoid dichotomous questions**
 - These questions can be answered with a "yes" or "no"
- **Why? is rarely asked**
 - Instead ask about attributes and/or influences. Attributes are characteristics or features of the topic. Influences are things that prompt or cause action.
- **Use "think back" questions.**
 - Take people back to an experience and not forward to the future
- **Use different types of questions**
 - Identify potential questions
 - Five Types of Questions
 1. Opening Question (round robin)
 2. Introductory Question
 3. Transition Questions
 4. Key Questions
 5. Ending Questions
- **Use questions that get participants involved**
 - Use reflection, examples, choices, rating scales, drawings, etc.
- **Focus the questions**
 - Sequence that goes from general to specific
- **Be cautious of serendipitous questions**
 - Save for the end of the discussion

Ending Questions

- **All things considered question**
This question asks participants to reflect on the entire discussion and then offer their positions or opinions on topics of central importance to the researchers.

Examples:
"Suppose that you had one minute to talk to the governor on merit pay, the topic of today's discussion. What would you say?"
or
"Of all the things we discussed, what to you is the most important?"
- **Summary question**
After the brief oral summary the question asked is:
"Is this an adequate summary?"
- **Final question**
The moderator reviews the purpose of the study and then asks the participants:
"Have we missed anything?"

Strategies for Focus Group Questions

- **Choose among alternatives**
- **Make a list**
- **Fill in the blank**
- **Rate with blank card**
- **Semantic differential**
- **Projection, fantasy and daydreams**
- **Draw a picture**
- **Develop a campaign**
- **Role playing**
- **Questions that foster ownership**
What can you do...?

Generic Questions

Example #1

1. How have you been involved in _____?
2. Think back over all the years that you've participated and tell us your fondest memory. (The most enjoyable memory.)
3. Think back over the past year of the things that (name of organization) did. What went particularly well?
4. What needs improvement?
5. If you were inviting a friend to participate in (name of organization), what would you say in the invitation?
6. Suppose that you were in charge and could make one change that would make the program better. What would you do?
7. What can each one of us do to make the program better?

Example #2

Here is a sample set of questions that could be used for many consumer products. Modify and adjust the questions as needed. The questions might be /applicable to such categories as: soap, breakfast cereal, fast food restaurants, automobiles, golf clubs, fishing equipment, cosmetics, deodorant or a variety of other products. These questions could be used for practice focus groups to allow moderators a chance to lead the discussion, for assistants to take field notes and provide oral summaries. You may want to have five to seven people in each focus group and then sitting slightly back from the table could be a number of assistant moderators.

1. How and when do you use XXXX?
2. Tell me about positive experiences you've had with XXXX?
3. Tell me about disappointments you've had with XXXX?
4. Who or what influences your decision to purchase a particular type of XXXX?
5. When you decide to purchase XXXX, what do you look for? Take a piece of paper and jot down three things that are important to you when you purchase XXXX?
6. Let's list these on the flip chart. If you had to pick only one factor that was most important to you, what would it be? You can pick something that you mentioned or something that was said by others.
7. Have you ever changed brands or types of XXXX? What brought about the change?
8. Of all the things we've talked about, what is most important to you?

Note Taking

Note taking is a primary responsibility of the assistant moderator

The moderator should not be expected to take written notes during the discussion.

Clarity and consistency of note taking

Anticipate that others will use your field notes. Field notes sometimes are interpreted days or weeks following the focus group when memory has faded. Consistency and clarity are essential.

Field notes contain different types of information

It is essential that this information is easily identified and organized. Your field notes will contain:

Quotes

Listen for notable quotes, the well said statements that illustrate an important point of view. Listen for sentences or phrases that are particularly enlightening or eloquently express a particular point of view. Place name or initials of speaker after the quotations. Usually, it is impossible to capture the entire quote. Capture as much as you can with attention to the key phrases. Use three periods ... to indicate that part of the quote was missing.

Key points and themes for each question

Typically participants will talk about several key points in response to each question. These points are often identified by several different participants. Sometimes they are said only once but in a manner that deserves attention. At the end of the focus group the assistant moderator will share these themes with participants for confirmation.

Follow-up questions that could be asked

Sometimes the moderator may not follow-up on an important point or seek an example of a vague but critical point. The assistant moderator may wish to follow-up with these questions at the end of the focus group.

Big ideas, hunches, or thoughts of the recorder

Occasionally the assistant moderator will discover a new concept. A light will go on and something will make sense when before it did not. These insights are helpful in later analysis.

Other factors

Make note of factors which might aid analysis such as passionate comments, body language, or non-verbal activity. Watch for head nods, physical excitement, eye contact between certain participants, or other clues that would indicate level of agreement, support, or interest.

Consider using a standardized recording form

Systematic Analysis Process

1. Start while still in the group

- Listen for inconsistent comments and probe for understanding
- Listen for vague or cryptic comments and probe for understanding
- Consider asking each participant a final preference question
- Offer a summary of key questions and seek confirmation

2. Immediately after the focus group

- Draw a diagram of seating arrangement
- Spot check tape recording to ensure proper operation
- Conduct moderator and assistant moderator debriefing
- Note themes, hunches, interpretations, and ideas
- Compare and contrast this focus group to other groups
- Label and file field notes, tapes and other materials

3. Soon after the focus group--within hours analyze individual focus group.

- Make back-up copy of tapes and send tape to transcriptionist for computer entry if transcript is wanted
- Analyst listens to tape, reviews field notes and reads transcript if available
- Prepare report of the individual focus group in a question-by-question format with amplifying quotes
- Share report for verification with other researchers who were present at the focus group

4. Later--within days analyze the series of focus groups

- Compare and contrast results by categories of individual focus groups
- Look for emerging themes by question and then overall
- Construct typologies or diagram the analysis
- Describe findings and use quotes to illustrate

5. Finally, prepare the report

- Consider narrative style versus bulleted style
- Use a few quotes to illustrate
- Sequence could be question by question or by theme
- Share report for verification with other researchers
- Revise and finalize report

Focus Group Analysis Tips

When analyzing focus group data consider . . .

WORDS

Think about both the actual words used by the participants and the meanings of those words. A variety of words and phrases will be used and the analyst will need to determine the degree of similarity between these responses.

CONTEXT

Participant responses were triggered by a stimulus--a question asked by the moderator or a comment from another participant. Examine the context by finding the triggering stimulus and then interpret the comment in light of that environment. The response is interpreted in light of the preceding discussion and also by the tone and intensity of the oral comment.

INTERNAL CONSISTENCY

Participants in focus groups change and sometimes even reverse their positions after interaction with others. When there is a shift in opinion, the researcher typically traces the flow of the conversation to determine clues that might explain the change.

FREQUENCY OR EXTENSIVENESS

Some topics are discussed more by participants (extensiveness) and also some comments are made more often (frequency) than others. These topics could be more important or of special interest to participants. Also, consider what wasn't said or received limited attention. Did you expect but not hear certain comments?

INTENSITY

Occasionally participants talk about a topic with a special intensity or depth of feeling. Sometimes the participants will use words that connote intensity or tell you directly about their strength of feeling. Intensity may be difficult to spot with transcripts alone because intensity is also communicated by the voice tone, speed, and emphasis on certain words. Individuals will differ on how they display strength of feeling and for some it will be a speed or excitement in the voice whereas others will speak slowly and deliberately.

SPECIFICITY

Responses that are specific and based on experiences should be given more weight than responses that are vague and impersonal. To what degree can the respondent provide details when asked a follow up probe? Greater attention is often placed on responses that are in the first person as opposed to hypothetical third person answers.

FINDING BIG IDEAS

One of the traps of analysis is not seeing the big ideas. Step back from the discussions by allowing an extra day for big ideas to percolate. For example, after finishing the analysis the researcher might set the report aside for a brief period and then jot down the three or four of the most important findings. Assistant moderators or others skilled in qualitative analysis might review the process and verify the big ideas.

The Old Fashioned Analysis Strategy: Long Tables, Scissors and Colored Marking Pens

Equipment needed:

- Two copies of all transcripts
- Scissors
- Tape
- Lots of room with long tables and possibly chart stands
- Large sheets of paper (flip charts, newsprint paper, etc.)
- Colored marking pens
- Stick-on notes

1. Prepare your transcripts for analysis. You will save time and agony later if you are careful in preparing your transcripts. Be sure they follow a consistent style. For example, single spaced comments and double spaced between speakers. The comments of the moderator should be easily identifiable by bolding, caps, or underlining.

2. Make two copies of each transcript. One will be used to cut up and the other one stays intact for later reference.

TIP: Consider printing transcripts on different colors of paper and color coding by audience type, category, etc. For example, teenagers are on blue paper and parents on green paper. Or use colored marking pens, highlight pens, or stick on notes to identify quotes that are cut out.

3. Arrange transcripts in an order. It could be in the sequence in which the groups were conducted, but more likely it will be by categories of participants or by some demographic screening characteristics of participants (users, non-users and employees, or teens, young adults and older adults, etc.). This arrangement helps you be alert to changes that may be occurring from one group to another.

4. Read all transcripts at one sitting. This quick reading is just to remind you of the whole scope and to refresh your memory of where information is located, what information is missing, and what information occurs in abundance.

5. Prepare large sheets of paper. Use a large sheet of paper for each question (sometimes several questions are integrated together into a theme). Place the large sheets on chart stands, on a long table or even on the floor. Identify the question or theme at the top of the sheet. If you have several categories of groups you might draw lines to divide the paper into sections and then group comments within these sections. For example, on one part of the page you might place comments from teen focus groups, in another place there will be comments from parent focus groups, and in a third place there will be comments from teacher focus groups.

6. Cut and tape. Read responses to the same question from all focus groups. Cut out relevant quotes and tape them to the appropriate place on the large sheet of paper. Look for quotes that are descriptive and capture the essence of the conversation. Sometimes there will be several different points of view and you can cluster the quotes around these points of view. The quality and relevance of quotes will vary. In some groups you might find that you can use almost all quotes, but in other groups there will be few useable quotes. Set the unused quotes aside for later consideration. Also remember that some comments are better placed in other sections, such as when an individual gets "off topic" and responds to a different question.

TIP: Develop a strategy for documenting the source of the quote. Later you may want to go back and examine the context of a particular discussion and this source information will be vital. You could use colored markers, stick-on notes, or a coding letter or number to represent the source of the comments. For example, you might use different colors of highlighter marking pens and use a specific color for each category of respondents. Draw a vertical line from top to bottom of each page of the transcript. Then when you cut up this transcript that color will be present as a marker for the source. Or, you use a code number for each group and place that code number at the end of every quote in the transcript.

7. Write a statement about the question. Look over the quotes and prepare an overview integrating paragraph that describes responses to that question. A number of possibilities may occur. For example, you might be able to compare and contrast differing categories, you might have a major theme and a minor theme, you might discuss the variability of the comments, or even the passion or intensity of the comments. Following the overview paragraph you may need several additional paragraphs describing sub-sets of views or to elaborate on selected topics. When you are finished, to on to the next question.

8. Continue until all transcripts are reviewed. Some analysts like to prepare the descriptive summary immediate after the quotes for a question are placed on the large sheet of paper, but other analysts like to wait until all sheets are filled before writing. The benefit of delay is that it allows you to rearrange quotes to places where they really belong.

9. Take a break. Get away from the process for a while. Refocus on the big picture. Think about what prompted the study. It's easy to get sidetracked into areas of minor importance. Be open to alternative views. Be skeptical. Look over the pile of unused quotes. Think big picture. Invite a research colleague to look over your work and offer feedback.

10. Prepare the report.

Systematic Notification Procedure

1. Set meeting times for group interviews
2. Contact potential participants by phone or in person
3. Send a written personalized invitation
4. Phone (or contact) each person the day before the focus group

Selection Strategies

List
Piggyback
On location
Nominations
Snowball samples
Random telephone screening
Screening and selection services
Ads in newspapers and bulletin boards

Incentives for Participation

Money
Food
Gifts
Positive, upbeat invitation
Opportunity to share opinions
Enjoyable, convenient and easy to find meeting location
Involvement in an important research project
Build on existing community, social or personal relationship

Transcribing Focus Group Interviews

- **Use quality play-back equipment**
The typist should avoid tape players with small speakers and awkward buttons. Earphones might be considered. Focus group interview tapes always have background noise and participants will speak with different tones and voice levels-- therefore these tapes will require concentration and the best quality play-back equipment that can be obtained. If possible, use equipment with a tape speed control and foot operated back space.
- **Minimize distractions**
Type transcripts in a place with minimal distractions or interruptions.
- **Identify moderator statements**
Use bold print for the moderator's statements and questions. If possible, type the name of each speaker followed by his or her comment. Single space the comments and double space between speakers.
- **Type comments word for word**
In real life people do not talk in complete sentences and when typing the transcripts avoid the temptation to add or change the words, correct the grammar, etc. If some of the words are unintelligible then type three periods ... to indicate that words are missing from the transcript.
- **Note special or unusual sounds that could help analysis**
For example, if there is laughter, loud voices, shouting, etc. be sure that these are noted in the transcript in parenthesis. Make note if someone was interrupted.
- **Allow sufficient time**
Typically it takes about eight hours to type one hour of tape. But the time will vary with typist speed, the quality of the tape recording, the length of the session, the experience of the typist with focus groups, and the complexity of the topic.

Reporting Focus Group Results

- **Use a communications strategy**
Rather than thinking of "a report", think of what type of communication strategy is needed. A variety of reports might be used to keep people informed. Consider: e-mail messages, postcards, phone calls, bulleted summaries, selected quotes, moderator comments, mid-project or final project reports, personal visits by members of the research team, etc.
- **Use an appropriate reporting style that the client finds helpful and meets expectations**
Ask users what kind of report would be helpful to them. What information are they looking for? What are the expectations and traditions of reports within the organization?
- **Strive for enlightenment**
Reports should raise the level of understanding of the client. The purpose is more to enlighten and convey new insights as opposed to repeating common knowledge which is already known by the sponsor of the study.
- **Make points memorable**
Help client remember the key points by limited the number of points you highlight. Too many points diminish overall impact. Begin with most important points and follow with lesser important points.
- **Use narrative or bulleted format**
Written reports can follow either a narrative format or a bulleted format. Don't surprise the client with a format different from what was expected.
- **Give thought to the oral report**
Oral reports should be brief, clear and concise. In addition, oral reports should allow opportunity for questions, indicate why the study is important and why the findings are meaningful, begin with the most important findings, and engage the listener in an active manner.

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