The Art and Science of Interviewing Groups: Focus Group Fundamentals

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Betty J. Kramer, PhD
University of Wisconsin-Madison
School of Social Work
1350 University Ave.
Madison, WI 53593

ejkramer@wisc.edu
Designing the Interview Guide: Asking Questions that Yield Powerful Information

1. Use open-ended questions
   - What did you think of the program?
   - How did you feel about the conference?
   - Where do you get new information?
   - What do you like best about the proposed program?
   - Be cautious of phrases such as "how satisfied" or "to what extent"

2. Avoid dichotomous questions
   - These are questions that can be answered with a yes or no.

3. "Why?" is rarely asked
   - May stimulate a defensive response
   - When you ask "why," people usually respond with attributes or influences. Better to ask what contributed to...what features did you like . . .?

4. Use "think back" questions.
   - Take people back to an experience and not forward to the future.

5. Carefully prepare focus questions
   - Identify potential questions:
     - Five Types of Questions
       1. Opening Question (round robin)
       2. Introductory Question
       3. Transition Questions
       4. Key Questions
       5. Ending Questions (see examples below and in text box)

      All things considered question: This question asks participants to reflect on the entire discussion and then offer their opinions on topics of central importance to the researchers. Example: "Suppose that you had one minute to talk to the President about health care, the topic of today's discussion. What would you say?"

      Summary question: After the brief oral summary, ask: "Is this an adequate summary?"

      Final question: The moderator reviews the purpose of the study and then asks: "Have we missed anything?"

6. Ask uncued questions first, cued questions second
   - Cues are the hints or prompts that help participants recall specific features or details.

7. Consider write down exercises or standardized questions
   - Sentence completion, conceptual mapping

8. Focus the questions.
   - Sequence that goes from general to specific

9. Be cautious of serendipitous questions
   - Consider but be cautious of these. Often best to save for last.

SAMPLE QUESTIONING GUIDE

This questioning route is used in focus groups with parents who have recently been involved with an intensive family therapy program.

Opening:
1. Tell us your name and tell us how long you have been working with (name of program.).

Introductory:
2. How did you learn about the service?

Transition:
3. Think back to when you first became involved with these services. What were your first impressions?
4. What was the start up process like for you?

Key Questions:
5. What was particularly helpful about the services you received?
6. What was particularly frustrating about the services?
7. Is your child any different because he/she received these services? If so, how?
8. Is your family life any different because you received these services? If so, how?

Ending Questions:
9. If you had a chance to give advice to the director of this program, what advice would you give?
10. We want you to help us evaluate these services. We want to know how to improve the service and what difference the service makes to families. Is there anything that we missed? Is there anything you that came to say that you didn’t get a chance to say?

(Krueger & Casey, 2009)
Setting the Scene:
Standard Introduction & Ground Rules
For Focus Group Discussion

The first few moments in focus group discussion are critical. In a brief time the moderator must create a thoughtful, permissive atmosphere, provide the ground rules and set the tone of the discussion. Much of the success of group interviewing can be attributed to the development of this open environment.

The recommended pattern for introducing the group discussion includes:

1. The welcome
2. The overview and topic
3. The ground rules and
4. The opening question.

Here is an example of a typical introduction:

Good evening and welcome to our session today. Thank you for taking the time to join our discussion of __________________. My name is __________________ and I represent University of Wisconsin-Madison. Assisting me is ____________________ also from the UW. We are attempting to gain information about __________________________. We have invited people with similar experiences to share their perceptions and ideas on this topic.

You were selected because you have certain things in common that are of particular interest to us. We are particularly interested in your views because you are representative of others in ______________ (the county, committee, program, etc.). We are relying on you to help us understand ______________ because of your experiences.

Tonight we will be discussing __________________________. This includes __________________________. There are no right or wrong answers but rather differing points of view. Please feel free to share your point of view even if it differs from what others have said.

Before we begin, I would like to share a few ground rules that will help our discussion. Please speak up—only one person should talk at a time. We are tape-recording the session because we don't want to miss any of your comments. If several people are talking at the same time, the tape will get garbled and we'll miss your comments. We will be on a first name basis tonight, and in our later reports there will not be any names attached to comments. You may be assured of complete confidentiality.

Please keep in mind that we're just as interested in negative comments as positive comments, and at times the negative comments are the most helpful.

Our session will last about an hour and a half, and we will not be taking a formal break. Well, let's begin. We've placed name cards on the table in front of you to help us remember each other's names. Let's find out some more about each other by going around the room one at a time. Tell us your name and how long you have been involved with ________________________.

(Archer & Layman, 2009)
Moderator Skills – Tasks

Moderator suitability
- Appears similar to participants
- Adequate knowledge of the topic
- Exercise mild unobtrusive control
- Communicates clearly
- Open and not defensive
- Respects participants and shows it

Selects appropriate location
- Neutral, free from distractions
- Participants facing each other

Is mentally prepared
- Alert and free from distractions
- Has the discipline of listening
- Memorizes questioning route

Uses purposeful small talk
- Create warm and friendly environment
- Observe the participants for seating arrangements

Provide smooth and careful introduction
- Typical introduction
  1. Welcome
  2. Overview and topic
  3. Ground rules
  4. First question

Uses pauses and probes
- 5-second pause
  "Would you explain further?"
  "Would you give an example?"
  "I don't understand."

Facilitates and encourages interactions
- Verbal and nonverbal
- Short verbal responses
  (avoid "that's good," "excellent")

Maintains subtle group control
- Experts
- Dominant talkers
- Shy participants
- Ramblers

Uses appropriate conclusion
- Typical three step conclusion
  1. Summarize with confirmation
  2. Review purpose and ask anything has been missed
  3. Thank and dismiss participants

Assistant Moderator Skills – Tasks

Assistant moderator suitability
- Appears similar to participants
- Is organized and alert
- Keen observation skills and able to synthesize
- Skilled in note taking and audio technology
- Communicates clearly

Takes responsibility for equipment
- Ensure that needed equipment (i.e., recorders, Microphone, tapes, handouts etc.) is available and working

Takes responsibility for refreshments
- Arrange for food (e.g., snacks or meals) and beverages to be available on time.

Arranges the environment - room
- Arrange chairs and table.
- Minimize background noises that would affect audio recording
- Check room temperature and lighting.

Serves as host: Welcomes participants
- Greets participants
- Helps them feel welcome and comfortable.

Sits in designated location
- May sit outside the circle, opposite the moderator and closest to the door.
- Greets late arrivals-finds place for them to sit.

Takes notes throughout the discussion

Operates recording equipment
- Be familiar with the tape recorder.
- Turn over or insert another tape as quietly as possible. Label the cassette tapes.

Does not participate in the discussion
- Talks only if invited by moderator.
- Controls personal non-verbal actions no matter how strongly one feels about an issue.

Asks questions when invited
- At end of the discussion - moderator will invite you to ask questions of amplification/clarification.

Gives an oral summary
- Provides a brief oral summary (about 3 minutes).
- Invites participants to offer additions or corrections to the summary.

Thanks participants and hands out honorariums

Debriefs with moderator
- Discuss overall impressions, notable quotes, key ideas or insights presented, and how this group compared to other groups.

Give feedback on analysis and reports
- Read reports and provide feedback.

(Barbour, 2007; Douglah, 2002; Greenbaum, 2000; Krueger & Casey, 2009).
Analysis Process & Tips

Start while still in the group
- Draw diagram of seating arrangement
- Listen for inconsistent comments and probe for understanding
- Listen for vague or cryptic comments and probe for understanding
- Consider asking each participant a final preference question
- Offer a summary of key questions and seek confirmation

Immediately after the focus group
- Conduct moderator and assistant moderator debriefing
- Type field notes as soon as focus group has ended, include summary

Soon after the focus group--within hours analyze individual focus group
- Make back-up copy of tapes and send tape to transcriber for computer entry if transcript is wanted
- Listen to tape, reviews field notes and reads transcript if available
- Prepare report of the individual focus group in a question-by-question format with amplifying quotes
- Share report for verification with other researchers who were present at the focus group

Later--within days analyze the series of focus groups
- Compare and contrast results by categories of individual focus groups
- Look for emerging themes by question and then overall
- Construct typologies or diagram the analysis
- Describe findings and use quotes to illustrate

Prepare the report
- Consider narrative style versus bulleted style
- Use a few quotes to illustrate
- Sequence could be question by question or by theme
- Share report for verification with other researchers
- Revise and finalize report

Consider the words.
Look at the actual words used by the participants and the meanings of those words. A variety of words and phrases will be used and the analyst will need to determine the degree of similarity between these responses.

Consider the context.
Participant responses were triggered by a stimulus--a question asked by the moderator or a comment from another participant. Examine the context by finding the triggering stimulus and then interpret the comment in light of that environment. The response is interpreted in light of the preceding discussion and also by the tone and intensity of the oral comment.

Consider the internal consistency.
Participants in focus groups change and sometimes even reverse their positions after interaction with others. This phenomenon rarely occurs in individual interviews due to a lack of interaction from other participants. When there is a shift in opinion, the researcher typically traces the flow of the conversation to determine clues that might explain the change.

Consider the frequency or extensiveness of comments.
Some topics are discussed by more participants (extensiveness) and also some comments are made more often (frequency) than others. These topics could be more important or of special interest to participants. Also, consider what wasn't said or received limited attention. Did you expect and not receive comments?
Consider the intensity of the comments.
Occasionally participants talk about a topic with a special intensity or depth of feeling. Sometimes the participants will use words that connote intensity or tell you directly about their strength of feeling. Intensity may be difficult to spot with transcripts alone because intensity is also communicated by the voice tone, speed and emphasis on certain words. Individuals will differ on how they display strength of feeling and for some it will be a speed or excitement in the voice whereas others will speak slowly and deliberately. One of the clues to intensity is when an individual varies their past speaking pattern. For example: non-talkers start speaking, slow speakers talk faster, fast talkers speak slowly, quiet speakers talk louder, etc.

Consider the specificity of responses.
Responses that are specific and based on experiences should be given more weight than responses that are vague and impersonal. To what degree can the respondent provide details when asked a follow up probe? Greater attention is often placed on responses that are in the first person as opposed to hypothetical third person answers. For example, "I feel the new practice is important because I have used it and been satisfied," has more weight than, "These practices are good and people in the area should use them."

Consider the bigger picture.
The researcher can get so close to a multitude of comments and details that trends or ideas that cut across the entire discussion are missed. One of the traps of analysis is not seeing the big ideas. It may be helpful to take a few steps back from the discussions by allowing an extra day for the big ideas to percolate. For example, after finishing the analysis the researcher might set the report aside for a brief period and then jot down the three or four of the most important findings. Assistant moderators or others skilled in qualitative analysis might review the process and verify the big ideas.

References & Resources:


