Guidance on Designing, Administering and Analyzing Focus Groups and Interviews[1]

This guidance on Focus Groups and Interviews is intended to provide basic tips to help programs use these methods, but it is not a substitute for having staff or consultants with basic research skills involved in design and analysis.

Definitions

A focus group is a confidential, facilitator-guided group discussion about a particular topic or set of topics, with recording and analysis of the conversation. Participants are encouraged to interact with each other as they answer a series of questions that are designed to generate discussion.

Semi-structured interviews are one-on-one conversations in which the interviewer asks questions from a pre-designed interview guide, often with both close- and open-ended[2] questions. The interviewer can ask "probing" questions about the interviewee's responses, and has more liberty to follow the flow of the conversation than in a structured interview.

Purpose

Both focus groups and interviews produce qualitative information that can be used for both program design and evaluation. Their purpose is to provide insight about diverse perspectives and experiences; these methods cannot deliver conclusions that can be applied to a whole population of young people or a whole community. Focus groups are most helpful for identifying the main perceptions and opinions among a specific group of youth or adults. Interviews are most helpful for providing uncensored and in-depth information from individuals.

- For needs assessment and design, both focus groups and interviews can identify challenges faced by youth that the program should address. Focus groups could also comment on the appropriateness of the wording of a draft survey or pre-test.
- For program evaluation, both interviews and focus groups can collect information on benefits or outcomes for participants and/or the local community, and provide suggestions for improving the program.
    - Focus groups are not a reliable *stand-alone* method to evaluate individual outcomes among youth, but they can add useful information that complements interviews, pre- and post-tests, surveys, or teacher/facilitator observation.

Confidentiality & Participant Selection

These guidelines apply to both Focus Groups and Interviews. Confidentiality rules and procedures are essential because both methods may elicit highly sensitive personal information. Following these rules, the evaluation can still generate compelling quotes to illustrate an important point in a report, publication, or publicity materials.

Participant selection guidelines ensure that the evaluation represents the perspectives of different groups involved in the program.

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[1] The guidance on Focus Groups is mainly drawn from "Evaluating Your Program: An Introduction for EMpower Grantees" written by Julie Solomon, EMpower consultant, in 2011.
[2] A closed-ended question has a list of answer choices from which respondents must choose. Examples include multiple choice statements, check-all-that-apply, and ratings formats, such as "rate from 1 to 10," or from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." An open-ended question has no list of answer choices.

Confidentiality Rules and Procedures

Confidentiality rules and procedures provide participants/interviewees with a sense of safety, encourage honest and open exchanges, and protect their right to privacy. These common rules ensure that the most basic protections are in place.

1. Notes: Any notes that identify interviewees by name are not shared with anyone except the evaluation team, and are kept hidden in a safe place. Original notes and recordings with identifying information should be destroyed after analysis.[3]
2. Recording: Interviewees/ participants should give explicit permission for recording.
3. Verbal communication: Promise not to comment on any content verbally outside the evaluation team. In focus groups, participants must make the same promise.
4. Explanation: The moderator or interviewer explains all the confidentiality procedures, both in the introductory remarks and in closing, and provides a written summary.
5. Use of quotes: In any public document, whether communications materials or an evaluation report, only identify the demographic characteristics of the interviewees or group participants.
    - Ensure that the quote does not enable others to identify the speaker. For example, if only four young people were interviewed from each school in the program, do not identify the school publicly.
    - Some interviewees might provide written approval to use their name publicly. Since most evaluations rely on notes, check the quote's wording with them, allow them to edit it, and get explicit approval to use it

Participant and Interviewee Selection

Good selection processes (sampling) capture the perspectives of distinct groups of young people and adults involved with the program, with enough representation from each group to yield useful findings. For example, programs with multiple sites have different experiences in each site, while boys have different perspectives than girls.

6. How many is "enough"? There is no general rule for a minimum number of participants or interviewees; qualitative methods do not aim to have statistically significant findings. Evaluations may use the concept of "saturation" –when no new findings are emerging -- to decide when to halt data collection.
    - For example, a program that involves 250 boys and girls in 9th and 10th year of schooling might plan 4 focus groups of 8 youth each-- two for girls, and two for boys. If the findings in the two girls' groups are similar, there is no need to run a 3rd group. If there are clear differences between the two boys' groups, a third group would be advisable.
    - In the case of interviews, plans tend to be more complex. Evaluations generally take a sample[4] of larger groups (boys and girls, younger and older adolescents, parents, for example) and also interview specific adults whose opinions are important to the program ("stakeholder interviews").
        - When interviewing the sample, researchers will notice when later interviews begin to echo the themes of the earlier ones. If all significant categories of interviewees are already represented, data collection can be halted.
7. Sampling and Recruitment: When a program serves a large number of youth, it is not feasible, usually, to include all youth in the evaluation, and must choose a sample.
    - Please see the resource from "Changing Minds" website for in-depth descriptions of many different sampling methods (*http://changingminds.org/explanations/research/sampling/choosing_sampling.htm*).

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[3] A stricter procedure would require that the first step in processing notes is to convert all names to an identifying number. A separate sheet matches each number with the characteristics you might need to know in analysis, such as age, sex, community, or stakeholder group in the case of adults.

[4] A sample is a subset of a larger population group, such as all youth in communities the program serves. The sample is selected to represent as closely as possible the profile of the larger group, so that the evaluation can draw conclusions about the attitudes and opinions of the group.

- Perhaps the easiest method to implement is systematic sampling (every nth person in a group). Using this method from a list of 2,000 youth participants, choose every 40^{th} name to get 100 interviewees. Then check the list to make sure that no sub-group is over-represented. For example, if the sample of 100 has 70 male interviewees, use a system to substitute 20 males with females from the full list.
- Recruitment can be challenging, especially for focus groups, which are planned for a specific time and place. Address barriers to access, such as transportation costs (which should be reimbursed), so that the group represents as closely as possible the profile of the youth involved in the program.

Basic Guidance on Focus Groups

- <u>Group size and composition</u>: The ideal focus group size is 6-10 participants -- enough people to generate discussion, but small enough that everyone can participate actively.
  - Sampling for focus groups is difficult because of the recruitment challenges
    - Don't choose participants from those most active in the program, because their views may not represent opinions of the whole group of beneficiaries.
  - Focus group participants should be the same gender, and similar ages, so 1-2 groups each for girls and boys, as well as older male and female youth.
- <u>Facilitator:</u> The focus group facilitator should be—and perceived as—a trustworthy, neutral person.
  - If the discussion focuses on views about the program, the facilitator should not be directly involved in implementation of the program.
  - He/she should not take sides in the discussion nor appear to like or dislike any responses.
  - She/he should be skilled at encouraging the participation of everyone in the group without making any member feel pressured to speak
- <u>Length</u>: Focus groups range from 1-2 hours in length. Two-hour groups should take a short break.
- <u>Arrangement</u>: The facilitator and the participants face each other around a table or in a circle to promote active discussion
- <u>Introductions and Ground Rules:</u> It usually takes at least 10-15 minutes for brief introductions of the facilitator, note-taker, and group participants, and for the facilitator to summarize the purpose of the group, how the information will be used, confidentiality procedures, and other ground rules. Participants must provide written or recorded consent for recording. Ground rules should include:
  - *Voluntary participation:* Participants do not have to answer questions that they do not want to.
  - *Respectful interaction:* Participants are urged to listen without interrupting, and when disagreeing, not belittle other participants' opinions.
- <u>Note-taking and Recording:</u> An additional person (not the facilitator) serves as an observer and note-taker. Notetaking on a computer saves time later.
  - Right after the group, the facilitator and note-taker fill in details from memory, highlighting notes that seem to be the best summaries of any agreements or disagreements among the group.
  - Ideally, the discussion will also be audio recorded, as a back-up for the notes, to capture compelling quotes, or fill in areas where the notes are not well understood.
  - <u>Guiding questions:</u> Focus group questions are designed in advance. They are generally open-ended, encouraging participants to address "how?", and "why?".

    - It is helpful to prepare prompts, which are follow-up questions if the initial question does not stimulate enough conversation. Prompts should not be leading questions, such as a question that assumes there was a benefit/change as a result of participation. See example below, to evaluate a livelihoods program.
- Closing and follow-up: When 10 minutes remain, the facilitator briefly summarizes the main points in the discussion, to see whether anyone has additional important points. In closing, the facilitator thanks all the participants for their thoughts, reminds them why the information will be useful to the program, and repeats confidentiality rules.
    - Whenever possible, it is good research practice to share the results of analysis and any reports on the evaluation findings with the participants

> Example of main focus group question: Did you learn anything important during the program, and if so, could you explain why is it important to you?
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> Examples of prompts:
> a. Did you learn anything new about how to think about your future employment?
> b. Did you learn anything new about how to look for employment?
> c. Did you learn anything useful about how to communicate with a potential employer?

Semi-structured Interviews

Interviews can produce invaluable information, and are often the best or only way to get certain insights or in-depth information on the program. However, they need to be carefully planned, as they produce large quantities of qualitative data that are time-consuming, challenging, and often expensive to collect, process, and analyze. The method demands basic research skills among staff or consultants. For these reasons, interviews tend to be used as a complement to other methods.

Common examples of uses of interviews in evaluation include: gaining insight on puzzling findings from a survey; identifying which aspects of the program were most responsible for changes among youth; understanding how the program is viewed by NGO partners or key stakeholders such as teachers or local officials; or obtaining information from a sample of youth on how they benefited from the program, or on sensitive topics that they might not want to discuss with peers in a focus group.

Planning and Design

1. Adapt interview guides to different groups of interviewees. If interviewing more than one group, you need to decide who will be asked which evaluation questions. Evaluations often include different interview guides based on the unique information needed from each type of interviewee, as well as common questions in all the guides.
    - For example, interview guides for external stakeholders such as other NGOs, local officials, or local business owners often ask for information on the program's reputation, and on how well it serves the local community. Youth participants will answer questions about their individual experience with the program.
2. Keep the guide brief! Ask: "what do I really need to know from this group of people?" Too many questions tire people out, so most interviews only last from 30-60 minutes. If the guide includes only open-ended questions, aim for a maximum of 8-10. The fewer the questions, the easier the analysis.
    - If interviewing very busy people, expect that they might only give a half-hour, and decide in advance which questions to cut if necessary.
    - If the guide starts with 2-3 general questions that relate to the main purpose of the interview, many people will talk at length in response, and answer many of the following questions in the guide, thus saving time in the interview.
3. Develop a standard introduction: Talking points for scheduling the interview and then again at the beginning of the interview usually include: the purpose of the interview and how the data will be used, procedures for confidentiality and for asking permission to quote, consent for recording and/or taking

notes. Early in the interview, also double-check how much time the person has available, and ask whether she or he has any questions.

4. Train and orient interviewers: Many evaluations use more than one person to conduct interviews; they need to be trained and oriented as a group, to ensure that the data from interviews will be comparable. Periodic group check-ins on difficulties in conducting the interviews, or on unexpected issues that that emerge, are important, as is feedback to individual interviewers on their data from the team leader. Less experienced interviewers tend to miss opportunities to ask additional questions when an important point comes up in the interview.

Conducting the Interview and using notes

5. During the interview:
    - Ideally, one person conducts the interview and another person takes notes and is in charge of recording. In many cases, though, the interviewer must do it all.
    - The interviewer's main job is to listen, take notes, and remain friendly and neutral. Don't interject opinions, or give advice. Encourage the interviewee to speak up if they don't understand a question.
    - Don't be afraid to say: "I want to be sure I have understood you correctly," and then ask clarifying questions or paraphrase your understanding of a point. Most interviewees appreciate it when an interviewer is serious about understanding their point of view, and this gives you the chance to be sure of capturing their main ideas in the notes.
    - Keep track of time. If the interviewee has talked at length in response to the first questions, check the guide, say you want to make sure to cover all important questions, and ask only those prompts or questions that have not yet been addressed.

Analyzing and Reporting for both Focus Groups and Interviews

1. <u>Processing the notes and/or recordings</u>
    - Transcription of the recording is time-consuming and expensive, and in most evaluations this is not necessary.
    - Always take written (or typed) notes, even when recording. The recording is for backup. Immediately after the interview, fill in the written notes from memory to better understand them later, and refer to the recording when a point is unclear.
    - <u>Reorganizing the notes</u> makes analysis much easier. The individual or group often answer or discuss more than one question in their responses.
        - If not typed initially, do so and re-organize the notes so that all content related to a specific question is together.
2. <u>Data analysis:</u>
    - <u>Summarizing themes</u>: Look at all answers to each interview question as a group: what are the trends? Note common themes, and areas where responses vary.
        - Even if there are only 10 interviews, it is worth reporting numbers when a significant majority – such as eight or more -- have similar responses.
        - When numbers interviewed are small, do not use percents in reporting trends.
    - <u>Reporting quantitative data</u>: Interviews can include some close-ended questions, such as responding on a 5-point scale how strongly they agree or disagree with a statement. These findings are reported in numbers and/or graphics.
3. <u>Short reports are more useful:</u> There may be different audiences for the evaluation – donors, youth participants, local communities, other NGOs. Which aspect of the findings will interest each of them? Make short reports on these aspects.
    - Audio tapes help identify quotes that express ideas in clear and compelling ways for reports and other program publicity, so long as confidentiality is maintained.
    - *Don't get lost in the details:* The data is complex and often fascinating. Pick out the major common ideas, as well as insights that will be useful to the program.

Additional Resources

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, *Using Qualitative Methods in Healthcare Research: A Comprehensive Guide for Designing, Writing, Reviewing and Reporting Qualitative Research*. The page on "Common Methods and Analytical Approaches" includes Observation, Interviewing, and Collecting Texts. Focus groups and semi-structured interviews are described on the Interviewing page. http://www.qualres.org/HomeComm-3597.html

Changing Minds, *Choosing a sampling method.*
http://changingminds.org/explanations/research/sampling/choosing_sampling.htm