

Focus Groups/Interviewing

Participant Guide

This course was adapted from a training developed by the

Denver STD/HIV Prevention Training Center

and from

**R. Kreuger, Moderating Focus Groups.
Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA 1998**

MODULE I – OVERVIEW OF FOCUS GROUPS

Objectives

By the end of the training session, participants will:

- Be familiar with focus groups and why they are used.
- Be familiar with the objectives for the training.
- Be familiar with the training agenda.

Focus groups are . . .

- ✓ Focus groups are a qualitative research tool that can be used to achieve a number of different purposes. By *qualitative*, we mean collection of data that is largely unstructured. Participants are encouraged to speak freely on multiple topics, unlike a survey, which forces people to respond in a very specific way.
- ✓ Focus groups are *group interviews* that accomplish things surveys cannot. People can be prompted by others to talk about things that may not have come up in a one-on-one survey or in-depth interview. Also, focus groups let you observe group dynamics to learn even more about attitudes and beliefs about a given topic than could otherwise be observed in a face to face interview.
- ✓ Focus groups are only one type of qualitative research tool. The *Community Based Assessment* course introduces a variety of other qualitative research approaches, in addition to focus groups and interviews.
- ✓ Focus groups are small group interviews of 6-10 persons led by a moderator (or facilitator) and observer. Groups generally last 1 ½ to 2 hours and focus on a single topic. Focus groups are intended to capitalize on the natural process of conversation that happens in group settings. They are designed to capture information generated in group discussion that would otherwise be difficult to elicit.
- ✓ Generally homogeneous group – participants are similar to each other. Focus groups work best when people feel comfortable, at ease and relaxed. This often works better when people see others like them in the group – i.e., same age, sex, orientation. Groups don't always have to be homogeneous, however. If the group organizers have reason to study interactions between diverse populations, heterogeneity might be preferred.
- ✓ Topic can be provocative or mundane. Focus groups should be conducted in informal, relaxed settings and can be effective for exploring topics that are sensitive, personal or associated with stigma. Skillful facilitation can make all the difference. That said, the provocative isn't the only type of topic explored in focus groups. People can discuss the ordinary and everyday just as successfully in focus groups.

- ✓ Used frequently for formative research—i.e. in the planning and assessment stages. Focus groups can be very helpful to CPGs as they assess and prioritize populations of interest. Also used for planning evaluation and to supplement quantitative research.

Focus groups are not . . .

- ✓ Not representative of the population studied, and findings cannot be generalized to the larger population.
- ✓ Not intended to replace surveys or other quantitative methods. Focus groups are not efficient when you need a large amount of specific data from a large number of people.
- ✓ Not predictive of how people *will* behave.

MODULE II – DEVELOPING A TOPIC GUIDE

Objectives

After completing this module participants will:

- Be familiar with what a topic guide is.
- Be familiar with types of questions to include in a guide.
- Be familiar with probes.

What is a Topic Guide?

- ✓ Questions included in the topic guide should relate to the “big questions” you ask on the community assessment form.
- ✓ Guide should have 5-10 questions MAX! Remember, you are going to have a discussion of no more than 2 hours, ideally 1 ½ hours, *including introduction to the group and evaluation*. Assume you will spend 10 minutes on each question and allow time for your introduction and evaluation. The more in depth your discussion for each question, the more time you will need.
- ✓ Think about questions that lend themselves to discussion and dialogue. You want open-ended, thought provoking questions. Avoid questions that can be answered with a “yes” or “no” and questions that have a simple answer. Also, avoid questions that your participants won’t likely have an answer for.
- ✓ Questions should be related. Don’t stray from one topic to another.
- ✓ Start out with ‘easy,’ general, or broad questions to get the group warmed up. Don’t put the most sensitive or difficult questions first! Then progress to more specific or sensitive questions. Broaden your questions again toward the end. Think of an hourglass.
- ✓ Use third-personing whenever possible, particularly for sensitive topics.
e.g. “What do most people think about . . .” as opposed to “What do you think . . .”
- ✓ For sensitive topics, consider “abstracting” a question one level up. Another good trick is to solicit responses to a sensitive question anonymously.
- ✓ Avoid jargon. Try to be simple and precise.
- ✓ Use probes.

MODULE III – GETTING ORGANIZED: HOW TO BEGIN YOUR FOCUS GROUP

Objectives

After completing this module participants will:

- Be able to identify the materials needed to conduct focus groups.
- Be able to set up a focus group session.
- Be able to identify typical ‘challenges’ faced by moderators and observers in focus group logistics.

Preparing for your focus group . . .

- ✓ **Before the focus group begins**, prepare yourself! Practice the introduction and topic guide questions—memorize them!! Arrive early and make sure you have some quiet time before you greet participants. Assemble the equipment before you leave the office to go to your focus group destination, and once you are there, check that you have all your equipment (see equipment checklist). Arrange the room—arrange tables (one for refreshments, one for check in/registration) and chairs. Set up and test recording equipment. Test equipment AGAIN! Set up flip chart, set up refreshments, set up sign in, consent and evaluation forms.
- ✓ **As people arrive**, greet them. Register participants and have them make name tags. Let your participants choose what name to use. Invite them to invent a name if anonymity or confidentiality is an issue. Make small-talk in order to create a warm and friendly environment, and put your participants at ease. At the same time, this allows you to identify the very shy or dominant personalities in the group. If you plan to collect basic contact or demographic information, do so before the session starts.
- ✓ **When the group starts**, welcome participants, review briefly the purpose and length of the focus group and procedures for disbursing incentives (if you’re offering them), and handle all logistics such as locations of bathrooms, silencing cell phones and pages, etc. Review ground rules. Instruct participants to complete the informed consent. Once consents are signed you may TURN ON THE TAPE RECORDER (don’t forget!) and begin.
- ✓ **After the focus group**, you may need to encourage people to pick up their incentive and fill out an evaluation and relevant demographic sheets. Immediately following the group is an ideal time for the moderator and observer to sit down and write up the field notes because the discussion is fresh in their minds. If it isn’t possible to do this, the notes should be written within 24 hours to ensure important details not caught on tape get documented.

What you may need for a focus group . . .

- Cassette tape recorder with cord or batteries
- Remote microphone
- extension cord (s) if using cords for cassette recorders
- Blank 5x8" index cards for name tents
- batteries
- blank cassette tapes
- marking pens (at least five)
- writing tablets and pens for moderator and/or observer
- flip chart
- copies of question guide
- list of names and available contact information for recruited participants
- address, telephone number and name of contact person at focus group location
- road maps
- pens, pencils and notepads for participants
- consent forms
- evaluation sheets
- business cards
- tape (masking, duct)
- box of tissues
- post-it notes
- incentives
- incentive log/book
- list of refreshments
- coloring books and crayons for children

GET ORGANIZED!

Before you leave for your focus group . . .

- ☺ Practice the introduction and questions
- ☺ Arrive early
- ☺ Check your list
- ☺ Quiet time to review your questions and probes
- ☺ Assemble the equipment and make sure it's in working order
- ☺ Be sure you know how to get to your focus group destination
- ☺ Check that you have all your equipment (see equipment checklist)

When you arrive at your focus group destination . . .

- ☺ Arrange the room
- ☺ Arrange tables (one for refreshments, one for check in/registration) and chairs
- ☺ Set up and test recording equipment
- ☺ Make sure your observer knows how to operate the equipment
- ☺ Test equipment AGAIN!
- ☺ Set up flip chart
- ☺ Set up refreshments
- ☺ Set up sign in, consent and evaluation forms

As people arrive . . .

- ☺ Register participants
- ☺ Distribute necessary materials (e.g. surveys, consent forms)
- ☺ Mingle with participants as they arrive

Let the focus group begin . . .

- ☺ Welcome
- ☺ Introduction - what a focus group is, what this one is about
- ☺ Informed consent
- ☺ Introduction of participants - use an icebreaker
- ☺ Review ground rules
- ☺ TURN ON THE TAPE RECORDER and get ask your questions

During the focus group . . .

- ☺ Anticipate the flow (KNOW your question guide!)
- ☺ Control your reactions
- ☺ Be comfortable with pauses
- ☺ Probe as necessary
- ☺ Listen
- ☺ Summarize

After the focus group . . .

- ☺ Pay incentives
- ☺ Debrief with observer and write field notes
- ☺ Pack equipment
- ☺ Clean up space

Suggested Ground Rules

Always inform participants . . .

- ✓ You're recording the session.
- ✓ No names are attached to any report.
- ✓ Who is paying for the focus group and why.
- ✓ Role of the moderator and observer.
- ✓ How long the group will last.
- ✓ Use first names only.
- ✓ There are no wrong answers.
- ✓ Please respect the right of everyone to express opinions.

Usually include . . .

- ✓ Rules for cell phones and pagers.
- ✓ Who will listen to the recording.
- ✓ Who sees the reports and surveys and how information will be used.
- ✓ Location of bathrooms (ask participants to use them before starting).
- ✓ Invitation to participants to help themselves to refreshments.

The Role of the Observer

Assists with logistics

- ✓ Materials preparation
- ✓ Set up on location (help arrange room, chairs, tables, flip chart)
- ✓ Responsible for refreshments
- ✓ Handle paperwork

Monitor entrance and handle interruptions

- ✓ Be a host/hostess
- ✓ Be a doorkeeper
- ✓ Help latecomers check in and find a place

Record discussion

- ✓ Flip chart and note taking
- ✓ Verbatim notes
- ✓ Operate tape recorder/microphone

Observe discussion

- ✓ Be prepared to discuss body language of participants, perceptions of reactions to discussion
- ✓ Be prepared to read back notes
- ✓ Ask follow-up questions as necessary

Offer oral summary

- ✓ Moderator and observer may both contribute to concluding summary remarks

Debrief with moderator

Help Complete Field notes

MODULE IV – STRATEGIES FOR MODERATORS/ TYPICAL FOCUS GROUP ENCOUNTERS

Objectives

After completing this module, participants will:

- Be familiar with strategies for responding to participants.
- Be familiar with how to use a topic guide.
- Be familiar with the ‘types’ of focus group participants.
- Be prepared for typical interruptions/disruptions in groups.

Strategies for moderators . . .

- ✓ **Facilitate**, and offer words and expressions to the conversation that will generate more discussion by participants. The moderator should be relaxed, comfortable, and in charge.
- ✓ **Memorize the topic guide.** The topic guide should be so familiar to the moderator that he or she can mentally check off which topics have been covered if the conversation unfolds out of sequence.
- ✓ **Stay NEUTRAL.** Don’t offer praise or condemnation of any participant or dialogue. Be careful not to use words like “excellent,” “good,” or “that’s great,” even if all you want to do is thank a participant for their input. Try using ‘ok, thank you,’ or ‘I see,’ ‘hmm, ok,’ ‘thanks for sharing that,’ to convey appreciation.
- ✓ **Use open-ended questions.** Moderators must condition themselves to ask open-ended questions and use direct language to elicit more from participants. The more assertive the language of the moderator, the more in depth the participant responses.
- ✓ **Elicit more information.** The moderator strives to create an environment in which participants respond as they choose. At the same time, participants sometimes need help expressing what they intend to say. An effective moderator can help in several ways:
 - *Probing questions.* One of the most useful things about focus group methodology is that the discussion is *semi-structured*, meaning that the moderator can leave the question guide for a moment and probe more deeply into an issue. A probing question can also be used to assess the strength of a response, or how many other people within a group share the point of view of the item discussed.
 - *Prompts.* A prompt can be used to keep the conversation lively, or to incorporate new speakers into the discussion.
 - *Rephrasing questions.* If you find you’re not getting a response to a question, you may want to ask it a different way. Even though you’ve pre-tested the questions

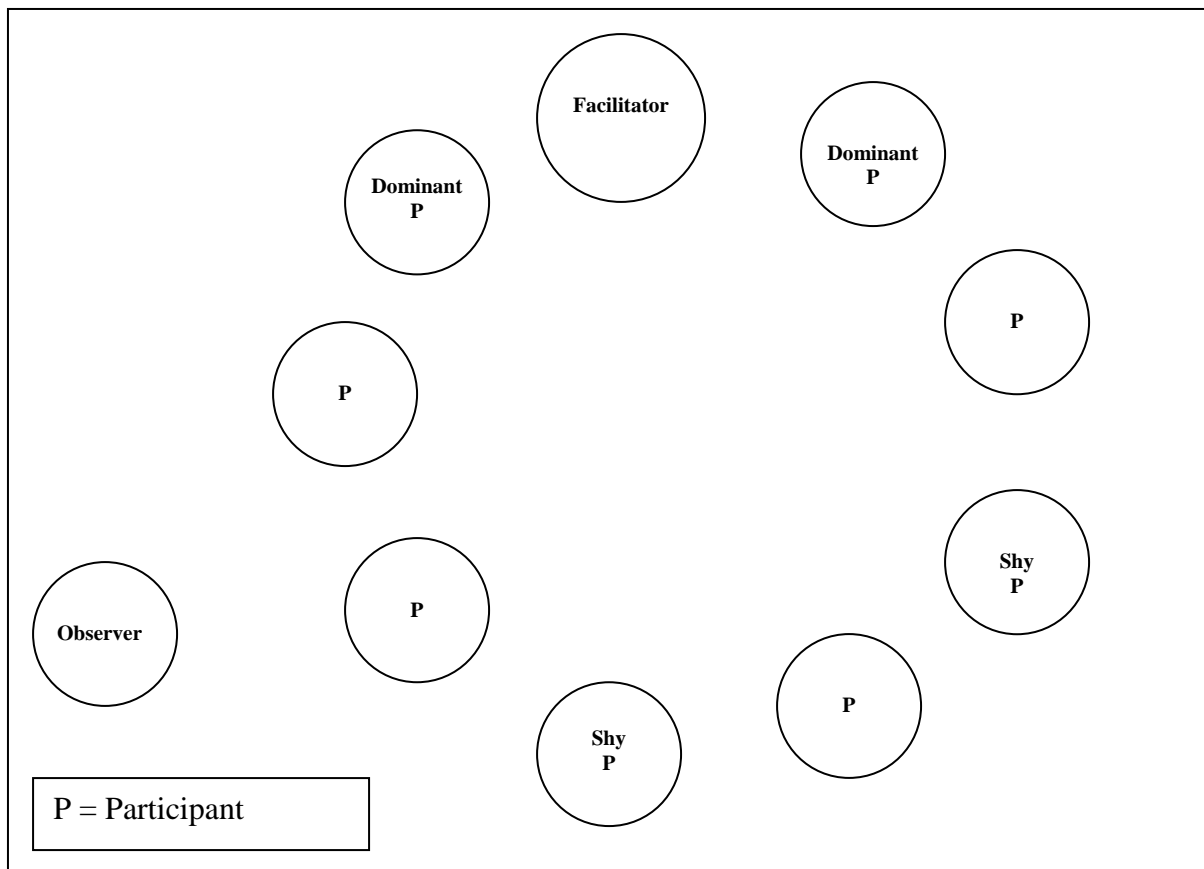
- and have designed them to be simple and straightforward, you might discover that participants just don't understand.
- *Eye contact and other non-verbal cues.* Raising your eyebrow, nodding, hand gestures, or simply establishing eye contact can be very effective in prompting someone else to talk, or prompting someone who is already talking to continue talking.
 - *The Pause.* It's often useful to pause a few seconds to let participants think more about the topic. This can also allow a new speaker to make a comment, especially if they are too shy to insert themselves into a conversation otherwise.
 - ✓ **Use body language and eye contact to your advantage** and don't be afraid to call on participants by name. Lean forward to convey interest in a participant. Look them in the eye and ask your question.
 - ✓ **Be aware of "types".** Participants come in all shapes, colors and sizes, but there are *types* of personalities that frequently emerge in focus groups. Moderators and observers should spend time mingling with participants as they check in to try to discern characteristics and types:
 - *Quiet and shy types.* First, consider if the problem is just shyness or intimidation by a dominant talker or expert in the group, a personal problem with the discussion at hand, or a reaction to another dynamic occurring in the group. If someone appears to be 'quiet,' the moderator can let them off with one or two word answers in the beginning so as to appear non-threatening. Try seating them across from the moderator in a way that eye contact and facial expressions can encourage them to speak. As the group continues, the moderator can more pointedly call the participant by name, ask them to elaborate, or ask them if they have had experiences similar to those described by others.
 - *Angry or disruptive types.* This person can be antagonistic or intolerant and tends to interrupt the free exchange of ideas and opinions. They may be driven by racist, religious, or political agendas. This participant may use body language and verbal cues to indicate he/she is frustrated with some aspect of the process. The moderator can respond by telling the participant how appreciative they are of their input and how important it is, validating the participant's right to such a point of view. If anger appears to be over disagreement with another participant, the moderator can reiterate how no one answer is correct and that the focus here is on sharing diverse opinions and that all opinions are important to the discussion. Open hostility by participants is rare; if they agree to the process early on they usually don't get too invested in their anger. It is important in the beginning to be up front about what is expected of participants. If a participant repeatedly interrupts someone who you'd like to finish talking, raise your hand and say firmly, "Wait, let's let her finish and then get to your point." You may have to ask for tolerance: "Wait. We're not asking people to agree with each other but simply to listen respectfully to the views of others." If repeated warnings don't seem to control the disruptive participant, consider adjourning the group for a 10-

minute break. Pull the participant aside and say, “Thanks for your participation. We’re splitting the discussion into two parts, and not everyone from the first half will be in the second half. So, thanks for coming.” Give them their incentive and dismiss them.

- *The talker.* This participant can be problematic because she/he can dominate a conversation and prevent others from equal air time. They may be extroverted to the point where it’s easy for the person to begin monopolizing the conversation. They may want to respond first to a question, and other members of a group may be content to follow them. You want to respond in such a way that will not stifle spontaneity but creates opportunity for maximum input from other. One strategy can be to identify dominant talkers ahead of time and seat them next to the moderator, where the moderator’s body language (a raised hand signifying “wait”, for example) can often keep them in control. If this doesn’t work, try a verbal shift, “Thanks, Sandra. Who feels differently? What can someone else add?” Using body language—looking away, turning away—can be effective. Wait for the talker to take a breath and jump in saying, ‘thanks so much—your perspective is helpful—are there others who can identify with what Z is saying?’ or, if the domination continues, ‘I appreciate your input—now I’d really like to give others a chance to share as well.’
- *The joiner.* This participant is someone who agrees with everything everyone says and has their own story to tell about it. Similar to the talker and like another variation the ‘off-track’ person, this type of participant can be handled the same way you’d handle a ‘talker.’
- *The questioner.* This participant is someone who interrupts the conversation for information or clarification. If the question is directly related to the topic of discussion, this may not be a problem. However, if addressing the topic would take the focus in an unrelated direction, direct the participant to hold these questions until after the group is over. You can then address unrelated issues as time permits.
- *Ramblers and Wanderers.* These are the people who use lots of words, but never seem to make a point. They can go on and on for minutes without stopping, grinding your interesting developing conversation to a halt. If the rambler goes on for more than 20 seconds or so, break away eye contact. Begin studying your papers. Learn the act of tactful interruption:
- *The expert.* These people are the classic know-it-alls. They may consider themselves an authority on your research topic, either through education or experience. The problem arises when the expert overshadows the other members of the group, making them intimidated to say anything. Prompting questions are useful for “moderating around” an expert.
- *Inattentive participants.* A bit like the rambler in their inability to stay on topic, this person always seems a bit preoccupied with something else, and may not even hear the question. While the rambler might know where he or she is

ultimately going, the inattentive participant either forgets or never had an idea to begin with. One strategy to cope with an inattentive person is to call them by name on key questions where you want their input. An alternate strategy would be to write the question down on a flip chart and point to it.

- ✓ **Summarize responses before moving to the next question.** If there have been particularly quiet participants this is a good time to ask them directly if they want to say something.
- ✓ **Assign seating for participants.** Seat the shy members of the group across from the moderator, so that the moderator can use eye contact to facilitate their conversation. Seat loud or dominant speakers next to the moderator. The observer should not sit in the circle and may want to change his or her position in the room throughout the discussion to assume, literally, different perspectives. The observer can also watch the door for late arrivals, and unobtrusively assist in logistics as needed. One option of seating arrangements is below:



Interpreting non-verbal communication . . .

Gesture	What it might mean
Smiling and Nodding	Signal of encouragement to participant who may be hesitant to speak
Lifting an eyebrow	An indication of interest An indication of judgment
Tilting head and lifting eyebrows	Similar to above
Gesturing with hands toward a participant	An invitation to speak
Gesturing with hands palms up	"We have a dilemma." "What now?"
Pointing to a participant	Inviting person to speak
Pointing to a participant and holding up hand to another	Two wanting to speak at once and moderator is playing traffic cop
Leaning in	Interest
Leaning back	"Keep talking. I'm listening."

Tips:

- Make sure your body language is value neutral.
- Don't overuse gestures - may be distracting and confusing.
- Make sure you use verbal language that is value neutral and does not communicate approval or disapproval of response.
- Don't talk too much in the session after the introduction; you are the moderator, not a participant.
- Smile and consciously project a relaxed demeanor.

More about questions and probes

Anticipate the flow

- ✓ Pay attention to what has been said before. DON'T repeat a question if the issue has already been addressed.
- ✓ DO allow participants to address a topic that is on the question guide even if it is out of your sequence
- ✓ Know your question guide well enough to refer to it only occasionally. DON'T read questions verbatim
- ✓ Be prepared to refocus the group on your questions
- ✓ Keep track of time and know when you must move on to the next question

Control your reactions

- ✓ Refer to sources for learning about and using non-verbal communication
- ✓ Remain value neutral
- ✓ Have a tough skin - don't take participant's comments personally

Be comfortable with Pauses

- ✓ Pauses create an opportunity for participants who may be hesitant to speak
- ✓ Pauses encourage people to take time to think about their answers
- ✓ Let participants know that pauses are OK

Probes

... with a specific person

- ✓ "Tell me more about that."
- ✓ "What's an example of that?"
- ✓ "How so?"
- ✓ "Please describe what you mean."
- ✓ "I'm not sure I understand."
- ✓ "How does that work?"

... with the whole group

- ✓ "Who else has something to add?"
- ✓ "What about the rest of you?"
- ✓ "I see some nodding heads - tell me more."
- ✓ "We'd like to hear all points of view. Who has experienced something different?"

Listen

- ✓ Pay attention to how much you're talking during the group - summarizing only before moving on to the next question.
- ✓ Let responses guide your decision about when to move on - once responses seem to repeat or no longer contribute new information, move on.
- ✓ Let your non-verbal communication and body language be congruent with your spoken communication

Summarize

- ✓ Include a final question (i.e. "Have we missed anything?" - note that you may WANT to use a close-ended question here!)
- ✓ Be brief and complete.
- ✓ Thank participants for their time and contributions; explain how you will distribute incentives.
- ✓ Use notes recorded on flip chart notes.
- ✓ Invite the observer to add to any summary remarks.
- ✓ Address misinformation shared during the group, as appropriate.
- ✓ Address questions raised during the group that couldn't be answered at the time.

MODULE V – ROLE OF THE OBSERVER/ FIELD NOTES

Objectives

After completing this module, participants will:

- Be familiar with the role of the observer and how it is integrated into a focus group session.
- Be familiar with field notes, what they are and how they are structured.

Role of the observer/field notes . . .

- ✓ **Observer and moderator work as a team.** Often the two will switch roles from one focus group to another so they can improve skills for both roles. The two can divide up preparation and set-up tasks.
- ✓ **Document nonverbal responses of participants.** The observer is responsible for careful observation of the focus group and should document non-verbal data of the group such as overall tone of participants, level of participation, enthusiasm and/or receptiveness to topic and group, and any issues or circumstances that might affect analysis of the data (e.g. two participants were clearly unhappy with one another, or one participant appeared very agitated).
- ✓ **Note taking, controlling equipment and handling any disruptions.** By the observer taking responsibility for these tasks, the moderator is able to focus exclusively on managing the discussion.
- ✓ **Consider writing notes on flip charts during the session.** Participants appreciate that their exact words or paraphrases of their statements are being documented; it makes them feel heard and acknowledged and may contribute to overall group satisfaction. Flip charts eliminate any mystery about what the observer is writing. Finally, standing up and writing throughout the session allows the observer greater ability to see and document non-verbal cues.
- ✓ **Write field notes.** Field notes should summarize of all the ideas expressed for each item on the topic guide and include important, relevant quotes from the participants. This requires the observer to listen very closely to everything that is being said in the session and to be able to write quickly. Neatness is nice, but not critical.

Suggestions for Note Taking

Flip Charts

- ✓ Allow participants to see what you're writing
- ✓ Provide a point of reference that may prompt discussion and new ideas
- ✓ Allows observer (as note taker) to stand and watch the group from more than one perspective

You can divide the flip chart page in two and record observations or questions on one side and quotes or participants' ideas on another:

(sample flip chart page)	
Observations/questions	Quotes/paraphrase/participant idea
"What do people think about condoms?"	"I hate them!" "You can't feel anything when you use a rubber."
Laughter, groans	Generally dislike condoms Think condoms should be free at drug stores to anyone Think condom use should be taught in school
People shifting in seats when topic brought up	
(Sketch of seating arrangement with people's first names)	

(sample page for recording responses to questions)

Q. 1 Brief Summary/Key Points

Notable Quotes

Q. 2 Brief Summary/Key Points

Notable Quotes

Q. 3 Brief Summary/Key Points

Notable Quotes

Comments/Observations about group

(Sample form for recording field notes)
Focus Group Field Notes

Date/Time:	Location:	Facilitator:
# of people:	Population:	Observer:
Methods of collecting information (tape recorded? flip charts?):		
Comments (include any specific data collection activities):		

(sample focus group evaluation)

Focus Group Participant Evaluation

What did you like best about this focus group?

What did you like least about this focus group?

What do you suggest we do differently next time?

MODULE VI – ROLE PLAYS

Objectives

After completing this module, participants will:

- Experience role playing a focus group moderator
- Experience role playing a focus group observer