Focus Groups Interviewing

Prof. David Morgan
Soc 510/610, Spring 2013

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The goal of this course is to teach you how to conduct research using focus groups. This is a practically oriented course, so there will be less reading and more emphasis on actually using these methods. The class schedule will follow the steps involved in conducting a research project that uses focus groups.

Readings

Required: Morgan, Focus Groups as Qualitative Research (2nd ed.), Sage Publications, 1997 (to be supplied in class or online).

There is only one required reading for this class, and it is quite short. This reflects the “hands-on” rather than “book learning” nature of this course.

Assignments and Grades

There are two sources for the grade in this course: a series of papers and regular class attendance. The papers will be written as a sequence of short assignments that add up to a full proposal for a research project using focus groups or two-person interviews. If you do not have attendance problems, then these papers will be the total source for your grade.

Attendance is very important in this class, due to its practical orientation. We will be conducting a series of interviews as a class project, which will be the source of your “hands-on” experience. In order for this project to succeed, each of you will need to make well-informed contributions, and that requires consistent attendance.

Rather than setting a “point value” on attendance, I will inform you when you reach two absences, after that additional absences may lower your grade. Also note that even unavoidable absences will interfere with your ability to participate in data collection, so if you anticipate problems you should take another course.

Class Research Project

The class will conduct a series of focus groups. I will provide the topic and I will handle the recruitment of the research participants. In other words, I will set up a series of interviews, and each of you will have the opportunity to do at least a two-person interview or a portion of a focus group. The total number of interviews that we do will depend on the size of the class.

We may be conducting some of the interviews at times other than our regular course meeting. If we need to schedule additional times, I will be sure we do that in a flexible fashion that allows for the complexity of your schedules.
Course Outline

April  3  Introduction

April  10  Uses for Focus Groups. with examples from students’ interests
Research Design for Focus Groups, Part 1, with student examples
Read: Morgan, pp. 1-30
Paper Due April 8, 5 PM via email, “Research Topic” (250 words, “pass-fail”)

April  17  Research Design., Part 2
Read: Morgan, pp. 31-75

April  24  Writing Question Guides for Focus Groups

May  1  Moderating Focus Groups
Paper Due “Research Design” *
(Add this section, 500-750 words, to earlier paper, 33% of grade)

May  8  Moderator Training and Practice Moderating for Data Collection

May  15  Guest Lecture

May  22  In-Class Data Collection: Focus Groups
Paper Due: “Interview Guide and Moderating Strategy” *
(Interview Guide is Self-contained, 500-1000 words, 20% of grade)
(Add “Moderating Strategy,” to paper 250-500 words, 13% of grade)

May  29  Analysis of Focus Groups, Part 1

June  5  Analysis, Part 2, and “Putting it All Together”

June 10  Final Paper Due by email, with “Analysis Strategy” and “Conclusions” *
(Add 500-750 words, 33%)

(There is no final exam).

* A double-spaced page, using 12-point Times and 1” margins, is about 300 words. (Please do not use 1.25” side margins because it wastes paper.)

NOTE: You are free to include revisions of the earlier sections of the paper when you write the later papers. If you do make changes in the earlier sections, please find a way to “highlight” those changes, so that it will be easy for me to find them.
Assignments

These papers are intended to be short, and each should concentrate directly on the topic for that assignment. Please use the “word count” feature of your word processor to check for length, and if your paper is too long, go back and edit out the less important parts.

None of These Papers Should Contain Any Citations, Literature Review, or Bibliography.

The overall goal in these papers is to describe what your research project is about and how you will do it. Although each paper is presented separately, the final paper will assemble them into a complete research design, similar to what you would submit in a thesis proposal.

“Research Topic” Monday, April 8th by 5 PM (Friday)

This statement of your research topic is the introduction for what will eventually become a complete research proposal. A useful format is to use two short paragraphs, with one stating: what is the purpose of your research project, and the other reasons why either two-person interviews or focus groups are a useful method for this project. In addition, for a short paper such as this, I recommend the strategy of beginning the first paragraph with the statement: “The purpose of this research this....” because this allows you to concentrate on the core of the assignment, right from the beginning.

I realize that most of you will be writing this assignment before you have had much exposure to focus groups, so I am not expecting you to show any expertise in this area. Hence, the grade is “pass-fail.”

After you send me your papers email, I will collect them into a single document and send the project descriptions out to the whole class This matches the “hands-on” orientation of this class, because we will be discussing your research projects throughout the course, as examples of the range of uses for Focus Groups. We will also use your example do demonstrate the range of research designs that you can use for different types of projects. Everyone thus needs to be familiar with each other’s research projects. This is the only assignment I will send out your material to the other students.

Note that you will not be locked into this topic for the rest of the course. Instead, you are free to change your topic at any time -- although you would be wise to discuss such plans with me, so I can help you think through the issues involved.

“Research Design” due May 1st

This assignment will add 500-750 words to what you have already written. You are free to rewrite portions of the earlier material so that it will serve as a useful introduction to your research design, but please highlight any changes you make.

The material that you are writing specifically for this assignment should describe the basic set of qualitative interviews that you would be conducting in this research project. Who will the participants be? How many interviews will there be? How will you locate and recruit the participants? And so on.

As in the first paper, you need to describe not only what you want to do, but also why you want to do it that way. In other words, each element in your research design consists of a choice to do things one way rather than another, and you need to provide a reason (a “justification”) for that decision. Thus, you need to coordinate your presentations of what you do in your design and how that serves your purposes.
**“Interview Guide & Moderating Strategy” due May 22nd**

The moderating portion of this assignment will add about 250-500 words to what you have already written along with a separate appendix for a draft of your interview guide. Once again, you are free to rewrite portions of the earlier material, and if you do so, once again highlight your changes.

This assignment is in two parts, one of which is a draft of the interview questions that you will ask in your interview. You should include this part as a separate appendix, which you will discuss in the body of your paper. There is no fixed format for writing the interview; instead, you should write your questions in any way makes their content clear -- but the maximum length should be 1000 words. (The goal is thus to show the basic content of the questions, rather than to produce an elaborate presentation of your full interview).

For the moderating section that goes into the body of your paper, you should, once again, describe not only what you will doing in terms of an interviewing and moderating strategy but why you will be conducting your interviews this way. One important issue here is the amount of “structure” that you will use in your interviewing strategy -- that is, the extent to which the nature of the groups will organized around either the researchers’ or the participants’ perspectives on the topic. In addition to that discussion of your overall interviewing strategy and goals, this section should describe the decisions you made in writing the actual questions in your interview guide, explaining why you choose to ask these particular questions in this particular order.

**Final Paper, with “Analysis Strategy” & “Conclusions” due June 10th (Monday)**

Adding these two final sections (500-750 words) should bring the body of your paper up to a total of, plus the appendix with the interview guide. The two new sections are: a summary of your analysis strategy for the project and a set of conclusions for the paper as a whole. As usual, you are free to rewrite portions of the earlier material, as long as you highlight any changes you make.

In the section on your analysis strategy, you should discuss how you will use the data from your interviews to address the purposes that you laid out at the beginning of the paper. Meeting those purposes is why you are doing the analysis, so this should be directly linked to your description of how you will do your analysis.

The final section of the paper is a set of conclusions that describes what you would accomplish if you actually did this particular research project. Like, the analysis section, it should return to the larger purposes that introduce your proposal, and then show how doing this research project in the way that you have proposed would indeed meet these goals. In other words, make it clear what you would learn from this research and why this particular research design would be an effective way to do so. One of the most effective ways to accomplish this is to match your introduction and your conclusions, so the beginning of the paper states a set of goals and while the final section shows how the project that you are proposing will meet those goals (of course, this may mean that you want revise your introduction, now that you have a clearer sense of the project as a whole).