

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 BOX 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 unintentionally 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/procedure
- Researchers cannot reconcile the differences that arise between individual-only and focus group-context responses.

Good Questions

How do people make the decision whether to have genetic testing done?

How do people view voluntary childlessness?

How do parents manage the challenge of living with a child with disabilities?

What criteria are essential for hiring a colleague?

How can we solve the issue of gun violence in this country?

What is the best way to increase diversity in our graduate program?

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
 - E.g., what are some reasons for applying for promotion?
 - Generate insight
 - Understand how a group's members reach decisions – **process**
 - How do senior faculty encourage or repress junior faculty? See differences?
 - How do participants effect change in perspectives over the course of a discussion?
 - Encourage interaction
 - "Sparking" – conversation shifts from moderator to group

FOCUS GROUPS

Develop and/or test constructs

- Act nomination substitute? What are reasons for participating in clinical trials? What are good methods for retaining students?

Check validity of conceptual models

- Does one dissenting opinion cause disruption in conformity? Does it matter who dissents?
- Does framing change perspectives on gun control?
- Do participants divulge more or less depending on sex composition of group?

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

Essentialist Position

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

Types of Evidence

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

Use theory as focusing vehicle

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

Specificity

- Range of Coverage
- transitions

Depth

PhotoVoice

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



Sampling and Recruitment

Random sampling not necessary

- Screening – reactivity – when is bias relevant?

Familiarity?

- Long-term consequences
- Confidentiality

Some common characteristics

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

Contextual Factors

- E.g., in discussing violence, men downplay victimization and exaggerate role as perpetrators
 - Women??
 - Role of group composition?
- Conformity
- Groupthink (endorse more extreme views in group than individually)
- Social Desirability
- Associational Context
 - If used to discussing work in that setting, not used to sharing personal details

Status and Power

- First speaker sets tone

Sampling and Recruitment

Knodel – run separate focus group sessions with homogeneous 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, rapport

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

Problematic Silence

Problematic Speech

Recording Data

Recording

Transcribing

Capture entire character of discussion

Analysis of Data

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

Virtual facilitation

- Real-time, versus on-going

Coordination issues

Absence of social context cues

Can online discussion groups still be considered focus groups?



Feedback?

Sensitive info?

Absolute confidentiality (no attributable info)

