Focus Groups in Qualitative Research

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What is a focus group?

- The term is used to describe a variety of procedures in which data is collected in a small group setting
- "Focus group" refers to two defining features:
  - Interview is conducted in a *group* and *focused* on one or small number of related issues

General guidelines

- Includes from 4-12 participants (usually 8-12)
  - 4-6 participants sometimes called "mini-focus group
- Has a trained moderator/facilitator who asks questions, promotes interaction, and keeps discussion on track
- Interaction of participants is encouraged
  - Note that in some group discussion procedures (e.g., brainstorming, nominal group technique) discussion is not allowed, at least in certain phases
  - This is a key feature and a major reason to use FGs (i.e., if you want to observe interaction)
- Questioning is semi-structured
  - Open-ended questions are primarily used
  - May vary from requests for broad reactions to topic (e.g., "Talk about your boss") to directive questions ("What do you like about...?"
- Permissive atmosphere is created, which encourages comfort, reducing inhibitions, difference of opinion
- Consensus is *explored*, but no pressure to reach consensus (unlike many creative problems solving procedures that encourage prioritizing)
  - Expression of differences (if they exist) are encouraged
- Participants are homogeneous on some relevant dimension (e.g., type of job) and (often) unacquainted
  - Goal of these features is to encourage uninhibited interaction

History

- Robert Merton and colleagues were pioneers in early 40s, using FGs to explore audience response to radio programs
  - Had groups listen, push red button for negative response, green button for positive response, then discuss responses afterwards
- From 40s through 70s, FGs mostly used in marketing research
  - Similar to Merton's use: audience responded to and then discussed products and ads
  - Often with one-way mirror and video cameras to study responses

Why use a focus group in management research?

- Calder specified three general purposes
  - Exploratory: generate hypotheses
  - Clinical: assess participants' unconscious motivations
  - *Phenomenological: assess participants' meanings and explanations for phenomena*
- For data collection

  - As a stand-alone method
  - As part of a triangulated strategy in conjunction with other methods
  - Particularly to get at
    - shared and non-shared meanings/accounts
    - reasons for differences
    - the process of sense-making and idea development
- To guide or refine other data collection instruments
  - e.g., to ensure that the issues addressed on a survey or interview guide are representative of the issues of importance to the group
  - e.g., to refine phrasing of questions
- To refine tentative conclusions and assess their validity

Advantages and disadvantages, compared to interviews and observation

- Focus groups may be seen as a compromise between the advantages of each
  - In observing natural interaction, they're stronger than individual interviews, weaker than observation
    - Since setting is somewhat artificial, removed from everyday experience
    - However, certain phenomena (e.g., discussion of certain issues) may be difficult to observe (e.g., risk factors associated w/ heart attacks in M&S)
- In-depth probing of informant knowledge: stronger than observation, weaker than interview
  - However, unlike interviews, FGs enable you to see how informants use, refine knowledge, are influenced by exposure to different perspectives
- FGs are also quicker, in that they allow interaction with more participants in less time

Planning the focus group

- Like most resarch, careful planning is essential
  - contact, logistics, physical setting, incentives for participation
- Ensure alignment with objectives, RQs
  - Are FGs appropriate for the RQs?
  - Is observing interaction on relevant issues necessary to answer RQ?
  - Does the RQ focus on differences in perspectives of groups?
- Choosing participants
  - Smaller number if more depth
  - Ask for more than you need (in case of no-shows)
  - Demographics: What differences are meaningful to RQs or to participants?
- Creating an interview guide
  - usually 10-12 questions
  - Initial questions designed to establish commonality, comfortable (non-threatening) interaction
  - Last questions often designed to (either):
    - Assess final positions,
    - Assess accuracy or acceptability of moderator's summary, or
    - Check for what's not been addressed ("Anything else?")