CHAPTER TWENTY

FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWING

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Consider advertising, public relations, and product testing. Companies spend millions of dollars annually on focus groups to test, introduce, and market consumer products. But there is another side of focus group interviewing that receives less publicity—its use as a research and evaluation strategy for public, not-for-profit, academic, and religious organizations.

This chapter discusses using focus groups as a component of an evaluation strategy. It focuses on both the benefits and the limitations of using this method and also offers suggestions for the effective use of focus group interviewing in an evaluation.

A focus group is a planned discussion led by a moderator who guides a small group of participants through a set of carefully sequenced (focused) questions in a permissive and nonthreatening conversation. The goal is not to reach agreement but to gain participant insights on the topic of discussion.

Focus groups are a wonderful method for gathering information for formative and summative evaluations. But don't limit your use of focus groups to the time after a program is implemented or completed. Focus group interviews are also valuable for gathering information in the design phases of programs, policies, and even evaluations. Here are some examples of the ways focus groups have been used.

Examples of Focus Group Use

To Assess Needs and Assets

A land grant university wanted to expand its outreach programs to minority ethnic and cultural groups in the state. It conducted focus groups to listen to these residents to determine what types of outreach programs would be most beneficial to their communities. Focus groups were held in various locations and in different languages to gather insights of local residents. With this information, the university then designed effective ways of delivering services, classes, and other opportunities.

To Design an Intervention

A state public health agency teamed with a local school district to design a program to increase the amount of fruits and vegetables that grade school students ate while at school. The team conducted focus groups with students, parents, teachers, and the food service staff to identify barriers to eating fruits and vegetables and to identify motivators for eating more fruits and vegetables. The team used the focus group findings to design a program that increased kids' motivation to eat fruits and vegetables and decreased the barriers.

To Evaluate Policy Options

When a state department of natural resources contemplated changes in hunting regulations, it conducted focus groups with hunters to get feedback on the changes. How easy are the potential regulations to understand? Do they make sense to hunters? How easy will the new regulations be to enforce? Answers to these questions helped policymakers craft regulations that were easier for hunters to understand and more efficient for game wardens to enforce.

To Pilot-Test Data Collection Instruments

A year after the completion of a smoking cessation study, we were asked to conduct focus groups with participants to evaluate the program. Although participants were extremely positive about the smoking cessation program, they complained consistently and with much passion about the telephone surveys used to collect participant data (even though we never asked about the telephone interviews). Participants said the telephone surveys were tedious and frustrating because the response categories changed frequently and, without visual cues, the participants couldn't remember which response category to use. Some said they became so frustrated they didn't take the survey seriously. Had focus groups been used to test the data collection instrument and process, we might have identified this problem and gotten better compliance and data.

To Understand Quantitative Findings

A health care system monitored its performance using a quantitative data collection system. As the health care system grew, ratings from staff declined. Administrators didn't know how to interpret the lower scores or how to reverse them. All they knew was that the scores were down and they wanted them back up. An outside organization conducted focus groups with staff, asking them to help the administration understand the drop in ratings and how the scores might be improved.

To Monitor and Evaluate Agency Operation

A federal agency regularly uses focus groups to monitor the employee climate, to canvass employees about human resource systems, to evaluate the promotion and recognition systems, and to improve cooperative efforts within the agency and with other federal agencies. Focus groups have helped the agency identify key factors that improved morale, streamlined the promotion process, and improved collaboration at all levels.

Of course, as mentioned, focus groups can also be used in formative and summative evaluations. They have been used to find out what's working, what's not working, and how programs can be improved. And they have been used to gather perceptions of program outcomes.

Focus groups may be conducted with:

- Potential participants, participants who completed a program, and participants who didn't complete a program
- Policymakers, administrators, staff, and others who want the evaluation findings for decision making
- Frontline people who will be asked to collect and provide evaluation data
- Experts in evaluation

Focus groups with decisions makers might identify gaps between the data that are currently available for decision making and the data that are needed. Focus groups with those who must provide the data might focus on how to get useful, credible data without overburdening frontline workers. Focus groups with evaluation experts might concentrate on how to create a cost-effective system that can provide the data decision makers need.

Characteristics of Focus Group Interviews

A focus group is not just any group where people get together to talk about a topic. Focus groups have certain characteristics. It is surprising how many people (experts and novices alike) do not clearly distinguish between a group discussion and a focus group.

Drawing on the pioneering work of Robert Merton, academics who study focus group research, and professionals who conduct focus group research, here are the core features that make focus groups distinctive.

The Questions Are Focused

The questions used in a focus group interview are carefully sequenced so that they focus more and more specifically on the key topic of the study. That is, the questions progressively direct participants into discussing the topic in greater detail and more depth. In other interview environments, the researcher might ask the most important questions first or use an informal, unstructured approach to interviewing. These strategies are not used in focus group interviews.

There Is No Push for Agreement or Consensus

Focus groups are distinctive in that the goal is not to reach consensus or to discover a single solution. Other group processes, such as the nominal group process or the Delphi method, are intended to push the group toward agreement. Although agreement can be a worthy goal, it is not the intent of the focus group. Focus groups are conducted to gather the range of opinions and experiences. The moderator doesn't pressure participants to come to agreement. Indeed, we have gained valuable insights in focus groups even from individuals who have described unique perceptions or experiences. One way to think of the distinction between different types of groups is to identify where the decisions are made. In focus group studies the decision-making process occurs after all focus groups have been completed. Focus group participants often offer recommendations, but these are used as input into the decision-making process by those who sponsor the study. By contrast, in a nominal group process the group is encouraged to make a decision at the conclusion of the discussion.

The Environment Is Permissive and Nonthreatening

The focus group environment should be comfortable. The moderator must be perceived as a person who is open to hearing anything. The moderator lays out the ground rules and states that participants may have differing opinions and that there are no wrong answers. All views are welcome, and if at times the group seems to be rushing toward agreement, the moderator might ask if there are opposing views. The focus group offers an honoring environment where individuals feel their views will be respected. The participants are assured that their names will not be used in any reports. The goal is to make people as comfortable as possible so they are willing to say what they think and describe how they feel. Focus groups are often held in places that are convenient for and familiar to the participants. The moderator welcomes participants and makes them feel comfortable and appreciated.

The Participants Are Homogeneous

People are invited to a particular focus group because they have something in common. They might all live in the same neighborhood, belong to the same organization, or have experienced a new program. Or they might have demographic factors in common that are important to the study (such as age, gender, race, or ethnicity). Focus groups use a homogeneous, purposeful sample composed of information-rich participants. This homogeneity fosters a sense of commonality that results in greater sharing of insights.

Sometimes there is confusion about homogeneous sampling because the participants are rarely completely homogeneous. What homogeneity means in this context is that the participants have something in common that relates to the topic of conversation. For example, in a study involving parents in a local school, the basis of homogeneity is that they are parents and they have children attending a particular school. Those same parents might be of different races or ethnic backgrounds, different occupations, or different ages or be different on other factors. The emphasis on homogeneity gives individuals comfort that they have something in common with other participants and this fosters sharing.

The Group Size Is Reasonable

The size of a focus group can range from as few as four or five to as many as a dozen people. The most workable size depends on the background of the participants, the complexity of the topic, and the expertise of the moderator.

Larger groups of nine to twelve participants tend to work better when working with consumer topics that do not evoke strong attachments. Smaller groups of five to eight are recommended for topics that might be seen as sensitive or personal or when the participants have considerable expertise or experience with the topic. The danger of the larger group is that it results in trivial responses, shortened answers, and less elaboration on critical details simply because of time constraints. In a focus group of a given length, each of six people can talk twice as long as each of twelve people can. The richness of the focus group is in the details and the explanations of the comments. This elaboration comes from having adequate time for participants to talk.

Patterns and Trends Are Examined Across Groups

Seldom would we conduct just one focus group. The rule of thumb is to hold three or four groups with each type of participant for which you want to analyze results. Therefore, if you want to compare and contrast the ways that men and women view a particular topic, you would conduct three to four groups with men and three to four groups with women.

The Group Is Guided by a Skillful Moderator

Skillful moderators make facilitation look easy. They are friendly, open, and engage with participants before the group starts, making people feel welcome and comfortable. They give a thorough introduction, helping people to feel they have enough information to trust the process. They move smoothly from one question to another. They have a set of questions and they get through all the questions in the allotted time. They get people to share their views freely. And they know just when to probe for additional insights. Typically, you want a moderator to ask the question, then sit back and listen. Let the participants interact. Let them have a conversation about the question. A focus group is working well when participants begin to build on each other's comments rather than continually responding directly to the moderator. The moderator begins to play a less central role as participants share experiences, debate ideas, and offer opinions. Some groups arrive at this point quickly. Others never reach this point.

The Analysis Fits the Study

One of the most time-consuming aspects of focus group research is the analysis. This is the process of identifying trends and patterns across groups and deriving meaning. In some situations it can involve audio recordings, transcripts, and content analysis of the exact words of participants. In other situations the analysis might be based on observation, field notes, and the memories of the research team. The rigor and intensity of the analysis has to fit the circumstances of the study. The critical factor in all analysis is that the process be systematic and verifiable. It should be systematic in that it follows a prescribed plan in a consistent way that fits the situation. It should be verifiable in that it leaves a trail of evidence that others can review.

Responsibilities

Evaluators must ensure that a variety of responsibilities are met when conducting a focus group study:

- Planning
- Developing questions
- Recruiting
- Moderating and capturing the data
- Analyzing and reporting

A key role is the study team leader, sometimes called the *principal investigator* (PI), who takes on the overall leadership of the study. The PI coordinates the budget, the timeline, the evaluation team, and the overall project. In most studies the PI assumes one or more of the responsibilities just listed. One person can complete all these tasks. However, we prefer working with a small team of perhaps two to four people who divide the responsibilities. These team members work together to complete the study, but individuals take primary responsibility for certain tasks. For example, one person may take primary responsibility for organizing—planning the study and developing questions—but the plan and the questions are usually stronger when that person involves others in the planning and question development. Or the team might involve multiple moderators who speak different languages or both men and women moderators, depending on what types of people the evaluators wants to listen to. We also often include a representative of the program or the client on the study team. We describe these tasks and roles in the following pages.

Planning

The main challenge during the planning stage is to come up with a study design that will answer the questions you have within the constraints of your timeline and budget. You and your team must be clear about the purpose of the study. You must decide whether focus group interviewing is an appropriate method for your study. If focus groups are appropriate, you must decide how many groups you will do and to whom you want to listen.

First Steps

The following sections offer a guide for the first steps in planning your focus group study.

1. Decide Whether Focus Groups Are Appropriate. Focus groups work particularly well for:

- Understanding how people see needs and assets in their lives and communities.
- Understanding how people think or feel about something, such as an idea, a behavior, a product, or a service.
- Pilot-testing things, such as ideas, campaigns, surveys, or products. Focus groups can be used to get reactions to plans before big amounts of money are spent in implementation.
- Evaluating how programs or products are working and how they might be improved.

Focus group interviews are not meant to be used as:

- A process for getting people to come to consensus.
- A way to teach knowledge or skills.
- A test of knowledge or skills.

Also, if you answer yes to any of the following questions, you will likely need to consider other methods to use in conjunction with or instead of focus group interviews.

- *Do you need statistical data?* Focus groups cannot provide statistical data to project to a population. The number of people listened to is too small.

- *Will harm come to the people sharing their ideas?* Although you can promise that you will keep information shared in the group confidential, you cannot guarantee that participants in the group will keep the information confidential. If harm may come to people who openly share in the group, choose another method, such as individual interviews.
- *Are people polarized by your topic?* People are very passionate about and polarized by some topics. In the United States, abortion, race, gay marriage, and the environment are topics that people have a hard time discussing with others who hold opposing views. Emotions run high, so it is difficult to conduct a focus group that contains people holding strong opposing views.
- *Is there a better, more efficient way to get the information?*

2. Clarify the Purpose of the Study. Sometimes study team members disagree about the type of information they want to obtain through the study and what they will do with the information once they have it. Having a clear purpose makes planning, conducting the groups, analyzing, and reporting simpler.

3. Decide What Types of People to Listen to—the Information Rich. What types of people have the experiences or characteristics that will enable them to provide input on the study topic? Michael Quinn Patton (2014) calls these individuals "information-rich" cases. They may not be the most highly educated or the most influential, but they are the people who know something about what you want to know about. For example, young people who drop out of school know a lot about what it might take to keep young people in school. Teachers, counselors, and parents can give you different perspectives.

Consider listening to:

- Those most affected by the change or program
- Those who must support the change or program before it can happen
- Employees (both frontline staff and managers) who must implement the change
- Government leaders or elected officials
- Influentials—respected people who may not hold an official office

4. Listen to the Information Rich. Find a few people like the people you want to invite to the focus groups. (For example, in the study just described you might look for a few young people who have dropped out of school.) Tell them about the study. Ask for their advice. Find out things such as these: Who can ask these kinds of questions (who can moderate)? What type of moderator would people feel comfortable with? Where might the groups be held? What days or times might work well for people? How do you find people with the characteristics you are looking for? What will it take to get people to come to the focus group?

5. Plan to Conduct the Focus Groups in Stages. When conducting focus group studies, we often find that the first few focus groups give us important clues about what lies ahead. This valuable information can be lost if all groups are conducted without reflection and feedback. We suggest that you plan to pause, analyze, and reflect after the first or second focus group. This means you transcribe early results, closely examine the data and consider whether adjustments are needed. Look over your data and think about whether your questions are being adequately answered. Are these first focus groups yielding insight or do you need to fine-tune the questions, the participant selection, or the assumptions undergirding your study? Too often, studies are conducted in one fell swoop, without reflection and without fine tuning. Consequently, they miss important opportunities to improve the study.

6. Put Your Thoughts in Writing. Develop a written plan. Developing this plan forces you to arrange your ideas in a logical order and also allows others to review your plan and offer comments. Your written plan ought to include a statement of purpose, number of groups, characteristics of information-rich participants, list of potential questions, and a timeline and a budget.

Sampling and Number of Groups

The basic strategy is to conduct three or four focus groups with each participant category that is of interest to you. So, if you want to evaluate a special education program and want to compare student, parent, and teacher reactions to the program, you might plan three or four focus groups with students, three or four groups with parents, and three or four groups with teachers. If you are hearing new information after the third or fourth group with one participant category, you might continue conducting focus groups until you have achieved redundancy.

Do not use a statistical formula for determining sample size. Instead, use the concept called *redundancy*, or *theoretical saturation*. With redundancy, or theoretical saturation, the researcher continues interviewing until no new insights are presented. In effect, the researcher has exhausted the range of views on the topic. Continuing the interviews after reaching theoretical saturation will only yield more of what the researcher already knows. This tends to occur after three or four groups with one participant type.

Developing Questions

There are several challenges when developing questions. Try to

- Develop questions that address the purpose of your study. Although that sounds obvious, some study teams get swept away dreaming up questions that would be fun to ask or nice to know the answer to but that don't address the purpose of the study.
- Identify questions that will produce information useful to the decision makers.
- Write your questions so they are conversational and easy for the participants to understand. Use words the participants would use.
- Aim for the right number of questions—not too many or too few. Usually, a set of ten to fourteen questions is appropriate for a two-hour focus group.
- Sequence the questions so that early questions set the stage for the conversation and later questions focus on the most important topics.
- Phrase questions so they are open-ended. Don't ask questions that can be answered with one word.
- Include some questions that get participants actively involved by listing, sorting, arranging, drawing, or some other activity.

Developing the Questioning Route

A *questioning route* is a set of questions developed for one or more focus groups. For a two-hour focus group, plan to use ten to fourteen questions, written in a conversational style. Follow these five steps to develop a questioning route.

1. Hold a Brainstorming Session. Invite four to six people who are familiar with the study to a one- or two-hour meeting. These people might be colleagues, members of the research team, or the individuals representing the client who is requesting the evaluation. Ask these people to generate questions that could be asked in the study. Try to use the procedures of brainstorming. Questions might be briefly discussed, but don't get stuck debating the merits of a single question. Have one person record all these questions.

2. Use the Brainstorming Questions to Draft a Questioning Route. Groups are good at brainstorming, but aren't efficient at developing questioning routes. Have one person use the questions generated in the meeting as the basis for developing a questioning route. Start by selecting key questions, questions that best address the study purpose and seem most likely to provide useful information. These are the heart of the focus group. Then add beginning questions and ending questions. Rephrase the questions using the ideas throughout this chapter. Then sequence the questions in a logical flow from general to specific. Say the questions out loud. Are they easy to ask? Do they seem like questions the target audience will be able to answer?

There is no magic to having about ten to fourteen questions. But beginning focus group researchers often develop questioning routes with twenty to thirty questions—far too many. The result? You will end up with superficial data because participants will not have enough time to go into depth on any of the questions. Once you have a draft questioning route, you can estimate how much time you think the group should spend on each question. Not all questions deserve the same amount of consideration. Some questions are simpler or less important than others and can be easily covered in five minutes. Some key questions may be complex or include activities. A key question might take up fifteen to twenty minutes. Once you have estimated times for each of the questions, you can add up the total to determine whether you should add or delete questions.

3. Send the Draft Questioning Route Out for Feedback. Send the draft to the brainstorming team and ask: Will these questions elicit the information we need? What have we missed? What can be deleted? Are these the words participants would use? Does the flow make sense? Revise the questioning route based on the team's feedback.

Remember, the same questions are asked in all the interviews with each type of participant. However, if separate groups are going to be conducted, for example, with teachers, parents, and students, a slightly different questioning route might be used for each of these types of participants (for example, you might ask students a question that you don't want to ask parents or teachers). Keep a core set of questions the same in each questioning route so responses can be compared across audiences.

Examples of Questioning Routes

Here are three examples of questioning routes for different situations. The first one includes an introductory statement as well as a list of questions.

For Pilot-Testing New Materials

Take a few moments and look over the materials. They include a brief description of a program and examples of handouts that participants would get.

1. What do you like the best about the materials?
2. What do you like the least about the materials?

3. If you could change one thing about the materials, what would it be?
4. What would get you to participate in this program? (Under what conditions would you participate?)
5. Suppose that you were trying to encourage a friend to participate in this program. What would you say?
6. What advice do you have for us as we introduce this new program?

For Formative Program Evaluation

1. Tell us how you participated in the program.
2. What did you like the best about the program? (What has been most helpful to you?)
3. What did you like the least about the program? (What was least helpful to you?)
4. What are the important accomplishments of the program?
5. What are the biggest weaknesses of the program?
6. What should be changed?
7. What should be continued and kept the same?
8. What other advice do you have about the program?

For Evaluating Services for Children

1. Introduce yourself and tell us how you learned about these services.
2. Think back to when you first became involved with these services. What were your first impressions of the services?
3. What has been particularly helpful about the services your family has received?
4. What has been disappointing about the services?
5. What has your child liked about the experience?
6. What has your child not liked about the experience?
7. Some of you may have had experiences with other services for your child. How does this approach compare with other services you've experienced? Is it any different? How so?
8. What would make the services work better?
9. Is your child any different because he or she has received these services? If so, how?
10. Is your family life any different because you received these services? How?
11. If you had a chance to give advice to the director of this program, what would you say?
12. Based on your experiences, would you recommend these services to other parents?

Recruiting

When you have your plan and you know the questions you are going to ask, the next challenge is to find the right people and persuade them to attend the focus groups.

The first step is to identify as precisely as possible the characteristics of information-rich participants. A basic principle of focus group interviewing is that the researcher controls attendance. You do not invite people simply because they are interested in attending. You invite people because they meet the *screens*, or qualifications, for the study. You invite people who have experienced something specific or who have common characteristics. For example, they may have participated in a community program that you are evaluating, or they may be residents in the community and you are doing a needs assessment of the community, or they may be farmers who have adopted improved agricultural practices.

One of the challenges of focus group interviewing is how to persuade people who may be uninterested in your study to participate. They may be apathetic, indifferent, or even consider the topic to be irrelevant. At times, you will want to involve people who are not initially interested in participating. If you limit your study to only those who show interest in the topic, you might obtain biased results. To be successful, think about your recruiting procedure as well as the incentives to participate.

The Recruiting Procedure

There are two distinct qualities of successful recruiting. First, the process is personalized. This means that each invited person feels that he or she has been personally asked to attend and share his or her opinions. Second, the invitation process is repetitive. Invitations are given not just once but two or three times. Here are the steps in a typical process of recruiting.

1. Set Focus Group Dates, Times, and Locations. Most groups with adults are scheduled for two hours. Focus groups with children are usually shorter. Don't schedule more than two groups in one day unless you have multiple moderators available.

2. Recruit Participants. Recruit participants via telephone or in person. This allows you to respond immediately to questions or concerns about the study. Before beginning the recruiting, be clear about how you are going to describe the study. People will want to know the purpose of the discussion, who wants the information, what the sponsor of the study is going to do with the information, why they are being asked to participate ("Why me?"), and how you found their names.

Usually, you shouldn't invite people to a "focus group." That term could be intimidating. Instead, you could say you are inviting a few people together to talk about the topic. Don't use jargon in the invitation. You want it to sound as though it will be an easy, comfortable, interesting conversation.

Think about who should offer the invitation. Will people be more willing to participate if someone from their community invites them than they would be if a stranger invites them? Or would people feel honored to be invited by the head of a local organization? People are usually more likely to say yes if someone they know and respect invites them to participate. If that isn't possible, it helps to be able to refer to a person they know and respect and to identify that person as supporting the study. For example, it often helps to say, "The president of the chamber of commerce [*or the community health nurse or some other person they know and respect*] said you might be able to help us. We are inviting some people to get together to talk about [*name of topic*]."

3. Send a Personalized Letter. Soon after the person has agreed to participate, send him or her a personalized letter. Don't use a generic salutation, such as "Dear Friend." This letter should thank the person for agreeing to participate and confirm the date, time, and place.

4. Send a Reminder. Phone or contact each person the day before the focus group to remind him or her of the group: "I'm looking forward to seeing you tomorrow at. . . ."

Finding a Pool of Participants

Typically, you will find a pool of people who meet your selection requirements and then you will randomly select individuals to invite from that pool. For example, you might invite every fifth name on a list or every tenth person who enters a store. Here are several different ways to find a pool:

- Find a list of people who fit your selection criteria. Think about who might have such a list. It might be a list of program participants or employees or parents.
- Piggyback on another event that attracts the type of people you want. Do farmers in a certain area get together for a specific event, for example?

- Recruit on location. For instance, invite every fifth person who arrives at a clinic.
- Ask for nominations. Ask key people, like elders, educators, or service providers, for names of people who fit the selection criteria.
- Build snowball samples. Once you find some people who fit the selection criteria, ask them for names of other people who fit the selection criteria.

Getting People to Attend—Incentives

First, think about what might make it hard for people to attend. Try to eliminate these things. If appropriate, provide transportation and child care.

Then, think about what might entice people to participate. Ask a few people who are like the people you are trying to attract what it will take to get them to show up. Here are things that have been used to encourage people to participate:

- Money. (We will pay you.)
- Food. (There will be something to eat.)
- Gifts. (We have a gift for you.)
- Compliment or honor. (We value your insights about the program.)
- Enjoyment. (You will have a nice time.)
- Community. (Your participation will help the community.)
- Location. (The location is familiar, easy to get to, and comfortable.)

Consider Your Recruiting Assets

Nonprofit, educational, public and similar organizations have unique assets, which can be valuable when recruiting. In many cases, these organizations have developed a positive reputation and image among those they want to recruit. Regularly, they can recruit and get people to attend without tangible incentives. One of the most overlooked assets is the special invitation to participate from an influential person with the organization. Don't ask the most recently hired employee to make the recruiting contacts. Instead, seek out a senior member of the organization whose name is recognized and respected by the potential attendees. When he or she makes a phone call to invite a participant, the potential attendee often sees it as an honor. If these senior people aren't available, then an alternative is for someone else to make the invitation in their name.

Moderating

The challenge of moderating is to help participants feel comfortable enough to share, in the presence of the rest of the group, what they think and how they feel. They must trust the moderator, the process, and the sponsoring organization and also that the results will be used in a positive way. The moderator must know when to wait for more information and when to move on. The moderator must be able to control dominant speakers and encourage hesitant participants. The moderator must respect the participants, listen to what they have to say, and thank them for their views even when he or she may personally disagree.

Moderator Skills

The moderator should have enough knowledge about the topic to understand what the participants are saying. He or she does not need to be an expert on the topic but should understand common terms that will be used in the discussion.

It sometimes helps to have a moderator who looks like the participants. This can make the participants more comfortable and give the impression that "this person will understand what I have to say." Consider such things as gender, age, and race and ethnicity. For some topics these things may not matter, but for other topics they are very important. For example, women may be more willing to talk about breastfeeding with a woman than a man. Also remember that the moderator should be fluent in the participants' language.

Here are other things the moderator should do:

Be Mentally Prepared

- Be alert and free from distractions. Arrive early so you are relaxed and ready to listen.
- Have the discipline to listen. Often beginning moderators are delighted that people are talking, and they don't notice that the participants are not really answering the question. As you listen, ask yourself, are they really answering the question? If not, refocus their attention on the question.
- Be familiar with the questioning route. Know which questions are the most important. Know which questions can be dropped if you are running out of time.

Work with an Assistant Moderator

- An assistant moderator improves the quality of the groups.

- On one level, the assistant helps by taking care of details (such as seeing to the refreshments, monitoring the recording equipment, or dealing with latecomers).
- On a more important level, the assistant helps to ensure the quality of the analysis by taking careful notes, summarizing the discussion at the end, and acting as another set of eyes and ears for analysis.

Polish Your Hosting Skills

- When conducting focus groups, act like the host. This means greeting people when they arrive, introducing them to other participants, providing beverages or snacks, and making the participants feel welcomed. Too often, the evaluator forgets to smile or welcome people and the environment changes to apprehension or, worse, drudgery. Focus groups are a social experience and people must feel comfortable and valued before they will share quality data.
- Create a warm and friendly environment. While you are waiting for participants, engage those who arrive first in small talk—informal discussions on topics of casual importance. These informal conversations that occur before the focus group help participants get a sense of you as the moderator. The small talk should put participants at ease and foster conversations among the participants even before the focus group begins. Think of this time before the focus group as what good hosts do when guests arrive at their homes—they welcome them in, introduce them to the others already there, and discuss an easy, upbeat topic.
- Small talk topics should be easy to talk about. It might be what is happening locally (if it is off the topic of the focus group). If you are new to the area, ask participants about the weather, or geography, or transportation, or places to eat, or their families. Your job is to make people feel welcome and comfortable.

Record the Discussion

- It is impossible to remember everything that is said in a focus group. The group's dialogue can be recorded in several ways, such as in field notes, by audio recording, or on a laptop computer.
- Digital audio recorders provide excellent sound quality, the ability to quickly locate comments, and the ability to regulate playback speed and background noise.
- Video recording of focus groups is regularly done in market research focus group facilities where cameras are placed behind one-way mirrors or mounted inconspicuously in the room. However, these video cameras can

be problematic in evaluation focus groups because of topic sensitivity, the need for confidentiality, and participant comfort. As a result, we avoid video recording evaluation focus groups.

Give a Short and Smooth Introduction

- Welcome everyone.
- Give an overview of the topic.
- Provide any ground rules for the discussion.
- Ask the first question.

Use Pauses and Probes to Draw Out More Responses

- Be comfortable with using a five-second pause. Beginning moderators are sometimes uncomfortable with silence. However, pauses encourage people to add to the conversation.
- Use probes to get more detail. Usually more detailed information is more useful. Consider these probes:
  "Would you explain further?"
  "Can you give an example?"
  "I don't understand."
  "Tell me more."

Control Reactions to Participants

- Don't lead participants by giving verbal or nonverbal clues as to what you like or don't like. The moderator should avoid showing signs of approval or disapproval. For example, it is often tempting for the moderator to give a broad smile and nod his or her head when hearing certain comments. Participants quickly spot this behavior and then assume that more of these "approved" comments are wanted.
- Avoid verbal cues like "that's good" or "excellent."
- Don't correct participants during the group. If they share information that is harmful, offer the correct information at the end of the group.
- Do not become defensive if participants tell you they think your program is horrible. Instead, try to get information that will help you understand their perspective.

Use Subtle Group Control

- Your job is not to make sure everyone speaks the same amount in a group. But everyone should have the opportunity to share. Some people will have more to say. If they are answering the question and giving new and useful information we let them continue.

- Control dominant talkers by thanking them for their input and asking for others to share. Remind the group that it is important to hear from everyone.
- Call on quiet participants. They are often reflective thinkers and have wonderful things to offer. Invite them to share by saying something like this: "Maria, I don't want to leave you out of the discussion. What would you like to add?"

Use an Appropriate Conclusion

- Summarize the key points of the discussion and ask for confirmation. Usually, the assistant moderator does this. (Do not summarize the entire focus group. Instead, summarize three to five of the most important points.)
- Review the purpose and ask whether anything has been missed.
- Thank the participants, distribute any incentive, and conclude the session.

Analysis

The analyst must take the focus group data and find what is meaningful to the purpose of the study. One of the skills that beginning analysts must learn is to match the level of analysis to the problem at hand. Not all studies require the same level of analysis. It helps to break the analysis into doable chunks so the analyst is not overwhelmed by the task. The analyst must look for the major themes that cut across groups and those gems that might have been mentioned by only a few people. The analyst can only do this by being clearly grounded in the purpose of the study.

Use a Systematic Analysis Process

Focus group analysis should be systematic. There is no single best way, but rather many possible ways to have a systematic process. Being systematic simply means that the analyst has a protocol that follows a predetermined and verifiable set of steps. Here is an example of a systematic analysis process that we have used often. Notice that the process begins while the first group is still being conducted and continues after the last focus group is completed. (See Box 20.1 for additional analysis tips.)

1. Start the Process While Still in the Group
   - Listen for vague or inconsistent comments and probe for understanding.
   - Consider asking each participant a final preference question.

- Offer an oral summary of key findings and ask if the summary is correct.

2. Continue the Process Immediately After the Group
   - Draw a diagram of the seating arrangement.
   - Spot-check the audio recording to ensure that the machine picked up the discussion. If the recorder didn't work, immediately take time to expand your notes. Recreate as much of the discussion as possible.
   - Turn the audio recorder back on. Record the observations of the moderator and assistant moderator. Discuss and describe such things as these:

     What seemed to be the key themes of this discussion?

     What was surprising?

     How did this group compare with prior groups?

     Does anything need to be changed before the next group?

     What hunches, interpretations, and ideas did the discussion produce?
   - Label, date, and file field notes, digital files, and other materials.
3. Analyze the Responses from Each Group Soon After Their Completion
   - Option 1: Transcript-based analysis

     Make a backup copy of the audio recording and send a copy to the transcriber if a transcript is needed.

     Listen to the audio recording, review the field notes, and read the transcript.

     Use the transcript (along with the other group transcripts) as the basis for the next steps.
   - Option 2: Analysis without a transcript

     Prepare a summary of the individual focus group in a question-by-question format with amplifying quotes.

     Share the summary with other researchers who were present at the focus groups so they can verify its accuracy.

     Use the summary (along with other group summaries) as the basis for the next steps.
4. Analyze the Series of Focus Groups Within Days of the Last Group's Completion
   - Analyze groups by categories (for example, first analyze the parent groups, then analyze the teacher groups, then analyze the student groups).
   - Analyze groups across categories (for example, compare and contrast the parent groups with the teacher and the student groups).
   - Look for emerging themes by question and then overall.

- Identify areas where there is agreement and disagreement, both within each focus group and across the series of focus groups.
- Consider developing diagrams of the analysis that depict flow, sequence, structure, or other factors of interest.
- Describe findings and use quotes from participants to illustrate.

5. Finally, Prepare the Report
   - Decide whether to use narrative style or bulleted list style.
   - Decide whether the report should be organized by question or by theme.
   - Use a few quotes from participants to illustrate each important point.
   - Share the draft report with other study team members for verification.
   - Revise in light of the feedback and finalize report.

Box 20.1. Tips for Focus Group Analysis

When analyzing focus group data consider the following:

Frequency

Frequency tells you how often a comment was made. But frequency alone does not tell you how many different people made this particular comment. Indeed, you might have ten similar comments that were all spoken by the same person. Do not assume that frequency is an indicator of importance. Some analysts count up how many times certain things were said and believe that those discussed most often are more important. This is not necessarily true.

Extensiveness

Extensiveness tells you how many different people made a particular comment. This measure gives you a sense of the degree of agreement on a topic. Unfortunately, it is impossible to determine extensiveness using only the transcript unless names are attached to comments. If you were present in the focus group you will have a sense of the degree of extensiveness and this can be captured in the field notes. Usually, extensiveness is a more useful concept in focus group analysis than frequency.

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 vocal tone, speed, and emphasis on certain words also communicate intensity. Individuals will differ in how they display strength of feeling, and for some it will be speed or excitement in the voice, whereas others will speak slowly and deliberately. Some may cry. Some may bang their fists on the table. Pay particular attention to what is said with passion or intensity.

(*Continued*)

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. For example, "I feel the new practice is important. I used it and I haven't smoked in a year," has more weight than, "These practices are good and people should use them."

Finding Big Ideas
One of the traps of analysis is focusing so much on the detail that you miss the big ideas. Step back from the discussions by allowing an extra day or two 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 most important findings. Assistant moderators or others skilled in qualitative analysis might review the process and verify the big ideas.

Important Comments That Don't Reoccur
In most qualitative analysis, we are looking for themes and patterns that reoccur within or across cases. In a focus group, we listen to see if others offer similar or complimentary views and, if so, we place emphasis on that data. But in focus group research, we occasionally find that important and insightful comments may not reoccur. A visionary individual may see relationships or consequences that are not apparent to others. Or an individual may have an unique experience. In a recent study, two focus groups were conducted with church members about tithing. In the first focus group, there was strong agreement that all members should be encouraged to give a specified percent of their income to the church. In the second focus group, the same pattern emerged until one woman spoke up and told about her financial difficulties. She valued the congregational community and wanted to remain in the church but she was a single mother and a required donation was beyond her reach. She cried as she told her story of financial struggle. The views of one person had a profound impact on other members of the focus group and on the church's decision.

The Analyst Should Be Present in the Focus Groups
We recommend that the person responsible for analysis attend the focus groups. Some analysts wrongly assume that they can do quality analysis by merely examining transcripts. Transcript analysis without actually attending the focus groups is not recommended and can lead to serious errors in analysis. By being present at the groups the analyst can get a sense of the conversation, the difference between frequency and extensiveness, the presence of emotions or intense feelings and the overall energy of the group. The analyst could serve either as the moderator or as a note taker.

Try the Classic Analysis Strategy: Long Tables, Scissors, and Colored Marking Pens

If you have not analyzed focus group data before, you may want to try this strategy. It offers a concrete way of categorizing and "seeing" the data. After you understand this method, it is easier to understand how the analysis process can be accomplished using computer software.

Equipment Needed

Two copies of all transcripts
Scissors
Tape
Lots of room, long tables, and possibly flip chart stands
Large sheets of paper (flip chart paper, newsprint paper, and so forth)
Colored marking pens
Sticky notes

Box 20.2. Tip for Preparing and Managing Transcripts

Consider printing transcripts on different colors of paper and color-coding by audience type, category, and so forth. For example, transcripts for groups of teenagers might be on blue paper and those for groups of parents on green paper. In addition, use a marker to draw one line down the right margin of each page of, for example, the transcript for the first parent group, two lines down each page of the transcript for the second parent group, and three lines down each page of the transcript for the third parent group, and so on. This way, once you have all the transcripts cut up, you can easily see that a participant response on green paper with two lines down the side came from the second parent group. Do this for each category of groups. To take this even a step further, most word processing programs allow you to easily number each line of a transcript. If you are uncertain about how to do this on your software just go to your "Help" icon and enter "Add line numbers."

1. Prepare the Transcripts for Analysis. You will save time and agony later if you are careful in preparing the focus group transcripts (also see the tip in Box 20.2). Be sure they follow a consistent style (for example, with comments single-spaced and a double-space between comments by different speakers.

The comments of the moderator should be made easily identifiable by bolding, caps, or underlining.

2. Make Two Copies of Each Transcript. One copy will be cut up and the other one will be left intact for later reference.

3. Arrange Transcripts in an Order. The most useful order for the transcripts could be the sequence in which the groups were conducted, but more likely it will be by categories of participants or by some demographic screening characteristic of participants (users, nonusers, and employees, or teens, young adults, and older adults, and so on). 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. Place the large sheets on chart stands, on a long table, or even on the floor. Write one of the questions at the top of each sheet.

6. Cut and Tape. Start with the first question you want to analyze. Read each quote, and answer these questions:

a. Did the participant answer the question that was asked?

IF YES → Go to question c.

DON'T KNOW → Set it aside and review it later.

NO → Go to question b.

(If you are undecided or unclear about any answers, then take the conservative approach and save the comments for later review.)

b. Does the comment answer a different question in the focus group?

IF YES → Move quote to that question.

IF NO → Put in discard pile (but don't throw the discard pile away until you are done with analysis).

(*Caution:* Don't assume that answers will follow the questions. Occasionally, participants will provide answers to questions asked earlier or to questions that have not yet been asked. When this occurs, move the answer to the appropriate location.)

c. Does the comment say something of importance about the topic?
   IF YES → Tape it to the newsprint under the appropriate question.
   (Or if you are working on a horizontal surface, just start a pile.)
   IF NO → Put in discard pile.
   (*Tip:* Don't use a lot of tape because you will want to move the quotes around later.)
d. Is it like something that has been said earlier?
   IF YES → Start grouping like quotes together. Basically, you are making piles (categories) of like things.
   IF NO → Start a separate pile.
   You are constantly comparing and making decisions. Is this similar to or different from other things?

When you are done categorizing the quotes from the first question, move to the second. After you've cut up all the transcripts and have your initial categories, you're ready to begin analysis of specific questions. Make sure you have all the quotes that say similar things together. Rearrange until you're satisfied. You might have categories and subcategories. You may get so many quotes about one thing that you make subcategories. Or you may decide to combine categories. You may want to talk with someone else about how you are categorizing certain things. When you've finished arranging quotes into categories, you are ready for the next step.

7. Write a Statement About Each Question. Review the quotes that are arranged by categories on the question sheet and prepare a paragraph that describes participant reactions to the question. The form of the description will vary depending on the content of the responses. For example, you might be able to compare and contrast differing categories, you might find a major theme and a minor theme, or you might find it useful to discuss the variability of the comments or even the passion or intensity of the comments. After writing this overview paragraph you may need to prepare several additional paragraphs to describe subsets of views or to elaborate on selected topics. Compare and contrast the ways in which different audiences (such as parents, teachers, and students) answered the question. (If you color-coded the transcripts, you can easily use the colors to help you "see" how the different audiences answered the questions.) When you are finished, go on to the next question.

8. 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

TABLE 20.1. COMMON CHALLENGES AND SOLUTION STRATEGIES IN FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS.

Challenges	Solution Strategies
Making participants feel comfortable and getting them to talk to one another. Beginning moderators tend to approach focus groups like individual interviews, expecting answers from individual participants but not encouraging interaction among them.	Even before the focus group begins encourage participants to talk to each other. In the focus group tell them it is OK to talk to each other. Use questions that elicit conversation and opinions instead of factual information. Use pauses to elicit conversation. Invite participants to comment on the ideas of others.
Recruiting. This is often the greatest challenge for those starting out with focus groups. It is especially difficult when you are recruiting individuals with no connection or allegiance to the topic or sponsor.	Successful recruiting is personalized and repetitive. Think about who should extend the invitation to participate and practice the recruitment invitation so that it flows smoothly and comfortably. Also, think about the array of incentives that prompt people to actually attend. In evaluation focus groups, cash incentives are sometimes effective, but don't overlook the persuasive appeal of nontangible factors.
Developing questions. This takes time and effort. Good questions are essential for successful focus groups.	Several heads are better than one. Work with others when developing your questions. Consider brainstorming to identify possibilities. Anticipate that you will have several drafts. Invite review by colleagues and potential participants.
Selecting the right level of analysis for the study. Analysis strategies are on a continuum; different strategies require different amounts of time and reflect differing degrees of rigor.	Don't be trapped by having only one way to do the analysis. Some situations demand more rigor, and in those cases you might use complete transcripts and even qualitative analysis software. But in other situations you may need a faster process that is based on careful field notes and uses oral summaries, participant response forms, or other strategies.

areas of minor importance. Be open to alternative views. Be skeptical. Look over the pile of unused quotes. Think of the big picture.

9. Prepare the Report. After you prepare the report with the paragraphs you have written for each question and the big ideas that emerged from the study, invite research colleagues to review your work and offer feedback.

Addressing Challenges in Focus Group Interviews

When using focus groups for evaluation purposes there are some challenges. We list the frequent challenges along with potential solution strategies in Table 20.1

Conclusion

Focus group interviews can provide valuable insights in program evaluation. They can be used alone or in combination with other evaluation methods. Results from focus groups are particularly valuable because they provide insights into the logic and rationale for certain behaviors, explain why these behaviors take place, how a program or issue is perceived, or the barriers or concerns of key stakeholders, and because these answers are presented in the words and logic of the people closest to the program. Focus groups look easy, especially when conducted by a skilled moderator, but they can be challenging to plan, conduct, and analyze.

Successful focus group studies are grounded on five key steps: planning, developing questions, recruiting, moderating, and analyzing. Each of these steps is critical to success. Those who seek to have successful focus groups should be attentive to performing each step with care, thought, and skill. Those who seek to develop skills would benefit from reading the literature on focus groups (see the Further Reading section for some suggestions), observing experts conduct focus groups, practicing the key skills, and seeking feedback.

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