

# Conducting Focus Groups & Interviews

## Advantages

- Make connection with participants
- Rich descriptive data
- Balance flexibility and intentionality

## Challenges

- Transcription
- Focus group dynamics
- Sensitive nature of topics
- Size of groups

### Types of Interview Questions:

- Experience and behavior
- Opinion/values questions
- Feeling questions
- Knowledge questions
- Sensory questions
- Background/Demographic questions

### Question Examples:

- Tell me about a time when . . .
- Give me an example of . . .
- Tell me more about that . . .
- What was it like for you when . . .

### Questions to Avoid:

- Multiple questions – ex: How do you feel about the instructors, the assignments, and the schedule of classes?
- Leading questions – ex: What emotional problems have you had since losing your job?
- Yes-or-no questions – ex: Do you like the program? Has returning to school been difficult?

### Alternative Focus Group Techniques:

- Free Association
- Storytelling
- Collages
- Drawing
- Word Bubbles

### Thoughts for conducting interviews/focus groups:

1. Consider how you will select the participants as well as the approximate number.
2. Be mindful of your participants' time.
3. Consider whether or not you will offer incentives for participation.
4. Ensure that participants are properly screened (if necessary) prior to beginning the interview. Nothing is worse than setting up a time/place only to find out the participant does not actually meet criteria for the study!
5. Pay close attention to the interview site and possible distractions since this can greatly affect the quality of the data you collect.

## MANAGING THE CONVERSATION

### Strategies for Dealing with Challenging Participants

Not everyone participates equally in a conversation, and that's alright. But we do want to ensure that everyone has an opportunity to participate in the focus group. Some moderators include a statement during the introduction that establishes expectations for their role in balancing the conversation:

*From past experience in groups like this, we know that some people talk a lot, and some people don't say much. It is important that we hear from all of you because you've had different experiences. So if you are talking a lot, I may interrupt you, and if you aren't saying much, I may call on you. If I do, please don't feel bad about it. It is just my way of making sure we get through all the questions and that everyone has a chance to talk.*

### The Conversation Hog

- Try to seat dominant talkers next to the facilitator
- Stop making eye contact after 20-30 seconds of talking
- Turn body slightly away from participant and toward others
- Interjecting may be necessary:
  - *Thank you, Bob. Are there others of you who would like to comment on this question?*
  - *Okay, that's one point of view. Does anyone feel differently?*
- Remain tactful and kind, because harsh comments may inhibit sharing by others in the group

### The Self-Appointed Expert

- Avoid opening questions that highlight participants' levels of experience or social position
- Emphasize the fact that everyone is an expert and all participants have valuable perspectives that need to be expressed
- Employ the same non-verbal cues that you would with any dominant talker

### The Rambler

- Employ the same non-verbal cues that you would with any dominant talker
- Interjecting may be necessary:
  - *Excuse me, Sally, but I think we might be getting a bit off track. Can you, in one sentence, tell me how this relates back to our question of...?"*
  - *In the interest of time, I'd like to hear from some others on this issue.*

### The Derailer

- Employ the same non-verbal cues that you would with any dominant talker
- Acknowledge that they appear to have a specific agenda, that it has been recorded in the notes, and that for the remainder of the time you would like them to focus on the questions being asked or give others an opportunity to also be heard

### The Quiet One

- Try to seat directly across from facilitator to maximize eye contact
- Use eye contact to encourage them to speak
- Call on the respondent by name:
  - *Tom, I don't want to leave you out of the conversation. What do you think?*
  - *Tom, you look like you have something to say about that.*

### The Agreeable Deflector

- Use neutral probes to elicit additional information (1-2 probes is probably max)
  - *Would you describe what you mean?*
  - *Would you give us an example of what you mean?*
- Remind participants of the value of differing points of view
- Ask if anyone has a different experience or other point of view