

# Focus Group Facilitation

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## Qualitative Research

“Qualitative research begins with questions; its ultimate purpose is learning...Qualitative researchers seek answers to their questions in the real world. They gather what they see, hear and read from people and places and from events and activities....Their purpose is to learn about some aspect of the social world and generate new understandings that can be used.”

(Rossman & Rallis, 1998)

## Qualitative Research

Research in which the data are words / pictures / ideas...mostly anything but numbers

Research in which the data are collected and analyzed by the researcher, not by any mechanical means

(Jacobs, 1985)

## Qualitative Researchers

Qualitative researchers are learners, and qualitative inquiry provides the detailed and rich data for this learning process. The learner - the researcher - makes choices that shape and are shaped by the emerging processes of inquiry.

(Rossman & Rallis, 1998)

## Assumptions

- Realities are multiple and socially-constructed
- There is a mutually-shaping relationship between the knower and the known
- Inquiry is value-laden
- The purpose of research is understanding

## Principles

1. The primary objective is understanding.
2. An emic perspective is necessary to achieve understanding.
3. Phenomena must be studied in their natural settings.
4. Phenomena must be studied from a holistic perspective, and with attention to their unique contexts.
5. Qualitative data are collected and analyzed by means of a “human instrument”.
6. Analysis of qualitative data builds understanding inductively, from the data themselves.
7. Standards of rigor are different, but no less mandatory than those used to judge quantitative research.
8. Qualitative methods demand special attention to conducting research with ethical obligations in mind.

## Focus Groups

“The groups are generally composed of 7 to 10 people who...have been selected because they share certain characteristics relevant to the study’s questions. The interviewer creates a supportive environment, asking focused questions, to encourage discussion and the expression of differing opinions and points of view....This method assumes that an individual’s attitudes and beliefs do not form in a vacuum: People often need to listen to others’ opinions and understandings to form their own....Often, the questions in a focus group setting are deceptively simple; the trick is to promote the participants’ expression of their views through the creation of a supportive environment.”

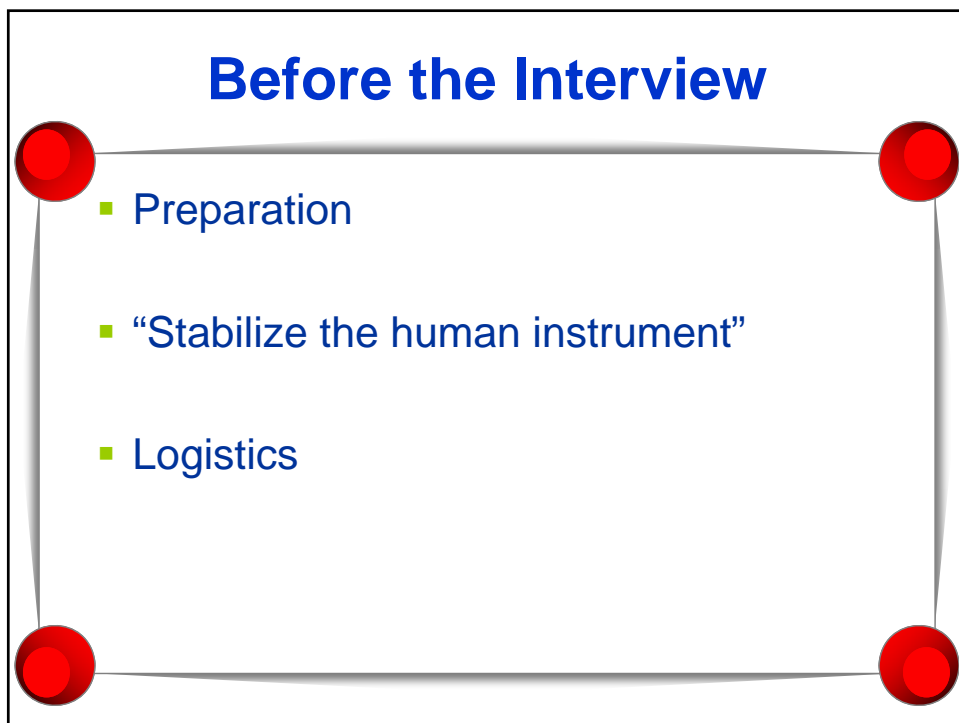
(Marshall & Rossman, 1999)

## Phases of the Interview

Phase One: Before the Interview

Phase Two: Conducting the Interview

Phase Three: After the Interview



## Preparation

- Review the interview materials
  - Understand the study
  - Understand interviewing
- Meet with your interview partner
  - Who will play what role?
  - How will you work together?
  - How will you build rapport?

## Preparation

- Review the interview script
  - Be familiar with the components of the script
  - Be familiar with the questions
  - Understand what is being asked
- Practice
  - Script
  - Questions
  - Taking field notes

## “Stabilize the Human Instrument”

- Qualities of a good interviewer
- Building rapport and trust
- Reflection
  - What do you think you are going to hear?
  - How will that influence what you hear?
  - How will you open yourself to hear students' stories?

## “Stabilize the Human Instrument”

- Consider
  - Your assumptions
  - Your values and attitudes
    - about the study
    - about Cornell
    - about students
    - about leadership
  - “Snakes” in the field
    - role conflicts, communication skills, expectations, only hearing what you want to hear

## “Stabilize the Human Instrument”

“The issue is not whether personal factors will be present, but when, which ones, and with what impact.”

~ Glesne

## Logistics

- Location
  - know where you are going (room / building)
  
- Time / Date
  - be certain about the date and time
  
- Check and re-check the equipment
  - tape recorder
  - batteries

## Logistics

- Bring to the interview
  - Room location information
  - Interview partner contact information
  - Interview script and questions
  - Informed Consent documents
  - Tape recorder
  - Tapes
  - Extra batteries
  - Paper and several pens for taking field notes

## Logistics

- Arrival
  - 15-20 minutes prior to interview time
  - arrange the room
    - chairs in a circle
  - set up tape recorder
  - be prepared to greet participants



## Conducting the Interview



## Points to Remember

- Look for meaning, the perspectives of the participants in the study.....their story.
- Questioning, listening, and observing are tools that can help in the interview process.

## Focus Group Interviewing

- Interviewer creates an open environment, asking questions that focus closely on one topic
- Interaction among the participants is the critical characteristic of this type of interviewing

## The Beginning

- Getting things off on the right foot—start on time
- Issues to cover: Introduce yourself, why you are here, why they are here, informed consent (obtain signatures), assure confidentiality, the research process and purpose, announce that the interview will be taped (begin taping) and begin questions.
- Stop talking

## The Middle

- Record interview data—electronic and manual
- Listen
- Look attentive
- Check emotions
- Keep track of time
- Be patient
- Naivety
- Be nondirective
- Periodically check on tape recorder
- Probe for more information (silent, echo, uh-huh probes)

## Bad Questions

- Yes/No - elicit only short answers
- Multiple questions - respondent might not answer at all
- Presupposition questions-presupposes the interviewee has something to say
- Leading questions-leads interviewee to respond in a way you would like
- Vague or irrelevant questions

## Follow Up Questions

- Follow up questions
  - Open-ended elaborations (would you tell me more about that)
  - Open-ended clarifications (rephrasing)
  - Detailed elaborations (who else was there)

## The End

- Issues to cover: reiterate what you heard
- What should I have asked you? What did I miss?
- End interview on time
- Thank everyone for attending.

## Observations

- Second data source, not primary.
- Gives meaning to the words of the person being interviewed.
- What to observe? Setting, participants, events, acts, gestures, non-verbal behavior.
- Question your assumptions
- Provide alternative explanations for what is going on
- Pay attention: immersion in the setting; move from wide-angle lens to narrow, and back. Take different perspectives.
- Key: check out what you think you saw and ask questions of your observations.

## Taking Field Notes

- Descriptive: The descriptive data of what you observe. What do I see? What is happening?
- Analytic: Your comments on the descriptive data or on the project itself. Why do I think so? How do I know? What does this have to do with my research? What is going on with me as I observe?
- Thick descriptions

# Sample Field Notes

## Interview Group

### Date – Facilitator Names

[Chuck] – senior, male, psychology

[Marge] – freshman, female, religious studies

[Mel] – senior, male, English

# Sample Field Notes

## Notes on What's Said

**How did you come to be a participant in the School of the Americas trip?**

[Ma] – For me, most surprising thing = went on trip bcs. enc. by others who'd gone before. Facilitators encouraged. Looked at it = political thing. By end, found trip = very spiritual, very personal.

[Ch] – Hist major. Didn't know a lot before I applied to go. Learned a lot when applied. And, during information process. It was more of a learning trip. Thought I would be objective.

## Your observations

[long pause before anyone answers]

Why shift from pol - spiritual?  
[what's the relationship to this study?]

Objective? [why am I reacting to notion of objectivity?]

## Sample Transcript

[after the heading portion]

**How did you come to be a participant in the School of the Americas trip?**

[Ma] – For me, I think the most surprising thing is, I went on the trip primarily because I was encouraged by other people who had gone on the trip previously. And, some of the facilitators of the trip encouraged me to attend. I went looking at the thing primarily as a political issue. But, throughout the trip and at the end of the trip, I found the trip itself to be a very spiritual, very personal experience. And, I think I learned a lot about myself and my own place in the world, politically and spiritually.

[Ni] – As a history major, I didn't know a lot about it before I applied to go and when I did apply I learned a lot. And, during the information process before we went, I learned a lot. It was more, at the point, of a learning trip. And, when I went I thought that I would be objective.

## After the Interview

## *Immediately*

- Clean the room
  - return to its original state
  - pick up trash, remaining items
- Fill in your notes
- Label the tape - “Date + Last Name”
- Process with your interview partner

## *Immediately*

- Complete the “Interview Summary” form
  - detailed
  - initial step in data analysis
- Secure the “Informed Consent” forms
  - place in manila envelope
  - return to OIR, Box 2229

## Questions

- What questions / concerns do you have about facilitating a focus group?