Assessment Workshop: FOCUS GROUPS
Facilitated by: Ellen Meents-DeCaigny
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Using Focus Groups for Assessment

1. Key Points in Developing a Focus Group

- Knowing your goal is crucial
    - Topic guide vs. Interview guide
    - Most of your projects will be driven by interview guides
    - Answer a specific question not necessarily exploring a general topic
- Typical group size is six to ten
    - Enough to stimulate discussion without competing for time
    - The smaller the number the more in-depth understanding of the participants perspective
- Consider randomly selecting participants to eliminate bias (if applicable)
    - Large group of a specific population
    - Nth place sampling easiest
- Most focus groups use purposive sampling based on the goals of the group
- Typical number of groups is three to five
    - Assumes groups are moderately complex and moderately diverse
    - Diminishing return from each additional group (Theoretical Saturation)
- Meeting should take place in public location
- Prepare for 1 to 2 hour focus groups
- Ask usually between 5 and 7 questions

2. Guiding Principles for asking Focus Group Questions

- Conversational
    - Wording of the questions should be direct, forthright, comfortable, and simple
    - Exp. What would it take for this program to get an A?
- Be Clear
    - Short, one dimensional, jargon-free (ACRONYMS)
    - Exp. What way was the program **useful** and **practical**? (Multi-dimensional)
- Seek Help
    - Test questions with people similar to your target audience
- Create an Interview Guide

3. Categories of Questions

- Opening **–** Participants get acquainted and feel connected
- Introductory – Begins discussion topic
- Transition – Moves smoothly and seamlessly to key questions
- Key – Obtains insight on areas of central concern for the study
- Ending – Helps investigators determine where to place emphasis and bring closure to the discussion

4. Sequencing Questions

- Provide background information
- General questions before specifics
- Positive questions before negative questions
- Consistency is important
- Usually questions are not changed

5. Phrasing the Question

- Use open ended questions
  - What did you think of the program?
  - What do you like best about the proposed program?
- Ask Participants to think back
  - "Think back" establishes a context for the response
  - Its good to shift participants from the "here and now" occasionally
  - Think back to the last time you registered fro a course at the university. How were you treated?
- Keep questions simple
  - What are the ingredients that are associated with a healthy lifestyle? Or Describe a healthy lifestyle
- BE cautious about giving examples
  - Gives clues to the type of response you want
  - Krueger (1998) "Mental Ruts"
  - Limits the thinking of the participants
- Probing question
  - Would you explain further?, Can you give me an example? I don't understand.
  - Not everything is worthy of a probe
  - Probe early to set the stage
  - Probe sparingly and consider the usefulness of the information
- Follow-up questions
  - Question links to the proceeding question by logic or reason
  - Generally if/then relationships

    - Exp. What is the major problem in our community? (Then) What are the causes? (And) What should we do about it?
- Unplanned and serendipitous questions
    - Use with caution unplanned questions can change the course of the discussion
    - Best to save those questions for the end

6. **Guiding Principles of Moderating**
    - Be a moderator not a participant
    - Be ready to hear unpleasant views
    - Use your unique skills
    - Anticipate the flow
    - Control your reactions
    - Be comfortable with the pause
    - Listen
    - Probe as needed
    - Ask Questions

7. **Five Keys to Success**
    - To listen not talk
    - To understand, not persuade
    - To soak up, not to teach
    - Ensure confidentiality
    - Verify key points with participants at the end

8. **Tips for selecting a Moderator and Note-Taker**
    - One staff member should moderate
    - One staff member should take notes
    - When possible, the moderator and note taker should not be directly affiliated with programs/services being assessed
    - Ask for support from other offices

9. **Tips for Collecting Data**
    - Take notes and tape record the session (when possible)
    - It is not enough to summarize - high quality notes will give the reader a sense of hearing the conversation
    - Try to capture as much of the participant language as possible
    - Make note of non-verbal communication
    - Tape recordings do not need to be transcribed but allow the note taker to check notes against the words of the participants and also capture important quotes to support analysis