

# Qualitative Research: Focus Groups



# Qualitative vs. Quantitative Research

- Qualitative – concentrates on words and observations to express reality and attempts to describe people in natural situations.
- Quantitative – grew out of a strong academic tradition that places considerable trust in numbers that represent opinions or concepts.

# What is a focus group?

- “A focus group is a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment.”
- When are they used?

# Who Cares?

- Valuable research tool
- A **VERY** marketable practical skill

# Who is Involved in the Process

1. Moderator

2. Note-taker/Assistant Moderator

3. Participants

4. Transcriptionist

# The Moderator

- Choosing a moderator
- Role of assistant moderator
- Moderator roles
  - Seeker of Wisdom
  - Enlightened Novice
  - Expert Consultant
  - Challenger
  - Referee
  - Writer
  - A Team: Discussion Leader & Technical Expert
- Mental preparation
- Pre-session strategy

# Selecting Participants

- Group composition
- Selection
  - Bias
  - Randomization
  - Cost vs. Quality
- Group size

# The Participants

- On average, 6-10 people participate in each focus group.
  - Small enough to give everyone the opportunity to express an opinion.
  - Large enough to provide diversity of opinions.
  - Should be composed of people who are not too familiar with one another (e.g., friends, family).
  - Typical focus group study has a minimum of three focus groups and as many as several dozen groups.

# Advantages

- Socially oriented research procedure.
- Format allows the moderator to probe—flexibility to explore unanticipated issues.
- High face validity.
- Relatively low-cost.
- Relatively fast results.
- Unlike structured interviews, increasing the sample size requires minimal time and resource investment.

# Disadvantages

- Less experimental control.
- Data more difficult to analyze.
- Requires carefully trained interviewers.
- Groups may vary considerably.
- Groups may be difficult to assemble.
- Discussion must be conducted in an environment that is conducive to conversation.

# Validity of Focus Groups

- How much confidence can you have in the data?
- High potential for leading and bias
- Face validity
- Moderator is critical

# When to use the Focus Group Method

- Insights are needed into a new area of research.
- Our purpose is to investigate topics where opinions or attitudes are conditional.
- Researcher needs additional information to prepare for a larger scale study.

# When ***NOT*** to use the Focus Group Method

- When the discussion could become emotionally charged.
- When the researcher loses control over the project and relinquishes control to a biased third party.
- Statistical projections are needed.
- Other methods would produce better quality information.
- Confidentiality is compromised.

# Overview of Focus Group Design

1. Carefully plan the focus group.
2. Write the script and practice.
3. Identify and recruit the participants.
4. Conduct the focus group sessions.
5. Develop the coding scheme.
6. Segment and code the data.
7. Analyze the data.
8. Interpret and publish the results.

# Planning

- Purpose of study: Exploratory versus confirmatory.
- What do we expect to learn?
- What are the main questions of interest?
- What is the appropriate order of questions?

# Considerations for Creating the Script

- What do you want to know?
- What kind of response will a given item elicit?
- Clarity of questions
- Consensus?

# Types of Focus Group Questions

- Opening question (Ice breaker)
- Introductory questions
- Transition questions
- Key questions
- Ending questions
  - All-things-considered question
  - Summary question
  - Final question

# Moderating

- Evaluating participants before-hand
- Eye contact
- Open-ended questions
  - “Was it enjoyable to meet this person?”
  - “How did you feel about meeting this person?”
- Dichotomous questions

# Moderating (cont.)

- Affirmation
  - Yes
  - That's good
  - I agree
  - Good point
- “Why?!?!”
  - Forces a rational response
  - Can be too pointed
- Uncued questions, followed by cues
- Serendipitous questions

# Create Your Own Script

Build your own focus group script:

*Choose a topic that interests you:*

1. Children's toy preferences
2. Ways to educate people about diet pill addiction.
3. Optimizing professor/grad student communication
4. Exploring adult listening preferences for rush-hour radio stations
5. Preferences for long distance communication
6. Ways to survive first year of grad school
7. Others?

# Activity Objectives

1. Explain why your topic is suitable for a focus group study. Would it be a stand-alone project or in conjunction with other measures?
2. Identify questions of interest.
3. Discuss how you would recruit your participants.
4. Develop a script with an ice breaker, 3 key questions, and a summary question.
5. Develop skeleton coding scheme.

# Further Readings

Krueger, R. A. (1994). Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Stewart, D. W., & Shamdasani, P. N. (1990). Focus groups: Theory and practice. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage