Notes on Focus Group Discussions
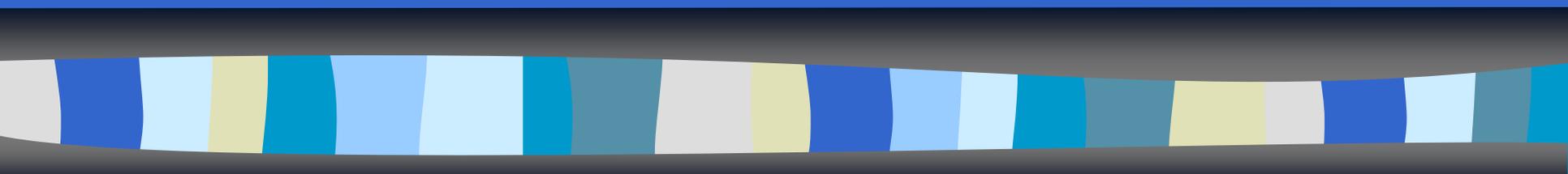
Initiative on Reproductive Health Program and Research Data Collection and Use
Workshop I

7-11 March, 2000   *Peshawar, Pakistan*

UNHCR
UNFPA
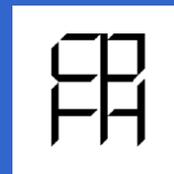
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Mailman School of Public Health
Columbia University
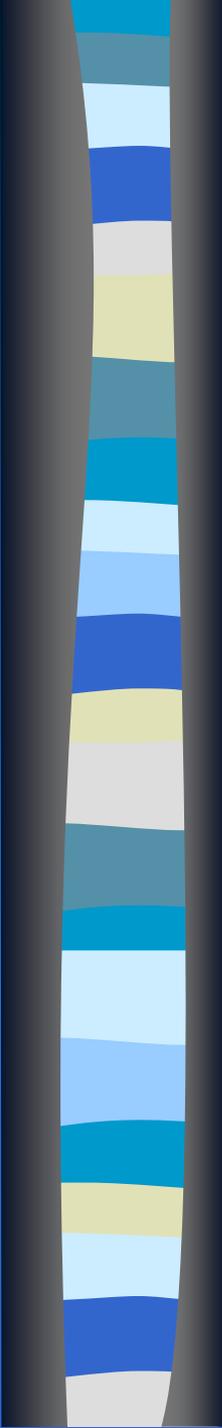
What is a Focus Group?

- Qualitative method for gathering data to answer a research question
- Led by an objective moderator
- Pre-determined topic guide
- Makes use of the group's interaction to explore the topic
- Structured analysis of the data
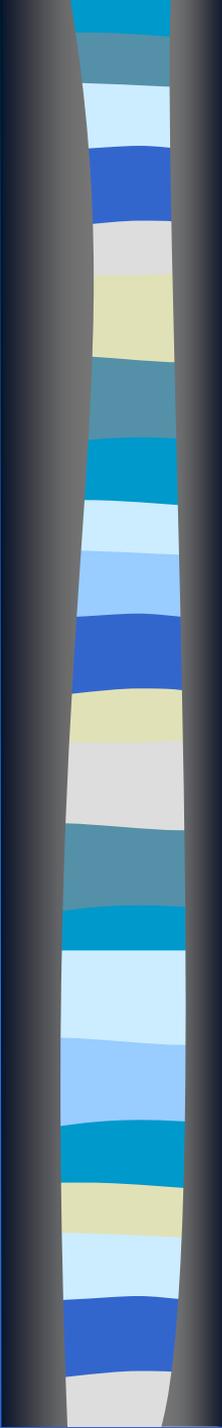
Advantages of Focus Groups

- Can generate large amounts of rich data

- Can help explore the "stories" behind the issues

- Group members play off one another's knowledge, opinions & experiences
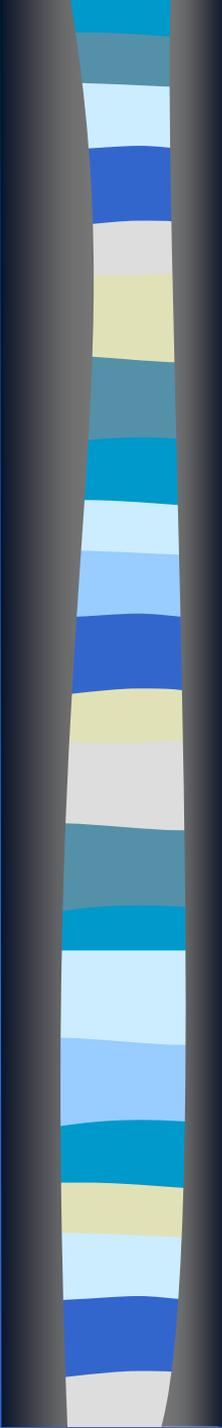
Advantages of Focus Groups (cont.)

- Can uncover inflammatory or controversial issues
- Allows for direct interaction between the researcher and the respondents
- Effective with non-literate groups
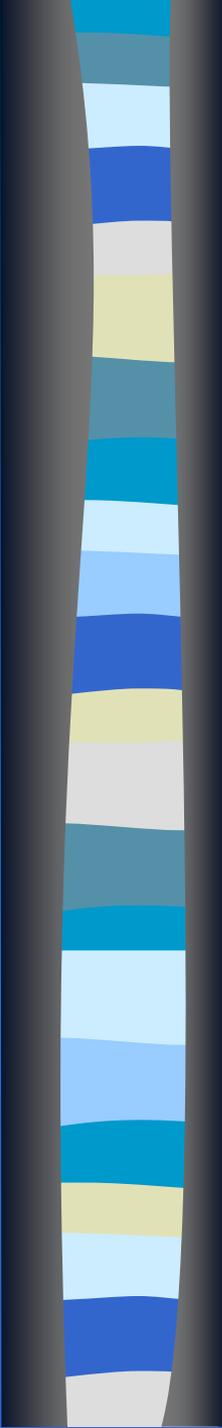
Disadvantages of Focus Groups

- Group bias
- Logistics
- Loss of confidentiality
- Requires skilled moderator
- Relatively small sample size
- Risk of domination
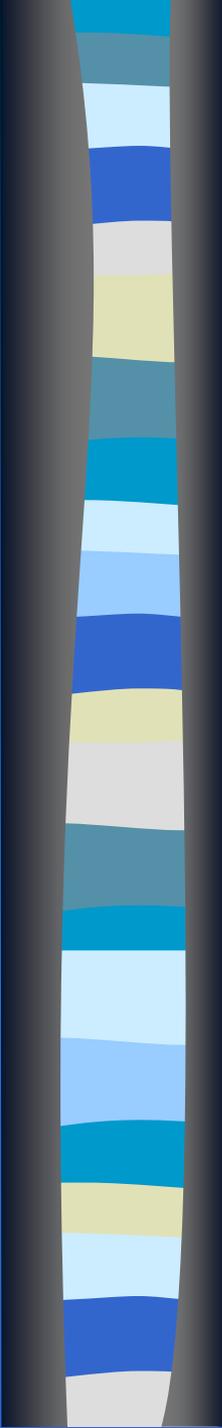
When to use Focus Groups?

- Exploratory research
- As a stand-alone research method -- needs assessment, monitoring progress, evaluating impact
- Survey design
- Prep for in-depth interviews
- Testing educational messages
- Explore unexplained survey findings
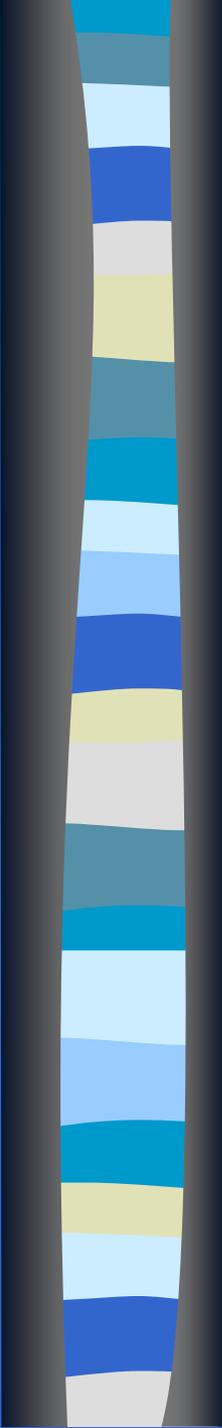
Focus Group Design

■ Number of Groups/Group size

■ Group composition

■ Length/Setting

■ Level of Structure

➲ Moderator Involvement

➲ Topic Guide
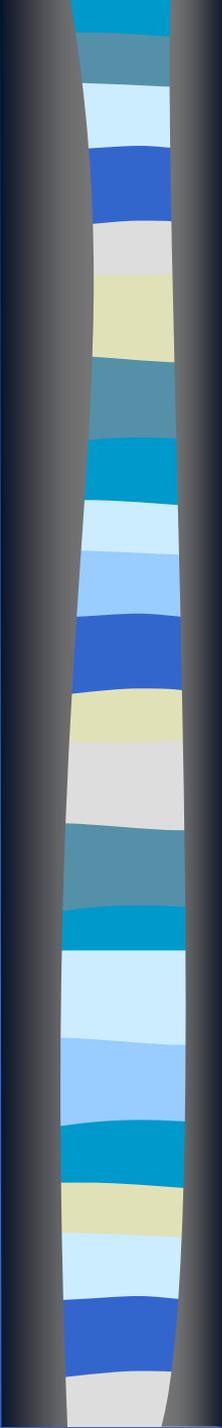
"Rules of Thumb"

- Homogeneous strangers
- Relatively structured/high moderator involvement
- 6 - 10 participants
- 3 - 5 groups per project
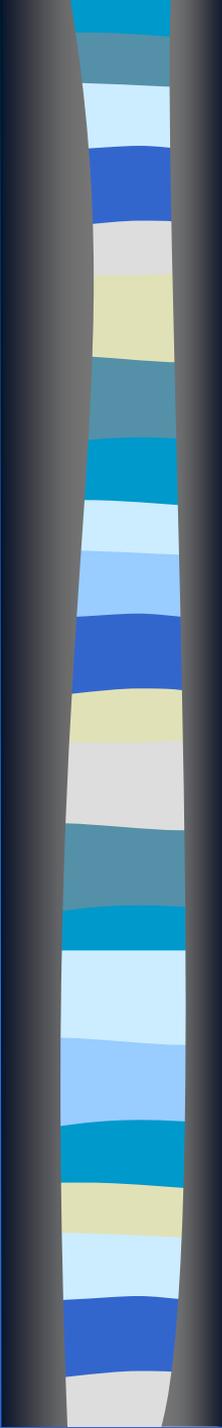
Topic Guide - Questions

- Cover the main topic areas, with probing questions on key variables in each area

- Flow naturally from general to specific

- Include transition questions

- Help the participants to explore the issues through discussion