



# Eliciting Program Staff and Participant Perspectives

## INTERVIEWS OR FOCUS GROUPS?

By *Helen Lee and Leigh Parise*

**JUNE 2017**

*This post is one in a continuing series aiming to inform implementation research in social policy evaluations. Contributors from inside and outside MDRC share lessons from past program evaluations and insights from ongoing studies.*

As implementation researchers, we often want to hear directly from program staff members and program participants in order to understand their perspectives and experiences. Gathering these perspectives can involve one-on-one interviews or focus groups. Guidance on which approach is more appropriate is available in qualitative methods textbooks, but it may not be easily accessible to evaluators or study planners. We recently led an internal MDRC seminar to summarize a few key considerations for conducting interviews or focus groups for implementation research.

### WHAT CAN INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS INFORM, COMPARED WITH SURVEYS OR ADMINISTRATIVE RECORDS?

- Surveys or administrative records can
  - answer questions of “What?” “How much?” “How often?” “To what extent?”
- Interviews and focus groups can
  - answer questions of “How?” or “Why?”
  - provide richer, more nuanced detail on complex ideas or processes than surveys or administrative data (for example, insight into questions of how principles of practice are translated into interactions with clients);
  - provide multiple perspectives on topics;
  - provide context for quantitative findings.

Conducting interviews and focus groups can be resource-intensive endeavors, so project teams should think strategically about whether their questions warrant these methods of inquiry.

### BOTH INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS

- use open-ended methods of inquiry;
- require a skilled moderator or interviewer;
- require a protocol to guide the conversation;
- require careful consideration of whom to include and how to recruit them;

#### NEW YORK

16 East 34th Street  
New York, NY 10016  
Tel: 212 532 3200

#### OAKLAND

475 14th Street  
Suite 750  
Oakland, CA 94612  
Tel: 510 663 6372

#### WASHINGTON, DC

1990 M Street, NW  
Suite 340  
Washington, DC 20036

#### LOS ANGELES

11965 Venice Boulevard  
Suite 402  
Los Angeles, CA 90066

[www.mdrc.org](http://www.mdrc.org)



- can be useful strategies throughout the research process:
  - at the beginning, to get a “lay of the land” or overview of a topic or a program;
  - in the middle, to get an understanding of participant experiences and implementation processes as they happen;
  - at the end, to gather reflections, perceptions, and experiences after service receipt;
- are labor intensive and can produce enormous amounts of data:
  - requiring substantial planning, recruitment, coordinating, and “detective work” (learning what you can before an interview);
  - involving training of interviewers or moderators, and often transcription costs;
  - requiring staff time and expertise to organize and analyze the data to ensure high quality.

### CONSIDER INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS IN THESE CASES:

- The questions you’re asking are personal or sensitive in nature.
- It’s important to get in-depth or detailed responses from a particular interviewee.
- You need to make sure to complete the entire interview protocol, or key parts of it.
- You need to conduct interviews over the phone or in a video call (in person is great, but it may be more expensive depending on the location and other factors).

### CONSIDER FOCUS GROUPS IN THESE CASES:

- The questions you’re asking are not sensitive in nature.
- You are interested in hearing multiple voices or perspectives.
- You are interested in participants building off of each other’s responses.
- You are interested in exploring consensus or lack of consensus.
- You are willing to accept less-detailed information.

### ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR CONDUCTING FOCUS GROUPS

- A focus group isn’t just a way to interview a lot of people at once. It’s not about any one person, but a group perspective.
- It is *very* important to consider the role of group dynamics in focus groups:
  - Participants can feed off each other, which may generate more energy than individual interviews.
  - But some participants may dominate, while others may feel uncomfortable.
- Focus groups often require more planning than interviews:
  - You may need more clarity on what you want to get from the discussion.
  - Moderators may need more training:
    - ◆ On the most critical outcomes or topics to explore;
    - ◆ On how to handle group dynamics — laying out “ground rules” and managing participant interaction.
- Focus groups may incur added costs, such as transportation for participants, note-taking, videotaping, and transcriptions involving multiple speakers.
- Overrecruitment may be necessary and sampling may be more complicated if you seek to achieve homogeneous or heterogeneous groupings.



## WHAT ABOUT THE IRB?

- Protocols for individual interviews or focus groups must be reviewed by your organization's institutional review board.
- The IRB will assess the risks associated with the proposed type of inquiry and will consider such issues as the sensitivity of questions being asked and confidentiality in group settings.
- Check with your IRB for further guidance.

*Suggested citation for this post:*

Lee, Helen, and Leigh Parise. 2017. "Eliciting Program Staff and Participant Perspectives: Interviews or Focus Groups?" *Implementation Research Incubator* (blog), June. <http://www.mdrc.org/publication/eliciting-program-staff-and-participant-perspectives>.

