Introduction to Focus Groups

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The Focus Group Defined

- Focus groups are in depth qualitative interviews with a small number of carefully selected people brought together to discuss a host of topics.
- Discussion is interactive
- Examples of topics
  - Guide with open-ended questions
  - Help designing survey questions
  - Understanding how to get cooperation from target population

Why a Focus Group?

- Concerned with understanding attitudes rather than measuring them
- Interactive nature allows a discussion to address 'how' and 'why'
- Gain insight into experiences and motivations
- Expense often less than surveys

Caveat

- Analysis is subjective, cannot generalize to the population (more for exploring, not representing)

Planning

- Clear “focus” for group
- Define and locate population dependent on the topic
  (Mixed, all women, all one ethnicity, etc.)
- Hire moderator if needed
- Develop discussion guide, consent form, recruiting and screening materials, decide on incentive type

IRB Submission

- Your IRB submission should include:
  - The (expedited?) IRB form
  - IRB protocol document (a few paragraphs on the study protocol)
  - Relevant appendices
  - Any recruiting / screening materials (flyers, ads, phone screeners, e-mail confirmations, reminder call scripts)
  - Consent form
  - Background questionnaire
  - Receipt form
Developing Questions
- Start with 3 clear goals / objectives. The questions will flow from there.
- Focus groups can be frustrating if you're asking survey questions
- Need reflection: how / why (not yes / no)
- You want people to 'get on a soap box'?
- Funnel approach: begin with broad questions / topics and move to narrow and specific towards the end. Try to place more neutral questions before sensitive ones.
- Follow-ups and probes

Recruitment
- Develop screening / scheduling questionnaire with key questions to screen out ineligible people (under 18 years old), etc.
- Locate population through flyers, list, mailing, phone, on-line list-serves, Craigslist, ads in local newspapers if you are targeting areas
- Set up unique e-mail address and / or voicemail for potential participants to contact you
- E-mail (or mail) confirmation letter with map and contact information soon after scheduling

Scheduling
- Usually schedule 12 to 15 for 8 to show up for group (you can adjust this ratio as you go)
- Make reminder call 2 business days in advance of group (gives you time to possibly replace
- Inform participants up front if they can/cannot bring colleagues, family members, or children.
- Tell them to come 15 minutes early and bring confirmation e-mail

Minimizing Bias
- Avoid grouping people who
  - know each other or
  - who are in a chain of command (supervisors and employees)
- Avoid "Professional Respondents" as much as possible
- When appropriate, matching moderators to participants by gender, race-ethnicity

Setting Up
- Select dates and schedule facility
- Arrange for taping equipment, internet access or conference call capabilities if needed
- Order food/beverages and have incentives ready
- Test audio equipment twice
- Investigate parking options

Ground Rules
- Latecomers
- First names only
- Respect opinions
- Each participant's opinions are necessary
- Speaking one at a time
- Confidentiality
- Voluntary participation
- Neutral moderator
- Address moderator with questions
Drawing out Quiet Participants
• Warm-ups
• Memorize name tents; call by name
• “Bob, what do you think about that?”
• Eye contact
• “Differences in opinion are OK”
• However, not all participants need to answer every question.

Keeping One Person from Dominating
• Explain at the beginning you may have to cut people short
• Hand movements (“stop” position; use other hand to motion someone else)
• Looking away; no eye contact
• “It’s important to hear from everyone”
• “I did hear your point”
• “Thank you so much; I think I’ve heard you”.

Getting Participants Back on Topic
• “Well, let me re-frame that.”
• “OK, we're having a great discussion here. I'm realizing our main purpose here is ...”
• Validate the importance of the comments however.

Maintaining Control
• Be firm about setting expectations in the beginning
• Write them on the board; point and remind
• Stop discussion and ask one person at a time for short responses (1 or 2 words)
• “We’ll take a break” (5 minutes won't hurt anything)

Asking Sensitive Questions
• Trust in and rapport with the moderator is key
• Stress confidentiality at beginning
• Have people write answers down to be gathered anonymously later
• Ask indirectly
  • “Have you or someone you know ever ...?”
  • “Have you ever heard stories about how people ...?”

Special Populations
• Type of day (i.e. late mornings could be less volatile for drug users)
• Allowing lots of response time
• Remind / repeat questions
• Gentle but firm reminders to stay on topic
• Visual aids
  • Writing questions on board and pointing to them
Analysis

- Meet afterwards to discuss observations
- Summary report by each observer / moderator
- Basic demographic questionnaires
- Documenting nonverbal behaviors
  - Video-tape and behavior code from videos
  - Have observer whose sole job is to tally nonverbal behaviors

Analysis, continued

- Transcriptions
  - Identify common themes, patterns
  - Deviations from these patterns
  - Interesting stories

- Software programs for qualitative data

Cost $$$

- Moderator fees ($500 - $1,000 per group)
- Incentives ($25-$75 average)
- Transportation/Parking for participants
- Facility cost (equipment)
- Child care?
- Food costs (~$100)
- Meeting times (include planning, IRB, developing materials)
- Recruitment (staff time, phone, mail, advertising)
- Report writing
- Transcriptions (about $300 per 2-hour group)

Questions?

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