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## Grey Matters: a guide to collaborative research with seniors

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## GREY MATTERS

A GUIDE TO COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH WITH SENIORS

Nancy Marlett and Claudia Emes

### GREY MATTERS

#### A Guide to Collaborative Research with Seniors

Nancy Marlett and Claudia Emes

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# 5

## Focus Group Research

Without a clear set of questions, there is no focus. (AH, 2005)

Okotoks is one of the fastest-growing small cities in Canada. It is located almost adjacent to Calgary. The seniors club has been a keen advocate and seniors are relatively well served because of their work. The seniors club was invited to be one of the research sites by the Cochrane senior researchers who were already part of the research project.

This chapter includes when to use focus groups, how to create an agenda, how to set up and organize a group, how to collect and analyze data, and how to train seniors to lead groups. Because focus group research was so effective, we have included a number of examples in the Appendices: 4,5,6 and 7.

Focus group methods were used throughout our resilience study. We learned how to make them work for seniors, and, in the process, challenged some of the established ways of doing focus group

research. Focus groups were the most popular and effective of the methods studied, and focus group research seems particularly suited to the way that seniors think about and do research.

A focus group can refer to any group that wants to explore a specific and well-defined topic. A focus group is effective in gathering the opinions and insights of people without controlling their responses. This method originated in the 1940s as a reaction against survey research where questions and answers are largely predetermined by the researcher. Focus group participants are chosen because they have expertise or interest in the topic and they are expected to be willing to discuss the topic. Questions move from general ideas to a sharper (more focused) understanding. Focus groups are popular in marketing and strategic planning and, more recently, they have become more acceptable as research tools in medicine, education, and human services.

Many seniors had previous experience with focus groups and they had enjoyed talking to other seniors or service providers and giving their ideas. However, once the flip charts were taken down, they saw little of the results of their work. We were determined to train seniors to run focus groups in a way that would ensure full participation throughout the process.

Each of the partner sites hosted a focus group. The senior researchers negotiated the day and the agenda, conducted the focus group, analyzed the data, and wrote a report on the findings of the day. It helped to be familiar with the program and the participants. We had very few difficulties recruiting people when the partner site had been involved in planning the event. The following is an excerpt from a letter to the Okotoks seniors inviting them to be part of the focus group.

With the kind cooperation of many of your club members we successfully completed phases 1 and 2 of our research

training and are now entering the 3rd phase, which is to conduct a focus group with about 10 of your members. Enclosed are some invitations you may wish to put before your members at your next meeting to explore the level of interest in the project. Date, time and location have been left to your discretion. (Excerpt from letter to the president of the Okotoks Seniors Association, 2005)

## A. When Should You Use Focus Group Research?

Focus groups can be used alone or along with other research methods. Group discussion brings a deep and rich understanding of your topic that is not readily available through other methods. Interaction is the key to the method because ideas can be confirmed, reinforced, or contradicted within the group discussion. Seniors might use focus groups to:

**Explore, define, or refine concepts** being proposed at the beginning stages of research.

The participants in our focus group (seniors themselves) had met to discuss the difficulties their elderly parents faced in accommodation and services once they lost their independence. Frustration and anger replaced the resilience they were once so proud of. These shared experiences helped enrich the discussion in the focus group.

The following is an excerpt from the focus group report that discussed the frustrations faced by older adults:

The focus group felt frustration and anger was often due to fear of the unknown, inability to cope with impending changes, loss of control and independence. This basic loss of control contributed to a loss of resilience and often resulted in deteriorating health.

**Explore and generate questions for research.** The following example from the report for the Okotoks Seniors explored the idea of stubbornness and resilience:

Stubbornness of seniors was noted when lifestyle changes were necessary. Dementia, fear of the unknown, depression, illness, withdrawal, inability to cope with impending changes, loss of control, and loss of independence were cited as some possible reasons behind stubbornness, which is often misinterpreted as being difficult or not motivated.

**But:** Does resilience promote stubbornness? Is stubbornness a lack of resilience? Or does resilience mimic stubbornness as a way to demand attention? (Focus group report)

This insight on the relationship between stubbornness and resilience might form questions for future research.

**Participatory Action Research.** The following shows how focus groups can help older adults become involved in their own services, as well as research and resource allocation:

The Okotoks seniors had identified the problems of seniors' organizations that provide volunteer support to other seniors but, as the senior volunteers age themselves, they cannot continue without support. As an organization they felt they needed access to government (health) agencies, corporate involvement, soliciting sustainable funding to help finance new facilities. (Focus group report)

This senior's centre not only provided the suggestions but carried through. They continued their involvement over several years. Their town now proudly boasts of a state-of-the-art Health and Wellness Centre for everyone, especially seniors.

**Provide seniors' input** into changes proposed by service providers, business, and government. Most governmental bodies now use focus groups to solicit input. We are suggesting that these governmental bodies either use independently trained seniors, or train and employ seniors to run focus groups. The major obstacle with this work is that seniors trained and employed by government may become absorbed by the culture of government. If government does employ seniors it may help to draw up a set of principles based on partnerships guidelines in Chapter 1.

**Evaluate products and services** from the perspective of seniors.

**Explore common experiences** related to specific health, social, and economic aspects of aging.

In order to understand how to provide effective access to home care, bring volunteers and neighbours into a focus group. They know about other seniors and how to access services when failing seniors may not be able to figure it out. Go to the natural helpers that are identified by the person. (AH, 2006)

**Look for alternative perspectives** on topics and issues when existing approaches have become stale:

Needs surveys of seniors are particularly ineffective. Aging adults really aren't interested in taking the time to answer another questionnaire or be interviewed by a professional. The focus groups enabled seniors to discuss amongst themselves and offer their own solutions. The problem lies in making the results acceptable to those who only can think about surveys. (DD, 2006)

### **Create a shared understanding of everyday life and events.**

We, as a research team, have come to believe that the role of seniors in setting the questions, facilitating the groups, and writing the reports is essential to good focus group research. If this is not done, the voices of seniors are easily used for the purposes of others who can take ideas out of context.

## **B. Creating the Focus Group Questions and the Agenda for the Day**

Of all the steps in focus group research, creating the agenda and the focus is the most time-consuming and the most important. While researchers should be flexible and willing to adjust the focus group process as it unfolds, without a clear set of questions and exercises, there is no focus, it becomes a group discussion. Plan from the desired outcome and work forward. You need to be clear about where you want to end up and why.

With our focus group in Okotoks we had several goals. We wanted to engage seniors in an open discussion about resilience so that individuals in the group might feel comfortable enough to be interviewed about their personal experience with resilience in the next phase of the research and we were interested in identifying some areas of resilience research that they might be interested in pursuing in the future. We realized that there were many ways to reach these ends but because we wanted to involve seniors, we began with personal stories of resilience and what was learned about resilience from these stories. From this foundation the groups identified research questions about resilience and seniors. (AH, 2004)



# Agenda for the Rural Resilience Day in Okotoks

Table 10. Focus group agenda for Okotoks Senior’s Club.

10 a.m.	Introductions (15 min.) Purpose of gathering, explanation of process
11 a.m.	Exploring personal resilience (60 min.). The following questions might focus our discussion around resilience and rural seniors: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Think of someone you know in this area whom you consider to be resilient (it could be yourself) and think about an example of their resilience.</li><li>• What do you think helped to make them/you resilient</li><li>• What factors in rural life can contribute to the development of this resilience? E.g. hardships of farming, isolation, farm friends.</li></ul>
Noon	Lunch Break
1 p.m.	Building senior resilience in small towns (60 min.) <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Do you think resilience in a small community like Okotoks is different than in large city?</li><li>• In what ways can small communities assist seniors to achieve resilience, particularly those with disadvantages such as: poverty, ill health or disability, loss of family connections?</li><li>• How can seniors assist other seniors develop resilience?</li></ul>
2 p.m.	Wrap up/Evaluation of the session (20 min.) <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How comfortable did you feel?</li><li>• Were you pleased/dissatisfied with the session?</li><li>• What can be improved?</li><li>• What do you think about seniors being researchers about seniors?</li></ul>

While focus group literature recommends setting five to ten questions, we have found that two to five well-thought-out questions, each one focusing the issue more closely, worked better with seniors. Too many questions can leave people feeling confused and overwhelmed, especially if the questions are not clearly related and moving in the same direction. More than five questions can make it difficult to finish the agenda for the day and there is risk of people feeling frustrated or incompetent.

We found that sharing narratives or stories about the topic was a very important way to break the ice. The data from the stories was research in itself and so the stories serve two functions.

### *Organizing the Focus Group Event*

Preparing for the focus group session takes considerable advance planning. The structure of the day should take advantage of high energy time for group discussion mid morning and include some down time where people can relax, take a short walk, call home, or freshen up.

**Time.** Generally the best time for a focus group meeting for seniors is between 10:00 and 2:00 on weekdays. This avoids rush-hour traffic, includes a lunch break, and gives two defined work sessions.

**Meeting place.** Easy accessibility, good parking, and a central location are important factors for the participants. Breakout rooms are ideal for small group discussions.

The design of the room and the type of tables used is important. Everyone should be able to see one another during discussions; not being able to see or hear the speakers is a problem. Round tables are best. When using a long table, the

facilitator should not sit at the head of the table but rather one or two spaces to right or left where he or she can be seen but not be perceived as “the Leader.” (BP, 2005)

**Introduction.** Before starting the focus group, arrange for fifteen minutes of introduction time with coffee, juice, etc.

**Refreshments.** If details like food, breaks and closure are well handled, focus group participants feel welcome and valued.

A break mid-morning or lunch takes the intensity level down and lets people chat with the leaders. (AH, 2006)

**Tasks and duties.** We developed a detailed list of responsibilities (Appendix 5) and the research team worked out their roles ahead of time.

We had a good rapport within our research group so we chose our own duties, taking into account our individual strengths. We met several times, choosing roles carefully, capitalizing on the knowledge and expertise of each. This preparation time paid off in a smoother session. (AH, 2006)

An Ice-breaker was planned and a funny story or two connected with the participants and built that initial rapport so necessary for a successful focus group session. (AH, 2006)

**Feedback.** It is important that the participants know what will become of their input and have a chance to look at what was recorded. Occasionally a participant requested deletion or revision of some of their comments.

At the end of the session the participants were advised that a draft report of the focus group session would be prepared,

each was invited to meet with one of more of the researchers to discuss the report in general and their input specifically. (AH, 2007)

### *Recruiting Potential Participants*

The partner sites hosted the focus groups and assisted the senior researchers to contact and talk to potential participants. Because the people in the partner sites knew the senior researchers, it was generally an easy sell. Personal phone calls to potential participants helped to secure commitment to attend and to answer any questions ahead of time.

Recruiting participants for focus groups can be difficult without personal contacts. The following guidelines should be useful.

- Sell the topic. Describe the topic in a short flyer/invitation so that it will attract those with expertise and interest.
- Co-sponsor the event. Host the focus group with a local seniors' club or organization, service provider, or community group.
- Negotiate the process and the day with the co-operating organization. Have the sponsor advertise to their members.
- Have a senior researcher talk about the project at lunch or general meeting to discuss what is involved and why it is important.
- Provide a phone contact. Be available to respond to phone calls about the day and follow up inquiries to ensure commitment.

## C. Ethical Issues in Focus Group Research

Ethical procedures in focus groups need to be carefully planned because participants may end up sharing more than they expect to in the comfort and stimulation of a group situation. Seniors need to know clearly what the topic is and what the process will be. In any group work, it is important not to pressure people to talk if they are uneasy. Ensure that everyone knows the signal for “pass by me this time.” The facilitator needs to remind people during the session that people should share only those details that they are comfortable with. For example, participants might be asked, “Is there an experience that you would feel comfortable sharing with us about a time when you felt resilient?”

Consent forms must clearly outline the topic, the questions, and the process for not participating. When focus groups have been used in market research, the real purpose is sometimes clouded to get unbiased answers, and this has made many people uncomfortable with the ethics of focus groups. It is therefore very important to declare that this is not market research and that there is no hidden agenda. Be clear and truthful about your purpose in doing focus research.

Because this is a group process, you might consider a group consent form:

Group \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_ Place \_\_\_\_\_

We, the undersigned, understand the purpose and process of this focus group on resilience. In signing this we understand that our ideas will be used as part of a report and also as part of a study on resilience.

Table 11. Group consent form.

Name	Consent to participate (sign)	Consent to use quotes with initials (Yes, No)	Please send me a copy of report. (Yes, No)

It is very clear that seniors are quite capable of knowing when to share and when not to share. In one focus group session in a different town, seniors began sharing stories of abuse and the facilitator tried to deflect the conversation until a senior declared:

It sure is good to talk about this; it's funny how great it feels to know you had the same experience. Don't try to stop us, we need to do this, we can handle it. (CP, 2004)

## D. Who Does What in Focus Group Research?

A focus group consists of a facilitator or leader, recorders, and participants. The leader presents a series of questions and or comments that guide the discussion on a defined topic. The recorders note the questions and comments and record the discussion of the participants. Participants provide the information and work to find meaning in their differences.

A workbook in Appendix 5 includes handouts of each of the following roles that can be photocopied and handed out during focus groups.

### *Role of the Facilitator*

Facilitating a group is hard work; it helps to work as a team and plan to change facilitators about half way through the agenda. (AH, 2006)

The facilitator's personality counts! A good facilitator is enthusiastic about the topic, helps the group feel safe and secure in sharing their ideas, and ensures that no one will be embarrassed or criticized. The facilitator does this by engaging people in a discussion about a specific question or topic. He or she keeps the discussion focused and makes sure that everyone has the opportunity to be heard.

An issue, once opened, may stray off topic and generate a spirited discussion. A good facilitator allows the conversation to flow until an opening provides an opportunity to bring the group back on track. (CE, 2006)

A senior as facilitator has much in common with the participants and he or she has an advantage over younger facilitators in understanding how to engage participants. Any facilitator faces the challenge of remaining neutral and of keeping in mind that he or she is not there to sell a particular point of view. If biases are apparent, a facilitator loses effectiveness, even to the point of silencing some participants who disagree. At worst, a group may join in trying to prove the facilitator is wrong. One leader commented:

I enjoyed this focus group experience but have a lot to learn about collecting objective data and, generally, about being

involved in research instead of talking a lot. I will increase my effectiveness by pushing harder to keep the focus in mind.  
(MW, 2006)

The following are some of the tools that facilitators can use to provide a positive experience for the participants. Focus groups are about group interaction, not a series of questions put to a number of individuals who happen to be sitting in the same space.

**Post ideas** from other groups on the wall as people come in. Some facilitators used inspirational sayings. Participants can also be encouraged to jot down their own ideas on the posted sheets as they come in.

**Share.** Seniors appreciate a chance to introduce themselves and talk about their background at the beginning of the session. We heard from our researchers that people need time to get warmed up and get to know each other.

**Rules.** Start by sharing some rules. For example, you might write on the flip chart: “Respect everyone’s ideas, listen and don’t interrupt, be creative in trying out new ways of thinking, speak up if you are unsure, uncomfortable or lost.”

**Post the agenda** so that everyone can see, or give everyone an agenda or a workbook to follow. Refer to the agenda or workbook each time you move to a new question, linking what has been done with the next topic to be discussed.

**Promote diversity** of opinion and debate by asking open questions and asking for alternate views. For example, “*Has anyone had experiences that would be just the opposite?*” Celebrate difference and be accepting of all opinions: a facilitator is not a judge. As one researcher put it, “*It can be difficult to get information from some people but it helps that participants can ‘play-off’ one another.*”

**Probe for details and depth.** You might ask such questions as: “*What led you to think that? Can you tell us a little more about that?*”



Be careful not to give the impression that you do not believe what has been said. Frame your questions so that it is clear that you are interested in more detail and not in challenging the truth of the statement.

**Control air space.** Make sure that everyone has a chance to contribute. If there is someone who tends to talk too much, you need to help them wrap up their ideas and focus on others. Some seniors liked to know when their turn was coming up and appreciated a quick “go round the circle” to start a topic. This allowed them to say something quickly and then they could enter into the discussion more fully after everyone had declared their position. For example, you might say, *“Let’s start this question with a quick response from every one about who first taught you about resilience?”* You could then follow up with ideas people suggested. Other prompts that would work include: *“Could we hear from this side of the room? Does anyone have a different idea? Does Bob’s experience trigger something in your past?”*

**Change direction.** Search for questions that open the discussion in new directions: *“How might things be different if ...? What else might explain this?”*

**Switch with a partner** before you become tired or frustrated. This is hard work and you need to be aware of your energy in the process.

**Build consensus** and team spirit in the group as you wrap up. Ask people what they learned during the session, what they appreciated about the discussion, or was there anything that they might like to follow up on.

**Summarize** what has been discussed and what contributions have been made to understanding the topic or question at hand. If you record the summary on the flip chart, the group needs to agree that the summary reflects what was said. Some facilitators have the participants sign the summary.

**Evaluate the process.** Senior researchers interviewed each participant personally at the end of the day. At the very least, the facilitator should discuss what people were pleased with and what they would suggest changing. Leave plenty of time for this evaluation so that you honour the input of the group. Evaluating the session as people are putting on their coats is disrespectful.

### *Roles of the Recorders*

Recorders recognize and preserve personal ideas and group consensus. While some focus group facilitators prefer to do their own recording, the seniors in our project found it helpful to separate the various functions so that it was a team process. We eventually used two recorders. One recorder worked with the facilitator to capture the ideas of the group so that every one could see. A second recorder used the techniques learned in Chapter 3 (Field-work) to record the process, who spoke, what was happening, alliances and areas of concern and agreement. Having two recorders provided a backup and a way to ensure that all the data were recorded. Specific suggestions for how to record are included under the next section, Recording in Focus Groups.

One of our senior focus group leaders commented that the focus group required concentration, good writing skills, and alertness. I was feeling anxious about getting everything down but was prepared and eventually started to feel quite relaxed. (OP, 2006)

**The flip chart recorder** works with the leader in conducting the focus group. Discuss ahead of time how the leader likes to work and how to ensure that you can keep up with the ideas, how to check the recordings for accuracy, and how to summarize at the end of each question. You will also need to have an agreement with the leader on

how to ask for assistance if the pace is too fast or if you are confused about what is expected.

The recorder is the keeper of the discussion because they capture each person's ideas. The role of the recorder can be challenging when several people are making the same point but in slightly different ways. As one researcher commented: "Attempting to consolidate ideas into a list left out much data in my view. Some areas were not recorded at all."

Flip chart recorders should practice summarizing ideas on a flip chart with the research team until they find a method that is comfortable to them. Much valuable information is lost if poorly recorded. Some participants may feel ignored if their input is not recorded properly.

You will develop a comfort recording and interacting with the leader and the group, but this will take practice. Each group and each leader will demand a slightly different style. This task requires balance. One recorder commented:

I learned that I talk too much – that I don't record well. Two tasks – thinking and writing – are one too many for me when there is a good conversation going on!

**Process recorder.** In most focus groups there is no need for a process recorder, but if you are collecting data and using more than one focus group, this role is very helpful. The process recorder does not interact except to clarify what is happening. This role is similar to that of a participant observer who sits as part of the group but their primary role is observer. This person tracks the interaction, identifying alliances, leaders, those who are silent. They also record the flow of the conversation as much as possible. These records are helpful as a backup to the flip charts. They assist the research team to debrief after the group session and to hone their skills.

## *Role of the Participant*

Participants in focus group research have an obligation to participate. But what does participation mean? The following is an affirmation of participation, based on comments from our research. You may find it helpful to give participants this list before they start their focus group. This is written in the first person, as a participant, so that you can use it with your focus group members.

I have been invited because I have expertise and interest. This is a chance for me to step up and be part of the process, to contribute and to learn.

My ideas help the group create new knowledge that none of us have on our own.

I must really listen to what other people say. When I spend all my time preparing what I want to say, or what I think about other people, I miss the best parts.

We are all here because we represent different perspectives. If everyone had the same opinions and ideas there would be no need for a group.

I must give everyone a chance to contribute. If I take up too much time, others who are shy can become intimidated. I need to encourage others to speak.

It is important to be polite. As a participant I don't talk on the cell phone, hold side conversations or talk directly to the facilitator or recorder about other topics. This interrupts the conversation and the ability of the group to focus.

I contribute when I have an idea. If I wait until I see if someone else has a similar comment, I will likely have forgotten what it was I wanted to say.

If I think about other perspectives on the question I should offer them even if I don't agree with them. It is all about trying to find as many different ideas as possible.

## E. Recording in Focus Groups

Groups also use a number of data collection techniques: flip chart notes, tape recordings, continuous reporting of the process using a laptop computer, or workbooks that participants fill out during the session. The techniques and their advantages and disadvantages are presented below.

**Flip chart recorders** must paraphrase to get the information down quickly. Read what's been written and check with the participant to ensure that the intent has not been changed in shortening their ideas. Flip chart operators need to be able to think on their feet, consolidate ideas, ask for clarification and write clearly. Participants see an entry on the flip as recognition that the idea is worthy.

Before the session begins, prepare all flip chart pages with a code that identifies: the recorder (e.g. NM), the date of the presentation (04/02/04), the topic of the focus group (e.g. Sex and Resilience), and page numbers (e.g. 5). e.g. NM, 04/02/04, Sex and Resilience, pg 5. This information should be entered in a small box in one corner. Flip chart sheets get jumbled during analysis, and without identifying information the data can become confused. Put the name or number of the question on the top of each page, so that it is clear what the notes are referring to.

Use coloured pens when doing flip chart recordings. For example, you could use black to record ideas that come from individuals, red to summarize group ideas that come from discussion, and green for ideas that you need to come back to because they relate to the recommendations but are not part of the question being covered.

There are symbols and drawing techniques that capture how a group is thinking about a topic. You could explore them once you are familiar with recording for a focus group.

**Tape recording.** Tape recordings should only be used as a backup to ensure accuracy of the discussion. Often a tape recorder distracts the group and members are diverted into thinking about what they should say. Participants must be able to offer ideas “off the record.” When you are learning how to run a focus group, you can justify using a tape recorder as a learning device. If there are a number of focus groups in your study, tape recordings done with a digital recorder can provide a way to transcribe and analyze data, but this requires additional consent.

**Continuous recording on a laptop computer.** In the first resilience workshop, we had the luxury of a trained recorder with each of the groups. The recorder not only recorded but transmitted the data to a central computer where two of the researchers were gathering and analyzing the data as it was transmitted. While this is expensive, it is worth the effort when launching a project because it adds a layer of fun and science to the project. It kept the process moving along and alive. People liked seeing their group ideas projected on the screen for everyone to see.

**Written record of the process.** A recorder sits with the group as observers, providing backup for the facilitator and the flip chart recorder. These recordings are very useful when analyzing data; they present a perspective on what happened from a more detached perspective.

**Individual workbooks.** An individual workbook adds a new variation on focus group recording. We discovered this by accident during a large focus group session. In developing a guide for the day, we provided space so that people could add personal ideas. When coffee or lunch occurred after the completion of a particularly interesting question, the seniors used some of their break time to enter their thoughts.

The first time this happened we were surprised by the care given to the individual records, and we were intrigued with the data. We had to negotiate with the participants to give us their workbooks and had to promise to return them. They didn't want to lose their record of the day because they wanted to keep their ideas for future use.

We have adopted this workbook process as particularly useful for seniors. Although we do not expect people to record their personal thoughts, if they wish to share their personal reflections it can be a powerful addition to the data. It is a way of capturing thoughtful ideas that may not have been part of the group discussion or a reaction to ideas.

## F. Data Analysis in Focus Groups

Participants in focus groups are more than data providers or collectors. Participants in focus groups analyze their own information as a group. They prioritize and categorize ideas, create abstractions, and look at implications. This would normally be called analysis. Senior researchers led these discussions and were responsible for completing the analysis of the data collected. The following steps were followed after the focus groups had completed their work:

**Compile data.** The researchers gathered all the flip chart sheets, the recorders' notes, and any individual submissions. They transcribed these into one summary document according to questions or general categories.

At the rural workshop in Cochrane we collected all the sheets and notes. A group of researchers and participants spent a day cutting up ideas and sorting these into categories. We tried many groupings but came up with a set of strategies/experiences that helped people understand the complexity of resilience. These ideas were prepared into another workbook and were presented back to a second focus group for verification and correction. We were able to develop an analysis that suited the data because we worked with the group of seniors. (Refer to Appendix 6 for a copy of this analysis workbook from Cochrane.)

**Verify information.** Because decisions are made based on the data, it is important to check the data for accuracy. Researchers take a common idea and look for examples of support for the idea within the flip charts and notes. This process is continued until there is a sense of confidence that the pertinent information has been accurately identified and expressed in the analysis.

**Use computer analysis.** In the large initial workshops (where we had over a hundred participants), we transmitted the data into a common computer while the groups were in process. Several of us were able to read the incoming data and identify emerging themes and these were then checked by the people who were at the session. You can use computer programs to analyze large data sets but you need to input the data. If you use digital recording, it is possible to use transcription programs but these are still in the early stages and take a lot of time.

Whatever the method of analysis, the results need to be written up for those who participated. It is also important to send reports to those who would be interested in your findings. Sharing findings will increase the likelihood that your group will be contacted when new topics or issues arise. If the focus group is a part of a larger research



study, it is helpful to invite participants to attend follow-up sessions to learn about the progress of the project and how their information added to the knowledge being created. The techniques in the final section of this book draw heavily on maintaining contact with participants.

There are more formal ways of analyzing data once you begin using focus groups to explore specific questions. The analysis you use will depend on the question and the purpose of the study. (Refer to the references at the end of the chapter for more ideas about analysis.)

## **G. Suggestions for Training Seniors to Conduct Focus Groups**

The following suggestions were offered by participants in focus groups:

Seniors liked to “make a day of it.” We found that most seniors liked to come at 10:00, have a lunch break, and leave at 2:00. They also preferred to work primarily in small groups. They found large group reporting to each other hard to hear, repetitive, and time-consuming.

Noise is a major factor in large groups. Seniors felt exhausted and frustrated by noise interference when several small groups worked in a large room. In another large workshop, groups were able to work in separate rooms and this was much more successful.

Seniors appreciate the open interaction among participants. When they sensed a mutual support that came from listening carefully to each other’s ideas and comments, they were open to debate their own ideas. A respectful, frank and open discussion usually brought a mutually satisfactory conclusion.

The actual size of the small group did not seem to matter to seniors, although the facilitators seemed to like groups under ten because they were easier to manage.

They felt their ideas were recognized when they were written on a flip chart. They felt consensus needed to be clearly written and discussed at the completion of the session.

The following outline can be used to train aging adults about focus group research:

**Pre-reading.** Read this chapter of the manual ahead of time along with an example of research developed from a focus group process. (A focus group report available in Appendix 8 and Cochrane follow-up is available in Appendix 7.) If the group has not studied Chapter 3 (Field-work), have them read this as well.

Each of the following sessions should be one to three hours in length.

**Overview.** Discuss the pre-reading and decide on a topic for a practice focus group. Follow the training workbook to prepare an agenda.

**Preparation.** Decide on roles and discuss what is not expected. Prepare materials.

**Conduct** the focus group.

**Debrief** and analyze findings.

**Write** report.

## Resources

For a sound introduction to all sorts of focus groups, see: R.A. Kreuger, *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994).

To extend the above resource in how to design questions, see Richard Kreuger, *Developing Questions for Focus Groups* (a Focus Group Kit). (Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage, 1997).

David Morgan has an excellent introductory book and a Focus Group kit in six volumes. Morgan, D. *Focus Group Guidebook* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage: 1997).

For those who want to use focus groups to explore people's lives and experiences, try Jean Bystedt's, *Moderating to the Max: A Full-Tilt Guide to Creative*

You might also try Gloria Bader and Cathy Rossi's, *Focus Groups: A Step-by-Step Guide* (San Diego, CA: Bader Group, 1998).

For a reference that talks about focus groups in the larger international context, see Holly Edmunds, *Focus Group Research Handbook* (Whitby, ON: McGraw-Hill, 2000).

You might also find Bonnie Goebert's *Beyond Listening: Learning the Secret Language of Focus Groups* interesting if you want to pursue the technique (Somerset, NJ: Wiley).

For researchers interested in focus groups for traditional and non-traditional research, see Edward Fern, *Advanced Focus Group Research* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 2001).



**Mary Ann Wilkat**

*Just because we're 65 doesn't mean we don't care anymore, can't do anymore. That's an important lesson.*