

## FOCUS GROUPS

"People's attitudes are not necessarily ...reasoned responses to direct questions, but are more likely to be constructed through discussion and interaction"

Bogardus (1926) - social distance

Merton and Kendall (1946) – social effects of mass communication/wartime propaganda

Marketing

Increase in use in applied/health psych research

Increase in use in research involving children



## Focus Groups

### EXPANSION 13.8 Advantages and Limitations of Focus Groups

#### ADVANTAGES

- The natural setting allows people to express opinions/ ideas freely.
- Open expression among members of social groups who are marginalized is encouraged.
- People tend to feel empowered, especially in action-oriented research projects.
- Survey researchers have a window into how people talk about survey topics.
- The interpretation of quantitative survey results is facilitated.
- Participants may query one another and explain their answers to one another.

#### LIMITATIONS

- A "polarization effect" exists (attitudes become more extreme after group discussion).
- Only one or a few topics can be discussed in one focus group session.
- A moderator may unknowingly limit open, free expression of group members.
- Focus groups can produce fewer ideas than individual interviews.
- Focus group studies rarely report all details of study design/procedures.
- Researchers cannot reconcile the differences that arise between individual-only and focus group-context responses.

## FOCUS GROUPS

- ▶ Focus groups are formed to address specific issues
  - ▶ Boundaries of discussion in relation to particular stimulus, event or situation
  - ▶ Not suited for formal hypothesis testing
- ▶ A focus group's main functions:
  - Gather information
    - Capture *content* in form of understandings, perspectives, stories, discourses and experiences
  - Generate *insight*
  - Understand how a group's members reach decisions - *process*
  - Encourage interaction
    - "Sparking" – conversation shifts from moderator to group

## FOCUS GROUPS

Develop and/or test constructs

Check validity of conceptual models

Supplement other more traditional methods

- **But, how to integrate data?**

To invite unique perspective

- Participants can challenge each other in a way researcher can not

To generate conversation worthy of analysis in its own right

## Types of Evidence

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### Essentialist Position

- Truth
- Emphasis on content
- Optimize quantity and quality of content using moderation skills
- Maximize disclosure

## Types of Evidence

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### Social Constructionist Position

- Analyze processes of social interaction
- Reality itself not as important as the way it is constructed, defended, and modified
- Group members empowered to guide flow of discussion
- Exercise in group dynamics

## Focal Stimuli

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### Use theory as focusing vehicle

- But – does this restrict conversation?
- Otherwise – random, offloading?

### Specificity

### Range of Coverage

- transitions

### Depth

## PhotoVoice

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Use camera to record real life experiences and bring them to discussion forum



## Sampling and Recruitment

Random sampling not necessary

Some common characteristics

- Too many differences limit disclosure
- Too many similarities flatten discussion
- Homogenous in gender
  - Assumes focus on content only, rather than process

Be aware of contextual factors

- E.g., in discussing violence, men downplay victimization and exaggerate role as perpetrators
- Women??
- Role of group composition?

## Sampling and Recruitment

Knodel – run separate focus group sessions with homogenous but contrasting sub-groups

- Use sampling criteria to inform the subdivision of groups to create potentially contrasting views and experiences
  - E.g., include tenured and non-tenured faculty members
  - SES, language, culture, religious beliefs, parents, non-parents
- Limit the extent to which the sample is broken up into sub-groups b/c one group needed for every combination of criteria

• E.g.,

	Non-tenured	Tenured
Non-immigrants		
Immigrants		

## Sampling and Recruitment

Average of 9 (6-12) participants per session

- Ease of control and recording
- **Factions**
- **Free-riding**

Over-recruit by 20%

1-2 hour sessions in comfortable, convenient locations

4-6 groups

## Facilitators

Preparedness, people skills

Active process facilitation (content)

- Topic guide

Strategic retraction (process)

Avoid "round robin" exercises (this would be more like conversation with the facilitator rather than conversation among participants)

Creativity

## Recording Data

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Recording  
 Transcribing  
 Capture entire character of discussion

## Analysis of Data

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Content analysis if essentialist

- Mechanical (organizing, subdividing) and Interpretive (meaningful?) components
- IPA (Interpretive phenomenological analysis) and discourse analysis
- Individual versus shared experiences?

Discourse analytic approach if social constructionist

- Grounded theory
  - Identification and integration of categories of meaning
- Analyzing interaction

## Global Focus Groups

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Virtual facilitation

- Real-time, versus on-going

Coordination issues

Absence of social context cues

Can online discussion groups still be considered focus groups?

