

FOCUS GROUPS FACILITATION

Planning and Institutional Research Office (PAIR)



AGENDA

- Context/Origins
- The core elements of Focus Group Theory
- Pre-focus group considerations + preparing questions
- Conducting the focus group
 - *Beginning the focus group*
 - *Interviewing styles*
 - *Managing the process*
- Questions and discussion



CONTEXT AND ORIGINS



ORIGIN OF FOCUS GROUPS

- Nondirective interviewing – 1930s and 1940s
- Focus groups came into vogue after WWII
 - Analysis of army training and morale films
 - 1941: Office of Radio Research at Columbia University – Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton
 - Studies of persuasive communication and effects of mass media – early 1940s
 - Sensitive information revealed when in a safe, comfortable place with people like themselves
- Evolved from:
 - Clinical psychological uses of group analysis and therapy
 - Sociological and social psychological studies of group dynamics
- Interdisciplinary theoretical underpinnings: socio-psychological and psychotherapeutic traditions and techniques
- Focus group vs focused discussion



CORE ELEMENTS OF FOCUS GROUPS



WHY (OR WHY NOT TO) USE FOCUS GROUPS

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- Getting deeper insights than surveys – more qualitative than quantitative
- Less hierarchical – more confidence for participants to express opinions and comments
- Enrich data collected – unexpected topics brought up; interactions between participants
- Interactions similar to everyday social processes (e.g., arguing, joking, teasing, persuasion, challenge, disagreement)
- Exploratory research

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- Group dynamics can influence responses
- Artificiality of the setting
- Not representative of a population at large; not meant for generalizations /quantifications



CORE ELEMENTS OF FOCUS GROUP THEORY

“The [FOCUSED] GROUP DEPTH INTERVIEW”

Paraphrasing Goldman’s (1962) “The Group Depth Interview”

- Robert Merton (sociology) + Alfred Goldman (market research)
 - Integrate the social and clinical psychological traditions
 - Bridge academic and practitioner perspectives



FOCUSED RESEARCH

- Studying a particular, concrete situation
 - Exploratory, clinical, and/or phenomenological

Examples:

- Science curriculum: Investigate undergraduate science students perceptions of their experiences with teaching interventions (e.g., new courses)
- Curriculum development: explore students' learning experience – inform curriculum enhancement
- **At UBCO: Health services, experiential learning, curriculum changes**
- Health sciences: Role and concept of the nurse practitioner
- Sociological: Psychosocial aspects of widowhood
- Clinical psychology: including individuals whose concrete situation center around the same psychological condition
- Marketing research: involvement in product categories and with competitive brands



GROUP INTERACTIONS

- Objective: better understand the group dynamics that affect individuals' perceptions, information processing, and decision making
- 3 key research design elements:
 - Group composition
 - Intrapersonal or individual characteristics: physical, personality, demographic
 - Interpersonal influences
 - Group cohesiveness – critical to ensuring interaction, group compatibility – homogeneity/heterogeneity, social power, group participation and nonverbal communication
 - Research environment factors
 - Material environment, territoriality, spatial arrangements, interperson space, moderated groupings of strangers



IN-DEPTH DATA

- Yield incremental answers that go beyond surface level explanation
 - Probing on particular answers, depending on answer and research objectives
- Too many questions can risk decline in depth (10-15 questions is common practice)
 - Better to get nuance from a few than get too many answered
- Tendency to use only direct questions and verbal responses to them, can also risk depth level



HUMANISTIC INTERVIEW

- Some degree of immersion into individuals' lives
- Emphasis on meaning rather than measurement
- Orientation of empathy, openness, active listening, etc
- No need to reach group consensus
- No need to ask every question that appears in the discussion guide



PRE-FOCUS GROUP CONSIDERATIONS



PRE-FOCUS GROUP

- Problem definition / research question
- Identify sampling frame and moderator
- Generate and pretest interview guide
 - Good questions – elicit substantial interaction
 - Check *The Art of Asking Questions* (Payne, 1951)
 - In general:
 - 1) Questions organized from more general to more specific
 - 2) Questions ordered by the relative importance to the research agenda
- Rolling interview guides
- Recruit sample
 - Ideally 6-12 participants

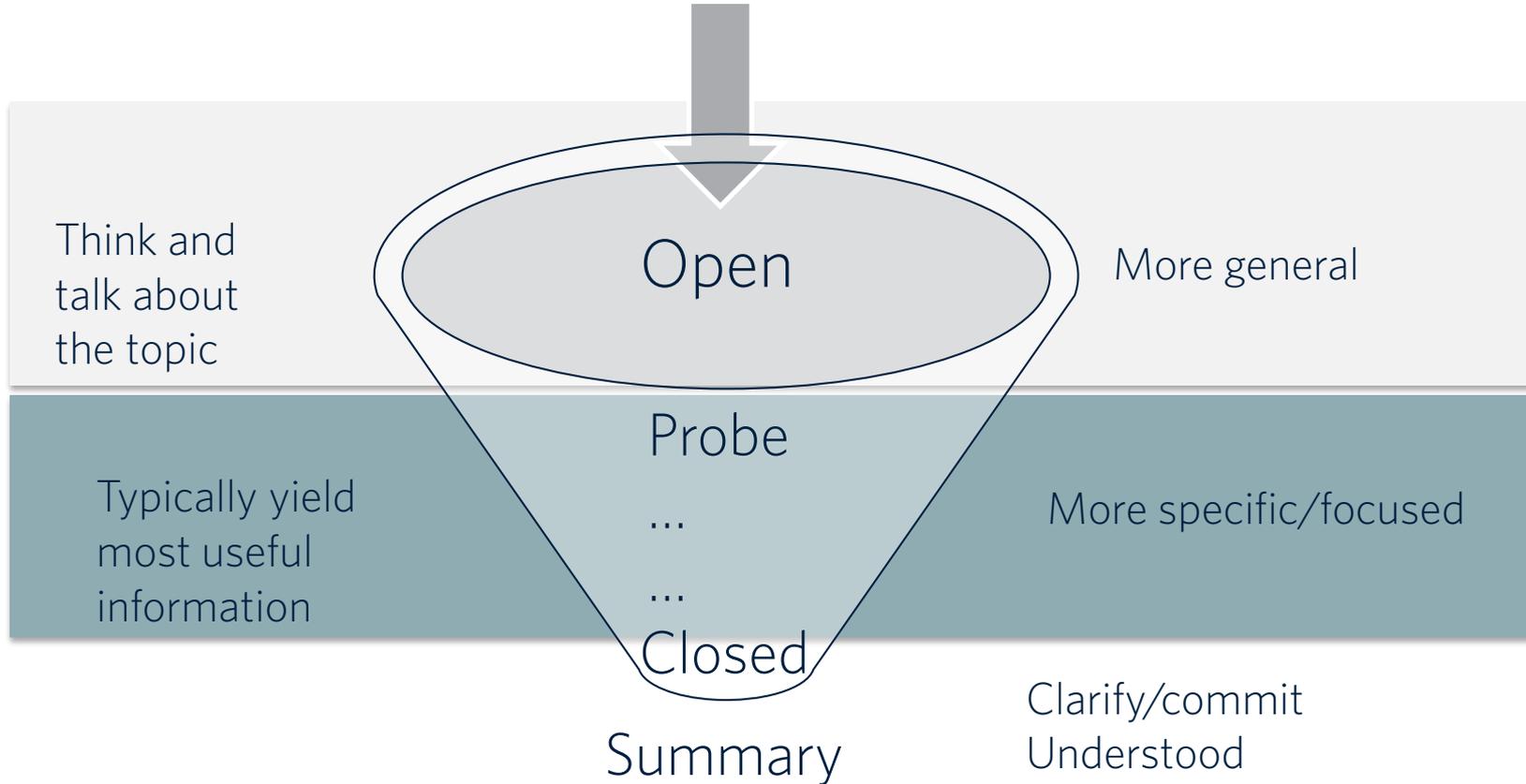


MORE ON QUESTIONS

- Relatively open questions – allow respondents to refer to any aspect of the general stimulus identified in the question
 - How do you feel about....What did you think when...
- *How, why, under what conditions* – interested in complexity and facilitates discussion
 - Wording: Careful with *why* – try to avoid “*intellectualizing*”
- One question at a time
- Less structured generally precede those with more structure
 - Primary questions and secondary questions
- Issues that respondents raise first are likely to be those that are most memorable, important, or salient to them
- Using the right tone – overly formal tone is likely to inhibit people’s willingness to share info.
- Relationship closeness induction – build sense of connection among participants



FUNNEL APPROACH FOR QUESTIONING ROUTE



TYOLOGY OF FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

<i>Type of Questions</i>	<i>Purpose/Usage Situation</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Main research questions 	Used to focus discussion on issues directly related to the purpose of the session. Exactly how you are going to ask these questions should be thought out beforehand.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leading questions 	Useful for carrying a discussion toward deeper meaning and are especially useful if the group seems hesitant to pursue it. Formulate the questions using the group's words and ideas and by asking, "Why?"
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Testing questions 	Used to test the limits of a concept. Use the group's words and ideas to formulate the question, this time feeding the concepts back to participants in a more extreme, yet tentative form, as though you may have misunderstood.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Steering questions 	Used to nudge the group back onto the main research questions, following excursions into other areas.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Obtuse questions 	Often the discussion will go into territory uncomfortable to the group. To further pursue topics into such areas, you need to back the questions off one level of abstraction, allowing the group to discuss other people's reactions or opinions, not necessarily their own: "Why do you suppose someone would feel this way?"
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Factual questions 	Useful for neutralizing emotionally charged groups or discussions, these questions have a factual answer and permit the group to answer without personal risk.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Feel" questions 	Used to ask for opinions surrounded by personal feelings. Feel questions ask participants to take risks and expose their personal feelings. They are the most dangerous and most fertile of question types. The rule to remember here is that every person is entitled to his or her feelings, and no one else can disagree with or discount them, though many will try.

<i>Type of Questions</i>	<i>Purpose/Usage Situation</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anonymous questions 	Used to get a group talking, comfortable with each other, or refocused on a key question. They generally take the form, "Please take the index card in front of you and write down the single idea that comes to mind regarding this issue."
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Silence 	Often the best question is no question. Many group leaders tend to fill in every void in the discussion. Simply waiting for a response allows those who are a little slower or uncertain to formulate their ideas.

SOURCE: From Langer, J., "Clients: Check Qualitative Researcher's Personal Traits to Get More; Qualitative Researchers: Enter Entire Marketing Process to Give More," *Marketing News*, (Sept. 8), copyright © 1978. Reprinted with permission of the American Marketing Association.



CONDUCTING THE FOCUS GROUP



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BEGINNING THE FOCUS GROUP

- Safe Space
- Introductions are key to build rapport and a sense of group
- Emphasize commonalities in introduction
- Set expectations - Identify focus group mission and facilitate the group to provide information consistent with this along the interview
- Provide guidelines for interaction – key: ask participants for responses that reflect what is true for them, even if it means disagreeing with others in the group
- Seek common experiences among group members before moving on to more controversial topics – add cohesiveness to the group
- Lively, interesting discussions tend to build a sense of cohesiveness
- Circular tables, name tags (Covered online e.g., with Zoom)
- Discussion aids
- Observers and recordings
- Food



INTERVIEWING STYLES

- Depend on types of groups and research questions
- Directive approach, e.g. nominal group
 - Greater coverage of topics or more detailed coverage of specific topics of interest
 - Less group synergy and spontaneity
- Nondirective approach
 - More group interaction, easier for individual views to emerge
 - Risks less coverage
- Moderator control: too much = interrupt interactions; too little = session is no longer focused
- Most involve a mix



MANAGING THE GROUP PROCESS

- No one respondent dominates the conversation
- No one respondent answers every question first
- Beginning of interview – discuss one issue at a time
- Ensuring participation – power relationships / moderator should not speak much - balance
- No one presents him or herself as a topic expert
- Respondents exhibit respect for others' opinions throughout their time together
- Probing + asking about opposing views – jumpstart discussions
- Distanced stance vs sharing personal examples
- Jokes – lightening the mood / ice breakers / connected to topic



FOR ONLINE FOCUS GROUPS

- Less visual and other nonverbal cues -> need for more proactive moderation
- Reduction in social cues and degrees of anonymity -> Heightened states of disinhibition
- Equalization of group participation
- Greater moderator skills (e.g., familiarity with technology used)
- Virtual jet-lag? Take into account spatial-temporal incongruities
- Co-moderator
- Use of slides to pace the process and focus/expand attention



CLOSING REMARKS

- Wrapping up discussion
- Post focus group debriefing

Every group is different: need to adapt and be flexible based on your research objectives.



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