

## **RESEARCH FORUM SERIES**

### **Core Curriculum Module I**

#### ***Focus Group Methodology***

**Jo Ann Kairys, MPH, Executive Director**

**Center for Healthy Families and Cultural Diversity**

#### **I. Background**

Focus group interviews are a useful qualitative inquiry strategy used in evaluation research and quality improvement activities. They are increasingly being used in the primary care setting and in community-based research projects.

At a Fellows' weekly Forum meeting in February 1999, the NRSA Fellowship Co-Directors solicited feedback concerning the schedule and content of the Fellows' Research Forum weekly meetings. In the context of quality improvement, these meetings were viewed as a "process" in which opportunities for improvements might be identified and incorporated into the overall applied primary care/health services research program.

The purposes of this focus group module were to:

- demonstrate the application of focus group/qualitative research techniques;
- elicit suggestions about potential content for the Fellows' workshops, seminars, and presentations; and
- identify the key quality characteristics of curricular content that contribute to a successful fellowship experience.

#### **I. Aim**

In this 2-part workshop, Fellows will be introduced to focus group/qualitative survey methodologies by conducting actual focus group discussions on a topic of interest. Focus groups are a commonly applied survey method for obtaining primary data from key informants. Typical focus groups in health care settings may include patients, health care professionals, and community members. In this scenario, Fellows themselves participated as key informants.

#### **II. Learning objectives**

- Describe the rationale for conducting focus group/qualitative survey research
- Name the steps involved in creating appropriate structured interview questions
- Identify "rules of thumb" that apply to focus group survey methodology
- List ways to analyze content of focus group discussions

#### **I. Teaching method(s)**

Jo Ann Kairys, MPH, Executive Director of the Center for Healthy Families and Cultural Diversity, moderated two 1.5-hour focus group discussions. All of the research Fellows participated in these discussions. The focus groups were utilized to illustrate key components of the design and implementation of focus group/qualitative survey methods.

## **II. Content outline**

Part 1. Focus Group #1 (1.5 hours) consisted of open-ended questions to solicit ideas for the content of future Research Forum meetings. Two observers not involved in the Fellowship hand-recorded Fellows' comments on post-it notes for follow-up grouping and qualitative content analysis. Preliminary topics identified for further discussion were as follows:

- Research methods
- Survey research
- Formulating research questions (qualitative and quantitative)
- Behavioral research
- Culturally competent research
- Choosing a research area, identifying questions, establishing priorities
- Choosing research collaborators
- Balancing interests with fundable research
- Definition of "core competencies" of primary care/health services research
- Funding sources
- Ethics
- Stakeholder analysis
- Future occupational concerns
- Journal club

Part 2. Focus Group #2 (1.5 hours) consisted of structured interview questions used to generate discussion:

- a. Are there topics or content areas that you would like to add to the list (see above)?
- b. Looking at the more complete list, elaborate on specific items. For example, concerning research efforts, what do you think is an appropriate balance between engaging in traditional academic research vs. applied research vs. action research?
- c. What are your top priorities?
- d. In what sequence should these be scheduled?
- e. Looking at the topic list, what recommendations would you like to make concerning specific presenters/faculty/speakers?
- f. Any suggestions regarding how to "market" the weekly meetings to attract a larger group of faculty?
- g. Any suggestions regarding the structure of the weekly meetings (e.g., day of week, time allocation)?
- h. How would you measure the quality of the weekly meetings?

Once again, two "independent" recorders wrote Fellows' comments on post-it notes that were placed on flip charts. Twenty minutes were allocated after the general discussion for content analysis. Fellows worked in pairs to group the notes into themes. Five major categories emerged as a basis for improving the content and

direction of the Fellows' weekly Research Forum: (1) definition of program; (2) independence vs. structure; (3) faculty/university involvement; (4) Fellows' background interests; and (5) definition of seminars. The moderator expanded upon these categories in a summary report that was distributed to the Fellows. It has since been used to guide the selection of topics for core competency modules, and to assess the degree to which innovation goals are being met.

## **VI. Application to Actual Research Projects by Fellows**

Dr. John Orzano utilized the focus group techniques in one of the weekly scheduled Fellows' meetings to gather feedback on his research project involving participatory practice-base research. Other Fellows who are interested in focus groups will have an opportunity to learn more about these and other qualitative research methods from the NRSA Fellowship faculty and through attending focus group workshops at conferences.

## **VII. References/Internet Resources**

Brown JB. "The Use of Focus Groups in Clinical Research," In *Doing Qualitative Research*, Second Edition, BF Crabtree, WL Miller, eds. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 1999, pp. 109-124.

Morgan D. *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research*. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE, 1988.

Morgan DL. "Designing Focus Groups Research," in *Tools for Primary Care Research*,

M Stewart, F Tudiver, MJ Bass, EV Dunn, and PG Norton, eds, Newbury Park, CA: SAGE, 1992, pp. 205-230.

Morgan DL, Krueger RA. *The Focus Group Kit*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 1998.