Criminology 321 / Week 9
Interviews & Focus Groups



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Interview Guide Structure

- The general structure/process of a semi-structured interview looks like this:
  1. Chat to make people feel comfortable
  2. Transition to the interview; make sure participant understands purpose, role, process; okay to record? [But take notes as well!]
  3. Gather basic *background information*: creates a question-response structure; begins rapport

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Interview Guide Structure

4. Some *general opening questions* that are directly related to the topic of the interview. A shift from brief descriptive information to longer more explanatory answers.
5. *Key questions* are core questions that address the research question; use of *probes* to encourage lengthier responding
6. *Closing questions*; emotional release
7. Answer any questions and say thanks.

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Varying Interview Structure

	Structured	Semi-Structured	Unstructured
Questions	Defined ahead of time; Presented in order	Start with list of ques but be prepared to go with the flow	Start with topics but order, wording, guided by participant
Objective	Aggregate, make comparisons; most researcher-driven	Understanding participant phenomenology	Explore an area or community about which little is known
Probes, Digression	Doing so would undermine standardization	Useful to encourage further elaboration	Used heavily because "right" questions to ask not clear
Assumes	Meaning of questions understood equally	Must adjust wording to ensure similar meaning	Most exploratory and thus assumes very little
When to Use?	When area well-established; research focus clear	Most common in settings where roles vary; field research	Engaging community for first time; augment observations

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Validity

How do we know what we have reflects what our participants see, do, feel, think?

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Process

- **Time**
  - The longer we are in the field, the more difficult it is for us to be bullshat; the more we build relationships
- **Rapport**
  - If you have the interests of the group at heart that will come out over time
- **Collaboration**
  - Involving participants in a collaborative process – before and/or after the project – to give them a stake

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Process

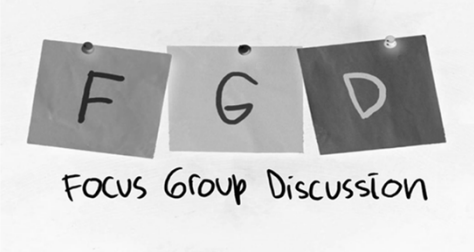
- **Methods triangulation**
  - e.g., surveys give distributions; interviews give details and allow probes about inconsistencies; observations can cross-check behaviour
- **Being reflexive/self-critical**
  - Consider what you bring to the site (reflexivity)
  - Critically evaluate your evidence

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Surveys & Interviews

- Surveys and interviews combine well for mixed methods studies/sequential designs
  - Survey → interviews:
    - provides context/distribution; interviewees can then elaborate further to help interpret survey responses
  - Interviews → survey:
    - will help ensure that survey questions are meaningful, understandable, use local vocabulary, address local issues

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"A *focus* on specific issues with a predetermined *group* of people, conducting an interactive *discussion*"

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1. Determine topic, goals

- "A focus group is not an in-depth interview with multiple participants but an interactive discussion between participants" (p.158)
- Can be used for exploratory, explanatory or evaluative research
- Can identify community or group norms
- Can supplement opinion polls by articulating reasons behind the opinions

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2. Identify potential participants

- Purposive sampling: Who can help the most? Who is missing from the discussion?
- Most focus groups bring together strangers; guideline rather than rule
- Differences among participants cannot be too extreme; need some common link; can bring in oppositional views as hypotheticals

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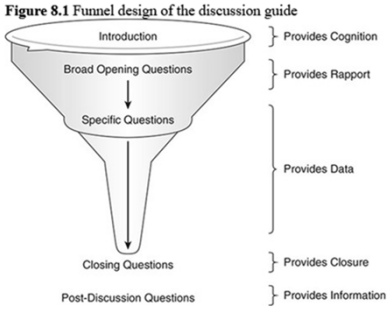
3. Prepare a question guide

- Start with introduction to create focus
- Opening question should be brief, get everyone talking
  - Avoid hierarchies, e.g., research area or department instead of rank
- Questioning often follows a funnel structure (e.g., judges study)

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3. Prepare a question guide

Figure 8.1 Funnel design of the discussion guide



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4. Choose a location (in person)

- Can be on site or in dedicated labs
- Usual criteria: neutral, quiet, comfortable, no distractions; easy to locate
- Be careful outside because of sound quality
- Recording can be a challenge depending on number of participants and room
- Transcription can be challenging as well

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4. Choose a location (online)

- COVID pandemic pushed many online; ended up doing focus groups on Zoom
- Equal visuals and can record interaction
- More clear who is speaking at any given time; transcription easier re speakers
- Extends geographical reach, but requires good tech on both ends

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5. Recruit 6-12 participants

- Goldilocks groups
  - some diversity helps discussion; too divergent dampens it.
  - enough people to generate discussion, but not so big that moderator loses control (ideal size varies, but often no more than 12)
- Strangers offer more anonymity, but takes longer to develop rapport

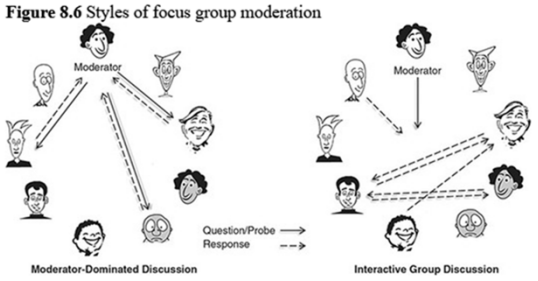
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6. Moderator conducts session

- Ideally two: note taker and moderator
- Characteristics of good moderator similar to interviewer: personable, curious/interested, neutral, listening/questioning, respectful; can think/respond quickly
- Group management skills important

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Figure 8.6 Styles of focus group moderation



Source: Adapted from Hennink (2007:178)

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Focus Group Strengths/Concerns

Strengths

- De-centers interviewer; participants do most of the talking
- Creates opportunity for interaction
  - Similarities and differences can be highlighted, discussed
  - One person's statements get others thinking

Concerns

- Need to avoid creating respondent hierarchies
- Moderator needs to ensure no one dominates, everyone participates
- Confidentiality can be encouraged but out of researcher control
- Transcription can be a challenge

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