Using Focus Groups for Program Evaluation

Evaluation Core
Smith Child Health Research, Outreach & Advocacy Center

June 10, 2019
Focus groups

Group discussion on a focused topic
- Address a specific topic
- Small group (6-12 people)
- 1 to 2 hours in length
- Max 10 questions
FG useful for

- Getting at decisions made in social context
- Learning about community/group norms/values
- Capturing discussion (interaction) among participants
- Learning what people think
- Learning how people think
- Finding range of opinions that exist in a group
- In-depth data
- Identifying MAJOR themes
FG not useful for

• Sensitive/controversial topics

• Situations in which confidentiality is required

• Decision making

• Training
Common FG uses

• Gathering topic background information
• Generating research hypotheses
• Stimulating new ideas
• Diagnosing potential problems
• w/a new program/service/product
Common FG uses

• Generating impressions of products, programs, services, institutions

• Learning how respondents talk about the phenomenon of interest (may facilitate quantitative research tool development)

• Interpreting previously obtained research results
Using Focus Groups in program evaluation

Can be used at various stages of evaluation...

Pre evaluation

• Evaluability assessments
  – Useful for clarifying the program theory, logic model

• Evaluation planning
  – Stakeholder engagement
  – Suggestions for outputs and outcomes to measure
  – Useful for survey development
Using Focus Groups in program evaluation

During evaluation
• Formative evaluation
  – Useful to identify program strengths, weaknesses and improvements needed
  – Useful to identify implementation issues

End of program
• Outcomes/impact evaluation
  – Collect outcome data – participant opinion/satisfaction/change
  – Identify perceptions about outcomes and impact findings
  – Identify opportunities for findings dissemination
  – Identify implications for application of findings
Developing focus group guides
Developing focus group guides

General rules

• ≤10 questions

• Pre-identify an evaluation purpose for each question

• Avoid long, drawn out questions
Developing focus group guides
5 standard question types

- Openers
- Introductory
- Transition
- Key
- Closers
Developing focus group guides

Tips
• Use care in causality (why) questions
• Ask 1 question at a time
• Avoid leading questions
• Avoid supplying response alternatives
• Do not ask yes/no questions
• Avoid asking for “second-hand” data
• Move from most to least sensitive/controversial
• Be careful in asking for solutions to complex problems
• Avoid hypothetical questions
Exercise: improve these questions

• Your child’s health is the most important thing in the world, tell us why.

• Do you feed your child a healthy diet?

• When you consider whether or not to get HIV tested do you consider cost or convenience to be more important?

• We know that diet and exercise are important contributors to health how do you think about the connection of diet and exercise to health?
Recruiting for focus groups

Consider:

- Do you have access to potential participants with the content expertise you are looking for?
  - Program participants –past? current? non-completers?
  - Staff
  - Stakeholders?
  - people with a particular experience
    - e.g. health issues, social issues, geographic location, etc.

**PRO TIP**

over-recruit to account for no-shows we estimate at 30-40%
Recruiting for focus groups

• If you are planning more than 1 FG consider if/how you will separate participants into groups by
  – age
  – Sex
  – role
  – some other factor(s)?

Depends on what you want to get out of the FG data and how you expect participants to interact

• Common to separate age groups if you have a wide range of ages, experiences.
  – parents vs children
  – staff vs. participants
  – newly diagnosed vs. long term diagnoses...
Focus Group Logistics
Preparing for Focus Groups

• Send reminder emails, texts or calls to reconfirm attendance
• Arrive early to get set up
• Bring:
  – Digital recorders (at least 2)
  – Signage if needed “x focus group this way”
  – Sign in sheets/pens
  – Consents (2 copies –1 for you, 1 for participant)
  – News print/markers
  – Activity supplies (cards, photos, post its, stickers, etc)
  – Incentives
  – Notetaking supplies (laptop, notebook, etc)
  – Refreshments
  – Name tents
Staffing a focus group

- Moderator – discussion facilitator
- Note taker
- Others who may assist with consenting, refreshments, directions to rest room, settle in latecomers, etc.

Facilitator role: implement the focus group protocol/guide WHILE nurturing an open and spontaneous conversation

- Encourages participation
- Keeps group focused
- Keeps her opinions to herself
Staffing a focus group

- Note taker
  - Record sentences or phrases that are especially enlightening or make a point well
  - Use initials to identify speaker when quoting
  - Record key points/themes for each question/topic with bullet points
  - Note follow up questions that should be asked/clarifications needed
    - Provide the facilitator with notes re: follow up questions
  - Note body language/non verbal activity (heads nodding)
  - Note tone (passionate, disinterested, doubtful, etc)
Moderating Focus Groups
HOW DID THE FOCUS GROUP GO?

I'M NOT SURE --- IT WAS ALL JUST A BLUR.
Focus groups: setting the tone

• Make people comfortable
  – Refreshments
  – Directions to amenities
  – Ability to get up during the conversation

• Set “ground rules”
  – No right or wrong answers
  – We are interested in opinions
  – OK to disagree but respect others
  – One person talks at a time
Focus group moderation techniques

Tips for creating/facilitating the conversation

• Use name tents
  – HIPAA/IRB considerations (if applicable):
    • If sending recordings to an external transcription vendor, work with OSP/IRB to ensure required agreements are in place

• Respond positively to participants initial attempts to communicate

• Avoid put down or close off comments such as
  – That is not what we are discussing
  – You’ve missed the point
  – Most people would disagree with you
Focus group moderation techniques

Redirect comments that are a bit off the mark:

– Now let’s take it a step further

– We could do a focus group just on that, but for now I would like to hear more about what you have to say about....

– That will become important later. Don’t forget what you had in mind...

• Avoid criticism, sarcasm, etc.
Focus group moderation techniques

Strategies to promote even participation

- Popcorning
  - someone will start off the introductions and if you hear something that you related to, you can jump in and direct your response to that person
  - Need a compelling/relatable opener for this to work well
Focus group moderation techniques

Involving everyone

Naming names:

- what do you think about that Noz?
- we haven’t heard from Adam in a while, Adam, what do you think...
- Rachel would you like to lead off with an answer to this question?

* I know you have a lot to say but let’s hear from some others first
Focus group moderation techniques

Strategies to get more information/detail

- **Probing**
  - Mirror/echo
  - Silence

- **Linking**: Ellie says she likes x and Josh says he likes y...

- **Reweaving**: bringing earlier info into later discussion. Earlier Josh said x, what do you think about x?
Focus group moderation techniques

Strategies to respond to unanticipated information

• you’ve raised an issue that we had not anticipated, can you tell us more about that?

• That is new information for us–let’s see what others think about that
Focus group moderation techniques

Strategies for keeping on topic

• Deflecting: if you don’t mind I would like to save that for later in our discussion but we will get back to it...

• I know that is an interesting idea but let’s stay on track with our question...

STAY ON TOPIC
Focus group moderation techniques

Strategies for managing disagreement

• That’s one way to look at it, what are other ways you can think of?

• You don’t have to agree with Bob. All opinions are welcome here.
At the end of the focus group

• Confer with note taker. With information from note taker:
  – Share key points recorded with participants. What do they think about these? Something missing? Something there that should not be?
  – Ask for clarifications where note taker notes they are needed.

• After the focus group participants have left debrief with staff
  – What impressions do people have?
  – What questions are they left with?
  – What new ideas do they have?
FG Practice Exercise

- Divide into 2 groups. Each group:
- Take one of the focus group protocols developed earlier in class
- Select 1 moderator, 1 note taker to start
- Record the FG on your cell phone if possible
- Spend 10-15 minutes facilitating the FG
- Spend 5 minutes debriefing the FG
FG practice debrief

- What worked well?
- What was difficult?
- What do you think you will have to work on?
- What issues do you foresee with transcribing?
- Other issues?
Analyzing focus group data

- Coding – process of assigning a code (theme) to data segments
  - Primary method for focus group analysis
  - Goals
    - Data reduction
    - Assigning meaning to data
    - Group data/find patterns
Analysis
Analyzing focus group data

Analysis steps

• Create an initial coding scheme based on
  – The focus group guide
  – Evaluation purpose
  – Literature
  – Focus group transcripts

Coding scheme example

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Assignment rules</th>
<th>Example of coded segment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>dropout</td>
<td>Someone leaving the program before finishing</td>
<td>Apply when people mention not completing program</td>
<td>So I left the program because my family moved pretty far away...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Analyzing focus group data

• Coding is Iterative
  – Constantly evaluate where the coded segment belongs relative to your earlier ideas
    • Does it fit?
    • How does it fit?
    • What attributes is it fitting with?

Coding seminar:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y8kW74b9fXY
Analyzing focus group data

• Taking it further – how do coded segments relate to one another? What’s the bigger picture of how things fit together?

• Developing themes/identifying relationships

• Start by looking at coded segments in relationship to one another – some “organizing frames” tips:
  – Time sequence (first second third...)
  – If/then statements
  – Program roles, components, etc.
  – Keywords
  – Outliers—Typical vs. non-typical
Coding Exercise

• Sort your cards
• No questions/no talking
• Think of the cards as your data set
Exercise

• Sort your deck a different way
Exercise

• Why did you sort the deck the way you did the first time?
Exercise

- Applying tacit theories to the data analysis
- Tacit theories – assumptions you are making
  - Source of bias in analysis
Exercise

• Why did you sort your deck the way you did the second time?
Exercise

• Explicit theory – explain why you have those categories/sorted cards in that way.
Focus groups = structured discussions
Useful in all program evaluation stages
+ getting at how/what people think
+ identifying group norms/beliefs
+ getting reactions to new ideas, products and findings
- dealing with sensitive topics
- decision making
- training
FG Guides

- follow a flow
  - opening,
  - topic introduction
  - Transition
  - key question
  - closer

- ≤ 10 questions
- Avoid leading, double barreled and close ended questions
Recruitment
- Over recruit
- Consider characteristics for grouping participants

Moderation
- Encourage participation
- Avoid negative comments
- Use probes

Analysis
- Based on iterative coding
- Look for relationships/concepts among codes
- Take steps to avoid bias—look for contradictions, exceptions
Questions?