CONDUCTING PROFESSIONAL FOCUS GROUPS

Janet Mancini Billson, PhD
Norman T. London, EdD

GROUP DIMENSIONS INTERNATIONAL

Barrington, Rhode Island   © 2005
Affiliated with NorthWing Consulting, Ottawa, Canada
THE PURPOSE AND USES OF FOCUS GROUPS

The purpose of focus groups is to elicit reliable data, not just interesting information…
THE USES OF FOCUS GROUPS

Focus groups focus a topic and a population.
Prior research, logic, and experience point to variables that provide the most rigorous explanatory power.

Recruiters, moderators, and data analysts are trained and clear about research objectives.

Respondents share unique characteristics.

The Moderator’s Guide targets “key research questions.”
Focus groups can...

- Help develop a survey questionnaire.
- Clarify sample selection.
- Contextualize survey data.
- Be used in tandem with surveys.
- Be used as a separate data collection tool.
Exploring:
- Explore issues and language.
- Test methodological approaches.
- Understand the setting.
- Formulate hypotheses.

Triangulation:
- Use multiple methods to enhance validity of data.
- Enrich data.
Pretesting:
- Test questionnaire items.
- Assess initial reactions to programs, products, or ideas.
- Explore impacts on relevant groups.

Uncovering Meaning:
- Identify meaning on multiple levels.
- Explore unexpressed meanings, beliefs, values, and motivations.
- Elaborate upon complex accounts.
When TO USE focus groups...

- If you want...
  - Group interaction.
  - Complexity of responses.
  - "How" and "why" not "whether" and "how much."
  - Contextual responses, not "yes" or "no" responses.
  - Triangulation of multiple methods.
Immediate feedback.
Complexity of behaviors and motivations.
The range and intensity of opinions.
Views on sensitive topics.
Or, when respondents are not comfortable with "paper and pencil" methods.
When NOT TO USE focus groups...

- If you want...
  - To gather **statistical data**.
  - *Or when*...
  - Language barriers are insurmountable.
  - You have little control over situation.
  - You cannot establish trust.
  - You cannot ensure free expression.
  - Confidentiality is critical.
Focus groups can contribute critical data for organizational analysis, but should not be asked directly to:

- Resolve conflicts.
- Make decisions.
- Build consensus.
The dangers of misusing focus groups stem from asking them to do too much.
Focus groups can be used in…

Social Policy Research

- Needs Assessments
  - Staff Expectations
  - Participant Expectations
  - Beneficiary Expectations

- Monitoring
  - Staff Debriefings
  - Mid-Term Reviews
  - Progress Monitoring

- Program Evaluations
  - Workshops and Conferences
  - Rapid Appraisals
  - Participatory Evaluations
Conceptualization

Design

Recruitment

Protocol

Moderation

Data Analysis

Follow-up

Reporting

THE FLOW OF FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH
RESEARCH DESIGN

Researchers are responsible for deciding...
Who should be in the focus groups.
How many focus groups to conduct.
Where to conduct the focus groups.
When to conduct the focus groups.
What to ask the participants.
And how to analyze and present the data.
The process begins with determining variables...

- Researchers **determine** the **variables** or dimensions along which the population **is likely to vary**.

- Then, they **use** a "screener" to ensure **that respondents** fit these dimensions.
Selecting variables is a critical part of the research process.

Selection depends on logic and a careful review of previous research on the topic.

Always use the most critical variables for the research agenda.
Variables often include ethnicity/race, gender, socio-economic status, and/or occupational role.

More specific variables depend on the research question, such as seniority, previous training, region, educational level, etc.
Once variables are determined, researchers devise a group blueprint...

- A "group blueprint" helps visualize how major variables interact with each other.
- When you must curtail the number of focus groups, a blueprint will help you decide rationally rather than randomly which groups to include...and which to exclude.

A group blueprint helps you see the relationships among variables.
Homogeneity within categories is useful. --most researchers conduct one group, or preferably two, groups per category.

However, mixed groups can be very productive as long as:

-- Participants can speak about the topic,
-- feel comfortable speaking to each other,
-- and are homogeneous on key variables.
## Group Blueprint: Village Well Project

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Use of Well</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Distance to Well</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;1000 Feet</td>
<td>Group 1</td>
<td>Group 3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;1000 Feet</td>
<td>Group 2</td>
<td>Group 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not using well</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 5</td>
<td>Group 6</td>
<td>Group 7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Include a mix of marital status, age, number of children, etc.
Group Blueprint: Women in Training Program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AGE</th>
<th>EDUCATIONAL LEVEL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Through High School</td>
<td>One Year of College or More</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-25</td>
<td>Group 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-35</td>
<td>Group 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36 and older</td>
<td>Group 3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All in rural region; include a mix of occupational role, number of years in position.
Recruitment

The key factor is that the approach to selecting participants must not bias the research results in any predictable way.

No category of potential participants should be overlooked if their responses can be expected to alter the results significantly.
For much public sector research, recruitment might be conducted personally by the researcher, staff members, or community leaders.

*This informal approach costs less but carries higher risks of skewing groups toward certain types of participant.*

Preparation for recruitment may take much longer than the actual recruitment period.
Matching groups, selecting statistical or logical samples, and planning how best to achieve satisfactory group membership take time, discussion, and negotiation among researchers.

One screener should be developed for use by all recruiters.

➢ Training of recruiters must be thorough.
Lack of resistance to political and organizational pressure causes:

- Resentment toward researchers.
- Biased responses.
- Unresponsive and confused participants.
- Frustrated moderator and researchers.
- “Politically correct” but skewed data.
Recruitment should be limited to the most desirable participants.

Be strong enough to ask inappropriate members to leave group.
MODERATING THE FOCUS GROUP

Content and Process

Moderators and interviewers must pay attention to two levels of interaction at all times...
**Content**

The moderator must attend to:

- Lines of argument.
  - Specific responses to questions.
  - Deeper meanings.
  - Novel ideas.
Process

The moderator or facilitator must observe, understand, and manipulate the process:

– Nonverbal cues among group members.

- Conflicts.
- Coalition-building.
- Scapegoating.
- Participation levels, etc.
The Moderator: Expressive vs. Instrumental Roles

"Expressive" or socio-emotional refers to past or present feelings.

"Instrumental" or task refers to past or present actions or behaviors.
Good moderation involves keeping the group on task so that:

- All questions are discussed.
- The focus group goals are met.
- The group starts and ends on time.

- However, the moderator must attend to socio-emotional concerns:
  - Preserving equal space.
  - Not playing favorites.
  - Neutralizing conflicts.
  - Defusing tension.
We have only fifteen minutes left...

We have many different opinions here...

Let me refocus our discussion...

How about those who haven’t had a chance to speak yet...

Focusing

Gatekeeping
How Do You Know Whether You are Moderating Effectively?
Weak Moderation
Strong Moderation
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STAGE</th>
<th>DESCRIPTIVE CHARACTERISTICS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>5 Esprit de Corps</strong></td>
<td>Cohesiveness, freedom, unity/support, high energy, no cliques, mutual acceptance, lack of possessive or dominant behavior.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>↑</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4 Constructive Stage</strong></td>
<td>Attitude changes, active listening, open to different ideas, acceptance of differing values, no attempts to control. (Mutual trust among members is critical to movement beyond stage #4.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>↑</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3 Bid for Power</strong></td>
<td>High degree of participation, attempts to influence, sub-groups, conflict, roles, lack of group identity. (Recognition of similarities/differences and acceptance of differences helps move beyond stage #3.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>↑</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2 Why Are We Here?</strong></td>
<td>Definition of goals and objectives; sub-groups/cliques, comparisons of personal agendas and expectations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>↑</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1 Polite Stage</strong></td>
<td>Superficial contact, milling around, sizing up, getting acquainted.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Strategies for Focused Discussion

...to reduce the impact of “negativists” or “dominators.”

– In-Depth Probing
  • EX: tell us more about how the new community toilet complex (CTC) has changed your life

– Continuously Linking (connecting ideas from one participant to another)
  • EX: “Yuki thinks that the CTC was not necessary and Mari says it was critical—how do others feel”

– Taking Straw Votes
  • EX: negative attitudes toward the World Bank might be held only by the dominants

– Using Prototypes or “Mock-ups”
  • EX: proposal for a new agricultural reform idea

– Using Dyadic, Triadic, or Other Break-outs
  • EX: to generate ideas for solving urban pollution
DATA ANALYSIS

Putting together the pieces of the puzzle…

Make sure you leave out nothing important!
Maintain Control

✔ Develop a system that works for you.
✔ Make copies of the original transcripts and work from the copies.
✔ Save your work every few minutes
  ...use the automatic backup feature.
✔ Analyze one group at a time, then compare across groups.
Focus the Analysis

✓ Revisit the key research question and initial discussion notes.

✓ Break the analysis into topics and sub-topics.

✓ Develop your analysis with trends, patterns, continua, etc.
Point out extreme cases:

– “Of all groups, older teachers were the least likely to want the Development Guide in electronic version. This may reflect their relative inexperience with computers.”

Include illustrative cases:

– “For example, a man in his 60s has not had much experience on computers. He would prefer the guide in hard copy.”
Use continua:

“Democratic Values in Four Asian Countries.”

High _____ x ___________ x ___________ x _Low
Korea    Thailand   Indonesia   Brunei

“Optimism in Four Asian Countries”

High____x_______x__________x_________x__Low
Thailand   Korea   Brunei    Indonesia
Use a “map”

Key Concerns

- Housing
- Protection
- Jobs

Low pay

People are leaving to find jobs in other cities
Use a “cycle diagram”

- Splitting Neighborhood
- Pollution (Noise, Air)
- STAKEHOLDER RESISTANCE TO URBAN ROADWAY
- Congestion On Side Streets
Use “insert diagram”

Parental Resistance

Agricultural Pressures

Lack of Female Teachers

CHALLENGES:

GIRLS’ EDUCATION
Use a Four-Cell Table

Attitudes toward Electronic Guide among Division Staff

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Accepting</th>
<th>Resistant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Current Readers</td>
<td>Converted</td>
<td>Hard-Copy Die-Hard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potential Readers</td>
<td>Open-Minded</td>
<td>Unconverted</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Cutting and Pasting

• Cut and paste approaches, manual or computer, can fail to capture the unfolding story of the interview:

• There is a sequence to an interview—especially focus groups—that can help explain the different kinds of talk at the beginning (forming and storming), the middle (performing) and the end (mourning).
• For focus groups, the decision must be made on whether to analyze data across groups or within groups as cases.

• The structured transcript can help organize data in advance.
STRUCTURED TRANSCRIPT

PART ONE: INTRODUCTION

I. Purpose of the Research

II. Research Design and Methodology
PART ONE: INTRODUCTIONS

1. Let’s start by asking you to introduce yourself with:
   – your name—first name only;
   – when you found out you were HIV positive;
   – whether you immediately sought help from a medical provider;
   – and how you got into care.

2. Let’s “popcorn it,” meaning that when you hear something you can relate to, that’s the time for you to join in! Who would like to start us off?

3. Let’s talk about what kind of medical care provider you see the most for your HIV-related care. What kind of provider is that for you?
   ◆ [Get examples—could be a doctor—internist, GP, family doctor, infectious diseases specialist—nurse practitioner, emergency room, etc.]

4. Let’s see a quick show of hands: How many of you are currently in care—that means you have seen a doctor or other medical care provider about HIV-related care at least twice in the last twelve months?

5. Some of you didn’t raise your hands, so you have not seen an HIV-related provider twice in the past twelve months. Tell us about that…

6. We want you to think of that provider you described as your “medical care provider” for this discussion. Now, how often do you have an appointment with your “medical care provider?”—remember, the person you see most for your HIV-related care! *
III. The participants

1. Learning about HIV Positive Status

2. Year Person First Learned HIV+ Status

3. How Long Before Person Sought Medical Care

4. How Person First Got Into Medical Care
5. Reasons for *Not* Being in Care NOW: Those respondents who have *not* seen an HIV-related provider at least twice in the past twelve months gave several reasons:

**GROUP I**
- Had no symptoms
- Heard that resistance can build up to medications
- Reluctance to identify self as HIV positive
- Depression upon learning about HIV status
- Lack of education
- Fear of dying
- Lifestyle issues:
  - Substance abuse
  - Addiction
- Lack of money and insurance to pay for doctors, medicines
- Stigma attached to HIV
- In denial
- Fear of government regulation
- Concerns about privacy issues
- Fear of losing job

Comments:
PART TWO: PERCEPTIONS OF MEDICAL CARE

1. Quality of Medical Care

1. Level of Quality:
   participants were asked to think about the quality of HIV-related medical care they have received during the past twelve months. The most frequent responses centered on:
   
   • ----
   • ----
   
   Comments:

2. Defining Quality of Care:
   For you, what does quality of care MEAN?
   [bullet; record interesting comments]
   Comments:
II. Access to Quality Medical Care

1. Facilitators of Access to Medical Care

What are the *most important things that have made it easier* for people living with HIV/AIDS to ACCESS good medical care?

**Males**

- Knowledge about:
  - Health benefits
  - Where to go for care
- Access to a peer counselors
- Support from partners, family members, and others
- Getting into a support group
- Good doctors
- Self-acceptance AND Self-respect
- Knowing that medicine was “not so bad”
- Understandable information
- Good communication with providers
- Good follow-up from providers
- Consistency in medical care
- Pleasant, friendly medical care providers
REPORT PREPARATION

• Follow structure of interview guide or major themes.

"Do not forget what you have chosen to ignore..."

Gordon Allport
Report Outline

• Executive Summary (maximum four pages)
• Introduction:
  – Purpose of groups.
  – Overview of methodology.
  – Structure of the report.
• The Main Findings (put positives first)
• Conclusions and Recommendations
• Appendices
  – The Nature and Purpose of Focus Groups
  – The Research Approach
  – All Instruments (inc. Moderator’s Guide)
  – Informed Consent Agreement
  – About the Researchers
• Summary statements:
  – Headings and sub-headings based on the moderator's guide.
  – Word tables.
  – Major issues.
  – Comparisons and contrasts.
  – Surprising or unusual findings.
  – Selected quotes.
  – Bullet highlights.
GROUP DIMENSIONS
INTERNATIONAL

Dr. Janet Mancini Billson, Director
Dr. Norman T. London, Co-Director

300 Narragansett Ave.
Barrington, Rhode Island 02806 USA

401-246-0797/0791 or 401-465-6004
fax: 401-246-0791

jmbillson@earthlink.net   normlondon@earthlink.net

www.focusgroupdimensions.com

©Group Dimensions International 2005