



# Conducting Interviews And Focus Groups

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# 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)

# Understanding Who, What, How, and Why

# 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

# Hallmarks

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

# Purposive Sampling



**Criterion Sampling**

## Extreme or Deviant Case Sampling

# Purposive Sampling

# Sampling for Interviews vs. Focus Groups

# Assembling a Focus Group

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Typically include people of similar backgrounds who have insights to share about study issues

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Purposive sampling procedures versus representative sampling procedures

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Sampling to the point of data saturation or redundancy (may be too costly, however)

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Focus group gurus recommend conducting 3-4 groups per population category of interest

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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



**Come and be COUNTED**

**Are you 15 - 25 years old?**

**Have you had difficulties finding a place to stay in the past year?**

**We'd like to speak to you!**

Our team is currently conducting interviews with young people in Albuquerque who have experienced challenges finding a place to stay. The interview may ask about:

- Experiences with housing
- Support from friends, family, and others like schools or community agencies
- Mental health
- Experience with foster care or juvenile justice
- Your recommendations for helping others who face challenges finding housing

You will receive a **\$25** for your participation in an interview.

**If you would like to participate, please contact Hannah at 505-765-2338.**

 @NMYouthcount  @youthcount

 New Mexico Youth Count and Housing Survey

- 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

# Examples

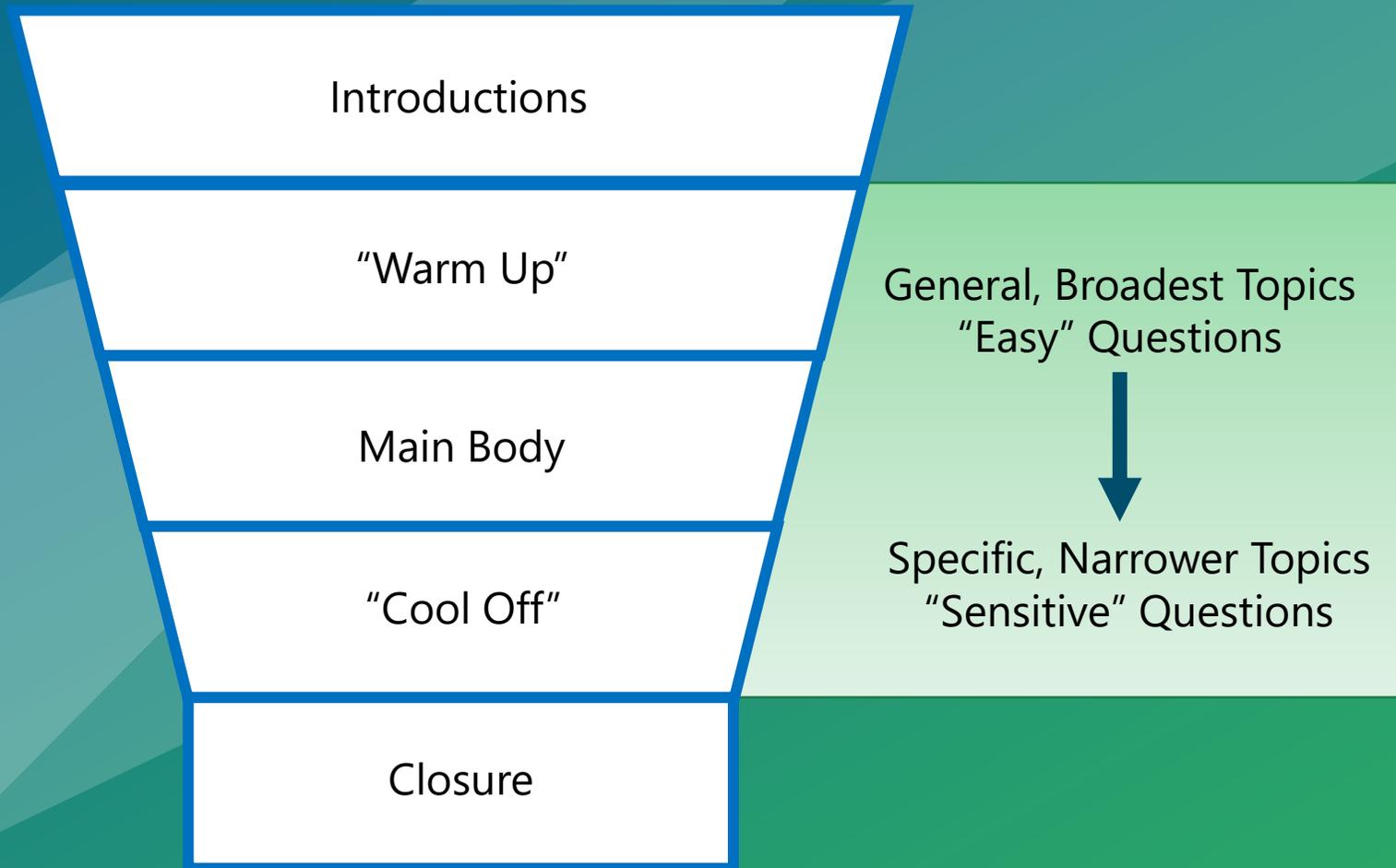
- Preparedness of Emergency Department in Caring for Transgender and Gender Diverse (TGD) Patients
- Exploratory study
  - Criterion and convenience sampling
  - Three emergency departments – sampled for geographic variation
  - Doctors, nurses, front line staff with experience caring for TGD patients
    - Reputational case selection, snowball sampling
  - TGD patients with experiences in emergency departments
    - Convenience sampling, reputational case selection, outcropping

# 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



## Useful for building "trust"

- Creates a relaxed and open atmosphere
- Helps with moving on to more sensitive topics

# Designing Interview and Focus Group Guides

**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

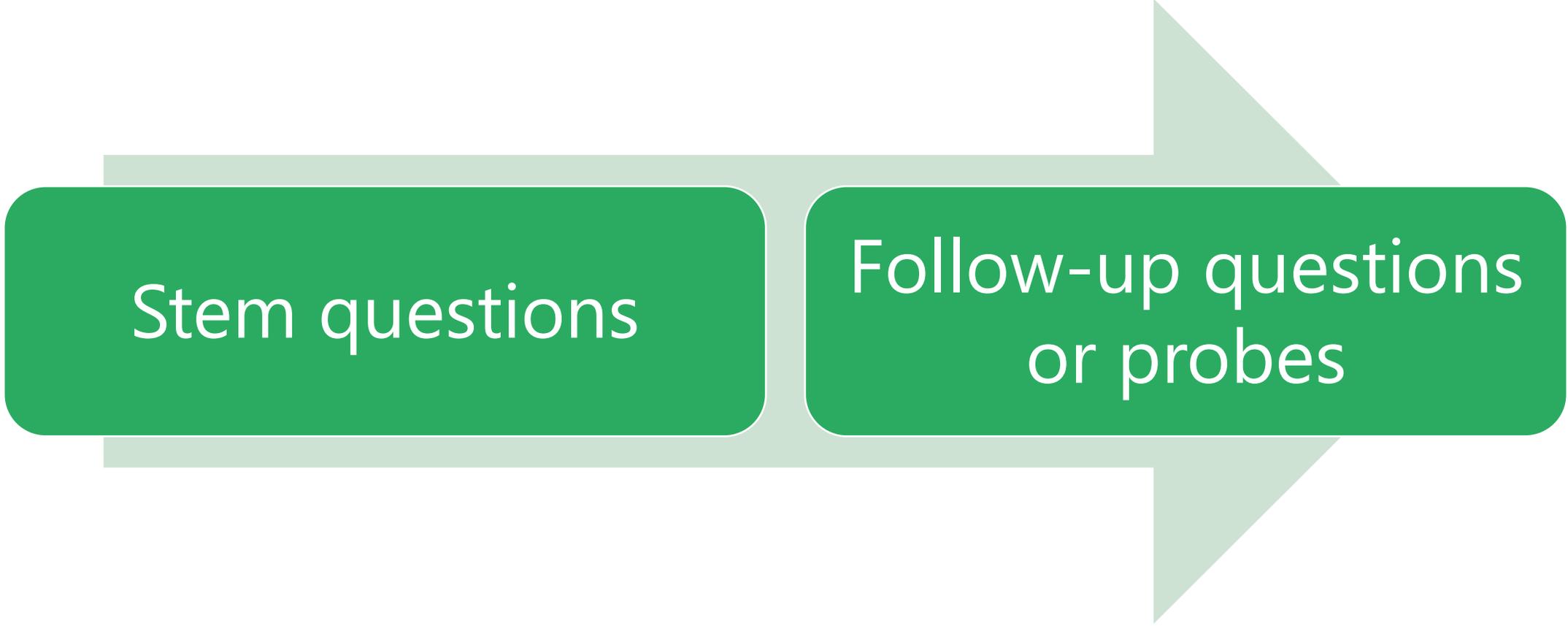
Recommendations to make things better for youth experiencing homelessness, advice to leaders, and final thoughts

## Closure

# What Kinds of Questions to Ask



# Two Types of Questions



Stem questions

Follow-up questions  
or probes

# Good or Bad Question?



**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.**

# 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



# Other Questions to Avoid

## Long questions

- Participant may remember only part of the question than respond to all of it

## Questions involving jargon

- Keep things simple so participants don't need to ask for clarification

## Leading questions

- Try to avoid questions that suggest a particular kind of answer, positive or negative; use neutral wording

# 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

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Can be useful in interviews and focus groups

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Feedback on process or product

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Reactions to a specific situation

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Use high impact, low burden tools (avoid homework)

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Don't overcomplicate things

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Example: Timeline to collect housing insecurity histories

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Example: 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**

## Primary Care Grant (Enhancing SGM Primary Care) Interview Procedures

### Generating ID numbers:

Role of participant	Clinic Location	Participant Number
Administrator = 01	01-04	Numerical count of each person in that role at that location
Provider/Staff = 02	See table below	
Patient = 03		

### Example:

- The ID for an administrator at [redacted] will be 01 02 01 (with spaces removed). If we interview another administrator at [redacted], their ID will be 01 02 02.
- A focus group of providers and staff at [redacted] will require an ID for each member of the FG, the first being 02 01 01. Then go to the next person in the FG, their ID will be 02 01 02, and so on.

\*\*Note: IRT members will still be labeled with 02 to indicate Provider/Staff

Clinic Name	Clinic Number
[redacted]	01
[redacted]	02
[redacted]	03
[redacted]	04

### Before the interview:

- 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)
  - Interview/FG guide – 1 per interview
  - Survey/demographic form for each interviewee (bring one extra)
  - Informed consent for each interviewee that has not already been consented
  - Notepad with sufficient paper and extra pens

### Conducting the interview:

(If the interviewee is not there see No Show section)

- Arrive 10 minutes early to set up.
- Introduce yourself and thank interviewee for participating
- Conduct quantitative section using the survey form:
  - Make sure to take notes on any information provided by interviewee that is not reflected on the form
  - Make sure to mark any refusals on the form for data entry purposes

## Instructions and examples for creating participant identification numbers

### Before the interview

### Conducting the interview

### Contingencies, No Shows, and Other Instructions

### Storing Data

- Conduct qualitative section using the interview guide:
  - Remind the participant that the interview will be recorded
  - Turn on the digital recorder
  - Take notes as well as possible – write quotable statements, star key concepts, note difficult questions and ways you overcame them, make note of any issues that stand out to you in the context and affect of the participant
- Turn off the recorder after the interview is completed
- Give interviewee \$50 and ask her/him to sign receipt book:
  - If interviewee refuses the respondent fee, ask her/him to sign the receipt book and write **DECLINE** on the receipt
- Thank the interviewee for her/his time!
- Keep ALL forms and the digital recorder with you at ALL times. Do not leave them in the 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.

- If you reach them and they can arrive in time for you to complete the interview proceed. If not reschedule them for another time.
- If no answer, wait **30 minutes** after the scheduled start time and **then leave**.
  - 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):

- Scan, and upload the following documents to the N drive. Labeled as below, N:\Projects\Willing Primary Care R21\Data\Interviews:
  - Demographic form (save as "Demographics\_ID#\_date")
  - 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"
- Mark 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.
- 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

# 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

## **Opening**

Invite a lengthy initial response; springboard for further questions, i.e., "How do you typically deal with...")

## **Probing**

Create further avenues for exploration, i.e., "Why might this be the case...")

## **Paraphrasing**

Provide speaker with a mirror with which to reflect and expand on comments, i.e., "It sounds like..."

## **Clarifying understanding or interpretation**

Prompt additional explanation, i.e., "I'm not sure I understand. Do you mean..."

# 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?

# Taking Notes

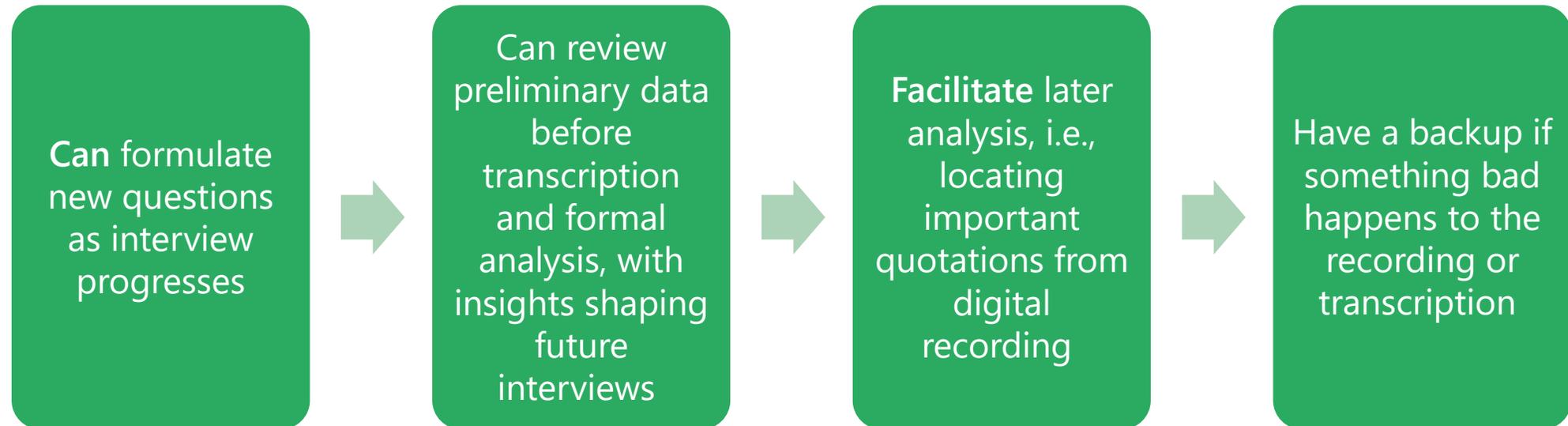
Even if your recording interview, still take notes!

Not verbatim but strategic and focused

Taking excessive notes can distract participant

Taking notes on a laptop can be more distracting

# Why Take Notes?



# Identify/Return to Unclear/Incomplete Information

# “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

# 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

# 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**

# 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)



# 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



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



# 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

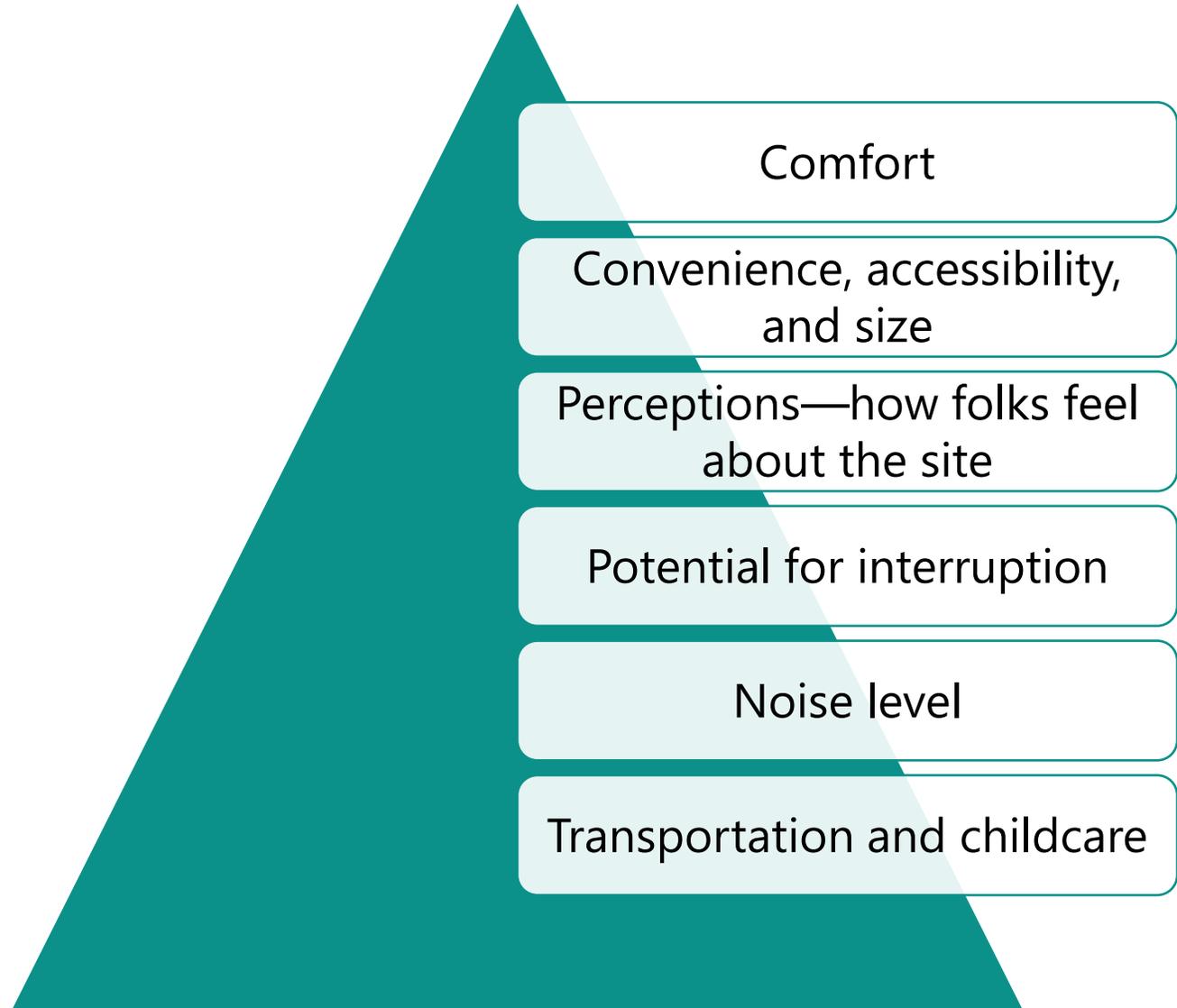


- Waiting room in strip-mall methadone clinic closed for lunch
- Clients banging on the door for entire hour
- Focus mob: Possibly enticed by gift card or voluntold, little knowledge of discussion topics
- No good place to record, plus notetaker who organized group was late...
- Questions about training/supervision 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)

# Choosing a Site for In-Person Focus Groups



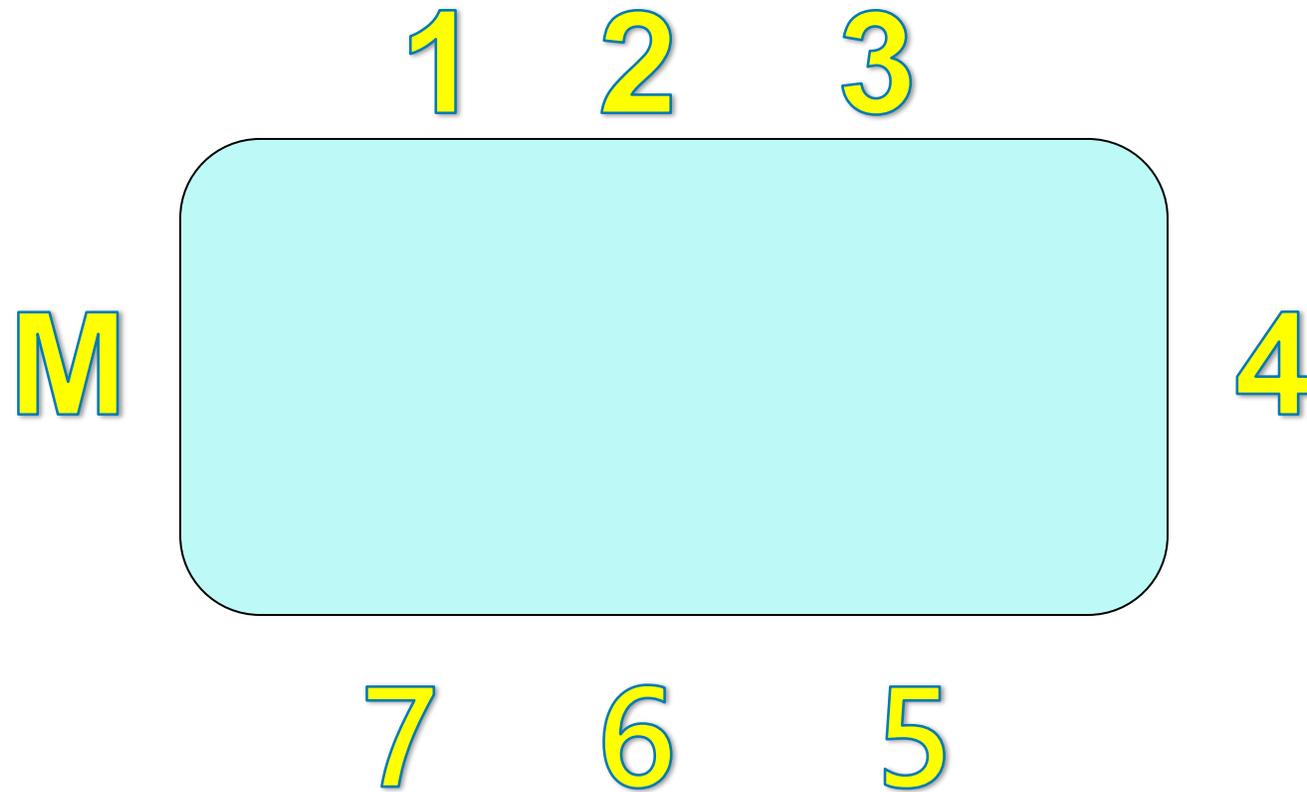
# Ensuring Privacy and Confidentiality



# Taking Notes and Recording Data

- 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

# Sample Diagram



# 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



# Sample Ground Rules

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 change 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.

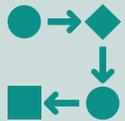
Because we want to be able to remember everything that people tell us today, [scribe's name] is going to write notes about what people say. Sometimes, [scribe's name] can't write fast enough to keep up, so we're also going to audio record what is being said. This way, we can check later to make sure 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

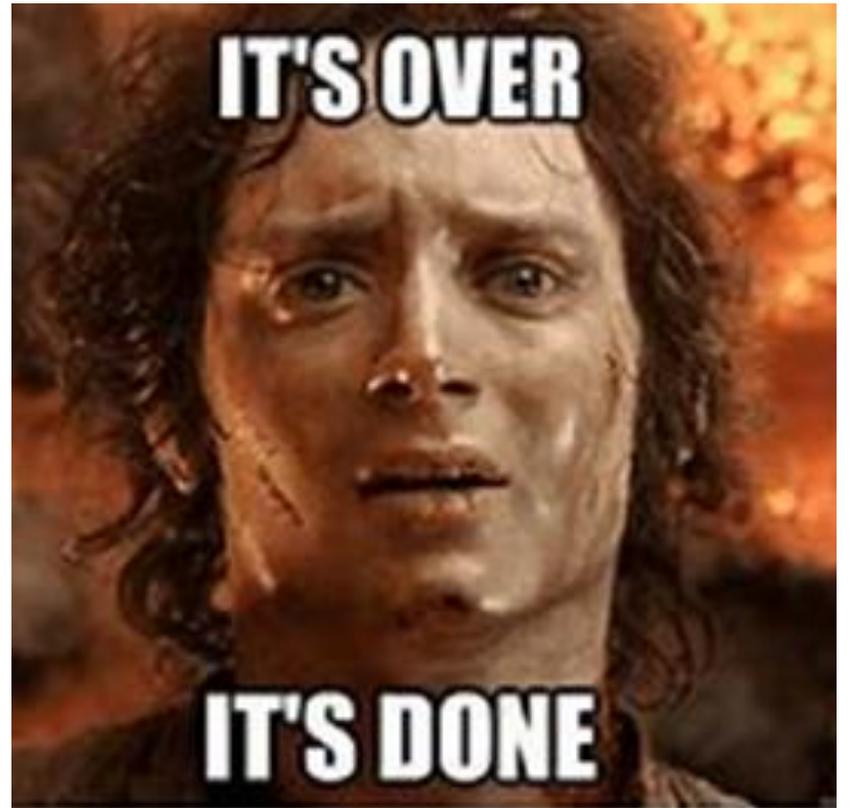
## Avoid....

- 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

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- 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



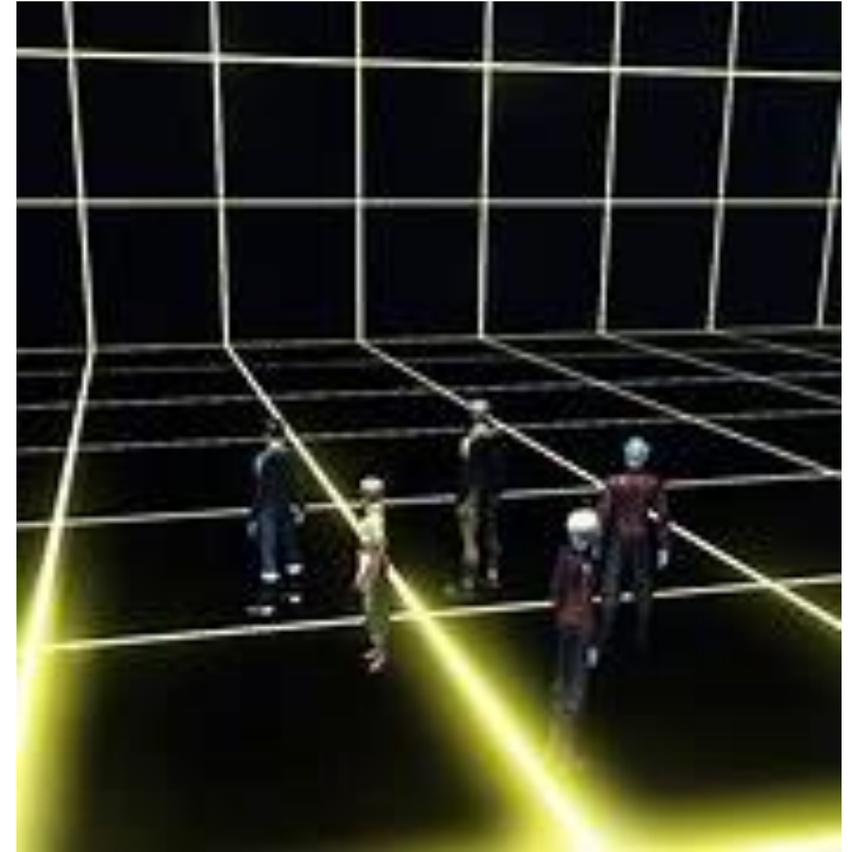
Advise everyone to be in a good space, i.e., not a moving vehicle



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)

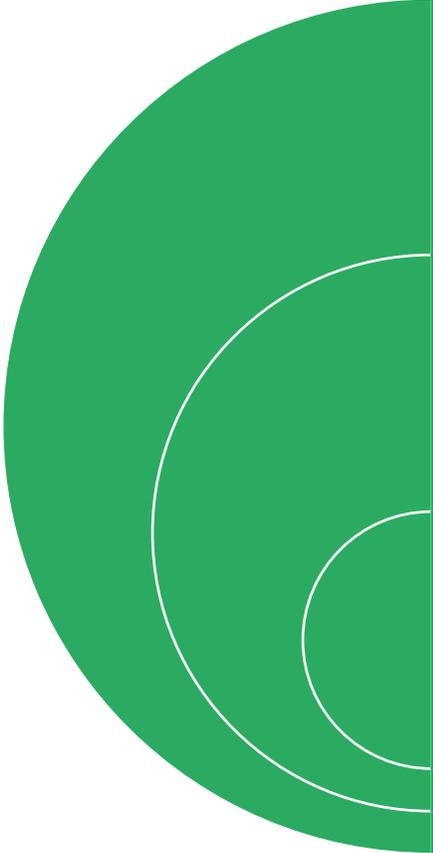


# Social Interactions

- 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”



One-page document with some focusing or summarizing questions about a data collection event

Captures thoughtful impressions and reflections

Should be tailored to project and its goals

# Sample Debriefing Questions

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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...

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