Analyzing Data from Focus Groups

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John J. Green
Institute for Community-Based Research
Division of Social Sciences / Center for Community and Economic Development
Delta State University
To utilize information obtained from focus groups, researchers must engage in the process of analyzing data.

Analyzing qualitative data involves development and assignment of themes and categories and looking for patterns and contrasts.

The process includes data reduction and interpretation of meaning.
Look
- gather data, define, describe & build picture

Think
- explore, analyze, interpret & explain

Act
- report, plan, implement & evaluate

Coding and Analysis is the “Think Stage” of Stringer’s Research Process.

(Stringer, 1999)
Remember, focus groups provide several sources of data (as long as the researchers remembered to document the focus group proceedings).

Documentation might consist of…

- Flip chart notes.
- Written summary notes of what was said, who said it, and descriptions of interaction.
- Partial/full transcripts of the discussions.
- Information from focus group activities (drawings, group question responses, etc.)
- Data from questionnaires.
Asking the Data Questions

One way to approach analysis is to “ask” questions of the data.

Example questions one might ask during the coding process include:

- What do the focus group participants have to say about the world in which they live?
- What assumptions do they make in their analysis?
- What recommendations do they have for the future?
- In what ways might personal identity and socioeconomic position (education, income, occupation) relate to their perceptions?
There are two general approaches to coding: “open coding” and “focused coding.” These are not mutually exclusive. Researchers may work back and forth between them.

1) Open coding – the researchers remain as open as possible in their attempt to “uncover” what is in the data.

2) Focused coding – the researchers identify themes and look for associated data fitting under categories of interest.
Memo Writing

It is often helpful to make notes to yourself or others on your research team that go beyond the specific participant or focus group data to address higher-level/more abstract issues and concepts.

These are referred to as “theoretical memos.”

In doing this, it is important not to de-contextual phenomena to the extent that your analysis is viewed as a stretch on what was said/done in the focus group.

Memos may later be used as the textual basis for your report.
There is a three-step cycle in the coding process.

1) General reading of research material (notes, transcripts, etc.). Read the materials as a collection all the way through.

2) Close coding in a line-by-line fashion. This involves assigning descriptive and meaningful labels/tags to the data.

3) Intensive analysis of codes in terms of their meaning and frequency. This is followed by another reading of research material.
There are computer software programs available to assist with coding and analyzing data, such as *Ethnograph*, *Atlas ti*, and *QSR N6*.

However, you can code using MS Word with the highlight function.

Also, the traditional pen and paper method works well (I like to assign colors to specific research questions).

This may also be done with other materials – pictures, drawings, etc. I tend to use Post-It Notes for these data sources.
Codes should then be categorized by theme.

These may be used in comparisons between individuals and groups to identify patterns in the data.

For example...
### Perceptions Expressed by Employers and Underemployed:

**Summary Results from Interviews and Focus Groups in Clarksdale, Marks, Tutwiler and Winstonville, MS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employers</th>
<th>Underemployed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Barriers and Challenges to the Local and Regional Economy</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Few jobs</td>
<td>Overall social and economic structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inability to attract new businesses</td>
<td>Few jobs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployable workforce</td>
<td>Limited educational credentials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low educational levels</td>
<td>Lack of dependable transportation to outside jobs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crime and drug problems in the community</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Action Ideas to Make Improvements</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop more industry and jobs</td>
<td>Move beyond traditional/ established approaches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic skills education (reading, writing, math)</td>
<td>Advocate, search for and help develop “good jobs”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocational training</td>
<td>Increase educational and training opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High-tech. skills training</td>
<td>Mentorship/apprenticeship program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hands-on experience</td>
<td>Small business incubator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work ethics</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Reliability (consistency of findings) and validity (accuracy of information) are important factors to consider in the process of data analysis. Two of the most useful tools for addressing them when analyzing focus group data are:

1) Coding Teams – researchers code the same data and discuss their findings. Similarities and differences between results are assessed.

2) Participant Validation – researchers take findings and analysis back to the participants and ask them to review the work and provide feedback.
The most important element of analyzing qualitative data, including data obtained from focus groups, is to **THINK!**