

SPECTRUM LINES

Purpose:

To share and collect basic information along a spectrum from one extreme to another.

To share and collect ideas on a single dimension of an issue. (the degree, extent or amount of something).

How to:

The simplest of all visual tools, the interview is focused on a single line which represents a range from one extreme to another.

There are two very different types of spectrum:

The first is where you are sharing basic information and the extremes at each end of the spectrum have an objective value. For example: ages between 0 and 100, distance from home between 0 and 100+ miles, time in your current job between 0 and 15 years.

The second is where you are sharing ideas about impressions and attitudes and the extremes are purely subjective. For example:
always able to choose the food I want to never able to choose the food I want.
The richest people in Cheetham Hill to the poorest in Cheetham Hill

It is necessary to be clear which type of exercise you want to try. If you use objective values like numbers or frequencies, you may limit the range of answers that people can give. For example; if you are working on How often we eat out per week, what would be your upper limit?

If you ask for responses to How many cigarettes per day; again, you might risk setting an upper limit that is lower than some people's consumption. The spectrum that runs from smoking *not as many as I'd like per day* to smoking *far too many per day* is asking a very different question about how people feel about their smoking.

The spectrum lines on attitudes give an opportunity to probe on why the participants have put themselves in a particular place. You can continue to discuss the situation by asking what would have to change to make you put your mark up here (or down there). The focus on the mark on the line allows some discussion of topics that might otherwise appear delicate, like the food poverty example above.

Historical Option: once participants have marked their position on a line it is possible to look at trends over time by asking them to put another mark to describe the same situation last year (or last month or appropriate time in the past). Depending on the topic it may be possible to pursue the questions some time into the past.

And then it may be possible to continue the discussions into the future; Where do you think you would put your mark this time next year? (next week/month...) This is a way of looking at hopes and ambitions and possible solutions. If a smoker may put a mark nearer the end of fewer cigarettes per day even when they find it hard to say more directly that they want to cut down their smoking.

Listen, encourage, ask for explanations, probe, verify, expect the unexpected, don't dominate.