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"Focus Groups Can Be Fun": The Use of Activity-Oriented Questions in Focus Group Discussions

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Interest in focus group discussions has grown recently, and so has the recognition of them as a valuable method for qualitative data collection. Despite increasing popularity, they are not an easy option, and moderators must find appropriate ways to approach participants to achieve good-quality data. A path to reach this aim is the inclusion in the focus group agenda of some "exercises" (or activity-oriented questions) that are enjoyable and productive supplements to questions. Exercises provide a different way of gathering information and are beneficial, for instance, for more reflective participants. They can help focus the group's attention on the core study topic and also make subsequent comparative analysis more straightforward. They can also be helpful with young people and to discuss sensitive topics. The author describes and provides suggestions for use and examples of several exercises, illustrating their application in a research project investigating the cultural meaning of youth suicide in university students in Italy, India, and Australia.

Keywords: methodology; focus groups; qualitative research; suicide; interview techniques; activity; creativity; art-based research

Qualitative methodology incorporates a variety of methods, of which participant observation and individual interview are among those predominantly used. Focus group discussion is a qualitative method that possesses elements of both these techniques while maintaining its own peculiarity and uniqueness as a distinctive research method (Morgan, 1988, cited in Madriz, 2000). In recent years, interest has grown in the use of focus groups across a diversity of contexts, including health research and community settings, to explore a wide range of issues.

I will open this article with a brief historical excursus and the state of the art of this method, followed by the description of various focus group techniques such as free listing, storytelling, and role-playing. Some of these activity-oriented questions will be exemplified, illustrating their application in a research project investigating the cultural meaning of youth suicide with students in Italy, India, and Australia and in upcoming projects. With this article, I intend to provide suggestions for the use of these and other activity-oriented questions during group (or individual) interviews, as summarized in the conclusions.

Historical Excursus of Focus Groups

Humans, as "social" beings, have long been gathering together and discussing important issues in groups. Researchers have used this naturally occurring behavior and refined it to make it a method of research whose development has been divided into three phases (Morgan, 1998): Focus groups began to be used both in academic and applied settings, "exploded" in marketing research, and have recently been adopted in numerous fields.

More precisely, forms of group interviewing have been used by social scientists since at least the 1920s. Social scientists, having doubts about the accuracy of traditional individual interviews, began investigating alternative ways of interviewing, where the researcher would take on a less directive and dominating role (Krueger & Casey, 2000). The forefathers of focus groups research are usually recognized as Lazarsfeld and Merton, colleagues in the Department of Sociology at Columbia University. Through the 1940s, Lazarsfeld and his colleagues at the Office of Radio Research used focused interviews, both with individuals and groups, as a method for uncovering the effects of mass communication (Delli Carpini & Williams, 1994). Merton became interested in group interviews in 1941, observing one of Lazarsfeld's works. He saw great potential in these collective interviews, and he and his students developed a set of guidelines, still used in great part today (Delli Carpini & Williams, 1994). The guidelines have been summarized in an article by Merton and Kendall for the *American Journal of Sociology* in 1946 and appeared in a book in 1956; both publications were titled *The Focused Interview* (cited in Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, & Robson, 2001).

Merton and students' work passed into a degree of obscurity because most academics did not embrace the focused interviews, and their contributions lay dormant in the social sciences for decades (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Lazarsfeld's earliest use of group interviews (i.e., evaluating consumers' responses to radio programs), as Morgan (1998) noted, was the direct connection between marketing research and focus groups. Therefore, the market research community began using focus groups in the beginning of 1950s, mainly because the method produced believable results at a reasonable cost. From then to the 1980s, focus groups (referred to in marketing research as "group depth interviews") were seldom found outside marketing research.

Even though academics created the "focused interview," the academic community did not embrace the method at first. Nevertheless, the success of focus groups in market research did not go unnoticed, and academics began to reexamine the potential for focus groups at the beginning of the 1980s (Krueger & Casey, 2000), often taking some strategies and procedures from market researchers and adapting them to other fields. Fundamental in this period was Morgan and Spanish's publication in 1984 (cited in Morgan, 1998), which drew attention to focus groups as a method for qualitative research in the social sciences. Since then the growing success of this method is evident in Morgan's estimate (1996, cited in Morgan, 1998) that social sciences journals are currently publishing more than 100 articles per year using focus groups.

Other than in the social sciences, focus groups are currently used across a wide variety of fields, such as education, communication studies, political sciences, and public health (especially development and evaluation programs). For instance, Wolf (1997) employed focus groups in immigration studies on second-generation Filipino youth; and Hicks, Lin, Roberston, Robinson, and Woodrow (2001) investigated ethically problematic situations for medical students. Focus groups were applied in a large study (81 focus groups) on health concerns and access to health care for young people living in rural and urban Australia (Quine et al., 2003) and Australian men's experience of depression (Brownhill, Wilhelm, Barclay, & Schmied, 2005). This method has been also used to describe how adolescents make sense of depression and respond to a depression diagnosis (Wisdom & Green, 2004); to understand the social construction of sexually transmitted infections in South African communities (Shefer et al., 2002); to study the underlying attitudes toward tuberculosis and its context in Democratic Republic of Congo (Bennstam, Strandmark, & Diwan, 2004) and the impact of shame and honor in the use of mental health services among South Asian women (Gilbert, Gilbert, & Sanghera, 2004); in tropical disease research (Khan & Manderson, 1992), suicidology (see Colucci, 2007a; 2007b[1]), and other fields as well.

However, even though this method is widely used and its implementation is widespread across different sectors and disciplines, too often focus groups in fact resemble individual interviews done in group settings. Focus groups might not take complete benefit of the "being in a group" in three ways:

1. Although various authors validated the utility of focus groups to explore group norms and values, making them a very precious instrument for cultural and cross-cultural studies and research with ethnic minority groups, this method has been used in these areas of study at a limited extent (Colucci, in press).
2. The fact that participants are part of a group and the opinions and ideas discussed are also products of the group is often not considered in the data analyses and/or in the report, where a sequence of individuals' contributions rather than parts of the discussion between participants are usually reported (Colucci, 2007c).

3. Groups also offer the ideal setting to make participants "do" something and answer questions in a more active way, taking the discussion more in-depth and in a potentially more enjoyable way.

The discussion of the use of these activity-oriented questions (or exercises) is the aim of this article. Presenting some of the techniques suggested by scholars, enriched by ideas and examples from my research experience, I hope that by the end of the article some readers might feel brave and inspired enough to use some of them in their practice.[2]

Activities as Supplements to Verbal Questions

In the third volume of the *Focus Group Kit*, Krueger (1998) affirmed, "Questions can be fun. Too often we get into a rut, but with a little help, our questions can be both enjoyable and productive" (p. 63).

The kind of questions he refers to are activities, or exercises, such as listing, sorting, ranking, and many others, where participants are actually asked to "do" something. These activity-oriented questions (called by Krueger, 1998, "questions that engage participants" and by Bloor et al., 2001, "focusing exercise") provide a different way of eliciting answers and promoting discussion. They might be particularly beneficial for those more reflective participants who are less comfortable with immediate verbal responses and need extra time for thinking or prefer to sketch out their ideas. In my experience, these strategies are very useful with young people, who can become bored after a sequence of verbal questions and start losing attention and also tend to act out and express their feelings and ideas in more active ways than adults. Bloor and colleagues (2001) recognized the utility of such exercises to focus the attention of the group on the core topic of the study and also to make subsequent comparative analysis more straightforward. Activity-oriented questions can also be appropriate for talking about sensitive topics, which might look less threatening when discussed through practical and enjoyable tasks.

These kinds of questions can assume several forms, adapting them to the specific sample and area of investigation. They can also be used at various stages of the focus group session (e.g., as "warm-ups," as a transition to another area of questions, or to summarize what was discussed during the session) and with several purposes (e.g., generate, share, discuss, and/or prioritize ideas; make a decision or reach an agreement).

In the following, some ideas for exercises are offered, which are inspired by other scholars' work (in particular, Krueger, 1998; Krueger & Casey, 2000) and the focus group sessions that I have moderated for my doctoral project (Colucci, 2007a), in which I compared the cultural meanings and social representations of youth suicide in 18- to 24-year-old university students in Italy, India, and Australia through a semistructured questionnaire followed by focus groups (two sessions for each group).

Free Listings

An easy but very powerful strategy to stimulate discussion is to ask participants to produce a list (Bernard, 1995). As noted by Bernard, this technique is often used to study a cultural domain. The moderator invites participants to list all elements of a domain, for example issues that need intervention, solutions to a problem, or characteristics of a certain topic. Participants verbally put forward their ideas while the moderators record those on a flip chart or whiteboard, or, alternatively, they might list items individually on paper and then share them with the group (Krueger, 1998).[3] Bartunek and Seo (2002) suggested, in ethnographic research, to check the frequency in mentioning some elements/words and the order in which they are mentioned to have an insight into the more salient meanings of a cultural domain. Free listing can be useful in applied research to find out where to concentrate efforts (Bernard, 1995).

For example, in the pilot phase of my study, students were asked to think about reasons why they would not kill themselves even if their life was awful. They were provided with small pieces of paper on which to write their answers. The various responses were collected in the center of the table and successively read by myself (the moderator), who asked participants to explain and discuss the answers.

Rating

Rating scales are powerful data generators (Bernard, 1995). Among other things, Krueger (1998) suggested that they can help identify which items should be discussed in more detail. Participants have a list of items (e.g., words, objects, or pictures) that must be rated on a scale, usually composed of a range of numbers or adjectives. The adjective ratings can take the form of a semantic differential. The rating in itself

can be the source of discussion between participants, or else, after each participant rates the items, the moderator can calculate a score for each item (in this case the adjectives will be anchored to numbers on the scale) and then discuss the results with the participants.[4]

The list of items and/or the scale can be prepared previously by the author or created by participants. As noted by Krueger (1998), self-determined scales might be closer to participants' opinions and beliefs, but they make it more difficult to aggregate or summarize answers between and across groups. In this regard, it is important to notice, as Krueger has recommended, that the purpose of the rating scale is not to achieve statistical precision but to foster discussion and get participants to think, so the emphasis in the report should be on the resulting discussion and not on average scores.

In another example from the same research project, participants were first asked to propose any strategy for youth suicide prevention they could think of. These were written on the whiteboard until participants decided the list was complete. Then participants were asked to rate the effectiveness of the suicide prevention strategies and rate them on a 5-point Likert-type scale, where 1 was *not effective at all*, 3 was *sometimes effective, sometimes not effective*, to 5, representing the answer *very effective*. I was interested in participants' ideas and in examining similarities and differences among cultures, but if I had aimed for more straightforwardly comparable data, I could have proposed that participants rate a list of suicide prevention strategies that I had composed through a previous literature review.

Ranking

In this task, participants generally receive a list of terms, written on cards or on a whiteboard, to rank according to a specified dimension; for example, from the most likely to the least likely, from the most accessible to the least accessible, or from the least dangerous to the most dangerous. A different ranking task could take the form of a paired comparison (Bernard, 1995); that is, all the items are combined in pairs, and participants are asked to say which item is "the most . . ." or "the least . . ." compared to the other element of the pair. At the end, to find the rank order, the "winners" for each comparison are counted. This variation, although more time consuming, is easier because participants express a judgment at a time instead of for the whole list.

For example, in the questionnaire developed for this project, students received a list of 14 reasons for some young people to kill themselves (extracted from existing literature and modified in pilot studies with students from the three countries) and were asked to rank them in order of importance, from 1 (*most important*) to 14 (*least important*). They were also given the option to add another three possible reasons that were not in the list and rank these as well. This task could have been used in focus groups, generating discussion about participants' different point of views.

Pile Sorting

Pile sorting is usually a card-sort task in which respondents sort cards (representing elements of a domain) into piles according to their similarity to and differences from each other. Pile sorts are typically done with cards or papers, but they can also be done with objects (e.g., cultural icons, tools) and photographs or pictures from magazines. After the sorting, the moderator might ask what the items grouped in the same pile have in common and generate discussion. Two questions that participants are often asked are "What do you mean by similar?" and "Can any element go in more than one pile?" (Bernard, 1995, p. 249).

Often the elements are written on cards, but a sorting task can be performed in other ways. For example, as proposed by Krueger (1998), participants might receive a sheet showing a box divided into quadrants, and they can be asked to group all the similar elements in a same cell. They can use only some of the quadrants or add more if they need to do so. After sorting, participants share results and discuss them.

The triad test (Bernard, 1995) is another technique belonging, similarly to pile sorting, to the clustering tasks and conceptual mapping. In the triad test, participants are showed three things (photographs, cards, objects, etc.) or listen to three words and must choose the one that does not fit in or the two that go best together or are most similar. This exercise becomes more informative if the moderator inquires participants about the reasons for choosing or excluding some items. This technique was inspired by Kelly's (1955) theory of personal construct and is very useful to explore individuals (and groups) differences in cognition.

Choosing Among Alternatives

As indicated by Krueger (1998), this is a popular technique in focus groups. Participants are offered various alternatives and are asked to discuss the advantages and disadvantages for each of them and select the one (or two, three) that they believe is the most appropriate, useful, and so on. They can also describe why

they made that choice. Instead of alternatives being predetermined by the researcher, these can be produced by the participants. Krueger and Casey (2000) observed that this exercise is often used to select among visual displays, advertising layout, educational materials, logos, or program options.

Furthermore, to the earlier example for rating, a simpler way to solicit participants' opinions on the youth suicide prevention strategies that they had listed earlier was asking each of them to choose the three most effective (indicated on the whiteboard with the symbol "+") and least effective ("−"). After all participants had given their symbols, we rated the three most and least effective strategies, and after doing this, participants often made further comments.

Label Generation

Bulmer (1998) defined a *label*, in the context of a focus group, as a statement, word, description, or concept stated by members of the group. In this activity, the author described, after participants have been asked a question, they receive small pieces of paper on which to respond to the question and are instructed to place them on the floor or table. Participants can keep filling in paper until they recognize that there is nothing else to add or a time limit or maximum number of papers can be set. Participants may discuss the labels while dropping them on the floor or table or after all participants have provided their responses. Label generation may also be used to answer the following kind of question: "What words come to your mind when you think about . . . ?"

Another way to generate labels or short descriptions might be to ask participants to imagine being writers who just finished a book about the topic under investigation. They have in their hands the cover page and must draw or write what the cover will look like and what would be the title. If the topic is something personal, it might be said that the book is an autobiography.

An example from a similar exercise that I used in the questionnaire, but could have been used in focus groups, is the word association task (Matsumi & Marsella, 1976), where I asked students to list the first three words that come to their minds if they thought of the word *suicide*. In focus groups, it would have been possible to investigate answers more in depth (which would have been particularly helpful, for instance, for ambiguous words such as *lost*, *broken*, or *wasted* or for unexpected words or phrases like *fan*, *long hair*, *blow*, *wide*, *eyeglasses*, and *charm*).

Picture Sort

The moderator usually begins this task by giving participants a selection of pictures from magazines or photographs. After the pictures have been distributed (one at time or in group), participants are asked to sort through them and select those that match a definite characteristic or that better represent a certain category. Participants might be asked to do the exercise all together, separated in smaller groups, or individually. Once the exercise is done, the moderator will investigate why participants chose those pictures (Kruger, 1998). This can be used to explore the mental representations or stereotypes of a category of people.

For example, in an upcoming project I will print images of people with various characteristics (e.g., young, Black, well dressed) and in different situations (e.g., alone in the room listening to music or in a pub with friends) and then ask participants to select the images of people who they believe are more unlikely (or likely) to be considering killing themselves.

Magic Tools and Fantasy

Dreams, magic, and fantasies can successfully be introduced in a focus group session. For example, to make participants think about possible strategies for prevention or solution to a problem, the moderator can say that he or she has a wand, hat, or device that will make their dreams or ideas become true. He or she then passes around the tool (even just symbolically), and each participant shares the fantasy, dream, or idea (Krueger, 1998). Kruger and Casey (2000) observed that this question often works well because it is different from what participants expect, but it is essential that the moderator plan the experience so that participants are ready for it.

For a research proposal on meaning in life and suicide, I borrowed an idea from a Japanese anime called *Millennium Actress* (Kon & Maki, 2001), where the protagonist travels around the world looking for a person who gave her a necklace with a key and told her that that was the key to the most important thing. Participants may be provided with keys for many other things: to a secrets box, to a never-opened door of possibilities, to a solution to a problem, and so on. The use of fantasy is infinite!

Storytelling

Inviting participants to create a story, a narrative, around the topic of interest can be useful for several

reasons: to make participants thinking about a solution to a problem, to see how they react to a situation, and to uncover their attitudes toward the topic under study. It can also be functional to obtaining an insight into participants' representations of a category of people. Participants can receive a vignette or case scenario where they are asked what they believe will happen or what the protagonist will do, and so on. The materials and scenes to build the vignette might be supplied through a prepilot focus group or using some prior exercise during the session. This option can be particularly appropriate when the moderator intends to catch a "real life" situation about a category of people different from himself or herself, such as in cross-cultural studies.

Of course, we can also play around with stories. For instance, after participants have told their personal stories, we can point to the voice recorder and propose that we go back in the tape in any point they want: Just press rewind, and it is done. Where would they like to go back to? What would they change? Which part of their story do they believe is (more) linked to what they are experiencing now (e.g., suicidal ideation)? In alternative, or in addition, we could also press forward to 1 month, 1 year, 20 years later: What do they see it being like at that time? What about if something changed exactly now, what will be different in this case? I love these sorts of "games" because, if used in the proper way by a skilled moderator, they can provide an incitement to a change or reconsideration of behavior and ways of thinking in the participants as well as provide interesting data for the research. This activity can have several variations: personal narrative, imagining other people's narrative, constructing a typical situation/scenario, comparing different scenarios (e.g., personal idea vs. generic idea; at-risk vs. no-risk situation), and so on. Scenarios can be particularly useful to investigate stereotypes and ways in which participants would behave in a specific circumstance (i.e., a peer who disclosed suicidal thoughts).

In my research project, for example, I found it interesting to ask questionnaire participants to construct a case scenario describing the characteristics of a person of their age and the situation in which it would be highly likely that he or she would kill himself or herself. Having completed this, they had to construct another scenario but this time describing the characteristics of a peer and the situation in which it would be most unlikely that he or she will consider suicide, hurt himself or herself, or attempt suicide.

A Variation: News Bulletin

A similar task is the news bulletin exercise, where participants are asked to compile a news article on a particular topic. Participants might be asked to tell a story using some objects or things as stimulation, such as a photograph: "Describe what you think is going on in this picture" (Bloor et al., 2001).

For instance, in my focus groups students were asked to become journalists temporarily and write a news article on a peer who killed himself or herself, describing the person, the act, and the reasons. Some of the articles were selected and read to the group. I (moderator) and the rest of the group then asked questions to the "journalist" to understand the case better. When there was little discussion between participants, I asked them more information by saying things like, "X was the neighbor of this girl, and he knows some other detail about this event." I wrote the answers on the whiteboard and then asked them more generic questions about why they thought some youth kill themselves and kept writing those reasons on the board until participants did not have anything else to add.

Another Variation: Role-Playing

There are circumstances in which participants might not be able to describe verbally how they would behave or react in a situation, solve a problem, or deal with a difficulty as it is requested, for instance, in the storytelling exercise but can demonstrate it in action. In those cases (but potentially also in others), role-playing is the perfect technique. In this activity-oriented question, one or two participants pretend to be in a certain situation, and the rest of the group observes how they behave. At the end of the role-play, participants are asked to share their observations and reactions (Krueger, 1998). In a variant of role-playing, all participants may gradually be included, taking them all into the scene, or some of them can take a role while others go out of the scene. In this latter case, the "spectators" might be asked to show what they would have done differently. Participants could also be divided in two groups, one group playing the role of someone who presents an argument or debate and the other group presenting an opposing point of view on the matter (this exercise is called mini-team debate by Krueger, 1998).

Scenes can be numerous; for instance, how emergency department staff behaves with a young person

who has just attempted suicide, what a young person would do if his or her best friend disclosed suicidal thoughts, and so on. Parts can also be swapped; for example, a participant can at first play the part of a young person "feeling down," having suicidal thoughts, and feeling not understood by the parents and successively play the role of the parents of that person.

Projective Techniques

In those situations where the moderator expects participants to be reluctant to express their opinions or ideas (for example, for the social acceptability of some responses), it might be particularly valuable to use projective techniques; that is, gather information on a particular topic by asking about a different and usually easier topic (Krueger, 1998). Some techniques are listed below, and they include both questions that indirectly inquire into the topic and those that are not properly projective but have elements that in some way can "distract" participants' attention and reduce inhibition or restraints.

Sentence completion. Sentences on the topic are prepared in advance, printed on paper, and distributed to the participants, who are given a few minutes to complete them and share the results with the group (Krueger, 1998).

Collage. The moderator assigns a theme and distributes materials (magazines, newspapers, flyers, pictures, etc.) to participants, who can be divided into small groups. The teams prepare their work using materials and their own words and drawings, and present the resulting collage to the group for comments and discussions (Krueger, 1998).

As for any activity-oriented questions, there are several variations. For instance, participants can be given a box (e.g., a noodles box) and various materials (e.g., magazines, drawing and decoration tools) to represent two sides of a topic, such as their strengths on the external face of the box and their weaknesses in the internal; characteristics of a problem and solutions to that problem; the present versus the past or the future; oneself versus others, and so on. For research with young suicide attempt survivors, for example, I plan to use a box and ask them to represent, on one side, the reasons that made them choose to kill themselves and, on the other, the reasons that make them choose to live now.

"If it was, it will be" task. In the analogy task, participants must find how the topic of discussion (e.g., group of people, behavior, institution, product) is like another topic (Krueger, 1998). For example, they might be asked, "If a youth who is considering seriously to kill himself or herself was a color (or a book, a TV show, a shop, a car, etc.), which color will he or she be?" What participants say to describe the target topic will give access to their conceptualization of the issue under investigation. In the same kind of task, if the target topic is something inanimate (e.g., an institution, flyer, or project), participants might be asked, "If it was a person, which kind of person would it be?" This exercise is called personification (Krueger, 1998) because the inanimate object is brought to life and participants are asked to answer how it looks, behaves, and thinks.

For example, in my project students often found it difficult to describe which kind of youth they believed would kill themselves or attempt suicide. Probably, using an analogy technique, they will have found it easier to describe the suicidal youth, pretending to be describing instead something less "threatening," such as a painting or a song.

Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2003) suggested a similar technique aimed to help participants make choices: Instead of asking immediately to make a choice with regard to an important issue, participants can first be asked to make a choice and explain the reason for it, thinking of the issue as if it were something else. In addressing these metaphors, the authors suggested, participants have first to think about making choices and how these choices are done before considering deciding something related to the matter under discussion.

Third-person narratives. This could be a good technique to encourage participants to speak about something personal in a less threatening way. For instance, a person who made a suicide attempt in the past could be told that he is in a film documentary and a narrator is now talking about that time when he attempted suicide, describing his feelings and thoughts. What is the narrator saying?

Drawing a picture. Participants are asked to draw a picture about a behavior, idea, or attitude and describe it to other participants. At the end they might also be invited to explore what is similar and different in the

various drawings (Krueger, 1998). An alternative is to sketch a stick person or a draft of something and ask participants to add words or narrative to the picture. As recommended by Krueger and Casey (2000), stick figures can be particularly useful for those participants who are anxious about the difficulty of drawing people.

In another example from this project (inspired by an example from Krueger, 1998), I drew a stick figure on the whiteboard and told students that this was a young person in the moments before trying to kill himself or herself. The picture had three different spaces in which to write, and students were asked to suggest what this person would probably think, feel, and say/communicate before attempting suicide. A selection of those group pictures can be included in the focus group final report.

Fantasy and daydreaming can also be used to inquiry indirectly about a topic. Analyses of projective questions are particularly challenging to perform because the answers can be very creative and complicated and hard to interpret. Morgan (1998) suggested asking participants what is the meaning of their responses and on which aspects of their answers the moderator should place attention.

Multitask Exercises

Techniques can be combined in a single exercise, as done in this project for the question about youth suicide prevention strategies. For example, free listing, pile sort, and ranking can be combined. Participants are asked to list their ideas on paper. These are then transferred to a large sheet or whiteboard, and participants group similar suggestions on the same sheet and choose a name for each category of items. After asking for additional items that might belong to the categories, the moderator invites participants to examine the lists and pick a given number of items (Morgan, 1998), such as the three most important, the five most likely, the four least known, and so on, or can ask to rate all items. Furthermore, the elements for the triad test or ranking can be developed in a free-listing task. Techniques can be merged in many different ways!

Activity-Oriented Questions for Specific Groups

Certainly the moderator can use other exercises than those proposed in this article, and some of them are appropriate particularly with some participants. For example, several focus groups with young people have used a campaign questioning strategy (Krueger, 1998).

The members of the group are asked to develop a campaign, write a slogan, or design an advertisement linked to the topic. Participants are provided with materials to realize it (cards, papers, colors, magazines, photographs, boxes, materials for hobbies, etc.). They might also be divided in small groups, and each of them presents its own campaign and provides comments on those of the other groups. Those in the focus group plan the strategy, complete with slogans, music, or whatever they think is needed to be effective (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Youth can plan a campaign aimed to persuade other youths to do or to not do something. Application of this technique can be in different areas, such as increase awareness of a problem or disease or promote a community activity, health services, and programs. As pointed out by Krueger and Casey, although this technique is particularly suitable to young people, allowing them to be active and creative, it also works well with adults.

Exercises can be adjusted to be sensitive toward cultural and/or gender differences as well. They also vary depending on the topic under investigation. For instance, for multimethod research on children's perceptions and experience of place, space, and physical activities, Darbyshire, Macdougall, and Schiller (2005) used a mapping exercise: The investigators asked children to draw a map of the social and physical environments where they were most likely to participate in physical activities.

Although exercises should be planned and piloted, it might be possible that the moderator decides to use a technique to address an unforeseen problem. For example, if in the group there are participants who dominate the conversation even after various attempts from the moderator to control such behavior, the moderator may decide to use the notion of silent conversation (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2003). Basically, participants are asked to comment on something; then they are given large, separate sheets of paper where they write their ideas. Once this has been done, they look at other's responses and express agreement or disagreement or elaborate on a point. All of this is done in silence (although for any activity-oriented question it is always better to give room to discussion). The benefit of the silent conversation in this kind of situation is that it ensures that even the quietest participant is heard.

Considerations for Focus Group Exercises

The exercises listed here have been exemplified and refereed to focus groups, but they can also be used in

individual interviews. They produce a wealth of information that can be compared across informants and across cultures and for this reason are becoming increasingly significant in anthropology (Bernard, 1995) and might be successfully used in other disciplines. However, exercises are meant to be the input for further discussion, and they accomplish their role best if the moderator goes further than the fulfillment of the task and invites participants to describe their answers more in depth, provide more detail, apply them to a real situation, and express agreement or disagreement with other participants' answers.

A matter of concern can be how many activity-oriented questions should be included and when. The number of exercises for focus groups depends on different aspects: length of the session, number (i.e., single session or multiple meetings), participants' age group, proficiency in expressing ideas verbally, and other. Bloor and colleagues (2001) suggested using at least two exercises. Dual exercises can have two purposes: The moderator might begin with a more exploratory exercise and then use a more structured one, or the first exercise pursues a positive aspect whereas the second explores a negative aspect of the same issue. This observation links to the question of when is a good time to introduce exercises. Of course, there is not "a" right moment: it depends on the purpose of the exercises; for example, to elicit a list of alternatives to discuss during the session (i.e., opening), to break the routine of more traditional questions (i.e., middle), or to express a final judgment on what was discussed during the session (i.e., conclusions). The same exercise (or material developed during an exercise) can also be used in different parts of the session. For instance, Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2003) suggested using postcards before commencing an interview and asking participants to find an image that best represents for them the topic under discussion and write a few lines on the back. One of the aims of this exercise is to focus the attention on the matter and ensure that everyone has some thoughts on it.

On the other side, I believe that the same technique can also be used in the concluding phase of the session(s). For instance, if in the beginning, participants had to write what they believed were the main problems in the area under investigation that required a solution, then at the end they could be invited to add which one of the solutions or alternatives discussed in the group they support most. This strategy maintains confidentiality of the answers, which is particularly important when members have different status.

Participants could also be invited to add other problems and/or solutions that had not been discussed during the session, with the aim of giving voice to participants who might not have had enough time or will to share some ideas.

Basically, it does not matter how many nor does it matter when, but, as also stated by Bloor and colleagues (2001), it is always preferable to include some kind of focusing exercise. As the authors affirmed, the final decision on the nature and content of it should be made on the basis of a pilot focus group. The best solution to make decisions about when, how, and how many questions to use certainly is doing pilot studies too: "Pretesting questions is just as important in focus groups as in other interview formats" (Morgan, 1995, p. 520).

Activity-oriented questions might be also used to give something to participants to take home and perhaps think about. In exercises where participants are invited to create something during or before the session, they could be invited to bring their artifacts with them, especially if there are positive feelings that the participant expressed about the creation. For example, the postcards used at the beginning or at the end of the session can be sent to them afterwards as a reminder for something (e.g., a plan, an idea, or to do a medical test, and so on) or to thank them; the box representing their future dreams can be given to them at the end of the sessions to wish them "Good luck!"

Data collected through the use of activity-oriented questions might be more complex to analyze. On the other side, they can help the researcher see elements that would have been neglected if the question was asked in a more classical way. Some ideas on how to analyze data are provided by Ryan and Bernard (2000). The authors suggested, for example, using component analysis and producing taxonomies or mental maps if the aim is to understand cultural domains. Taxonomies can be produced leaning on various techniques, such as paired comparison, pile sorts, and triad tests.

Tasks Preceding the Focus Group

The moderator can ask participants to do something before the focus group, to prepare them on the topic or to produce materials to be used during the activity. This task might consist in reading some references, checking the Internet for a topic, visiting a location, speaking with a specified person, writing

a diary, taking photographs, or finding materials such as flyers, music, participants' primary school notebooks, and so on (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

Leichtentritt (2004) asked young Israeli adults to write an essay about what kind of things would make death a good death and an experience of a bad or good death. The essays were then discussed in a group meeting and individual interviews. Essays and other products can become a stimulus for discussion during the group, but they can also be requested only with the aim of making participants think about the topic before coming into the group so that they have already given some thought to it. This strategy might make the discussion more fluent and rich as well. Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2003) proposed giving tape recorders to participants before coming to the group session. In this way, they can ask questions to themselves and respond, offering them time for reflection before sharing their thoughts in the group. In the study of Darbyshire et al. (2005), cited previously, at the end of the focus groups the investigators provided children with disposable cameras and asked them to take photos about their physical activities and write a brief comment for each of them. This task was not followed by a further discussion, but, as the authors commented, it could have been an opportunity to allow participants to talk about their photographs and stimulate further discussion. This was done, for example, in Krueger and Casey's (2000) study on women's attitudes toward car repair, where participants were given a disposable camera (although I prefer low-cost digital cameras, which reduce roll and printing costs and can be immediately checked) and a scrapbook where every page had a caption (e.g., "take a picture of how you feel when your car breaks down") and were asked to take a picture for each caption. Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2003) proposed that participants' photographs be used in the group to make a poster, which was then put on display for others to see and comment on. They also suggested using photographs in situations in which a change has been planned (e.g., a health service about to embark on an innovation). The photographs can then be used to prompt "before" and "after" discussions. Kruger and Casey also proposed asking participants to keep a log of some behavior or experience for a determined length of time, which can then help participants recall their experiences and can also be analyzed by the researcher. Logbooks and diaries can also contribute to make participants start thinking about the topic of discussion, have access to experiences, feelings, thoughts, and stories which will not be expressed during the

session and have access to a change in the way of thinking or doing before the occurrence of an event and after this occurred (in those studies where a follow-up session is planned).

Items produced during or before the session might be used to organize an exhibition or be published in a manuscript. Developing this kind of project, the researcher allows research findings to be spread to a larger audience rather than just the scientific community, increasing also the chance of having an impact on a larger and diversified audience. For example, a colleague and I are organizing focus groups with young gays, lesbians, and transsexuals, asking them to bring poems, paintings, drawings, and any other "art piece" made by them to symbolize why they would not kill themselves if their life was very hard. With the exhibition we hope to give a positive message to other youth facing sexual identity problems (or any other person who will eventually attend). Before going to the conclusion, I would like to mention that some of these as well as other "preceding activities" can be organized immediately before the session, for instance participants can be given a photo camera or video camera for a set time before the session, can be shown a film which is then followed by discussion, can be divided in small groups and asked to produce a play and so on. These tasks can also be produced in-between meetings in multiple-sessions research.

Conclusions

In this article, I explored a less traditional way of moderating focus groups, which can complicate further the analysis of data but, on the other hand, can make focus groups more enjoyable, successful, and rich in in-depth data. In Table 1, I have outlined some of the benefits and limits of activity-oriented questions.

The aim of this article was to show that research is a "serious" matter and must be "scientific" and robust but does not have to be "boring," for either the researcher or the participants or repress creativity. Inserting some activity-oriented questions adapted to the topic under study and the group of participants has the potential to enrich the data collected, reduce drops in attention, make it easier to talk about sensitive and complex topics such as suicide, and be likely to be remembered—and recommended to other participants in snowball sampling projects—as a positive experience. Therefore, as I concluded at the 7th IIQM Advances in Qualitative

Table 1
Activity-Oriented Questions

Limits

   Might be more difficult to compare answers and interpret them (especially if there is no discussion)

   Might take more time and increase session length

   Might be more expensive (e.g., use of art materials)

   Some participants might have more difficulties in "doing" than "saying"

   Less confident people might feel that they must participate or feel embarrassed for their answers

   Some participants might think qualitative researchers are a bit "weird"

Benefits

   Might provide an alternative and better way to access peoples' views and opinions; the use of nonverbal and/or oral answers makes it an ideal method for illiterate or lowly literate populations and potentially adequate across ages.

   Might uncover opinions or ideas that would have otherwise remained hidden (e.g., issues about sensitive topics)

   Make sensitive topics less threatening

   Give variety to the session; avoids boredom (especially important with children and youth)

   Comparisons are very interesting and complex

   More participation of less confident people through individual tasks and of people that prefer "doing" or using their creativity

   Participants may take home their work, or something can be realized with them

   Some participants might think qualitative researchers are a bit "weird" but also that "unusual" might be better than "boring"; therefore, they will remember the experience positively (good for snowball sampling or future researches too)

Methods Conference, do not be shy or afraid. Find the appropriate techniques, adapt them to the audience and topic, and try. Focus groups can be fun!

Notes

   1. The manuscripts Colucci (2007b and 2007c) are currently under preparation and were originally based on the work for Colucci (2007a).

   2. In this regard, if readers have experience, examples, or ideas about these or other exercises that they are willing to share, please write to ecolucci@unimelb.edu.au or fera_76@hotmail.com. Your suggestions and ideas might be included as contributions in further publications.

   3. In this exercise, as in many others, illiterate or lowly literate participants can be offered the option of giving nonverbal answers, by drawing, using objects, photographs, images from magazines, and so on.

   4. Note that after listening to the answers from other members of the group, participants might wish to modify their responses or add a new item to the list.

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