Using focus groups in qualitative research (...or maybe not?!)
Focus group is...

...a research method for collecting qualitative data that enables the researcher to generate data through **group discussions**. (Morgan, 1997)
Focus groups are about...

• **interaction** (that is a part of the method!) (Kitzinger, 1995)

• **interchange between the participants** (that is the valuable data) (Barbour, 2007)

• Learning from the **discussions** (about aspects of the phenomenon that were not previously known) (Morgan, 1988)

• **co-construction of meaning** in action (as a way of collective sense-making) (Wilkinson, 1998)
If a research team is interested in...

...personal narratives...
...a quick way to gather qualitative data...
...group interviews (where each subsequent participant is asked the same question) or...
...a substitute for a survey...

...then focus group is NOT the right method of data collection!
In the past

Focus groups originated in broadcasting and market research...had significant contribution to organizational research...then moved to other contexts: community development, participatory approaches, political campaigns...
In academia...

Focus groups are often used in social sciences. **In health research**, focus groups help researchers understand the meanings that participants attach to their experiences of health and illness. Focus groups can also help explore the needs, experiences and practices of health care professionals.
What does it take?

Studies that use focus groups require a team effort that includes:

- designing
- recruiting
- organizing
- moderating
- transcribing
- analyzing
- writing up
Designing: what to explore using focus groups?

• **gaps** between different groups of people (*i.e.*, *patients and health care professionals*)

• **ways in which people behave** and the motivations/meanings they attach to them (*i.e.*, *attitudes about infant immunization among [...] families*)

• **ideas, knowledge, practices** within a given cultural context (*i.e.*, *practices among health care professionals in relation to palliative care*)

• **range of experiences** within a phenomenon (*i.e.*, *to create exercise programs for women with severe menopausal symptoms*)
Designing: who does what?

- Who will moderate focus groups?
- Who will be the assistant moderator?
- Who will debrief participants at the end of the focus group?
- Who will do the organization and recruitment? How?
- Who will do the transcription?
Designing: what else to think about?

- Childcare (if appropriate)
- Parking and/or accessibility of the focus group location(s)
- Incentives (i.e., gift cards)
Designing: what about the focus group questions?

Focus group guide should include:

• Introductory question(s)
• 3-5 main topics to explore in a form of open-ended questions, ranging from less sensitive/specific to more sensitive/specific questions
• Closing question(s)
Designing: what about the ethics?

- What ethical obligations do the researchers have to the participants?
  - Participating in focus group can have either positive or negative impact on participants. (Barbour, 2007)
  - Debriefing at the end of FG is important!
- What ethical obligations do the participants have to each other?
  - Focus groups are unique because information is shared not only with the researcher, but also with the other participants.
- What ethical obligations do the researchers have to their fellow team-mates?
  - Team debriefing; self-care; pacing focus groups to allow time for reflection and rest
Designing: who should participate in the focus group?

- “Information-rich cases” are participants from which we can learn a great deal about the issue of the central importance to the purpose of the research. (Patton, 2002)

  “Focus group should be homogeneous in terms of background and not attitudes.” (Morgan, 1988)
Recruiting: how to do it?

• Create a pool of identified contacts
• Create questions for screening criteria for eligibility (and **interest to participate**!)
• Determine best times and locations for the focus groups
• Make follow-up calls to ensure attendance
  • Recruit 5-8 participants per focus group, although it is a good practice to over-recruit (8-10), in case of “no shows”!
Organizing: Checklist #1

• Checking the space
  ✅ make sure it is comfortable, without any unnecessary distractions
• Posting wayfinding signs
• Ordering refreshments
• Having all your documents in order (consent forms, etc.)
• Having gift cards (or other incentives) ready
• Checking for equipment:
  ✅ 2 audio recorders (tested!)
  ✅ extra batteries
  ✅ name tags
  ✅ paper/pens
Moderating: Checklist #1

- Remind participants about the study objectives and the FG topic
- Remind participants about ethical considerations (including their own responsibility to keep the focus group participation confidential)
- Collect consent forms and demographic information
- Remind participants that focus group will be audio recorded (and why)
Moderating: Checklist #2

State focus group rules!

- one person speaks at the time
- there is no right or wrong opinion
- the aim of the discussion is for participants to talk to each other
Skills of moderating

“interactional choreography”
(Puchta & Potter, 2004)
What does the moderator do?

- Creates a sense of “informality” and spontaneity in a formal setting
- Asks questions in a non-scripted, non-inquisitorial way
- Listens and observes
- Is attentive and (emotionally) responsive
- Tolerates silence, but also knows when to break it!
What does the moderator do?

Generates data by:

• Stimulating a wide-ranging discussion, while focuses the discussion on the chosen topics
• Stimulating participation
• Seeking clarification
• Thinking comparatively and anticipating analysis

“It is your focus, but it is their group.”
(Morgan, 1998)
What does the moderator do?

• Debriefs with the participants at the end of the focus group
  ✓ depending on the topic, sometimes a professional needs to be available for debriefing
• Debriefs with the team and practices self-care
  ✓ do not skip this step!
What does the assistant do?

• takes notes (the name of each subsequent participant and their first two words, to help the transcriptionist to identify the voices)
  
  • i.e., Mary: *I think*....
  
  John: *No, actually*...

• observes and takes notes about participants’ body language and other non-verbal communication

• takes care of late-comers
Transcribing

Researchers should:

• talk to the transcriptionist about the topic (especially if it is sensitive) and other specificities of the focus group (accents, noise, etc.)

• debrief with the transcriptionist during and after transcription

• “clean” data (check the accuracy of the transcription!)
Analysis

Sources of focus group data:
• Audio recordings/transcripts
• Notes
• Any materials developed through collective, focus group activity
Analysis: focus is on group interaction!

The analysis of focus group data is about **balancing** individual voices with group dynamic...paying attention to group consensus vs. ‘augmentative interactions’ (Kitzinger, 1994)...comparing inter-group and intra-group differences ...
Analysis: focus is on interpretative insights!

“In focus groups, the participants want to understand each other: How can two people who seem to be so similar have such different experiences? How can people who are outwardly very different in fact share the same beliefs? These are the kinds of encounters that make participants interested in finding out about each other, and those discussions give you the kinds of interpretive insights that you are seeking.” (Morgan, 1998)
In conclusion

Focus groups are:

• difficult to organize!
• not easy to moderate!
• difficult to analyze!
• however, they are also...

…ideal for exploring people’s experiences, opinions, wishes and concerns and how these accounts are articulated, censured, opposed and changed through social interaction. (Barbour and Kitzinger, 1999)
References


