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

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? Sex differences?
How do participants effect change in perspectives over the course of a discussion?
Encourage interaction
“Sparking” – conversation shifts from moderator to group

Types of Evidence

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

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 dissent?
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

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

PhotoVoice

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

Focal Stimuli

Use theory as focusing vehicle
- But – does this restrict conversation?
- Otherwise – random, offloading?

Specificity
- Range of Coverage
  - transitions
  - Depth

Contextual Factors
- E.g., in discussing violence, men downplay victimization and exaggerate role as perpetrators
- E.g. in discussing alcohol use, men downplay harm to others
- E.g. in discussing victimization, men downplay role as perpetrator
- Groupthink (endorse more extreme view in group than individually)
- Social Desirability
- Association/Context
- Status and Power
- First speaker sets tone

Sampling and Recruitment
- Random sampling not necessary
- Not as relevant when using theory
- Screening
  - Reactivity
  - When is bias relevant?
- 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

Sampling and Recruitment
- Knodel – run separate focus group sessions with homogeneous but contrasting subgroups
- Use sampling criteria to inform the subdivision of groups to create potentially conflicting 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 subgroups by one group needed for every combination of criteria

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Sampling and Recruitment

- Average of 9 (6-12) participants per session
- Ease of control and recording
- Facilitators
- Free-riding

Over-recruit by 20%
3-2 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, subcategorizing) 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)