Pushing the Boundaries of Focus Group Research

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Pushing the Boundaries of Focus Group Research

Standard practice in focus group research brings together

- Participants who all share a similar background with regards to the topic
- In groups of 4-8 participants
- To answer a fixed set of questions
- Using an in-person setting

Four ways to push the boundaries in focus group research

- Going Beyond Homogeneous Groups: Heterogenous Group Composition
- Going Beyond Larger Groups: Dyadic Interviews
- Going Beyond Fixed Designs: Emergent Designs
- Going Beyond In-Person Groups: Online Focus Groups

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Heterogenous Group Composition

Basic Principle: Common Ground

How much *mutual understanding* do the participants share with regards to the topic?

If backgrounds are different, can participants comprehend these differences?

Shared interest in the topic often includes an interest in differences

Hearing about diversity is often a goal, but how much diversity is workable?

Segmentation creates homogeneity by separating out diversity to create common ground

What about letting the group discuss their differences? "Sharing and comparing"

Focus groups do need to avoid conflict, but that is different from requiring homogeneity

Heterogeneity and Homogeneity don't have to be "either/or" options

Can compare "segmented" homogeneous groups to "mixed" groups

Can use initial homogeneous groups to plan for subsequent heterogeneous groups

Dyadic Interviews

Upper size limit for focus groups is open, but lower limit is clearly two

Gap between one-to-one interviewing and focus groups

What are the advantages of dyadic interviews?

They are easier to recruit

They provide more information about each participant

How different are dyadic interviews and focus groups?

Our research indicates that dyadic interviews are more free-flowing than focus groups

Our research indicates that dyadic interviews are easier to moderate than focus groups

These are meaningful differences, but our research group may have over-emphasized them

If you know how to do focus groups, you know how to do dyadic interviews

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Emergent Designs

Create a set of basic changes across a full set of groups

Can change the questions in the interview guide

Can change who the participants are

Four Basic Options

- Preliminary groups to determine the majority of the design
    Particularly useful for pre-testing
- Follow-up groups to collect additional information
    Particularly useful for targeted sub-groups and special topics
- Mid-point assessment to reconsider starting and ending points
    Particularly useful for feed-back from "clients" or in participatory research
- Three-point funnel to move from participant-oriented to researcher-oriented content
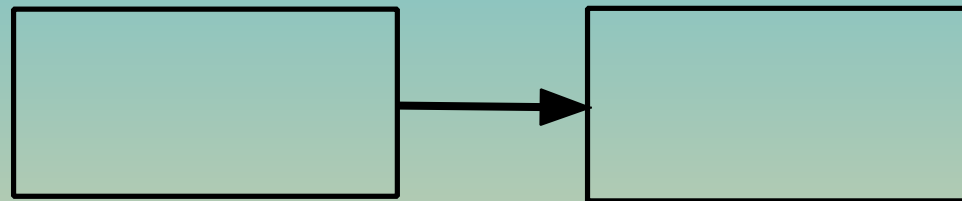   Particularly useful for developing survey questionnaires
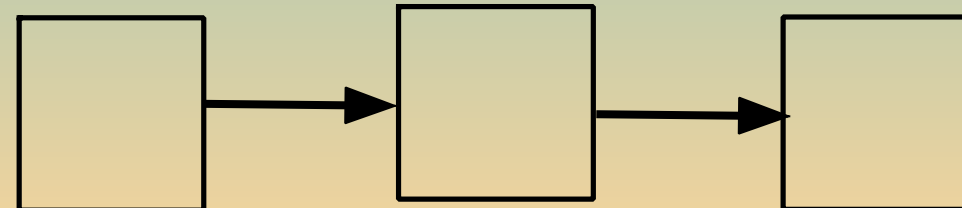
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Preliminary Groups
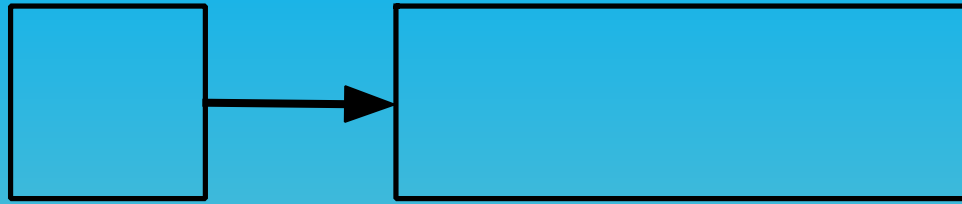
Follow-Up Groups

Mid-Point Assessement

Three-Point Funnel

Online Focus Groups

Advantages of online videoconferencing for focus groups

Do not have to bring participants to the same place, or have research team travel

Possible to record and transcribe automatically

Disadvantages of online videoconferencing for focus groups

Requires participants to possess and have mastery of relevant technology

Can produce "flat" discussions with low levels of active participation

Much is still unknown about what leads to success

Do online groups require high levels of engagement to produce adequate interaction?

Which works better, smaller or larger groups?

What are effective moderating strategies?

What are effective questioning strategies?

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Where Do We Go From Here?

Why innovate?

To gain specific advantages from an alternative approach

To generate methodological publications

- International Journal of Qualitative Methods

- International Journal of Social Research Methodology
- Qualitative Health Research

Is innovating risky? Main difference is that it requires *justification*

For journal articles, probably relatively easy to justifuy

For grant applications, "prior work" can always help

One "expert" source: Morgan, D. (2019). *Basic and Advanced Focus Groups*. Sage Publications

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Questions?