Conducting Interviews And Focus Groups

Cathleen Willging, PhD
Daniel Shattuck, PhD, MPH

Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation
University of New Mexico, Department of Anthropology
Agenda

- Orientation to Qualitative Interviews and Focus Groups
- Recruitment and Sampling
- Constructing an Interview Guide
- Conducting Qualitative Interviews
- Conducting Focus Groups
- Tips for Online Interviews and Focus Groups
- Debriefing after Interviews and Focus Groups
Let’s Chat!

Why use a qualitative interview or focus group for implementation research?

(Respond in the chat box)
Keep in Mind that Both Methods...

- Can be labor intensive and expensive
- Require training and practice
- Involve data collectors with strong interpersonal skills
- Necessitate putting actions and behavior into context

-Patton, 2015
Open-ended vs. closed or fixed-alternative questions

Participants can create response based on things they consider important

Can ask participants to say more about things they mentioned as important
Recruiting and Sampling for Interviews and Focus Groups
Purposive Sampling

- Most common for implementation science
- Preselected criteria per study objectives
- Sample size varies depending on objectives, resources, and time
- Often determined based on saturation

-Patton, 2015
Purposive Sampling

Criterion Sampling
Extreme or Deviant Case Sampling
Sampling for Interviews vs. Focus Groups
### Assembling a Focus Group

| **Typically include people of similar backgrounds who have insights to share about study issues** |
| **Purposive sampling procedures versus representative sampling procedures** |
| **Sampling to the point of data saturation or redundancy (may be too costly, however)** |
| **Focus group gurus recommend conducting 3-4 groups per population category of interest** |
| **Traditionally, participants don’t know each other; not the case in implementation research** |
Recruitment

• Traditionally, recruitment involves searching for:
  • Participant characteristics or population of interest
  • Topics or subject areas of interest

• In implementation science:
  • We are recruiting from the contexts of implementation
  • Potentially smaller, more specific population from which to sample
Recruitment

- Direct invitation
- Social media, flyers, posters, other advertisement
- Outcropping and community engagement strategies
  - Takes time and effort
  - Useful for vulnerable or stigmatized populations
  - Example: interviewing youth experiencing homelessness
    - Attend youth advisory board meetings
    - Volunteer with programs serving these youth
    - Build rapport/relationships with key gatekeepers
- Send reminders to those who agree to participate
Examples

• “Reducing LGBTQ+ Adolescent Suicide” (RLAS) Study
  • Implementation science study to facilitate and study the use of LGBTQ+ supportive practices in high schools
  • Purposive sample
    • Interviews with school administrators and implementation leads
    • Focus group with implementation resource teams
    • Selection based on role within school
    • Sampling from all enrolled school sites

-Willging, Green, & Ramos, 2016
Examples

• Preparedness of Emergency Department in Caring for Transgender and Gender Diverse (TGD) Patients

• Exploratory study
  • Criterion and convenience sampling
  • Three emergency departments – sampled for geographic variation
  • Doctors, nurses, front line staff with experience caring for TGD patients
    • Reputational case selection, snowball sampling
  • TGD patients with experiences in emergency departments
    • Convenience sampling, reputational case selection, outcropping

-Willging et al., 2018
Consider Power Dynamics

• In implementation science, the likelihood of participants knowing and working together is high

• Concern for power informs sampling and the data collected

• Example: RLAS study
  • School administrators or leads excluded from focus groups with staff

• Example: Clinic-based organizational intervention study
  • Sampling executive level, clinic-level leadership, and staff
  • Participants may be “voluntold” to engage with study and researchers
Designing Interview and Focus Group Guides
Designing Interview and Focus Group Guides

- Introductions
- “Warm Up”
- Main Body
- “Cool Off”
- Closure

Useful for building “trust”
- Creates a relaxed and open atmosphere
- Helps with moving on to more sensitive topics

General, Broadest Topics
“Easy” Questions

Specific, Narrower Topics
“Sensitive” Questions

-Patton, 2015; Roller & Lavrakas, 2015
**Objective:** To examine the lived experience of youth without stable homes regarding housing, informal and formal support systems, risk behaviors, health, and barriers and facilitators to addressing housing insecurity.

**Introductions**

Questions regarding where the young person is from, what they like about their current town, and what they do for fun

History of housing insecurity, experiences at school, social supports, financial difficulties, physical and behavioral health challenges, abuse and violence, law enforcement and justice system, and foster care and child protective services

Recommendations to make things better for youth experiencing homelessness, advice to leaders, and final thoughts

**Closure**
What Kinds of Questions to Ask

-Patton, 2015
Two Types of Questions

- Stem questions
- Follow-up questions or probes
Now, the first question I’d like to ask you, just to get us started, is how you and your colleagues at this agency first happened to find out about the Community Health Worker HIV Prevention Initiative; what it was like when you first came—you know, how you think about it now, and what impact it’s had on you and your workplace…”

(Respond in the chat box)
Ask Singular Questions
Ensure Clarity of Questions

Make sure that questions use terms and phrases that are understandable to participants.

Use terminology appropriate for the participant’s command of language, level of knowledge, cultural background, age, etc.

-Patton, 2015
Avoid Dichotomous Questions

- Questions suggesting a “yes” or “no” response
  - Are you satisfied with your involvement in the PrEP program?
  - Has your practice changed as a result of your participation in this program?
  - Do you know the procedures for enrolling in the PrEP program?

- Don’t limit expression; invite participants to share...
  - Experiences, feelings, ideas, opinion, and knowledge

-Patton, 2015
Other Questions to Avoid

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Advice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Long questions</strong></td>
<td>• Participant may remember only part of the question than respond to all of it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Questions involving jargon</strong></td>
<td>• Keep things simple so participants don’t need to ask for clarification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Leading questions</strong></td>
<td>• Try to avoid questions that suggest a particular kind of answer, positive or negative; use neutral wording</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

-Patton, 2015
Allow Questions to Evolve

Year 1

• What policies and procedures are in place to address the particular needs of LGBTQ+ students? (Probe: How useful are these policies and procedures? How long have they been in effect? How could they be improved upon?)

Year 5

• What policies and procedures are now in place at this school that concern LGBTQ+ students? These could include dress code, procedures to protect students from being “outed,” rules around social events like prom, or protections against bullying based on sexual orientation. (Probe: How useful are these policies and procedures? How do they impact your school climate? How long have they been in effect? How could these policies and procedures be improved upon?)
  • What, if any, changes to policy have made in response to the Safe Schools for All Students Act?
  • How did the school go about making these changes?
Formatting Questions on Guides

• Depends on interviewer or moderator preferences
  • Large, easy-to-read font is helpful
  • Can include space for notes
  • Start sections on new pages

• Well-organized guide helps with transcription and analysis
  • Basis for matrices for arranging “nuggetized” data per categories or domains, research questions, etc.
  • Enables efficient review
  • Useful to have in hand for publication appendices
Inclusion of Elicitation Tools

- Can be useful in interviews and focus groups
- Feedback on process or product
- Reactions to a specific situation
- Use high impact, low burden tools (avoid homework)
- Don’t overcomplicate things

Examples:
- Timeline to collect housing insecurity histories
- Google mapping with youth to identify “hot spots”
### Piloting

- Make sure to pilot the interview or focus group guide(s)
- Feel out the flow
- Identify areas that are worded poorly, confusing questions, leading questions, areas of interest missed
- Estimate time the interview or focus group will take
- Trim the fat
- Work out technological issues
Conducting Qualitative Interviews
Let’s Chat!

How do you typically prepare for a qualitative interview?

(Respond in the chat box)
Ready, Set, Go...

Take time to prepare
Instructions and examples for creating participant identification numbers

Before the interview:

1. Gather the following materials:
   - Digital recorder (test for batteries and if necessary, remove previous recordings)
   - Extra AA batteries
   - Receipt and $50 cash for each interviewee (make sure to break down cash into exact amounts)
   - Interviewer guide - 1 per interviewee
   - Survey form for each interviewee (use one copy)
   - Informed consent for each interviewee that has not already been consented
   - Notepad with sufficient paper and extra pens

Conducting the interview:

1. Arrive 10 minutes early to set up
2. Introduce yourself and thank interviewee for participating
3. Conduct qualitative section using the survey form:
   a. Make sure to take notes on any information provided by interviewee that is not reflected on the form
   b. Make sure to mark any refusal on the form for data entry purposes

Contingencies, No Shows, and Other Instructions:

4. Conduct qualitative section using the interview guide:
   a. Remind the participant that the interview will be recorded
   b. Turn on the digital recorder
   c. Take notes as well as possible - write quotations, statements, key concepts, notes
d. Write down questions and ways you overcome them, make note of any issues that stand out to you in context and affect of the participant
5. Turn off the recorder after the interview is completed
6. Give interviewee $50 and ask her/him to sign receipt book:
   a. If interviewee refuses the respondent fee, ask her/him to sign the receipt book and write DECLINE on the receipt
   b. Thank the interviewee for her/his time!
8. Keep ALL forms and the digital recorder with you at all times. Do not leave them in your car, at home, or anywhere else until you return to BHRCS

No Shows:

If the interviewee is not there, wait 10 minutes. Then try to contact them:
1. If you reach them and they can arrive in time for you to complete the interview process
2. If not reschedule them for another time.
3. If no answer, wait 30 minutes after the scheduled start time and then leave:
   a. Try contacting them up to 6 times to reschedule. Make a note of your attempts

An interview may be rescheduled up to three times. If not completed after the third attempt consult the PI to see if continued efforts are necessary.

Storing interview data (AS SOON AS YOU RETURN TO THE OFFICE):

1. Scan, and upload the following documents to the N drive. Labelled as below:
   - N:Projects\Willing Primary Care R21 Data\Interviews:
     a. Demographic form (save as "Demographics_ID#, date")
     b. Notes (save as "Notes_ID#, date")
   - Upload digital audio file into N:Projects\Willing Primary Care R21 Data\Audio and label as "Audio_ID#, date"
   - Make that the interview has been completed on the enrollment log.
   - Give hard copies of the above forms, as well as signed receipts to the lead Research Associate (Sonnie) for storage.

5. You're done!
Intense Listening vs. Intense Questioning

- Be an active listener above all!
- Listen for cues about how to ask questions appropriately
- Take extra steps to ensure cultural humility
- Sincerely try to understand what participant wants to convey, even if you must ask naïve-sounding questions
- Be open to listening for unexpected comments
- Allow your thinking to be changed by what you hear

-Eliot, 2013
Key Strategies for Active Listening

- Extend responses from participant by showing an interest in topics discussed; ask them to reveal more...

  Enhance the quality of the data being collected

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opening</th>
<th>Probing</th>
<th>Paraphrasing</th>
<th>Clarifying understanding or interpretation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Invite a lengthy initial response; springboard for further questions, i.e., “How do you typically deal with...”)</td>
<td>Create further avenues for exploration, i.e., “Why might this be the case...”)</td>
<td>Provide speaker with a mirror with which to reflect and expand on comments, i.e., “It sounds like...”</td>
<td>Prompt additional explanation, i.e., “I’m not sure I understand. Do you mean...”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

-Lavee & Itzchakov, 2021; Louw et al., 2011
Recording the Data

• You can create the best interview guide and be the greatest interviewer ever, but...
  • If you don't document what people say in own words, i.e., quotations...
  • What's the point of the interview?

-Patton, 2015
Taking Notes

- Even if your recording interview, still take notes!
- Not verbatim but strategic and focused
- Taking excessive notes can distract participant
- Taking notes on a laptop can be more distracting
Why Take Notes?

- Can formulate new questions as interview progresses.
- Can review preliminary data before transcription and formal analysis, with insights shaping future interviews.
- Facilitate later analysis, i.e., locating important quotations from digital recording.
- Have a backup if something bad happens to the recording or transcription.

-Miles et al, 2020; Schensul et al., 1999
“Cool Off” and Closure

• Be mindful of time
• After covering the main topics (which may be quite personal or emotional)
  • Move back to a few general questions
  • Lighten the atmosphere
  • End on a positive note
• Elicit any remaining thoughts from the interviewee
• Depending on your sampling strategy, ask for recommendations for other possible interviewees
• Express your appreciation!!!
After the Interview

- Check recording (upload it for transcription)
- Make extensive notes in case of a malfunction
- Review handwritten notes
- Compile debriefing notes
- Send “Thank you” card, especially if you want to re-engage for future data collection event
Conducting Focus Groups
Advantages of Focus Groups

1. Learn about the views of many participants in one place and in the same amount of time it would take to interview one or two people.

2. Assess the reactions of participants to various ideas and to each other.

3. Gauge how strongly committed participants are to their views and the changes that arise when different ideas are considered.

-Krueger, 2014; Patton, 2015
Advantages of Focus Groups

- Efficient; can maximize use of resources
  - Get lot of data in a short period of time
  - Usually, less data preparation and analysis time (compared to interviews)
  - Can quickly assess the extent to which there is a consistent, shared view or diverse views

Krueger, 2014; Patton, 2015
Advantages of Focus Groups

• Efficiently develop locally valid surveys, i.e., identify appropriate questions and response categories
• Field-test a survey or questionnaire for coherence
• Usability testing and evaluation
• Get input into and assess reactions to a new intervention or program
• Community assessments

• Cross-check data from other methods
• Feedback can be more specific and meaningful than data from individual questionnaires and surveys
• Tend to be enjoyable to participants because they draw on “human tendencies as social animals” (Patton, 2015)
Disadvantages of Focus Groups

- Participants whose viewpoints are in the minority may be reluctant to speak up
- Not representative
- Not appropriate for assessing controversial, highly personal issues
- Outside natural settings where social interaction usually occurs

-Krueger, 2014; Patton, 2015
Disadvantages of Focus Groups

• Can be difficult to pull together
• Number of questions is restricted
• Limited response time for each participant
• Less control vs. other qualitative methods (e.g., interview)
• Require group processing skills beyond asking questions (i.e., negotiating participants who dominate discussions)

-Krueger, 2014; Patton, 2015
Valued Skills and Qualities of Facilitators

- Language skills matching those of participants
- Functions well in group setting
- No strong opinions about topics in question, or can withhold them; doesn’t use groups as a platform for their views
- Good at active listening!!!
- Can summarize participants’ ideas in a way that keeps with what’s expressed

-Krueger, 2014; Patton, 2015
A provider who delivers or has a vested interest in a new program that's being asked about might not be the best choice.

Just because a person is good in a one-on-one interview context doesn't mean they will be similarly skilled in focus group facilitation.

Same lesson holds for persons skilled at working with communities (e.g., organizers, advocates, coalition leaders, etc.).
Responsibilities of Facilitators

• Keep the discussion on topic
• Ensure the topics are culturally acceptable for the majority of group participants
• Help participants avoid extremely personal disclosures they might regret later
• Ensure focus group is not a therapy group
• Make sure everyone has a chance to speak and listen
• Recognize that silence/topics avoided can be revealing

-Patton, 2015
Responsibilities of the Recorders/Scribes

- Help greet people
- Set up equipment and food items (avoid chewy, gooey, crunchy substances)
- Take comprehensive notes
- Chime in when appropriate
- Help resolve unexpected problems.... Like latecomers
Let’s Chat!

What can go wrong in a focus group?

(Respond in the chat box)
Worst Focus Group Experience

• Waiting room in strip-mall methadone clinic closed for lunch
• Clients banging on the door for entire hour
• Focus mob: Possibly enticed by gift card or voluntold, little knowledge of discussion topics
• No good place to record, plus notetaker who organized group was late....
• Questions about training/supervision practices
  • Few took the training due to high turnover
  • Uninvited supervisor wouldn’t leave room
• Attention to process is key to a great group
Preparing for Focus Groups

• Determine focus of the discussion beforehand

  • Keep in mind that average group takes 90 to 120 minutes (30% of which may be spent on organizing and informal socializing)

  • Range and scope of topics are limited

  • Allow for flexibility in questions and responses (to get new information)

  • Risk of boredom if discussion is too focused (and everyone isn’t engaged)

-Patton, 2015
Ensuring Privacy and Confidentiality

Confidentiality cannot be assured

Participants can be reminded to please keep the conversation confidential

General informed consent procedures should be implemented

-Patton, 2015
• Note-taking
  • Diagram seating arrangement
  • Track who is saying what
  • Use diagram and notes to assign numbers to each speaker to guide transcription
• Bulleted flip charts shouldn’t replace taking good notes or transcription to cut costs
• Have two recorders going at once to be on the safe side
Doing Focus Groups: Introductory Remarks

• Explain purpose, why participants have been invited, and why their voices are important to the project

• Explain roles of facilitator and recorder

• Ask permission to audio- or video-tape (folks should also have advance notice about this)

• Have everyone (briefly) introduce themselves (be prepared to negotiate local etiquette expectations)
Doing Focus Groups: Explain Ground Rules

- Everyone should participate
- All ideas are equally valid
- There are no right or wrong answers
- Each person’s view should be respected
- Respect each other’s confidentiality
In other groups, it’s been helpful to say a couple of things about how the group works. First, because we really want to hear what everyone thinks, if it seems like someone is not speaking up, we may ask them what they think. At the same time, we’ll ask everyone to please not interrupt so that we make sure everyone gets a chance to talk. Remember that there are no right or wrong answers to these questions. Finally, we ask that everyone please agree to keep whatever is said here private. While it’s okay to talk about the focus group generally, we ask that each of you not talk to anyone about what specific people say today.

Because we want to be able to remember everything that people tell us today, [scribe’s name] is going to write notes about what people say. Sometimes, [scribe’s name] can’t write fast enough to keep up, so we’re also going to audio record what is being said. This way, we can check later to make sure we get everything right. We will not write down the name of anyone here today. If your name gets recorded, we’ll make sure it gets erased from the transcript.

Our discussion will take about 2 hours. We ask that you please silence your cell phones. Please feel free to get refreshments or use the bathroom at any time during our discussion. Afterwards, you’ll get $40 in appreciation for taking the time to talk to us today.
Preparing Supplementary Aids

• Consider different data collection formats to gather demographic and other information about participants, i.e., brief questionnaires

• Write out the focus group process or expectations for participants (and facilitators)

• Share handouts that describe the process or expectations, the focus group questions, etc.
Troubleshooting Problems

- Participants don’t arrive (find out why if you can!)
- Some participants will show up late (it’s up to facilitator’s discretion whether they can join; 15-minute rule-of-thumb)
- Fewer than half show up (how this is handled depends on the research design, i.e., shift to small group interview)
- Logistical difficulties at site (arrive early to address problems in advance of the group; keep cell phone handy)
Asking Questions

- Same rules as interview questions apply – funnel structure, avoid close-ended, vague, or leading questions
- Use open-ended questions with probes, particularly when the issues to be explored aren’t well-understood
- For a 90-minute group, 5 to 7 stem or core questions may be sufficient
- The more familiar the facilitators are with the topic, the more likely they’ll ask good questions; be ready to ask clarifying questions
Avoid....

• Serial interviewing – asking the same question of each participant (round robin)

• Having one or two participants dominate the discussion

• Allowing persons with power over other participants to join group or observe proceedings (e.g., frontline staff supervisors)

• Leaving participants with incorrect information that could harm them (e.g., risks associated with a particular virus or disease or treatment)
  - Can distribute fact sheets afterwards
Wrapping Up

• Provide opportunity for participants to share their views after the group (i.e., stick around to chat, provide phone number and email address, etc.)

• Clean up the room!

• Debrief between the moderator and the recorder/scribe
Closing Tips for Online Interviews and Focus Groups
Virtual Space Considerations

- Use accessible web platform without expecting folks to download software.
- Orient folks to web platform in advance.
- Ensure that everyone can see each other (critical for focus groups).
- Can use of pseudonyms for online identifiers for privacy.
- Advise everyone to be in a good space, i.e., not a moving vehicle.
- Don’t let background stuff (e.g., kids, dogs) get in the way unless truly disruptive.
- Don’t forget to press record (let folks know when you do).
Social Interactions

• Allow time for rapport building…. Stuff observed before in-person data collection event allows insight into context and to developing a relationship
• Don’t mute yourself, but consider shutting off self view
• Remember that participants might struggle with seeing themselves on screen
• Maintain eye contact as you would in when in person
• Allow for pauses; it is harder for folks to judge when they might be interrupting others
• Be present throughout!
• Don’t forget to thank the participants (and to email them their gift card)
• Don’t rush to the next interview or focus group
• Take downtime, as you won’t be walking to your car…
Debriefing After Interviews and Focus Groups
Debriefing or “Contact Summary Form”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>One-page document with some focusing or summarizing questions about a data collection event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Captures thoughtful impressions and reflections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Should be tailored to project and its goals</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sample Debriefing Questions

What people, events, or situations were involved?

What were the main issues or themes that struck you?

Summarize the information that you got (or failed to get) for key questions.

What else struck you as salient, interesting, illuminating, or important?
For More Information....

• Cathleen Willging, PhD
  • Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation
  • Email: cwillging@pire.org
  • Tel: (505) 765-2328

• Daniel Shattuck, PhD, MPH
  • Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation
  • Email: dshattuck@pire.org
  • Tel: (505) 765-2331
References


