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FOCUS GROUPS: A TOOL FOR UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITY PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES

BY

LORNA MICHAEL BUTLER, FORMER EXTENSION ANTHROPOLOGIST
DEPARTMENT OF RURAL SOCIOLOGY

COLETTE DEPHELPS, COMMUNITY FOOD SYSTEMS PROGRAM COORDINATOR
PALOUSE-CLEARWATER ENVIRONMENTAL INSTITUTE

ROBERT E. HOWELL, EXTENSION SOCIOLOGIST (RETIRED)
DEPARTMENT OF RURAL SOCIOLOGY
WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY
A FOCUS GROUP IS A SPECIAL KIND OF ORGANIZED DISCUSSION OR SERIES OF DISCUSSIONS. IN FOCUS GROUPS, DISCUSSION IS GUIDED BY A FEW SPECIFIC QUESTIONS. THESE QUESTIONS FOCUS ON DIFFERENT ASPECTS OF A TOPIC. FOCUS GROUP TOPICS MIGHT INCLUDE WATER QUALITY AND ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES, TECHNOLOGY IMPROVEMENT, PROGRAM OR PRODUCT ACCEPTABILITY, OR WAYS TO IMPROVE A COMMUNITY SERVICE. THE PURPOSE OF A FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW IS TO GAIN A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING OF PARTICIPANTS' VIEWS AND EXPERIENCES, THEIR FEELINGS, PERCEPTIONS, BELIEFS, KNOWLEDGE, AND ATTITUDES ABOUT THE TOPIC BEING INVESTIGATED. THE TECHNIQUE IS FREQUENTLY USED IN MARKET RESEARCH AND IN IDENTIFYING NEEDS AND INTERESTS OF HUMAN SERVICES AGENCY CLIENTELE. IT IS A USEFUL AID IN COMMUNITY PROBLEM SOLVING AND PROGRAM EVALUATION.

In this publication we will discuss:

(1) potential uses of the focus group technique as a tool for understanding views about issues and obtaining ideas for their resolution;

(2) fundamentals about organizing and implementing a focus group interview; and, in conclusion,

(3) ways of organizing information collected through focus group interviews for effective report writing and the development of related presentations.
### TABLE 1. **WHEN TO USE A FOCUS GROUP**

- **WHEN CREATIVE GROUP THINKING IS DESIRED**
- **WHEN FACING COMPLEX PROBLEMS**
- **WHEN A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON DIFFERING PROPOSALS FOR RESOLVING A PROBLEM IS NEEDED**
- **WHEN CLARIFICATION IS NEEDED**
- **WHEN IDEAS, PERCEPTIONS, AND ASSESSMENTS ARE NEEDED QUICKLY**
- **WHEN IT IS DIFFICULT TO OBTAIN NEEDED INFORMATION IN WRITING**

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**EXAMPLES OF FOCUS GROUP APPLICATIONS**

Focus groups are often used to get more information about a community, population, organization, product, or service. This information might include: needs, history, concerns, reactions, perceptions, behaviors, and/or problems. Focus groups are also used to:

1. learn in advance how people will react to programs, methods, policies, products, and/or services;
2. identify problems, constraints, costs or benefits; stimulate creative thinking, e.g., about potential solutions, opportunities, linkages, or identify potential impacts;
3. set priorities or narrow a problem;
4. obtain more depth of information;
5. obtain a more accurate picture of cultural or social class groups different from the investigator’s own;
6. involve new audiences;
7. get feedback quickly; and
8. get public input with few meetings and focused agendas.

The process itself can be modified to suit the needs of organizers and the interests of the group participants.
The potential impacts of agricultural activities on estuarine water quality are of increasing concern to recreationalists, scientists, environmental groups, regulatory agencies, and other segments of American society. In response to this concern, the Padilla Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve (Reserve) contracted with Washington State University to investigate the feasibility of a Reserve owned agricultural research and education farm to preserve and enhance surface and groundwater quality within the Padilla Bay watershed.

Recognizing the need to understand the particular agriculture/estuary concerns of various interest groups, the feasibility study team used a modified delphi method and focus group interview to identify issues which might be addressed by research or educational activities on the Reserve farm. Five growers who farmed within the drainage basin where the Reserve farm would be located were invited to attend an evening meeting at the local agricultural experiment station. Since it was the middle of the planting season, only three growers were able to attend.

Following introductions, the study team briefly described the feasibility study they were undertaking, presenting maps and other information about the Padilla Bay estuary. The county extension agent then asked the growers to identify issues related to agriculture and the estuary environment which were of concern to them. This information was recorded by the project coordinator. Following a discussion of the issues identified, the growers had the opportunity to ask more questions about the project and to convey their perceptions of the usefulness of a Reserve owned research and demonstration farm.

When the meeting adjourned 2 1/2 hours later, the study team had learned what issues growers in the region were concerned with and how they initially felt about the proposed Padilla Bay farm project. The growers who attended learned about a project which could affect their production practices and were asked to articulate their needs and concerns prior to project implementation.

Source: DePhelps, 1993.
In order for the focus group technique to be a successful tool for understanding interest groups’ views, the participants must have something in common related to the topic being addressed, e.g., single parents, unemployed mill workers, participants in an educational program. In some cases, they may exhibit similar social qualities (social class, cultural identity, age). This will foster comfortable interaction among participants. Group participants should also be representative of some larger group or population of relevance to the study.

TABLE 2.

PREREQUISITES FOR SUCCESSFUL APPLICATION

- A COMMITTED TEAM LEADER WHO UNDERSTANDS THE PROCESS
- LEGITIMIZATION, E.G., SPONSORING GROUP
- COMPOSITION OF IMPLEMENTATION TEAM AND ABILITY TO WORK AS A TEAM
- FACILITATOR SKILLS
- IMPLEMENTATION TEAM MEMBERS’ KNOWLEDGE OF THE ETHNOGRAPHIC INTERVIEW TECHNIQUE
- SELECTION OF FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWEES
- PERSONAL ATTENTION GIVEN TO INTERVIEWEE PARTICIPATION
- WELL-PLANNED FOCUS INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
- ORGANIZATION BEFORE FOCUS INTERVIEW MEETINGS
- METHOD OF DOCUMENTING DISCUSSION (ACCURATE BUT NOT DISTRACTING)
- AVAILABILITY OF IMPLEMENTATION TEAM AND INTERVIEWEES FOR GROUP PARTICIPATION IN DATA ANALYSIS
When information is sought from several special interest groups who may be in conflict, more than one focus group session may be held so each interest group can meet separately. The number of different groups interviewed has to do with the amount of diversity in the population under study or the complexity of the issue. If there is very little variation, then a single group may do the trick. If not, then more groups may be necessary. Then the information obtained and ideas generated can be integrated or compared and contrasted. The complexity of the issue may also require more than one interview with each group.

The place the focus group meets should be easy to get to and neutral to all participants.

An interviewer/facilitator who is knowledgeable about the topic being addressed and skilled in asking questions and probing for information without biasing the answers.

An assistant interviewer who has the same knowledge and skills as the interviewer, but serves as a recorder and helper. If summary statements are recorded on newsprint, the recorder should be able to write statements that are visible and understandable by all participants.

A group of participants, about 8-10 in number, should be purposefully selected to represent some larger population or group of relevance to the problem or situation being investigated.

Each session should be no longer than two hours in length, with all participants encouraged to actively and creatively express their views in response to the questions asked. Sessions may be tape recorded, or recorded on a lap top computer, as an aid to data analysis and more in-depth understanding. Video taping may be useful, or a summary of key points can be recorded on newsprint and displayed in clear view of participants. Interaction among participants is encouraged throughout the interview session.
ORGANIZING AND CONDUCTING THE INTERVIEW

PREPLANNING ACTIVITIES

Identify qualified persons to serve as the interviewer and assistant interviewer. The interviewer should be able to

(1) maintain a neutral style to avoid biasing the findings,

(2) develop rapport with the participants and set them at ease,

(3) have skills in conducting group interviews.

In the event that more than one interview is conducted, use of the same interview team will help maintain consistency of questions and probing as well as interpretation of findings.

Obtain support or sponsorship from key people and groups, e.g., advisory boards and policy councils. Other resources may also be secured such as appropriate facilities and monetary or other forms of compensation to be used as an incentive to prospective participants.

Recognize constraints on the work, e.g., major events occurring at the same time, and conflicting demands.

PLANNING ACTIVITIES:

Begin by clearly specifying the purpose(s) of the study—the why?

Decide on the population or the group to be studied—the who?

Identify the questions that need to be asked—the what?

Consider how the findings will be used? Ask the persons who have a vested interest in the problem being investigated or the solution being proposed (the stakeholders) what their informational needs are.

Develop a plan for implementing the study. The plan should include a method of identifying and recruiting participants, coordination of arrangements for facilities, refreshments and compensation of participants for their time, and the development of a timeline for carrying out specific actions.
**Design** the interview session to include a statement of purpose, the preparation of an agenda, the identification of pre-interview activities such as an informal reception, statements used to welcome the participants, discussion of ground rules, the provision of information about the location of rest rooms and the availability of refreshments during the interview. Compensation for participation should be considered in relation to each participant's circumstance. While cash payments may be appropriate in some circumstances, in others, recognition, gifts, refreshments, or lunch, and covering travel expenses may be all that is needed.

**Determine** whether other data collection methods, e.g., surveys, case studies, and the use of demographic information, should be used to provide complementary and supplementary data based upon the use of the findings.

**Set** priorities for action and specify responsibilities.

**Develop** a plan for recruiting the participants. The identification of incentives is important. Incentives may range from monetary payments to conveying the important contribution that can be made toward improving public programs. The recruitment plan should also include the method of contacting participants (by phone or in person, with a personalized letter in advance of the contact) and the method of confirming the commitment and communicating information about the purpose of the interview, the responsibility of the participant, as well as the date, time, and location of the interview. In some cases, it may be useful to send the questions to the participants before the meeting.

**PREPARATION**

**Identify** the questions to be asked. All questions should be of high quality and consistent with the goals of the study. Brainstorming sessions with stakeholders and colleagues can be very helpful for generating questions. These should be prioritized to identify the most relevant questions that are then carefully phrased to elicit valid information.
Arrange questions in logical sequence. Begin with more general questions that are open-ended (Table 3). These will encourage the widest possible range of responses from participants. Opening questions work best if they represent something that is familiar or comfortable to the participant. For example, an open-ended question would be, “How do you feel about the new program?” As the interview progresses, closed-ended questions can be asked. For example, “To what extent is the new program an improvement over programming in the past? Would you say the new program is a great improvement, moderate improvement, a slight improvement or not an improvement relative to programs in the past?” Questions about how to promote the new program or product can be asked after finding out whether the participants are enthusiastic about it. Be prepared to follow new lines of questioning that are of relevance to the topic but were unanticipated when preparing for the interview.

**TABLE 3.**

**EXAMPLES OF OPEN-ENDED FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS**

- What do you think should be done to help people gain better access to . . .?
- What do you think about the new . . .?
- How will the new . . . work? . . . affect the situation?
- How should the proposed . . . be promoted?
- How well is the current . . . working?
- Is the . . . effectively meeting your needs?
- How do you feel about . . .?
Establish the context for asking questions. The context statement will help the participants accurately focus on a particular issue, product, or service, and their experience with it. The statement should provide the mental framework for helping participants understand the situation being addressed. The context is best conveyed by using past tenses, for example, “Let’s begin by thinking back to . . . .”, “Consider what you did when . . . .”

Providing participants with a short, written questionnaire to reflect on and complete at the outset of the interview session can be helpful for getting them to think clearly about the topic being addressed. Written questions can ask the participants to, “List three things you liked about . . . .” or “What three things would you change in . . . ?”

Pretest the questions and context statement. For an effective pretest it would be best to select a few representatives of the population or group that has experienced the product or program being investigated. Prior to the pretest the interview routine can be tried on colleagues or loving critics. All bugs should be worked out of the questions and the interviewer should be well-prepared prior to conducting the data collection session. After each subsequent focus group session, it will be helpful to evaluate and refine the questions and the organization of the interview session.

Develop open-ended questions that cannot be answered with “yes” or “no,” or with a numerical response. Try to shape the questions to encourage description and elaboration.

Consider several probe questions or statements for each major question to clarify or encourage the participant. Probes are “hints” like, “Is there anything else?” “Would you give me an example of what you mean?” that assist participants to understand what is wanted.

Design of the interview session. All elements of the interview session from room arrangements and obtaining equipment and refreshments to the concluding activities should be enumerated. The purpose or objective of each activity on the agenda should be listed next to the item as well as the person who is responsible for assuring that it is properly executed.
Location. As noted above, the interview session should be conducted in a neutral place that is accessible to all participants. Holding the meeting in the facilities of the organization that is responsible for the program being evaluated or in a location representing a special interest in the program can lead to bias.

Room arrangements. The room should have tables and chairs that can be arranged to assure eye contact among all participants.

IDENTIFYING PARTICIPANTS

Obtain a list of people who have some experience with the program or issue being addressed or who have a particular interest in the product or service. Identify clusters of persons within the list who have some similar characteristics or common interests that will permit them to interact freely during the interview, e.g., similar age, gender, social class, community of residence, or group membership. People having a specific perspective or interest in a program should be assembled into groups so their understanding of the situation or perspective can be made clear.

Balancing participant similarities and differences is important. Differences encourage creativity, but too many differences can create conflict. Oftentimes less vocal or accessible people are overlooked as focus group participants. Other times, a very visible group representative is included who may not represent the views of the majority. Participant selection affects the outcomes of the focus group process. Where innovative solutions are desired, it may be necessary to take some risks by selecting persons who represent perspectives or interests that are different from those of the organizers.

Within the clusters, 8-10 participants that will represent the larger group can be selected at random. Selective sampling can include people who have had similar experiences with the program or product, such as teenagers or parents of teenagers. Take care not to draw someone into the group such as a dominant supervisor or an overbearing individual who may unduly influence the responses of other participants.
OBTAINING COMMITMENTS FROM PARTICIPANTS

Carefully planned notification procedures and incentives do a lot to encourage individual participation in the focus group. Prior to making telephone calls to gain commitments, send a personalized introductory letter to potential participants. Telephone several weeks prior to the meeting to further discuss the proposal and gain commitments. Follow the phone call with a written letter to confirm the commitment and convey the purpose of the interview session and the date, time and location of the meeting. Telephone the day before the interview session as a reminder.

Depending on the topic, general focus questions may be sent to participants ahead of the meeting to encourage thought about the subject. Too much information may encourage unnecessary research on the topic. Participants are not expected to act like experts, rather to speak from their own experience and knowledge. While compensation may be needed in many circumstances, it is just as important for the participant to feel his/her contribution is of significant value.

PRE-INTERVIEW ACTIVITIES

As participants enter the interview room, it will be important to greet them and to carry on appropriate “small talk.” This will help the participants feel welcome and convey that they are valued consultants. Since participants arrive at different times this part of the interview process maintains a warm and friendly environment until a sufficient number of participants are present to begin the session.

During the pre-interview session it will be important to discover individuals who may dominate the group, or those who may be excessively shy, or consider themselves to be experts. By understanding the group, the interview leaders avoid potential problems. For example, it has been suggested that a helpful technique for dealing with domineering individuals is to seat them next to the leader of the group. A shy or quiet person can be seated immediately across from the leader to assure maximum eye contact.
FOOD SAFETY CONCERNS

In the wake of the Alar scare, a multidisciplinary group of 15 academics and government agency personnel, representing very different points of view on the subject of food safety, gathered around a horseshoe-shaped table for a 3-hour focus session. Initially, because of their disparate world views, group members adamantly disagreed about the food safety issue. As the participants expressed their points of view and frustrations, a non-linear outline of the discussion grew on the chalk board like a strawberry plant. The process of drawing the discussion map gave individuals the opportunity to recognize the complexity of the food safety issue and how their own views fit within a more complex picture of the subject. The strawberry plant “mind map” aided the group in creating a holistic view of the problem, broadening their understanding of food safety issues.

The group arrived at a constructive and bridge-building conclusion. They decided to abandon attempts to identify the “correct” point of view and to “educate the public.” Instead, the participants chose to develop an educational program aimed at helping people understand how risk perception and understanding facilitate sensible compromise. The focus session format assisted the participants in listening to, understanding, and gaining more respect for each other.

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

Arrange seating so everyone has eye contact, i.e., equally spaced around table. Use name tags or name cards at seating locations.

Facilitator team members assume mutually agreed upon roles with interviewer or lead facilitator greeting participants, welcoming them, seating them, and making “small talk” until a comfort level is established.

LEADING THE INTERVIEW

The interviewer/facilitator is concerned primarily with directing the discussion and keeping it flowing (Table 4). The interviewer takes very few notes.

The assistant takes comprehensive notes, operates the tape recorder or computer, records the discussion on newsprint, and handles logistics such as room arrangements and refreshments, as well as unexpected interruptions.

Written documentation is essential but the method of recording should not interfere with the interview discussion. Discuss the method to be used with participants. It tends to relax participants to indicate that names will not be associated with any comments. If tape recorders or computers are used, do this openly and arrange for a note-taking back-up in case of equipment problems. Newsprint documentation works well and allows participants to observe what is recorded, and to make corrections if they wish. The easel should be visible to everyone. Careful documentation of interviewees’ comments is extremely important to ensure accurate data generation.
TABLE 4. INTERVIEW PATTERN FOR FOCUS SESSION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pattern</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• GREETINGS/WELCOME</td>
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<tr>
<td>• INTRODUCTIONS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• OVERVIEW, BACKGROUND, PARTICIPANTS' SELECTION, THEIR ROLES, AND ROLES OF TEAM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• PURPOSE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• GROUND RULES (TIME DURATION, METHOD OF DISCUSSION, RECORDING, TURN-TAKING, BREAKS, CONFIDENTIALITY, REFRESHMENTS)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• QUESTION NO. 1 (FOLLOWED BY OTHERS INCLUDING PROBES)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• UNANTICIPATED QUESTIONS (TIME PERMITTING)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• SUMMARY (RE-STATING OF MAIN IDEAS GATHERED TO ASSURE ACCURACY)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• CONCLUSIONS, EXPRESSIONS OF APPRECIATION (INCENTIVES IF APPROPRIATE), PLANS FOR FOCUS INTERVIEW NO. 2 (IF SCHEDULED), PLANS FOR DATA ANALYSIS AND PRESENTATION, INCLUDING PARTICIPANTS' FEEDBACK</td>
</tr>
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</table>
INTERVIEW TECHNIQUES:
THE PAUSE AND THE PROBE

A five-second pause and the probe following a question is a useful technique for assuring participants’ response. If this does not generate sufficient information, several short probing questions may be helpful.

The pause is most often used after a participant comment. This technique is used to prompt additional points of view as well as agreement or disagreement with a previously mentioned position. The pause can be very effective, especially when coupled with good eye contact from the facilitator.

The probe is a request for additional information. There is a tendency for people to respond with vague answers that could have multiple meanings. When this occurs the probe can help to clarify. Probes involve comments such as, “Would you explain further?” “Please describe what you mean?” “Could you give us an example?” Probes should not be overused.

Other interview methods which might be used include head nodding and short verbal responses. Different cultural groups may interpret body gestures in many different ways. Understanding the acceptability of these and other types of body gestures to all participants is extremely important.

Head nodding can be very effective but it should be used sparingly and consciously. Short verbal responses to comments such as “okay,” “yes,” or “uh huh” can be helpful, but avoid saying “that’s good” or “excellent” or “good” because they imply judgments about the quality of the information provided. It is also sometimes helpful to verbally summarize what has been stated, then follow with a comment like, “Is that what you said?” or begin the comment with, “Do I understand you to mean . . . ?”
SKAGIT COUNTY CROPPING STRATEGIES AND WATER QUALITY MODIFIED FOCUS GROUP

In response to growing evidence that nitrates were accumulating in the ground water of several western Washington counties, an interdisciplinary group of Washington State University (WSU) social and biological scientists have conceptualized a strategy to stimulate joint learning and investigation about nitrate leaching and farming practices in Skagit County, Washington. A modified focus group strategy was implemented to bring diverse agricultural and environmental interests together to jointly examine the issues, learn the facts and each others’ perceptions of the issues, and collaborate on needed solutions.

A focus group comprised of 16 persons representing a wide array of community interests was convened, in a series of 2-hour blocks, to jointly analyze the nitrate issue and its implications for western Washington farming systems. Each meeting emphasized mutual learning with sessions containing an equal balance of information delivery, in response to questions posed by participants, and information gathering, through individuals’ sharing of their own perceptions, experiences, and knowledge, and group analysis of the information.

The WSU team that initiated the focus group sessions initially anticipated the group would simply learn together about nitrates. Instead, the focus group process has consisted of a number of evolving phases: (1) learning together about nitrates; (2) defining research and educational needs; (3) planning on-farm research; (4) implementing on-farm research; (5) understanding on-station research results and implications; (6) planning for public education; (7) acquiring additional grant resources; (8) broadening the agenda to include wildlife management; and, (9) identifying mechanisms for taking greater control of the agenda. It is expected that the evolution of these phases will continue.

Outcomes of the cropping strategies and water quality focus group process include on-farm research, public education, new interest group linkages, interdisciplinary partnerships, expanded resources, and partner commitment and ownership.

The focus group process has provided a unique opportunity for a diverse group of people to examine issues of common concern. The process took advantage of participants’ different life experiences, expertise, and points of view, helping them to learn from each other about the problem, its impacts, and potential solutions.

Gather all documentation reports, notes, and tapes from each focus interview. Arrange an implementation team meeting to review all data, and to listen to tapes (or to read transcripts if available). It may be productive to include some focus group members in the data organization and analyses process to ensure greater objectivity of the findings and avoid bias. This may increase participants’ ownership in the findings and commitment to and perceived credibility of any proposed actions. Team members begin to make individual notes and highlight important words and phrases, themes, ideas, etc. The leader gathers team data on large newsprint pads easily visible to all. Follow these steps, in group fashion, for data organization:

**STEP 1.** List key words and phrases until all important ideas are noted from all reports. Do not repeat ideas, but note recurring ideas. Be true to participants’ categories and terms.

**STEP 2.** Identify themes or topics that seem to recur. List these.

**STEP 3.** Put one theme at the top of each sheet of paper. List data under corresponding theme.

**STEP 4.** Analyze each theme. Aggregate or lump related items so there are fewer categories within each theme (some themes may be merged).

**STEP 5.** Identify problems or gaps in data. Plan ways to add needed information or to clarify unknowns. Identify new concepts or ideas. Allow for team members’ interpretations, but note these so they can be separated from what has been said by participants.

**STEP 6.** Display data in some sort of tabular form if it lends itself to this approach, e.g., see Figure 1.
STEP 7. Interpret findings in relation to study objectives. Analysis of findings can be divided into 4 different levels of discussion:

- Findings. Participants’ information.
- Interpretations. What team thinks findings mean.
- Client/audience usefulness. Value of findings to users, judgments made about the value of the findings.
- Recommendations. What should be done and by whom in order to achieve study goals, and to respond to users’ needs and concerns.

STEP 8: Generate a report based on the findings. Parts of the report (depending on the audience) may include:

- Recommendations
- Methods
- Participants
- Client usefulness (judgments)
- Interpretations
- Findings
- Potential applications
Include the findings in the report to document team judgments and recommendations. Consider the possibility that further information may need to be gathered to confirm or negate team interpretations. Suggest methods for obtaining this information.

The leader writes up the report. Then it is reviewed by the team and sponsoring group. Share a summary of report with focus group participants to assure their ideas have been fairly represented.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

Audience. A report of the findings can be prepared in different ways depending on the users. Plan on several kinds of user reports that target the interests of these people.

Key Findings. Present important findings in order of priority.

Time. Take the needed time to revise, clarify, and have reports reviewed by others.

Presenter/Editor. Identify a skilled person, who understands the study and the process, to edit reports, and to make oral presentations.

Presentation Styles. Some of the following styles of presentation may be considered:

- Technical report including description of methods, charts of findings (not the best approach for decision makers, better for people interested in details).

- Executive summary of major findings and recommendations. Appropriate for decision makers, advisory committees, etc.

- Short leaflets or brochures that highlight general findings and recommended actions. Useful for community groups and general public.

- Posters which visualize central findings with pictures, charts, and few words. Appropriate for general public, young people, less literate audiences.

- Oral presentations to sponsoring group—at community or organization meetings, on radio or television. Consideration might be given to video taping selected interviewee case studies to illustrate findings.
Historically speaking, the focus group interview technique has been a highly structured, extractive process. Practitioners from many disciplines, most notably business, have used focus groups to gather information from specific interest groups. McGrath and his colleagues (1992) distinguish between the focus group technique and focus sessions. Rather than being a tool to gather information, focus sessions are designed as group learning experiences, highlighting invention, learning, and collaborative problem solving (see Figure 2). According to McGrath and colleagues, focus sessions usually meet once for 1-3 hours. Focus group interviews may meet once, but more often they meet several times.

There is much to be said for establishing a level of equality between participants and a facilitator. The degree of control participants have depends on how the focus group process is carried out. Potential for participant control and ownership increases as community involvement becomes more interactive and communication changes from predominately one-way to two-way. Practitioners with little experience in shared learning situations may have difficulty relinquishing control. As practitioner experience and comfort level increase, greater equity among all participants may evolve.

### Figure 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Practitioner/Client Communication</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Practitioners and participants jointly exchange information and learn together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus session and working groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surveys and focus group interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lectures, publications, and demonstrations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Adopted from McGrath and colleagues, 1992*
The case studies highlighted in this publication show the adaptability of the focus group interview process. As with any participatory techniques, the focus group approach should be modified to suit the situation. Case study 1 (page 3) is an example of a slightly modified, but largely traditional focus group interview, where a focus group was used to gain insight into what farmers viewed as important environmental issues in the Padilla Bay watershed. In contrast, the focus session on food safety concerns described in case study 2 (page 12) shows how the meeting format developed new insights into the problem, facilitated the development of a consensus-based educational program, and how the process can produce unanticipated outcomes.

Case study 3 (page 16) outlines a focus group process in which a diverse group of individuals met in a series of 2-hour blocks to learn about the problem of nitrates in groundwater and regional farming practices and to collaborate on needed solutions. While some of the focus group meetings were structured as focused interviews, the approach evolved into a multi-phased process of data collection, mutual learning, and problem solving.

All three case studies illustrate the usefulness and flexibility of the focus group technique. The technique is a tool for practitioners to gain an understanding of an interest group’s views about specific issues and provide a method for obtaining ideas and commitment for problem solving. The success of the method will be enhanced by the creativity and commitment of a diverse team of practitioners. Community ownership in focus group findings and outcomes will be increased if the process is designed to encourage greater control on the part of group participants.
STRENGTHS AND LIMITATION OF FOCUS GROUPS

STRENGTHS

• Provides deep understanding of issue or problem
• Group interaction may decrease individual bias
• Facilitates involvement of diverse interest groups, some of whom may be in conflict
• Participants may be selected for a purpose or randomly
• Social interaction stimulates group creativity
• Allows flexibility to explore unanticipated issues and to clarify or elaborate
• Technique is easily understood and results are credible (if accompanied by findings)
• Low cost
• Produces many ideas quickly
• Permits larger sample size for data not easily tabulated using numbers
• Accommodates short-term public involvement with few meetings, focused agendas, feedback
• Provides immediate feedback
• Forces professionals or 'experts' to listen, therefore conveying a positive public impression
• Generates practitioners' commitment to the findings of the focus group
• Can enhance public visibility for sponsoring group
• Can generate advance information in preparation for a more limited quantitative study

LIMITATIONS

• Requires a skilled facilitator to maintain group control (group can influence discussion, raise irrelevant issues)
• Facilitator requires skills in open-ended interviewing, e.g., probing, re-stating, listening, pausing
• Data which is not numerical and is more difficult to document, organize, and analyze
• Wide variation in groups requires having enough groups to provide balance
• Participants may be difficult to assemble at designated location and time
• Quality of data is dependent on group composition and combination of groups
• Requires comfortable meeting environment
• Some participants may be unwilling to share ideas in front of others
• Requires well-focused interview questions
• Some groups may not generate desired information
• Care needs to be taken when generalizing findings to a larger population
• Not suitable to easy statistical analysis
• No guarantee of confidentiality
REFERENCES

A. FOCUS GROUP TECHNIQUE


B. THE ETHNOGRAPHIC INTERVIEW AND THE KEY INFORMANT METHOD


C. QUALITATIVE RESEARCH


D. CASE STUDIES


COMMUNITY VENTURES: PARTNERSHIPS IN EDUCATION AND RESEARCH CIRCULAR SERIES TOPICS

COMMUNITY SURVEYS
SONDEO OR RAPID RECONNAISSANCE
DELPHI TECHNIQUE
FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW TECHNIQUE
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