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Focus Groups

CMAa11 Qualitative Research

What are we going to talk about today?

– The origin of focus groups

– The principle and purpose of focus groups as a research method

– How to conduct focus groups

  – Focus group guide

  – Focus group moderation

  – The role of the assistant

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Question for the beginning

What do you know or how do you imagine a focus group?

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What is the origin of focus groups?

Sociology (40s-50s)

– **Robert K. Merton** (1910 – 2003) and Paul

Lazarsfeld

- WWII: research on the effects of US war mobilization propaganda (to increase willingness to mobilize and fight, to make fighting meaningful)
- The Bureau of Applied Social Research, Columbia University
- Original research: confrontation with the material and dichotomous indication of emotions ("like" "dislike" button) -> analytical speculation about the reasons
- Introduction of the *focused interviews* method
  - Discussion of the reasons for positive and negative emotions
  - Form: more of an individual or a serial interview
  - Goal: confirm or modify experimental hypotheses

Something extra:

- Interpretation of the meaning of US propaganda materials:
  https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/powers-of-persuasion

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Further developments

Marketing (50s-80s)

- **Ernest Dichter** (1907 – 1991)
  - American Freudian psychologist and analyst, Austrian immigrant
  - reactions to the inadequacy of consumer surveys and sales metrics
  - Marketing: a tool for externally creating needs so that they are experienced as internal
  - Commodity fetishism and consumer hedonism as instruments of defence of society against totalitarianism (fascism and communism).
  - New concept of FG (application of therapeutic procedures and techniques):
    - room with one-way mirror
    - gather the target group
    - reveal desires and predispositions
    - build a brand identity (and create a need and sense of empowerment)

Some findings:

- Compton Agency (soap sales): bathing is also a symbolic and mental cleansing, it is not the instrumental reason for use that is important, but the meaning in life -> "Start again with ...„

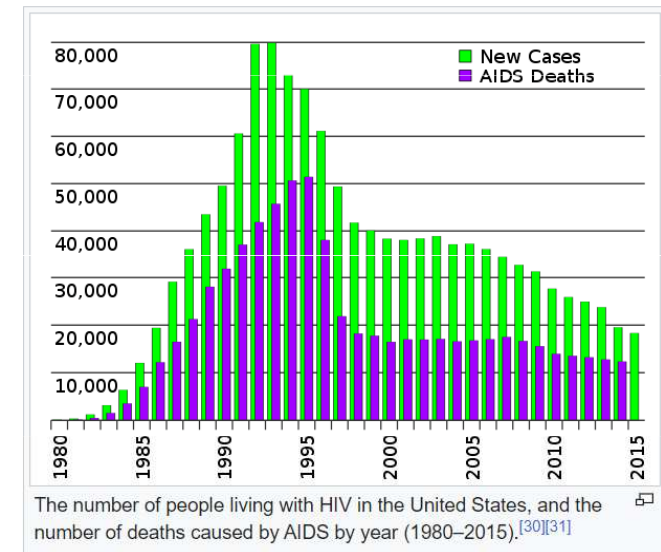- Chrysler Corporation (Plymouth sales): advertise in women's magazines + keep low-selling types of goods

- Reason for the use and success of the lighter: symbolic reasons (need to control the fire)

- Cake ready mix: necessary to add something yourself

- Mattel (Barbie): a doll is not just for play, it is also about aspirational identification

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Further developments

Medical/nursing studies (80s)

– FGs are beginning to return to academia, now without the emphasis on hypothesis testing

– Topics related to sexuality and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) at the beginning
  – efforts to understand the spread (risk factors and populations)
  – disease progression and impact
  – stigma mechanisms

– Later and now:
  – interest in experiencing all kinds of diseases and disabilities
  – setting and availability of therapeutic procedures and services
  – public image of diseases and attitudes towards health -> planning of health campaigns and their effectiveness

The number of people living with HIV in the United States, and the number of deaths caused by AIDS by year (1980–2015).[30][31]

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Further developments

Other areas

– ## Political Science/Politics:
  - – Reagan administration - attitudes toward the US-USSR relationship
  - – Labour Party: attitudes of the British towards tuition fees

– ## Applied areas:
  - – Urban planning
  - – Evaluation of services and policies (government, commercial and non-government institutions)
  - – Management (organisational culture, process setting) professional/expert groups (identification of systemic barriers in medicine, law, education, etc.)

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The nature of FG as a research technique

– Takes advantage of the *group's presence…*

– *…discussing views,* opinions and attitudes, values and meaning…

– …towards a certain phenomenon/event - they concentrate on its meaning, which is the common *focus of interest*.
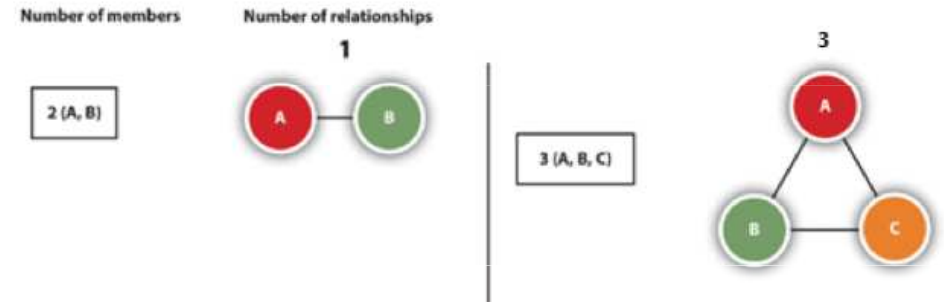

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What is the principle of their operation?

– The main advantage and principle of the technique is the effect of *social moderation* = mutual influence of actors based on interaction, through which it also manifests itself.

   – It always exists, but in individual interviews it is only indirect and difficult to detect.

   – People make sense of the world not in a vacuum but in interaction (Weber, Schütz, Goffman, Garfinkel).

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What is the principle of their operation?

– **Georg Simmell** (1858-1918)

  – society can only be studied through social interactions
  – study of forms of social interaction
  – social interaction can also take place at the dyadic level, but it will always lead to consensus or polarization
  – but only the triad brings real social cooperation (cliques, relations of dominance and subordination, collective identity and consciousness can emerge)

Number of members   Number of relationships
                              1

2 (A, B)   A — B   3 (A, B, C)   A
                                                    / \
                                                   B — C

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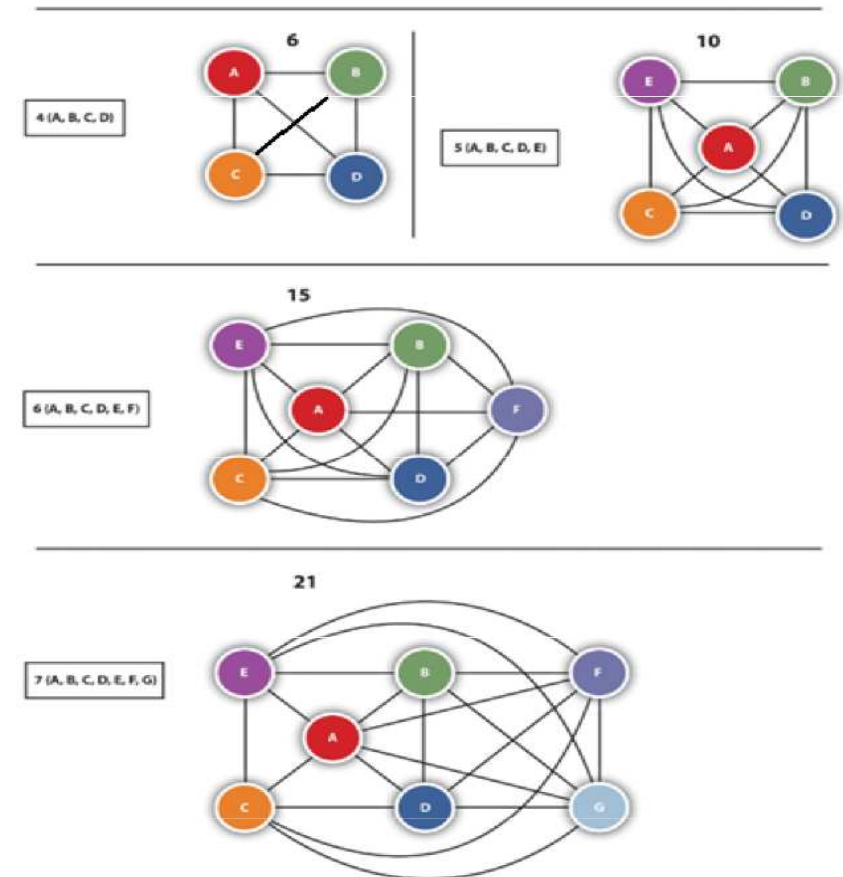# What is the principle of their operation?

– More actors -> more interactions and iterations:

– a wider variety of views and opinions
– saves time and resources
– reduces the risk of forgetting

Fern (1982): 1 FG can generate up to 70% of the data as a series of interviews.

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FG output?

– social moderation => *collective narrative* (result of interactions -> collective meaning)

– Personal (who)
  - Influence of individual characteristics
  - Personal sense
  - Frequency as a guide!!!! majority attitudes, not an explanatory characteristic (not a statistically representative sample)

– Collective (what => shared meaning)
  - Group identities, shared language, memory, meaning
  - Boundaries, dimensions, layers of the phenomenon
  - Taboo
  - Group rules and norms

– Procedural (how)
  - Consensus building, conflict emergence and their dynamics
  - Methods of prioritization
  - Ways of reaching the goal (consensus x compromise)
  - Decision-making methods (authoritative, non-hierarchical)
  - Transforming personal sense into shared meaning

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FG output?

- The quality, richness and depth of the collective narrative depends on the ratio of:
  - Positive dynamics:
    - FG can usually strengthen the feeling of openness, group safety ("I'm not alone in this")

      reduce the distance between participants and the moderator

      cultivate interactions

  - Negative dynamics:
    - bystander effect (diffusion of responsibility): risk of passivity "there are enough of them, let them talk"

      "bandwagon effect/groupthink": the effect of sticking to a position, an opinion, a stance that is perceived as "strong" regardless of one's own real perspective

      spiral of silence: monitoring the environment - assessing acceptability (fear of confrontation or non-acceptance) -> presenting attitudes

      polarization and amplification of extremes (attempt to distinguish oneself, to perform dominance)

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How to do focus groups?

- Preparation
  - Definition of the research problem and research question
  - Group discussion scenario/guide
  - Recruitment of participants
- Realization
  - Moderation, assistance
  - Data recording
- Data processing
  - Data analysis
  - Writing output (research report, academic text)

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Focus group guide

What is it and what is it good for?

– A pre-prepared list of topics and questions that the moderator uses to guide the group discussion

– Function:
  – Defines the researched field/topic
  – Identifies the main areas of interest in this field/topic
  – Helps maintain encounter structure (introduction, core, conclusion) and expectations

– Some (very experienced) researchers don't use it at all.

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Focus group guide

The Structure

– Hourglass:

    – It follows the logic of the discussion

    – Avoids unwanted skipping and repetitiveness

    – Builds rapport (relationship of trust, reciprocity and commitment)

    – Enhances logic

    – Reduces fatigue

    – Also used in other data collection methods (interviews, questionnaire)

– Introduction/Greetings
– Opening questions
– Introductory questions (warm-up)
– Key topics (core)
– Final questions
– Free addition, debreefing, feedback

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Focus group guide structure

Introduction/Welcome

- Goal:
    - To put the participants in a situation
    - Address initial needs (where am I, how will it work, should I be afraid?)

- Form:
    - Text x bullets
    - Relaxed friendly expression
    - Varying degrees of formality (beware of being too formal)

- Content:
    - Welcome and "props": greetings, explicitly name the meeting (without a detailed description yet), thanks for attending, introduction of the researcher (who I am, for whom I work, possibly experience with research), introduction of the note-taker (+brief description of his/her role)
    - Treatment of initial needs: more detailed description of the nature of the meeting (topic in multiple sentences), topic segments of debate, length of meeting, sponsor/funding/independence, format = debate = importance of everyone's voice, collect a range of attitudes and perspectives, respond to each other
    - Rules and ethics, "calming down": define the rules (politeness, respect, conflict yes, but politely, agreement and disagreement ok, not jumping into each other's mouths, confidentiality), explain the logic of data collection and the need to record, explain what will happen with the recording and the data, what the output will look like, ask for 'enthusiastic' consent, strong emphasis on anonymity and confidentiality and link to need for openness, no right or wrong answers, not testing, option not to answer (off-record), 'feel at home' (refreshments)
    - Formalities: info consent (if not signed in advance), socdem questionnaire (if not provided in advance or collected at the end), name cards (nicknames), silence phones
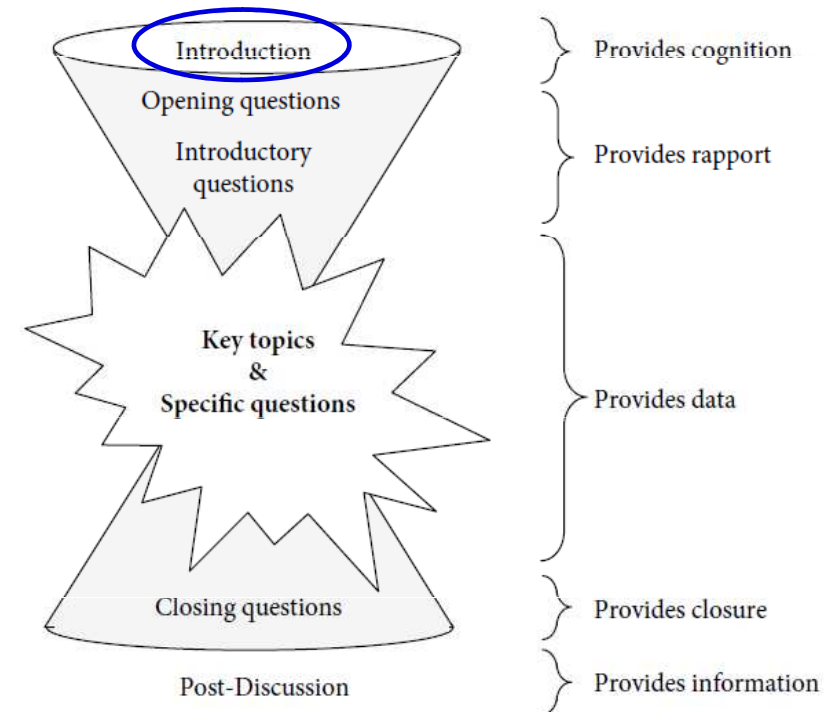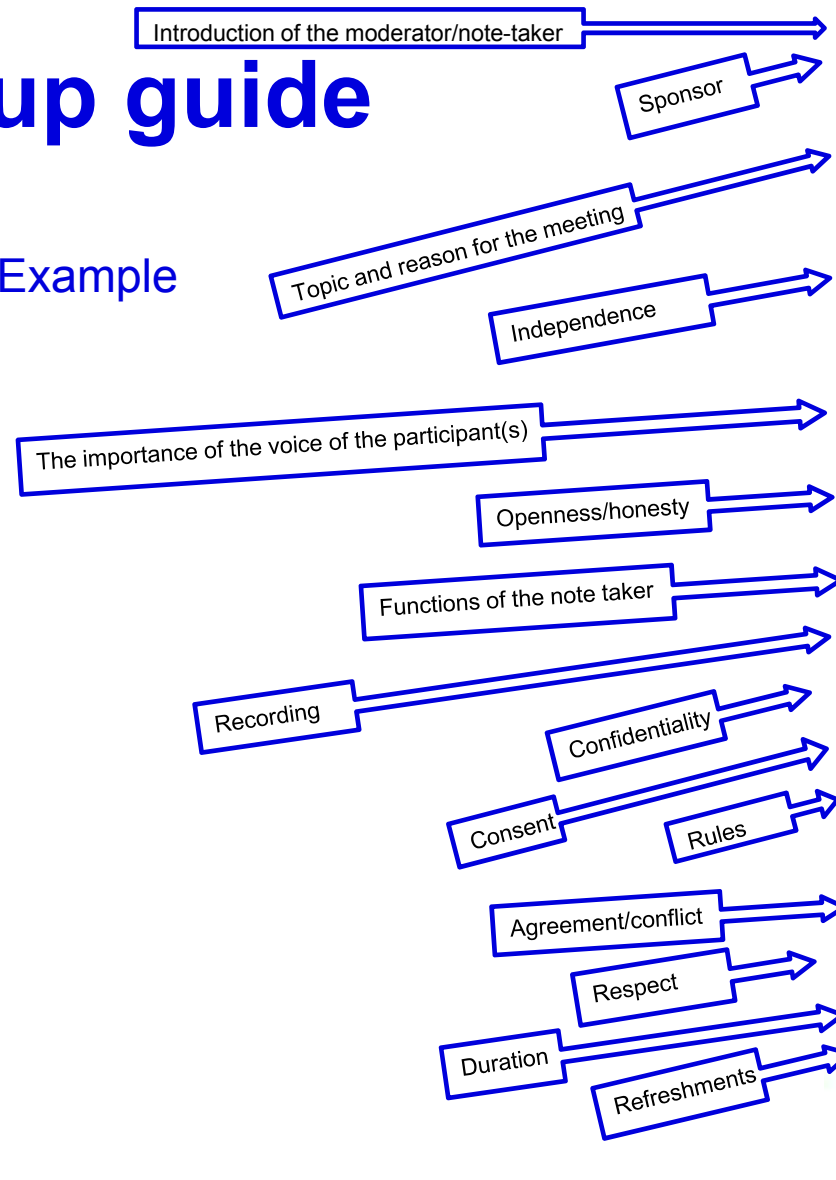   - Pre-start questions

Figure 2.2. Hourglass design of the focus group discussion guide.

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Focus group guide structure

Introduction/Welcome Example (text)

Introduction of the moderator/note-taker

Sponsor

Topic and reason for the meeting

Independence

The importance of the voice of the participant(s)

Openness/honesty

Functions of the note taker

Recording

Confidentiality

Consent

Rules

Agreement/conflict

Respect

Duration

Refreshments

Questions

Introduction

Thank you all for coming today. My name is (moderator) and this is (note-taker). We are helping (health agency) to find out about your experiences of this summer camp and how it can be improved. The best way to do this is to talk to people who attended the camp, so we are holding these discussion groups with boys and girls at the camp this week. In our discussion today we just want to talk about your experiences at this camp, what you did here, what you learned, what you liked and didn't like – all to help improve the experience for the next camp.

We are not part of the camp itself and are just collecting the information, so we hope that you will feel comfortable to share with us what you really thought about this camp. Please don't feel shy, we want to hear from all of you about your time here. You are the experts because you have been at camp this week and we are here to learn from you. There are no right or wrong answers we simply want to hear your thoughts and suggestions. I have some questions for you but also feel free to add other things you feel are important as we go along.

During our discussion (note-taker) will be taking notes and reminding me if I forget to ask something, but s/he cannot write down every word we say so we would like to record the discussion so that we don't miss anything that is said. Please don't be concerned about this, our discussion will stay confidential and only the research team will listen to the recording. Camp leaders will not listen to the recording. **Is it OK with everyone to record the discussion?**

During our discussion please let everyone share their views, but only one person should speak at a time so that the recording will be clear. Just join in when you have something to say, we will not be going around the group for every question. Remember we want to hear all your views. It's OK to disagree with others if you have a different opinion but please also respect other people's views. Also, everything that you hear today should be confidential and not shared with people who are outside the group. This discussion will last about one hour, please help yourself to the refreshments. **Are there any questions before we start?**

Figure 2.3. Example focus group discussion guide.

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Focus group guide structure

Opening Questions

- Beginning of the discussion

- Often one question:
  - Inclusive: so that everyone can/should respond
  - very short and simple
  - reduces fear of difficulty
  - breaking the silence (important for further speaking)
  - has no informative value
  - does not encourage debate (just a "round")

- Usually:
  - introduction + something about yourself (what you saw last time on a streaming platform, studio type/discipline, how you are, what the road was like)
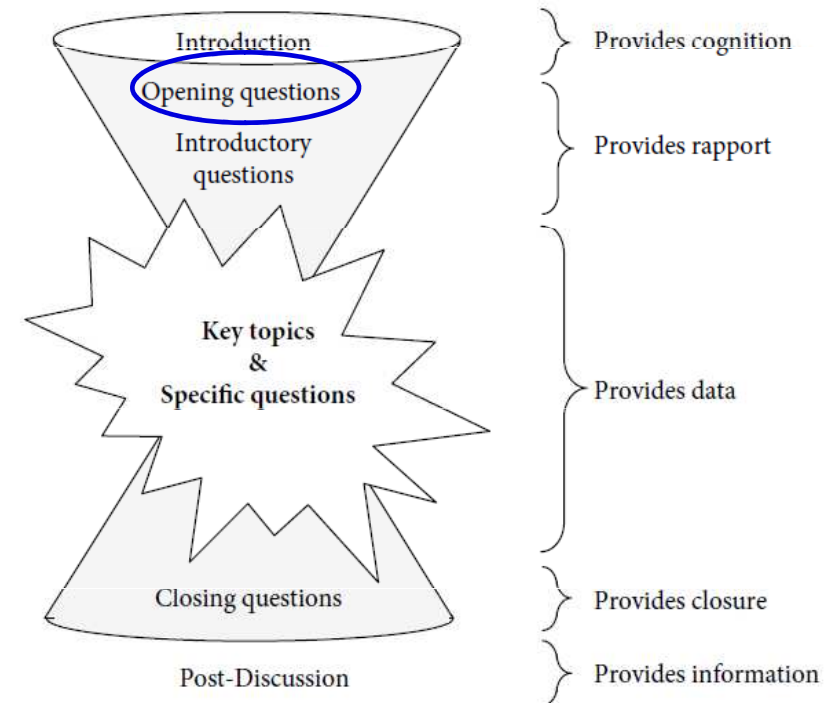   - beware of possible pitfalls (breaking anonymity, polarization/conflict)

Figure 2.2. Hourglass design of the focus group discussion guide.

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Focus group guide structure

Opening Questions

– The question can be replaced by a simple activity with an assignment (next class)

– Limits:
  – starting activity does not lead to "talking" (this occurs only at the first "real question„)
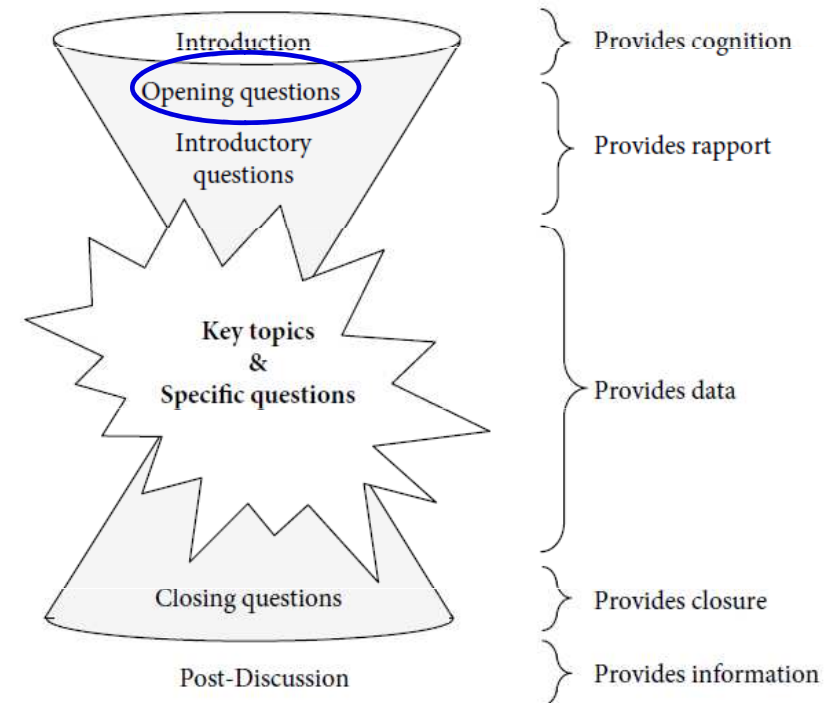 – may take time

Figure 2.2. Hourglass design of the focus group discussion guide.

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Focus group guide structure

Opening Questions

Let's start by introducing ourselves....

1. Let's each share our first names and where you are from.

2. What type of summer camps have you all been to before?
   (probe: activities, location)

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Focus group guide structure

Introductory questions (warm-up)

– Typically a series of questions and

probes:
  – approx. 3 to 5 questions
  – connection to the topic ("warm" the debate)
  – but the generality and lower difficulty
  – approx. for 15 minutes (initial "operating temperature" time)
– Alternative: introducing the definition of the main topic (based on "public knowledge„):

  > "We hear about... What do you think of this term?"
  > "We often see ... what for you ... means?"
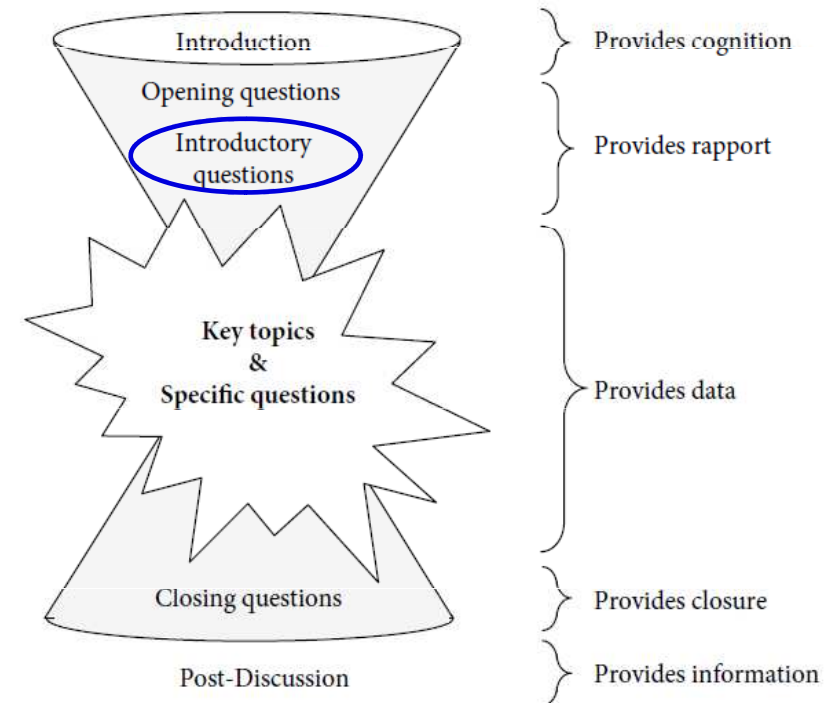 > "... When and where do you encounter this term?"

Figure 2.2. Hourglass design of the focus group discussion guide.

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Focus group guide structure

Introductory questions (warm-up)

1. What types of physical activities are common among the elderly in this community?
2. Where do elderly people generally go to exercise?
3. With whom do elderly people usually exercise?
4. What type of elderly people exercise regularly?

EXPECTATIONS ABOUT CAMP

First, I would like to hear about your expectations before you came to this camp…

3. What made you all chose to come to this camp? (probe: parents, friends, activities, cost)

4. What did you expect this camp would be like before you came? (probe: people, activities, lessons)
   a) What were you most excited about?
   b) What were you most worried about?

5. How was the camp different to what you expected?

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Focus group guide structure

Key topics (core)

– The most important part of the discussion
– Half to two-thirds of the time
– A series of questions with a direct link to research objectives
– Mono/multi-thematic (as needed)
    – Location: approx. third to half of the guide (optimum "operating temperature")
    – carefully prepared probes (it is necessary to "touch" the phenomenon in detail)
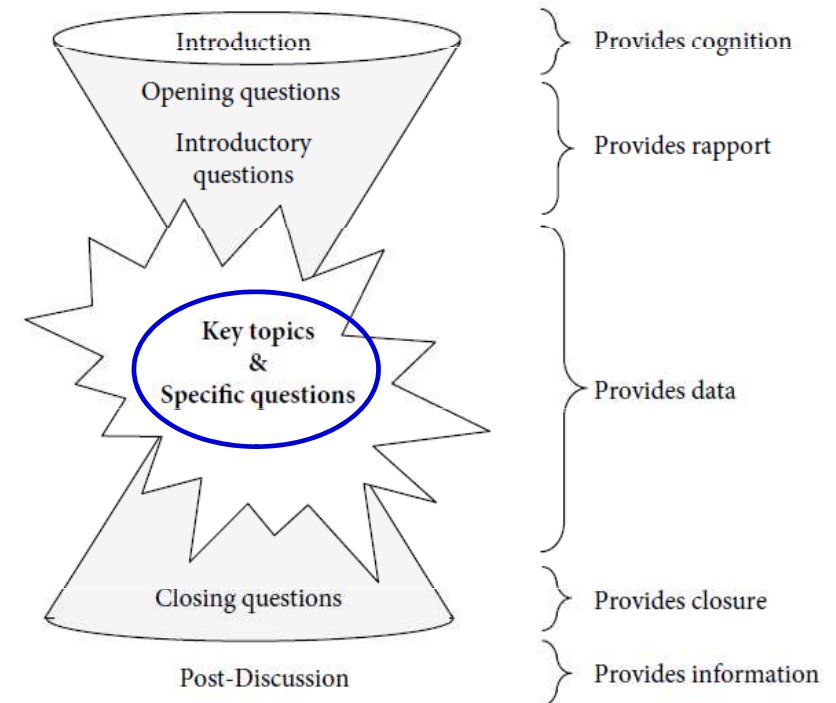– Highly detailed analysis

Figure 2.2. Hourglass design of the focus group discussion guide.

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Focus group guide structure

Key topics (core)

HEALTHY LIFESTYLE LESSONS LEARNED

Now let's focus on what you did and learned at this summer camp…

6. What new things did you learn here about having a healthy lifestyle? (probe on four lifestyle lessons)

7. Which healthy habits from camp can you manage back at home? (probe: reasons)

8. Which healthy habits would be hard to keep at home? (probe: reasons)

ASSESSMENT OF CAMP

Now let's talk about all the things you liked and didn't like about this summer camp…

9. What did you like most about this camp? (probe: activities, people, camp leaders)

10. What were the things you didn't like about this camp? (probe: reasons why)

a) How could these things be changed for future camps?

11. What was the hardest thing you did this week? (probe: physical activity, restrict diet, no cellphones)

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Focus group guide structure

Closing questions

- A series of more general, easier questions/tasks:
  - They indicate the last part of the discussion
  - They relax participants and help to concentrate "before the finish"
  - Allow summarization (for both sides)
  - Don't rush
- Possibilities:
  - ranking: topics, arguments, meanings according to some logic (e.g., importance, frequency, positivity,...)
  - summary: the moderator summarizes the key findings in a few theses/points and let them be briefly "validated" or expanded
  - role play: participants play the role of advisor/director/leader/politician/expert/celebrity and formulate a message of "what should be done"/"what they themselves would do"
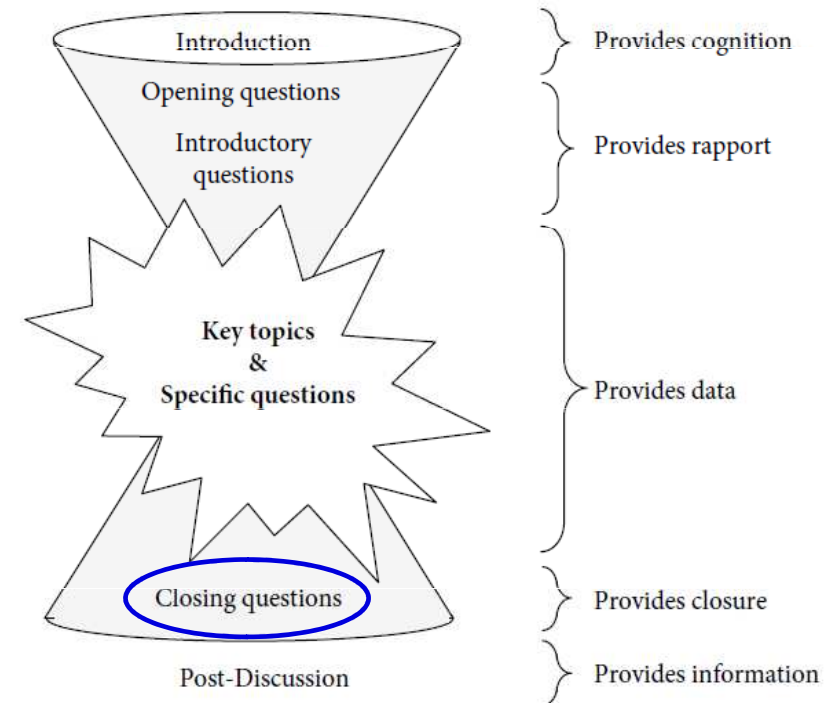

Figure 2.2. Hourglass design of the focus group discussion guide.

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Focus group guide structure

Closing questions

SUMMARY & CLOSING

I just have a few last questions....

12. How could more people be encouraged to come to this camp?

13. What would you tell your friends who are considering coming to this camp?

14. Of all the things we discussed today, which are the three most important things to improve this summer camp?

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Focus group guide structure

Free addition, debreefing, feedback

- Filling in "blind spots"
  - the equivalent of "diagnosis with your hand on the doorknob" in medicine
  - indication of omission of significant aspects or possibilities of changing the way of questioning (e.g. we did not beat sensitivity)
  - do not underestimate time
- Invitation to reflect on progress and impressions, control of harm
- Opportunity to further (re-)explain the purpose and process
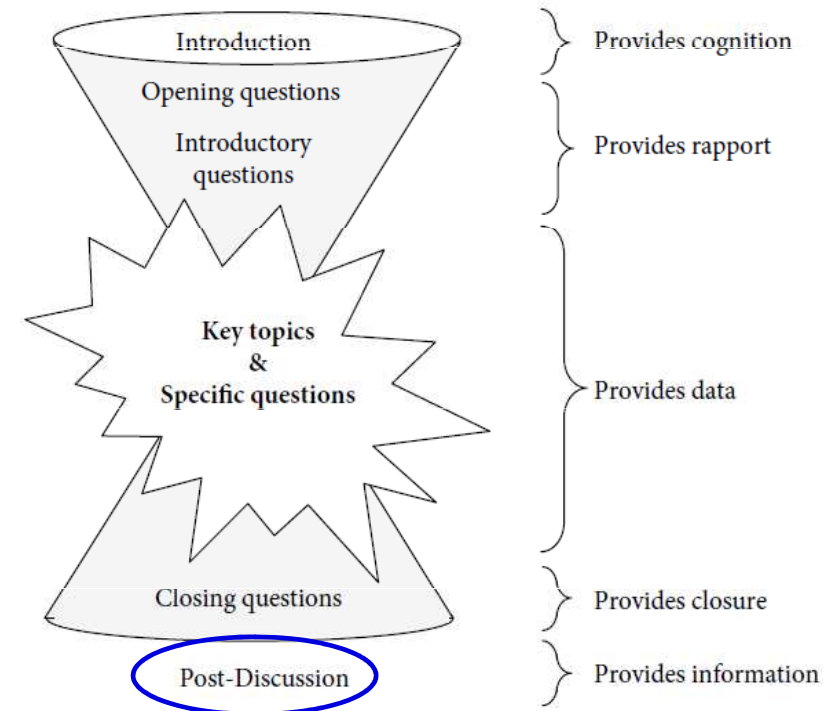- Thank you, farewell, invitation to take refreshments away

Figure 2.2. Hourglass design of the focus group discussion guide.

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Focus group guide structure

Free addition, debreefing, feedback

Are there any other things about this camp that you would like to share before we finish?

Thank you for sharing your thoughts with us today

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Focus group guide structure

Probes

– Complementary questions
– Maintain the moderator's focus (memory tool)
– When it's not enough, they point to new perspectives
– They are generated from available knowledge and research invention
– There's no need to overload the debate:
  – usually the main questions and questions provoking a range of answers
– Optional (but recommended)
– Not an exhaustive "list of possibilities"

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Key roles in FG

Moderator

– Ensures the progress
  – Welcome phase
  – Instruction
  – Formalities
  – Focus the discussion
  – Closing, farewell
– Maintains integrity
  – Rapport
  – Controls the dynamics
    Atmosphere
   Tempers too assertive
    Encourages the silent

Notetaker/Assistant

– Separate data source, rescue in case of recording impossibility or failure
– Ensures notetaking
  – Topics of discussion
  – Parts of important speeches
  – Turns and changes in discussion
  – Mutual reactions
  – Nonverbal communication
    – Body, face, nodding...
  – Intensity of dis/agreement
  – Disruptive factors
– Notation without interpretation
– Ensures recording
  – Ensures the device and its functionality
  – Turns recording on and off
– Helps with activities (distributes papers, materials, if not done by a moderator)
– Sitting aside

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Moderation

Moderator-dominated discussion   Interactive group discussion

Question/Probe ⟶
Response - - - ⟶

– Uses group dynamics but does not lead the group (it is not a questionnaire)
– Keeps within the bounds of topic and functional atmosphere
> But not every deviation is a problem (it's a matter of degree)
> Conflict is not in principle a bad thing.
   – Ideal: only mild asking about reason and meaning and indicating transitions between parts, participants interact fluently on their own and lead to explanations
   – Moderation changes during FG:
> Initially more active, then more passive.
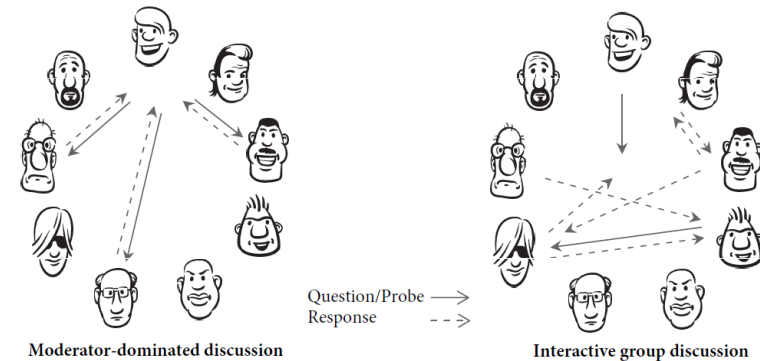
– Active moderation
   – More directive
   – Constant comparison of what has been said, how, why and how it relates to research goals
   – Relation of the "now" situation to the whole of the investigation
   – Based on the targeted directing of the discussion
– Passive moderation
   – "Invisibility" of the moderator
   – Concentration within the situation "now"
   – Listening quietly, appreciating and maintaining debate

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Group dynamics

Based on the mix of participant characteristics and the moderation style

Silent participant

- Barriers to expressing oneself
- Expression rare, silent
- Risk of oversights
- Risk of "fading out" (the longer the silence, the longer the silence)
- Techniques:
  - Eye contact: direct, slightly longer, not too long
  - The appeal: firstly, in general terms, "so we have several views here, do the others have the same, or do you differ in something?";
  - moderately directed "we have several views here, if anyone would like to add theirs ones, we appreciate everyone's views...";
  - Highly addressed "Peter/Martina, how about you, I'd be very happy if you share your view too, if you don't mind..."
  - Encouragement can bring relief to the participant, as well as more stress
- More silent participants/ic may indicate a problem in recruitment or topic (or just a taboo that needs to be better grasped)

Dominant participant

- Without scruples, trying to dominate, to be first, to have the strongest voice
- Expressing everything, a lot and as loudly as possible, possible aggression
- Risk of collapse of the collective narrative and negative social moderation (silencing, reluctance to express oneself)
- The need to respect but at the same time moderate
- Techniques:
    - Eye contact: at the end of the speech, the moderator moves on to the other participants and stays with them, lowering his/her eyes to the remarks
    - Body: turned to the side, head towards others
    - Verbal: Slight "Thank you for your insight, what do others think?"; Middle: "Thank you, I see you have much to say about XY and I would be happy if you would continue to participate, however it would be very nice if we could give space to others."
    - Expressive: " Mary/Peter, can we please agree that you will think more about others and give them space as well?"
    - Good to combine with repeating the rules of group debate, and agreeing to them at the beginning.
    - In the last instance, interrupting and asking for a moment between the four eyes on the side: clarifying the rules and offering or asking to leave
    - Maintain professional performance
- More dominant participants/ic may indicate polarity in the topic. Calm the argument by emphasizing the rules and possibly using or diverting to another topic.

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Group dynamics

"Wandering" participant

– Trying to be a good participant, communicatively solved nervousness, talkativeness
– A long, off-topic statements with no clear direction or conclusion
– Risk of loss of collective narrative (fatigue) and noise (uncertainty of the direction and content of the discussion)
– Techniques (according to the type of " wandering"):

Long/repetitive speeches

Eye contact: at the end of the talk, the moderator moves on to the next participants and stays with them, lowering his/her eyes to the notes

Body: rotated sideways, forehead to others

Verbal: Slight "Thank you for your insight, what do others think?";

Middle: "That was very detailed. Thank you, I can see that you have a lot to say about XY and I would be happy for you to continue to be involved, however it would be very nice if we tried to give space to others."

Expressive: " Mary/Peter, thank you for your detailed insight. Can we agree on more space for the others?"

Interrupting, jumping in to talk, thanking and politely reiterating the need to give space to others.

Confused speeches

To try to summarize one main thesis for others, to have it validated by "Thanks, I understand that correctly, right...?" Alternatively, to avoid a new iteration, "Thanks, Peter/Mary thinks that..., so what about the others?

Maintain a professional approach

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Group dynamics

"Group thinking"

– Sticking to one point of view
– Suspiciously intense and fast consensus
– According to some, a natural part of social dynamics; according to others, necessary to address:
  – Use a lighter version of some activation: often pre-write/mark/grade for yourself and then read
  – One question asked several times differently

Sensitivity, taboo, group silence

– Sensitivity/taboo
  – Depersonalization techniques
    "Hypothetical" situations (personal)
    "What if" (general)
    "Have you ever met?"
  – Personal disclamer
    It has to be engaging enough, but not too discrediting
– Group silence
  – Activation
  – Reformulation of the question
    Reduction of abstractness
    Example

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