Focus

Group

Guide

For Public Health Professionals

What is a Focus Group?

A focus group is a group interview. Its purpose is to obtain information about a topic related to how the topic is perceived socially, usually in a peer group.

Focus groups were originally conceived as a marketing research strategy. A product would be presented to a group and they would be asked to give feedback on it. The information was used to alter the product or influence its marketing in order to make it more desirable to the target group.

The focus group is also applicable to public health professionals and others doing social marketing – marketing health or social programs to encourage positive individual and/or community change.

Why use a Focus Group?

Use a focus group when you want to find out not only what people think of your idea, program or product, but what they say to each other in a group, and how the group affects their feelings about the topic.

An individual interview or questionnaire can elicit information about an individual's feelings or opinions. A focus group can add information about what that same person will say in a peer group, and how the group influences his or her feelings on the topic. Group conversation can also jog memories about relevant past experiences or feelings.

For instance, Community Health Education Concepts (CHEC) conducted focus group interviews with students about a school-based family planning clinic. The youths' statements on why they did or did not use the clinic and how they felt about the services were influenced in many ways by the presence of their peers. In our evaluation of the marketing and use of the clinic, it was important to know how students talked with each other about the clinic and what were group perceptions of the services.

Focus groups can provide feedback for existing public health interventions or information on designing new ones. If quantitative data is needed, focus groups can help determine effective wording and content of survey questions.

Hypotheses

Focus group conversations are directed in part by group interaction, but hypotheses, an opening question, and follow-up questions are important to help the moderator keep the discussion on track and gather the desired information.

The hypothesis need not be confirmed—information to the contrary is just as useful. Two to four broadly-stated hypotheses are useful in framing the focus group discussion and report.

Example Hypothesis - Causes of and risk factors for farm injuries: Adolescent focus group participants will be more likely to identify young children and older adults at higher risk than their own cohort, whereas adult farmworkers and clinicians will see adolescents as the highest risk group for agricultural injury.

Example Hypothesis - Use of School-based family planning clinic: Users of reproductive health services will be more likely than Non-Users to be sexually active, and will have initially used the clinic to obtain contraceptives.

Opening Questions

Ideally, the focus group moderator will lead off the discussion with a single all-encompassing question, and then simply prompt and re-direct with follow-up questions as the conversation proceeds.

The opening question should be open, but have enough specifics to allow participants to start the responding conversation.

Example Opening Question - For Users of reproductive health services: I'd like you to talk about using the services here at the Health Center. What have you been the Health Center for? What was your experience was like?

Example Opening Question - For participants in the after school program: I'd like you to talk about what it is like to be in the after school program and about what it was like to talk about the dating and sexuality information you covered in that unit recently?

Follow-up Questions

After asking the opening question, the moderator will prompt and re-direct the conversation as needed with follow-up questions.

Follow-up questions are general, open-ended prompts (“Say more about that”; “How did you feel when that happened?”; “What gave you that impression?” etc.) tailored to the interview subject. The moderator steps in when the conversation has gotten off a useful topic or has stalled (“Earlier, you mentioned something about ____--tell me more about that.”)

The moderator may also need to prompt non-responders (“What did *you* think of that aspect of the program?”), intercede when some one is dominating the conversation (“Let’s hear from some one else about this, did anyone else have a similar experience?”), or stop some one from being cut off (“You were starting to say…?”). If there is persistent conflict among participants, the moderator may need to remind the group that agreement is not necessary, and every opinion is valid.

Remember that some silence is OK! Moments of silence may indicate discomfort, which can be a useful focus group finding. A pause may give participants a chance to think, quieter people a chance to break in, or some one a chance to suggest a new relevant discussion topic. Do not be too quick to prompt.

Setting up the Focus Group

Most researchers consider 8-10 participants an ideal size for a focus group, though 5-12 is considered acceptable. Fewer than five may lead to a thin conversation, and more than 12 can be hard to manage and get input from everyone. Participants are generally similar in age, type of work, gender, or other characteristic relevant to the topic.

Participants in focus groups must give consent for their participation in the group, and focus group facilitators must follow any requirements of the hosting agency. If the purpose of the group is for academic or formal research, this usually requires approval by an Internal Review Board (IRB). Be aware that this process can take weeks to months, and plan accordingly. Sometimes gathering program evaluation information for reports to funders and/or improving services does not require IRB sanctioning. However, all participants must sign a consent form stating at least the following points:

- The conversation will be taped, but all information given is anonymous, and names will not be used in any reports. (If participants are clients of an agency, the consent should state that no staff member will see the original transcripts or hear the tapes.)
- Their participation is entirely voluntary, choosing not to participate will not cause them to be penalized in any way, and they may choose to stop participating at any time.

Incentives are a common device for attracting participation, though sometimes the idea of giving input to improve a program or services important to the individual may be reason enough to participate.(At CHEC, we usually provide a snack or lunch to participants. This is an incentive as well as a way to help participants fit the time into their day.) Existing groups (support groups, classes, etc.) can be used as long as the group is notified in advance and those who do not wish to participate can choose not to attend. Participants commit to being at the meeting in advance to assure adequate participation. It is a good idea to bring a back-up individual interview script to the site, in case there are too few people (under four is probably not worth doing): you can at least collect some information from the people who came, and validate their willingness to participate.

One to hour is generally a good amount of time for a focus group. (Some skilled moderators may opt for slightly longer times, but most groups are talked out by the time an hour has passed, and most people are reluctant to commit more than an hour.) Since this includes some introduction time, this really amounts to 45 or 50 minutes of conversation.

The room is set up so that participants are seated in a cozy, but not cramped, circle. No one should be outside or behind the circle. A tape recorder should be in the middle of the room or table. The room should have a door that can be shut and the participants should feel that their conversation is not audible to others in the building.

How to Conduct a Focus Group

Two people are necessary to conduct a focus group: a moderator and a recorder. A third person sometimes helps set up the group, some one who is familiar with the group (teacher, youth group leader, etc.), but to ensure open and honest responses, that person should leave the room after the moderator and recorder are introduced.

The moderator should sit in the circle, as part of the group, not in front as in a lecture model. The recorder can sit in the circle or slightly off to the side.

The moderator should be skilled at facilitating focus groups. (One way to learn these skills is to participate in groups as a recorder before moderating a group.) They should go over the purpose of the group, guidelines for the discussion and signing of consent forms. They start the discussion with an opening question, and then allow the participants to interact, interceding only to prompt or redirect conversation back to a relevant topic. Near the end of the group, the moderator gives a 20-minute warning to let participants know the time and conversation is nearing an end. At five minutes before the end of the allotted time, ask if anyone has any last thoughts to add. Thank them again for their time and participation. Respect participants by adhering to the stated ending time.

The recorder should monitor the taping of the conversation, including flipping the tape when necessary. They should conduct a test asking each person to say something to make sure the equipment is working and the microphone is properly placed. (They should also have extra batteries/tapes/etc.) The recorder also takes notes on who says what. This will be very important to the transcription. Make a diagram of the group with initials or numbers of participants where they are sitting in the room. Use the number or initial to identify the person in your notes. Each time a new speaker begins to talk, write down their number or initial and the first few words of their statement. (C- I think boys are... J- I agree...) Also take notes on non-verbal communication that the tape will not be able to record. Facial expressions, anyone entering or leaving the room, fidgeting, nodding off, etc. These clues can also give insight in the analysis of the focus group data.

Sample Introductory Script

Introductions:

I am __________. I will be moderating this discussion. ___________ will be recording the discussion and taking notes. (Have each participant introduce him or herself by name.)

Directions for Participants:

Thank you for agreeing to help us with this project. We appreciate your willingness to share your time and expertise. We are with the _________ (agency) and are working on a project to ____________. You are the experts on this topic: the information you give us will help us develop/improve programs to help others.

What you say here is confidential. We are interested in hearing your experiences: your name will not be included in any reports. If you have any questions about this interview or the project after we leave, you can call us at this number, or you can talk to ____________ here, who can get in touch with us.

I want you to talk to each other rather than to me. I will start the conversation out with a question, but after that I will just jump in to get us back on track if we have gotten off the topic, or to bring up something we are interested in that you have not covered. Feel free to disagree with what others have said or give another opinion: the more different ideas we hear, the more information we will have to work with. Again, we are interested in hearing your experiences, how you remember them.

I will let you know when we are near the end of our time. If you have to go to the bathroom, just slip out quietly and come back as quickly as you can. Are there any questions before we begin?

(Introduce Opening Question)

Analysis and Use of Focus Group Results

Transcribe focus group recordings using the notes taken by the recorder as well as the tapes. In the transcription, identify participants by initial, and include notes about non-verbal cues such as laughter and facial expressions.

Qualitative data analysis is time-consuming and takes practice and skill. The transcript is analyzed, usually by a team of researchers or evaluators, first for general overall themes. Then individual quotes relevant to those themes are pulled out and grouped. This can be done physically, with quotes on small pieces of paper or cards, or with qualitative data analysis software.

The focus group report describes the purpose of the focus group, the composition of its members, and results, and conclusions. The results include the overall themes with example quotes given for each theme. Tell readers whether a quote was an exception, a common theme among participants, or typical of certain subgroups of participants (e.g. boys rather than girls, or married people versus singles). Conclusions state the researcher/evaluator’s opinions about whether initial hypotheses were confirmed or found to be incorrect, and what were the most important findings of the focus group process.

Well-conducted, analyzed, and reported focus groups can add rich and unique qualitative data to investigations and projects.