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SHADAC Conference Call Focus Groups with Dr. Richard Krueger

In December, the State Health Access Data Assistance Center (SHADAC) hosted a conference call led by [Richard A. Krueger, Ph.D.](#) who shared his expertise on conducting data collection using focus groups. Dr. Krueger is on the graduate faculty at the University of Minnesota in both education and epidemiology where he teaches courses on program evaluation and focus group interviewing. In addition, he currently serves as the President of the American Evaluation Association. In 2001-02, he was involved with data collection from underrepresented populations including Native Americans, Hmong and Latinos as part of Minnesota's HRSA State Planning Grant activities. A description of some of Dr. Krueger's upcoming focus group training opportunities is attached.

The call covered a broad range of topics related, including:

- Overview on the history of focus groups
- Unique challenges related to exploring public policy questions through focus groups
- Components of successful focus groups

A total of 26 people representing 11 states (including 8 round four HRSA SPG recipients) participated in the call. Dr. Krueger began with a formal presentation, followed by questions and answers with conference call participants.

History

Begun during World War II to gauge soldiers' morale, focus groups have thrived in social and policy research. Bringing small groups together, making them feel at ease through a series of non-threatening questions, and asking the most critical questions after the group has achieved a certain level of comfort can yield rich information about the human experience. Researchers have found that the opinions, ideas, and values of individuals often are best formed and understood in relationship to those of others. Thus, one key advantage of focus groups—over individual interviews—is the group dynamic.

Unique Challenges in Exploring Public Policy Issues

Over time, approaches for conducting focus groups have evolved. For example, certain focus group protocols have been developed in commercial product industries to determine what goes into a consumer's decision-making. Some of these market research protocols may need to be relearned if the goal is to explore issues of public policy.

Group Size

Because the topics are more sophisticated, focus groups intended to gather information on issues of public policy should be smaller (6-8 people) than those intended to gather information on consumer products (10-12 people). It will be critical to provide the group with a thoughtful overview of the public policy issue to be discussed (e.g., health insurance), a description of the social benefit to come from the project, and an understanding of why their input is important. Also, certain techniques employed in market research (e.g., two-way mirrors) may not work for these types of focus groups.

Language

There are many things to consider in recruiting and conducting focus groups with individuals with limited incomes, or who do not speak English as their first language. It is important to respect the wisdom within the group. Always try to conduct the focus group in the first language of the participants. Moderators who speak the language fluently are preferable to possibly more seasoned facilitators who do not speak the language. Translations into English should be done after the focus group, but not while it is being conducted. It is also important to recognize that certain concepts (e.g., health insurance) may not be familiar, or may have a different meaning, to many new immigrant groups.

In-House vs. Contracted

There are pro's and con's of contracting out for focus groups, versus conducting them in-house. Contractors may have more experience with focus group protocols, but they may also be more expensive, and less familiar with the nuances of public policy issues. A hybrid model—whereby certain tasks are performed in-house and others are contracted out—may make sense. Conducting focus groups in-house allows organizations to develop capacity for future projects.

Components of Successful Focus Groups

There are many factors to consider when conducting focus groups. Methods that work in for one purpose and in one context often do not work in others. The focus group environment has a profound effect on the way people talk and respond to questions, and thus the quality of the data collected.

Participants

Recruit focus group participants carefully. Groups of individuals with common characteristics (e.g., a group of small business owners) work best. The goal is to create a non-threatening environment in which all individuals feel comfortable to participate. As such, avoid diversity within groups with respect to educational attainment, employment status, etc.

Some suggestions for successful recruiting include:

- Determine what would constitute a meaningful incentive for the group to be recruited.

- If money is used, the amount must be sufficient to make it worthwhile for individuals to commit their time to your focus group. For example, in one particular situation, small business owners in a certain city were reluctant to participate for \$100, but showed more willingness to participate when offered \$150 as an incentive..
- With top-notch recruiting, one can plan on an 80-100% participation rate (i.e., if you want 6-7 people, recruit 7-8 people). Do not over-recruit.
- Initial contacts with potential participants should be personalized and repetitive.
- Start with an in-person or telephone invitation. Follow-up with a written notice.
- Make it clear to all the possible participants, that their points of view are unique and important to your project.
- Provide a phone call reminder the day before the focus group
- Give thought to who should do the recruiting. Some people are just naturally better at doing it than others. Often local people are more effective than outsiders.

Environment

Pick locations that are comfortable, convenient, and familiar to participants. Audio tape recording with remote microphone is usually less intimidating, obtrusive, and cumbersome than videotaping. Someone should take careful notes of each session, even if it is being recorded. One way to do this easily is to take notes on a laptop computer, if one is available.

Examples of welcoming locations include:

- Someone's living room
- Community meeting room
- Church basement
- Library meeting room
- Back room in restaurant

Moderators

In general, select a moderator who speaks the language of the participants fluently. Facilitators should draw people out so they are comfortable to participate, pause often and intentionally to allow for additional comments, act diplomatically, and be conscious of cultural appropriateness, etc.

Other useful suggestions for moderators:

- *Plan the first five minutes.* Moderators should introduce the topic of the focus group, provide background information on the topic, and describe how participants were selected, and how the information will be used. Do not start by asking divisive questions (e.g., how much education do you have, or how many employees do you manage?)

- *Wait before immediately rephrasing questions.* When questions are posed and not answered immediately, moderators should pause and allow the participant adequate time to answer (10-15 seconds). Participants may be confused by a rephrased question if they understood the question the first time.
- *Allow participants to do most of the talking.* A skilled moderator will not dominate the focus group discussion. Comments by participants, not moderators, inform the final analysis.
- *Watch your body language.* Do not react to participant comments overtly (e.g., large smiles, vigorous head nods). Be more subtle, and even-handed in your approach. React to comments you personally agree and disagree with similarly.
- *End with a summary of the discussion.* Be prepared to give a 1-2 minute synopsis of points made during the focus group. Make sure you haven't missed any important themes by asking participants whether you have covered everything.

Question Design

The questions used in a focus group interview should be carefully phrased and purposefully sequenced to focus the discussion of the group. Begin the process by constructing the most important questions. Once these questions are written, it will be easier to envision lead-up questions. Also, sequence your questions in reverse order of their importance. The most important questions should be asked at the end of the discussion, when participants are feeling more at ease with sharing their opinions and have had some time to think about the subject matter.

Other useful suggestions for constructing an interview guide:

- *Avoid asking "why" questions.* "Why" questions often put people on the defensive as they feel they need to justify or rationalize their previous response. Because finding out about the context within which they made their decision is the most important, start instead with "Tell me about how you go about..." or "Describe a specific event where..." , etc.
- *Prepare an appropriate number of questions.* Usually, 10-14 questions will be more than adequate for a 2-hour focus group.
- *Summary, or end of session, questions provide useful themes.* Consider an ending question like, "Of all the things we have discussed today, which is the most important to you personally?" Or alternatively, "If you had one minute to talk about this issue with _____ (e.g., the Governor), what would you say?"

Analysis

The analysis of focus group data must be systematic and verifiable. A plan must be in place for note taking, taping, and transcripts. Deciding how much work to do on the analysis is often a question of resources. In general, plan on 40 to 80 hours of analysis for 3-6 focus groups. If a great amount of time and effort is invested in setting up the focus groups, it is probably prudent to transcribe the tapes to assist in comparing responses across sessions. Transcripts can cost between \$140-\$300. One possible

method of analysis is the “Long Table Approach” which is described in Dr. Krueger’s “Designing and Conducting Focus Group Interviews”.

State Q & A

Q: Do you have any suggestions for how to determine what individuals are willing to pay for access to health insurance when they don’t have experience with it?

A: One way is to provide a series of choices (say 1-5) and ask participants to put price tags on each “option”. Options could include various goods and services, as well as health insurance. Many times you will find that insurance does not rank high on the scale, either because people perceive themselves to be healthy, or they avoid thinking about their health until they have to. Keep in mind that there is often a gap between what people say and how they behave.

Q: How do you decide what to pay attention to if you notice that participants change their mind about a topic during the focus group session?

A: Usually, true changes in opinions will be very subtle, and difficult to detect during the session. If you are unclear about the internal consistency of an individual’s answers, try asking questions to clarify. If this concern is important to you, consider asking the participants at the end of the focus group if they have changed their minds on any of the issues that were discussed. In analyzing results, try to pay attention to the ideas expressed that are the most persuasive, the clinching arguments.

Q: May we make changes to the structure or content of our questions along the way as we learn more through the focus group process?

A: Yes, as long as you realize that when you change the questions, you are changing the study. Usually there comes a point after a certain number of focus group sessions where you have saturated a concept—you have explored most of the variation that exists with respect to your specific questions. Glasser and Strauss call this “theoretical saturation.” One way to deal with this is to ask the full set of questions in the first half of your focus groups. Then in later groups allow less time for in-depth discussion of the “saturated” responses. In addition you might add higher level questions (e.g. questions that provide more depth, questions that seek examples, questions where respondents do the analysis).

Q: Should we choose a seasoned moderator over a less-seasoned moderator who speaks the first language of participants fluently?

A: Usually, but I would recommend choosing a moderator who speaks the language over one who doesn’t, despite the difference in experience with focus groups. Participants will be more comfortable in responding if they feel they have something in common with the moderator. Accurate translations after-the-fact then become a critical component of the data collection and analysis strategy. The topics of health and insurance can be sensitive and some individuals might feel threatened when outsiders ask somewhat

personal questions. This fear is somewhat defused when the moderator speaks the language and is a local person.

Q: Do you have any special tips for recruiting providers and getting at sensitive topics, such as the provision of uncompensated care?

A: Going through your local medical association or hospital association may be a good place to start. To gather honest opinions, trust must be developed within the group. What you don't want is for participants to "spin" answers for the benefit of others in their peer group. Depending on how sensitive the topic is, this may be a place where "key informant interviews" (one-on-one) may be more useful.

Q: What are some strategies for reaching out to rural populations who do not have telephones?

A: Start with organizations within the area you are seeking to recruit. For example, you may recruit members of a church congregation to participate. You might consider making a contribution to the church if the church helps recruit participants. Other local groups may be helpful too. The key is to find a community where people know and trust each other.

Q: Can focus groups be used to complement the results of a more formal survey?

A: Absolutely. There are certain benefits associated with doing the survey prior to the focus groups, and certain benefits associated with doing the focus groups prior to the survey. However, all these activities take a lot of time and resources. Your ability to do both will depend on how much of both you have.

Information on upcoming Focus Group training sessions conducted by Richard Krueger

January 5-9, 2004 in Tampa, Florida (NOTE: Class may be filled. It will be offered again in June, 2004 in Tampa.)

Richard Krueger will be teaching a 5-day class on Focus Group Interviewing at the University of South Florida School of Public Health. This course can be taken in two different ways: (1) for 3 semester credits or (2) not for credit (which is less costly). This course covers all of the material in his traditional 2-day course but allows for additional opportunities to practice and apply the concepts of focus group interviewing. Information is available on the website at: www.cme.hsc.usf.edu To find the course information begin with the CE course menu and scroll down to "Public Health" and the month of "January" and then click on the "Social Marketing Field School" and you will find the course entitled: "Focus Group Research Strategies". The contact person for more details is Diane Ray at USF and her phone number is: 813-974-6695

March 8-9, 2004 in St. Paul, Minnesota

Dr. Krueger will also be teaching this 2-day workshop which is offered as a pre-session to the Minnesota Evaluation Studies Institute (MESI) sponsored by the University of Minnesota Evaluation Studies unit. Each year MESI offers an evaluation institute. The pre-session on focus group interviewing is offered on March 8 & 9 and then the remaining 3 days (March 10-12) are on general topics. It is possible to attend the 2-day focus group training as well as the subsequent 3 day general session. The cost of the 2-day focus group session is \$275. For more information contact: Jean A. King at kingx004@umn.edu or 612-625-1614.

Training at your location

Dr. Richard Krueger is available to conduct his 2-day workshop on focus group interviewing at your location. This training session covers the basics of focus group interviewing, allows opportunity to practice key aspects of the methodology, and is best suited for 20 or fewer participants. This session has helped many organizations and communities gear up and prepare a team to successfully conduct a focus group study.

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