Focus Group Presentation Notes*
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June 6, 2013

Module 1: Introduction

Slide 1: Cover Slide

Slide 2 (S 2): Overview of Presentation
This presentation on Focus Group methodology will consist of 5 modules. The first four will be brief audiovisual presentations using Power Point slides. The last module will be a video with an example of how to conduct a focus group. References used in the development of these presentations are included at the end of Module 4.
1. Introduction to Focus Group Methodology
2. Recruitment
3. Conduction of a Focus Group
4. Data Analysis
5. Video Demonstration of a Focus Group

S 3: Definition of Focus Groups
A focus group is a qualitative data collection method involving 6-10 participants in a methodically planned discussion conducted in a relaxed atmosphere to learn what participants think or feel about a specific topic. The dialogue and discussion generated among focus group participants fosters new levels of thought, detail and meaning about personal experiences. Focus groups can be used before a program begins, during a program or after a program to gather information. Focus group interviewers must have good listening and facilitation skills. Their job is to create an environment in which participants feel comfortable sharing their comments. Focus groups usually last from one to two hours.

Other defining descriptions and perspectives:
- Various uses in the past, not all with research intention (such as military intelligence, market research)
- Collective conversations
- Group interviews that are efficient – larger amount of data in shorter time
- An instrument of qualitative research
  - Can provide complex testimonies and group resistance narratives
  - Allows for synergy and dynamism – that might not occur in individual interview
  - Allows for development of a collective voice

*Modified with permission from: McQuiston, T. & Lippin, T. Self-sufficiency research and evaluation pilot project manual.
**S 4: Strengths**
- provides a natural, relaxed social setting for participants
- allows the interviewer to probe unanticipated issues that come up
- group dynamics contribute and help the discussion focus on the most important topics and issues
- often enjoyable for participants

**S 5: Limitations**
- larger group size decreases the number of questions that can be asked
- need moderator with experience managing group discussion
- data are more difficult to analyze because they must be interpreted in the context of the group discussion
- logistical barriers in finding private quiet location and in organizing participants to all be present at same time and place

**S 6: Sampling Methods Used for Focus Groups**
- Purposive/Purposeful
- Not random selection in most studies!
- Clear inclusion and exclusion criteria
- Need to be realistic and respectful while recruiting participants

**S 7: Sampling Criteria: Common Experiences**
Participants should share a common experience. The people in a focus group should be similar to each other in some way so they have a common base of experience. For example, workers in the same industrial sector may form the basis for a focus group. Depending on the information you are seeking, you may want to have workers from different work sites, or a separate focus group for managers, or a separate group for people who have a commonality, such as working at the same facility, speaking the same dialect, being from a similar region, etc.

**S 7: Sampling Criteria: Participant Diversity**
Participant diversity can enrich data. Although a common experience is generally a major criterion, including people with a range of experiences can enrich the data you collect. For example, you could have a first focus group of workers from a central city who participated in your focus group. To enrich the information you collect, you may next decide to invite workers from several different locations including other cities or rural areas.

**S 7 Reducing Bias in Participant Selection.**
Since qualitative studies do not use random sampling and other scientific methods that can route out bias, you are challenged to eliminate weaknesses to ensure that your evaluation is rigorous. For example, if you think participants may be biased because they all work for the same boss or in the same region, you may need to include participants from other regions as well. This will strengthen your data by
including other voices, making your findings more credible.

Note: Additional Material on sampling will be reinforced in Module 2!

**S 8: Ethical considerations**

It is important that the impact of conducting or using your evaluation does not harm participants. Several ethical issues related to focus group research are discussed below.

**Informed Consent.** Tell participants about the research project. Include information about: your organization, the purposes of the study, how it will be used, who will see data, and how their confidentiality will be protected. Let them ask questions. Have a time at the beginning of the interview when you explain all this and record their agreement using a digital recording or written consent form.

**Confidentiality.** Plan to protect the confidentiality and identity of participants. This includes all forms of data collected via digital audio recordings, typed transcripts, as well as in your analysis and reporting. For example, who will be allowed to listen to the digital recordings or review the written transcripts and how can you assure participant confidentiality? How will you share participants' stories but not their identities? You can do this with substituting names (use false names or numbers such as participant One) and other identifying information.

**Incentives and Stipends.** To encourage focus group participation sometimes participants are offered incentives. For persons who participate on their own time (not during work hours), it is customary in the U.S. to offer a modest cash stipend or gift certificate to a local store to help reimburse their time and travel expenses. If someone participates in the group during work hours, there may be no incentive or a smaller token of appreciation may be given. However this is a culturally determined issue and may not be appropriate in Thai culture. Often, food and beverage are provided for the participants in addition to other incentives.

**Treating with Respect –** Awareness of power imbalance; shared knowledge, give information and resources after the focus group relevant to their needs. Offer to share results in some format

**S9: Determination of how to establish trustworthiness or rigor in the study**

It is recommended that researchers decide which types of strategies they will incorporate into the study to strengthen their accuracy before data collection begins. These strategies should be identified during all phases of the research process including: sample selection, the data collection process, and the analysis phase.

- The terms “validity” and “reliability” are typically used in quantitative
research and are rarely included in discussions of qualitative evaluation today.

➤ In the early days of qualitative research, the predominant terms used to refer to the evaluation included a determination of “rigor” or “trustworthiness.”

➤ In a classic book Lincoln & Guba (1985) identified 4 criteria related to trustworthiness to consider: credibility; transferability; dependability; and confirmability.

➤ Since that time, many different terms have been suggested along with many criteria to evaluate qualitative research, including authenticity, validation, understanding and credibility.

➤ There is not one accepted standard of evaluation of qualitative research.

➤ Despite the lack of standard criteria, it is expected that qualitative researchers do demonstrate some methods of establishing rigor.

S10

➤ Creswell (2013) uses the term “validation strategies” (which is different from the quantitative measure of validity).

➤ He suggests researchers thoughtfully include at least 2 validation strategies from 8 suggested:

1. Prolonged engagement and persistent observation
2. Triangulation of data – using multiples data sources to verify results
3. Peer review or debriefing
4. Negative case analysis
5. Clarifying researcher bias
6. Member checking
7. Rich, thick descriptions of data
8. External audits

S11

➤ In contrast, Richardson (2005) proposes 4 interpretative standards to judge qualitative research by:

1. Substantive contribution to the literature and understanding
2. Aesthetic merit – creative processes evident
3. Reflexivity – researcher’s subjectivity examined and shared
4. Impact – emotional or intellectual contribution

S12

➤ Reliability or stability of responses is also considered by some authors as separate condition of rigor. This includes:

1. Inter-coder agreement – on codes, themes, data interpretation
2. Detailed field notes
3. Accurate transcription of digital recordings
4. Developing code book for codes and themes so there is little variation in interpretation
5. Independent coding and then consensus coding (80% recommended at a minimum)
Strategies that an easily be integrate to strengthen the design of a focus group study include:

- Peer review or debriefing
- Clarifying researcher bias
- Member checking
- Rich, thick descriptions of data
- Reflexivity – clarifying researcher bias and assumptions
- Detailed field notes
- Developing code book for codes and themes so there is little variation in interpretation
- Independent coding and then consensus coding (80% recommended at a minimum)

**S14: Process of Development for Interview Guide**

Based on the information being sought in the research or evaluation, a list of questions to guide the focus group interview is developed. It should:

- provide a sequence of topics and questions aimed at answering your research or evaluation question
- be designed to help the flow of conversation
- ensure that you are being systematic about your data collection
- include open-ended questions - don't use questions that can be answered with "yes" or "no" or other single words.
- aim to stimulate discussion and information sharing
- use questions that stimulate more responses (data) such as "What influenced your supervisor's decision to revise your work policy on health protection?"
- include follow-up questions or probes
- allow for spontaneous questions if something important comes up
- be pilot tested to be sure it is appropriate for the type of people being interviewed and that it really gets information you need

**S15: Use of Probes**

Remember you are a researcher and your job is to collect descriptive, specific information. Vague comments such as "I agree" or others that are not clear require a follow-up question, sometimes called a probe, to find out more specifically what a participant may be thinking. Here are some probes you can use:
Focus Group Presentation Notes

➢ Would you explain further?
➢ Can you give an example of what you mean?
➢ Would you say more?
➢ Is there anything else?
➢ Please describe what you mean.
➢ I don't understand.
➢ Tell me more about that.
➢ How does that work?

Probes for the whole group.
➢ Who else has something?
➢ What about the rest of you?
➢ I see people nodding their heads; tell me about it.
➢ We want to hear all the different points of view. Who else has something that might be a bit different?

S16: Conclusion Slide- Module 1
In this module we reviewed the following:
➢ Definition of a focus group
➢ Sample selection process
➢ Ethical considerations
➢ Validation Strategies
➢ Development of an Interview Guide

Module 2: Recruitment

S1: Cover Slide
S2: Acknowledgements
S3: Recruitment Strategies
➢ Purposeful sampling
➢ Participant inclusion criteria
➢ Ethical concerns in participant recruitment
➢ Successful recruitment strategy
Examples of recruitment materials used
➢ Essential immediate follow-up tasks when participants have been selected

S4: Purposeful Sampling
➢ Applied in qualitative research
➢ Selecting information-rich study participants
   ▶ Gain insight about the phenomenon
   ▶ Not empirical generalization to a larger population
➢ For focus groups: homogeneous sampling
   ▶ In-depth study of a particular subgroup
   ▶ Bring together people of similar backgrounds & experiences

S5: Inclusion Criteria
➢ The study purpose guides whom to invite
➢ Homogeneity criteria
   ▶ Potential participants have something in common that is essential to the study (e.g. job/occupation)
➢ Be mindful about your data analysis though
   ▶ REMEMBER: If you aim to compare different types of people's views, you must separate different types of people into separate focus groups

S6: Ethical concerns with recruitment
➢ Participants must volunteer
   ▶ Not because they feel obliged to participate
     ▶ Do not mix supervisors and subordinates in the same focus group
   ▶ Fair opportunity to be included in the participant selection
➢ Maximum number of participants in one focus group
   ▶ Recommendation: no more than ten participants
   ▶ Fair selection of participants

S7: Successful Recruitment Strategies
➢ Offers incentives to participate
➢ Applies systematic, structured, personalized, and repetitive approaches
➢ Describes the study and its benefits carefully

S8: Example of Recruitment Materials – see slide

S9: Example of Recruitment Materials- see slide

S10: Example of Recruitment reply card- see slide

S11: Follow up after recruitment
   • Send a personalized follow-up letter
S 12: Questions and Follow Up Information

Module 3: Conducting a Focus Group

S1: Cover Slide

S2: Role Clarification: Moderator and Observer/Note-taker

It is recommended that you have a designated moderator and also an additional member of the research team to serve as an observer and note-taker. The moderator asks the questions and leads the discussion. The moderator is actively engaged in the focus group discussion.

The observer/note-taker does not actively participate in the discussion. He/she takes notes about who is speaking when and observes any group dynamics during the discussion. He/she may also serve to write comments from the group’s discussion on a black board or large note paper that is visible to all to keep track of the major points and help the group to see common responses and unique responses.

S3: Moderator Role

Before the Focus Group

- **Prepare yourself mentally.** Leading focus groups requires having a clear mind, and paying attention. It is a good idea to be mindful and calm before you begin.

- **Set-up the room and equipment.** Set-up tables, chairs, and refreshments. Set-up equipment and test it to be sure it’s working.

During the Focus Group

- **Make small talk.** Welcome and greet participants warmly, as if they were visiting your home. Encourage them to have a snack, etc.

- **Introduce the focus group.** Welcome participants, provide an overview of the topic, your ground rules and ask the opening question.

- **Ask questions.** Be familiar with your questions. Ask them in a conversational format. Modify the sequence if people have already answered a question in previous discussion.

- **Anticipate the flow.** Be ready for likely scenarios.
➤ **Control your reactions.** Affirm people’s participation, but stay away from words that convey judgments such as “excellent” or “that’s good.” Stick with “uh huh” and “okay” or “yes.”

➤ **Be comfortable with the pause.** Let people have about at least 10 seconds after a comment or question. This gives people a chance to add additional comments or answer your question. Silence is okay!

➤ **Probe as needed.** You may need to ask follow-up questions to get more information or to better understand what the persons is saying. Do it.

➤ **Listen.** Your job is *to really* hear what people are saying with words, and what they are communicating in other ways. Their tone of voice, speed of talking, and non-verbal cues also can tell you what people are thinking and feeling.

➤ **Summarize the discussion.** A summary of the main points of the group and then asking people if this perception is accurate can be helpful in analysis and gives participants one last chance to clarify something.

➤ **Debrief.** This terms means to review with the research team after the focus group has been conducted. The focus is on how the focus group process went and to identify the preliminary findings. What were major ideas expressed? Was there consensus about the issues? Which questions worked well and which did not generate discussion? How could the interview guide or process be improved next time?

### S4: Guiding Principles for Moderator

➤ **Be interested in participants.** The moderator must believe that participants have valuable wisdom to contribute regardless of their position, experience or background, or if this is the fourth focus group on the same topic. **Participants are the key to the focus group.** Their comfort and sense that they have key information or experiences to share are critical to getting the data you are seeking. The moderator must communicate this in his or her manner to the participants.

➤ **Be a moderator, NOT a participant or a trainer.** The moderator’s only role is to guide the discussion. This may be difficult when you are leading a group about something important to you and that you have lots of opinions about. It may be especially challenging as a researcher if participants ask questions about something you know about, or if they seem to not understand or remember something. **Remember you are only the focus group moderator.** Do not give out information or add your opinion to the group discussion.
Be ready to hear unpleasant or disappointing views. You may not like everything you hear, but we are doing research to learn more, and we may not like all there is to learn. There may be criticism of things near and dear to your heart. Just smile and say "thank you," it doesn't mean you agree.

You can't moderate all groups. The person selected to moderate a focus group may be a factor in making participants feel comfortable. Sometimes it may be important to have the moderator have certain characteristics. Consideration should be given to factors such as gender, language, race, age, industry or union affiliation, hourly or salaried, or someone with special knowledge.

55: Preparing the Setting
- Digital audio recording tips
- Ensuring room is comfortable, private, adequate in size
- Informed Consent forms available with pens

56: Use of Field Notes
- An accurate and thorough written record of all field activities
- Includes subjective and objective data
- May be categorized as Pre and Post field Notes
- Also categorized as Descriptive and Reflective
  - Descriptive: details of what happened during the focus group
    - Descriptions of participants, their dress, demographics and their behaviors
    - Description of the setting – space and physical comfort
    - May include a diagram of the seating during the focus group to help identify who said what later
  - Reflective: subjective observations including
    - Assumptions of the researcher
    - Impressions
    - Attitudes
    - Interactions of the group with the researcher
    - Emerging themes
- Memos are also considered reflective field notes. They are usually longer more detailed emerging analyses of themes immediately after the focus group and may be added to anytime during the analysis phase.

57: Maintaining Control
As focus group moderator, you are a researcher and your job is to collect information. While your mission is quite different than that of an interrogator or police investigator, you do have a list of questions that you need answered. Your time is precious and getting focus group participants together is difficult, use your
Focus Group Presentation Notes

time very well. You will undoubtedly have to deal with people who are long-winded, or talk off topic or share irrelevant information. Other tips:

- Expect that people will contribute by being... Experts, Dominant talkers, Disruptive, Ramblers and wanderers, Quiet and shy, Inattentive, and other challenging ways.

- Let the participants know the physical gestures you will use to guide the discussion and complete the focus group in time. Pick a hand gesture you will use to let participants know you want them to wrap up their remarks.

- Avoid eye contact, ignore the respondent if he/she is dominating the group.

- Remind participants that the recorder is on and they need to talk only one at a time.

- Say “Excuse me” or “One person at a time please” when several are talking at once.

- Ask for full group participation. Say, “we want to give everyone a chance to talk.”

- To avoid the same people from jumping in to respond quickly to answer a question, say “Let’s have some who has not spoken about this yet go first.”

**S8: Avoiding a Focus Group Disaster!**

- **conduct participant outreach and recruitment early:** invite more people than you need but not too many in case they all come! Approximately 10-12 invitations might be a good rule to use to get at least 6-8 participants with a maximum of 12; follow-up so you have a good turnout.

- **provide good directions** to the focus group site for you and participants.

- **arrive early** to set up (and take care of any trouble that you find).

- **test recording equipment** before you start to record.

- **provide a meal or snacks** (pizza, munchies and drinks); knowing there will be food can help in recruiting participants and then make them feel welcome.

- have more than one digital recorder in case there are technical problems.

- have a minimum of a two person team with one taking notes.
have an accurate clock or watch to monitor time
have fun and relax, it makes others more comfortable

**S9: Debriefing**

Take some time immediately following the focus group with your co-researchers (observers, note-takers of co-moderator if one used) to:

- review any notes
- write down additional reflections
- review the responses to each question, in the order they were discussed
- review the preliminary major issues discussed during the focus group
- discuss what questions worked and which didn’t to modify future guides
- check your digital recorder to be sure it functioned ok
- Consider the following questions:
  - How did participants respond to each other in the group?
  - Was there any conflict during the discussion?
  - Were there any unforeseen problems during the discussion?
  - Did any members dominate the group? How was this handled?
  - Was there group consensus (everyone agrees on the issues from their own perspectives) or group conformity (people agree with dominant voices and opinions)?

Doing this immediately following the group is best, or soon after if you cannot do it right away. The further away from the time of the group you debrief, the more details you will lose.

**S10: Summary Slide Module 3**

In summary, the method of conducting a focus group includes:

- Providing a conducive setting to hold a discussion
- Having a moderator who is able to be an effective leader in the discussion and yet establish a good rapport with the participants
- Having a research team member serve as an observer
- Careful attention to digital recording pre-testing and quality control
- Writing field notes before and after the focus group that include descriptive and reflective data
- Team review of the process and emerging results immediately after the focus group is over (debriefing)

**Module 4: Data Analysis**

**S1: Cover Slide**

**S2: Principles of Qualitative Data Analysis**

- Data analysis is an ongoing reflective process
- It is often occurring at same time as ongoing data collection
It is not a linear process with a beginning and end
It is a process of reflecting and refining idea based on review of the data
It takes much longer than quantitative analysis – so be prepared!
It involves analysis of all data including field notes, interview transcripts and any observations

S3: Pros and Cons of Using Qualitative Software Programs
Advantages:
➢ Helps to store, organize and easily retrieve data
➢ Helps to search for common words, phrases
➢ Helps to make comparisons between cases
➢ Can organize codes in a hierarchical order to help see emerging themes
➢ Facilitates use of memos and coding books for a research team
➢ Can generate visual display of patterns in the coded data
Disadvantages:
➢ Cost
➢ Time to train

S4: First steps:
➢ Establish team analysis standards
➢ Transcription of data
➢ Transcription of field notes
➢ Verification/cleaning the data
➢ Transcript and field note review

S5: Individual Level Review
➢ Reading and reading and reading the transcripts!
➢ Identification of significant statements
➢ Assigning Coding to statements that appear of importance to topic
➢ Assigning broader categories or themes based on numerous codes

S6: Group Coding
➢ Best to have a minimum of 2 people code independently first
➢ Then come together to compare – which statements were chosen and why. What labels/codes were attached and why
➢ Need to develop a code book – can do this prior to data collection if following a conceptual framework.....otherwise develop codes by the team as analysis is happening

S7: Group Consensus with Themes
➢ Once coding scheme is accepted by team and the analysis phase progresses to making sense of all the assigned codes.....team meetings are needed to discuss emerging themes
➢ Generally the themes are categories that encompass the majority of codes – but they can be considered as a continuum...not all need be in agreement.
➢ There may be subthemes to distinguish the opinions expressed
related to a theme

S8 & 9: Validation Strategies during Analysis Phase
As noted in Module 1, the time to decide on validation strategies is in the study design phase, before it is time to analyze data!

Recommended validation strategies that could enhance rigor, trustworthiness, credibility and stability might include:

- Peer review or debriefing – asking peers outside the analytic team to review the transcripts, codes and themes and verify them
- Clarifying researcher bias – always important at the outset to examine the research teams assumptions and thoughts about what they will find and compare to what they did find. Member checking
- Rich, thick descriptions of data – using participant’s words in the names of themes and use of frequent quotes to support themes
- Reflexivity – clarifying researcher’s role in the process – was there a power imbalance between moderator and participants? How might that impact the results?
- Detailed field notes – detailed recording of subjective and objective data related to the focus group conduction. Before (pre) and after (post) the actual focus group conduction
- Developing code-book for codes and themes so there is little variation in interpretation. These need to be written and stored electronically and readily available to all team members. Use of qualitative software facilitates this but is not a necessity.
- Independent coding and then consensus coding (80% recommended at a minimum) – this requires regular team meetings devoted to data analysis. It reflects the creative process required in qualitative analysis.

S10: Dissemination Phase: Reporting Qualitative Results

Key Points:
- Know your audience
- Be careful not to fall in quantitative mode when writing
- Do not apologize for small samples or lack of reliability and validity!!! (all quantitative concepts)
- Do include methods of rigor/validation
- Describe inclusion criteria and sample in depth as well as sampling method (purposive/purposeful)
- Include reflexive strategies used throughout the process
- Include as many unique quotes as possible but choose them carefully – minimize redundant ideas in the quotes
- Identify limitations – but do not make them related to quantitative...
Standards!

- Conclude with knowledge gained and next steps in the understanding of the problem

S11: Conclusion of Module 4
In this module, we reviewed data analysis. Key points included:

- Data analysis can occur at the same time as data collection
- It must integrate reflexive methods such as pre- and post-field notes
- Identification of significant statements, assignment of codes and later thematic identification is an ongoing process
- Strategies for validation must be included in the analysis phase
- Clear code definitions need to be established by team consensus
- Identification of themes from the codes must also be established by team consensus
- Validation by having external peer review or member checking can also be done to improve trustworthiness
- Writing qualitative research results must be in accordance with principles of qualitative research methods

S12: Summary of Series of Modular Presentations

- A focus group is a qualitative group interview.

- Focus groups use an interview guide to lead participants through a relaxed discussion.

- Focus groups can foster new levels of thought and information through the exchange of ideas.

- Audio recordings are usually made of focus groups and then the recordings are transcribed into a text manuscript.

- The words of focus group participants are the data. Your notes of the interactions and emotions in the group are also data, but more subjective than what was spoken.

- The focus group moderator needs skills leading and managing discussions.

- Standards of rigor must be established before and adhered to throughout the process.

- The process of qualitative data analysis is a creative endeavor that is enhanced by adhering to ethical principles in research design, following standards in the field and integrating team building mechanisms throughout the process.
Final Module: Observing a Mock Focus Group in Progress

S13 & S14 & S15: Training Modules: References


*McQuiston, T. & Lippin, T. *Self-sufficiency research and evaluation pilot project manual.*


*We particularly want to give credit to this resource whose structure and content we borrowed from as we developed our modules.*