

Planning for Successful Focus Groups



In a Successful Focus Group:

It is your *focus*

This a researcher-constructed setting for gathering data.

But...

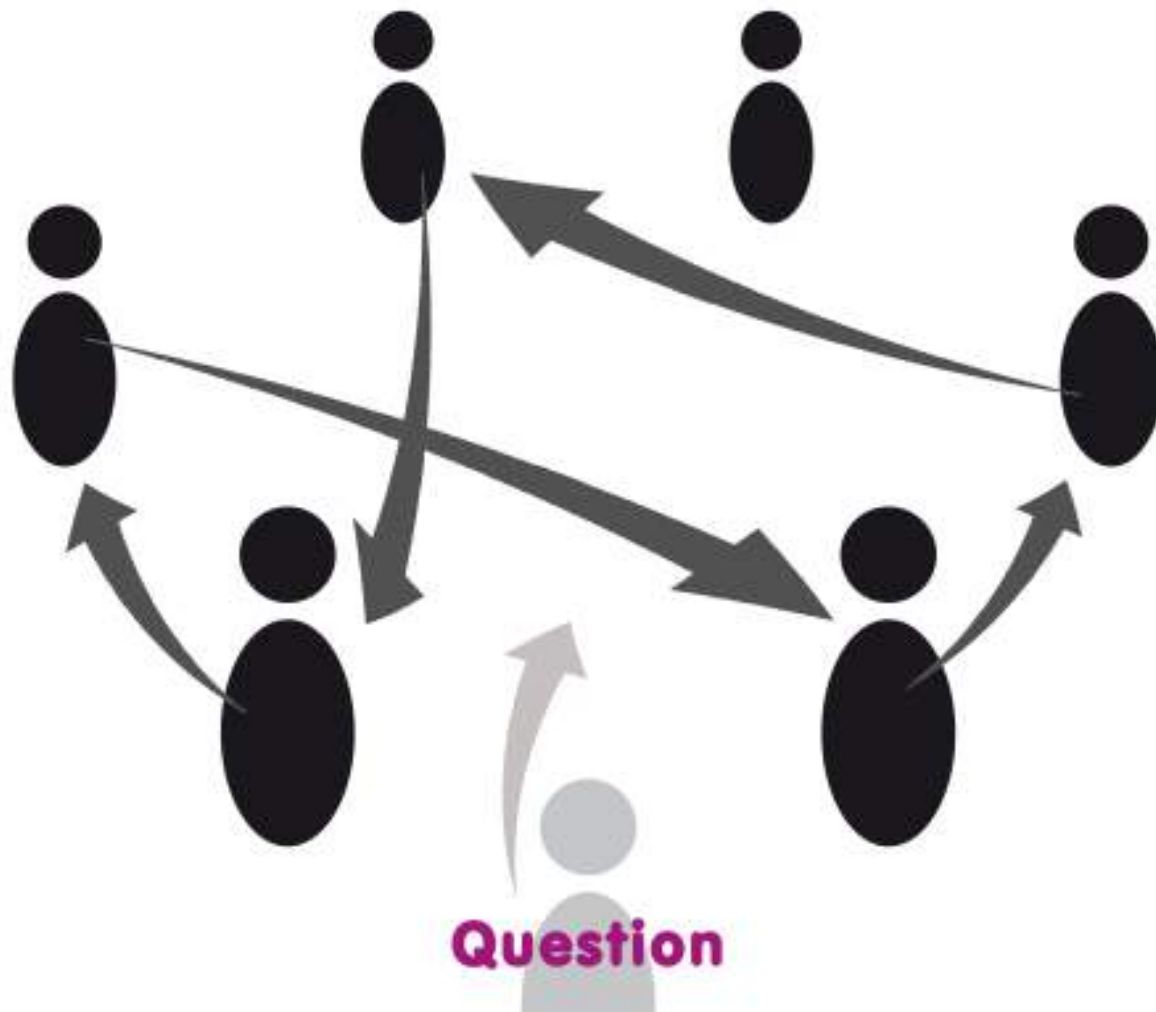
It is their *group*

It is the participants' conversation that generates the data.

Basic Principles in Doing Focus Groups

- Always consider the balance between *your needs* and the participants' *interests*
 - You need high quality discussions to generate high quality data
 - Pay attention to anything that will affect the quality of their discussion
- Moderating is *not* necessarily the most important aspect of focus groups
 - The moderator is not the only key player
 - Effective choices about **participants** will generate more discussion
 - Appropriate **questions** will determine the content of the discussion

Group Interaction = More Natural Data



Key Elements in Planning Focus Groups

Research design consists of making three “*Basic Decisions*”
(and many smaller ones)

1. **Who** will the participants be?
2. **What** questions will you ask?
3. **How** will you moderate the groups?



Group Composition and Recruitment



Group Composition and Recruitment

Group Composition: Who will participate?

Recruitment: How will you locate them

Group Composition and Recruitment

Who Should the Participants Be?

The participants must be able to discuss the topic in ways that interest both you *and* themselves.

Focus groups work best when:

The participants are just as interested in the topic as you are.

Do they want to hear what others have to say about the topic?

Group Composition and Recruitment

The Importance of “Common Ground”

Participants should share a similar background on the research topic

Homogeneity means having something in common about the topic

Homogeneity is *not* about background or demographic characteristics

Group Composition and Recruitment

What do these people have in common?



Group Composition and Recruitment

What do these people have in common?



They are all astronauts

Homogeneity and Segmentation

Often, you want to sort groups into homogeneous "Segments."



Homogeneity and Segmentation

Often, you want to sort groups into homogeneous “segments.”

Homogeneity *within* groups creates comfort & common ground.

Differences *between* groups lead to useful analytic comparisons.

Example: Family Caregivers and AD

- Caring for a family member with Alzheimer's disease
- When & why did they seek diagnosis for their family member?
- Located through a diagnostic clinic
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- Segmented between low versus high symptom severity
 - For participants: Allowed them to share similar experiences
 - For researchers: Created an interesting contrast

Recruitment: Locating the Participants

Your Recruitment Strategy Must be in Place from the Start

Make it a central feature of your planning

Follow-Through is Essential: Recontact the Participants

Make sure they understand how important this is

Consider “Over-recruiting” by about 20 %

(E.g., invite 10 people when you need 8)

*Recruitment failures
are the single biggest problem
in focus groups.*

Asking Questions in Focus Groups



Asking Questions in Focus Groups

The Interview Guide Shapes the Discussion

One Basic Format for the Interview Guide

Interview Guide Shapes the Discussion

Guide brings together Researcher, Moderator, & Participants

- For the *Researcher*: Summarizes goals
- For the *Moderator*: Directs actions
- For the *Participants*: Provides discussion topics

The Interview Guide and the Moderator

- The guide links the moderator's actions to the research goals.
- The moderator's core job is to implement the guide.
- *The guide leads the discussion more than the moderator does.*

The Interview Guide: Starting the Discussion

The first real question is often the most important for the discussion.

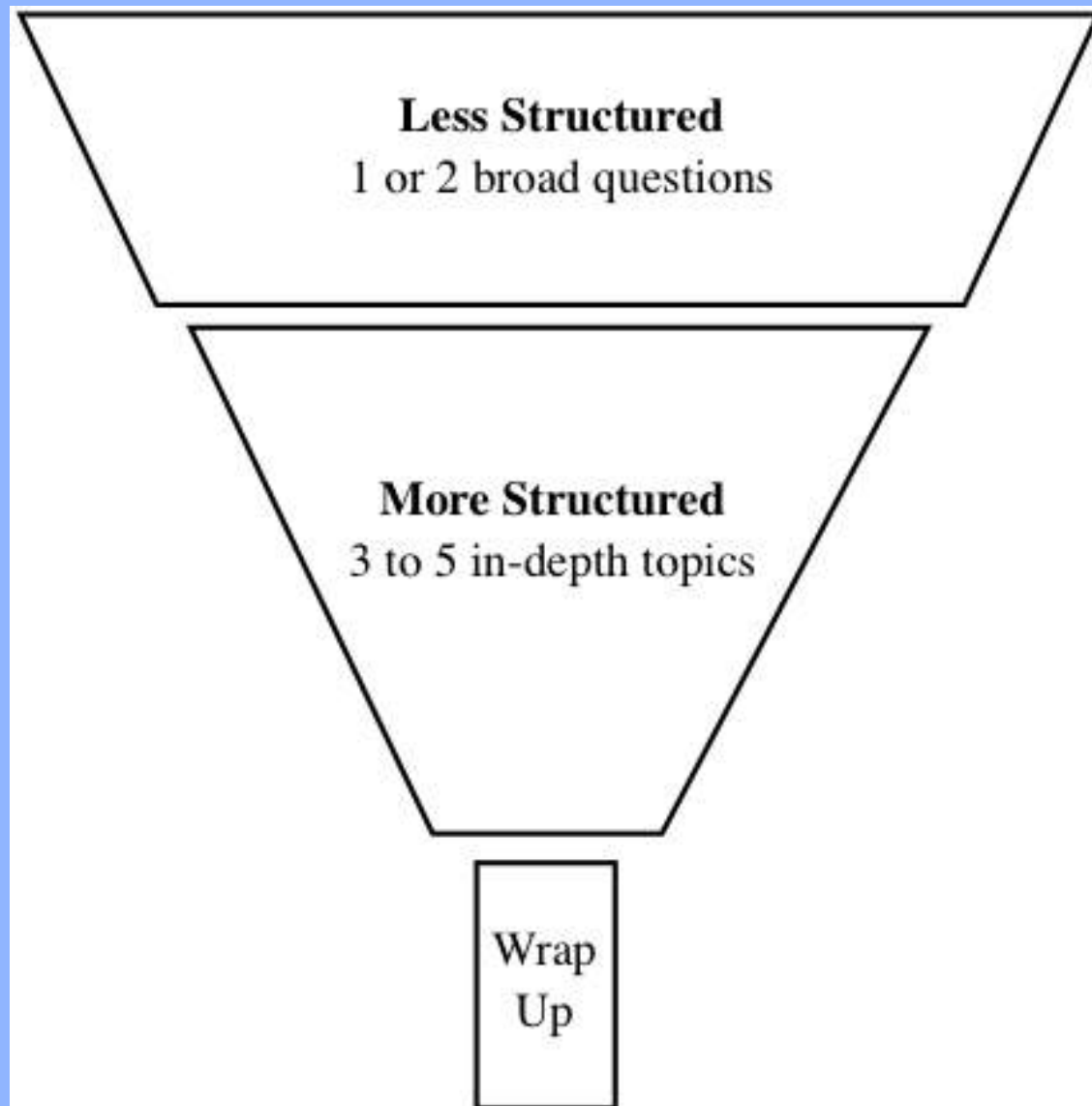
Start with questions that are interesting to the participants.

Their discussion is your data...

...so be sure that you get them talking.

Basic Formats for the Interview Guide

The "Funnel" is A Common Format



Basic Formats for the Interview Guide

The "Funnel" is A Common Format

Beginning is broad, less structured; hears *participants'* views.

- Usually includes one or two questions that help to get the discussion started.
- Explores the topic in ways that interest the participants.

Middle is more structured; targets the *researcher's* key topics.

- Typically includes 3-5 questions that get at the core research goals.
- These more specific questions build on the earlier, more general questions.

Final, "wrap-up" question brings the discussion to a close.

- Signals that the interview is ending, and asks for one last round of input.
- Allows the researcher one more chance to hear from the participants.

Moderating Focus Groups

Styles of Moderating



Moderating Focus Groups

Styles of Moderating

Less Structured

- Moderator helps participants generate broad-ranging discussion; hears their views
- Interaction lets researchers discover insights they might not have anticipated

More Structured

- Moderator asks questions and gets answers; keeps participants “on task”
- Interaction provides depth and detail on a researcher-determined agenda

Moderating Focus Groups

Setting up a Moderator Style

Moderating Begins as Soon as the Participants Arrive

- Moderator's instructions "define the situation" for the participants
- By the first question, the level of structure should already be in place
- More structured approach begins by emphasizing the moderator's agenda
- Less structured approach begins by emphasizing the participants' inputs

Moderating Focus Groups

Put Moderating in It's Proper Place

Good recruitment is essential: You need people who feel comfortable talking to each other about the research topic.

The questions produce the data: The participants will talk about what you ask them to talk about.

With good recruitment and appropriate questions: Moderating will be much easier.

Moderating Focus Groups

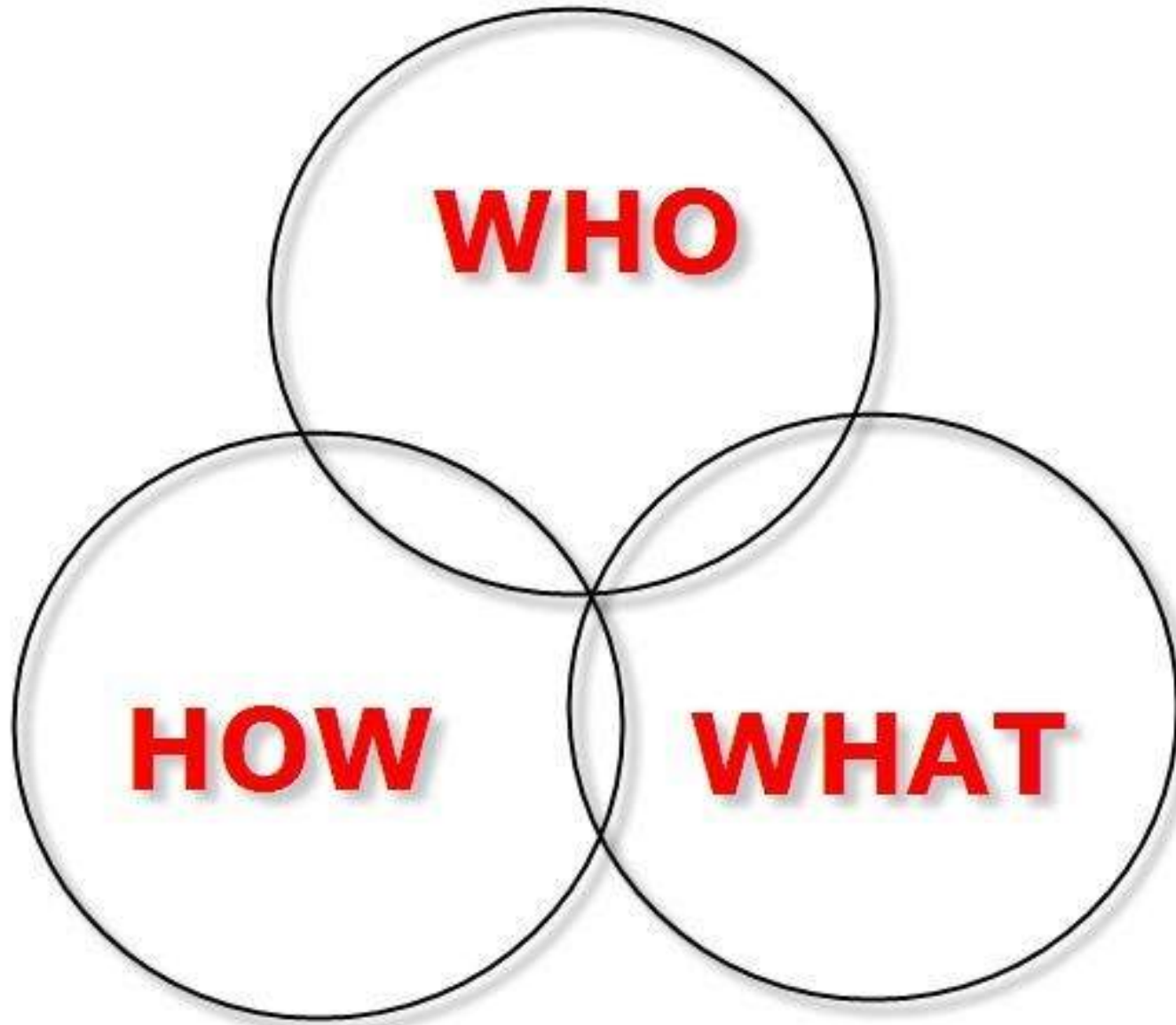
Put Moderating in It's Proper Place



Moderating is Not Necessarily Leading

Bringing It All together

Bringing It All together



Questions?

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Reference for the examples used in this presentation:

Morgan, David L. 2002. "Seeking Diagnosis for a Family Member with Alzheimer's: Evidence from Focus Groups."
In Graham D. Rowles & Nancy E. Schoenberg (eds.),
Qualitative Gerontology (2nd ed., pp. 213-231),
New York, NY: Springer Publications.