

Focus Group Fundamentals

Using Focus Groups in Program
Planning and Evaluation

Learning Objectives

- To understand the definition and purpose of focus groups
- To know when to use focus groups (and when not to!)
- To become familiar with the logistics of planning a focus group
- To become comfortable with conducting a focus group

Focus Groups: Definition and Purpose

- Focus group is a group interview:
 - used to gather information on a specific, focused issue
 - through the group and its members interaction
- Composed of
 - 6- 10 members of a clearly defined target audience
 - individuals with one or more common characteristic **who are...**
 - Guided through a facilitated discussion **by a...**
 - Skilled *moderator*.
- **With the purpose of:**
 - Promoting a nurturing environment to allow for different perceptions, self-disclosure and “piggy-backing” in order to...
 - Elicit reliable data, not just interesting information.

Focus groups are NOT:

- **Decision-making groups**
- **Town meetings**
- **Public forums**
- **Training groups**
- **Hearings**
- **Conflict resolution groups**
- **Rap or buzz groups**
- **Study circles**
- **Therapy groups**

What a focus group can tell you...

Focus groups can tell you:

- **How groups of people think or feel**
- **Greater insight into why certain opinions are held**
- **Help improve planning and design of new programs**
- **Help evaluate existing programs**
- **Produce insights for developing new program strategies**

They cannot tell you:

- **Valid information about individuals**
- **Valid “pre/post” information** (how things have changed over time)
- **Information that you can apply to the general public or community**
- **How much progress an individual has made**

Some Uses of Focus Groups in Evaluation

- Determining program needs
- Program design
- Pilot testing curricula and products
- Developing or testing social marketing messages
- Program improvement
- Participant satisfaction
- Organizational development
- Policy making and testing
- Outcomes (limited, but useful when combined with other outcome measures)

Evaluation purpose	Example of FG study
<u>Formative</u>	<p>In order to develop an innovative healthy living initiative for low-income community member in rural Maine, program staff want to understand what individuals living at or below poverty think about healthy eating and physical activity, including the barriers and facilitators to healthy behaviors.</p> <p>After a series of focus groups with a selected group of community members, the organization develops and pilots a training program that uses meaningful language/messages, provides practical examples and targets salient community issues.</p>
<u>Process</u>	<p>Following the pilot, the program staff held several focus group with participants to try to understand why some members dropped out. The groups explored their satisfaction with and perceptions of the program, the barriers to participation and, how it could be improved to respond to such barriers.</p>
<u>Outcome</u>	<p>During the second year of the project, the project staff interviews 100 participants in ten focus groups to explore the program's impact and to help them make sense of their quantitative survey results. (i.e., how has the program impacted their self-efficacy?)</p>

Advantages & Limitations

Advantages:

- Cost-effective
- Interactions among participants enhance data quality
- Good method for obtaining data from individuals at lower literacy levels
- Shared or divergent views can be quickly assessed
- Flexible
- Results easy to understand, accessible
- Rich data
- Enjoyable to participants

Limitations:

- # of questions restricted
- Facilitating focus groups requires group process skills beyond just asking questions
- Minority perspective easily lost
- Work best when participants do not know each other
- Controversial and highly personal issues are tough topics
- Confidentiality cannot be assured
- Data analysis can be difficult
- Not able to generalize results

Design: The who, what, when, where and how

- Need to plan for:
 - Who should be in focus groups
 - What to ask
 - When to conduct groups
 - Where to conduct groups
 - How many groups to conduct
 - How to analyze, report, and present data



Give yourself 6-8 weeks lead time for a focus group study

Planning Step 1: Conceptualize

- Determine the focus, clarify expectations
 - What is the purpose of the group?
 - What types of information are of particular importance?
 - Who needs/wants the information?
 - How will it be used?
- The answers to these questions will determine:
 - 1) Who needs to be included in the sample
 - 2) How many and what types of groups you need

TIP: One group is not enough. You want to have at least 2 groups **per participant type (i.e., teachers, parents, students)**

Step 2: Select Participants

- Think about who can provide the needed information
- Members of a focus group should have some characteristic that they share in common
 - E.g., women at risk for CVD
- Homogeneity is desirable, but they will also vary in terms of other demographic information
 - E.g., race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, relationship status, age, occupational/organizational role
 - How you address with these factors are dependent on research questions!
 - Such factors may or may not be a problem but thinking about them ahead of time is necessary
 - Depending on your questions to be explored...you may want a diversity of certain factors (e.g., ethnicity) while you may want to avoid other differences (e.g., health insurance status)

Planning Tool: Group Blueprint

- Visual representation of the groups based upon major variables
- Helps determine how variables will interact
- Guides decisions such as exclusion of groups, etc



Tip: Homogeneity of groups is helpful – 1-2 groups per category is typical. Heterogeneity of groups is OK as long as participants can speak about topic, feel comfortable with each other, and are homogeneous on key variables

Group Blueprint Example

Examination of barrier to colorectal screening: Men and women over age 49

Insurance Status	Gender			
	Women		Men	
Insured	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4
Uninsured	Group 5	Group 6	Group 7	Group 8

Include a mix of age, ethnicity and marital status, *note try to avoid including health care providers*

Step 3: Recruitment of groups

- Approach must not bias results but it's OK to use personal contact to *identify* participants
 - Ask members of target sample for ideas (where to hold it, etc)
 - Snowball sampling
- Contact them with at least 2 weeks notice and remind them a day before
- Participants must be adequately screened
- Provide them with an overview of the purpose of the group
- Depending on setting – recruitment conducted by researcher, staff member, or community leaders
- Assure people of confidentiality (if possible)



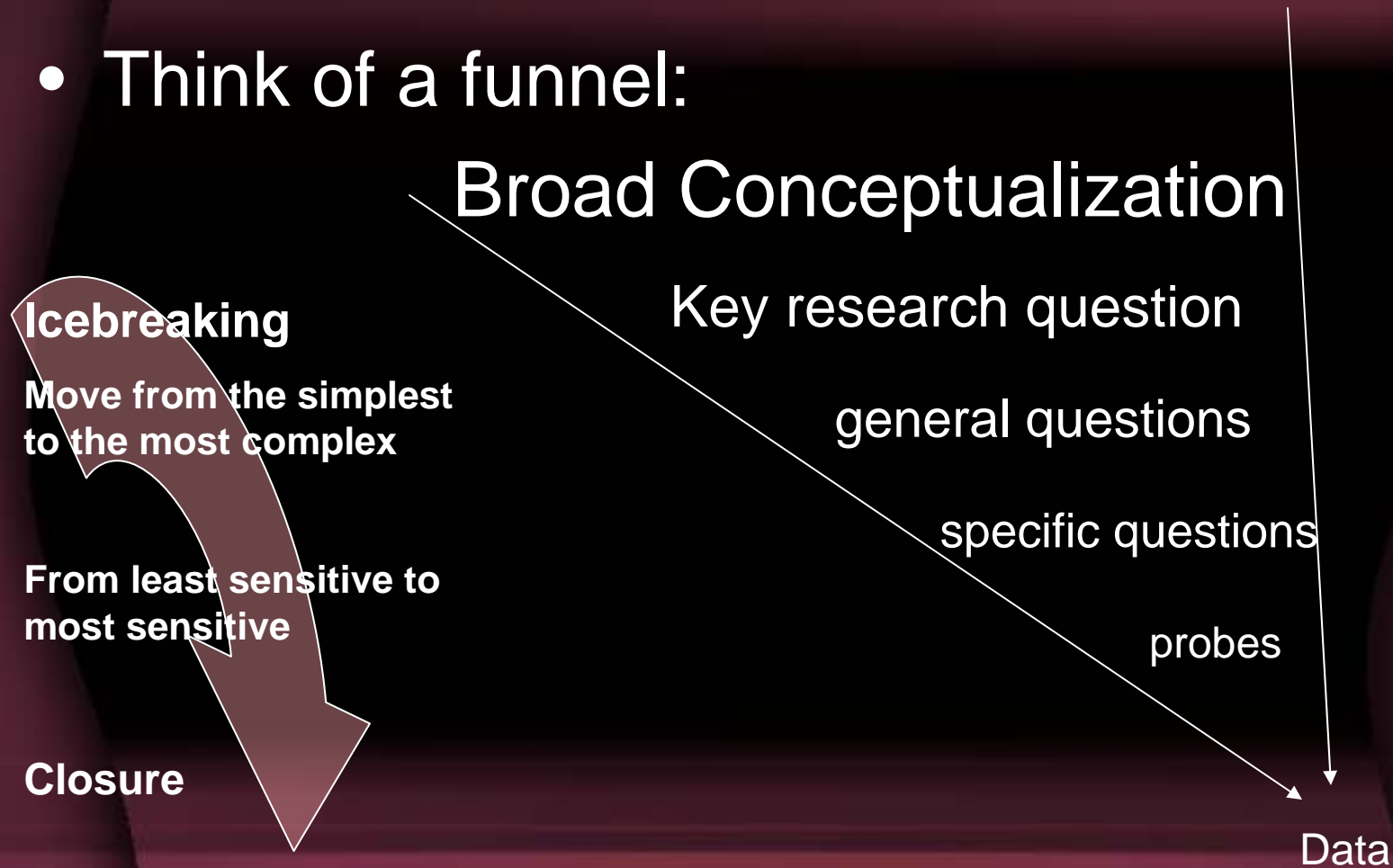
Plan accordingly, this could take longer than you think!

Getting them to Attend...

- Choose a convenient, comfortable location
 - THINK about who is in the group
- Time of day is KEY, choose one that is most convenient for your participants
- You might need to offer transportation or child care
- Refreshments are helpful
- Make sure to remind them a day before

Step 4: Developing Questions

- Think of a funnel:



Structuring your Guide

- Questions should be carefully planned but appear spontaneous (easy, huh?):
 - Use open-ended questions (avoid yes/no questions)
 - Use probing questions
 - Order of questions should seem natural, conversational
 - Keep questions to a minimum of topics (don't try to cover too much!)
 - 5 – 6 key questions
 - End with closure questions
- Pre-test and refine

Guide Structure

- Phase I. Preamble or opening
 - Welcome and explain purpose of focus group
 - Provide ground rules
- Phase II. Introductory questions, ice-breaking
 - Introductions, getting comfortable
 - *Let's start by asking you to introduce yourselves. Please tell us your name and the nature of your involvement in this program*
 - Participants relate their experience and roles to the topic
 - *How did you first learn about the program?*
 - Moderator stimulates group interaction and dialogue on main topic – transition questions, start to go into more-depth
 - *Think back to when you first became involved in the program. What were your first impressions?*

- Phase III. Main Group Discussion
 - Deep responses
 - Broad participation
 - Most time spent here
 - **KEY QUESTIONS ARE ANSWERED!!**
 - *In what ways is your life different because of your participation in the program?*
 - What are the key lessons you would like us to take away from this discussion?
- Phase IV. Closure
 - Moderator summarizes key themes
 - Final comments
 - *Is there anything we should have talked about but didn't?*

Group exercise – Planning a Focus Group

- Get into groups of your choosing
- Using the handout, begin the process of planning a focus group
 - 1) Think about your topic and key research question
 - 2) Who should be in your group(s)?
 - How might you recruit them?
 - 3) Start thinking about the topics for your questions
 - 4) Try to write at least one or two questions

You have 20 minutes....

Step 5: Moderating Overview

- **Effective moderating requires:**
 - Preparation
 - Mental discipline
 - Skill
- **Moderation should:**
 - Provide safety, sensitivity, respect, empathy
- **Moderators should:**
 - Be prepared
 - Listen attentively
 - Believe that everyone has something to add (regardless of education levels, experiences or backgrounds)
 - Show interest in the participants and their environment
 - Interact informally with participants before and after focus group

General Rules of Moderating

- **Control the conversation among group members**
 - We have only 15 minutes left....
 - Let me refocus our discussion...
- **Keep discussion focused ...** In a group of ten, the number of possible interactions between members increases to 3000!
- **Gate-keeping is key – dominating, interrupting, etc. can even happen in a conversation with only 2 people!**

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

We have so many different opinions here...

Moderation, cont'd

- Have a co-moderator to help take notes
- Memorize your questions
- Greet participants before the session. Start small talk
- Record the session (and take notes)
- Pause and Probe
 - Pause 5 seconds after asking the question
 - Pause after a participant speaks before speaking again or using a probe...
 - **PROBE:** A simple question to encourage group members to add or elaborate
 - Would you explain that further? Tell me more about that.

Hints to enhance participation

- Use name-tents and refer to participants by name
- Respond positively and encourage further contributions –AVOID putdowns...
- If a participant goes off topic – invite comments later (*“That will be important later...”*)
- Avoid passing group members over
- Use non-verbal cues: make eye contact with quiet participants – withdraw contact from dominators
- LISTEN!!! Improve listening skills → enhance moderation skills

Active and Reflective Listening



- In focus groups, listening emphasizes the:
 - analytical level
 - comprehension level
- Making meaning of what people are saying
- HINTS for better listening:
 - Suspend judgment
 - Be patient, but help speaker come to closure
 - Restate main ideas to ensure that you have heard them correctly
 - Ask for clarification
 - Paraphrase if necessary to ensure accuracy
 - Be aware of your posture
 - Control distractions
 - Tune into the speaker's nonverbal cues



Be aware of nonverbal cues (e.g., smiling, squinting, arms folded, yawning, watch looking, frowning, squirming, sitting forward or back in seat, head nodding)

Moderation in a nutshell

- Stay focused
- Ask if everyone has had a chance to respond
- POPCORN technique (jump around the table)
- Keep the ball in play – if ball back at you – throw it right back
- The dominators and quiet ones know who they are so it's your job to manage them
- It is **THEIR** time to speak, not **YOURS**
 - Restrain from giving your personal views
 - Don't comment on responses – a simple “ok,” “thank you” “anyone else?” will do
- Re-ask questions if need be – don't rephrase
- Summarize briefly at end of each *section*
- Start and stop *ON TIME*

Other techniques to generate ideas

- Ask participants to write down two or three ideas, then ask them to share
- Use a prototype or mock-ups about which participants can give their opinion
- Use a flip chart, brainstorm as a group
- Use break-outs (2 – 4 people)
- Ask more in-depth “probes”

Group Exercise: Facilitation

Role-Play – 15 minutes

- Each table has 8 cards
- Draw a card – this will be your role to play
- Each facilitator will lead a group of at least 3 people
- The “mock” focus group will be gathering ideas for a Worksite Wellness Initiative
- After 5 minutes pass your card to the person on your right
 - 2 people should have a chance to facilitate...
- If time, we will discuss how it went...



Step 6: Now that you have all that data...

Qualitative data can seem daunting...but stay calm! 😊



First steps...

- Start thinking about analysis while still in the group – Probe if something is unclear, summarize major ideas
- Immediately following the group – review your notes and reflect on what you've just heard. These initial reflections are invaluable later

Later....

- Have tapes transcribed (or do it yourself) Find your own method – (e.g., verbatim or structured)
 - Analyze major emergent themes to your key questions
 - Use your questions as a guide
 - The purpose of the study drives the analysis (or how you organize your results)
 - E.g., bulleted suggestions for a training program may suffice if your goal is simply idea generation

Tips on Data Analysis

- Read each transcript and assign codes (or labels) to each piece of relevant information
 - Can do this on the paper or use the computer
 - Analyze one group at a time, then compare across groups
- Combine the relevant text for each code
 - Cut and paste is a good method for this
 - Put into a table to organize
- Interpret the “codes” into key themes or summary statement
 - Organize into a theme
 - Make sure the themes are not just from 1 or 2 people but shared within and across groups
 - Varying views on issues is just as valuable as consensus
- Find the big ideas
- Share your results with others! They can help you verify your analysis, hunches, thoughts, insights
- Reporting
 - Organize data around initial question
 - Discuss key themes that emerged for each question
 - “Back-up” these statements with key quotes

Nutrition

Questions 1 – 4: Knowledge, social context, norms

The questions in this section were designed primarily to capture the participants' descriptions of and knowledge about healthy eating. In addition, we asked the participants to identify potential contextual, social factors related to their eating habits. The results are presented below.

Question 1: What does eating healthy mean to you?

The most common theme for participants in groups 1 and 2 was the expense of healthy foods. Every participant in these groups agreed that eating healthy was more expensive and often, cost prohibitive. Other themes included eating everything in moderation, watching portions and having the time to eat healthy.

I just think it's awful when I go to Shop and Save and 90% of my grocery bill is fruits and vegetables. And you start thinking about \$1.79 for green beans, I'm thinking, Wow.

Include information on group sample, methods, procedure

* Review results and discuss reporting format with stakeholders

Sample Report

Theme	Group	Quotes
Expensive	1, 2	"Affording to buy them for one thing." (Group 1, female) "Very, very expensive." (Group 1, male) "Everybody's on this kick, the diet kick, the healthy kick. They get the price up there." (Group 2, female) "... And a lot of the farms have gone out of business." (Group 2, male)
Everything in moderation/variety/portions	1, 3	"I think I eat healthy foods we try to have a variety... I do think I eat healthy at home...it's a variety – we might have fried foods but we also have stuff on the grill, all these fruits and vegetables in the house." (Group 1, male) "Balance." (Group 3, female) "Quantities, portion size." (Group 3, male) "No soda; or moderate." (Group 3, female)

QUESTIONS?

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Additional Resources:

Krueger & Casey (2000). *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research*. 3rd ed.
Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications

<http://www.uwex.edu/ces/pdande/evaluation/evalpresentations.html>

<http://www.ca.uky.edu/AgPSD/Focus.pdf>