Qualitative Research: Focus Group Method Workshop

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for

ASSOCIATION OF RESEARCH LIBRARIES

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Overview

- Qualitative Research & the Focus Group Method
- Quality Design Considerations & Best Practices
- Moderator & Moderating Considerations
- Online Mode
What is Qualitative Research?

- Qualitative research embraces the idea that
  - Researchers need to go **beyond the obvious & expedient** to reveal plausible interpretations of behavior & attitudes.
  
  - **Context & interconnections** are central to understanding human thought & behavior.
  
  - A response to any single research question lies in a host of **related questions**.
    — One facet of something **adds meaning** to another facet
Qualitative Research – *Unique Attributes*

Absence of absolute “truth”

- Thematic analysis
- Importance of context
  - Importance of meaning
  - Participant-researcher relationship
  - Researcher as instrument

- Unique online & mobile capabilities
- Researcher skill set
- Flexibility of design
- Types of issues & questions

A qualitative research data collection method that involves interviewing two or more people simultaneously with the goal of fostering interaction among participants, resulting in an exchange of experiences and ideas.
Focus Group Method – **Strengths**

**Strengths**

- Participant interaction/group dynamics
  - Stimulates recall
  - Spontaneous ideas/thoughts

- Allows moderator to hear people “think out loud”
  - Hear how/if people change their opinions, the basis by which attitudes shift

- Can foster a supportive environment where people may feel “safe” to reveal personal information

- Efficient way to gather a wide range of attitudes & behavior
Focus Group Method – Limitations

Limitations

- Participant interaction/group dynamics
  - May stifle differing attitudes
  - May stifle highly personal input
  - May lead to “group think”
  - Can be difficult to control

- Inappropriate for certain types of participants, e.g., executives

- Inappropriate for certain types of topics, e.g., highly personal subject matter

- Ethical considerations
  - Confidentiality & anonymity
“If it is agreed that qualitative research can, in fact, serve worthwhile (‘good’) purposes, then logically it would serve those purposes only to the degree that it is done (‘executed’) well…” (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, p.20)
The Total Quality Framework (TQF)

CREDIBILITY
Completeness & accuracy of the data
Scope (Representation: coverage, sampling, sample size, unit nonresponse)
Data Gathering (construct validity, inter-researcher reliability, question-answer validity, internal consistency, researcher bias, researcher-participant interaction, item nonresponse)

ANALYZABILITY
Completeness & accuracy of the analysis & interpretations
Processing (transcriptions, coding)
Verification (peer debriefings, reflexive journal, triangulation, deviant cases)

TRANSPARENCY
Completeness & disclosure in the final document
Reporting (thick descriptions, rich details, enabling the reader to determine applicability – transferability – to other contexts)

DATA COLLECTION ➔ ANALYSIS ➔ REPORTING

USEFULNESS
Ability to do something of value with the outcomes
(Advancing the state of knowledge via new insights, actionable next steps, and/or applicability to other contexts)
- Support or rejection of current hypotheses and/or emergence of new hypotheses
- Validity of the interpretations and recommendations to the extent they are supported by the methodology
- Transferability of the research to the extent that the documentation discloses its strengths and limitations
### TQF-Credibility (Data Collection)

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SCOPE

- **Coverage**
  - *Representativeness* of participants to the population
  - Working with *complete & accurate lists* (if applicable)

- **Sample design**
  - *Purposive* – not convenience or snowball – sampling
  - When working with highly targeted lists
    - *Stratify* the list based on known characteristics
    - Conduct systematic, random *selection across the entire list*

- **Nonresponse**
  - Gaining access to & cooperation from participants.
How Many Focus Groups to Conduct

- **At the design stage**
  - **Location** of the target population
  - **Depth** of discussions
  - **Homogeneity or heterogeneity** of participants
  - **Expected variation** of results
  - **Schedule & resources**
How Many Focus Groups to Conduct (cont.)

- **In the field**
  - Research **objectives** have been met
  - Key **constructs** discussed in all groups
  - Moderator clearly **understands** the outcomes from each discussion
  - **Variations** in the data can be explained
  - Equal **sharing** of attitudes & experiences from all participants
  - Moderator’s **skills** met high quality standards in all groups
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Gaining Cooperation

- Explaining the **purpose** of the study
- **Nonmaterial** incentive, e.g., make things “better”
- **Material** incentive, e.g., cash, charitable contribution
- Effect of identifying the **sponsor**
- Nature of advance **communication**, e.g., personalized
- Tailoring the **recruit** to each individual rather than a one-size-fits-all approach
- Flexibility of **location** (for in-person mode)
- Use of **gatekeepers** for hard-to-reach segments
DATA GATHERING

▪ Are our outcomes valid?

  • Content/information obtained
    — Moderator guide

  • Researcher effects
    — Moderator bias
    — Moderator inconsistency

  • Participant effects
    — Willingness/ability to provide information
The discussion guide is an outline

- Overall flow (organization) of the discussion
- Topics/issues to be covered
- Main questions within each topic
- Follow-up probing questions to be considered

- It is a guide, not a script

- It has a “funnel” 4-stage design – moving the discussion from the general to the specific
A Funnel Approach to Guide Development

**STAGE 1**
Introductions

**STAGE 2**
General information related to the topic

**STAGE 3**
Awareness, attitudes &/or behavior related to particular issues

**STAGE 4**
Attitudes specific to the targeted objective or research question

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Example:
A focus group study for Michigan State U. with faculty & academic staff.

Objective: To provide a deeper, “more inclusive” perspective on the future strategy for the University Outreach & Engagement (UOE) office as a campus-wide resource than would be gained from survey data.
Moderator Bias

- Moderators can negatively impact the credibility of a discussion by
  - Giving *selective attention* to participants.
  - Giving *affirmation* or voicing their own opinion.
  - Losing track of the *group dynamics* & not identifying inconsistencies in participants’ comments.
  - Their physical *appearance*.

- A *reflexive journal* can help identify ways the moderator may have biased the discussion(s).
What do I think I “know” from this/these participants?  
How do I think I “know” it?

Does this knowledge change or support my earlier assumptions or beliefs?  
Will this knowledge change the course of the research, in terms of objectives, methods, line of inquiry; and, if so, how?

What assumptions did I make (what did I assume to be true) about the participant(s)?  
What assumptions did I make about comments/responses to my questions?

How did these assumptions affect or shape the questions I asked, the interjections I made, my listening skills, and/or my behavior?

Values, beliefs, life story, social/economic status

How did my personal values, beliefs, life story, and/or social/economic status affect or shape the questions I asked, the interjections I made, my listening skills, and/or behavior?

How will my emotions or feelings for the participant(s) affect the analytical process and my ability to draw valid interpretations from the data?

Physical environment and logistics  
How did the physical setting/location of the research event alter how I related to the participant(s), and vice versa?

How did the physical setting/location impact data collection?

What were the logistical issues (e.g., in gaining access) that contributed to the “success” or weakness of the outcomes?
Moderator Inconsistency

- **Moderators face a great challenge**: Managing multiple points of view while ensuring full engagement from all participants within a limited time period.

- **Inconsistency in the data can happen if group dynamics are not well-managed**, e.g.,
  - Discussion **guide is not fully covered in all groups** due to domineering participants in some groups that forced the moderator to skip content in the guide.

- Or, key concepts or definitions are **presented differently** from one group to another.
Strong interpersonal qualities are fundamental to being a good moderator.

Interpersonal qualities are essential to building rapport & a trusting group environment.

Rapport & a trusting environment are the bedrock by which participants will share candid thoughts.

A greater willingness to share candid thoughts moves you closer to your objectives, what you need to learn from the discussion.
Moderator Skills

Four Key Moderator Skills

- Highly organized
- A leader
- Open-minded & flexible
- Attentive
**Highly organized**

- **Well-prepared** going into the discussion
  - Participants **confirmed**
  - Facility/platform **set up & materials** ready to go
  - **Guide** finalized & practiced/“**internalized**”

- Ability to **manage time** during the discussion
  - Cover all **topic areas** within the allotted timeframe
  - Maintain focus on core research **objectives**
- **A leader**
  - Can manage the discussion *without being overbearing*
  - **Exhibits control** as necessary, knowing
    - How long to spend on a topic/thread & *when* to move on
    - *What* topic to move on to
    - *How* to speak firmly yet respectfully to manage the flow of discussion
Moderator Skills – *Open-minded & Flexible*

- **Open-minded & flexible**
  - **Objectivity**
    - Particularly important for highly-charged, polarizing topics
  - **Unanticipated events**
    - Not all participants show up for the discussion
    - A participant gets very angry or upset
    - Last-minute changes are made to the guide
  - **Logistics**
    - Discussion room or technology is not set up as requested
    - You have forgotten or misplaced certain materials (e.g., the moderator’s guide, preliminary questionnaire, concepts)
Moderator Skills – Attentive

- **Attentive**
  - “Think on your feet”
    - **Listen** carefully to each participant
  - Remember the **thread** for each participant
    - Are the participant’s comments consistent, are there inconsistencies?
  - Listen carefully to the **interaction** between participants
    - Is the discussion moving in an unanticipated direction?
    - Is the direction of the discussion consistent with the research objectives or far afield (i.e., unimportant to the objectives)?
  - Identify & assess the importance of **unanticipated topics** emerging from a single participant or group interaction
Your goal is to gain a very clear understanding of each participant’s attitudes & behavior related to the topic \textit{as well as} that of the group overall.

- **Verbal** questioning
  - Direct
  - Indirect

- **Nonverbal** techniques
Moderator Techniques – *Direct Questions*

3 C’s of Direct Questions

- **Context**
- **Comparison/contrast**
- **Clarification**
Moderator Techniques – Direct Questions

Questions that give **CONTEXT**
What is your process for exploring scholarly literature relevant to your research?

Questions that give **COMPARISON/CONTRAST**
To what extent, if at all, do you use specific scholarly databases, Google Scholar, the college/university library website, or an all-purpose search engine in your process?

Questions that give **CLARIFICATION**
You mentioned earlier that you use [SOURCES MENTIONED] in your process to explore relevant literature. Are these also the sources you use to stay current with new scholarship in your field?
Moderator Techniques – “Why” Question

- **Evokes rationality.** Researchers are in essence asking participants to justify their attitudes and behavior. In contemplating a justification, participants seek a response that “makes sense” or is otherwise deemed appropriate.

- **Stifles the researcher-participant conversation.** It stops the flow of conversation while the participant considers rational scenarios that hopefully “makes sense.”

- **Clouds question meaning.** “Why is the library important to your research?” is difficult and confusing for the participant compared to “What are the specific aspects of the library that make it important to your research?” which is more straightforward.

- **Asks a different question from the one intended.** The question “Why do you use Google Scholar?” is essentially a different question than “What are the benefits you derive from using Google Scholar compared to other databases?”
Moderator Techniques – *Indirect Questions*

- **Enabling techniques** probe by modifying direct questions
  - **Sentence completion**
    - “I have found that the most visible way to share the findings of my research is __________.”
  - **Word association**
    - What is the first word or words you think of when I say, “library support”?
  - **Storytelling**
    - Tell me about a time when the library staff was most helpful with your literature search.
Moderator Techniques – Nonverbal

- **Silence**, allow for silence after asking a question.

- Be **patient**, allow for “slow talkers,” difficult responses.

- **Actively listen**, e.g., eye contact, head nod, smile.

- Use the **easel/white board** to write
  - Questions/topics from the guide prior to the discussion
  - Participants’ comments

- Be “**approachable***
  - Smile
  - Dress appropriately, wear open collar
Group Dynamics – Participant Types

- **Dominator** – dominates the discussion preventing others from contributing

  - Make it clear in the introduction that it is important to hear from everyone
  - Let participant speak before interjecting, “Thank you for that comment. Let’s hear from someone else.” or “Thank you. Any reactions to David’s comment?” or “Sally, what do you think of the library’s rare books collections?”
Group Dynamics – Participant Types

- **Argumentative/hostile participant** – “an axe to grind”
  - Be sure participants **understand the purpose of the research & how the discussion will be conducted**
  - Like the dominator, **let the participant vent**. Listen politely & do not take the participant’s comments personally
  - Then, “Susan, I hear you. Thank you for your comments. But we need to move on with today’s discussion. Can you and I talk afterwards about your concerns?”
  - There may also be an opportunity to use the participant’s comments to **start a new discussion** – “Jack, you make a good point…”
**Group Dynamics – Participant Types**

- **Shy participant** – quiet, doesn’t make eye contact
  - Make a special effort during introductions to engage the participant via **active listening techniques**.
  - You may need to “**back off**” from the shy participant until sufficient rapport has been established.
  - When the time is “right,” attempt to **engage the participant** – “**John, what do you think about the idea of adding more maps to the special collections?**”
  - If the participant does not want to contribute to the discussion, **do not risk angering or upsetting the participant**.
For whatever reason, participants appear to be in agreement on one or more topics.

Look for inconsistencies:
- Is someone contradicting earlier statements in order to agree with the group? If so, ask about it.

If rapport has been established, paraphrase what you think you are hearing & ask each participant to explain his/her basis for agreement.

Play devil’s advocate:
- “I have heard the opposite from other students. Help me understand how this group thinks differently.”
Group Dynamics – *Straying from the Guide*

- Participants may bring up topic areas that are
  - *Relevant* but earlier than intended per the guide
  - *Not relevant* to the research

- When *relevant* to the research, the moderator may
  - Ask to discuss the topic at a *later time* (per the guide), or
  - If it wouldn’t be too disruptive, choose to *discuss the topic right then and there*.

- When *not relevant* to the discussion or research objective, the moderator can say, “*Thank you for bringing this up. This may be something for us to consider for future discussions.***”
A participant (in an in-person discussion) may begin a **private conversation** with the person sitting in the next seat while the rest of the group is carrying on in discussion.

- **Call for a “time out”** to stop the group discussion. This will also stop the private conversation. Then ask what the two participants were chatting about, emphasizing that you are interested in hearing all comments.

- A “time out” might also be necessary during an online focus group when **participants become distracted**.
Online Mode – Advantages

Advantages

▪ Representation & cooperation
  • **Coverage** & access (geography & population segment)
  • **Convenience** & flexibility for participants
  • Appropriate for **sensitive** topics
  • **Relevant** form of communication, esp., for certain demographics, job type

▪ Data accuracy & depth
  • Added dimension via visual elicitation & **multimedia** – text, video, images
  • Allows for **detailed**, thoughtful responses (async)
  • Mitigates **recall error** (async)

▪ May be efficient use of **resources**
Online Mode – *Potential Drawbacks*

**Potential Drawbacks**

- Managing **engagement** (skills, time)
- Important visual &/or verbal **cues** may be missing (async)
- **Analysis** – Lots of data (in volume & formats)
- **Fraud**, misrepresentation – “Identity is fluid and potentially multiple on the Internet”
- **Security**, confidentiality, anonymity
- Internet **access** & technical glitches
- **Text-based** communication (async)
Online Mode – TQF Credibility Considerations

SCOPE

**Representation**
- Geographic coverage
- Access to pop segment
- Access & comfort with platform technology

**Cooperation**
- Flexibility of location, time, & device
- Requires reminders & instructions

**Validity**
- Triangulation, multi-media responses, & platform capabilities – text, video, image, markup
- Breadth & depth due to days of discussion (async)

DATA GATHERING

**Researcher Effects**
- Platform features help mitigate bias & maintain consistency
- Losing focus while managing engagement

**Participant Effects**
- Mitigates bias due to multiple ways to express thoughts
- Nonresponse – Unwillingness or inability to fully participate due to technology or text-based format (async)
There are many QR-dedicated platforms

- Aha!
- Civicom
- Discuss.io
- FocusVision InterVu
- iTracks
- 20|20 Research
- VisionsLive
Online Mode – *Platform Features*

Platform Features – *Markup*
During the Pleistocene Epoch, over 15-thousand years ago, a huge ice sheet covered the ground all the way from Canada down to the Ohio River. On the edges of this ice sheet, great herds of giant mastodons, wooly mammoths and ground sloths were attracted to the warm salt springs that still bubble from the earth at Big Bone Lick State Park. The salty marsh that attracted these prehistoric visitors sometimes proved to be a fatal attraction. Animals became trapped and perished in what the early pioneers called "jelly ground," leaving skeletons and interesting clues about life in prehistoric Kentucky. The fossilized remains of these prehistoric animals were discovered in 1739 and displayed extensively at museums throughout the world. Notable Americans such as Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin personally examined the fossils, many of which are on display today at Big Bone Lick Museum. The scientific community recognizes the site as the "Birthplace of American Vertebrate Paleontology."
### Online Mode – **Platform Features**

#### Platform Features – **Managing Engagement**

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Online Mode – **Platform Features**

**Platform Features – Observer Chat**

Video / Audio of Participants and Text Interaction between Observers and Moderator

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**Observer Chat (Everyone)**

Garnette: Hi Candace! Great to have you observe the group today. Feel free to provide input and feedback.

Candace: Will Do!

Garnette: Everyone is in a breakout room at the moment. They will be coming back shortly.

Candace: Sounds good. I can't wait to see what people say.

Garnette: Let me know if there is anything you would like me to probe for more information on.

Candace: Do people get the pun I wonder?

Tom: Safety?

Garnette: Yes they did!
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Online Mode – Cooperation

- **Cooperation** needs to be carefully considered
  - **Over recruit** by 2-3
  - **Communicate**
    - When **recruiting** – About the technology you plan to use, participant’s comfort with the format for the subject matter
    - When **confirming** – About the date, needed technology, & tech checks (i.e., instructions), consent, send multiple reminders
Online Mode – Moderator Considerations

- The necessary **moderator qualities & skills** are similar in the off-line and online modes
  - Ability to build **rapport** & a trusting environment
  - Highly **organized**
  - Ability to effectively lead & **manage** the discussion
  - Open minded and **flexible**
  - **Attentive**
But moderator **techniques** need to be adjusted for online

- Participants are typically **less interactive** compared to in-person
  — Moderator will need to call on participants to respond

- Participants may be unclear how to **interject a comment**
  — Moderator needs a “rule” for engagement, e.g., hand raising

- Maintaining a **flow of conversation** (rather than just asking a series of questions) may be more difficult
  — Moderator can add exercises or stimuli to the guide – or ask participants to show something – to maintain energy & engagement
Online Mode – Moderator Techniques cont.

• Participants may be **distracted**, need to step away
  — Allow participants to turn off video

• Moderator can’t rely on **eye contact** or “feel” of the group
  — Moderator can add a “response exercise,” e.g., poll

• Moderator needs to be **more direct**
  — e.g., Asking how the participant is feeling in response to a comment or stimulus, asking explicit probing questions

• Moderator needs to stay very focused on **maintaining contact** with the participants
https://www.researchdesignreview.com
https://www.researchdesignreview.com/tag/total-quality-framework/
https://researchdesignreview.com/tag/focus-groups/
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