Qualitative Research Methods: A Data Collector's Field Guide

Module 4

# Focus Groups



FAMILY HEALTH INTERNATIONAL

# Focus Groups

Focus groups are a qualitative data collection method effective in helping researchers learn the social norms of a community or subgroup, as well as the range of perspectives that exist within that community or subgroup. Focus groups are often used to determine what service or product a particular population wants or would like to have, such as in marketing studies. Because focus groups seek to illuminate group opinion, the method is especially well suited for sociobehavioral research that will be used to develop and measure services that meet the needs of a given population.

This module presents the fundamentals of using focus groups in applied qualitative research. It includes:

- Overview of Focus Groups
- Ethical Guidelines
- Logistics of Focus Groups
- How to Be an Effective Moderator
- How to Be an Effective Note-taker
- Suggested Readings
- Case Study Samples
- Steps in Moderating a Focus Group
- Steps in Note-taking for a Focus Group
- Focus Group Checklist

## Overview of Focus Groups

### What is a focus group?

A focus group is a qualitative data collection method in which one or two researchers and several participants meet as a group to discuss a given research topic. These sessions are usually tape-recorded, and sometimes videotaped. One researcher (the moderator) leads the discussion by asking participants to respond to open-ended questions – that is, questions that require an in-depth response rather than a single phrase or simple "yes" or "no" answer. A second researcher (the note-taker) takes detailed notes on the discussion. A principal advantage of focus groups is that they yield a large amount of information over a relatively short period of time. They are also effective for accessing a broad range of views on a specific topic, as opposed to achieving group consensus. Focus groups are not the best method for acquiring information on highly personal or socially sensitive topics; one-on-one interviews are better-suited for such topics. Table 7, page 52, summarizes some of the strengths of focus groups in comparison to in-depth interviews.

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**Table 7. Strengths of focus groups versus in-depth interviews**

| | Appropriate for | Strength of method |
|---|---|---|
| **Focus groups** | Identifying group norms<br>Eliciting opinions about group norms<br>Discovering variety within a population | Elicits information on a range of norms and opinions in a short time<br>Group dynamic stimulates conversation, reactions |
| **Interviews** | Eliciting individual experiences, opinions, feelings<br>Addressing sensitive topics | Elicits in-depth responses, with nuances and contradictions<br>Gets at interpretive perspective, i.e., the connections and relationships a person sees between particular events, phenomena, and beliefs |

## What can we learn from focus groups?

Focus groups are especially effective for capturing information about social norms and the variety of opinions or views within a population. The richness of focus group data emerges from the group dynamic and from the diversity of the group. Participants influence each other through their presence and their reactions to what other people say. Because not everyone will have the same views and experiences – because of differences in age, gender, education, access to resources, and other factors – many different viewpoints will likely be expressed by participants.

Focus group data can also capture idiosyncratic experiences and views of individuals, but it is preferable to collect that data during one-on-one interviews, rather than in a group environment.

Within a study, focus groups are typically one method among many that are used to create a complete picture of how a given issue affects a community of people. Focus groups contribute to this broad understanding by providing well-grounded data on social and cultural norms, the pervasiveness of these norms within the community, and people's opinions about their own values.

## What form do focus group data take?

Focus group data consist of tape recordings, transcripts of those recordings, the moderator's and note-taker's notes from the discussion, and notes from the debriefing session held after the focus group. Notes are initially handwritten in field notebooks, on the focus group guide, or on special forms. After data collection, all handwritten notes are expanded into more complete narratives, then entered into a computer.

## How are focus group data used?

Typed transcripts are the most utilized form of focus group data. During the data analysis phase of the research, after data collection, transcripts are coded according to participants' responses to each question and/or to the most salient themes emerging across the set of focus groups.

The moderator's and note-taker's expanded focus group notes (from the discussion and the debriefing session) are used:

- by moderators during the focus group discussions, to remind themselves of questions they need to go back to, where they need more complete information, etc.
- during debriefing sessions with other field staff and investigators
- during transcription of focus group recordings, to clarify and add contextual details to what participants have said

## Ethical Guidelines

### How do I explain the purpose of the focus group?

Sometimes participants or potential participants ask focus group recruiters or facilitators to answer questions about the research or the topic of discussion before the focus group session begins. In this event, it is important not to talk about the topic in any detail, to avoid influencing what people say during the discussion.

You should, however, explain the purpose of the focus group as it fits within the broader context of the research study. In doing so, it is important that you be truthful and straightforward about the objectives of the study and the anticipated risks and benefits to the individual participant and the community. You should also identify the organizations involved in the study. Do not create false expectations in order to obtain a participant's cooperation. Be cautious about making even small promises, such as saying a staff member can give a participant a ride home after the focus group, unless you know for certain that they can be fulfilled.

Participants may ask you questions that you prefer to answer at the end of the focus group – for example, if your response would risk influencing the discussion. Write them on a board or large piece of paper to ensure that you come back to them at the end.

### What should I say about confidentiality?

Maintaining confidentiality requires special precautions and emphasis in focus groups. For this reason, it is often preferable to avoid using participants' names during the focus group. In such instances, you should implement a system of name substitution before the session begins. For example, you could assign participants numbers, letters, or pseudonyms for the moderator and note-taker to use on the seating charts and to identify speakers in their notes.

Although the moderator and note-taker should assure participants that everything they share in the focus group will be treated as confidential by project staff, they cannot promise that other members of the focus group will do the same. It is therefore important to emphasize both at the beginning and end of each session that participants should respect each other's privacy and anonymity. Once outside the focus group setting, they should not reveal the identities of other participants nor indicate who made specific comments during the discussion.

If any participants express concern about their privacy during the focus group, assure them that you have taken special precautions to protect participants' identities and the data. You should understand the procedures outlined in the study protocol for protecting participants' privacy and

> **Obtaining informed consent with focus group participants**
>
> 1. For less literate populations, read the consent form aloud to the participant. The form must be written and read in a language the participant understands. Speak slowly. Ask the participant often whether he or she understands what you are saying, and explain any terms or sentences in your own words as necessary. For more literate populations, give the participant time to read the form. Then review each section with him or her and check for comprehension.
> 2. Once you are satisfied that the participant fully understands the research and his or her rights as a participant, ask for his or her consent to be in the focus group.
> 3. If the study protocol requires you to obtain written consent, ask the participants to sign the consent form. After the participants sign the forms, sign them yourself.
> 4. If the study protocol requires you to obtain oral consent, you should sign the consent form to document that you have obtained oral consent from these participants. Protocols may require that oral informed consent be tape-recorded in full or in part, before and sometimes again after the focus group.
> 5. Offer the participant a copy of the informed consent form, written in a language the participant understands. This document should always list the contact information for study officials to whom questions about the research may be directed.

be able to explain those steps clearly. You should also provide participants with the contact information of study officials whom they can call for more specific information. (If consent forms are being used, these contacts will appear on the forms.)

If, after these assurances, any participants are still uncomfortable and wish to withdraw from the focus group, the moderator should respectfully acknowledge and support their right to do so and thank them for their time and effort. The note-taker should then take the person or persons to the side, preferably to another room, provide them with the full reimbursement (if there is one), and again thank them for their time. The moderator should then redirect the focus group back to the discussion, taking care to avoid personal commentary.

### How should informed consent be handled for a focus group?

Before beginning the focus group, you must obtain informed consent in accordance with the procedures of the specific study protocol. Typically, you will obtain informed consent individually with each participant before the person joins the group. As noted in the Qualitative Research Methods Overview module, page 10, the overarching purpose of informed consent procedures is to ensure that participants understand that they are not for any reason obligated to participate in the focus group, nor are they required to answer any questions they do not wish to answer. Informed consent for focus groups is often oral and may be tape-recorded in full or in part, but some studies may require written informed consent. It is also essential to provide participants with information on how the focus group data will be used and who will have access to it.

## Logistics of Focus Groups

### Who conducts the focus group?

Focus groups work best when conducted by two researchers, often called facilitators. These facilitators have both individual and shared responsibilities. One person acts as the moderator of the discussion and the other is the note-taker. Both facilitators should be prepared to perform either role, in case it becomes necessary to switch roles during the focus group.

## What does the moderator do?

Typical duties of the moderator are described in detail in this module's section on How to Be an Effective Moderator, page 59, and the specific scope of the moderator's role will be clarified for every project. In general, however, moderators are responsible for leading the focus group discussion, posing all questions specified in the focus group question guide, keeping the discussion on track, and encouraging all participants to contribute.

## What does the note-taker do?

Typical duties of the note-taker are described in detail in this module's section on How to Be an Effective Note-taker, page 69, and the specific scope of the note-taker's role will be clarified for every project. In general, however, note-takers are responsible for taking detailed notes of the discussion, even though focus group sessions are typically tape-recorded. These notes serve as supplementary documentation of the discussion, documentation of the note-taker's observations, and as a backup in the event that the recording system fails. Note-takers may also be responsible for tasks related to recording (operating the tape recorder, labeling the cassette tapes, and taking appropriate security measures to protect the tapes once the session is over). Finally, note-takers typically facilitate the logistics of participant arrivals and departures, such as early withdrawal and escort to the restroom.

## What other duties do focus group facilitators have?

Depending on the protocol, focus groups facilitators may also be responsible for fulfilling the roles, tasks, and obligations in the list that follows. If these tasks are not their responsibility, facilitators should know who is performing them and be assured that everything has taken place according to plan. Tasks include:

- *Recruiting participants* according to the recruitment strategy outlined in the work plan.
- *Reminding recruits of the focus group time and place.* If the particularities of local public transport could affect participants' punctuality or their accessibility to the focus group location, facilitators may need to arrange to transport participants from an agreed location. In that case they would need to consider how to maintain confidentiality – for example, by using an unmarked car or finding out whether participants are sensitive about being transported as a group.
- *Answering any advance questions* recruits may have, without providing information in excess. To do this, you should be knowledgeable about the research topic. If you do not know the answer to a question, tell the participant that you will research the matter and respond later. Maintain your credibility by following up on such promises.
- *Being reliable.* Participants will be more likely to take the focus group discussion seriously if you demonstrate your own commitment to the discussion. Arrive on time, with the recording equipment, focus group guide, and notebooks, and be prepared to either moderate or document the focus group, according to your role. Satisfy any commitments you make to participants, such as fact-finding and confidentiality, to the greatest possible extent.

## How many people are necessary for a focus group?

The qualitative work plan for each site will specify the approximate number of participants to be recruited for each focus group, as well as the number of focus groups required for the project. A typical number of participants is eight to ten people, with a maximum of 12.

In most cases, more than the target number of people will be recruited because it is common for people who are scheduled to participate not to show up. If more than 12 people come to the session, one of the facilitators should explain to the last arrivals that the group is already full, provide them with the full reimbursement (if there is one), offer refreshments (if applicable), and thank them for coming. If a participant is especially disappointed at not being able to participate in the focus group, the facilitator can try to schedule him or her for another group or for an individual interview, if feasible.

## How do I recruit people for the focus group?

Recruiting participants is often a challenge for a variety of reasons, including the often delicate nature of working with vulnerable populations; possible stigmatization of participants resulting from affiliation with the study; the high mobility of some populations; participants' concerns about confidentiality; and misinformation, lack of information, fear, or rumors about the study.

The work plan for each site should outline policies and strategies for recruiting participants. However, it is common for realities in the field to necessitate creative revision of these strategies. When developing a recruitment strategy, it can be helpful to consult with local people who are active in or have connections to the study population. They may be able to offer ideas about how to gain access to the population, how best to approach people, and possible obstacles to recruitment.

## How do I identify individual participants in my notes?

In most cases you should identify individual participants by some convention other than their real names. Once all participants have arrived, assign them each a number, letter, or pseudonym and provide them with the materials to display their "nametag" clearly. Both the moderator and note-taker should draw a seating chart and label it. This will be of benefit as you take notes during the focus group and expand them later. The sample seating chart on page 70 uses numbers to identify participants. The same numbers are used to identify which participant responds to the question (e.g., "R10") in the sample notes on page 71 and the sample transcript on page 78.

## Where should I conduct the focus group?

Whenever possible, focus groups should be conducted in a location affording a maximum degree of privacy to participants. This decision should be made by someone who is familiar with the local area and cultural context.

## How should I present myself to focus group participants?

Dress is an important part of making a good impression on participants, as are initial remarks, manner of speaking, and body language. All of these should be appropriate for the specific culture and setting and convey respect for the participants. Cell phones should be turned off and placed out of view so as not to imply that the participants' testimony is of secondary importance.

### How long should the focus group last?

Focus group sessions usually last from one to two hours and should include time for participants to take a break. If possible, they should be scheduled no closer than 90 minutes apart to allow time for each staff member to take a break, participate in a debriefing session, and prepare for the next focus group. As you begin the focus group, consider how much time you are likely to have and set realistic goals for covering all of the questions in the focus group guide. Keep track of which questions have been addressed, and be ready to redirect the conversation if necessary in order to cover all questions. It is a good idea to record the start and end times of each focus group.

### What if nonparticipants want to observe the focus group?

It is preferable that no outside observers (that is, someone who is neither a participant nor a facilitator) be present during the focus group. Their presence might inhibit participants from speaking freely. Therefore, even stakeholders should be strongly discouraged from attending the discussion.

### What if a participant does not stay for the entire discussion?

Participation in focus groups is always voluntary. Participants who do not want to remain for the duration of the discussion, for any reason, should be reminded of the confidentiality agreement, thanked for their participation, and reimbursed, if applicable. In such a situation, the note-taker can take the participant aside to handle departure, and the moderator can take notes until the note-taker returns.

### What if the focus group is interrupted?

If a focus group discussion is interrupted by someone outside the group, take any steps necessary to protect the confidentiality of participants. At the least, this will involve stopping the discussion temporarily and explaining the private nature of the discussion to the person(s) responsible for the interruption. Again, the note-taker can take the interrupter outside or aside to explain the need for privacy.

### What if I want to refer a participant for help?

If, during the discussion, a participant appears to be distressed about information shared, the moderator or note-taker might consider approaching the person after the focus group and offering to refer him or her for help as appropriate or desired.

### How should I handle reimbursements?

Policies on reimbursements vary from study to study. In accordance with local practices and with approval from relevant ethics committees, some studies provide financial compensation to participants. When this is the case, researchers should not refer to this compensation as "payment" or "incentive" for participation. Instead, use the term "reimbursement," which acknowledges that the participant has taken time away from other obligations and may have incurred expenses, such as transportation or child care, to meet with you.

Note that all participants should be provided with the full reimbursement sum, regardless of whether they complete the focus group. This includes:

- participants who arrive for the focus group and decide not to participate after all
- participants who choose not to answer some questions
- participants who turn out to have no knowledge about the focus group topic

Procedures for documenting reimbursement dispersal are study-specific and usually outlined in the informed consent form. Commonly, in studies that require only verbal (and not written) informed consent, the facilitator signs a statement certifying that each participant was given the cash reimbursement. In studies that require written informed consent, participants may be asked to sign a receipt.

Note that accounting personnel are not always aware of the confidentiality issues related to research studies. The local principal investigator should be prepared to inform accounting personnel if the established reimbursement procedures risk compromising confidentiality, so that alternative procedures may be created. These procedures should be worked out by the on-site principal investigator before the focus group begins and must comply with the ethics committee's approved protocol.

### How do I document the focus group?

Documenting the focus group consists of making tape recordings and writing notes. The note-taker is responsible for taking detailed notes of the discussion and often for operating the recording equipment. The moderator takes brief notes. Both facilitators should take the opportunity to expand their notes during the debriefing session after the focus group, and/or generate a set of debriefing notes.

### What if the recording equipment fails?

Facilitators should practice operating the recording equipment before conducting any focus groups and test it just before each session. If the equipment fails, the note-taker's detailed notes, supplemented by the moderator's brief notes, will serve as backup documentation. It is important to check for equipment failure immediately after the focus group and to expand notes as soon as possible if a failure has occurred.

### What should I do with my focus group recordings and notes?

The module on Data Documentation and Management, page 83, provides detailed guidelines for handling your recordings and notes. To summarize briefly, the procedure consists of labeling all materials according to the established convention, placing them together in one large envelope, expanding all notes and entering them into computer files, transcribing the tapes, and entering the transcripts into computer files. Facilitators should check the typed transcripts for accuracy if the transcription is done by other staff members.

### When should I share my data with the research team?

At the local level, the field staff should debrief each other, as well as the local site coordinator, principal investigator, etc., about the focus groups they have conducted immediately after focus groups, at staff meetings, or according to other arrangements as appropriate.

## How to Be an Effective Moderator

The moderator is responsible for moving the discussion of each focus group along and for keeping it on topic. A good moderator should be skilled at creating a discussion in which he or she participates very little. In this regard, the moderator should stress the value of participants' contributions to the study and emphasize the moderator's own role as a learner rather than a teacher. Moderators also need to be adept at directing the discussion at a pace that allows all questions in the guide to be addressed thoroughly. Having these skills depends on your familiarity with the focus group guide, flexibility, ability to monitor and gauge the tone of the discussion, and ability to make quick judgments about when and how to interject.

### How do I prepare for a focus group?

An effective focus group facilitator knows the research material well and is practiced in the method. As a first step in preparing for a focus group, become thoroughly familiar with the informed consent documents. Although you will read the form to participants, you should also be able to explain its contents in your own words. Be prepared to address any questions participants may have about the content of the consent form, the terminology used, whom to contact for further information, the purpose of the research, and so on.

Next, the moderator should become thoroughly familiar with the focus group guide. Being familiar with the guide allows the moderator to be more engaged during the discussion, to adhere to the guide more easily should the conversation begin to deviate from the questions, and to focus on encouraging equal participation from group members rather than on locating the questions in the guide. It is important to understand the purpose behind each question and how it fits within the overall research aims. It may be necessary to rephrase questions that are unclear to participants, or to spontaneously think of follow-up questions and probes. You should be able to recognize when participants have adequately addressed the intent of the question, when a response or responses contain information that applies to a separate question or to a scripted follow-up question, and when or which probes are needed to elicit additional information from individuals or from the group as a whole. Being familiar with the guide also enables you to use it flexibly, taking advantage of natural shifts in the discussion. It is advisable to review the focus group guide before every session. If multiple versions of a guide have been developed, make sure you are using the correct version.

It is also helpful to practice moderating in pilot or mock focus groups. Mock sessions, in which you use the focus group guide and other project staff play the role of participants, allow you to test your knowledge of the questions, your ability to probe and to keep the discussion on track, and your flexibility. (Some suggested exercises are provided in the Exercises for Training Data Collectors appendix, page 93.) You might also conduct practice focus groups with people in the community who are not participating in the study. In that case, however, you must obtain informed consent, just as you would from someone who was participating in the study. Informal practice sessions – such as with friends, family, or support staff or other researchers – do not require informed consent.

Another important step in preparing for a focus group is to label all materials that you will use during the focus group – including notebooks and the focus group guide – according to a previously established convention for archiving the data. All items should be labeled identically. (See the Tools for Data Managers appendix, page 105, for an example of archival conventions.)

Finally, it is very helpful to review debriefing forms from previous focus groups before conducting your own. Debriefing information will provide insights into questions that need more probing, topics that were not well covered in previous groups, and other useful information.

### How do I encourage positive group dynamics?

Efforts by the moderator to cultivate a positive atmosphere for the focus group can foster a productive and rewarding discussion that is rich in data. Ideally, participants will express a wide range of perspectives and some points of disagreement, controversy, or debate, rather than consensus. Of course, participants may all agree on a given issue, but you should make certain that this is the case by encouraging participation of all those in attendance.

A crucial skill for moderating a productive focus group is the ability to build rapport with and among participants from the start of the discussion. This involves quickly establishing a positive, relaxed, and mutually respectful group dynamic. If participants do not feel comfortable expressing personal opinions and experiences during the discussion, the focus group will not achieve its objectives.

Specific techniques for building positive rapport are culturally specific; words and behaviors that would put someone of one culture at ease may be offensive in another. Therefore, if you are unfamiliar with the context, it is a good idea to ask colleagues who have qualitative research experience in the local culture for ideas about establishing rapport. Table 8 outlines some suggestions for establishing and maintaining good rapport in any culture, and Table 9 suggests some ground rules that can help ensure that the focus group goes smoothly.

**Table 8. Behavioral techniques for building rapport in focus groups**

| Fostering a relaxed, positive atmosphere | Establishing mutual respect among researchers and group members |
|---|---|
| Be friendly | Set ground rules at the beginning of the focus group |
| Smile | Have a humble attitude |
| Make eye contact with participants (if culturally appropriate) | Do not be patronizing, for example, by unnecessarily repeating everything participants say or "talking down" to them |
| Speak in a pleasant tone of voice | Do not scold or berate participants for the content of their responses or for personal characteristics |
| Use relaxed body language | Do not allow any participants to berate others in the group |
| Incorporate humor where appropriate | Do not coerce or cajole participants into responding to a question or responding in a certain way |
| Be patient and do not rush participants to respond | |

## How should I handle participants' different personalities and emotional states?

Every focus group you conduct will be a unique experience, not only because what the participants say will be different each time, but also because the group dynamics will vary according to the personalities and moods of the people who attend. Some groups will have a gregarious tone to them, and others a serious or quiet tone. Whatever the case, your goal should be to keep the discussion moving along, with as many people participating as possible. If someone presents an obstacle to meeting this goal, such as by dominating the discussion, expressing a negative attitude, or having an emotional outburst, you need to know how to reduce that person's impact on the group and to steer the discussion in a more productive direction.

In an interview setting, the interviewer might try to adjust his or her style to the character of the individual participant. In contrast, in focus groups, the moderator has to maneuver the conversation among too many individuals for this technique to be practical. Following are suggestions for handling common personality traits and emotional states within the focus group context.

*If a participant is …*

**Talkative.** If a participant holds the floor for too long, you may need to intervene. You could start by thanking the person for his or her contribution and inviting others to comment on what the person said or to provide alternative views. You might also try encouraging a talkative person to make only one point at a time. You could, for example, step in as the person is introducing a new topic and encourage the group to discuss the first point. You might also use body language to discourage someone from talking for an excessive amount of time, such as decreasing your eye contact with the talkative participant and increasing eye contact with other participants.

### Table 9. Suggested ground rules for building rapport in focus groups

Taking time to establish ground rules at the start of the focus group can save the moderator (and sometimes the entire project staff) much grief later on. All parties will be much better positioned if participants are kind to one another during the focus group and if they respect one another's privacy afterward. Laying ground rules is your opportunity to address which behaviors are desirable and which are unacceptable.

Suggested ground rules include:

- Ask participants not to discuss details of the content of the discussion once they leave the focus group site.
- Ask participants to respect other group members by not divulging what any participant says during the discussion or the identity of any individual present once they leave the focus group site. Remind them that in the informed consent agreement, you have pledged not to disclose anything concerning their participation in the study with anyone other than the research team.
- Ask that participants speak one at a time. A moderator may prefer to have participants speak in turn according to seating, in the order in which participants indicate having something to say, or according to no particular arrangement. Speaking one at a time lets everyone hear and react to each contribution; it also makes the note-taker's job easier.
- Ask participants to treat one another with respect. This means not doing anything that could cause another member of the group to feel uncomfortable, such as singling out an individual for criticism, name-calling, or making pejorative comments about any given contribution. All participants need to feel free to express their opinions without fear of being attacked by the group.

**Prone to interrupt.** One strategy is to remind the group that one of the ground rules of the focus group is to refrain from interrupting other people. You might also thank the individual and suggest returning to his or her point after the first speaker's contribution has been completed.

**Aggressive.** You might first remind participants of the ground rule that no one is permitted to insult or personally attack anyone else. You could also try to decrease the level of aggression by calmly asking the individual in question to explain the reasoning behind the stated negative opinion and then involving the rest of the group in the discussion.

**Shy.** Some participants will be hesitant to join an ongoing debate or discussion. You could offer them a safer opportunity to speak by pausing the discussion and asking whether anyone else has something to contribute. You could also pose questions directly to individuals who have been especially quiet, thank them afterward for sharing their experience, and encourage them with body language, such as smiling.

**Angry.** If a participant becomes angry, try to soften the level of emotion by acknowledging that the issues at hand are indeed sensitive or controversial. If you consider it preferable to address the person's anger, steer the conversation toward the idea that it is the issue that is upsetting rather than another participant.

**Crying.** If a participant begins to cry, it is up to the moderator to gauge whether it is better to address the issue directly or not call attention to the person. If you decide to discuss it, you might ask the person to identify the source of his or her distress. When the source is an issue related to the content of the discussion, ask the group if other people feel emotional as well. If the issue has to do with group dynamics, react accordingly, reminding people of the ground rule of mutual respect, and so on. In some situations, the note-taker might take the crying participant aside to resolve the situation.

**Tired.** If more than one participant begins to appear tired or irritable, it may be time to take a break. Encourage people to get up and move around, use the restroom, and have refreshments (if provided).

## What are some techniques for effective questioning?

Proficiency in techniques for asking effective questions is especially important for leading focus groups in which participants speak liberally. This involves keeping track of which questions have and have not been asked and answered; knowing how to phrase questions that encourage participants to provide elaborate, detailed (rather than brief) responses; and asking questions that elicit the participant's own views and experiences as opposed to reflecting the convictions of the moderator. Relevant techniques include asking one question at a time, verifying unclear responses, and using follow-ups and probes. You can remain neutral by asking open-ended questions and avoiding leading questions.

## What does it mean to ask one question at a time?

Be careful not to pose several questions at once without giving the participant an opportunity to respond to individual questions. This is especially apt to happen when questions are grouped together in the focus group guide. When it does happen, participants are unlikely to address each of the questions in full. A better technique for getting answers to all the questions is to ask them one at a time, which gives you the opportunity to provide clarification or to rephrase each question. If participants do not understand the question or seem to have misinterpreted it, rephrase it. If the question still does not stimulate a productive discussion, let it go and move on to the next question. You might also try reintroducing the question later if there is an appropriate time.

### How do I stay neutral?

Refrain from inserting your own biases by paraphrasing what participants have said or making evaluative comments like "good" or "that's interesting." Instead, repeat their comments in their own words, provide positive reinforcement by looking interested, and using neutral comments and probes, such as, "I see" and "Any other thoughts about this?" You may also address questions to the group, such as, "What do you [the group] think about what [name or identifier] just said?"

### How do I verify unclear responses?

If you are unsure that you accurately heard what a participant said, verify the response before going to the next question. You might say, for example, "I'm sorry, could you repeat what you just said? I didn't quite hear you." Be careful not to imply that the response was somehow incorrect. Alternatively, you might use the mirroring technique, where you reflect the participant's answer back to him or her in question form. For instance, you might say, "So you told her that you think being in that study is a sign of having tuberculosis?"

### How do I ask open-ended questions?

Closed-ended questions are questions that may be answered with a single word or phrase, or with a "yes" or "no" response. An example is, "Have you ever used the family planning services at xxxx clinic?" It is difficult to glean much insight from these brief responses, because they usually do not indicate "why" or "how." A better technique for getting in-depth answers is to phrase questions as open-ended – that is, requiring more than a "yes" or "no" response. Open-ended questions set no limits on the range or length of responses, instead giving participants the opportunity to explain their position, feelings, or experiences. An example is, "What were your experiences using the family planning services at xxxx clinic?"

### What are leading questions and how do I avoid them?

Leading questions are questions worded in such as way as to influence participants' responses – in other words, questions that lead participants along a particular line of thinking. Asking leading questions risks conveying your own value judgments and biases and imposing a perspective on participants. When asked a leading question, participants are likely to provide a response that accords with it simply because they are reluctant to contradict the moderator. To avoid this, ask neutral questions free of preconceptions. Table 10, page 64, provides a comparison of leading and unbiased questions.

### What are follow-up questions and how do I use them?

Follow-up questions (or sub-questions) are intended to ensure that participants provide the complete set of information each main question was designed to elicit. They prompt participants to speak on some aspect that was not mentioned in response to the original question. Sub-questions are often provided in the focus group guide under each main question or topic, as cues for the

**Table 10. Unbiased versus leading questions**

| Unbiased question | Leading question |
|---|---|
| "I've heard some people in this community say that most smart people use a condom, and others say that they know smart people who don't use condoms. What do you think?" | "Most smart people in this community always use condoms, don't they?" |
| "Why did you want to use the female condom?" Potential follow-up question: "What were you trying to protect yourself from?" | "Was one reason that you wanted to use the female condom because you were trying to prevent sexually transmitted infections?" |
| "What do you think stops people in the school community from talking about sex and condoms?" | "Do you think people in the school community don't talk about sex and condoms because they might be stigmatized and seen as loose?" |

moderator. If a participant answers a sub-question in the initial response, it is not necessary to then pose that sub-question. Engaged listening will help you decide which follow-up questions to ask.

## What are probes and how do I use them?

Probes are neutral questions, phrases, sounds, and even gestures moderators can use in focus groups to encourage participants to elaborate upon their answers and explain why or how. Suggestions for probes are sometimes outlined in the focus group guide, but they are also left to the discretion of the moderator. The particular probe used depends on the response given by the individual participant. Probing therefore requires the moderator to listen carefully to participants and to engage actively with what they say.

You should use probes when a participant's response or contribution is brief or unclear, when a participant or the group seems to be waiting for a reaction from you before continuing to speak, or when a person appears to have more information on the subject. As much as possible, probe for more detail about what the participant thinks, feels, and experiences in relationship to the research topic. Do not assume that you understand the intent of a brief response. Instead, use probes to further or confirm your understanding and to encourage more explanation. Be careful, however, not to use probes to excess. Balance knowing when to probe with knowing when to move on to the next question. If responses are repetitive or lacking in substance, or if the participant becomes annoyed or upset about lingering on a particular topic, it is best to advance to the next question.

Probing is probably the most important technique in focus group moderation, but also the hardest to master. It requires practice, thorough knowledge of the focus group guide and research objectives, and a solid understanding of what kind of information each question is intended to elicit. It also requires patience and sensitivity, effective time management, and good interpersonal skills.

## What are indirect probes and how do I use them?

Indirect probes are verbal and physical expressions that indicate that the moderator is listening attentively. It is important to note that the appropriateness and effectiveness of indirect probes vary from culture to culture. The box on this page offers examples of effective probes, including both direct questions and indirect probes.

**Examples of effective probes**

**Direct questions:**
- "What do you mean when you say …?"
- "Why do you think …?"
- "How did this happen?"
- "How did you feel about …?"
- "What happened then?"
- "Can you tell me more?"
- "Can you please elaborate?"
- "I'm not sure I understand X. … Would you explain that to me?"
- "How did you handle X?"
- "How did X affect you?"
- "Can you give me an example of X?"

**Indirect probes:**
- Neutral verbal expressions such as "uh huh," "interesting," and "I see"
- Verbal expressions of empathy, such as, "I can see why you say that was difficult for you"
- Mirroring technique, or repeating what the participant said, such as, "So you were 19 when you had your first child …"
- Culturally appropriate body language or gestures, such as nodding in acknowledgment

## How do I manage the focus group discussion?

Moderating a focus group discussion is something of an art. The moderator must be vigilant about covering all the material in the focus group guide, while also ensuring that the entire group participates and that a wide range of perspectives has been solicited and expressed. The role requires you to be fully engaged in the discussion, yet refrain from participating too much in it. You must know how and when to interject and intervene, yet not interfere.

*Facilitating group discussion*

- *Open with a general comment* and wait for a response. For example, you might say, "Family planning can be a complex issue …" or "What do you think about the issue that has brought us here today?" Alternatively, you might address the first question to an individual who seems comfortable speaking in front of the group. The first question in the focus group guide is usually designed to engage participants in discussion and may not actually be intended to yield important data.
- *Invite a wide range of commentary* by asking participants for experiences, thoughts, and definitions. Also ask what others like them or others in their families think, say, or do that may be similar or different. If everyone appears to agree about a particular issue, verify this by inquiring, "Are there any other points of view?" or "Does anyone see it differently?"
- *Use silence to your advantage.* Give participants a chance to think about the questions, and do not be afraid to wait until someone speaks. In some cultures, people are comfortable with silence; in others, they are not. In the latter case, allowing for pauses could be advantageous, because eventually someone would feel compelled to speak to end the silence.
- *Limit your own participation* once the discussion begins. After going through the introductory material, set the stage by posing a question and then letting the participants react to it for a few minutes with limited direction from you. Do not provide commentary on each contribution or take on the role of counselor or educator. The moderator's role is to elicit information, not dispense it.

*Covering the material in the guide*

Moderators are responsible for asking all of the questions in the focus group guide. A good way to keep track of the questions addressed is to check them off in the guide. This is especially practical when you ask questions in a different order than they appear in the guide and when a response applies to a different or additional question than the one you initially presented.

Checking off the questions also makes it easier to return to questions that were skipped in the natural progression of the discussion.

Although the guide is designed to help the discussion flow easily, you usually do not have to follow the exact order of questions. Try to cover each question thoroughly, because each question is designed to elicit specific information. Probe each topic as necessary to get sufficient information. Make notes in the discussion guide as a reminder to return to a question or address an issue further. Take advantage of natural shifts in the discussion as they relate to questions in the focus group guide. If an individual's comments do not pertain to the research focus, look for opportunities to steer the conversation back to the topic.

**A good moderator . . .**
- Shows flexibility
- Shows sensitivity
- Has a sense of humor
- Links ideas together
- Encourages participation from everyone

**A good moderator tries not to . . .**
- Dictate the course of discussion
- Lose control over the conversation
- Judge comments or be an "expert"
- Inform or educate *during* the group
- Lead a question and answer session

During the focus group discussion, moderators should not correct participants. It is important in qualitative data collection to elicit all the participants' perspectives, including misinformation. If inaccurate information is stated during the focus group, make a note to correct the misinformation but only after the focus group discussion is over. Afterward, however, the moderator should provide correct factual information. For example, if, during the focus group, participants mention that there are no HIV counseling services in the area, and the moderator knows this not to be true, he or she can provide referral information after the discussion ends. Or if someone mentions the belief that HIV can be transmitted by touching something an infected person has touched, you should explain how HIV is spread.

*Encouraging maximum participation*

Try to include as many participants as possible in the discussion, keeping track of their participation by marking the seating chart each time individual participants contribute to the discussion. Techniques for encouraging full participation include referring back to a reticent participant's previous comments if the current conversation relates it. For example, you might say, "What you are describing sounds very similar to (or different from) what Beverly was talking about earlier. What do you think about this, Beverly?" You might also direct one of the questions from the focus group guide to a particular participant. After he or she responds, ask whether others agree or disagree. Also, encourage participants to discuss the questions with each other rather than address the moderator. Finally, remain in charge. Do not allow a pattern to develop in which everyone orients toward one particular participant and his or her comments.

## How do I take field notes?

Focus group moderators write brief notes on the focus guide or in a notebook as they lead the discussion. Moderators necessarily take less detailed notes than focus group note-takers because their primary responsibility is to engage in and lead the discussion with participants. (See the Case Study Sample, page 68.) However, focus group moderators must be prepared to take more detailed notes in the event that the note-taker has to leave the room. It can also be helpful to have a backup note-taker available for this purpose. To facilitate note-taking and later transcription, either the moderator or the participant should state the person's identification (ID) number or pseudonym before they respond or contribute.

## How do I expand my field notes?

Key skills for qualitative researchers include the ability to take notes quickly and with discretion, and then to expand those notes into rich descriptions. Moderators should expand their notes as soon as possible after each focus group session. Expanding notes involves transforming shorthand into prose or a narrative and elaborating on your initial observations. Expanded notes are also called "field notes," and they are written directly into your field notebook or a computer file. Begin each notebook entry with the date, time, place, and type of data collection event. Eventually, all expanded notes should be typed into computer files using a specific format as discussed in the Tools for Data Managers appendix, page 105.

Expanding your notes involves the following:

- *Scheduling time to expand your notes,* preferably within 24 hours from the focus group session. This requires discipline, because it is easy to tell yourself that you will do it later. A good time to expand your notes is just before or after the focus group debriefing session. If you cannot expand your notes the same day as the focus group, try to do so first thing the next morning. This makes it less likely that you will forget what an abbreviation stands for or that you will have trouble remembering what you meant. Also, the sooner you review your notes, the greater the chance that you will remember other things that you had not written down. Good note-taking often triggers the memory, but with the passage of time, this opportunity is lost.
- *Expanding your shorthand into sentences* so that anyone can read and understand your notes. Use a separate page in your field notebook to expand the notes you wrote in the focus group guide. Depending on circumstances, you might be able to expand and type your notes into a computer file at the same time.
- *Composing a descriptive narrative from your shorthand and key words.* A good technique for expanding your notes is to write a descriptive narrative describing what happened and what you learned. This narrative may be the actual document you produce as your expanded notes. Be sure that you create separate, clearly labeled sections to report your objective observations versus your interpretations and personal comments.
- *Identifying questions for follow-up.* Write down questions about participant responses or comments that need further consideration or follow-up, issues to pursue, new information, etc. This continual adjustment of the research questions and techniques is part of the iterative nature of qualitative research, because answers to some research questions lead naturally to others. In some cases, your questions might be answered through further clarification from a participant.

FOCUS GROUPS

CASE STUDY

## Sample Focus Group Guide

**Family Planning Users Focus Group Guide**

moderator copy

Archival #: CCFGFPU01

Site: Capital City Hospital

Moderator: Sandrine B.

Number of participants: 10

Note-taker: Marie K.

Date: 15-6-04

Transcriber: Marie K

Start: ~~15~~ 15: 30

End: 16:50

**Excerpt from page 4:**

(Question 4)

Have you ever gone to get your preferred method of contraception at the family planning clinic and found it was unavailable?

Yes

Price

ch methods

(4a) If so, what did the clinic staff tell you?

leave

no advice

(4b) Did they ever try to give you a different method? Please explain what they said.

Yes

no sex!

(4c) Did they ever refer you to a different clinic? Please explain what they said.

No

*See page 71 for the note-taker's sample notes from the same focus group.*

- *Reviewing your expanded notes and adding any final comments.* If you have not typed your expanded notes directly into a computer file, add any additional comments on the same page or on a separate page. If you use additional pages, be sure to clearly cross-reference new notes with the original pages in case another staff member types your notes.

## How to Be an Effective Note-taker

Note-takers play just as important a role in focus groups as moderators. Their efforts, focused largely on documentation, are essential in providing a record that can be used for immediate review of the focus group data, improvement of the focus group guide, and improvement of the facilitator's skills. Ideally, note-takers should have the versatility to conduct the focus group in the moderator's stead should the need arise, but their expertise draws for the most part on a different set of skills. These skills include mastery of an efficient system for taking copious notes and the ability to quickly identify and take down individual quotes that capture the spirit of a given point. Effective note-takers should also be careful observers of verbal and nonverbal behaviors and be discreet about note-taking as they operate the recording equipment. They should be able to synthesize their observations to serve as the basis for immediate discussion following each focus group session. Gaining proficiency in these areas rests on preparation for the focus group, developing effective note-taking techniques, and learning how to lead a productive debriefing session.

### How do I prepare for the focus group?

An effective note-taker knows the research material well and is practiced in the method. As a first step in preparing for a focus group, become thoroughly familiar with the focus group guide for several reasons. First, as mentioned previously, you might need to conduct the focus group at the last minute or perhaps to fill in temporarily during a portion of the discussion. Thorough knowledge of the guide will enable you to step seamlessly into this role. Knowing the guide thoroughly is also essential for being able to track the questions as you take notes. You want to be able to easily identify and indicate the question to which a noted response pertains. Develop a system of shorthand for associating answers with questions that will be simple for you to expand when completing your notes later on. Finally, if you know the guide well, you are more likely to understand the purpose behind each question, which will enable you to identify quotations that capture the essence of an answer or stance.

Another step in preparing for a focus group is to practice taking notes in a pilot or mock focus group. Practicing note-taking is best done in cooperation with a moderator who is also rehearsing his or her part in a focus group. Mock sessions, in which the moderator uses the actual or real focus group guide and other project staff play the role of participants, allows you to test your knowledge of the questions and note-taking skills. (Some suggested exercises are provided in the Exercises for Training Data Collectors appendix, page 93.) You and the moderator might also conduct practice focus groups with people in the community who are not participating in the study. In that case, however, you must obtain informed consent, just as you would from someone who was participating in the study. Informal practice sessions – such as with friends, family, or support staff or other researchers – do not require informed consent.

*continued on page 72*

CASE STUDY

## Sample Note-Taker Form with Field Notes

**Focus Group Note-Taker Form**

Archival #: CCFGFPU01

Date: 15-6-04

Start time: 15:30

End time: 16:50

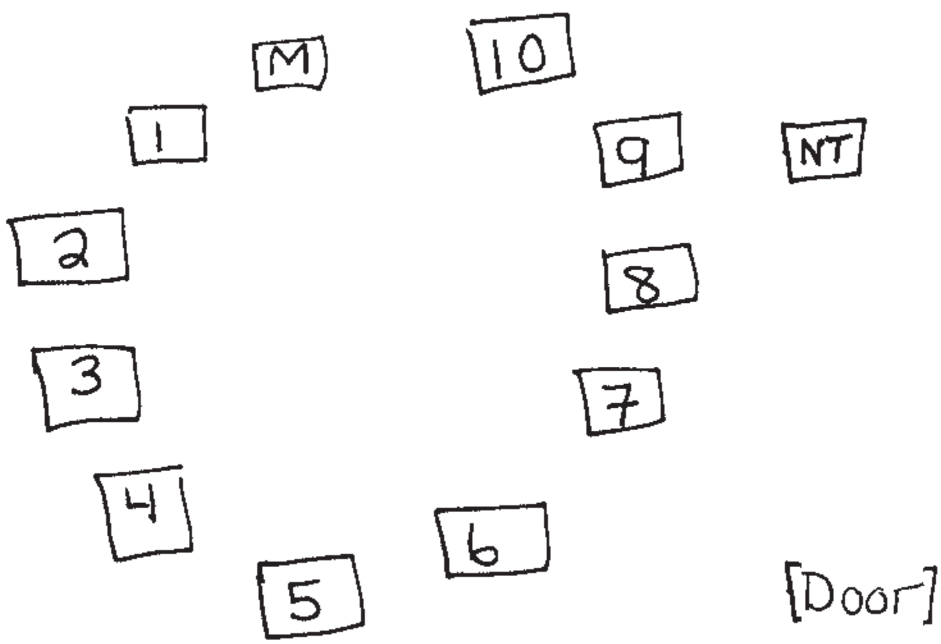
Site: Capital City Hospital

Focus Group Category: FP Users

Moderator: Sandrine B.

Note-taker: Marie K.

**Seating chart :**
Make a seating chart indicating the participants and their number or identifier. Use this chart to identify speakers as you take notes.



## Sample Note-Taker Form with Field Notes (contd.)

**Focus Group Note-Taker Form**

Archival #: CCFGFPU01 Date: 15-6-04 Note-taker: Marie K.

| **Question** (# or key words) | **Responses** | **Observations** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| #4 FP supplies available | >1 s/t not available<br>R10 – no pills / injections<br>– price ch<br>– ch. methods (nurse says)<br>R5 – shortage | Frustrated<br>All agreed<br>?? |
| 4a Advice | R2 – tell u to go<br>R8 – leave u to go, no advice<br>R5 – "They don't even tell u to come back!!!" | Agreemt<br>Idea of drs abandoning |
| Mod – | R3 – Some clinics dr will get methods from other clinic | (dif. city, on coast) |
| 4b Alternatives | R7 no advice<br>>1 yes, get advice<br>-R2 "Go home + take care of yourself!"<br>-R6 ie no sex w/ husband | Gp knows what means b/c laugh<br>laughter gp |
| 4c Referrals | –>1<br>– N | |

## Sample Expanded Field Notes

Archival #: CCFGFPU01
Site: Capital City Hospital
Note-taker: Marie K.
Date: 15-6-04

A lack or shortage of FP supplies appears to be a recurrent problem at this clinic. All participants agreed that supplies are sometimes not available, for example pills and injectables. (How often does this happen???)

Another problem with the supply is that the prices change and women travel to the clinic to find they didn't bring enough money. They expressed that in that case coming to the clinic is a waste of time because they leave empty-handed even though the supplies were there. (Find out why prices change.)

One person said when there are supply problems they are told to switch methods.
(Who recommends this? Doctor? Nurse? How often does this occur? How many women end up abandoning FP for this reason? Potential for problems adjusting to new methods – but no one mentioned this. Do women in fact switch methods?)

It seems like women are left to their own devices when the supply runs short. There don't seem to be any temporary solutions offered or advised. Participants laughed but nonetheless appeared frustrated about the lack of concern of the clinic staff. One person imitated a staff member throwing up her hands and saying, "Sorry, nothing we can do for you!"

*continued from page 69*

It is also important to practice operating the recording equipment to prevent disruption during the middle of a session. Know how many batteries are required, the range of the microphone, how to quickly flip or change the tape, and the convention for labeling the tapes accurately. Bring a sufficient number of tapes and extra batteries to the focus group, and test the tape recorder before every focus group session.

Another important preparatory step is to label all materials that you will use during the focus group – including cassette tapes, notebooks, note-taking and debriefing forms, and the focus group guide – according to a previously established archival system. All items should be labeled identically. (See the Data Documentation and Management module, page 87, for information about archival numbers.)

Finally, arrive early to set up the focus group space and equipment. Be sure to arrange timely transportation to the site so that you have time to set up before participants arrive. You should also find out where the closest restrooms are located. It might be wise to allow for extra travel or set-up time if you have never been to the location, and take traffic into consideration. Set up the recording equipment according to the range of the microphone. Remember that you will need to sit next to the recorder during the discussion. (It is preferable for the note-taker to sit off to the side from the group, if possible.) You should then verify that the equipment is working properly. Make sure that features such as pause, voice activation, and high-low recording levels are turned off, and that extra batteries, tapes, and a spare tape recorder are readily accessible. Place chairs in a circle or around a table, so that all participants will be able to see the moderator and each other.

## How do I take field notes?

Focus group note-takers are responsible for taking detailed notes on what they observe and on what participants say during the focus group, regardless of whether the focus group is being tape-recorded. These notes serve as a backup when recording fails and to capture nonverbal information. Every note-taker develops his or her own style, which will undoubtedly evolve and become more precise and efficient over time. Although the specifics of how you organize your process is up to you, the tips on page 73 offer some suggestions. (See also the Case Study Samples, pages 70-71.)

## How do I expand my notes?

Key skills for qualitative researchers include the ability to take notes quickly and with discretion, and then to expand those notes into rich descriptions. (See the Case Study Samples, page 71.) Note-takers should expand their notes as soon as possible after each focus group session. Expanding notes involves transforming shorthand into prose or a narrative and elaborating on your initial observations. Expanded notes are also called “field notes,” and they are written directly into your field notebook or a computer file. Begin each notebook entry with the header information, including the archival number, site, date, names of the moderator and note-taker, and start and end times. Eventually, all expanded notes should be typed into computer files using a specific format, as discussed in the Tools for Data Managers appendix, page 105.

**TIPS**

### Tips for taking focus group notes

**Create a form on which to write your notes.** If a note-taking form is not provided, creating one can help you organize your notes during the session and make it easier to expand your notes. For example, you might have several columns – one to identify the speaker, another to write quotes or the main idea of what a speaker said, and another in which to write your observations. Begin each notebook entry with the date, time, place, and type of data collection event, and either leave space on the page for expanding your notes, or plan to expand them on a separate page. (See the section in this module on "How do I expand my notes?")

**Take notes strategically.** It is usually practical to make only brief notes during data collection. Direct quotes can be especially hard to write down accurately. Rather than try to document every detail or quote, write down key words and phrases that will trigger your memory when you expand notes. However, remember that your notes will be the only documentation of the session if the recording fails or is faulty. Try to capture the content of all essential verbal contributions, and when possible, to document especially representative quotes word-for-word.

**Record participant identifiers.** It can be a great help during later transcription if you note the identifier of each participant as they speak. The moderator can make this easier for you by asking participants to say their identifier before making a contribution.

**Use shorthand.** Because you will expand and type your notes soon after you write them, it does not matter if you are the only person who can understand your shorthand system. Use abbreviations and acronyms to quickly note what is happening and being said.

**Record both the question and the response.** If the question or probe comes from a focus group question guide, save time by noting the question number. If it is not possible to record direct quotations, write down key words and phrases.

**Distinguish clearly between participant comments and your own observations.** You could use your own initials or "MO" to indicate "my observation." For example: "MO – embarrassed by empty beer bottles in room." This documents the researcher's observation that the participant seemed embarrassed about the empty beer bottles in the room.

**Cover a range of observations.** In addition to documenting what people say, note as well as you can their body language, moods, or attitudes; the general environment; and other information that could be relevant.

Expanding your notes involves the following:

- *Scheduling time to expand your notes,* preferably within 24 hours from the focus group session. This requires discipline, because it is easy to tell yourself that you will do it later. A good time to expand your notes is just before or after the focus group debriefing session. If you cannot expand your notes the same day as the focus group, try to do so first thing the next morning. This makes it less likely that you will forget what an abbreviation stands for or that you will have trouble remembering what you meant. Also, the sooner you review your notes, the greater the chance that you will remember other things that you had not written down. Good note-taking often triggers the memory, but with the passage of time, this opportunity is lost.
- *Expanding your shorthand into sentences* so that anyone can read and understand your notes. Use a separate page in your field notebook to expand the notes you wrote in the focus group guide. Depending on circumstances, you might be able to expand and type your notes into a computer file at the same time.

CASE STUDY

## Sample Focus Group Debriefing Form

**Focus Group Debriefing Form**

Archival #: CCFGFPU01

Date: 15-6-04

Name of Study: FP-VCT Integration

Moderator: Sandrine B.

Note-taker: Marie K.

(1) What are the main themes that emerged in this focus group?

- lack of FP supplies
- frustration w/ health services
- still stigma re: FP (condoms)

☆ Problems w/ FP will affect integr of VCT

(2) Did any information contradict what you learned in previous focus groups?

- Provider Int said follow up clients when not enuf supplies, give new appts but FG participants say don't even tell them to come back

(3) What did participants say that was unclear or confusing to you?

"Go home and take care of yourself"
- What do providers intend w/ this advice?

(4) What did you observe that would not be evident from reading a transcript of the discussion (e.g., group dynamic, individual behaviours, etc.)?

- lot of frustration in gp
- R4 silent

(5) What problems did you encounter (e.g., logistical, behaviors of individuals, questions that were confusing, etc.)?

Q7 & 12 overlap

(6) What issues will you follow up?

- Ask about how clinic supplied - who? how often?
- Advice about changing methods when supplies run out
- No follow up of clients?
- Why do methods prices change?

(7) Does the note-taker have any suggestions for the moderator and vice versa?

- NT -> try to get more quotes
- Mod -> direct questions at participants who don't speak

- *Composing a descriptive narrative from your shorthand and key words.* A good technique for expanding your notes is to write a narrative describing what happened and what you learned. This narrative may be the actual document you produce as your expanded notes. Be sure that you create separate, clearly labeled sections to report your objective observations versus your interpretations and personal comments.
- *Identifying questions for follow-up.* Write down questions about participant responses or comments that need further consideration or follow-up, issues to pursue, new information, etc. This continual adjustment of the research questions and techniques is part of the iterative nature of qualitative research because answers to some research questions lead naturally to others. In some cases, your questions might be answered through further clarification from a participant.
- *Reviewing your expanded notes and adding any final comments.* If you have not typed your expanded notes directly into a computer file, add any additional comments on the same page or on a separate page. If you use additional pages, be sure to clearly cross-reference new notes with the original pages in case another staff member types your notes.

## How do I lead a debriefing session?

The note-taker typically conducts a debriefing session with the moderator immediately after the focus group. This should ideally begin shortly after the discussion session has ended, say within 15 minutes or a half-hour. Although the mood should be more relaxed than during the discussion session, it should not be completely informal. Debriefing is a very important part of focus group research and must be done with a certain degree of rigor to maximize its usefulness.

Debriefing has multiple purposes:

- To log any additional information about the focus group while it is still fresh in the memory. For example, even when audiotapes are used to record the session, there will be nonverbal communication, such as gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, tension, that will not be picked up on tape.
- To discuss issues or comments that need clarification. Field notes explaining confusing parts of the focus group will be valuable for helping other researchers to interpret the transcripts later on.
- To discuss particular questions that did not work well and why.
- To note any information that contradicts or confirms data collected in previous sessions.
- To discuss new topics that arose during the focus group.
- To identify missing information. Comparing what information was being sought with what was actually learned can help moderators plan how to solicit this information more effectively in subsequent focus groups.
- To identify information that needs to be researched outside the focus group setting. This may have to do, for example, with cultural norms, fact-checking, or specifics about the study.

- To discuss trouble spots that came up during the focus group, with regard to participants, group dynamics, and questions. It may be necessary to develop new strategies for dealing with a particular issue for subsequent focus groups.

- To provide the moderator and note-taker a forum for giving each other constructive feedback.

### How do I take and use debriefing notes?

Note-takers use debriefing forms to record all points and issues that come up during the debriefing sessions. Creating and using a debriefing form will help you to be consistent and thorough about which aspects of the focus group you discuss at each session. (See the Case Study Sample, page 74.) These notes must then be typed and appended to the focus group transcript in the computer file.

Debriefing notes are used for two purposes. Before the start of every new focus group, moderators and note-takers review debriefing notes from previous sessions. This helps them to make adjustments and improvements as they conduct the next session. Debriefing notes are also shared and reviewed during staff meetings, when data collectors and other researchers discuss what they are finding and any questions or problems they may have. This helps all the researchers to get a sense of what is and is not working well, which issues require follow-up, and whether any new issues are emerging as potentially important.

## Suggested Readings

Greenbaum TL. *The Handbook for Focus Group Research*. New York: Lexington Books, 1993.

Krueger RA. *Moderating Focus Groups (Focus Group Kit)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1997.

Krueger RA, Casey MA. *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994.

Morgan D. *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research*. London: Sage Publications, 1988.

Morgan D. *Successful Focus Groups: Advancing the State of the Art*. London: Sage Publications, 1993.

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For additional information on this topic, refer to Chapter 4: Collecting Qualitative Data: The Science and the Art, Appendix 4: Procedural Guidelines for Managing Focus Group Discussions, Appendix 6: Topic Guides for Focus Group Discussions on Reproductive Health, and Appendix 8: Common Errors in Moderating Focus Groups in these companion guides:

*Qualitative Methods in Public Health: A Field Guide for Applied Research*

*Qualitative Methods: A Field Guide for Applied Research in Sexual and Reproductive Health*

CASE STUDY

## Sample Focus Group Transcript

### Family Planning Users Focus Group

Archival #: CCFGFPU01
Site: Capital City Hospital
Number of participants: 10
Date: 15-6-04
Start: 15:30 End: 16:50

Moderator: Sandrine B.
Note-taker: Marie K.
Transcriber: Sandrine B.
Typist: Samuel D.

M = Moderator
R = Respondent

**Excerpt from page 5:**

(Question 4)

M: Even the way you are all here, I believe you are under different family planning methods. There are those who are under the injection, there are those who are using pills, there are those who are even using condoms; let me ask, is there a time you went to an FP clinic and found that injectables were not available? Or the pills were not available? Is there any time that this has happened?

R: Yes. (in chorus)

R10: That one is very common. You could have prepared that you are coming for injections or pills, then they tell you that the pills are not there. You wait . . . maybe you go to buy and find they are not even there and you know . . . you could get that they are selling them at thirty shillings and you don't have that.

M: Mmm

R10: Coming back they tell you the pills are not there, they tell you we don't have this type . . . change to this . . . you know it causes a lot of problems and we are having that problem. Especially people who are on pills.

M: There has always been a shortage?

R5: Oh yes.

Respondents: Yes yes. (in chorus)

(Question 4a)

M: Now when you experience such a problem of shortage of stock, let's say for pills or so, what do these providers advise you?

R2: They just tell you to go.

R8: Because the pills are not there, they therefore just leave you to go.

M: They are not there.

R8: There is no single advice they give.

M: No single advice?

R8: They tell you that the pills are not there.

M: So you go?

R8: Yes.

M: Come back maybe when . . . when they have . . .

R5: (Interjects) They don't even tell you to come back!

M: Mmm . . . they don't tell you anything?

R3: But in some places they advise you. If you find that there are no pills the doctor can get them for you from elsewhere immediately.

M: Where is this sister?

R3: XXXXX

M: So they provide an immediate solution?

R3: Yes.

R1: But here it's like you wait on till the stock is brought.

## Sample Focus Group Transcript (contd.)

(Question 4b)

M: Do they ever attempt to advise you on an alternative?

R7: No they don't.

M: They don't?

R: Yes (some respondents say yes).

R2: They just tell you to go back home and take care of yourself.

M: That you just go back home and take care of yourself? Now, how do you take care of yourself?

R6: You should not have sex with your husband.

M: You should not have sex with the old man?

R6: Mmm.

R8: Or they say to use condoms but if there are none then the advice is no good.

(Question 4c)

M: So there's no time that you are referred to another place or there' s nothing like that?

R: (Majority) There' s nothing like that . . .

STEPS

# Steps in Moderating a Focus Group

## Preparing for the Focus Group

1 Study the focus group guide.

2 Study the informed consent document.

3 Practice both moderating and taking notes.

4 Decide with the note-taker how you will handle not using participants' real names.

5 Review debriefing notes from previous focus groups.

6 Prepare a checklist of everything you need to bring to the focus group. (See the Focus Group Checklist, page 82.)

7 Confirm the reservation of the focus group location and arrange for refreshments (if applicable).

## Day of the Focus Group

8 Before leaving for the focus group, use a checklist to verify that you have all equipment.

9 Arrive early at the focus group site to set up the room and materials.

10 Label all data documentation materials.

11 Greet and check in participants.

12 Obtain informed consent from each participant before they join the group (unless the note-taker has this responsibility).

13 Assign identifying pseudonyms or numbers to participants and provide materials for making name cards (unless the note-taker has this responsibility).

14 Make a seating chart to identify speakers in your notes.

15 Introduce yourself and explain your role.

16 Lay the ground rules.

17 Lead the discussion according to the focus group guide.

18 Take brief notes in the focus group guide during the discussion.

19 End the question-asking phase of the discussion.

20 Give the note-taker the opportunity to ask questions.

21 Give the participants the opportunity to ask questions.

22 Obtain oral confirmation of the group's informed consent while the tape recorder is still on (if specified in the protocol).

23 After the focus group, clarify any factual misconceptions expressed by participants.

24 Reimburse the participants in accordance with study procedures.

25 Wrap up all conversations and clear the room.

## Immediately after the Focus Group

26 Take a break.

27 Participate in the debriefing session led by the note-taker.

28 Using a checklist, gather all forms and notes.

29 Expand your notes, within 24 hours if possible.

STEPS

# Steps in Note-taking for a Focus Group

## Preparing for the Focus Group

1 Study the focus group guide.

2 Study the informed consent document.

3 Practice taking notes and moderating.

4 Obtain or create note-taking and debriefing forms.

5 Prepare a checklist of everything you need to bring to the focus group. (See the Focus Group Checklist, page 82.)

6 Decide with the moderator how you will handle not using participants' real names.

7 Review debriefing notes from previous focus groups.

## Day of the Focus Group

8 Before leaving for the focus group, use a checklist to verify that you have all equipment.

9 Arrive early at the focus group site to set up the recording equipment.

10 Test the recording equipment.

11 Label all data documentation materials.

12 Greet and check in participants.

13 Obtain informed consent from each participant before they join the group (unless the moderator has this responsibility).

14 Assign identifying pseudonyms or numbers to participants and provide materials for making name cards (unless the moderator has this responsibility).

15 Make a seating chart to identify speakers in your notes.

16 Introduce yourself and explain your role.

17 Monitor the recording equipment discreetly throughout the focus group.

18 Write notes on the note-taker form about what people say and what you observe.

19 Turn away latecomers or extra participants, but provide them with the reimbursement, outside the room where the discussion is being held.

20 Provide reimbursements to participants who drop out of the focus group early.

21 At the end of the discussion, ask the group for clarification of any questions you have.

22 Stop the tape recorder after the group has orally confirmed their consent.

23 Reimburse the participants in accordance with study procedures.

24 Wrap up all conversations and clear the room.

## Immediately after the Focus Group

25 Take a break.

26 Lead the debriefing session.

27 Using a checklist, gather all forms and notes.

28 Assemble all materials into one envelope. Double-check that you have completed all forms and that all materials are appropriately labeled. Note and explain any missing materials on the archival information sheet. (See the module on Data Documentation and Management, page 83.)

29 Expand your notes, within 24 hours if possible.

CHECKLIST

# Focus Group Checklist

## Make arrangements for

- ❑ Private setting for focus group site
- ❑ Transportation of staff to focus group site
- ❑ Transportation of participants to focus group site
- ❑ Refreshments for participants (if applicable)

## What to take to the focus group

*Equipment*

- ❑ 1 tape recorder (plus 1 extra, if available)
- ❑ 2 blank 90-minute cassette tapes per focus group
- ❑ Spare batteries
- ❑ Field notebook and pens
- ❑ Name card materials

*Focus group packet*

- ❑ 1 large, heavy-duty envelope
- ❑ Archival information sheet with archival number
- ❑ 2 copies of focus group guide (1 for moderator, 1 for note-taker)
- ❑ Informed consent forms (enough for all participants)
- ❑ Note-taking form
- ❑ Debriefing form
- ❑ Participant reimbursement (if applicable)
- ❑ Reimbursement form (if applicable)

## What to place in the envelope after the focus group

- ❑ Completed archival information sheet
- ❑ Signed inform consent form (signed by moderator and/or note-taker)
- ❑ Labeled focus group guide with notes (moderator's copy)
- ❑ Labeled focus group guide (note-taker's copy)
- ❑ Note-taker's field notes
- ❑ Labeled cassette tapes, re-record tabs punched out
- ❑ Signed reimbursement form (if applicable)