Tools for HIV Prevention

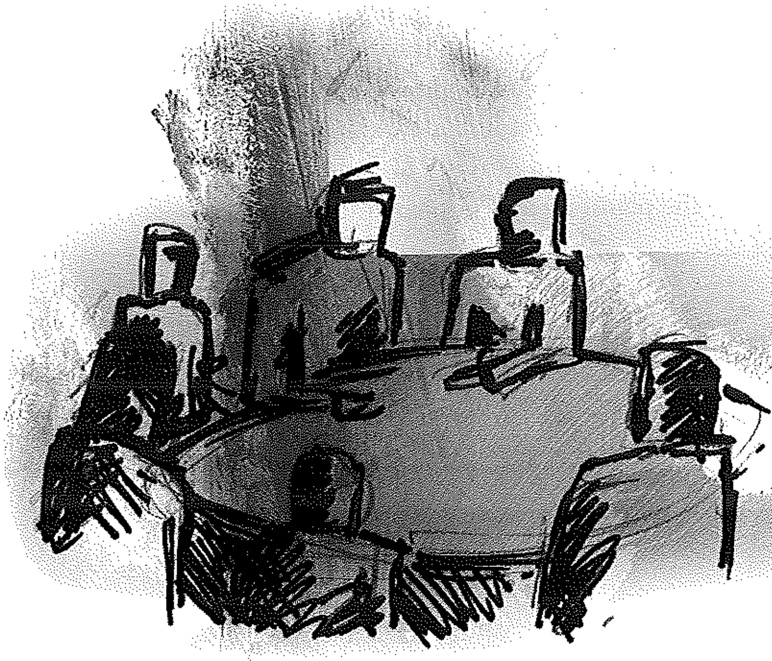
TAR Technical Assistance Reports

USCM HIV/AIDS PROGRAM

November 2000

Focus Groups

Using Them To Enhance Your HIV Prevention Programs



This issue of *Technical Assistance Reports* (TAR) provides an overview of the uses of focus groups in the design and evaluation of HIV prevention programs and materials. The intended audience is staff of community-based organizations and health departments involved in HIV prevention programming who have limited or no experience with focus group research. The information provided here is designed to help staff determine whether focus group research is appropriate for their needs and to serve as a "how-to" guide for those interested in conducting focus groups.

What Is a Focus Group?

Focus groups have primarily been employed in private sector market research but have recently become popular in social research. There are a number of key characteristics that distinguish focus groups from other discussions held in group settings. First, focus groups are a research method used to collect qualitative data (i.e., words and observations about how people think, act, and feel) based on specific research questions. Second, focus groups are composed of individuals who are carefully selected based on shared characteristics related to the purpose of the research. Third, a focus group involves focused (rather than free-form) discussion led by a trained moderator using a carefully researched, worded, and sequenced set of largely open-ended questions.

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What Focus Groups Are/Are Not

Focus Groups Are
- a method for gathering qualitative data to answer specific research questions that employs
- groups of individuals who share certain key characteristics, and
- a carefully planned and moderated interactive group discussion format to
- collect data on the perceptions of participants regarding a defined area of interest.

Focus Groups Are Not
- discussion groups
- consensus-building or decision-making groups
- "brainstorming" or problem-solving sessions
- ongoing committees
- advisory groups or expert panels
- support or therapy groups
- group "bonding" sessions (although this can happen)
- sessions intended to improve morale and encourage feelings of involvement (although this can happen)

Strengths and Limitations of Focus Group Research

Strengths
- Provides insight into knowledge, attitudes, perceptions, opinions, beliefs, motivations, and practices
- Capitalizes on the interaction within a group in a natural, real-life setting
- Provides insight on how certain groups use language (e.g., special terminology used by injection drug users)
- Provides insight into how language is understood by certain groups
- Stimulates thinking and participation through the dynamics of group interaction
- Encourages openness and candor (inhibitions are often more relaxed in a small group setting)
- Identifies variation in perspectives and attitudes on a set of topics
- Provides data more quickly and at a lower cost than individual interviews
- Can be relatively inexpensive if internal resources and volunteers are used

Limitations
- Is not based upon a representative sample so data cannot be generalized to larger populations and thus are not statistically significant
- Depends significantly on the abilities and experience of the moderator
- Groups can be difficult to manage
- Can be time-consuming and expensive if volunteers and internal resources are not used
- Can present a number of logistical problems during the planning and implementation stages

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE REPORTS (TAR), is an official publication of the Health Programs of The United States Conference of Mayors (USCM). It is published as a part of USCM's HIV/AIDS Program, funded by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) under grant #U62/CCU300609-17. Boise Mayor H. Brent Coles is President of USCM. David W. Moore, Mayor of Beaumont, Texas chairs the Standing Committee on Health and Human Services. USCM's Executive Director is J. Thomas Cochran, Roger Dahl is Director of the Office of Program Development and Technical Assistance, and Richard C. Johnson is Director of Health Programs. Nothing in this TAR should be construed as necessarily reflecting the policies of CDC. This TAR was written by Elizabeth Kresse, M.A., Senior Staff Associate, Health Programs, with technical assistance from Dora Marcus, Ph.D.

How Focus Groups Are Used to Enhance HIV Prevention Programs

Common Uses

Complement or strengthen other research methods. Focus group data can assist in the design of survey and interview instruments by identifying relevant topics, questions, and vocabulary. They can also assist researchers in interpreting and verifying data collected from other sources such as questionnaires.

Conduct a needs assessment of the target population. Organizations that plan to work in a new geographic area or with an unfamiliar target population may find it necessary to conduct some preliminary research to determine the nature of HIV risk in the population and its specific service needs. When used in conjunction with other sources of information like surveys, focus groups can provide a wealth of information on topics such as local HIV-related risk behaviors; types of services desired by potential clients; client preferences regarding program logistics (i.e., content, location, scheduling, and format); client recruitment strategies; and appropriate participant incentives.

Strengthen a grant proposal. Data gathered from focus groups held during the design phase of a program can strengthen grant proposals by demonstrating that the target population was involved in planning the program.

Design a prevention program. Focus group data can inform the design of a program by providing feedback about clients' knowledge levels, the type of information they want, and the best way to present it to them. Data can be used to identify an appropriate theme for the program, key program concepts, what topics to cover, how to present information (e.g., interactive groups versus a lecture format), and other program-related preferences.

Develop educational materials. Focus groups are invaluable in developing message content for prevention materials such as brochures, videos, and posters. They are also helpful in identifying the reading level of the intended audience, appropriate vocabulary, and the most effective format and presentation of the information.

Pre-test new materials. Focus groups can be used to review and comment on early drafts of newly developed prevention materials, thereby increasing the chances that they will be appropriate for and effective with the intended audience.

Determine appropriateness of existing educational materials or curricula. Focus groups can be used to evaluate whether existing prevention materials or curricula obtained from outside sources are appropriate for the intended audience, thereby avoiding a "one size fits all" approach that is likely to fail.

Gather client feedback during a program. Focus groups can be held at several points during the course of a program to gather information that staff can use to make needed adjustments to the program based on client feedback.

Evaluate a program upon its completion. Focus groups can be part of a program evaluation intended to assess client satisfaction with the program and its effects on clients.

Assess client satisfaction with an organization and its programs. Focus groups can be used to provide insight into how an organization and its services are perceived in the community or communities it is trying to serve. Focus groups with former, current, or potential clients can produce valuable feedback regarding barriers to community participation — or opportunities for enhanced participation — that can be used to improve the delivery of services.

Gather staff feedback. Holding focus groups to obtain insight from staff regarding their perceptions of the target population can be useful at any stage of a program. Focus groups can also be used to obtain insight into organizational factors that have facilitated or hindered program implementation.

Indirect Benefits

In addition to serving as a mechanism to gather in-depth information about peoples' perceptions, focus groups provide some secondary benefits listed below. However, if held solely for these purposes, they are not focus groups and should be called something else, such as "community forums" or "brainstorming sessions."

Empower stakeholders. Focus groups can offer stakeholders (such as staff, volunteers, clients, and community members) a forum for direct participation in the design and evaluation of programs.

Gain community support. Focus groups can help raise awareness and support for an organization and its programs in a community.

Recruit clients. Focus groups with community members offer opportunities to recruit new clients for specific programs.

Examples of Ways Focus Groups Have Been Used in HIV Prevention Services

The following examples were drawn from the program files of U.S. Conference of Mayors (USCM) HIV prevention grant recipients. They do not represent the complete range of possible uses of focus groups.

Assessing needs

A Native American community health clinic located in a southwestern city was faced with the challenge of designing the first intensive HIV prevention program in the state targeting gay/bisexual/two-spirit (GBTS) men. This was a population with little sense of community or group identity, at home in neither the gay nor the Native community and consequently very hard to reach with existing HIV prevention programs. A series of focus groups with GBTS men revealed an unexpected interest in learning more about traditional Native culture. As a result, in addition to basic HIV prevention messages, the program (which included weekly meetings and two weekend-long retreats) focused on various areas of Native culture, such as viewing videos about Native history, attending powwows, and engaging in Native rituals. These activities helped foster self-esteem and a greater sense of community, and the program was re-funded.

Developing prevention materials

A minority health education organization located in a large eastern city conducted a series of focus groups to gather information about the knowledge and perceptions of African American youth aged 14-19 regarding HIV and related health risks. The organization utilized the focus group data, supplemented by data from knowledge surveys, to tailor its educational messages and materials to that population. For example, when focus group data revealed gaps in knowledge about proper condom use, staff designed a condom storage container that displayed explicit verbal and pictorial instructions on correct use. Given the finding that young men were reluctant to buy and carry condoms (they preferred to obtain them from peers and girlfriends), the container was designed so that it could be carried discreetly in a pocket. Focus group data were also used to design and pre-test an HIV/AIDS informational brochure for youth. In response to feedback that young people felt inundated with health education brochures, staff recognized the need to design a brochure that would grab and hold the attention of young people. They developed a brochure titled "Word Up" (a popular slang term) and pre-tested it successfully in focus groups with the target population.

Gathering client feedback during a program

An organization that provides harm reduction services to substance users in a small, East Coast city held a focus group with clients of a prevention program for women at high risk for HIV to solicit feedback about their experiences with a local sexually transmitted diseases (STD) clinic. The organization was offering the women financial incentives to attend the clinic and be tested for STDs as part of the overall HIV prevention intervention. Because it was the first time the organization was sending clients to the clinic in such large numbers, program staff wanted to assess the level of client satisfaction with clinic staff and services. When focus group data revealed that the majority of women had concerns about the way they were treated at the clinic, program staff arranged a meeting with clinic staff to address these concerns and identify possible solutions prior to referring other clients to the clinic. The feedback received by clinic staff led them to institute client satisfaction surveys so they could monitor their services on a continuous basis.

Enhance morale, feelings of involvement, and group solidarity. The emotional "bonding" that sometimes takes place during focus group discussions can increase staff and client morale, feelings of involvement in a program or cause, and feelings of belonging to a group.

Focus Group Research - Step by Step

1. Determine the Purpose

Begin by writing down as clearly as possibly *how* you plan to use the data you will collect from your focus group research. Will the body of data stand on its own or supplement data from other sources such as surveys and individual interviews? Then, write down *what* you hope to learn from your research. State an overall research goal and then break it down into a few key topics. This initial formulation of your intended use of data, research goals, and topics will guide your overall research and help you develop your focus group questions.

2. Determine Whom to Study

Deciding whom to include in your focus groups requires careful consideration. For example, if the goal of your research is to obtain client feedback about your agency's HIV prevention programs, you will have to decide whether you're interested in current, past, or potential clients and whether demographic characteristics such as age, gender, sexual orientation and race/ethnicity are important. A general rule of thumb is to select participants who are similar in some key way related to your research but who, at the same time, represent a range of perspectives. Participant homogeneity increases the chances that group members will be compatible and the discussion fruitful. If you identify sub-groups within your overall target group (e.g., younger versus older gay male clients), consider dividing them into separate groups based on their common characteristics. Another traditional rule of thumb is to avoid selecting participants who know each other well because familiarity may affect group dynamics negatively. Friends may behave in a cliquish manner and may not bother to explain their perspectives thoroughly because they share certain taken-for-granted assumptions. Increasingly, however, the notion that focus groups should be composed of complete strangers is being challenged because identifying participants who do not know each other can be difficult in community-based settings.

3. Decide on the Number and Size of Groups

Decide On the Number of Groups. Whenever possible, it is better to conduct more than one focus group. With only one group, it is impossible to know whether the opinions expressed represent anything more than the particular experiences and backgrounds of that single group of individuals. That being said, there is no "perfect" number of focus groups. The main rule of thumb is to continue conducting groups until participants provide little or no new information (known as reaching *theoretical saturation*). Generally speaking, **3 to 5 groups** are needed in order to reach this point. However, the actual number of groups depends on factors such as the complexity of the research topic and the degree of participant heterogeneity within and across groups. The simpler the topic and the more similar the participants, the fewer the groups that are needed — and vice versa. If single groups are used — due to factors such as budgetary constraints and lack of participation — results should be interpreted cautiously.

Decide On the Size of Groups. There is no hard-and-fast rule about the right number of participants to include in a focus group. The challenge is to strike a balance between having enough participants to generate a lively, diverse discussion and not having so many that some people don't have an opportunity to speak or are hesitant to speak. Large groups are harder to control while small groups are more vulnerable to being dominated by aggressive or overly talkative individuals. Experts suggest a range of between 6-12 participants, with the ideal size ranging between **6-9 people**. Generally speaking, smaller groups are better for tackling personal, controversial, sensitive, or complex topics, while larger groups are preferable when the goal is to generate brief suggestions from a broad range of individuals.

4. Select and Recruit Participants

Selection

Sampling Considerations. Once you have decided on the general characteristics of focus group participants, you will have to make some decisions about which *specific* individuals to include. Most non-profit organizations that conduct focus groups on a limited budget rely on *purposive samples* (choosing participants according to project goals, such as when you select participants from a client list), *convenience samples* (choosing whoever is around who meets your selection criteria and is willing to participate), or *self-selected samples* such as volunteers who respond to notices or advertisements. While these sampling strategies are not considered *probabilistic* (statistically representative of a larger population), they are perfectly appropriate for focus group research where the goal is to gain insight from a small group of people rather than to generalize to larger groups (as is common in survey research). If, however, you would like to generalize about a larger group of people and would like to avoid *bias*, you can introduce *randomization* into your sampling strategy by ensuring that all participants have an equal chance to be included in your study. This can be accomplished in a number of ways. To obtain a *random sample*, you can throw the names of all potential participants into a container and pull out the amount of names that you need. Or you can use a random number table (obtained from statistics or quantitative research books) to select from the list of participants. Another strategy is to select a *systematic sample* by choosing every nth name on a list. For example, if you need 10 names from a list of 200, you select every 20th person on the list starting from the beginning.

Screening. If you are lucky enough to have more potential participants than you need, you can screen for the most appropriate ones. For example, you can conduct a quick, preliminary interview or administer a short questionnaire to determine whether potential participants meet your specific criteria such as age, racial/ethnic identity, socioeconomic status, or HIV-related risk behaviors.

Sources of potential participants. Some methods of identifying potential participants include:

- reviewing an existing client list or database to identify eligible participants
- obtaining membership or client lists from local non-profit organizations such as health and social services agencies, civic, and religious organizations
- contacting community "gatekeepers" or leaders and asking them to refer you to potential participants
- soliciting referrals from already identified participants who can provide the names of other individuals who share similar characteristics (known as *snowball sampling*) but who preferably are not friends
- having your outreach workers recruit potential clients during street outreach
- advertising in local newspapers, on websites, handouts, bulletin boards, and posters
- holding "piggy-back" focus groups scheduled to occur in conjunction with another event or meeting
- going to public places where potential participants gather and recruiting them on the spot

Recruitment

Once you have identified potential participants and they agree to take part in your research, follow these steps:

1) Send participants a personalized letter that explains the purpose of your research; why it is important that they participate; the date, time, and place of the focus group discussion; and the topic of discussion. Send this letter soon after your first contact with each participant.
2) Contact participants again via telephone or letter 10 to 14 days before the session to remind them about the focus group. (If the participant does not have a telephone or permanent address, you will have to attempt to contact them in person).
3) The day before the session telephone each person again to remind about the focus group and to confirm attendance.

5. *Take Care of the Logistics*

A number of things can go wrong during a focus group that can significantly impact the quality of the discussion and the resulting data. Taking the time in advance of the focus group to anticipate and attend to all the small details involved in planning a focus group — no matter how tedious — will help you avoid potential setbacks.

Location. Increase participation by making it easy for invited participants to attend. Consider where the majority of them live or work and choose a meeting site that is conveniently located and easy to find. The site should be neutral and non-threatening. For example, holding a discussion in a church basement may inhibit individuals involved in socially stigmatized behavior. When dealing with hard-to-reach individuals — say runaway youth — you may want to consider conducting the focus group in a place where they tend to congregate, such as a public park.

Strategies to Increase Participation and Minimize "No-Shows"

- *Personalize invitations.* Each participant should feel that he or she is an important part of your research. Telephone invitations should be delivered in warm and sincere tones without sounding as if they are being read from a script. Written invitations should be individually typed on letterhead paper, should contain the name and address of the invited participant, and should be personally signed. Impersonal form letters should be avoided at all costs.
- *Stress the importance of the research.* For many people, the opportunity to participate in something important — such as identifying ways to reduce HIV transmission in their community — serves as a powerful psychological incentive to participation in focus groups.
- *Offer incentives.* Monetary incentives are commonplace in focus group research. Financial incentives may be absolutely essential when working with populations whose income is unreliable, such as substance users and sex workers. The amount of the incentive need not be particularly high — usually an amount ranging from $10-25 is sufficient to attract recruits. Nonmonetary incentives can also be effective. These can include items such as T-shirts or baseball caps with your agency logo, toiletry kits, condoms, movie passes, vouchers for free meals at a local fast-food restaurant — essentially anything that participants value. You may be able to convince local merchants or the health department to donate these incentives, thereby lowering your costs. Finally, the offer of food — whether a simple snack or a full meal — can serve as an incentive to participation, particularly if the focus group is scheduled around meal time.
- *Schedule the focus group discussion at a convenient time and place.* If you make it easy for participants to attend the focus group, they are more likely to show up.
- *Eliminate potential barriers to participation.* Taking the time to anticipate and address potential barriers to participation will help reduce the number of "no-shows." (Specific strategies are discussed on page 8.)
- *Overrecruit.* Inadequate recruitment is the single most common source of failure in focus group research. Recruit 2-4 more people than you need to ensure that you have a full group. Even the most committed participants may encounter unforeseen problems such as traffic and sudden illness that prevent them from attending.
- *Follow up.* Some of your participants may forget about your focus group altogether, get confused about when and where it is being held, or lose interest in participating. If you want to ensure that they show up, it is essential that you follow up your initial invitation several times by telephone, mail, or in person as outlined on the opposite page under *Recruitment.*

Meeting room. The room where the discussion will be held should not contain any visual or auditory distractions. Avoid rooms that have large windows with a view or that are located near a busy corridor. Rooms with background noise such as a noisy ventilation system should also be avoided as the quality of the tape recordings may be affected. The room should be comfortable and should provide adequate light, ventilation, and an appropriate room temperature. Note whether the room contains working electrical outlets (for your tape recorders) and where these are located.

Room set-up. The meeting room should contain chairs arranged around a table so that participants can face each other. The table can be round or rectangular but should not be so long and narrow that some participants are at a considerable distance from the moderator. The moderator should sit away from the door to avoid being distracted. If the moderator is working with an assistant, that person should sit close to the door to handle late arrivals, early departures, and hallway noise. If refreshments are served, they should be placed on a table pushed to the side of the wall that is furthest from the table.

Time of day and day of the week. The time of day and day of the week when a focus group is held may also affect participation. Get to know something about the lifestyles, schedules, and needs of participants and select a time and day when they're most likely to show up. For example, scheduling a focus group of sex workers in the morning is unwise because they are likely to be sleeping. Similarly, holding the group on a day of the week when many of their clients get paid may also affect their participation. Factor in travel time and allow some extra time for participants who are running late.

Duration of discussion. Plan on about 2 hours for your focus group — from the time the first participant arrives until the last one leaves. The discussion itself should last approximately 1-1½ hours. A block of free time before a focus group discussion begins is essential. It allows you to make small talk with participants to put them at ease and increase their trust in you. It also allows participants to get to know each other and enjoy the refreshments. Further, the extra time also permits you to integrate latecomers without disrupting the discussion.

Food. Food can serve as an incentive to participation for some people, particularly if the discussion is held around meal times or if participants are economically disadvantaged. Serving food also helps to promote conversation and make group members feel more at ease with each other. Although most food served to focus groups consists of light snacks such as cookies and pretzels, full meals ranging from "bag lunches" to a multi-course catered meal can also be served, depending on available resources. Refreshments are usually placed on a table to the side of the room and are eaten before the discussion begins. If refreshments are served, care should be taken to avoid potential noisemakers such as crunchy chips and clinking ice cubes, which can interfere with recording.

Address practical barriers to participation. Focus group planners should carefully consider all potential barriers to participation and make advance provisions for them. Accommodate female participants with children by providing on-site childcare or giving them a stipend to pay for a babysitter. Consider the needs of individuals with HIV and arrange to pick them up and drive them to the focus group location if necessary. Low-income participants who rely on public transportation should be provided with subway tokens, bus passes, or a transportation stipend. Adequate parking should be secured for participants and, if a parking fee is involved, arrangements should be made to waive the fee or to provide participants with a parking stipend.

Recording equipment. Failed recording equipment or recordings that are of poor quality can quickly destroy the time and effort put into planning a focus group. Resources permitting, two tape recorders are better than one since the second one can serve as a back up in the event that the first one fails. Plug-in microphones are more sensitive than built-in ones and omni-directional remote microphones placed at the center of the table are ideal. Some experts say that cassette tapes that provide 90 minutes of recording time are the best choice. Test recording equipment several days before and immediately preceding the discussion to ensure that the recorder works and that the microphone is picking up all the sounds in the room. The moderator should bring along extra cassette tapes in the event that one fails and an extension cord if the outlet is located at a distance from the table where you will place the tape recorder. Alternatively, you may wish to rely solely on batteries for your tape recorder(s). In that case, make sure you test the batteries in advance for freshness and bring extras.

An assistant. When resources allow it, it is very helpful to have a second person on hand to assist the moderator and ensure that he or she is not distracted. An assistant can take detailed notes about what participants say and the body language they use, operate the recording equipment, handle logistics such as lighting and refreshments, and deal with interruptions such as latecomers, background noises, and switching cassette tapes. The assistant can also provide valuable feedback during the analysis phase by noting body language and linking speakers to their comments in the transcript.

6. Select a Moderator

An experienced focus group moderator can make the job seem effortless. However, retaining control of the discussion and managing group dynamics while making it seem natural is quite challenging in practice.

Focus Group Logistics Checklist

○ *Select a date and time for your focus group that is convenient for the majority of your participants.* Have you checked to make sure that no conflicting community events or meetings are scheduled for the day of your focus group? Have you scheduled the group for a time of day that does not greatly inconvenience your participants? Have you allowed enough extra time before the discussion starts for latecomers?

○ *Identify a place to hold the focus group.* Is the site easy to get to by car or public transportation? Is it centrally located in relation to where your participants live or work? Is it a neutral, non-threatening site?

○ *Select an appropriate room in which to hold the focus group.* Is the room free of visual or auditory distractions? Does it provide adequate light, ventilation, and a comfortable room temperature? Does the room contain working power outlets in which to plug your tape recorder?

○ *Plan the meeting room set-up.* Have you made arrangements to secure a table and sufficient chairs for the group? Will the chairs be arranged so that participants can face each other? If you plan to serve refreshments, have you arranged for a refreshment table to be placed to the side of the wall furthest from the discussion table?

○ *Decide whether or not to serve refreshments and plan accordingly.* If serving snacks, have you avoided selecting "noisy" foods such as chips? If serving a catered meal, have you allowed enough time before the discussion for participants to finish their meals?

○ *Address practical barriers to participation.* Have you arranged for childcare, special transportation for ill or impaired individuals, bus or subway tokens/passes, and parking?

○ *Prepare the recording equipment.* Have you tested your tape recorders to see if they work? Have you obtained a remote microphone and tested it? Have you obtained extra tapes, batteries, and extension cords?

○ *Provide participants with sufficient advance notice.* Did you send recruits formal letters of invitation? Did you contact them by telephone 1-2 weeks before the discussion to remind them of it? Did you make a final reminder call the day before the session?

Although it is highly desirable to use an experienced focus group moderator, inexperienced individuals can be trained to conduct focus groups. In nonprofit settings, volunteer moderators from the target population can be a great asset.

Some Qualities of the Ideal Moderator

Regardless of whether or not the moderator is experienced, the following are some minimum qualities that the individual should possess.

- *Good listener.* The individual should know when to be quiet and listen and when to interrupt to move the discussion along. This is harder to do than it seems.
- *Nonjudgmental.* The moderator should be able to put aside his or her personal values and beliefs and project an open, nonjudgmental attitude. This is particularly important in HIV-related research, which frequently involves individuals who practice stigmatized behaviors.
- *Sincere.* The moderator should believe that all participants have something of value to offer.
- *Perceptive.* A good moderator should be attentive not only to what is being said but what is left unsaid. He or she should be able to read between the lines and to observe body language.
- *Comfortable with sensitive topics.* The moderator should not be squeamish about discussing sensitive topics such as sexual practices or illegal activities related to prostitution and drug use.
- *Familiar with group process.* The moderator must know how to deal with a passive, quiet group or an overly talkative and energetic one. He or she must know how to handle individuals who attempt to dominate the discussion, who are hostile, who repeatedly go off on unrelated tangents, or who don't participate in the discussion.
- *Familiar with the topic.* A moderator who is unfamiliar with the topic of discussion can frustrate a group or miss important references.
- *Interested in the topic.* Participants will quickly sense if a moderator is bored with the discussion or is feigning interest.
- *Appropriate for the group.* In some circumstances, *who* the moderator is in terms of race/ethnicity, gender, age, sexual identity, occupation, and socioeconomic status can encourage or hinder discussion. Consideration should be given to the appropriateness of a moderator for a particular group of participants, especially when there exists a power differential between the moderator and group.

7. Prepare a Moderator's Guide

The term "focus group" has become so popular that it is often loosely applied to *any* group discussion. In fact, focus groups involve *focused* discussion based on *focused* questions. Although focus group questions may appear to be spontaneous, they are actually the result of careful advance preparation. Questions are crafted to elicit a maximum amount of information, are phrased in terms appropriate for participants, and are asked in a certain meaningful order.

Guidelines for Developing Focus Group Questions

- *Ask open-ended questions.* Open-ended questions are questions that allow respondents to answer freely and that do not influence their answers. For example, asking "What did you think of the program?" is better than asking "How satisfied were you with the program?"
- *Avoid questions that can be answered with a simple "yes" or "no."* An example is a question like "Did you like the program?" Such questions are likely to lead to conversational dead-ends.
- *Minimize the use of "why" questions.* Too many questions that begin with "why" can put people on the defensive because they may make respondents feel as if they are being interrogated or judged.
- *Don't ask two or more questions in one.* A question such as "What did you think of the program and the staff?" obviously contains two questions and requires two separate answers.
- *Keep questions simple and short.* Avoid long and overly wordy questions — they will confuse and distract respondents.
- *Pay attention to vocabulary.* Avoid jargon and academic words. Try to use natural language.
- *Don't ask too many questions.* One of the most common pitfalls in focus group research is preparing more questions than can be answered in the allotted time.

Participants will quickly become frustrated if they are rushed along by an overeager moderator who is anxious to collect more and more data. This problem can be avoided by pilot testing the question guide as described below.

- *Don't ask overly personal questions.* Try to avoid questions that will be perceived as strong invasions of privacy.
- *Pilot test the interview guide.* To ensure that you get the most out of your focus group discussion, pre-test the guide by asking knowledgeable individuals to review and comment on the content and sequencing of the questions. These individuals could be members of the group your participants belong to or individuals who work with that population. You can also pilot test the guide with the first focus group discussion you hold, making needed adjustments before you hold the remaining discussions.

8. Moderate the Discussion

The sample moderator's guide on pages 12-13 demonstrates the areas that need to be covered in a typical focus group discussion, as well as the timing and order of questions.

Basic Guidelines for Successful Moderating

- *Set the right tone early.* Try to establish an atmosphere that is conducive to balanced and open participation at the outset by stressing that there are no right or wrong answers and that all opinions are valued.
- *Be friendly,* empathetic, and nonjudgmental. Participants are more likely to express their true feelings if they feel comfortable and safe with you.
- *Be natural.* Ask questions in a conversational manner, rather than a stilted one as if you were reading from a script. Asking questions in your own words is acceptable as long as your wording doesn't deviate from the intended meaning of your prepared questions.
- *Improvise as necessary.* Although it is extremely important to stick to the content and sequence of planned questions, you should be flexible enough to rephrase a question if participants don't understand it and to modify the order of questions or even eliminate a question if it has been answered in previous discussion.
- *Allow participants enough time to respond.* After a participant has finished commenting, pause for about 5 seconds to allow others to jump in — don't rush on to the next question. Look around the table and make eye contact with participants to encourage them to comment.
- *Know how to handle silence.* Conversational lulls can make moderators nervous. Sometimes participants are silent because they need a few seconds to gather their thoughts. If, after observing a 5-second pause, participants are still silent, say something reassuring like "There's no rush. Take some time to think about the question." If responses are still not forthcoming, say something like, "Sometimes it's hard to answer certain questions but remember that we are here to learn from your perspectives because all of your experiences are unique and we value each one." In some cases you may have just hit a conversational dead-end and should just move on to the next question.
- *Probe as needed.* When a participant's comments are vague or confusing, use a probe such as "Could you give me an example of what you mean?" or "Would you tell us some more about that?" However, don't use probes excessively as this may become annoying to participants.
- *Probe without leading.* Moderators are sometimes tempted to provide examples when participants don't seem to understand the question or are taking too long to answer it. This should be avoided because the example you give may influence the participant's response.
- *Pace yourself.* Be aware of how long you're spending on each question and how much time you have left. You should spend the most time on your key questions and minimize discussion related to introductory questions.
- *Determine if perceived consensus among participants is real.* Sometimes participants appear to be agreeing with each other, if only tacitly, by staying silent. In order to determine whether this agreement is real and to tease out the full range of participants' perceptions, use probes such as "Does anyone have a different point of view?" or "I see several of you nodding your heads — tell me what you're thinking."
- *Avoid giving personal opinions or sending nonverbal messages.* Expressing your opinions on the topic at hand may affect participants' responses so try to avoid doing so. Also, try to display neutral body language

Sample Moderator's Guide

The following is a sample moderator's guide for assessing the level of HIV risk among teenagers. It can be adapted to focus group discussions with other groups.

Introductory Comments	Briefly introduce yourself and your assistant (if you have one), explain whom you work for, provide a short overview of the purpose of your research, explain how participants were selected, and thank them for taking the time to participate in the discussion.
Ground Rules Establishing ground rules before the discussion begins helps create a mutually respectful, productive atmosphere.	• Everyone should participate. • Only one person should talk at a time • Everyone's opinions are equally valid. • There are no right or wrong answers. • Each participant's view should be listened to and respected.
Confidentiality Assuring participant confidentiality is imperative in HIV/AIDS research, which can involve discussion of sensitive topics and disclosure of HIV status. You may have to repeat assurances of anonymity and confidentiality throughout the discussion if participants seem hesitant to talk.	• Ask verbal permission to tape the discussion or have participants sign informed consent forms. • Explain that the session is being taped to ensure that comments are recorded accurately. • Stress that all comments are confidential. • Explain that cassette tapes and the transcript of the session will be locked up in a safe place.
Opening Question Ice breaker. (5-10 minutes)	"Let's go around the table and introduce ourselves. Tell us your first name and what school you go to."
Introductory Question Introduces the general topic and sets the stage for the more critical questions. (5-10 minutes)	"To what extent is AIDS a problem in your community?"
Transition Question Serves as the logical link between the introductory and key questions. (5-10 minutes)	"What are some of the things that put young people at risk for HIV in your community, if anything?"

Key Questions Form the heart of your research interests. Typically, there are 2 to 5 key questions in a focus group discussion, requiring as much as 10 to 15 minutes each. (45 minutes)	• "How common is sexual activity among the young people you know?" • "What types of sexual activity are the teens you know engaging in?" • "What are teens doing to protect themselves from getting HIV through sex, if anything?" • "How common is drug use among teenagers you know?" • "What types of drugs are they using?"
Ending Questions Provide the moderator the opportunity to clarify how participants feel about the topic of discussion and to make sure that no important points were overlooked. This is also an opportunity to ask participants for their recommendations. (15 minutes)	"Let me summarize what I heard today. (Summarize key points). Did I correctly describe the main points of our discussion?" "Is there something we didn't cover in our discussion today that we should have?" "What is the most important advice to give sexually active/drug using teens that will protect them from HIV?"
Next Steps Telling participants what will be done with the information they have provided reinforces the importance of your research and acknowledges their stake in it. Repeat assurances of confidentiality.	Tell participants how the information they provided will be used. If a report will be produced, tell them when it will be available and whether or not it will be public. Explain that no information about individuals will be published, just group data.
Thanks	"Thank you all for being here today and sharing your ideas with us. Your opinions will be a great help to us as we design HIV prevention materials for young people."

and facial expressions since your nonverbal expressions may betray your feelings or send the wrong message to participants. For example, head nodding, which for you may simply mean "uh huh...I hear you," may signal agreement and may encourage the respondent to provide you more of the same type of information to please you. Your role as moderator is to remain neutral.

- *Note body language of participants.* Pay attention to the nonverbal cues that participants give you and respond accordingly.

Handling Problem Behavior

- *Participants who do not speak.* Draw a silent participant into the discussion by making eye contact with the individual and saying something like, "Mary, I don't want to miss what you have to say. Would you like to add something to what the others have said?" The trick is to do so without making the individual feel put on the spot or singled out.
- *Participants who dominate the discussion.* You may have to interrupt dominant participants from time to time by telling them to "hold that thought for a moment" or asking them to wait until others have had an opportunity to speak. If these verbal cues don't work, you can simply avoid eye contact with the individual and communicate disinterest with your body language.
- *Participants who ramble.* Ramblers take a long time to get to the point or have no point to make at all but feel compelled to say something. As with the overly talkative individual, discontinue eye contact with the rambler and discourage additional comments with your body language (e.g., look down at your papers, turn your body away from the rambler, look at your watch, etc). As soon as the rambler stops or pauses, jump in with another question.

9. Analyze and Apply Results

1. *Prepare a record of the discussion.* A word-for-word transcription of the discussion is ideal but can be costly and time-consuming to prepare, particularly if you have multiple focus groups. Generally, 1 hour of taped discussion may take up to 3 hours to transcribe with a transcription machine and even longer if you use a regular tape recorder. A quicker alternative is to produce a shorter version by selecting significant quotes only and typing them into a computer while listening to the tape. Prepare the transcript as soon as possible after the session takes place so that everything is still fresh in your mind.

Tips

Save time when typing up the transcript by skipping the introduction, off-track comments, and meaningless expressions like "you know."

Tips

Boldface all the questions so that they stand out in the transcript and make it easier to read.

2. *Clean up the transcript.* When the transcript is completed, listen to the tape again, note the names or initials of individual speakers next to each separate block of text, and make any necessary corrections or additions. Review any notes taken by the moderator or assistant during the discussion and add pertinent information about individual or group behavior that may affect the interpretation of the transcript. For example, a moderator may have noted that some group members nodded when a certain point was being made, thereby indicating silent agreement.
3. *Identify themes and notable quotes.* Read the transcript and identify key ideas and quotes. The most common way to analyze focus group data is the sort-and-cut procedure. The "low-tech" approach involves writing

Sensitive Topics

Discussion about socially stigmatized, illegal, or highly personal behaviors requires special handling by moderators. If sensitive topics are to be discussed — such as individual sexual practices, participation in illicit drug use or sex work, or HIV status — the moderator should make a special effort to put participants at ease by creating a social climate that encourages openess and, at the same time, protects their feelings, privacy, and personal safety. Below are some general strategies to consider:

- The moderator should set aside some extra time before the formal discussion begins to build rapport with participants and to allow participants to feel comfortable with each other.
- The moderator can encourage self-disclosure by participants by revealing something personal (but not excessively so) about himself or herself during the discussion.
- When asking direct questions about sensitive topics, the moderator can ask participants to talk about somebody they know, rather than themselves, thereby lessening participants' discomfort with self-disclosure.
- The moderator should avoid putting excessive pressure on participants who are reluctant to talk about an uncomfortable subject. The key is to legitimize nonparticipation, while at the same time encouraging participation.
- The moderator should stress at the outset that information that could potentially compromise the safety of participants should not be shared with the group. He or she should stop or redirect the discussion if inappropriate information is divulged that may endanger participants (such as mentioning the names of drug dealers, pimps, or others involved in illegal activities).
- Moderators should also caution participants not to disclose their HIV status unless they are comfortable with sharing that information and aware of the potential consequences of making their status public.

down your key questions on separate pieces of paper, going through the entire transcript and cutting out all relevant passages related to each question, and taping or placing the passages under each question. You can do the same thing on the computer using the cut-and-paste features of your wordprocessing program. With either technique you are essentially developing a classification system that will identify the weight (i.e., amount and type of comments) given to each topic and the patterns that emerge from the content of the discussion.

Tips

When working with multiple focus group transcripts, you can merge the computer files of each transcript into one file. Then, working with one question at a time, go through all the responses to that question and cut-and-paste them under the question. You will end up with one master transcript that will save you time during the analysis phase. Make sure that you retain copies of the original transcripts for each individual discussion.

Tips

Remember to document the source (i.e., speaker and location in transcript) of each passage you cut out of a transcript so that if later you have to go back and examine it in context, you will be able to find it easily.

4. *Analyze the themes.* Go through the transcript question-by-question and look for themes within questions. Then look for larger themes or big ideas that cut across the discussion as a whole. If you hold multiple focus groups, do this for each discussion and look for common themes that emerge across all the discussions.

Working with Specific Populations

Adolescents

- Consider holding the focus group in an informal setting rather than in an institution run by adults.
- Adolescents sometimes have a shorter attention span than adults so it is wise to limit a focus group discussion to 45-60 minutes.
- Because young people often feel self-conscious and uncomfortable with strangers, set aside time before the formal discussion to allow participants to get acquainted and increase their comfort level with each other.
- It may be an advantage to have a moderator who is close in age to participants to reduce the tensions that sometimes exist between adolescents and adult authority figures.
- It is especially important when working with young people to create a tolerant, respectful environment and to project a willingness to listen since adolescents often feel that they are not taken seriously or listened to by adults.
- Inform parents about the purpose of the research and secure their written consent for their child's participation in your research.
- Serving refreshments is particularly effective with adolescents, who are often hungry.

Ethnic/Racial Groups

- When the researcher and study participants are of a different racial/ethnic background, it is important for the researcher to get to know something about participants' culture and communication style. This may involve spending time with members of the target population and noting communication patterns and special expressions, seeking their input on the study methodology (see below), or consulting the large body of literature that exists on understanding and managing cultural diversity.
- It may be helpful to use a moderator from the same racial and ethnic background as participants, although it is not always essential to do so. The issue of whether or not to use an indigenous moderator should be carefully considered on a case-by-case basis and should ultimately hinge on the individual skills, experience, and attributes of the potential moderator.
- Convening a task force of community leaders to provide advice on recruitment strategies and proposed focus group questions can help ensure that the methodology and questions are culturally sensitive and appropriate. In addition, by consulting community leaders, researchers can increase community support for their research.
- Exploring one's own cultural biases and how these may affect one's judgement can also help researchers prepare for, moderate, and analyze the results of focus groups.

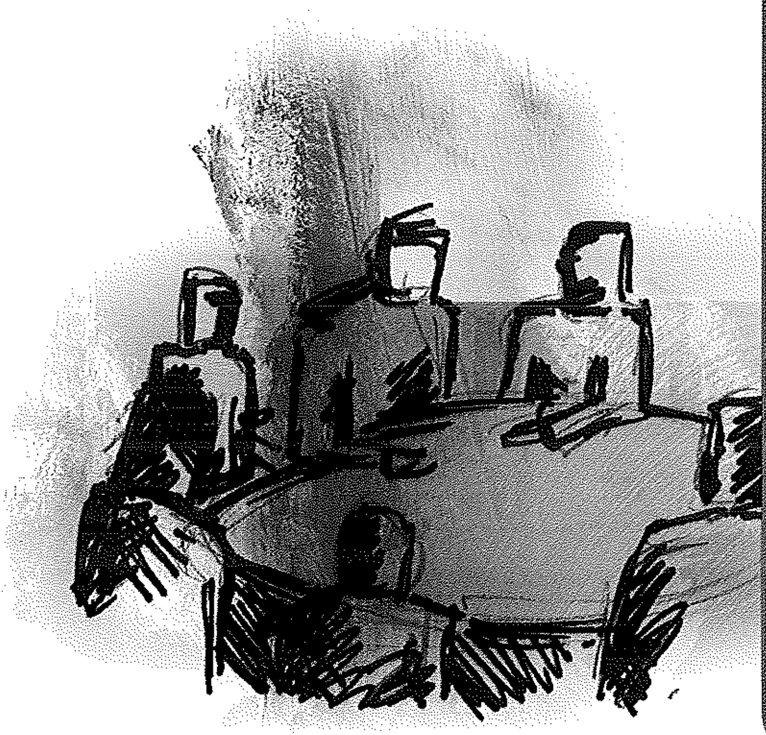
Drug Users

- Focus groups are especially effective with substance users because many are already familiar with the group session format, having experienced it in drug treatment and other similar settings.
- Paying close attention to group composition is essential in research with drug users because of their significant heterogeneity. It may not always be advisable to create groups based solely on specific risk behaviors (such as injection drug use) because a number of variables may affect your results. For example, gender is a key variable that should be considered carefully; men and women have different life experiences, attitudes, motivations and HIV-related risk behaviors. In addition, since drug users may be members of several risk-behavior groups simultaneously, you will have to determine which of their multiple memberships is the most important for purposes of your research.
- It is very common — even expected — to reimburse drug users for the time they spend in your focus group. Determine what the "going rate" is on the street by consulting outreach workers or community members. If your funding source does not allow you to provide financial incentives, consider non-monetary incentives that are valued by substance users (i.e., items such as grocery vouchers that they can use themselves or that they can exchange for cash).
- The timing of a focus group discussion with drug users is crucial. Experts recommend holding the discussion no earlier than late morning or noon and providing a meal if the discussion is held around a meal time.
- Drug users frequently experience complex life and health problems, some of which may be raised during the course of focus group discussions. You may want to prepare for this possibility by establishing procedures to refer them to agencies that can provide them with professional assistance.
- Taking steps to safeguard the safety and privacy of focus group participants is especially important when working with drug users since drug use itself is illegal, as are some of the income-generating activities drug users participate in (see the box entitled *Sensitive Topics*).

Tips

You will know when you find a significant theme by the emphasis participants give to it in terms of the number and intensity of comments and the repetition of key words.

5. *Report your findings.* The easiest way to report your findings is to organize them under headings that represent key questions, themes, or big ideas arranged in logical order (usually from most to least important). Use representative quotes to illustrate each finding. Use numbers to document the degree of agreement or emphasis given by participants to key points. You may also want to add a conclusion that ties together the most prominent themes that emerge from your data. Finally, if appropriate, consider adding a set of recommendations for future action based on what participants said and your own opinions of how each issue can be addressed.



Collaborative Approaches: Involving Staff, Volunteers, and Community Members

There is a growing trend within the field of social research towards including nonresearchers — staff, volunteers, clients, and community members — in program design and evaluation. Rather than relying on outside researchers, the collaborative approach taps into internal and community resources. Staff and community members can be involved in all aspects of a research project that uses focus groups — from research design, question development, recruitment of participants, focus group moderation, to analysis of results.

The collaborative approach can have many positive benefits. Staff and community members often possess unique insight into the target population. Nonresearchers from the target population also have the advantage of being more readily accepted by focus group participants because they are members of the same social group. Further, involving those who have a stake in a program increases the chances that the results of the research will actually be used. A collaborative approach can also save money by replacing costly researchers with volunteers and can serve as a long-term investment in staff and volunteers by providing them with training opportunities. Finally, this approach can empower individuals who previously may have had little or no experience in program design and evaluation. On the other hand, the collaborative approach is time-consuming since it requires intensive training, continuous supervision of nonresearchers, and a slower decision-making process based on group consensus.

For more information about collaborative approaches, consult Richard A. Krueger and Jean A. King, *Involving Community Members in Focus Groups* (see *References*).

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