



# Focus Groups



# A Focus Group Is . . .

## What

- Planned discussion
- Specific topic: to obtain perceptions of a defined interest area
- Group interaction - key

# A Focus Group Is . . .

## Where

- In a permissive,  
non-threatening  
environment

# A Focus Group Is . . .

## Who

- Approximately seven to ten people
- With common characteristics relating to discussion topic

# A Focus Group Is . . .

## How

- Conducted by a trained interviewer (moderator, facilitator).



# Focus group – full definition

..a focus group is a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interests in a permissive, non threatening environment.

It is conducted with approximately 7 to 10 people by a skilled interviewer. The discussion is comfortable and often enjoyable for participant as they share their ideas and perceptions.  
(Kreuger 1996)



# Combining Focus Groups with quantitative methods

- Before a quantitative procedure – before constructing a questionnaire
- At the same time as quantitative methods – triangulation
- After quantitative procedures – help in interpretations of questionnaire results



# Combining Focus Groups with other qualitative methods

- Before qualitative interviews – i.e. to gain knowledge and to develop interview guides
- At the same time as other qualitative methods
- After other qualitative methods – interpretation of observations and interview results





# How Many Focus Groups?

- “Theoretical saturation”
  - Same ideas repeating
  - Improves validity
- Practical concerns
  - Cost
  - Time
  - Available participants

Recommendation: Plan for 3 focus groups



## Selecting Participants

- Participants are similar
- General selection rules:
  - Set exact specification
  - Maintain control of the selection process
  - Use the resources of the sponsoring organization in recruiting
  - Beware of bias
  - Develop a pool of eligible participants and then randomly select



# The role of the moderator

- Create an unthreatening environment – information, ethical rules
- Control and steer the discussion
- Encourage everyone to participate – support quiet ones, hold back dominant ones
- Encourage all types of comments – broad range of ideas
- Careful not to make judgments – No right and wrong

# Assistant Moderator/Note taker

- Equipment (!!)
- Refreshments
- Room arrangement
- Taking complete notes
- Incentives
- Debriefing with moderator
- Feedback on analysis

# Logistics and implementation

- Pre-session strategy
  - small talk
  - observe participants
- Arrange name tents
  - dominant talkers beside moderator
  - shy talkers across from moderator

## **Beginning the discussion**

- Welcome
- Overview of topic
- Ground rules
- First question

**Tape recording is highly recommended!!**



# Beginning the Focus Group Discussion

- The first few moments in focus group discussion are critical.
  - Create a thoughtful, permissive atmosphere
  - Provide the ground rules
  - Set the tone
- Recommended introduction pattern:
  - Welcome
  - Overview and topic
  - Ground rules
  - First question



# Managing the Discussion

- Explicitly encourage differing points of view
- Moderating techniques
  - **Pause:** wait 5 seconds after a comment
  - **Probe:** most useful early in session
    - Would you explain further?
    - Would you give me an example of what you mean?
    - Would you say more?
    - Is there anything else?
    - Please describe what you mean.



# Asking Questions That Yield Powerful Information

- Use open-ended questions
- Avoid dichotomous questions
- "Why?" is rarely asked
- Use "think back" questions
- Carefully prepare focus questions
- Ask uncued questions first, cued questions second
- Consider standardized questions





## Ending Questions

- **Summary question**

"Is this an adequate summary?"

- **All things considered question**

Ask participants to reflect on the entire discussion and then offer their positions or opinions

- **Final question**

"Have we missed anything?"



# Begin Analysis Immediately!!!

- Schedule FGs carefully (max: 2/day)
- During session
  - take good notes
  - use summary end question
- Right after session
  - tape record debriefing
- Within 1-2 days
  - use tape to complete notes
  - label & file everything



# When are Focus Groups useful?

- To collect qualitative data
- Determine attitudes, feelings, perceptions and thinking
- Planning, design and evaluation of new programs
- Assess needs, test ideas, improve and evaluate
- At the beginning of large scale research projects
- When there is a understanding gap between different groups of people i.e. professions, age-groups



## Advantages:

- It is a research tool which provides valuable spontaneous information in a short period of time and at relatively low cost.
- Can complement other qualitative techniques
- People get caught up in the spirit of group discussion and may reveal more than they would in a formal interview.
- As discussants, or speaker, ask questions to the groups, new ideas may come out.



# Limitations of Focus group

- The researcher has less control over the interview
- Data can be more difficult to analyze
- Limitation of number of questions
- Requires skilled moderators
- Groups are harder to gather
- May be risky to use FGDs as a single tool.
- In case of very sensitive topics, such as sexual behavior or coping with HIV/ AIDS group members may hesitate to share



# Tips for Creating Good Questions

- Phrase questions in a conversational style
- Be clear and brief
- Be practical: count minutes for reply!!!
- Be sure to establish the context
- Have participants “think back” to specific situations or experiences

And don't forget... write, reduce, review, revise!!