Understanding Focus Groups

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What is a Focus Group?

A focus group is a **guided conversation** with a small group of people to gather opinions, experiences, and ideas about a **specific topic.**

Unlike one-on-one interviews, **focus groups** encourage participants to **interact and engage** with each other, fostering deeper conversations and more nuanced insights.

Observing how people talk and respond within the group can also reveal **shared values** and social norms.

(Crano, Brewer, & Lac, 2015)

Why Have a Focus Group?

- Voices of the **community** are heard in the decision-making process
- Provides space for **dialogue** and connection
- Understanding **lived experiences**
- Participants build on each other's responses, often leading to **richer insights** than you'd get from a survey or interview ("Oh, I hadn't thought of that!")

Before You Begin

Decide:

- What is your main goal?
- What question are you trying to answer?
- What do you hope to learn from this focus group?
- What decisions will this group help you make?

~~Let's just get a group of people together and see what comes up!~~

Know what question you are trying to answer BEFORE the focus group

Recruitment Tips

- **Ask yourself:** Who do we *really* need to hear from?
- **Recruit:** Flyers, word of mouth, social media
- **Offer:** Stipend or gift card to honor their time and input
- **Remind:** Text, email, or phone reminders before the session

Recruitment Tips for Incarcerated Individuals

- **Get permission:** Facility leadership, program coordinators, reentry staff, etc.
- **Use:** Existing classes or support groups already in facility – have facilitators spread the word
- **Post:** Flyers or written invitations in common areas or housing areas with permission
- **Work with:** Case managers or counselors – identify those who meet criteria
- **Incentives where permitted:** Extra commissary items, certificates of participation, early release from daily work responsibility

Planning the Focus Group

- **Group Size:** 6–10 participants
- **Length:** 60–90 minutes
- **Setting:** Comfortable, private, neutral space (in-person or virtual)
- **Facilitator:** Guides discussion
- **Note taker:** Helps document without interrupting flow
- **Recorded:** (With permission) For analysis and clarification

Logistics, Setup, & Other Considerations

- **Seating:** Arrange in a **circle** or around a table so participants face each other – this encourages dialogue and makes moderator less of a focal point.
- **Food:** **Yes!** Providing food makes people feel **relaxed** and welcomed.
- **Timing:** Choose **convenient times** (evenings/weekends if necessary) based on participants' schedules.
- **Childcare:** Offering childcare often **reduces barriers** to participation.
- **Supplies:** Nametags, pens, printed questions, sign-in sheet, water.
- **Accessibility:** Consider whether you need **wheelchair access**, parking, or transit access.
- **Language:** Do you need a **translator**? Quieter participants may not be fluent in English. Consider ways to help them feel **comfortable contributing**. Consider asking what their **needs** are *before* the session – visual or hearing accommodations?

The Session

- **Start:** With an **icebreaker** to get participants feeling comfortable and lower initial tension.
- **Set:** Ground rules: what topics are off limits (if any), one person speaks at a time, be respectful of different opinions, everyone feels ***heard*****.**
- **Ask:** **Open-ended questions**; questions that cannot be answered with a simple “yes” or “no”. The purpose is to facilitate a ***conversation*** between participants.
- **Everyone:** Has an opportunity to speak; moderator **manages dominant voices** so no one voice monopolizes the conversation.

What Happens After?

- **Notes:** Or recordings are reviewed for *themes and insights*.
- **Share:** With participants what you heard—the “takeaway”.
- **Findings:** Are used to shape programs, policies, or decisions.
- **Trust:** Is built when people see their voices led to change.

Q & A

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