

## AEA/CDC Summer Evaluation Institute

### Offering 25: Qualitative Interviewing: Asking the Right Questions in the Right Way

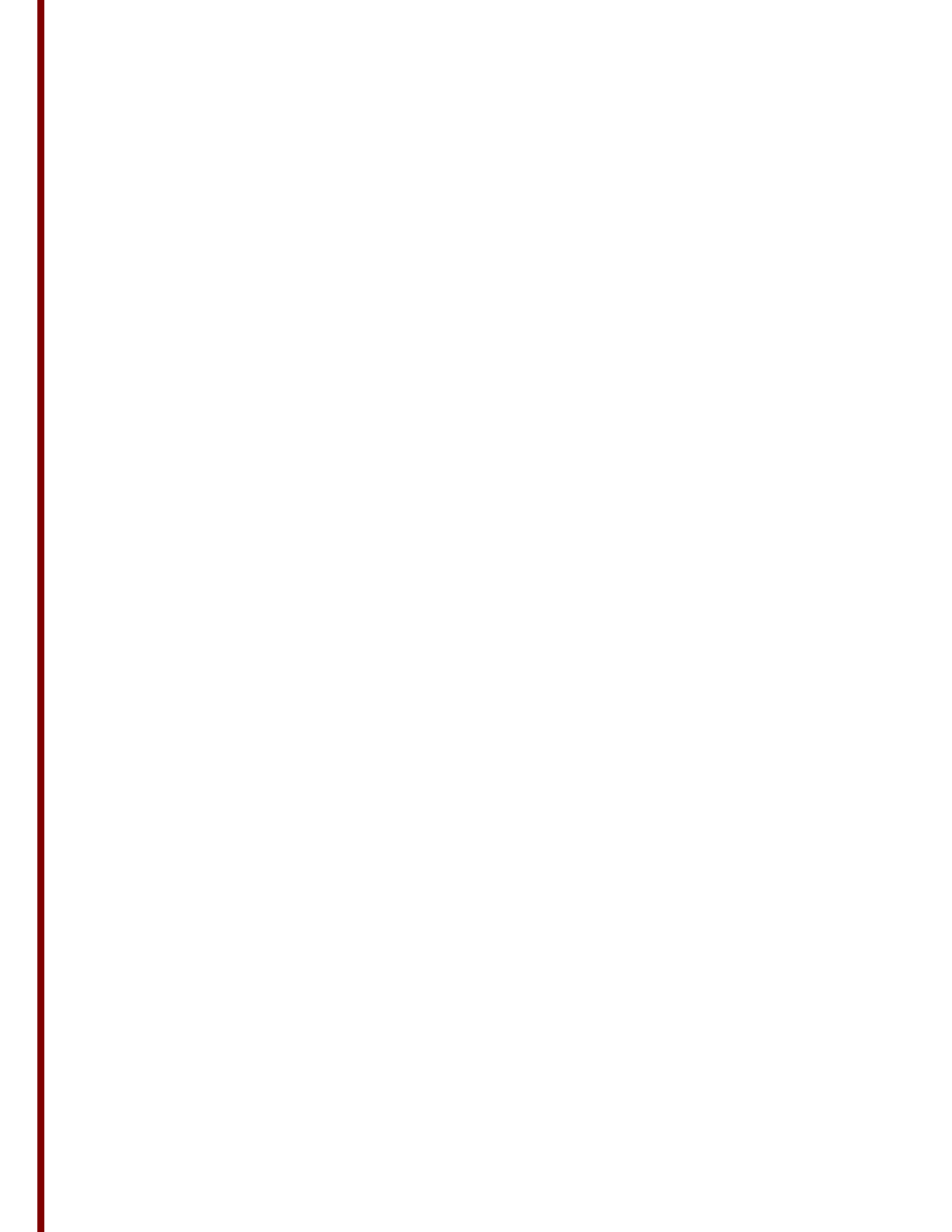
**Description:** Preparing a proper interview guide is only a first step to proper Q & A in a qualitative data collection episode. This session outlines key sections to include in an interview guide and offers suggestions for how to conduct a qualitative interview and/or focus group. The face-to-face interaction in this case is critical. The interviewer must balance attention to the questions designed for the interaction and the emergent topics in the interview. Core skills that focus attention on the audience for the study, the topics of the project, important lines of questioning and goals for ensuring quality interaction in this relationship improve the quality of data collection.

**Audience:** Researchers in any discipline with a basic knowledge of qualitative analysis who are interested in using conversational techniques in the form of interviews or focus groups

**Raymond C. Maietta, PhD** is president of ResearchTalk Inc., a qualitative research consulting company in Bohemia, New York. A sociologist from the State University of New York at Stony Brook, Ray's interests in the art of qualitative research methods motivated him to start ResearchTalk in 1996. ResearchTalk Inc. provides advice on all phases of qualitative analysis to university, government, not-for-profit and corporate researchers. Work with ResearchTalk clients using qualitative software informs recent publications: *Systematic Procedures of Inquiry and Computer Data Analysis Software for Qualitative Research* (with John Creswell in *Handbook of Research Design and Social Measurement*, Sage 2002) and *State of the Art: Integrating Software with Qualitative Analysis* (in Leslie Curry, Renee Shield and Terrie Wetle, (Eds.) *Applying Qualitative and Mixed Methods in Aging and Public Health Research*, American Public Health Association and the Gerontological Society of America 2006). More than 12 years of consultation with qualitative researchers informs the methods book Dr. Maietta is writing. *Sort and Sift, Think and Shift* will be completed in 2009.

**Offered (Two Rotations of the Same Content - Do not register for both):**

- Monday, June 23, 9:25 – 12:45 (20 minute break within)
- Tuesday, June 24, 9:25 – 12:45 (20 minute break within)



# Conducting Qualitative Interviews and Focus Groups

Creating and Benefiting from a Focused  
Conversation

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## Can anyone conduct an interview or focus group?

What you can bring to the experience:

- Being a good listener
- Knowing when to and not to interrupt
- Substantive expertise
- Curious enough to let stories unfold
- Passion for people and your subject
- Suspicion about research
- Comfortable waiting on the meaning
- Ability to manage silence



## Interview and Focus Group as Relationship

- Communication
  - Trust
  - Rapport
  - Comfort
- About Participants...
- Who do they think we are?
  - Why do they think we ask them these questions?
  - Do they know what happens with data?
  - How often are we asked:
    - ‘Tell me about your life’ - by someone who actually wants to know?



# Thanks

- Participants are doing you a favor
- Invite, rather than dictate words
- Sense their moods
- Work according to their pace
- Know your respondents
  - What knowledge pre-exists interview?
- The latest fashions
  - Should you leave your nose ring at home?



## Where to conduct sessions; room setup

- You do NOT need to use a special facility
- You do need:
  - To see the faces and non-verbal actions of your participant(s). For focus groups, it can be helpful to position the moderator and assistant moderator at opposite ends of the table.
  - Tape recorders and microphones
  - Room for refreshments
  - Space for completing paperwork
- Consider pros and cons of holding sessions at your site or at the site of your participants.

See Morgan (1998) *Planning Focus Groups*



## Interview-Focus Group as Story

- Introduction
- Body
- Conclusion



## Key Sections for Discussion

- The typical length of a focus group or interview is 90 minutes
- Allow time for introductions and any administrative work
- Develop 3-4 key topics for discussion to divide the session.
- Sections should be broad and emerge directly from your research question and/or goals.
- The more specific you get, the more narrow your conversation becomes. Narrow may or may not be a good thing.



## Two Session Examples

### **Lost in the Shuffle: In Search of Wayward Friendship**

This study has three primary goals:

1. How do adults define friendship? What does it mean to them?
2. What do adults do with their friends? What role does it play in their lives?
3. How satisfied are adults with their friendships? What factors contribute to friendship quality and in what ways?

A series of interviews and focus groups were conducted with adults age 15-80. Group composition was homogeneous along lines of gender, age, marital status and life obligation (work or student status). 2 interviews with participants of matching demographics for each focus group were also conducted.

The same discussion guide was used for the interviews and focus groups. The focus of the guide was evolution of personal friendships.



### **Helping Parents Assist 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Grade Children with Math Homework.**

This study preceded implementation of a program aimed at helping parents of 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> students assist their children with math homework. A series of interviews and focus groups were held with mothers and fathers to assess their readiness and needs to assist their children as they entered 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade.

The study was a needs assessment that also sought to understand gender differences in this area. Study findings were used in curriculum design for parent assistance. Follow up interviews and focus groups assessed the effectiveness of the program.

## *Introduction:*

# Getting started sets the tone



Who are we?  
What do we say?  
Why?

- Introductions
  - Set an intro paragraph
- Ice Breakers
  - ‘Tell me about what you are doing now’
    - Notice openness of question
    - Generality provides invitations for later cues
    - Take notes you can use later in the session



## The Ice Breaker

- Open with a question that is inviting and accessible. In a focus group, each person should answer this question.
- Responses should provide you with material for probes and segues later in the session.
- For focus groups, prepare a seating chart that includes participant names and short notes on ice-breaker responses.



## The Ice Breaker - Exercise

- Come up with an ice breaker question for your assigned topic.
- Would the ice breaker be the same in an interview and a focus group?
- How would you answer it?



## Ice Breakers Used in Other Studies

How does life obligation affect friendship?

- Please discuss the first close or best same sex friend that comes to mind and why that person comes to mind

*Note:* The interviews and focus groups were divided along lines of gender, age and life obligation

Is a program designed to help parents assist children with math homework effective?

- Discuss either a major success or challenge you have experienced when helping your child with homework.

*Note:* The interviews and focus groups were divided along lines of gender, ethnic background and grade level.



## *Body:*

What you say to what they say  
dictates tone and direction



## Focus

- Attention to agenda  
vs.
- Attention to what is said  
and how it is said
- Interview-Focus Group  
Guide
  - Your words direct their  
words



## Phrasing Questions

- Your goal is to inspire conversation and reflection.
- Avoid yes-no and short answer questions.
- Use words like describe, story, or detail.
- Consider pros and cons of questions that ask participants to report vs. interpret.
- Debate is fine, but debate for debate sake is not.
- Avoid why questions – you run the risk of shifting the study to a study of participants' interpretations.

See Krueger (1998) *Developing Questions for Focus Groups*



## Sequencing

- Consider the flow of discussion.
- Start with your main sections and then work within key sections.
- Make a 'best guess' of how topics will move from one to another.
- Envision several options.
- Ultimately, be flexible and use participant responses as segues where possible.

See Krueger (1998) *Developing Questions for Focus Groups*



## The Actual Focus Group or Interview: Part 1-Developing Questions - Exercise

- Determine your ice breaker question.
- Determine 3-4 main sections of your interview-discussion guide.
- Create 2-3 questions within one of your main sections.



## Moving Along

- How do you keep things in-line or return to the task at hand?
- Probe
  - Don't assume you know what they mean.
  - Asking for more information confirms interest.
- Segue - 'The transition!'
  - 'Earlier you said...'
- Directives - 'Sorry to be so direct...'



## Speaking without Words

- Non-verbal communication
  - Eye contact
  - Body posture
  - Gestures
  - Working with your notes



## Planning for Probes and Flexibility

- Your interview or moderator's guide is just a guide.
- Consider how people will respond to and discuss topics.
- Diagram potential routes for flow.
- Note key words, phrases and expressions that you will want participants to define.
  
- PRE-TEST



## The Actual Focus Group or Interview: Part 2 – Conducting the Session

Practice Session(s) with feedback

Important Topics:

- Administrative duties
- Key skills for interviewers and focus group moderators
- The art of probing
- Dealing with sensitive issues
- Dealing with emergent challenges
- Transcription and note-taking; video vs. audiotape



## Key Skills for Interviewers and Focus Group Moderators

- Flexibility
- Attentiveness
- Active listener
- Special knowledge?
  - Group dynamics
  - Subject matter

See Krueger (1998) *Moderating Focus Groups*

See Seidman (1998) *Interviewing as Qualitative Research* (Chapter 6)



## The Art of Probing

- Do not assume you know what participants mean by certain terminology.
- Ask for stories and vivid examples of points being made.
- Look for opportunities to ask for clarification.
- Active probing validates your interest in what is being said and encourages detailed response.
- Your opportunities for probing and follow up dwindle as the session moves to conclusion.

See Krueger (1998) *Moderating Focus Groups*

See Weiss (1994) *Learning from Strangers*. Chapter 4.



## Sample Probe

Topic - Studying the effectiveness of a handbook for preparing resumes. The handbook was designed to help members of a community who lost jobs when the corporation they worked for moved out of state.

- Respondent: "The person who wrote this section on previous job experience probably never worked a day in his life."
- Interviewer's response – "Let's look closely at that section. What specific part led to your reaction? Let's look at it and think about how it could be presented differently."

### Why this works:

- It validates the participant's opinion.
- It calls for specific examples to draw the participant into specific references.
- It lays out a useful agenda for the next few minutes of discussion.
- *However*, cutting too quickly to suggesting changes may cut the discussion of negative reactions short.



## Sample Probe

Studying the implementation of a web based support group designed to help middle school teachers teach biology.

- Respondent: “We could never iron out technological glitches. We got frustrated early and never really participated actively.”
- Moderator’s ACTUAL response: “Did anyone else have a similar experience?”
- **More effective probe:** “Tell me more about the technological glitches. You can describe one specifically if that helps and also let us know if you sought out help.”

### Why this works:

- It validates the experiences of ‘technological glitches.’
- It grounds the discussion in actual experience and provides specific material for analysis.
- You begin to model the level of detail invited in the discussion.
- Notice the use of ‘us.’ By saying ‘let us know’ the moderator is emphasizing that the experience is a group discussion and not a simple question-response session.



## Under the Umbrella of Consideration

- Good listening
- Orient to the participant
  - Eye Contact
  - Body Position
- Asking more about what they say shows interest
- Returning to earlier comments provides validation



## Don't Let Them See You Sweat

- Paperwork
  - Early and accurate
    - label tapes and folders
    - prepare packets
- Technical Equipment
  - Test frequently
    - bring second recorder, extra batteries, tapes, etc.



## Administrative Duties

- Prior to session – give careful directions and include an emergency contact and any special instructions for entering the facility.
- Welcome participant(s) and be sure each one gets a personal introduction from the interviewer, moderator and/or the assistant moderator.
- Prepare any food and/or refreshments.
- Complete confidentiality forms and basic info requests from participant(s).
- Make sure you have contact info to send final reports or request follow-up if appropriate.



## Video and Audio Tape

- Either way, test equipment in the actual room where the session will be held - if possible, ahead of time.
- Use microphones.
- In your test, make sure people are seated around the room.
- Use digital recorders if you can.
- Audio tape works best for transcription.
- Video allows you to see changes in facial expression and body language, but note that those issues are hard to analyze and it is harder to reach concrete conclusions about them.

See Krueger (1998) *Moderating Focus Groups*



## Transcription and Note-taking

- You should transcribe and audio tape.
- Note-taking alone is extremely difficult and involves a level of interpretation that is hard to diagnose and place.
- Transcription should be verified against notes.
- Notes and video tape can help identify speakers and include reference to obvious changes in non-verbal cues.

See Krueger (1998) *Moderating Focus Groups*



## *Conclusion:*

Smooth endings yield  
comfortable memories



It's never over 'til it's  
over

- When are you done?
- How do you end?
- Can you follow up?
- Incentive procedure



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