

# Conducting Qualitative Interviews and Focus Groups

Creating and Benefiting from a Focused  
Conversation

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## Starter Exercise

- Read a type written journal entry and  
add questions for follow-up (probes)



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## Can anyone conduct an interview or focus group?

What you can bring to the experience:

- Being a good listener
- Knowing when to and not to interrupt
- Substantive expertise
- Curious enough to let stories unfold
- Passion for people and your subject
- Suspicion about research
- Comfortable waiting on the meaning
- Ability to manage silence



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## Interview and Focus Group as Relationship

- Communication About Participants...
- Trust
- Rapport
- Comfort
- Who do they think we are?
- Why do they think we ask them these questions?
- Do they know what happens with data?
- How often are we asked:
  - ‘Tell me about your life’ - by someone who actually wants to know?



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# Thanks

- Participants are doing you a favor
- Invite, rather than dictate words
- Sense their moods
- Work according to their pace
- Know your respondents
  - What knowledge pre-exists interview?
- The latest fashions
  - Should you leave your nose ring at home?



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## Where to conduct sessions; room setup

- You do NOT need to use a special facility
- You do need:
  - To see the faces and non-verbal actions of your participant(s). For focus groups, it can be helpful to position the moderator and assistant moderator at opposite ends of the table.
  - Tape recorders and microphones
  - Room for refreshments
  - Space for completing paperwork
- Consider pros and cons of holding sessions at your site or at the site of your participants.

See Morgan (1998) *Planning Focus Groups*



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## Interview~Focus Group as Story

- Introduction
- Body
- Conclusion



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## Key Sections for Discussion

- The typical length of a focus group or interview is 90 minutes
- Allow time for introductions and any administrative work
- Develop 3-4 key topics for discussion to divide the session.
- Sections should be broad and emerge directly from your research question and/or goals.
- The more specific you get, the more narrow your conversation becomes. Narrow may or may not be a good thing.



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## Two Session Examples

### **Lost in the Shuffle: In Search of Wayward Friendship**

This study has three primary goals:

1. How do adults define friendship? What does it mean to them?
2. What do adults do with their friends? What role does it play in their lives?
3. How satisfied are adults with their friendships? What factors contribute to friendship quality and in what ways?

A series of interviews and focus groups were conducted with adults age 15-80. Group composition was homogeneous along lines of gender, age, marital status and life obligation (work or student status). 2 interviews with participants of matching demographics for each focus group were also conducted.

The same discussion guide was used for the interviews and focus groups. The focus of the guide was evolution of personal friendships.

### **Helping Parents Assist 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Grade Children with Math Homework.**

This study preceded implementation of a program aimed at helping parents of 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> students assist their children with math homework. A series of interviews and focus groups were held with mothers and fathers to assess their readiness and needs to assist their children as they entered 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade.

The study was a needs assessment that also sought to understand gender differences in this area. Study findings were used in curriculum design for parent assistance. Follow up interviews and focus groups assessed the effectiveness of the program.



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## *Introduction:*

Getting started sets the tone



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Who are we?  
What do we say?  
Why?

- Introductions
  - Set an intro paragraph
- Ice Breakers
  - ‘Tell me about what you are doing now’
    - Notice openness of question
    - Generality provides invitations for later cues
    - Take notes you can use later in the session



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## The Ice Breaker

- Open with a question that is inviting and accessible. In a focus group, each person should answer this question.
- Responses should provide you with material for probes and segues later in the session.
- For focus groups, prepare a seating chart that includes participant names and short notes on ice-breaker responses.



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## The Ice Breaker ~ Exercise

- Come up with an ice breaker question for your assigned topic.
- Would the ice breaker be the same in an interview and a focus group?
- How would you answer it?



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## Ice Breakers Used in Other Studies

How does life obligation affect friendship?

- Please discuss the first close or best same sex friend that comes to mind and why that person comes to mind
- Note:* The interviews and focus groups were divided along lines of gender, age and life obligation

Is a program designed to help parents assist children with math homework effective?

- Discuss either a major success or challenge you have experienced when helping your child with homework.
- Note:* The interviews and focus groups were divided along lines of gender, ethnic background and grade level.



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## *Body:*

What you say to what they say  
dictates tone and direction



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## Focus

- Attention to agenda  
vs.
- Attention to what is said  
and how it is said
- Interview-Focus Group  
Guide
  - Your words direct their  
words



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## Phrasing Questions

- Your goal is to inspire conversation and reflection.
- Avoid yes-no and short answer questions.
- Use words like describe, story, or detail.
- Consider pros and cons of questions that ask participants to report vs. interpret.
- Debate is fine, but debate for debate sake is not.
- Avoid 'why' questions – you run the risk of shifting the study to a study of participants' interpretations.

See Krueger (1998) *Developing Questions for Focus Groups*



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## Sequencing

- Consider the flow of discussion.
- Start with your main sections and then work within key sections.
- Make a 'best guess' of how topics will move from one to another.
- Envision several options.
- Ultimately, be flexible and use participant responses as segues where possible.

See Krueger (1998) *Developing Questions for Focus Groups*



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## The Actual Focus Group or Interview: Part 1~Developing Questions ~ Exercise

- Determine your ice breaker question.
- Determine 3~4 main sections of your interview-discussion guide.
- Create 2~3 questions within one of your main sections.



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## Moving Along

- How do you keep things in-line or return to the task at hand?
- Probe
  - Don't assume you know what they mean.
  - Asking for more information confirms interest.
- Segue ~ 'The transition!'
  - 'Earlier you said...'
- Directives ~ 'Sorry to be so direct...'



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## Speaking without Words

- Non-verbal communication
  - Eye contact
  - Body posture
  - Gestures
  - Working with your notes



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## Planning for Probes and Flexibility

- Your interview or moderator's guide is just a guide.
- Consider how people will respond to and discuss topics.
- Diagram potential routes for flow.
- Note key words, phrases and expressions that you will want participants to define.
- PRE-TEST



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## The Actual Focus Group or Interview: Part 2 – Conducting the Session

Practice Session(s) with feedback

Important Topics:

- Administrative duties
- Key skills for interviewers and focus group moderators
- The art of probing
- Dealing with sensitive issues
- Dealing with emergent challenges
- Transcription and note-taking; video vs. audiotape



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## Key Skills for Interviewers and Focus Group Moderators

- Flexibility
- Attentiveness
- Active listener
- Special knowledge?
  - Group dynamics
  - Subject matter

See Krueger (1998) *Moderating Focus Groups*

See Seidman (1998) *Interviewing as Qualitative Research* (Chapter 6)



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## The Art of Probing

- Do not assume you know what participants mean by certain terminology.
- Ask for stories and vivid examples of points being made.
- Look for opportunities to ask for clarification.
- Active probing validates your interest in what is being said and encourages detailed response.
- Your opportunities for probing and follow up dwindle as the session moves to conclusion.

See Krueger (1998) *Moderating Focus Groups*

See Weiss (1994) *Learning from Strangers*. Chapter 4.



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## Sample Probe

Topic - Studying the effectiveness of a handbook for preparing resumes. The handbook was designed to help members of a community who lost jobs when the corporation they worked for moved out of state.

- Respondent: "The person who wrote this section on previous job experience probably never worked a day in his life."
- Interviewer's response – "Let's look closely at that section. What specific part led to your reaction? Let's look at it and think about how it could be presented differently."

### Why this works:

- It validates the participant's opinion.
- It calls for specific examples to draw the participant into specific references.
- It lays out a useful agenda for the next few minutes of discussion.
- *However*, cutting too quickly to suggesting changes may cut the discussion of negative reactions short.



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## Sample Probe

Studying the implementation of a web based support group designed to help middle school teachers teach biology.

- Respondent: “We could never iron out technological glitches. We got frustrated early and never really participated actively.”
- Moderator’s ACTUAL response: “Did anyone else have a similar experience?”
- **More effective probe:** “Tell me more about the technological glitches. You can describe one specifically if that helps and also let us know if you sought out help.”

### Why this works:

- It validates the experiences of ‘technological glitches.’
- It grounds the discussion in actual experience and provides specific material for analysis.
- You begin to model the level of detail invited in the discussion.
- Notice the use of ‘us.’ By saying ‘let us know’ the moderator is emphasizing that the experience is a group discussion and not a simple question-response session.



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## Under the Umbrella of Consideration

- Good listening
- Orient to the participant
  - Eye Contact
  - Body Position
- Asking more about what they say shows interest
- Returning to earlier comments provides validation



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## Don't Let Them See You Sweat

- Paperwork
  - Early and accurate
    - label tapes and folders
    - prepare packets
- Technical Equipment
  - Test frequently
    - bring second recorder, extra batteries, tapes, etc.



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## Administrative Duties

- Prior to session – give careful directions and include an emergency contact and any special instructions for entering the facility.
- Welcome participant(s) and be sure each one gets a personal introduction from the interviewer, moderator and/or the assistant moderator.
- Prepare any food and/or refreshments.
- Complete confidentiality forms and basic info requests from participant(s).
- Make sure you have contact info to send final reports or request follow-up if appropriate.



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## Video and Audio Tape

- Either way, test equipment in the actual room where the session will be held ~ if possible, ahead of time.
- Use microphones.
- In your test, make sure people are seated around the room.
- Use digital recorders if you can.
- Audio tape works best for transcription.
- Video allows you to see changes in facial expression and body language, but note that those issues are hard to analyze and it is harder to reach concrete conclusions about them.

See Krueger (1998) *Moderating Focus Groups*



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## Transcription and Note-taking

- You should transcribe and audio tape.
- Note-taking alone is extremely difficult and involves a level of interpretation that is hard to diagnose and place.
- Transcription should be verified against notes.
- Notes and video tape can help identify speakers and include reference to obvious changes in non-verbal cues.

See Krueger (1998) *Moderating Focus Groups*



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## *Conclusion:*

Smooth endings yield  
comfortable memories



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It's never over 'til it's  
over

- When are you done?
- How do you end?
- Can you follow up?
- Incentive procedure



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## **SECTION 1 - Main Topics**

### *Career:*

◇ *On a scale of 1-10, how satisfied are you with your career path?*

◇ *What is your career now or career you are working toward?*

I'm hoping to get a job in sports marketing. I know it's a tough field to get a good job in, but Indiana University has a really good program and the placement program is not bad at all. This summer I am going to intern for the Indianapolis Indians AAA Baseball team, so that will really give me a better idea about it. Ideally, I want to get into promotions, that way I can combine my sports management degree with my business minor (marketing).

◇ *Discuss your career satisfaction here...please include details on relevant actors, actions, events, reflections, etc. Feel free to discuss past, present and/or future career path issues.*

I want to be happy, and I love sports so I want to work with some team. I've known that for a long time, and I hope that I get the chance. Of course I'd like to make a lot of money, but that is definitely not the most important thing. If I have a job I like and I can make enough money to keep my wife and kids happy, then I will be happy.

### *Health:*

◇ *On a scale of 1-10, how satisfied are you with your health?*

I stay healthy, but maybe I'm not as healthy as I was in high school when I swam almost every day. I still swim, but more often I play basketball with my friends at the SSRC. I hardly ever get sick, although I had mono for about 3 months in high school, and I was afraid I was getting it again last year. Luckily, I didn't. I feel that health has always been pretty easy for me, I lead an active life and so far I've had no problems.

### *Home Life:*

◇ *On a scale of 1-10, how satisfied are you with your home life?*

My parents are OK, but they think I party too much and it has been such a pain living at home lately. It's funny, because I partied a lot more in high school than I do now, but my parents think that now that I'm 21 I will get drunk every night. My sister is not happy when I come home lately, either, but I think she's just mad that I dumped Jennifer, who got to be pretty good friends with her. She'll get over it, though. This summer will be fun working with the Indians, but I'm not looking forward to living in Carmel

again with my folks. I usually get along with them, though. My dad's pretty cool, we go to a lot of Indiana University games together.

I am pretty lucky, I've got two parents who are good to us and have raised us in comfortable surroundings. They love me, and I love them back. I just wish they would try to understand that I like to have fun, too. I think they set a good example for me, though, that I will probably use a lot when I am old enough to have my own family.

#### *Recreation:*

◇ *On a scale of 1-10, how satisfied are you with recreation and leisure in your life?*

I'm not sure what more I can say here, really. I am very satisfied with my recreation life, and I'm sure I will always have some time for recreation.

◇ *Please list recreation\leisure events you participate in..*

Like I said, I still swim, but more often I spend time at the frat house I joined hanging out with my friends, playing some hoops, and we go out a lot.

#### *Relationships:*

◇ *FRIENDSHIP*

I have a lot of friends, I always have. The good thing about the frat house is that I have like ten good friends right there, and someone is usually around if I need to talk. I still keep in touch with a few of my friends from high school, two guys I swam with and my best friend from childhood.

◇ *ROMANCE*

I broke up with my girlfriend last month, I think I finally realized that my spirituality is very different from what people have come to expect of me because of who my folks are and such. I come from a good, Christian home, with God-fearing parents, and it really surprises people when I express my doubts about it. Jennifer (my ex) would always say these annoying rhetorical statements whenever I was struggling with my spirituality, like "Is Jesus Christ my personal savior?" "Yes!" I would then express my doubts, and finally I decided I just don't feel that way, at least I'm not as sure as she is, and religion is a lot more important to her than it is to me. Eventually, we decided to break up because I just couldn't become as spiritual as she was. I'm not even sure I'm a Christian, really. This surprised me a lot, I really liked her but the religion came between us-she sort of became a "born-again" after she got arrested last year. It was funny, after that my little sister started liking her more, but I started liking her less. Oh, well.

## **SECTION 2 - WORD TO STORY PROMPTS...**

#### *FAILURE:*

Hmm...I used to get really bummed out when I didn't swim well, but I never felt like a failure. My coach was pretty good at helping us keep our heads up despite how we swam that day. Maybe when I got cut from the basketball team my junior year, I thought I should have made it, but obviously the coach didn't agree. When the team went on to have a great season, I felt even worse. I couldn't even enjoy it as a fan, I was still feeling miserable about getting cut. That sucked.

#### *SUCCESS:*

I would have to say in High School, when I was on the State Champion swim team. We've won several times, but it was so awesome when my senior year I finished second in two events and tied for fourth in another. I wasn't sure I could do so well, in fact I was really nervous that weekend, on the verge of being sick. But I guess it was a good kind of nervous after all.

#### *HAPPINESS:*

When I first got to Indiana University, I was so overwhelmed, and happy. I'd heard about it my whole life, and I'm a HUGE Indiana University basketball fan, so when I got here for freshman orientation it was great. I was at a pep rally for homecoming, and I was just thinking to myself, here I am at Indiana University, in the frat I wanted to join, with this hot girlfriend, and now I'm on my own. And I loved it, it felt like I was living a dream.

#### *SADNESS:*

Probably when my grandfather passed away. He and I were really close (in fact I'm named after him), and I couldn't believe that I wouldn't get to see him again. That was hard-and it was hard on my mom, too. I guess I never really thought about how he was also her dad, that sort of just hit me when he died.

### **SECTION 3 - Overall Life Satisfaction**

#### *Overall:*

Overall, I'm pretty satisfied. I must admit I'm a little nervous about what will happen after I graduate, but I look forward to the future as much as anyone. No complaints.

### **SECTION 4 - Personal Characteristics**

#### *Quick Info:*

What is your gender?

- Male

How old are you?

- 21

Do you live with a romantic partner? ,If so, how long?

- No

Are you married? If so, how long?

- No

Do you have children? If so, How many?

- No

What is the highest level of education you have attained?

- currently a junior in college

Please tell me your race/ethnicity...

- White

## **SECTION 5 - Survey Feedback**

*Survey:*

◇ *Please estimate how long it took you to complete this survey.*

◇ *Please provide any feedback that may be helpful to designing the final version of this survey.*

It was fine. I did this on computer or face-to-face, I would probably say the same things, I think.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME!

## **SECTION 1 – Main Topics**

### *Career:*

◇ *On a scale of 1-10, how satisfied are you with your career path?*

9

◇ *What is your career now or career you are working toward?*

I'm a Computer Programmer/Analyst I'm very satisfied with my career. In fact, I feel the only better career would be a teacher.

◇ *Discuss your career satisfaction here...please include details on relevant actors, actions, events, reflections, etc. Feel free to discuss past, present and/or future career path issues.*

Teaching is something I wanted to do, since I was 7, but I never took that path! But, programming has got to be the second best job. My job allows me to be pretty self-sufficient in how I handle my workload. The only aspect I don't like about it, is being called at 2 or 3AM if something goes wrong! I could do without being jolted out of a sleep! I also must admit I'm a person who doesn't like changes, and the computer business is constantly changing. So, readjusting makes me uncomfortable. I became a computer programmer after being laid off from AT&T in 1985. I decided I needed to take a gamble with something I thought was interesting.

### *Health:*

◇ *On a scale of 1-10, how satisfied are you with your health?*

8

I've gained too much weight over the last several years and I don't seem to be doing anything to get rid of it. I have high cholesterol levels, but I don't attempt to change my eating habits. I'd like to jolt myself into becoming more physically active, so I can lose the weight and feel more energetic. I keep saying I'm going to do something about it, soon.

### *Home Life:*

◇ *On a scale of 1-10, how satisfied are you with your home life?*

3

I'm currently living with my parents, I know I'm WAY TOO OLD to be doing this!! Five years ago I lived in a garden apartment complex and a fire started in my next door neighbor's apartment. There wasn't any firewall between our apartments, but by the quick work of the volunteer fire department, my apartment was saved from also going up in flames. There was smoke damage and the firemen had to break windows and punch holes in the ceiling in my apartment to contain the fire, otherwise it was in good shape. I had to vacate

the apartment, but was assured by the Super the apartment would be habitable again in several months. I just couldn't go back. I had a "weird" feeling about going back to the apartment. The woman in the apartment where the fire started had died of cardiac arrest in the hospital after the fire. There was so much black smoke, the firemen couldn't get to her very quickly. SO, this started my odyssey moving back into my parents home. I I didn't feel comfortable about moving back to ANY apartment. So, I've stayed here the last 5 years and been miserable. They are wonderful people and I love them dearly - but I need to do things MY way, not THEIR way! I'm currently hoping to purchase a little house which will allow me to feel free and independent, again.

#### *Recreation:*

◇ *On a scale of 1-10, how satisfied are you with recreation and leisure in your life?*

5

◇ *Please list recreation\leisure events you participate in...*

Bowling and other sports, collecting sport's memorabilia, listening to and attending concerts.

Currently bowling is the only "sporty" leisure activity I participate in. I've participated in league play the last 5 years, after having been away from it for 25 years (I hate the smoke in bowling alleys)!! I was always athletic, so I hope to start participating in golf and tennis, again. If I don't play that many sports anymore, I certainly do watch them - baseball, bowling, football, basketball (mostly only college since Michael left the pros). Associated with my love of sports, I do spend time collecting sports memorabilia - mostly autographed baseballs (currently about 70 baseballs, mainly of the stars I admired as a kid). I also have recently taken an interest in listening to classical music - mostly the violin. I started attending concerts of my favorite violinists at Carnegie Hall and Lincoln Center.

#### *Relationships:*

◇ *ROMANCE-1*

(why isn't zero an option??) There isn't any right now. I've sort of made myself wear blinders and not attempt to look for any. About 5 years ago, a relationship I had had for 5 years dissolved. I still haven't gotten over it. He was a real man's man - an ex-cop, ex- Navy SEAL who represented what I considered my ideal man. The deterioration of the relationship started when he retired from the police force and decided he wanted to take a 5 thousand mile canoe trip - up the Hudson, over the Great Lakes, down the Mississippi, to the Gulf, around Florida ... Little did I know there was someone else down in Florida during some or most of our relationship!

## **SECTION 2- WORD TO STORY PROMPTS**



### *FAILURE:*

To go to college straight from high school in 1964 and become a teacher. I was a good student in high school graduating 19th in a class of 403. I really wanted to go to college, but my family couldn't afford it. Unfortunately, my mother had the attitude college was a waste for girls, because they got married and didn't put their college education to use. So, I never pursued the issue. I know, I shouldn't blame my mother for my not going to college. I could have been more enterprising and tried to find a way to pay for it on my own. I think never having been a teacher will always haunt me. Now it's too late. I'd have to take a large salary cut if I were to change professions at this stage in life.

### *SUCCESS:*

I'm not sure if I think of anything I've done as a success!! I'm probably still waiting for it to happen! (Sounds awfully pessimistic, doesn't it?) I know this will sound silly, but back in high school in 1963, I was the first female sports' editor of the school newspaper. I reported on the baseball and was shocked one day when one of the players told me, "Coach wants to see you." I went into the locker room (a very "ahead of it's time" thing to do) and the baseball coach told me how much he had loved my baseball column. He rated it better than any professional newspaper article or sport's column he had ever read! I was quite happy and felt I had conquered a bastion of the male world by his praises and approval.

### *HAPPINESS:*

I had never been happier in my life when from 1988-1994 I had that relationship with the "man's man" I described earlier. I felt so lucky to experience such happy times with him. I would look at other people and say to myself, they can't possibly be as happy as me. I felt not too many people really ever feel that much happiness in a relationship. I think too many people settle.

### *SADNESS:*

Simply put, I think the sadness I feel these last several years has to do with not having children. I have no legacy.

## **SECTION 3 – Overall Life Satisfaction**

*Overall:* Actually, as pessimistic as I may sound in much of the above, I have recently decided I'm going to make some changes and be more up and positive. I think that as soon as I can buy that little house I mentioned I'll start a very independent existence and have a good feeling of self worth. So,

overall I'd rate my "Life Satisfaction" as an '7' with the possiblility of going higher and higher, once I have started reaching some goals.

## **SECTION 4 – Personal Characteristics**

*Quick Info:*

What is your gender?

- Female

How old are you?

- 53

Do you live with a romantic partner? If so, how long?

- NO

Are you married? If so, how long?

- NO

Do you have children? If so, how many?

- NO

What is the highest level of education you have attained?

- College Senior

Please tell me your race/ethnicity...

- Caucasian - Italian/American

What state do you currently live in?

- NY

How long have you lived in this state?

- 53 years

## **SECTION 5 – Survey Feedback**

*Survey:*

◇ *Please estimate how long it took you to complete this survey.*

3 and 1/2 Hours

◇ *Please provide any feedback that may be helpful to designing the final version of this survey.*

I felt very relaxed and comfortable just freely typing info into a computer. I felt as though I could convey more of my true feelings this way. Please include a discussion of how you think this approach would compare to your ability to convey information about life satisfaction in an individual face-to-face interview and a group interview with individuals of the same gender and age. In an individual face-to-face interview, I'm sure I'd say much less. In a group interview, I'd probably totally "clam up."

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME!

