

Analyzing Data from

Focus Groups



Applied Rural Sociology, 2006

John J. Green

Institute for Community-Based Research

Division of Social Sciences / Center for Community and Economic Development

Delta State University

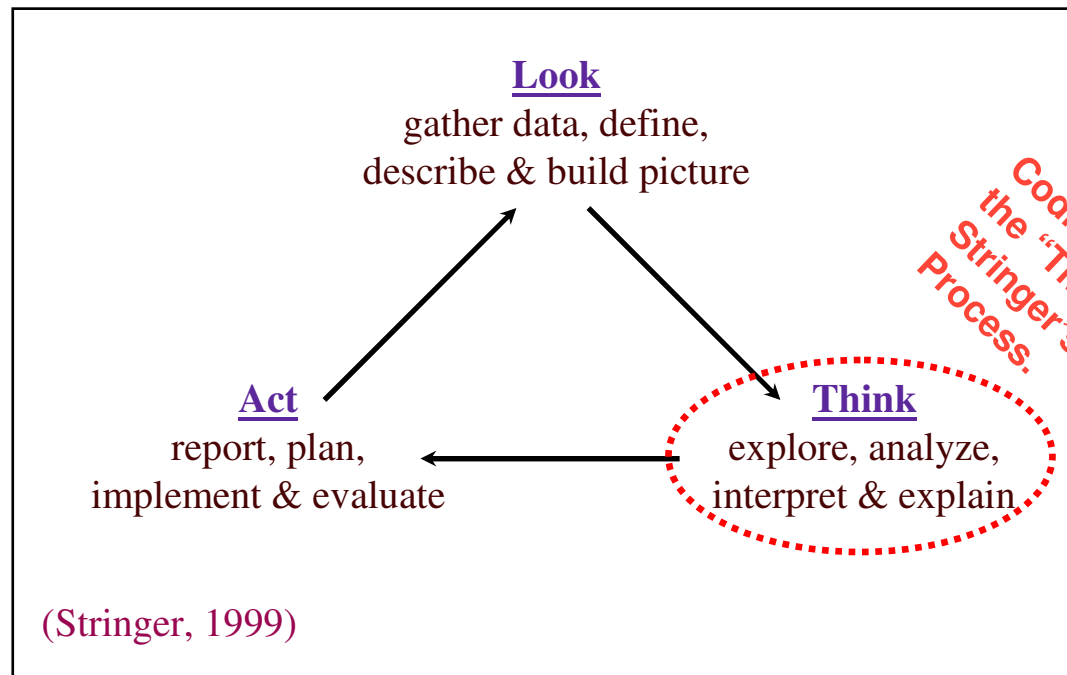
In a Nut Shell. . .

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.





*Coding and Analysis is
the "Think Stage" of
Stringer's Research
Process.*

Sources of Data

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



Documentation might consist of...

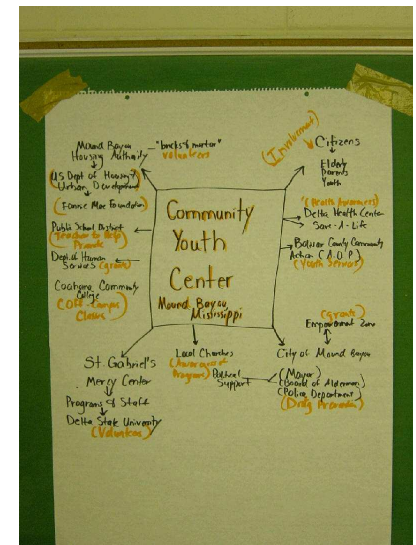
Flip chart notes.

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?

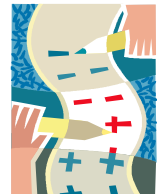
In what ways might personal identity and socioeconomic position (education, income, occupation) relate to their perceptions?



Approaches to Coding

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.

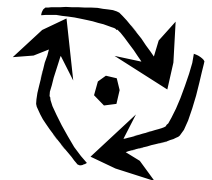
Memos may later be used as the textual basis for your report.



Coding Cycle

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.

Antoinette: If the opportunity for the job existed, do you think you could get the position?

#5: There is just a lack of opportunity.

#4: Every job I seem to get, they hire me to catch up. It is temporary.

#1: There are not a lot of job opportunities. Don't have the skills. Not much in opportunity. Don't know the people.

N/F Jobs

L. Skills

#2: Few jobs. These require experience. How can you get experience if you cannot get the job?

N/F Jobs

#3: Lack of employment. Lack of jobs.

Fav.

Job Comp.

#5: Fifty folks will apply for one job. There is favoritism. They will pay to train others, even though I have the skills.

Fav.

#4: You have to know someone. Sometimes you have to lie about experience. There is also lack of transportation. Now I have computer training.

L. Transp.

#6: I do have a job, and I know a little. Trying to improve myself. Some of my opportunities come because I am white.

Group: Note – there was general agreement expressed by the group concerning this last statement. A few people had said that they did not want to come right out and say, but it was a very important issue.

#5: I agree, but I wasn't gonna come right out and say it. It is time for a change. Need to get the old leaders out and get some new ones. Can't get no worse than it is now.

Antoinette: Do you feel like job opportunities will be better for the next generation?

#5: Yes, maybe.

#4: We will have to be active in the community. Go to meetings and things like that.

#1: They will try to shut you down.

#2: Won't get better.

#6: Have to educate. Bring in industry.

Antoinette: If a Nissan plant were to come in here, could you do the job?

L. Skills Group: Yes. But, not enough skills.

*RED = Barriers/
Challenges*

Antoinette: If a Nissan plant were to come in here, could you do the job?

Group: Yes. But, not enough skills.

EXCERPT CODES FROM FOCUS GROUP ANALYSIS

Code Family: **Barriers/Challenges to Achieving Ideal Job**

[Barriers/Challenges: Businesses privilege education over experience]
[Barriers/Challenges: Businesses show favoritism in hiring practices]
[Barriers/Challenges: Cash flow/credit for small business development]
[Barriers/Challenges: Competition with highly educated]
[Barriers/Challenges: Daycare/supervision for children]
[Barriers/Challenges: Feelings of discouragement/low self-esteem]
[Barriers/Challenges: Feelings of disempowerment]
[Barriers/Challenges: Having to travel out of area for work]
[Barriers/Challenges: High proportion of applicants to available jobs]
[Barriers/Challenges: Limited experience]
[Barriers/Challenges: Limited skills]
[Barriers/Challenges: Limited transportation]
[Barriers/Challenges: Loss of factory jobs]
[Barriers/Challenges: No jobs/few jobs]
[Barriers/Challenges: Overqualification]

Code Family: **Economic Barriers/Challenges**

[Barriers/Challenges: Businesses leaving after incentive programs end]
[Barriers/Challenges: Businesses looking for cheap labor]
[Barriers/Challenges: Businesses want government to put up some funds]
[Barriers/Challenges: County government has no money]
[Barriers/Challenges: Lack of benefits]
[Barriers/Challenges: Limited customer base/spending power for small businesses]
[Barriers/Challenges: Local businesses/farmers going under]
[Barriers/Challenges: Local powerful people resist change]
[Barriers/Challenges: Loss of factory jobs]
[Barriers/Challenges: No jobs/few jobs]
[Barriers/Challenges: People with money leaving community]
[Barriers/Challenges: Traditional development path not working]

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**

Employers	Underemployed
<i>Barriers and Challenges to the Local and Regional Economy</i>	
Few jobs Inability to attract new businesses Unemployable workforce Low educational levels Crime and drug problems in the community	Overall social and economic structure Few jobs Limited educational credentials Lack of dependable transportation to outside jobs
<i>Action Ideas to Make Improvements</i>	
Develop more industry and jobs Basic skills education (reading, writing, math) Vocational training High-tech. skills training Hands-on experience Work ethics	Move beyond traditional/ established approaches Advocate, search for and help develop “good jobs” Increase educational and training opportunities Mentorship/apprenticeship program Small business incubator

Quality

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!