APPLIED SOCIAL RESEARCH
METHODS SERIES

Series Editors
LEONARD BICKMAN, Peabody College, Vanderbilt University, Nashville
DEBRA J. ROG, Vanderbilt University, Washington, DC

1. SURVEY RESEARCH METHODS
   Second Edition
   by FLOYD J. FOWLER, Jr.

2. INTEGRATING RESEARCH
   Second Edition
   by HARRIS M. COOPER
   and MICHAEL A. KAMNS

3. METHODS FOR POLICY RESEARCH
   Second Edition
   by ANH MAJCHRZAK

4. SECONDARY RESEARCH
   Second Edition
   by DAVID W. STEWART
   and PREM N. SHANDASANI

5. CASE STUDY RESEARCH
   Second Edition
   by ROBERT K. YIN

6. META-ANALYTIC PROCEDURES FOR
   SOCIAL RESEARCH
   Revised Edition
   by ROBERT ROSENTHAL

7. TELEPHONE SURVEY METHODS
   Second Edition
   by PAUL J. LAVRAKAS

8. DIAGNOSING ORGANIZATIONS
   Second Edition
   by MICHAEL L. HARRISON

9. GROUP TECHNIQUES FOR
   IDEA BUILDING
   Second Edition
   by CARL M. MOORE

10. NEED ANALYSIS
    by JACK MOELLER

11. LINKING AUDITING AND
    MEETAEVALUATION
    by THOMAS A. SCHWANDT
    and EDWARD S. HALPERN

12. ETHICS AND VALUES
    IN APPLIED SOCIAL RESEARCH
    by ALLAN J. KIMMEL

13. ON TIME AND METHOD
    by JANICE R. KELLY
    and JOSEPH E. MCGRAH

14. RESEARCH IN HEALTH CARE
    SETTINGS
    by KATHLEEN E. GRADY
    and BARBARA STRUDLER WALLERSTON

15. PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION
    by DANNY L. JORGENSEN

16. INTERPRETIVE INTERACTIONISM
    by NORMAN K. DENZIN

17. ETHNOGRAPHY
    by DAVID M. FETTERMAN

18. STANDARDIZED SURVEY
    INTERVIEWING
    by FLOYD J. FOWLER, Jr.
    and THOMAS W. MANGIONE

19. PRODUCTIVITY MEASUREMENT
    by ROBERT O. BRINKELEFF
    and DENNIS E. DRESSLER

20. FOCUS GROUPS
    by DAVID W. STEWART
    and PREM N. SHANDASANI

21. PRACTICAL SAMPLING
    by DARY T. HENRY

22. DECISION RESEARCH
    by JOHN S. CARROLL
    and ERIC J. JOHNSON

23. RESEARCH WITH
    HISPANIC POPULATIONS
    by GERARDO MARIN
    and BARBARA VANOSS MARIN

24. INTERNAL EVALUATION
    by ARNOLD J. LOVE

25. COMPUTER SIMULATION
    APPLICATIONS
    by MARCIA LYNN WHICKER
    and LEE SIGELMAN

26. SCALE DEVELOPMENT
    by ROBERT F. DAVERUS

27. STUDYING FAMILIES
    by ANNE P. COPELAND
    and KATHLEEN M. WHITE

28. EVENT HISTORY ANALYSIS
    by KAZUO YAMAGUCHI

29. RESEARCH IN EDUCATIONAL
    SETTINGS
    by GEOFFREY MARUIYAMA
    and STANLEY DENO

30. RESEARCHING PERSONS WITH
    MENTAL ILLNESS
    by ROSALIND J. DWORKIN

31. PLANNING ETHICALLY
    RESPONSIBLE RESEARCH
    by JOAN E. SIEBER

Other volumes in this series are listed at the end of the book.
Copyright © 1990 by Sage Publications, Inc.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

For information address:

SAGE Publications, Inc.
2455 Teller Road
Newbury Park, California 91320
E-mail: order@sagepub.com

SAGE Publications Ltd.
6 Bonhill Street
London EC2A 4PU
United Kingdom

SAGE Publications India Pvt. Ltd.
M-32 Market
Greater Kailash I
New Delhi 110 048 India

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Stewart, David W.
Focus groups: theory and practice / by David W. Stewart, Prem N. Shamdasani.
p. cm. -- (Applied social research methods series ; v. 20)
Includes bibliographical references.
1. Focused group interviewing. 2. Social sciences—Research—Methodology. 3. Social groups. I. Shamdasani, Prem N.
II. Title. III. Series.
H61.28.S74 1990
300'.723—dc20
90-8235
CIP

96 97 98 99 00 01 14 13 12 11 10 9

Sage Production Editor: Kimberley A. Clark

Contents

Preface 7
1. Introduction 9
2. Group Dynamics and Focus Group Research 33
3. Recruiting Focus Group Participants and Designing the Interview Guide 51
4. The Focus Group Moderator 69
5. Conducting the Focus Group 87
6. Analyzing Focus Group Data 102
7. Focus Groups in Practice 122
8. Conclusion 140
References 144
Index 151
About the Authors 153
In late 1986, when we were asked to write a book on focus groups for the Sage Series on Applied Social Science Research Methods, there were few extant sources on the use of focus groups. There were a few collections of readings and some chapters in various handbooks, but these tended to be either dated or quite superficial, and Merton's classic The Focused Group Interview was long out of print. By the time we completed the book in late 1989, numerous treatments of the conduct and application of focus groups had appeared. Most of these books were by experienced focus group moderators and provided considerable detail about the recruitment of focus group participants, the actual conduct of groups, and the interpretation of data generated by focus groups. We have referenced a number of these books herein, and we feel that the reader will find them useful supplements to the material we offer.

Despite the recent appearance of other books on the topic, we feel that this work offers a unique perspective on focus groups. Our original intent—and one to which we think we have adhered—was to produce a relatively short volume that would provide a simple guide to the conduct and application of focus groups and place the use and interpretation of focus groups within a theoretical context. Focus group research had its origins in early research on group dynamics, persuasive communication, and the effects of mass media. These origins, and the rich empirical and theoretical foundations they provide, are seldom acknowledged and used infrequently. We have revisited the origins of focus group research in our text, and have tried to tie focus group research more closely to its origins in mainstream social science. In doing so, we believe we have set our own book apart from others on the same topic, which tend to provide considerable detail on the conduct of groups (as well as detailed examples) but tend to place less emphasis on the theoretical dimension.

The reader will find three chapters that are concerned especially with the theoretical dimensions of focus groups. Chapter 2 draws heavily on the literature of group dynamics and the social psychology of groups. Focus groups are, by definition, an exercise in group dynamics, and the conduct of a group—as well as the interpretation of results obtained—must be understood within the context of group interaction. Chapter 4 considers the literature on interviewer and moderator effects, including the interaction of group and moderator. This chapter not only emphasizes the importance of the moderator in determining the quality of focus group data, but suggests that
the data are themselves the result of a unique interaction of moderator and group. Only an understanding of this interaction and the factors that contribute to it provides a sound basis for the interpretation of focus group data. Chapter 6 also includes some discussion of the theory of content analysis. Because this chapter is concerned with the interpretation of focus group results, it seems particularly appropriate to consider the theoretical underpinnings of this interpretation.

The remaining chapters of the book (as well as portions of the chapters already discussed) are devoted to the mechanics of designing, conducting, and interpreting the outcome of focus groups. We hope the result is a balance of theory and practice that suggests that focus groups need not be ad hoc, atheoretical, or unscientific exercises. Rather, we have tried to convey the notion that focus groups can be useful social science research tools that are well grounded in theory.

No work is ever the sole accomplishment of its authors. Ours is no exception, and we would be remiss if we did not acknowledge the contributions of others. Len Bickmann, co-editor of the Sage series of which this monograph is a part, was instrumental in encouraging us to undertake the project. Tom O’Guinn of the Department of Advertising at the University of Illinois reviewed an early draft of the manuscript and offered a variety of helpful criticisms and suggestions. Siony Arcilla typed the final version of the manuscript. To all of these individuals we extend our gratitude. Any remaining problems or points lacking in clarity are, of course, our responsibility and exist despite the generous help of others.

Introduction

Among the most widely used research tools in the social sciences are group depth interviews, or focus groups. Originally called *focussed interviews*, this technique came into vogue after World War II and has been a part of the social scientist’s tool kit ever since. The focussed group interview had its origins in the Office of Radio Research at Columbia University in 1941, when Paul Lazarsfeld invited Robert Merton to assist him in the evaluation of audience response to radio programs. In this early research, members of a mass-media studio audience listened to a recorded radio program and were asked to press a red button when they heard anything that evoked a negative response—anger, boredom, or disbelief—and to press a green button whenever they had a positive response. These responses and their timing were recorded on a polygraph-like instrument called the Lazarsfeld-Stanton Program Analyzer (a recording device that is quite similar to devices still in use today). At the end of the program members of the audience were asked to focus on the positive and negative events they recorded and to discuss the reasons for these reactions. Thus, the focussed group interview began.

After the outbreak of World War II, Merton applied his technique to the analysis of Army training and morale films for the Research Branch of the United States Army Information and Education Division, which was headed by Samuel Stouffer. This experience resulted in the publication of a paper outlining the methodology (Merton & Kendall, 1946) and eventually a book on the technique (Merton, Fiske, & Kendall, 1956). Research findings based on use of the technique, both during the war and later at Columbia University, formed the basis of one of the classic books on persuasion and the influence of mass media (Merton, Fiske & Curtis, 1946).

Merton later adapted the technique for use in individual interviews and, in time, the method—both in group and individual interview settings—became disseminated and used rather widely. It also tended to change as researchers began to modify procedures for their own needs, and to merge it with other types of group interviews that did not include the media-focus procedure employed by Merton. Thus, what is known as a focus group today takes many different forms and may not follow all of the procedures Merton identified in his book on focussed interviews.
In the time since Merton’s pioneering work, focus groups have become an important research tool for applied social scientists such as those who work in program evaluation, marketing, public policy, advertising, and communications. Focus group interviews are but one type of group research, however, although many of these group techniques have significant communalities. Goldman (1962) differentiated group depth interviews from other techniques by examining the meaning of the three words in the name. A group is “a number of interacting individuals having a community of interest”; depth involves “seeking information that is more profound than is usually accessible at the level of inter-personal relationships”; and interview implies the presence of a moderator who “uses the group as a device for eliciting information.” The term focus in the full title simply implies that the interview is limited to a small number of issues. The importance of the group as a means for eliciting information has been emphasized by Smith (1954) in his classic definition of group interviewing:

The term group interviewing will be limited to those situations where the assembled group is small enough to permit genuine discussion among all its members. (p. 59)

The contemporary focus group interview generally involves 8 to 12 individuals who discuss a particular topic under the direction of a moderator who promotes interaction and assures that the discussion remains on the topic of interest. Experience has shown that smaller groups may be dominated by one or two members, while larger groups are difficult to manage and inhibit participation by all members of the group. A typical focus group session will last from one and a half to two and a half hours. Although they can be conducted in a variety of sites ranging from homes to offices (and, as we will discuss in Chapter 3, even by conference telephone), it is most common for focus group sessions to be held in facilities designed especially for focus group interviewing. Such facilities provide one-way mirrors and viewing rooms where observers unobtrusively may observe the interview in progress.

Focus group facilities also may include equipment for audio or video taping of the interview and perhaps even a small transmitter for the moderator to wear (a “bug in the ear”) so that observers may have input into the interviews. Such facilities tend to be situated in locations that are either easy to get to—such as just off a major commuter traffic artery—or in places like shopping malls where people naturally tend to gather.

The moderator is the key to assuring that a group discussion goes smoothly. The focus group moderator generally is well trained in group dynamics and interview skills. Depending on the intent of the research the moderator may be more or less directive with respect to the discussion, and often is quite nondirective—letting the discussion flow naturally as long as it remains on the topic of interest. Indeed, one of the strengths of focus group research is that it may be adapted to provide the most desirable level of focus and structure. If researchers are interested in how parents have adapted to the child care requirements created by dual careers, the interviewer can ask very general and nonspecific questions about the topic in order to determine the most salient issues on the minds of the participants. On the other hand, if the interest of the researchers is parents’ reactions to a very specific concept for child care, the interviewer can provide specific information about the concept and ask very specific questions.

The moderator might also be more or less directive in this example; that is, the moderator might begin with a series of general questions about child care, but direct the discussion to more specific issues as the group proceeds. In fact, it is quite common for an interviewer to start with some general questions, then focus the group on more specific issues as the discussion progresses.

It is important to recognize that the amount of direction provided by the interviewer does influence the types and quality of the data obtained from the group. The interviewer provides the agenda or structure for the discussion by virtue of his or her role in the group. When a moderator suggests a new topic for discussion by asking a new question, the group has a tendency to comply. A group discussion might never cover particular topics or issues unless the moderator intervenes. This raises the question of the most appropriate amount of structure for a given group. There is, of course, no best answer to this question because the amount of structure and the directiveness of the moderator must be determined by the broader research agenda that gave rise to the focus group: the types of information sought, the specificity of the information required, and the way the information will be used.

There is also a balance that must be struck between what is important to members of the group and what is important to the researchers. Less structured groups will tend to pursue those issues and topics of greater importance, relevance, and interest to the group members themselves. This is perfectly appropriate if the objective of the researcher is to learn about those things that are most important to the group. Often, however, the researcher has rather specific information needs; discussion of issues relevant to these needs may only occur when the moderator takes a more directive and structured approach. It is important to remember that when this occurs, participants are discussing what is important to the researcher, and not necessarily what they consider significant.
Although focus group research can produce quantitative data, focus groups almost always are conducted with the collection of qualitative data as their primary purpose. This is their advantage, because focus groups produce a very rich body of data expressed in the respondents’ own words and context. There is a minimum of artificiality of response, unlike survey questionnaires that ask for responses expressed on five-point rating scales or other constrained response categories. Participants can qualify their responses or identify important contingencies associated with their answers. Thus, responses have a certain ecological validity not found in traditional survey research. This, however, makes the data provided by focus groups idiosyncratic. It also makes the results of focus group research more difficult and challenging to summarize. This does not mean, however, that quantitative tools cannot be applied to the analysis and interpretation of focus group data. We will examine how quantitative methods can be used to analyze focus group data in Chapter 6.

Focus group research has been the subject of much controversy and criticism. Such criticism is generally associated with the view that focus group interviews do not yield “hard” data, and the concern that group members may not be representative of a larger population (because of both the small numbers and the idiosyncratic nature of the group discussion). Such criticism, however, is unfair. Although focus groups do have important limitations of which the researcher should be aware, limitations are not unique to focus group research; all research tools in the social sciences have significant limitations.

The key to using focus groups successfully in social science research is assuring that their use is consistent with the objectives and purpose of the research. Indeed, this is true of the successful use of all social science research methods. Focus groups may serve a variety of purposes, depending on where in the research agenda they are applied. For example, focus groups are often a useful starting point for the design of survey questionnaires because they provide a means for exploring the ways potential respondents talk about objects and events, for identifying alternatives for closed-ended survey items, and for determining the suitability of various types of scaling approaches. Although they are most often used for such exploratory research, they also have a place as confirmatory tools. For example, the responses of the members of one or two focus groups who are representative of a larger population may be sufficient to determine whether the humor used in an advertising execution is on the mark or whether the humor is lost on the respondents. We will discuss another example of a confirmatory application in detail in Chapter 7.

If focus groups can be used for both exploration and confirmation, the question arises how focus groups differ from other tools of science, and what purposes they serve that are not served by other methods. The answer lies in the nature or character of the data generated by focus group interviews. Krippendorf (1980) distinguishes between two types of data: emic and etic. Emic data are data that arise in a natural or indigenous form. They are only minimally imposed by the researcher or the research setting. Etic data, on the other hand, represent the researcher’s imposed view of the situation. Little of the research that is actually carried out can be described as completely etic or completely emic. Even the most structured type of research will be influenced to some extent by the idiosyncratic nature of the respondent and his or her environment. On the other hand, even the most natural of situations may not yield data that are completely emic, because the researcher must make decisions about what to attend to and what to ignore. Thus, it is perhaps more useful to think of a continuum of research, with some methods lying closer to the emic side of the continuum and some techniques lying closer to the etic side.

Focus groups—along with a few other techniques such as unstructured individual depth interviews—provide data that are closer to the emic side of the continuum because they allow individuals to respond in their own words, using their own categorizations and perceived associations. They are not completely void of structure, however, because the researcher does raise questions of one type or another. Survey research and experimentation tend to produce data that are closer to the etic side of the continuum because the response categories used by the respondents have been generally prescribed by the researcher. These response categories may or may not be those with which the respondents are comfortable, although they may still select answers. Even when closed-ended survey questions are the only options available, some respondents elect to give answers in their own words, as most experienced survey researchers have discovered.

Neither emic nor etic data are better or worse than the other; they simply differ. Each has its place in social science research; each complements and serves to compensate for the limitations of the other. Indeed, one way to view social science research is as a process that moves from the emic to the etic and back, in a cycle. Phenomenon that are not understood well often are studied first with tools that yield more emic data. As a particular phenomenon is understood better and greater theoretical and empirical structure is built around it, tools that yield more etic types of data tend to predominate. As knowledge accumulates, it often becomes apparent that the explanatory structure surrounding a given phenomenon is incomplete. This frequently leads to the need for data that are more emic, and the process continues.
FOCUS GROUPS

The philosophical issues associated with this view, as well as the complementarity of structured and unstructured approaches to social science research, are beyond the scope of this book. The interested reader can find further discussion of these issues in Bliss, Monk, and Ogborn (1983) and Bogdan and Biklen (1982). Nevertheless, an understanding of emic versus etic provides a useful way of distinguishing the purpose and value of focus group interviewing.

PURPOSE OF THE BOOK

Despite its widespread use, the focus group has been the object of rather little systematic research, particularly in recent years. A number of “how to” books have appeared recently (Goldman & McDonald, 1987; Greenbaum, 1987; Krueger, 1988; Templeton, 1987) but they tend to deal with the practical aspects of recruiting and running focus groups. None reflect recent advances in the use of computer-assisted content analysis techniques that may be helpful for analyzing focus-group generated data, and few seek to integrate the focus group technique with the rich literature on group dynamics from which the method sprang. Calder (1977) has provided a review of the use of focus groups in marketing, and the American Marketing Association has published collections of readings on the technique (Bellenger, Bernhardt, & Goldstucker, 1976; Higgenbotham & Cox, 1979). Morgan and Spanish (1984) provide a recent introduction to the use of focus groups in sociological research. Wells (1974) offers a helpful introduction to the technique and the Qualitative Research Counsel (1985) of the Advertising Research Foundation has published a discussion of issues and recommendations concerning the use of focus groups. Although all of these sources are useful, they are often incomplete, particularly for the student or scholar seeking a theoretical foundation for the approach.

The objective of this book is to provide a systematic treatment of the design, conduct, and interpretation of focus group interviews within the context of social science research and theory and the substantial literature on group processes and the analysis of qualitative data. Much is known about the interaction of small groups, and about the analysis of qualitative data. It is on this knowledge that the validity of the focus group interview as a scientific tool rests. The remainder of this chapter provides an overview of the uses of focus groups, their relative advantages and disadvantages, and a brief summary of the steps in the design and use of focus groups. It then contrasts focus group interviews with several other group research tech-

INTRODUCTION

iques. Finally, the latter portion of this chapter provides an outline of the remainder of the book.

USES OF FOCUS GROUPS

Focus groups may be useful at virtually any point in a research program, but they are particularly useful for exploratory research where rather little is known about the phenomenon of interest. As a result, focus groups tend to be used very early in a research project and are often followed by other types of research that provide more quantifiable data from larger groups of respondents. Focus groups also have been proven useful following the analysis of a large-scale, quantitative survey. In this latter use the focus group facilitates interpretation of quantitative results and adds depth to the responses obtained in the more structured survey. Focus groups also have a place as a confirmatory method that may be used for testing hypotheses. This application may arise when the researcher has strong reasons to believe a hypothesis is correct, and where disconfirmation by even a small group would tend to result in rejection of the hypothesis.

A variety of research needs lend themselves to the use of focus group interviews. Bellenger, Bernhardt, and Goldstucker (1976) and Higgenbotham and Cox (1979) provide detailed discussions and examples of the use of focus groups, particularly in the context of marketing applications. Among the more common uses of focus groups are the following:

1. obtaining general background information about a topic of interest;
2. generating research hypotheses that can be submitted to further research and testing using more quantitative approaches;
3. stimulating new ideas and creative concepts;
4. diagnosing the potential for problems with a new program, service, or product;
5. generating impressions of products, programs, services, institutions, or other objects of interest;
6. learning how respondents talk about the phenomenon of interest. This, in turn, may facilitate the design of questionnaires, survey instruments, or other research tools that might be employed in more quantitative research; and
7. interpreting previously obtained quantitative results.

Focus groups are used widely because they provide useful information and offer the researcher a number of advantages. This information and the advantages of the technique come at a price, however. We will briefly discuss
the relative advantages and disadvantages of focus groups, then turn to a
discussion of the steps involved in the use and design of focus groups.

Advantages of Focus Groups

Focus groups provide a number of advantages relative to other types of
research:

1. Focus groups provide data from a group of people much more quickly and at
less cost than would be the case if each individual were interviewed separately.
They also can be assembled on much shorter notice than would be required
for a more systematic, and larger survey.

2. Focus groups allow the researcher to interact directly with respondents. This
provides opportunities for the clarification of responses, for follow-up ques-
tions, and for the probing of responses. Respondents can qualify responses or
give contingent answers to questions. In addition, it is possible for the
researcher to observe nonverbal responses such as gestures, smiles, frowns,
and so forth, which may carry information that supplements (and, on occasion,
even contradicts) the verbal response.

3. The open response format of a focus group provides an opportunity to obtain
large and rich amounts of data in the respondents’ own words. The researcher
can obtain deeper levels of meaning, make important connections, and identify
subtle nuances in expression and meaning.

4. Focus groups allow respondents to react to and build upon the responses of
other group members. This synergistic effect of the group setting may result in
the production of data or ideas that might not have been uncovered in
individual interviews.

5. Focus groups are very flexible. They can be used to examine a wide range of
topics with a variety of individuals and in a variety of settings.

6. Focus groups may be one of the few research tools available for obtaining data
from children or from individuals who are not particularly literate.

7. The results of a focus group are easy to understand. Researchers and decision
makers can readily understand the verbal responses of most respondents. This
is not always the case with more sophisticated survey research that employs
complex statistical analyses.

Limitations of Focus Groups

Although focus groups are valuable research tools and offer a number of
advantages, they are not a panacea for all research needs and they do have
their limitations. Many of these limitations are simply the negative sides of
the advantages listed above:

1. The small numbers of respondents that participate even in several different
focus groups and the convenience nature of most focus group recruiting
practices significantly limit generalization to a larger population. Indeed,
persons who are willing to travel to a locale to participate in a one- to two-hour
group discussion may be quite different from the population of interest, at least
on some dimension, such as compliance or deference.

2. The interaction of respondents with one another and with the researcher has
two undesirable effects. First, the responses from members of the group are
not independent of one another, which restricts the generalizability of results.
Second, the results obtained in a focus group may be biased by a very dominant
or opinionated member. More reserved group members may be hesitant to
talk.

3. The “live” and immediate nature of the interaction may lead a researcher or
decision maker to place greater faith in the findings than is actually warranted.
There is a certain credibility attached to the opinion of a live respondent that
is often not present in statistical summaries.

4. The open-ended nature of responses obtained in focus groups often makes
summarization and interpretation of results difficult.

5. The moderator may bias results by knowingly or unknowingly providing cues
about what types of responses and answers are desirable.

Thus, we see that focus groups offer important advantages, but that these
same advantages have associated dangers and limitations. As noted above,
focus groups are used most often as a preliminary stage in a larger research
program that includes a larger, more representative survey of the population,
or as a means for adding insight to the results obtained from a survey. We
should not overlook, however, the cases in which focus groups alone may be
a sufficient basis for decision making. One example in an applied research
setting would be the identification of flaws or serious problems with a new
product or program that would necessitate redesign. Another would be a
situation in which there is reason to believe that the group of people—or
population—of interest is relatively homogeneous, at least with respect to
the issue at hand. In such cases, a small number of respondents is all that is
needed to generalize to the larger population. Reynolds and Johnson (1978)
provide a useful example of the complementary use of focus groups and
survey research.

It is true that focus groups yield qualitative data obtained from relatively
small numbers of respondents who interact with one another; yet, this is
exactly their purpose. There are those who would use focus groups to explore
all manner of research questions. This view, however, is as inappropriate as
the view that dismisses the focus group as having no utility. The focus group
is one tool in the social scientist’s research tool kit and it should be used where it is appropriate and for the purposes for which it was designed. Other tools should be used for other purposes. It has been said that to a man with a hammer, everything is a nail. There is an unfortunate tendency among some social scientists to view the world in the same way. Thus, they tend to regard focus groups as either appropriate or inappropriate, sound or unsound, without regard to the research question. Focus groups are appropriate—more appropriate than more quantitative techniques—for certain classes of problems. Other tools are more appropriate for other classes of problems.

Focus groups do represent an important tool for discovery and exploration. When little is known about a particular subject or a certain phenomenon, there are few alternatives. Some type of interview will be required; the options available are individual interviews or focus groups. Focus groups provide a more rapid and cost-efficient means for completing interviews. Table 1.1 lists a number of other advantages of focus groups relative to individual interviews. The decision to use focus groups instead of individual interviews must recognize the potential, however, for confounding of individual responses.

**STEPS IN THE DESIGN AND USE OF FOCUS GROUPS**

Research employing focus groups shares many of the same characteristics and steps as other types of research. (Figure 1.1 lists the sequence of steps in the design and use of focus groups.) Like all research, focus group research must begin with a problem. Focus groups are designed to do exactly what the name implies—focus. A focus group is not a freewheeling conversation among group members; it has focus and a clearly identifiable agenda. Problem definition requires a clear statement of what kinds of information are desirable and from whom this information should be obtained. A clear understanding of the problem, or general research question, is critical because it gives rise to the specific questions that should be raised by the moderator, and identifies the population of interest.

Once a clear statement of the problem has been generated it is possible to move to the second stage of the research. Like any survey, it is important to identify a sampling frame. A sampling frame is a list of people (households, organizations) that the researcher has reason to believe is representative of the larger population of interest. The sampling frame is the operational definition of the population. The identification of a sound sampling frame is far more critical in large-scale survey research than it is for focus group

**INTRODUCTION**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1.1 Advantages of Focus Groups Relative to Individual Interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Respondent Interaction Advantages**

1. **Synergy**: The combined effort of the group will produce a wider range of information, insight, and ideas than will the accumulation of the responses of a number of individuals when these replies are secured privately. [Note: some researchers suggest that this is not always the case. We will review this research in Chapter 2.]

2. **Snowballing**: A bandwagon effect often operates in a group interview situation in that a comment by one individual often triggers a chain of responses from the other participants.

3. **Stimulation**: Usually after a brief introductory period the respondents get “turned on” in that they want to express their ideas and expose their feelings as the general level of excitement over the topic increases in the group.

4. **Security**: In an interviewee-interviewee situation, respondents may not be willing to expose their views for fear of having to defend these views or fear of appearing “unconcerned” or “radical” or whatever the case may be. In the well-structured group, on the other hand, “the individual can usually find some comfort in the fact that his feelings are not greatly different from those of his peers, and that he or she can expose an idea without necessarily being forced to defend, follow through or elaborate on it. He or she is more likely to be candid because the focus is on the group rather than the individual; the respondent soon realizes that the things he or she says are not necessarily being identified with him or her.”

5. **Spontaneity**: Since no individual is required to answer any given question in a group interview, the individual’s responses can be more spontaneous, less conventional, and should provide a more accurate picture of the person’s position on some issue. In the group interview, people speak only when they have definite feelings about a subject and not because a question requires a response.

**Sponsor Advantages**

1. **Serendipity**: It is more often the case in a group rather than an individual interview that some idea will “drop out of the blue.” The group also affords the opportunity to develop it to its full significance.

2. **Specialization**: The group interview allows the use of a more highly trained, but more expensive, interviewer, since a number of individuals are being “interviewed” simultaneously.

3. **Scientific scrutiny**: The group interview allows closer scrutiny. First, the session itself can be observed by several observers. This affords some check on the consistency of the interpretations. Second, the session itself may be tape-recorded or even videotaped. Later, detailed examination of the recorded session allows additional insight and also can help clear up points of disagreement among analysts.

4. **Structure**: The group interview affords more control than the individual interview with regard to the topics that are covered and the depth with which they are treated, since the “interviewer” in the role of moderator has the opportunity to reopen topics that received too shallow a discussion when initially presented.

5. **Speed**: Since a number of individuals are being interviewed at the same time, the group interview permits the securing of a given number of interviews more quickly than do individual interviews.

INTRODUCTION

The interview guide should be compatible with the group to be interviewed. The moderator who is well suited for interviewing children may be inappropriate as a moderator of a group of design engineers who will be discussing the technical characteristics of a complex product. Questions that might be used with computer programmers and systems analysts probably would be worded differently than those used with the lay user of personal computers.

It is common for the identification of the moderator and design of the interview guide to be carried out simultaneously with the recruitment of participants for the focus groups. The recruitment process requires identification of a time and place for the group. Special facilities or equipment that might be required to carry out portions of the interview may dictate a special type of setting, which must be identified in reasonable proximity to potential participants. Persons in the sampling frame are contacted and asked to participate in a group at a particular time and place. They usually are informed of the general topic for the interview, because this often stimulates interest and increases the probability of participation. In addition, it is often customary to offer participants an incentive for participation.

It generally is best to recruit a few more participants than the number desired. Participants often cancel at the last minute, get stuck in traffic, have unexpected emergencies, or otherwise fail to arrive at the designated time and place. After recruiting the participants, usually it is a good idea to follow up with a reminder by telephone or mail a day or two before the group session is scheduled.

The focus group interview itself is the next step in the process. The moderator leads the group through the questions on the interview guide and seeks to facilitate discussion among all the group members. This discussion may be audiotaped or videotaped to facilitate later analysis. The last phases of focus group research, analysis, and interpretation of data and report writing, are similar to those in other types of research.

Each of the phases outlined above will be discussed in greater detail in later chapters. Before turning to an outline of the remainder of this book, it may be useful to contrast traditional focus group interviewing with several other types of research involving groups.

OTHER GROUP METHODS

Focus groups are but one of a number of research techniques that involve the use of groups. Although most of this book is concerned with focus groups, much of the discussion is applicable to the other techniques. In addition, there

---

**Figure 1.1.** Steps in the Design and Use of Focus Groups

- Problem Definition/ Formulation of the Research Question
- Identification of Sampling Frame
- Identification of Moderator
- Generation and Pre-Testing of Interview Guide
- Recruiting the Sample
- Conducting the Group
- Analysis and Interpretation of Data
- Writing the Report

research, however. Because it is inappropriate to generalize far beyond the members of focus groups, the sampling frame need be only a good approximation of the population of interest. Thus, if the research was concerned with middle-class parents of schoolchildren, a membership list for the local PTA might be an appropriate sampling frame.

The definition of the research question and identification of the sampling frame provide important information for the third step in the focus group design process, identification of a moderator and design of the interview guide. Both the moderator and the types and forms of questions included in

---

The interview guide should be compatible with the group to be interviewed. The moderator who is well suited for interviewing children may be inappropriate as a moderator of a group of design engineers who will be discussing the technical characteristics of a complex product. Questions that might be used with computer programmers and systems analysts probably would be worded differently than those used with the lay user of personal computers.

It is common for the identification of the moderator and design of the interview guide to be carried out simultaneously with the recruitment of participants for the focus groups. The recruitment process requires identification of a time and place for the group. Special facilities or equipment that might be required to carry out portions of the interview may dictate a special type of setting, which must be identified in reasonable proximity to potential participants. Persons in the sampling frame are contacted and asked to participate in a group at a particular time and place. They usually are informed of the general topic for the interview, because this often stimulates interest and increases the probability of participation. In addition, it is often customary to offer participants an incentive for participation.

It generally is best to recruit a few more participants than the number desired. Participants often cancel at the last minute, get stuck in traffic, have unexpected emergencies, or otherwise fail to arrive at the designated time and place. After recruiting the participants, usually it is a good idea to follow up with a reminder by telephone or mail a day or two before the group session is scheduled.

The focus group interview itself is the next step in the process. The moderator leads the group through the questions on the interview guide and seeks to facilitate discussion among all the group members. This discussion may be audiotaped or videotaped to facilitate later analysis. The last phases of focus group research, analysis, and interpretation of data and report writing, are similar to those in other types of research.

Each of the phases outlined above will be discussed in greater detail in later chapters. Before turning to an outline of the remainder of this book, it may be useful to contrast traditional focus group interviewing with several other types of research involving groups.

OTHER GROUP METHODS

Focus groups are but one of a number of research techniques that involve the use of groups. Although most of this book is concerned with focus groups, much of the discussion is applicable to the other techniques. In addition, there
are circumstances and research questions for which group techniques other than traditional focus groups may be more appropriate. For these reasons we will identify and briefly discuss five other group techniques: the nominal group technique, the Delphi technique, brainstorming, synectics, and leadership discussion groups.

The Nominal Group Technique (NGT)

An alternative approach to group interviewing has come to be called the nominal group technique. Nominal groups are groups in name only. The participants may not even meet. Even when they do meet, they do not interact directly with one another, at least in the early stages of the meeting. Rather, each member of the group is interviewed as an individual, and summaries of the responses and ideas of each group member are provided to the other members. Nominal groups may be useful when it is not possible to assemble a particular group of interest on a timely basis. This is often the case with very specialized groups like scientists, senior business executives, and high-level government officials. In such cases the researcher may obtain a first round of responses from each member of the group, summarize the responses, share the summary (in greater or lesser detail) with members of the group, and ask for a second round of responses. Alternatively, the members of the group may be brought together, but are asked to speak one at a time in response to questions. Thus, participants may hear the answers of other group members and elaborate upon them during their turns, but they are not allowed to interact spontaneously.

An even more common reason for using the nominal group technique is to avoid the influence of group opinion (or the opinions of one or more very dominant group members) on the responses of individuals. Although the opportunities for group synergy and facilitation of response are important advantages of focus groups, there are some circumstances in which the group setting may inhibit the responsiveness of the group as a whole, or of some individual members of the group. This may happen when the group to be interviewed includes supervisors and subordinates, parents and their children, an individual member who is recognized by other members as having unusual expertise on the topic to be discussed, or an individual with a particularly dominant personality. The nominal group technique may also be appropriate when there is reason to believe that the level of conflict among group members is sufficiently great that it interferes with discussion of the topic of interest. Finally, the nominal group technique may be useful even when the majority of group members share the same general opinions. A strong majority opinion, or even a strong plurality, may inhibit the responses of members of the groups who hold dissenting opinions.

Sometimes the nominal group technique is combined with a more traditional focus group to obtain the best features of both. In these cases a nominal group technique is used to obtain the independent responses of individuals. Summaries of these responses are distributed to members of the group before or during the group discussion. The preliminary nominal group exercise assures that all opinions are represented adequately and provides input for the focus group discussion. A more detailed discussion of the nominal group technique, as well as examples of its use, may be found in Delbecq, Van de Ven, and Gustafson (1975) and Moore (1987) in this series of Sage publications.

The Delphi Technique

A specialized application of the nominal group technique is used for purposes of developing forecasts of future events and trends based on the collective opinion of knowledgeable experts. The technique derives its name from the Oracles of Delphi in ancient Greek literature who were reputed to be able to see the future. Many forecasting problems cannot be solved with quantitative tools because the historical data on which these techniques depend are unavailable, or because the data that are available provide little or no insight into the probability of events of interest. This is often the case where forecasts of long-term social trends or technological developments are of interest, or when there is a need to forecast the timing of an infrequent event or the implications of a new social or product innovation.

One area of research that is particularly well suited for research using the Delphi technique is the impact of new technology. In areas such as information and telecommunications, technological advances can have profound implications for life styles (e.g., the growth of telecommuting), for legislation and regulation (e.g., the telephone company now finds itself competing with its customers in offering certain types of services, and it is no longer as clear who needs regulation), in the way business is done (e.g., computer-aided manufacturing is altering radically the traditional assembly line), and in personnel requirements of organizations (e.g., computer literacy is necessary for many of the jobs being created today). Dealing with changes in technology and its implications is difficult, but forecasting what new technologies will be available at a given point in time and what the implications will be is even more difficult. There are no mathematical algorithms to which to turn for guidance in such cases.
Indeed, this type of problem is extremely complex. There is a need to understand where technology will be at any one point in time. Predicting the advance of technology—which tends to be discontinuous and nonlinear—is difficult in itself. Predicting the impact of the technology is even more difficult. Putting technological forecasts together with forecasts of the implications of technology is an extraordinarily difficult task, but one that is essential for a large number of organizations. The Delphi technique represents one approach to the solution of this problem.

The Delphi technique requires a panel of experts on the social or technological trend(s) of interest. Members of this panel are asked to provide independent forecasts of events they expect to occur and to identify the assumptions on which they base their forecasts. Such forecasts may include estimates of whether particular events or scenarios will occur, or they may include specific point estimates such as what the rate of inflation will be in the third quarter of next year. These experts also may be asked to provide ranges or confidence intervals associated with their forecasts, particularly when specific point estimates are involved. These independent forecasts are summarized in statistical form and key assumptions are identified. These summaries and assumptions then are provided to all members of the panel, and each member is asked to provide a new forecast based on this new information. These new forecasts are summarized and reported to the panel members, who again are asked to revise their forecasts. This iterative process continues until a consensus is obtained or no further changes occur in the individual forecasts. In practice, it has been observed that the Delphi technique seldom requires more than three or four iterations. Figure 1.2 illustrates the steps in the process.

The critical elements of the Delphi technique are the identification of the panel of experts, the design of the set of questions used to elicit forecasts and assumptions, and the summarization of the individual input. Although the group does not meet face to face, the facilitators of a Delphi exercise play a critical role because they control these key elements. More detailed discussions of the Delphi technique may be found in Linstone and Turoff (1975), Dalkey and Helmer (1963), and Moore (1987).

**Brainstorming and Synectics**

Although brainstorming and synectics are rather different techniques, both are group techniques that are designed to facilitate the generation of new ideas and encourage creative expression. Traditional brainstorming sessions involve groups who may or may not have a designated moderator. Group members are instructed to generate ideas, approaches, or solutions without
regard to cost, practicality, or feasibility. Members of the group also are asked not to be critical of any ideas generated by others. Instead, they are encouraged to build on the ideas of others by suggesting embellishments, improvements, and modifications.

Brainstorming can be an exciting creative experience. The emphasis of the exercise is the quantity of ideas produced, as the greater the number of ideas generated, the higher the probability that at least some will be good ideas. It should be pointed out, however, that brainstorming appears to be most useful for problems that have no single best solution, and when the interaction and different perspectives of group members facilitate creativity.

Some focus groups often resemble brainstorming sessions. For example, it is quite common for manufacturing and service firms to bring together customers and potential customers to talk about new products, product modifications, or problems for which new products might be useful.

Synectics is a somewhat more structured approach to the generation of ideas. A trained moderator generally leads a synectics group and tries to get the group to view problems, needs, or actions from new and often unusual perspectives. For example, the moderator may suggest that the group is stranded on a desert island with none of the traditional tools to accomplish some simple tasks; there are, however, ample natural resources. A related example would involve the group being told that the space shuttle had crashed on an unknown island with no means to communicate to the outside world. The group might be asked to think of all the ways the technology in the shuttle could be used to help the occupants survive. The outcome of such an exercise could be the identification of new commercial opportunities for technologies developed in the space program.

The role of the moderator in a synectics session is to use a variety of techniques to create the noncritical and accepting atmosphere that characterizes a brainstorming session and, at the same time, to force participants out of habitual perceptual and problem-solving modes and into more creative and innovative modes of analysis. Synectics has been used rather widely in business organizations as a means for generating ideas for new products and services.

There are five basic principles underlying the synectics approach (Osborn, 1963):

1. Deferment, that is, look first for viewpoints or perspectives, rather than solutions. For example, rather than immediately discussing the types of pumps available for moving water, a synectics group might discuss the more general problem of how to move "things" from one place to another.

2. Autonomy of the object, that is, let the problem take on a life of its own. For example, instead of talking about what is feasible with respect to the design of software for desktop publishing, the group might focus on what would be an ideal desktop publishing system. Thus, the problem rather than potential solutions becomes the focus of the discussion.

3. Use of the commonplace, that is, try to use the familiar as a way of gaining perspective on the strange. An example of this approach would be a university faculty group given the task of designing a curriculum in computer science for incoming freshmen. Rather than focus on the unfamiliar, computer science, the group might be asked to focus on what would constitute mastery of an area within the curriculum.

4. Involvement/detachment, that is, alternating between the general and the specific, so that specific instances may be identified and seen as part of a larger perspective.

5. Use of metaphor, that is, use analogies to suggest new viewpoints. (p. 274)

Among the techniques that a synectics moderator might use to facilitate creativity are moving from the most general to the most specific example of a problem or process (or vice versa), the use of role playing, and discovery of analogies. When individuals or groups immediately focus on a very specific issue there is frequently a rapid narrowing of perspective that occurs because people tend to use their prior experience and past solutions as a point of reference. Thus, a group of engineers asked to consider new designs for pumping equipment tends to think of the way pumps have been designed in the past. Changing perspective by considering a more general problem—such as how one might move a liquid from one place to another—may facilitate the identification of radical new designs that have little in common with past designs.

Role-playing may also help change perspectives. For example, a group of architects might be told to pretend they are a wall and describe how they feel and how they relate to other parts of the building. Analogies may serve a similar purpose. When analogies are used in a synectics session, the group members are instructed to come up with ideas that are similar but not identical to some reference object. Table 1.2 summarizes a number of techniques that may be employed in a synectics session.

Brainstorming and synectics are but two of numerous group techniques that have been developed to facilitate creativity and the generation of ideas. A more thorough treatment of brainstorming and synectics, as well as other group creativity techniques, may be found in Arnold (1962) and Osborn (1963).
FOCUS GROUPS

Table 1.2
Techniques Used to Facilitate Creativity in Synectics Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technique</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal Analogy</td>
<td>Participant puts himself in the place of a physical object (e.g., a tuning fork, a wall) or product and gives a first person description of what it feels like to be that object.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book Title</td>
<td>Participant gives a two-word phrase that captures the essence and the paradox involved in a particular thing or set of feelings (e.g., familiar surprise, interested disbelief).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example Excursion</td>
<td>Group discusses a topic seemingly unrelated to the basic problem in order to trigger thoughts and/or &quot;take a vacation&quot; from the problem.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Force Fit-Get Fired</td>
<td>Participant thinks of an idea to force together two or more components of an idea. In the get-fired technique, the idea is to be so wild that the boss would fire the participant if similar ideas were offered at work.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Leaderless Discussion Groups

There are occasions when interest in the content of a group discussion is of less importance than the dynamics of the group itself. Communication patterns among group members, the actions of individual group members, and even the alliances or coalitions that form in a group may be of interest to a researcher. This is particularly true in personnel assessment situations where interpersonal skills need to be evaluated. Leaderless discussion groups provide an approach to this type of assessment and research. For example, a trait that is highly desirable in certain types of managers is the ability to facilitate action toward a common goal among individuals who do not report directly to the manager. Product managers in marketing organizations often have responsibility for coordinating a team of individuals over whom they have no direct responsibility. A leaderless discussion group provides one vehicle for assessing the extent to which an individual can give direction and obtain results in such situations.

Leaderless discussion groups are well described by their name. There is no moderator or leader designated for such groups. The group is given instructions, which may range from a general and ambiguous task (e.g., "Do something productive with your time during the next 90 minutes") to a very specific task such as producing a product or report. The group is observed as it completes the task, and the patterns of interaction among members are recorded. Some members of the group tend to emerge as more dominant than others. One or more individuals may assume a leadership role, and other members of the group may assume other roles such as peacemaker, arbiter, or cheerleader.

Leaderless discussion groups are used widely as assessment tools in organizations, particularly for management positions and positions involving personal selling activities. There is a rich and large literature on the use of leaderless discussion groups; Stogdill and Coons (1957) and Finkle (1976) provide a useful introduction to this literature.

As we have seen, focus groups are but one type of research technique involving the use of groups. While focus groups are very flexible, there may be occasions when one of the other techniques, discussed above, is more appropriate. Much that will be discussed in the remainder of this book applies to all group techniques, but the specific emphasis will be on focus groups. The reader interested in using other group techniques should consult sources that emphasize these techniques and the unique issues and problems associated with their use.

INTRODUCTION

The remaining chapters of this book will deal with specific aspects of the design, use, and interpretation of focus groups. One of the important advantages of focus groups as a research tool is the fact that a very substantial body of research and theory exists with respect to behavior in groups. The field of social psychology—and particularly the subfield of group dynamics—provides a strong foundation upon which to build valid and useful focus groups. Chapter 2 provides an overview of the theoretical and empirical foundations of focus group research. It will consider such topics as power, leadership, interpersonal communication, social facilitation and inhibition, and the influence of group composition. The literature related to each of these issues will be briefly reviewed and the implications of this literature for focus group settings and the data generated in such settings will be examined.

Following the review of the literature on group dynamics, we will turn to the mechanics of designing, conducting, and interpreting focus groups.
Chapter 3 considers the problem of recruiting participants for focus group sessions and designing the interview guide. Issues related to the determination of the sampling frame, the use of incentives, scheduling, and physical facilities are considered in this chapter. Chapter 3 also addresses the problems associated with the recruitment of special groups of individuals such as business executives, working parents, physicians, and children.

The key to obtaining rich and valid insights through the use of focus groups is an effective moderator. Chapter 4 deals with the characteristics of effective focus group moderators. This chapter will summarize the rich literature on interviewing skills, techniques, and leadership styles and relate this literature to the focus group setting. In addition to characteristics specific to the interviewer, Chapter 4 will consider the potential for interaction between various interviewer characteristics and the dynamics of the group. The implications of such interactions for the quality of data obtained from focus groups also will be discussed.

Techniques and approaches for conducting a focus group are treated in Chapter 5. Methods for drawing out respondents, for probing for additional information and clarification of responses, for dealing with domineering or reticent respondents, and for facilitating discussion are reviewed. In addition, the chapter explores such topics as how to deal with sensitive or potentially embarrassing issues, how to present stimulus materials, and how to deal with specialized populations such as children. The use of audio and video recording equipment is considered in the chapter, as well as the collection of observational data to supplement verbal responses.

Focus groups generate verbal and observational data; this data must generally be coded and analyzed by means of content analysis. Chapter 6 provides an overview of the content analysis literature and its application to focus group data. The chapter also offers a discussion of various computer-assisted approaches to content analysis, and the implications of recent research in cognitive psychology on associative networks for the analysis and interpretation of focus group data. In addition to considering the issues of content coding and analysis, the chapter will discuss the interpretation of such coding and analysis.

Chapter 7 is designed to tie together all of the preceding chapters through the use of examples of the uses of focus groups. These examples include a discussion of the problem that precipitated the research, the reasons a focus group is appropriate, the development of the interview guide, and the conclusions drawn from the focus group and the actions that followed from these conclusions. Finally, in Chapter 8 we will offer a brief summary of the role focus groups may play in the broader array of research tools within the social sciences.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What are the key characteristics of a focus group? How do focus groups differ from other group techniques such as the nominal group technique, synectics, leaderless discussion groups, and the Delphi technique?
2. What are the differences between emic and etic categorization? How do these differences relate to the use of focus groups?
3. What are the primary uses of focus groups? When would it be appropriate to use a focus group instead of a set of individual interviews? A standardized survey?
4. What are the relative advantages and disadvantages of focus groups relative to surveys? Relative to controlled experiments?
5. Why is it important to have a clear definition of the research question(s) prior to initiating a focus group?
6. What does it mean to say that a good focus group is not too unstructured and not too structured? What provides the structure of the agenda for a focus group?
7. What does it mean to say that the results of a focus group are only as good as the moderator? Why is this so?
8. How are the results of focus groups interpreted? Why is interpretation sometimes difficult?
9. What actions or decisions might be appropriate based on the results obtained from a focus group?
10. Why is it often useful to conduct several focus groups on the same topic?
11. What alternatives are available to the researcher if it is not possible to bring people together as a group or when the interaction of group members may be undesirable?

Exercise:

Think of a topic with which you are familiar, but that involves some degree of controversy (e.g., abortion or assistance to AIDS victims). Design several survey-type questions with specific closed-ended responses. Convene a small group (perhaps just a few friends). Ask your questions without offering the alternatives you have generated. Near the end of the group meeting, offer...
your alternatives to the group and ask how well they capture the opinions of the group. Compare the responses of the group to your original survey items. What do you learn about the use of group interviews? About closed-ended survey questions?

NOTE

1See Merton (1967) for an interesting recollection of these beginnings, as well as how focussed interviewing lost its second “s.”

2

Group Dynamics and Focus Group Research

Over the years, a great deal of theoretical and empirical research has been done on the behavior of groups and the interactions among people in groups. This chapter is designed to summarize this knowledge in a way that will place focus group research within a theoretical context and, in turn, aid in the design of valid and more useful focus groups. By understanding the physical, temporal, social, cultural, psychological and environmental influences on the dynamics of group behavior, we will be better able to identify the nature and degree of bias in our analysis and interpretation of focus group data. Although a thorough and comprehensive review of the literature is not practical here, a useful framework for understanding focus group dynamics is to analyze the impact of major variables on group behavior. In general, the usefulness and validity of focus group data are affected by the extent to which participants feel comfortable about openly communicating their ideas, views or opinions. The wealth of literature on group dynamics suggests that there are many variables that influence participants’ “comfort zones.” These influences can be categorized as intrapersonal, interpersonal, and environmental.

Intrapersonal or individual variables include demographic, physical, and personality characteristics. Each individual’s unique combination of intrapersonal variables represents a certain behavioral disposition that predisposes the individual to certain modes of behavior in group situations. This behavioral disposition often is “used” by other group members to determine their reactions or responses to the individual. These differences in individual characteristics and interpersonal expectations should be matched carefully to maximize focus group participation. For example, in discussing racially sensitive problems, the probability of emotional outbursts in a racially heterogeneous group can be minimized to a certain extent by including persons who are fairly homogeneous in terms of socioeconomic status.

In the group situation, it is important to note that it is the characteristics of group members relative to one another and not merely individual characteristics that determine group behavior and performance. These differential interpersonal characteristics influence group cohesiveness, compatibility, and homogeneity versus heterogeneity, which, in turn, affect group conformity,
FOCUS GROUPS

leadership emergence, bases and uses of power, interpersonal conflict, and so forth.

The general pleasantness of the focus group environment influences the level of rapport and participation. Studies on spatial arrangements and interpersonal distance, for example, suggest that the seating arrangement and general proximity of participants can affect the ability of participants to talk freely and openly about issues of interest.

Finally, it is important to recognize that focus groups should be structured to facilitate the goals of the researcher. This structure includes composition of group members, the physical layout of the group, and the location in which the group discussion occurs. Failure to attend to these factors can result in a less than optimal outcome of a focus group exercise.

Having discussed the implications for focus group outcomes, it is important to point out that the wealth of theory and research on group dynamics must be tempered with the following realities when applying it to the management and analysis of focus groups: First, the temporary nature of focus groups may limit the ability to manage and—more importantly—predict the influence of certain demographic factors such as age, sex, and occupation on openness of interpersonal communication. Therefore, research findings based on long-term observation of group members in the work environment may not always apply to focus group members, who in all likelihood are perfect strangers and as a result do not have the time to develop a true rapport. Yet much of the research on group dynamics has been carried out within the context of the same type of group that defines a focus group—temporary groups brought together for a specific purpose that are disbanded once the purpose is served.

A frequent assumption about focus group interviews is that better data are obtained when participants are strangers. For example, Smith (1972) argues that acquaintances can seriously upset the dynamics of groups and inhibit responses, and Payne (1976) advocates eliminating respondents who belong to the same ethnic group or come from the same neighborhood. Fern (1982) tested this acquaintanceship assumption and concluded that an aggregation of the independent responses of individuals who are unknown to one another and who do not meet as a group is just as effective for generating ideas as focus groups. On the other hand, although differences between focus groups and unmoderated groups in terms of quantity and quality of ideas were modest, the differences did favor focus groups. Generally, focus group sessions are preceded by “get-acquainted” and “warm-up” sessions that usually provide participants ample opportunity to get to know one another.

GROUP DYNAMICS

Thus, the issue of acquaintanceship appears to be a matter of degree in most focus groups, and its influence appears modest at best.

The voluntary nature of focus group participation, coupled with a lack of motivation or incentive on the part of group members, may inhibit the desire to share ideas or responses to problem situations. The temporary nature of focus groups also may affect the efficacy of using certain strategies to influence focus group outcomes. In the work environment, rewards such as promotions and bonuses are often used to bring out the best in the individual and the group. On the other hand, the temporary nature of the focus group and the lack of acquaintance among the members may facilitate discussion, because there are few consequences associated with each member expressing his or her views.

Finally, the presence of a moderator or facilitator—who is almost always a stranger to the group—may create an atmosphere of artificiality and potentially inhibit the free flow of discussion. In work-related groups, leaders gradually emerge or are appointed by group members or authorities to provide direction and motivation for the achievement of group goals. The moderator of a focus group is thrust upon the group and is entrusted with the difficult tasks of creating rapport and motivating participants to share their ideas and feelings. While this “artificial” leader may hinder the group in some ways, this designated leader eliminates much of the distraction associated with the group developing its own pattern of leadership.

Thus, what may appear as limitations of focus groups also offer advantages and the limitations may be overcome partially by pregroup screening interviews, by providing incentives for participation, by selecting convenient times and places for the meetings, and by employing well-trained moderators. General awareness of group dynamics can go a long way toward creating atmospheres that are conducive to focus group participation.

Having discussed the relevance and applicability of the theory of group dynamics to focus group interviewing, the rest of this chapter is dedicated to reviewing selected studies on the influences of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and environmental variables on group dynamics and discussing the implications of these studies for focus group research. Much of the research on group dynamics was carried out during the period that ranged from the 1940s through the 1960s. The findings of these pioneering studies remain valid today and have important implications for the design and analysis of focus group research. There is also a body of more recent research that provides a further foundation for focus group research. Thus, in our review, we will consider some classic studies of group dynamics as well as those of more recent vintage.
FOCUS GROUPS

INTRAPERSONAL INFLUENCES

The need to understand intrapersonal influences on group processes is underscored by the obvious fact that groups are made up of individuals and that group outcomes are the consequences of individual actions. Shaw (1981) notes that

it is not always clear to what extent an individual’s behavior is influenced by others, but it is at least theoretically possible that each group member’s actions are determined in part by other group members. As we shall see, evidence from research indicates that people do, in fact, behave differently in groups than when alone. (p. 46)

In focus group interviewing, the key to success is to make the group dynamic work in service of the goals and objectives of the research. Intrapersonal or individual characteristics influence group processes in two ways. First, the personal characteristics of individuals (e.g., physical, personality, demographic) will determine individuals’ behavior in the group and how others react to them. Second, a particular combination of personal characteristics may influence the group’s behavior. For example, attractive, extroverted persons may be perceived to be bright, friendly, and candid—and may therefore predispose others in focus groups to respond more favorably to their comments or ideas. Focus group participation can be maximized by increasing interpersonal attraction through appropriate blending or selection of participants. We will consider some of the factors that influence this successful blending below.

DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES

Demographic variables include age, sex, income, occupation, education, religion, and race. The influence of these factors on group dynamics, though pervasive, is often difficult to determine. Further, the relationships that do exist may be difficult to isolate. For example, it is well known that age differences influence group behavior. The extent and direction of the influence of age, however, is not well documented. One reason for this may be that the effects of age on group behavior are considered so obvious that controlled studies seem unnecessary. As a result, knowledge of the influence of age on group behavior is based largely on anecdotal evidence (Shaw, 1981).

Age and its effects on the frequency and complexity of interaction have been examined by a number of scholars. Selected studies of age suggest that the number and percentage of social contacts increases with age (Beaver, 1932); an individual’s ability to empathize increases with age (Dymond, Hughes, & Raabe, 1952); proneness to simultaneous talking and interruptions decreases with age (Smith, 1977); and risk-taking behavior decreases with age (Chaubei, 1974). There is some evidence to suggest that leadership behavior increases with age, as well (see Stogdill, 1948, for a review of trait studies of leadership).

Conformity, which is a tendency toward uniformity when individuals interact in a group, also appears to be related to age (see Berg and Bass, 1961; Piaget, 1954). Constanzo and Shaw (1966) hypothesize a curvilinear relationship between age and conformity—conformity increases to a maximum at about age 12 and decreases thereafter. This literature suggests that, other things being equal, a mix of ages may be appropriate for most focus groups. Thus, for all material purposes, there should be little variation in relative conformity within groups composed of adults.

Men and women behave differently in group situations. Sex differences in interpersonal interactions can be attributed to biological factors as well as to differences in the social and cultural environments to which they are subjected. Much of this socialization is lifelong and is manifested in basic personality differences between men and women. Research on sex differences in personality suggests that men are more aggressive (e.g., physical aggression and nonverbal dominance) than women; women conform more to group pressure than men; women are more sensitive and better able to interpret emotions than men; women are more anxious than men; and men are more confident about their abilities than women (Freize, 1980). These stereotypical sex differences in aggressiveness, dependency, social orientation, and emotionality influence different aspects of interpersonal communication, including nonverbal communication such as body orientation and eye contact. Therefore, the ability to create rapport and maximize the scope and depth of focus group discussion is influenced heavily by the gender composition of the group. This means that care must be exercised when mixing men and women, and the moderator will need to assure an acceptable level of interaction in mixed-gender groups.

Varying socioeconomic backgrounds of individuals—such as differences in income, occupation, education, and family backgrounds—can affect the
dynamics of group interaction. In general, interaction is easier when individuals with similar socioeconomic backgrounds comprise the group. Similarity of abilities, level of intelligence, and knowledge tends to facilitate communication at the same wavelength. Similarly, in culturally and racially homogeneous group situations, it may be easier to encourage member participation. This suggests that focus groups should be designed to maximize interaction by assuring similarity with respect to socioeconomic status.

**PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS**

Physical characteristics of individuals also affect behavior within a group. Characteristics such as size, height, weight, general health, and appearance influence the behavior of others toward the individual, which in turn influences the person’s behavior toward the group. For example, Stogdill (1948) found a positive relationship between leadership and weight, height, and measures of physique. It has been shown that physically attractive persons are rated as more socially skillful and likeable than less attractive ones (Goldman & Lewis, 1977). Adams and Huston (1975) found that attractive middle-aged adults are judged by both children and adults to be more pleasant, more socially at ease, higher in self-esteem, and of a higher occupational status than less attractive adults. The physical characteristics of group members, of course, are unlikely to be known to a researcher prior to the actual interview. A skillful interviewer will, however, quickly size up the group and determine what problems or opportunities are offered by the composition of the group. He or she will then adjust the interviews accordingly.

Clothing style affects people’s impressions about individuals (Gibbins 1969) and behavior toward them (Bryant, 1975). Shaw (1981), however, notes that “relative to other variables, these factors are generally weak and can be overcome by effects of more powerful variables such as personality and ability” (p. 186). Yet there may be some situations when physical appearance may well be the single most important determinant of impressions, such as when impressions are based on very limited information or when initial impressions shape the direction of future interactions (Frieze, 1980). Focus groups, for example, tend to lend themselves to such situations when both observers and participants have to interact with each other based on minimal personal information. Thus, it is probably wise to suggest the manner of dress to group members at the time they are recruited, and the moderator should dress accordingly.

**GROUP DYNAMICS**

Personality characteristics interact with demographic variables to influence the behavior of individuals in groups. A personality trait represents a tendency or predisposition to behave in a certain manner in different situations. For example, an aggressive personality generally is expected to display aggressive behavior or tendencies even in nonthreatening situations. Although the effects of any one personality variable on group behavior may be relatively weak, they can have a significant influence on interpersonal interaction. An aggressive or dominant personality in a focus group situation may discourage other participants from being candid with their opinions by making emotional and/or negative comments. Chapter 5 offers suggestions for dealing with such individuals, but it is important for the moderator to size up the personalities of group members quickly and respond accordingly.

The influence of personality characteristics on individual behavior has received a great deal of attention. Shaw (1981) suggests that personality can be represented by relatively few dimensions, and that these dimensions can be grouped into five broad categories: interpersonal orientation, social sensitivity, ascendant tendencies, dependability, and emotional stability.

Interpersonal orientation refers to the “way or ways an individual views or reacts to other persons” (Shaw, 1981, p. 192). Examples of personality traits that fall under this broad category are approval orientation, authoritarianism, cyclothymia (approach tendency), and schizothymia (avoidance tendency). Social sensitivity can be described as the “degree to which the individual perceives and responds to the needs, emotions, preferences, etc., of the other person” (p. 194). It subsumes attributes like empathy, independence, sociability, and social insight, among others. Ascendant tendencies refer to the “degree to which individuals assert themselves, and the extent to which they wish to dominate others” (p. 195). They may help explain why certain individuals wish to be prominent in group situations. Examples of ascendant tendencies include assertiveness, dominance, individual prominence, and ascendence.

Interpersonal attraction is increased when people can depend on one another. Dependability has several dimensions—personal integrity, ability, and behavioral consistence.

A person who is self-reliant and responsible for his or her actions probably will be viewed as a desirable group member and will contribute to the effectiveness of the group. Similarly, an individual who can be expected to behave in conventional
ways is unlikely to disrupt the group, whereas an unconventional person is likely to cause disorder and dissatisfaction. (Shaw 1981, p. 197)

Emotional stability refers to a "class of personality characteristics that are related to the emotional or mental well-being of the individual" (p. 199). These include emotional control, stability, anxiety, defensiveness, neuroticism, and depressive tendencies.

A skillful focus group moderator will do a quick assessment of these individual characteristics in the first few minutes of the interview and try to make adjustments accordingly. This may involve using a more or less structured approach depending on which approach will maximize the interaction among all members of the group. We will discuss the efficacy of different approaches and amounts of structure for conducting focus groups in Chapter 5.

Additionally, some researchers like Quiriconi and Durgan (1985) advocate administering personality inventories to participants over the telephone prior to their focus group sessions. By doing so, it is possible to construct homogeneous groups (e.g., only trendsetters or only traditionalists) or heterogeneous personality groups (e.g., both trendsetters and traditionalists), depending on the purpose of the research. Since focus group participants are usually recruited based on demographics and product use, prior knowledge of the respondents' personalities helps moderators to understand why participants are behaving the way they do and how to best interact with them.

INTERPERSONAL INFLUENCES

Interpersonal interaction is affected greatly by expectations about how others will act or behave. These expectations are derived from beliefs about demographic characteristics (e.g., age, sex, and socioeconomic status), personality traits, and physical characteristics (e.g., appearance, dress, etc.), as well as past experiences. Miller and Turnbull (1986) examined four types of social interaction: between experimenter and subject; between teacher and student; casual interactions; and bargaining and negotiation. On the basis of this examination they concluded that "the expectancy that one person (the perceiver) holds concerning another (the target) affects three phenomena: (1) the target’s behavior, (2) the processing of the target’s behavior by the perceiver, and (3) the target’s perception of him or herself" (p. 234).

Expectations and beliefs are often embodied in stereotypes; the effects of stereotypes on interpersonal processes have received considerable attention

GROUP DYNAMICS

(Jones, 1977; Snyder 1984). Stereotypes tend to be pervasive, resistant to change, and are generally invalid (Ashmore & Del Boca, 1981). Despite the general lack of validity of stereotypes, they do influence interpersonal interactions and the general composition of groups in terms of cohesiveness, compatibility, and homogeneity versus heterogeneity. Furthermore, the perception of social power and its use in enhancing group participation and performance also are influenced by interpersonal expectations. Focus group moderators have important roles in establishing the expectations of their groups; they must understand that group members bring expectations to the group and add to these expectations as they meet other members of the group. The moderator needs to take a firm hand and assure that the expectations of the group members are consistent with and facilitate the purpose of the research.

GROUP COHESIVENESS

Group cohesiveness describes the desire of group members to remain as members of the group (Cartwright, 1968). Shaw (1981), however, notes that "at least three different meanings have been attached to the term cohesiveness: (1) attraction to the group, including resistance to leaving it, (2) morale, or the level of motivation evidenced by group members, and (3) coordination of efforts of group members" (p. 213). Although focus groups tend to be temporary, the cohesiveness of a focus group is not a trivial issue. It is important for the group to identify its mission—which is to provide information—and support this mission if the interview is to be successful. This is something the moderator must facilitate early in the focus group meeting.

The sources of group cohesiveness include most of the variables affecting interpersonal attraction, such as similarity of backgrounds and attitudes. For example, Terborg, Castore, and DeNinno (1976) found that groups consisting of individuals with similar attitudes are more cohesive than groups composed of persons with less similar attitudes. This does not mean that focus groups should consist of people who agree with one another, but it does suggest that groups composed of individuals with violently opposed opinions will be troublesome.

Cohesiveness is also influenced by the degree and nature of communication among group members, their proneness to being influenced by other group members, and their responsiveness to the actions of or feedback from members of the group (Deutsch, 1968; Schable & Jacobs, 1975). In the context of focus groups, this means that recognition that the group is
FOCUS GROUPS

achieving its purpose can add to the cohesiveness of the group. Occasional comments by the moderator about the quality of the discussion may go a long way toward achieving a sense of cohesiveness and success on the part of the group.

Group cohesiveness influences a number of group processes such as verbal and nonverbal interaction, the effectiveness of social influence, productivity, and satisfaction of group members. Shaw and Shaw (1962) studied differential patterns of interaction between high- and low-cohesive groups of children and observed that relative to low-cohesive groups, high-cohesive groups were more cooperative, friendly, and more praiseworthy of each others’ accomplishments. Classic studies by Berkowitz (1954) and Schachter, Ellerton, McBride, & Gregory (1951) suggest that the more cohesive the group, the more power the members have—and, therefore, the greater the influence members exert over each other. This means that the cohesiveness of a focus group is a critical element in assuring interaction. Thus, a sense of cohesiveness may facilitate discussion of even the most sensitive topics.

How strongly attracted group members are to the group also affects motivation to work harder to ensure success in the achievement of the group’s goals. Van Zelst (1952a, 1952b) found group productivity and cohesiveness to be positively related. These studies also suggest that members belonging to highly cohesive groups experienced greater satisfaction than those in less cohesive groups.

Focus groups generally are considered “fun” by participants. A lively, interesting discussion tends to build a sense of cohesiveness. Equally important, the sharing of experiences and recognition that others have had similar experiences add to the cohesiveness of the group. It is for this reason that focus group moderators will spend time early in the group discussion seeking common experiences among group members before moving on to more controversial topics.

GROUP COMPATIBILITY, AND HOMOGENEITY VERSUS HETEROGENEITY

Closely related to group cohesiveness is group compatibility—the extent to which members of a group have similar personal characteristics (e.g., needs, personality, attitudes, etc). Compatibility has implications for effective group performance and group satisfaction. In general, highly compatible groups perform their tasks more effectively than less compatible groups, because less time and energy are devoted to group maintenance (Haythorn,

Couch, Haefner, Langham, & Carter, 1956; Sapolsky, 1960; Schutz, 1958). Furthermore, compatible groups experience less anxiety and greater satisfaction than incompatible groups (Cohen, 1956; Fry, 1965; Smelser, 1961).

It is important to note that compatibility does not necessarily imply homogeneity, although they are closely related. In evaluating compatibility, emphasis is placed upon the relationships among particular characteristics of group members, rather than the fact that group member characteristics are homogeneous or heterogeneous (Shaw, 1981). For example, members of one focus group may be homogeneous in terms of gender, but incompatible in terms of socioeconomic status (e.g., income, occupation, social status, etc.). On the other hand, members of another focus group may be homogeneous in terms of gender and compatible in terms of socioeconomic status. Although these two groups are homogeneous in terms of gender, the lack of socioeconomic compatibility in one of the groups may result in different interaction styles and influence the level of group participation. Such differences in the interaction among group members may alter the results obtained from a focus group (see Ruhe, 1972; Ruhe and Allen, 1977), and should be taken into account when recruiting respondents and determining the composition of individual groups.

The influence of the composition of a group in terms of gender has been studied frequently by social scientists. This research consistently has found differences in the interaction styles of men and women associated with the gender composition of the group. For example, Aries (1976) found that men are more personally oriented, have greater tendencies to address individual members (as opposed to the group as a whole), and speak about themselves more often in mixed-gender groups than in same-sex groups. In all-male groups, men are concerned more with status and competition. By contrast, women in mixed-sex groups tend to be less dominant than in all-female groups. Such research suggests that the nature of the interaction in and the quality of the data obtained from a focus group will be influenced by the gender composition of the group. For this reason, many researchers will conduct both same-sex and mixed-gender groups. This practice tends to produce different, but complementary insights. It is a practice that also takes maximum advantage of the group as a data collection tool.

Some researchers (see Hoffman, 1959; Hoffman & Maier, 1961) believe that heterogeneous groups generally are more effective than homogeneous groups because a variety of skills, perspectives, and knowledge can be brought to bear on the performance of tasks. Ruhe (1978) also found that mixed-gender groups were more effective than same-sex groups. Closely related to effectiveness in performing group tasks are conformity and the emergence of leadership. There is some evidence to suggest that there is
greater conformity among members of mixed-gender groups than among members of same-sex groups because of greater concern about interpersonal relations (Reitan & Shaw, 1964). Thus, the diversity of opinions expressed in a mixed-sex group may be smaller than that expressed within a same-sex group.

Dyson, Godwin, and Hazelwood (1976) found that leadership traits are more likely to emerge in mixed-sex groups than in same-sex groups. Leadership behavior generally facilitates objective task accomplishment through the exercise of interpersonal influence and effective communication. This suggests that, topic permitting, mixed-gender groups are more effective in encouraging participation and solving problems than focus groups comprised of members of the same sex. If a variety of solutions to problems or responses is desired, however, it may be better to use same-sex focus groups to reduce the tendency toward conformity common in mixed-gender groups. Ultimately, whether a mixed-gender group or same-sex group is best depends on the nature of the topic. It is important to remember, however, that these two types of groups can produce very different group dynamics and types of information. In general, mixed-gender groups are easier to control for the moderator, but this control may come at the cost of less spontaneity. Less obvious to the focus group researcher is the influence on group dynamics of social power (whether perceived or exercised), to which we now turn our attention.

**SOCIAL POWER**

Social power is the potential or ability to influence others in a group setting (Emerson, 1964). It is an ever-present phenomenon that has important implications for small group interaction and performance. An understanding of the nature of social power and how it can be used to advantage in the context of focus group interviewing is an important component of planning and conducting focus group research.

The ability to influence others in a social situation traditionally has been held to derive from five sources: reward power, coercive power, legitimate power, referent power, and expert power (French & Raven, 1959). In most situations, however, it is the perception of power—and not the actual possession of power—that influences the behavior of individuals and the reactions of other persons. In the focus group situation, for example, the moderator may be perceived to have more power by virtue of his or her position and ability to dictate the flow and intensity of the discussion. Certain participants, however, may be perceived to have expert power because of their education, training, and/or general experience. This expert power may be real or simply perceived; both cases pose problems for the focus group moderator, but each must be dealt with differently. In Chapter 5, we will examine specific strategies for dealing with such “experts.”

Sometimes, seating preferences among certain group members may be an indication of their desires to influence the discussion and the opinions of other participants (see Hare & Bales, 1963). Behavioral implications of spatial arrangements will be discussed in the section of this chapter that considers environmental influences, and again in Chapter 5 when we will take up the issue of seating participants.

A number of studies suggest that group members who are perceived to possess greater power are liked better than those with less power (Hirwit, Zander, & Hymovitch, 1953; Lippitt, Polansky, Redl, & Rosen, 1952). This phenomenon appears to be a result, at least in part, of the fact that a person who possesses power is viewed as the source of rewards and punishment. Furthermore, a high-power person who is liked is more likely to dispense rewards than punishment. At the same time, a high-power group member is likely to find the group more attractive than a low-power member (Lippitt et al., 1952; Watson & Bromberg, 1965; Zander & Cohen, 1955). Shaw (1981) notes that “a group member who is highly accepted by the group, who is the target of deferential treatment from others, who has great influence upon the group process, etc., undoubtedly finds the group more attractive than a member who is not treated so favorably” (p. 313). Thus, the focus group moderator must recognize that certain members of the group may be accorded higher status or power than others within the group. The moderator needs to use this to advantage when it occurs; we will discuss strategies for doing so in Chapter 5.

Another factor associated with social power that has implications for focus group interaction is the relationship between power and status. In general, low-status persons are accorded less power, and therefore have less influence on the group. Studies of Air Force crew members (Torrance, 1954) support this observation; it is interesting to note in these studies that even when the lowest-ranked crew member had the correct solution to a problem, he had little influence on group decision making. Furthermore, Maier and Hoffman (1961) found that a great deal more time and energy is spent either supporting or rejecting the ideas of a high-status person than in finding alternative solutions to a problem. The focus group moderator must be aware of such tendencies and encourage individual idea generation, especially if a variety of perspectives is desired. The moderator also will need to legitimize the expression of opinions by lower-status individuals by explicitly asking for
them and by providing verbal rewards for such opinions. This not only encourages lower status members to speak, it also models behavior for the rest of the group that will encourage active participation and acceptance of opinions.

**GROUP PARTICIPATION AND NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION**

In recent years, the structural (i.e., who and how much of it) and temporal (i.e., the when of it) patterns of participation among group members have received increasing interest and greater research attention, fueled by the availability of more sophisticated methods for recording, processing, and analyzing information. Researchers are now able to examine a number of issues—such as patterns of interpersonal trust, cognitive load in interactions, self-monitoring in interactions, and patterns of dominance and influence—that have been difficult to examine in detail in the past (see McGrath & Kravitz, 1982).

Of particular interest in the context of focus groups is research on the nonverbal aspects of group interaction. Considerable research exists on gazing and eye contact. Eye contact serves some important functions within the group. McGrath and Kravitz (1982) describe three primary functions of looking within the interpersonal interaction situation: (1) to express interpersonal attitudes such as friendship, agreement, or liking; (2) to collect information about other persons, such as how they are responding to a particular point of view; and (3) to regulate and synchronize dyadic conversations (Allen & Guy, 1977; Beattie, 1978; Cary, 1978; Ellsworth, Friedman, Perlick, & Hoyt, 1978; Kendon, 1978; Rutter & Stephenson, 1979; Rutter, Stephenson, Ayling, & White, 1978).

Other nonverbal cues such as smiles (Brunner, 1979; Kraut & Johnston, 1979) and body posture (Bull & Brown, 1977) also can provide useful information during interpersonal interaction. Interpersonal distance, or proximity of individuals, and its implications for group interaction also has received some research attention, and will be discussed in the following section.

With respect to the accuracy and effectiveness of nonverbal communication, it has been found that nonverbal decoding accuracy is affected by the sex and the decoding skills of the receiver (Hall, 1978, 1980). Furthermore, when cues in different modes (e.g., audio versus visual) are contradictory, then receivers are apparently more influenced by visual than by auditory cues (DePaulo, Rosenthal, Eisenstat, Rogers, & Finkelstein, 1978). In general, visual cues often are used to compensate or to overcome audio difficulties (Krauss, Garlock, Bricker, & McMahon, 1977). The importance of nonverbal cues in focus group discussions has important implications for the selection and training of moderators, as well as the conduct of focus group interviews. Further, the information represented by nonverbal responses of focus group participants can be useful and complement the information provided via verbal channels of communication. It is for this reason that direct observation or videotaping may be desirable in many focus group research situations. We will return to these issues in Chapters 4 and 5.

**ENVIRONMENTAL INFLUENCES**

The focus of this section is to review briefly some of the more frequently studied aspects of the physical environment—such as territoriality, personal space, spatial arrangements, and the patterns of the communication channel—in addition to the more obvious influences such as shape and size of the room, lighting, ventilation, furniture, and color of the walls. A more detailed treatment of the physical environment determinants of individual and group behavior can be found in Shaw (1981). These factors have important implications for the conduct of focus groups, and we will discuss these implications in the remainder of this chapter.

**The Material Environment**

Research on the influence of room size on group interaction has particular implications for focus groups. Lecuyer (1975) found that group interaction on a task was more intense in small rooms than in large rooms; greater polarization of opinions was observed in small rooms. The presence of props also has been found to affect interpersonal interaction. Mehrabian and Diamond (1971) observed that preoccupation with a puzzle poster reduced affiliative behavior (such as amount of conversation, head nodding, eye contact, and verbal reinforcers), whereas preoccupation with a sculpture facilitated interaction but only between persons who were sensitive to rejection. These findings would suggest that the focus group setting be relatively nondescript. Pictures, artwork, or other wall decorations serve to distract members of the group from the task at hand. Indeed, the physical environment should serve to focus the attention of the group on the topic of discussion. When props are used to facilitate discussion, they should be kept hidden until it is time to employ them.
Territoriality

Territoriality, which refers to the orientations that individuals adopt toward geographical areas and objects in these areas, has significant implications for small group interactions. Shaw (1981) notes:

When a group assumes a proprietary right to a particular object, the smooth functioning of the group depends upon the degree to which other group members respect that person’s assumed territorial right. For example, if one member adopts a particular chair as his or her own and another sits in it and refuses to move, intra-group conflict is inevitable. (p. 122)

Generally, in focus groups there is a comfortable distance for participants. Participants who are made to sit too close to others may feel uncomfortable and will tend to protect their territory through actions that are not consistent with the purpose of the group. These actions may include withdrawal from the discussion and a tendency to attend to the moderator rather than the group as a whole.

Spatial Arrangements

Spatial arrangements—such as seating arrangements—can influence group members’ perception of status, degrees of participation, patterns of interaction, and leadership behaviors. In a study of seating preferences, Hale and Bales (1963) found that people who scored high on dominance tended to choose the more central seats in the group. Communication among group members seated across a table from one another was significantly greater than among those in other positions (Steinzer, 1950; Strodbeck & Hook, 1961). This suggests that seating a group in a circle, or at least in a fashion where all group members can easily see one another, will facilitate discussion and reduce the tendency for particular members of the group to emerge as dominant.

Interpersonal Distance

As noted above, group interaction also is affected by the preferred interpersonal distance between group members. Shaw (1981) notes that the traditional concept of personal space (Little, 1965; Sommer, 1959), which suggests that people consider the space immediately around their bodies as personal and private, ignores many personal, social, and situational variables. For example, interpersonal distances between friends is smaller than between strangers. Even among strangers, interpersonal distances will vary according to demographic characteristics such as age, sex, and socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. Interpersonal distances also increase with age up to a certain point (Baxter, 1979; Tennis & Dabbs, 1975).

The nature of relationships between individuals also affects preferred face-to-face distances (Little, 1965; Meisels & Guardo, 1969). Interpersonal distances tend to be greater for strangers than for acquaintances, and greater for acquaintances than those for friends. In general, females tend to prefer closer interpersonal distances than males (Patterson & Schaeffer, 1977; Willis, 1966). Perceptions of relative social status also can influence preferred interpersonal distances. A study by Lott and Sommer (1967) suggests that interpersonal distance does not indicate which person has a higher status, because people tend to distance themselves from both higher- and lower-status persons.

These studies make it clear that the issues of territoriality and personal space are not simple. Rather, the comfortable distance and seating arrangement for a particular focus group will depend to some extent on the composition of the group—whether it is of mixed or uniform gender, the socioeconomic status of the members of the group, and the cultural or subcultural backgrounds of the participants. These issues must be considered during the design phase of focus group research and should be resolved in a manner consistent with the purpose of the research and the need to maximize participation by all members of the group.

SUMMARY

It is quite clear that the substantial body of literature on group dynamics provides a firm foundation upon which to build a methodology for the focus group interview. In the next chapter we will consider some of the practical issues associated with recruiting participants for focus groups and assuring that the groups are designed to maximize the accomplishment of the researchers’ purpose.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. An adequate understanding of group dynamics is an essential prerequisite for the conduct of any meaningful focus group. Discuss.
2. How can personal characteristics of focus group participants influence the nature and intensity of interaction?

3. How can we use our knowledge of environmental influences such as spatial arrangements and the physical environment to enhance focus group participation?

4. Why must a qualitative researcher be wary of certain sexual or racial stereotypes when conducting focus groups?

5. Discuss some influences of personality on focus group dynamics.

6. Individuals behave differently in groups than when they are alone. What are some of the group processes (e.g., cohesiveness, leadership emergence, etc.) that can impact the productivity of focus groups?

7. Why is it important for the moderator to pay attention to nonverbal aspects of group participation?

8. Under what conditions would a qualitative researcher prefer more heterogeneity among focus group participants?

9. Acknowledging the fact that gender differences in attitudes seem inevitable, what are some basic behavioral considerations in designing a focus group study to understand contraceptive usage among men and women?

10. When is physical appearance an important determinant of group interaction? How does the physical appearance of a moderator affect his or her ability to conduct focus groups effectively?

Exercise:

Find a place, such as a library, restaurant, or coffee shop, and observe the behavior of several groups. Note who the group members are, who appears dominant, and how strongly each member is affiliated with the group. You should be able to make these determinations by observation from a distance. What cues give you information about the group? How would such cues be useful to a focus group moderator?

3

Recruiting Focus Group Participants and Designing the Interview Guide

Focus groups are conducted to obtain specific types of information from clearly identified sets of individuals. This means that individuals who are invited to participate in a focus group must be able and willing to provide the desired information and must be representative of the population of interest. Thus, the selection and recruitment of participants for a focus group is a critical task. So too is the design of the interview guide, because it establishes the agenda for the group discussion and provides a structure within which participants may interact and articulate their thoughts and feelings. A focus group is not just a haphazard discussion among people who happen to be available; it is a well planned research endeavor that requires the same care and attention associated with any other type of scientific research.

Two critical elements in successful focus group research are the recruitment of participants and the design of the interview guide. The interview guide establishes the agenda for the discussion of the group. The nature of the discussion is determined in large measure by the composition of the group and the interaction that ensues among its members. Thus, the development of the interview guide and the selection of group members may, in one sense, be viewed as the construction of the research instrument.

The review of group dynamics in Chapter 2 suggests that particular care must be given to the composition of the group because the quality of the discussion, and perhaps even its direction, may be determined by the interaction of the particular set of people who are brought together. For example, if a group of technical specialists are brought together to discuss a complex problem, it is likely that the discussion will take on a very different character than if the group were composed of a few technical people, a few nontechnical but knowledgeable lay persons, and a few novices. A group composed of parents and children will produce a very different type of discussion than a group composed of parents or children alone. Mixed-gender groups often give rise to different outcomes and group dynamics than do single-sex groups. The relative homogeneity of groups on a variety of characteristics also may influence the dynamics of the group. Such differences are not a cause for dismay. They simply suggest that when a group is a part of the measurement tool, considerable care must be exercised in its design and
FOCUS GROUPS

composition. The researcher should consider the impact of group composition early in the design phase of the project and assure that membership in any given focus group is consistent with the objectives of the research. This means that the research agenda and its objectives must be established clearly and very early.

In this chapter we will consider the construction of the focus group as a research instrument. We will consider both the recruiting process and the construction of the interview guide. Both activities must be guided by the purpose of the research; therefore, we will begin our discussion with consideration of the research agenda.

ESTABLISHING THE RESEARCH AGENDA

Focus group research does not differ from other forms of research where problem formulation and the specification of research objectives are concerned. Although focus groups are used frequently and are particularly helpful when little is known about a phenomenon, this does not mean that a focus group should be a substitute for problem formulation. Focus groups are not designed to be opportunities for a group of people to discuss whatever comes to mind; they are designed with a purpose in mind. Too often, focus groups are used as a substitute for thinking about a topic, with the result being that very little useful information is obtained from the group. There is a considerable difference between not knowing very much about a particular phenomenon and not knowing what you want to learn.

The first step in establishing the research agenda is problem formulation. Problem formulation is simply the specification of what problem is being solved, what information is sought, and for what purpose. Indeed, it will not be clear that a focus group is the most appropriate type of research for the question at hand until the problem has been defined clearly.

An adage says, “A problem well defined is half solved.” This is as true for focus group research as it is for any other type of research. Only by careful definition of the research question can the type of group required for a focus group be identified. As we will see, the definition of the research problem is also critical to the design of the interview guide.

Problem formulation must begin with an assessment of what is already known about the phenomenon of interest and what additional information is required. The purpose of research may be to inform a decision, identify alternative hypotheses or courses of action, confirm a hypothesis, explore a defined domain of behavior, or provide the solution to any of hundreds of other problems. The purpose of the research must be identified clearly in terms of desired outcomes and the information to be obtained related specifically to these outcomes. This is a thought process in which the researcher and all parties with a stake in the research should participate. Once the research question has been articulated clearly, it is possible to move on to the recruitment of subjects and the design of an interview guide.

RECRUITING PARTICIPANTS

Participants in focus groups can be recruited in a variety of ways. The limitations on the generalizability of focus group results have at least one advantage—that convenience sampling can be employed. Indeed, convenience sampling is the most common method for selecting participants in focus groups. This type of sampling saves both time and money, but it does not eliminate the need to consider the characteristics of the group. The intent of virtually all focus groups is to draw some conclusions about a population of interest, so the group must consist of representative members of the larger population. If the research question is related to the responses of specific types of individuals (e.g., men, children, physicians, etc.), the composition of the group must reflect this type of individual. In addition, it may be desirable in some situations to have a group that is made up of a particular mix of people (e.g., older and younger individuals, men and women, users and nonusers of a particular product or service). Thus, convenience sampling does not free the researcher from matching the sample used in the focus group to the objectives of the research.

In addition, as we saw in the previous chapter, the composition of the group has important implications for the outcome of the discussion. Insofar as the researcher has a specific agenda and wishes the group to interact in particular ways, he or she will structure the membership of the group to maximize the probability of the desired outcome. This may mean assuring a certain level of homogeneity or heterogeneity within the group or carrying out multiple groups that differ with respect to their composition.

Many types of focus groups require only very generally defined groups of individuals. For example, in many marketing research applications the group may be defined only in terms of the principal food shopper in a household or the user of a particular product. Government planners may define groups in terms of individuals who are likely to be affected by a new program or regulation. When such general definitions of the group are used, recruitment is relatively easy.
Many civic and religious organizations make their memberships available for focus group recruitment. Lists of individuals who have certain characteristics or who have engaged in certain types of activities also may be available readily. For example, many organizations maintain lists of their members, employees, or customers. Persons who have purchased homes or automobiles recently can be identified easily by examining court or tax records. Where such lists are available, they save considerable time and expense because they reduce the number of contacts that must be made in order to identify individuals who are appropriate for the group.

When pre-existing lists are not available, the only alternative is to contact individuals by telephone, by mail, or by intercepting them in public places. The same types of procedures used to identify and qualify participants that are employed in survey research are used ordinarily in such instances. For example, random-digit dialing procedures may be employed to identify representative households. Then a few brief screening questions can be used to determine whether individuals meet the requirements for participation in a particular focus group. Further information concerning the recruitment of representative samples can be found in Fowler (1988) in this series.

MAKING CONTACT

The first step in recruiting a focus group is an initial contact to invite participation. The initial contact may occur by mail, telephone, or in person. When the researcher's purpose requires that groups be composed in a particular way, a few qualifying questions may be used. These questions may include demographic characteristics, personality factors, or other variables related to the purpose of the research. When multiple groups need to be carried out with different groups composed in different ways, this type of screening is necessary for matching individuals with specific groups.

After determining that the individual contacted is appropriate for participation, the individual is usually given a general description of the nature of the research, including the fact that the research will involve a group discussion. The general topic for research should be identified, and the importance of the individual's participation and opinions should be emphasized. If an incentive is to be used, this should be indicated along with how and when it will be paid. If refreshments or a meal are to be served, this also should be noted.

Prospective participants then should be given the time and place of the group session. Both the starting and ending times for the interview should be indicated. It is a good idea to ask group members to arrive 15 to 30 minutes prior to the interview in order to account for traffic delays, weather conditions, and other assorted minor emergencies. One advantage of scheduling several focus groups on the same topic is that participants can be offered several alternative times, dates, and often locations. Such alternatives increase the likelihood that individuals will be free to participate.

Once individuals have agreed to participate in a focus group, they immediately should receive either a written confirmation of their willingness to participate or a confirming telephone call. Written confirmations are preferable when time permits because they provide a means for delivering maps and directions to the site of the discussion. Written confirmations also carry a more formal tone and imply an obligation which serves to increase the commitment of the individual to participate.

Regardless of the type of confirmation used, participants should be contacted again by telephone 24 hours or so prior to the focus group interview. This reminds the participant of the earlier agreement and provides an opportunity to assure that the participant has accurate directions.

INCENTIVES

Focus groups are a time-consuming activity for participants. Taking two or more hours out of one's life to talk to a group of strangers is not likely to be viewed as an appealing prospect, particularly if one has worked all day. There are a variety of incentives that may be used to encourage participation, and most focus group participants are provided monetary and other incentives. In addition, for most people, the focus group itself can be an incentive because it is generally an enjoyable experience. When recruiting participants, this aspect of participation should be emphasized. A stimulating discussion, however, is not enough to induce most individuals into spending time in a focus group. Commercial research organizations were paying focus group participants an average of $25 for participation at the time this book was written. Members of certain specialized groups command even greater compensation.

It is also a good idea to serve snacks or even a light meal if the group will be conducted near a mealtime. The presence of food tends to relax participants and it encourages participation by eliminating concerns about meals. Babysitting services also help assure participation.

Other types of incentives that have been used include free products, transportation, and even overnight hotel accommodations. Incentives should
be selected that have universal value to the participants; what may be valuable to one person may have little value to other. This is one reason money is employed most often.

One reason that civic and religious organizations provide membership lists is that the incentives—or some portion of them—go to the organizations. This is not an uncommon fund-raising activity for many organizations. Such organizations provide researchers with ready-made lists of individuals who have agreed, at least in principle, to serve as research subjects. The disadvantage of using such groups, however, is that many of the individuals may be well known to one another or even be close friends. Such individuals may form small cliques within a group and reinforce the opinions of one another. This may diminish the responsiveness of other group members, or move the group toward a consensus opinion more quickly than might otherwise be the case. Friends also are more likely to engage in side conversations that may disrupt the flow of discussion in the group or create resentment among others in the group. As we saw in Chapter 2, the dynamics of groups change radically depending on the level of acquaintance and the homogeneity of the participants. It generally is not desirable to have a few people who know one another well within a group of strangers. Furthermore, a group composed of rather homogeneous friends is likely to produce less variance in opinion than a group of strangers who might otherwise be equally homogeneous.

In addition, in time such groups become professional focus group participants. Such “professionals” are seldom representative of the larger population. For these reasons it is a good idea to inquire how frequently the group participates in focus group activities. Prospective participants also can be screened to assure that they have not participated recently in other focus groups and are not acquainted with other participants.

**LOCATION**

It was noted in Chapter 1 that focus groups can take place in a wide variety of settings. In Chapter 2 we reviewed many of the factors related to location that may influence the dynamics of a group’s interaction and discussion; this review suggested that location is an important factor to consider when designing a group. Location also will influence the ease with which participants are recruited. In general, the closer the location to participants’ homes or work, the more likely they are to participate. Travel time generally is more critical than distance in determining convenience, and when the location of the interview is between home and work there is a lesser sense of traveling out of one’s way.

Location also has psychological implications. Many prospective participants may be reluctant to travel to a location in a seedy part of town or to a deserted downtown location. Focus groups held in familiar, well-traveled areas are likely to be perceived as more attractive. This is one reason why shopping malls are a favored location with many researchers. Shopping malls are familiar, well traveled, and attractive locations in which focus group participants feel comfortable. They also serve to set the tone of the focus group as an interesting experience and to provide a set of cues for participants that suggests professionalism, comfort, and purpose.

**HOW MANY PARTICIPANTS?**

Most focus groups are composed of 6 to 12 people. Fewer than 6 participants makes for a rather dull discussion, and more than 12 participants are difficult for the moderator to manage. The presence of more than a dozen participants also does not afford enough opportunity for all individuals to participate actively. It is generally a good idea, however, to recruit more individuals than required. A good rule of thumb is to assume that at least two participants will not show up for the interview; this number may vary somewhat depending on the nature of the participants and the type of recruitment used. For example, participants who have significant demands on their time—like senior executives and physicians—often are required to make last-minute schedule changes that may result in their missing a focus group meeting. Individuals who must travel a long distance through heavy traffic may be delayed even if they had planned to attend the session. On the other hand, participants that are recruited through a local civic organization for a group that will meet in a location a few blocks from their homes are much more likely to attend.

It generally is better to overrecruit slightly than to cancel a group because too few individuals are present. If, by some chance, all participants who were recruited do happen to show up, it is relatively easy to ask one or two persons to leave. Generally, the best way to do this is to ask the last persons to arrive to leave. The incentive should always be provided, even when the participant is asked to leave.

The question of how many participants to recruit is related to the number of focus groups as well as the number of persons in each group. There are no
FOCUS GROUPS

general rules concerning the optimal number of groups. When the research is very complex or when numerous different types of individuals are of interest, more focus groups will be required. When the population of interest is relatively homogeneous and the research question is relatively simple, a single group may be sufficient. Most focus group applications involve more than one group, but seldom more than three or four groups. The question of the number of groups to use is ultimately one that must be determined based on the objectives of the research. It is also a question that must be informed by the factors reviewed in Chapter 2, because the dynamics of individual groups may well be related to the purpose of the research.

RECRUITING HARD-TO-REACH INDIVIDUALS

There are occasions when a particular research question requires that focus group discussions be carried out with individuals who are difficult to reach. Such individuals include physicians, senior business executives, government officials, and an array of other specialists or just very busy people. Recruiting such individuals for participation in focus groups is not impossible, but it may require heroic efforts. In many cases, it also may be found that interviewees are easier and less costly to schedule. Nevertheless, groups have been and can be carried out with such people.

One way to reach individuals who are otherwise difficult to recruit is to go to places where they tend to congregate. Trade shows, professional conventions and conferences, and business meetings are often good places to recruit and carry out focus groups. Groups may be recruited prior to the event or on-site. Generally, such groups will feature a cocktail party or other event for the participants. Some organizations have gone so far as to sponsor their own conferences, often in attractive locations, just to obtain access to such individuals. Incentives generally are not required to obtain participation in such settings.

Focus groups with business executives often are easier to schedule in airports than other places. Airports are places where some people spend a significant amount of time simply waiting and where an interview or focus group may provide a way to fill some time. Physicians often may be recruited more readily if the location of the interview is a hospital at which they practice. In some cases it may be necessary to compensate them at their hourly rate in order to obtain access.

RECRUITING PARTICIPANTS

One particularly creative telecommunications company decided that it needed to talk with the chief executive officers of major corporations. Such individuals tend to be extremely busy and are virtually impossible to find in the same place. The telecommunications firm made an offer too good to resist: It chartered a cruise ship and invited the CEOs and their spouses for a three-day weekend cruise, all expenses paid. The firm succeeded in drawing over 200 CEOs to the cruise. Although the cruise cost several hundred thousand dollars, it was well worth the cost to have a captive research pool for three days.

In recent years, working mothers with young children have become an increasingly difficult group to interview; providing babysitting services is an almost indispensable requirement for obtaining their participation. When the focus group is held in a shopping mall location and the babysitting service is extended for an hour or so before or after the focus group, an additional incentive for participation is provided.

The key to recruiting any group is an understanding of where and how the potential members spend their time, what barriers may exist that make participation difficult, and what incentives are valued by the group. This understanding provides a basis for developing a recruitment plan that includes a location that optimizes participation, the identification of ways to eliminate barriers, and provides incentives for participation in a focus group.

It is important to remember that the greatest obstacle to carrying out a focus group is the need to bring 8 to 12 people together at the same place and at the same time. Time is a finite resource, and in modern society the time budget of the average individual may be constrained more than the financial budget. Asking individuals to spend 90 minutes or more in a focus group discussion—and to spend time traveling to and from the group—is asking for a significant sacrifice on the part of the individual. To ask also that these individuals rearrange their calendars, forego dinner, find babysitters, or travel to unfamiliar locations is simply too great a sacrifice for many potential focus group members.

The researcher should be sensitive to the sacrifice participants make. A $25 incentive is not very much for a three-hour detour on the way home from work, particularly if a babysitter for the children costs $6 an hour. Researcher arrogance may be the single most important factor in the failure of a focus group: Participants are doing the researcher, and his or her sponsors a favor, regardless of the compensation and other incentives provided. Recognition of this fact and an appreciation of the participants' potential sacrifice is a good beginning for scheduling a focus group.
FOCUS GROUPS BY TELECONFERENCING

Technology is having an impact on most types of research, and focus group interviewing is no exception. An increasingly common approach to reaching individuals who are dispersed geographically or otherwise difficult to reach is the use of a conference telephone call as a substitute for a face-to-face group meeting. Teleconferencing greatly expands the pool of potential participants and adds considerable flexibility to the process of scheduling an interview. Busy professionals and executives, who might otherwise be unavailable for a face-to-face meeting, often can be reached by means of a telephone call.

Focus group interviewing via teleconferencing is carried out in much the same way as other focus groups are conducted: A moderator leads a discussion of participants who are brought together by a conference telephone call. The moderator’s task is aided by electronic monitoring equipment that keeps an ongoing record of who has talked and for how long. A visual display can keep the names and frequency of participation of group members before the moderator. Thus, the moderator can draw out quiet participants, just as in a more typical focus group.

Focus group interviewing via teleconferencing may be the only option for certain types of samples, but it is not without some costs relative to more traditional groups. The lack of face-to-face interaction often reduces the spontaneity of the group and eliminates the nonverbal communication that plays a key role in eliciting responses. Such nonverbal communication is often critical for determining when further questioning or probing will be useful, and is often an important source of interplay among group members.

Teleconferencing tends to reduce the intimacy of the group as well, making group members less likely to share more personal or sensitive information. Finally, the moderators’ role is made more difficult because it is harder to control the participants. Dominant participants are more difficult to quiet, and less active participants are more difficult to recognize. Despite these limitations, teleconferencing has become an important tool for conducting focus groups among hard-to-reach respondents.

DEVELOPING THE INTERVIEW GUIDE

The interview guide sets the agenda for a focus group discussion. It should grow directly from the research questions that were the impetus for the research. Like the selection and recruitment of participants, the construction of the interview guide should not proceed until the research agenda and all of the questions related to it have been articulated clearly and agreed upon by all parties with an interest in the research.

The development of the interview guide is not the sole responsibility of the focus group moderator. Indeed, the moderator may not even be selected until the research agenda has been established and a preliminary interview guide has been drafted. The interview guide should be developed in collaboration with all parties interested in the research at hand. These include policy and decision makers who may use the information, as well as the researchers charged with implementing the research. At some point, the moderator should be brought into the design process in order to assure that he or she is comfortable with the instrument and understands the intent of the questions.

When designing an interview guide it is important to remember that its purpose is to provide direction for the group discussion. It is not a verbal version of a survey questionnaire; survey questionnaires provide a great deal more structure than should a focus group interview guide. In addition, survey questionnaires often provide both questions and potential responses from which the research participants select answers. Interview guides provide far less structure in the questions themselves and do not suggest potential responses.

Formulating Questions

When developing the interview guide, there are two general principles that should be observed. The first suggests that questions be ordered from the more general to the more specific. This means that questions of the most general and unstructured nature should be placed early, and more specific questions—which may suggest specific responses to the more general questions—should be placed near the end of the guide. Second, questions should be ordered by their relative importance to the research agenda. Thus, the questions of greatest importance should be placed early, near the top of the guide, while those of lesser significance should be placed near the end.

These two principles may appear to conflict (and they often do), but it is frequently possible to establish an agenda that starts with general questions about one particular topic, moves to specific questions about the same topic, and then moves back to another set of general questions. Obviously, this approach does not work well when the topics for discussion are related very closely and where the answers to specific questions regarding one topic may influence the responses to general questions to be raised later.

Ultimately, the researcher will need to exercise judgment in making trade-offs between the general-to-specific rule and the more-to-least-important
rule. In some cases where there are many questions of great importance, the only solution may be the use of a number of different focus groups, each with its own interview guide. Furthermore, it is important to recognize that groups often take on lives of their own and that agendas are dictated by the natural flow of discussions. Thus, the interview guide is just that—a guide, which the moderator and group should be allowed to modify if it proves desirable.

Another factor that must be considered in the design of the interview guide is the amount of effort required to discuss a particular topic. It is virtually impossible to extend any group beyond two hours without exhausting everyone, but some topics create cognitive fatigue more quickly than others. Very technical topics or topics that are emotionally charged will exhaust participants more quickly, and the interview guide should reflect this fact. When the topic is likely to require considerable energy and effort on the part of the participants, the interview guide should be shorter and involve fewer questions.

How Many Questions?

It is often difficult to judge the number of topics and questions that can be covered in a designated amount of time. Different groups will spend radically different amounts of time on individual topics, and what may evolve as a long and intense discussion in one group may be met with disinterest by another group. Chapter 2 reviewed some of the factors that might influence the amount of time required to deal with particular topics by groups of varying composition. A very homogeneous group may be able to move through many questions quickly, while a group composed of very heterogeneous individuals on a number of dimensions may labor over even a small number of questions. An experienced moderator can often provide some guidance with respect to the amount of material that can be covered on a particular topic. Generally, the more complex a topic, the more emotionally involving the topic, or the greater the heterogeneity of views on the topic within the group, the fewer the topics and specific questions that can be covered.

In practice most interview guides consist of fewer than a dozen questions, though the moderator frequently is given considerable latitude to probe responses and add new questions as the actual interview progresses. A focus group interview is a dynamic and idiosyncratic exercise, so such flexibility in pursuing new questions is critical to the success of the interview. It may be helpful during the design of the interview guide to try to anticipate the many directions in which a discussion may go. This is often not practical, however, because one reason for carrying out a focus group is the lack of information regarding the topic for discussion.

One option available to the researcher who carries out several focus groups is the rolling interview guide. An interview guide is developed for the first group, then the guide is revised for use in the second group based on the outcome of the first group discussion. Information obtained in the second group may then be used for yet another revision of the interview and the whole process is repeated. This process may continue until a guide is developed with which the researcher is comfortable or until interviews with all groups have been completed. One significant disadvantage associated with this approach, however, is that it makes comparison across groups even more difficult. With the use of rolling interview guides, no group is asked to respond to exactly the same set of questions. Despite this disadvantage, a rolling interview guide may be the only alternative available, and it frequently makes the best use of multiple focus groups because it allows information to unfold over time as more is discovered about a topic.

How Much Structure?

It was noted earlier that questions in the interview guide should not be structured so that they provide potential responses for the discussants. Yet even when such highly structured questions are avoided there remains considerable choice regarding the amount of structure to use when designing questions. Although it is impossible to eliminate structure in questions completely, it is possible to design relatively unstructured questions. Such relatively unstructured questions allow respondents to refer to virtually any aspect of the general stimulus identified in the question. For example, a relatively unstructured question might take one of the following forms:

How do you feel about XYZ?
What thoughts went through your head while you watched the program?
What did you think about when you first saw XYZ?

Note that these questions do not draw attention to any specific aspects or dimensions of the stimulus objects referred to in the questions. The respondent can select any aspect or dimension—and, indeed, what they select may have important implications. More specifically, those issues that respondents raise first are likely to be those that are most memorable, important, or salient to them. Exceptions to this general rule are topics that are threatening or of a very sensitive or potentially embarrassing nature.
Structure may be introduced into a question by providing information about those dimensions or aspects of the stimulus object on which the respondent should focus. Thus, a respondent may be asked a question about a particular dimension of the stimulus object in the question:

Do you think a value-added tax will help the very rich or the very poor?
How do you feel about the safety of X automobile?
When do you use your widget?

Alternatively, the question may draw attention to a particular type of response to the stimulus object:

How did you feel about the woman in the perfume ad?
Did you find the spokesperson believable?
What did you learn from the advertisement that you didn’t know before?

Generally, the less-structured types of questions will precede those with more structure because those with more structure tend to be more directive and establish directions for responses. Although more-structured questions do not suggest specific answers, they do tend to move the discussion in particular directions and produce a narrowing of the discussion.

Although it may appear that less structure is better in focus group interviews, this is not always the case. Some people need help in articulating a response; providing a key word or cue may help respondents to formulate answers. In other cases those aspects of the stimulus object that are most salient and easily remembered for respondents may not be the aspects of primary interest to the researcher. This often occurs in communication research where the researcher may be interested in the full array of beliefs and feelings communicated, but where the respondents are able to recall only the most salient aspects of the communication. More specific cues may be required to elicit less salient or memorable portions of the communication.

On the other hand, it is important that the interviewer not “lead” the respondent in the sense of providing an answer. Rephrasing a question can be helpful, but suggesting what the respondent should say is not what a focus group is designed to do. A skillful moderator is often able to handle this problem by having other group members interpret or rephrase the question. This is not always a viable solution, however, because another group member may simply suggest an answer. Even so, this is more desirable because the other group members are not as aware of the research agenda as is the moderator.

The critical issue in determining the amount of structure is the preservation of the emic mode of data collection referred to in Chapter 1. Focus groups are designed to determine how respondents structure the world, not how participants respond to the researcher’s view of how the world—or how a particular phenomenon—is structured.

More structured questions may be useful when respondents are uncertain or embarrassed about particular responses. Even when an aspect of the stimulus object or response to the object is very salient, it may not be offered as part of a response to a relatively unstructured question for fear of being wrong or embarrassed. Providing additional structure may serve to bring out such responses by suggesting an interest in the topic and by suggesting that such responses are acceptable.

Because the objective of a focus group is to stimulate discussion, questions that call for a direct, one- or two-word response should be avoided. Questions that can be answered simply “yes” or “no” provide little information and stifle discussion. While closed-ended questions of the agree-disagree variety or questions that suggest specific sets of responses may be particularly appropriate in survey research, they are of little use in focus group research. Questions that include words such as how, why, under what conditions, and similar probes suggest to respondents that the researcher is interested in complexity and facilitating discussion.

The nature of the questions are but one determinant of the amount of structure in a focus group discussion. The style and personality of the moderator, as well as the composition of the group itself, also influence the amount of structure and its desirability. Thus, we will return to the issue of structure in Chapters 4 and 5, when we examine the influence of the moderator and the ways in which focus groups may be conducted.

Wording of Questions

Respondents can give meaningful responses only to questions they comprehend. This means that questions should be phrased simply in language that respondents understand. Long, complex, multipart questions are not only difficult to understand; response is also difficult.

The way in which questions are worded also may place respondents in embarrassing or defensive situations. This should be avoided, and in most circumstances questions can be phrased to avoid threatening or embarrassing the respondents. For example, instead of asking respondents “Why don’t you take your child in for a regular check-up with a doctor?” the same question might be asked as “What prevents you from taking your child to the doctor
as often as you would like?" It may even be possible for the moderator to
have other group members raise these questions, or to play off of the
responses of the group in such a way as to place the question within the natural
flow of the discussion. This often reduces the anxiety or embarrassment of
respondents, and a skillful moderator will know when to use this technique
to broach a topic rather than ask a question directly. A little forethought
and sensitivity goes a long way toward the prevention of embarrassing and
threatening questions and may make the difference between a lively, talkative
group and one that is sullen and uncomfortably quiet.

PRETESTING

There is no substitute for trying out an interview guide prior to its use. No
matter how experienced the researcher and moderator or how thorough and
conscientious the designers, it is impossible to predict in advance the way
respondents will interpret and respond to questions. Professional researchers
are not typical individuals, and no matter how skilled they are their impres-
sions of questions are not usually representative of the research population.
This means that at least some degree of pretesting is appropriate. Such
pretesting may take a variety of forms ranging from a small, mock focus
group to simply trying out the questions on a few individuals. At minimum,
those persons involved in the pretest should not have been involved in the
design of the interview guide and should not be aware of the purpose of the
research. When practical, it is highly desirable to carry out the pretesting with
respondents representative of those who will participate in the actual focus
groups.

Pretesting of the interview provides an opportunity to determine whether
the wording of questions is appropriate, to determine whether the questions
elicit discussion, and to identify questions that are not understood easily. It
should be noted, however, that the interview guide is only one part of the
research instrument; the group itself and the moderator are also important
elements. This means it is impossible to pretest the research instrument fully.

SUMMARY

The selection and recruitment of participants for a focus group is a critical
part of the design process. The fact that focus groups are not designed to
produce projectable statistical results does not mean that care should be

RECRUITING PARTICIPANTS

abandoned when recruiting respondents. As in all research, respondents
should be selected from an identified population of relevance to the research
question. Likewise, the interview guide should be designed with care and
with a clear understanding of the research problem.

Focus groups are not random discussions among a group of individuals
who are brought together haphazardly. Rather, they are group discussions
among carefully selected individuals guided by a skilled moderator who
follows a well-constructed interview guide. Ultimately, the composition of
the group, the structure of the interview guide, and the location of the
interview must flow from a well-defined research objective. Like all other
research, focus group research begins with and should be guided by a
well-articulated purpose.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Why is the establishment of the research agenda, or research question, the first
   step necessary in both recruiting focus group participants and designing an
   interview guide?
2. Why is convenience sampling the most common type of sampling employed in
   selecting respondents for a focus group? What are the relative advantages
   and disadvantages of this approach to recruiting participants?
3. Why must attention be paid to the composition of focus groups? What factors
   should be considered when determining the composition of a particular group?
4. What steps may a researcher take to assure the participation of potential group
   members?
5. What types of individuals are difficult to recruit for participation in focus
groups? Why? For each group identified, list some ways to increase the
   probability of their participation.
6. What is the purpose of a focus group interview guide? How does such a guide
   differ from a survey questionnaire? What are the reasons for this difference?
7. What are the two principal rules governing the design of an interview guide?
   How does one resolve conflicts between these two principles?
8. What is a rolling interview guide? Why is it used? What are its advantages
   and disadvantages?
9. What is a relatively structured question? How should structure be introduced
   into a focus group question? Why is the use of structure necessary?
10. What factors should be considered when selecting the wording of questions
    used in the focus group interview guide? Why are these factors important?
11. Why is pretesting a necessary step in developing an interview guide? How
    would a researcher pretest an interview guide?
Exercise:

Select a topic. Develop a description of the type of individuals you would include in a focus group discussion of this topic. Indicate how you would recruit such individuals. Develop an interview guide for a discussion of the topic.

The Focus Group Moderator

Throughout the first three chapters of the book, we have suggested that one of the keys to the collection of rich and valid insights through the use of a focus group is an effective moderator. In this chapter we will examine the role of the moderator, and consider issues related to his or her selection and training. In so doing we will draw on the substantial literature on interviewer effects and interviewing (see Fowler & Mangione, 1989). It is clear that what distinguishes effective focus group moderators from less effective ones is a function of both individual and situational factors. These include personal characteristics (e.g., age, sex, personality, etc.); educational background and training; amount of experience as a moderator; and situational characteristics such as the sensitivity of the topic, the scope and depth of coverage required, the conduciveness of the physical setting, and time constraints. Mastering the technique of moderating a focus group is an art in itself, requiring the moderator to wear many hats and assume different roles during the course of even a single focus group. He or she has the unenviable task of balancing the requirements of sensitivity and empathy on the one hand, and objectivity and detachment on the other.

An important first question is whether moderators should be selected on the basis of specific requirements related to the purpose of the group, the group’s composition, and the location of the group, or whether there exists an ideal general-purpose moderator who can handle most if not all focus group interviews. To answer this question we need to examine what it takes to be a good moderator or facilitator. Then we will see if these requirements or standards are representative of an individual or require an interaction of specific characteristics of the moderator with other characteristics of the group. For example, Karger (1987) suggests:

The best facilitator has unobtrusive chameleon-like qualities; gently draws consumers into the process; deftly encourages them to interact with one another for optimum synergy; lets the intercourse flow naturally with a minimum of intervention; listens openly and deeply; uses silence well; plays back consumer statements in a distilling way which brings out more refined thoughts or explanations; and remains completely nonauthoritarian and nonjudgemental.
Yet the facilitator will subtly guide the proceedings when necessary and intervene to cope with various kinds of troublesome participants who may impair the productive group process. (p. 54)

Scott (1987) emphasizes that the choice of the moderator is critical and acknowledges that moderators have the difficult task of dealing with dynamics that constantly evolve during a focus group discussion. They must know how to handle the “rational man” syndrome, in which respondents give the “right” or “socially acceptable” answer.

A good moderator must handle the problem by constantly checking behavior against attitudes, challenging and drawing out respondents with opposite views and looking for the emotional component of the responses. (p. 35)

Given these expectations of moderators, let us now review some of the theoretical bases for the art of moderating. Insights on effective moderating can be drawn from three major research streams: interviewing techniques and tactics; leadership studies; and group dynamics. This knowledge, together with an adequate understanding of the research problem, can help improve the effectiveness of moderating in four ways: selection of the moderator, preparation of the moderator, the process of moderating, and analysis of focus group data (including evaluating the unintended consequences of moderator behavior).

This chapter will focus primarily on the application of interviewing principles and knowledge of leadership styles to moderator selection and preparation. The dynamics of moderating a focus group and the role of the moderator in the analysis of focus group data will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5. We begin with a brief review of leadership styles and interviewing strategies, and discuss their implications for different styles of moderating. This is followed by a discussion of the issues related to moderator training, preparation, and selection.

LEADERSHIP AND GROUP DYNAMICS

The focus group moderator is placed in the role of nominal leader of the group. Exactly what this role entails, however, will vary from group to group. There are many interpretations of leadership. It has often been associated with motivation, exercise of social influence (power), giving direction, and providing a good example for others in the group. Shaw (1981) notes that it is important to distinguish between leader and leadership: “Leadership refers to a process, whereas leader refers to a position within the group structure or to a person who occupies such a position” (p. 317). Two classic definitions of leadership serve to illustrate the process nature of leadership:

Leadership is the process of influencing group activities toward goal setting and goal achievement. (Stogdill, 1950)
Leadership is interpersonal influence, exercised in situation and directed, through the communication process, toward the attainment of a specified goal or goals. (Tannenbaum & Massarik, 1957)

There is some communality among the numerous definitions of leadership—namely, that it involves people, influence, and goals. Certainly by these criteria the focus group moderator is a leader. Carter (1954), in his classic study of leaders, identified three broad clusters of traits related to leadership:

Group goal facilitation, which includes those abilities that are necessary to help the group attain its goal (e.g., insight, intelligence, knowing how to get things done);
Group sociability, which includes those factors that are necessary to keep the group functioning smoothly (e.g., sociability, cooperativeness, popularity); and
Individual prominence, which includes factors related to the person’s desire for group recognition (e.g., initiative, self-confidence, persistence).

As pointed out in Chapter 2, the emergence of leadership is influenced by individual characteristics such as personality and intelligence, and interpersonal processes such as group cohesiveness, compatibility, and the homogeneity or heterogeneity of the group. Furthermore, situational variables such as spatial position and location in the communication network can affect the probability of a person becoming a leader. For example, a person occupying a spatial position providing the maximum eye contact has a greater probability of emerging as a leader. Also, central positions in communication networks enhance leadership selection and emergence. Thus, the focus group moderator is not only the nominal leader of the group, but generally is seated in a central position within the group, which tends to reinforce the leadership role. These factors alone, however, do not make the moderator a leader. Personal traits and behavior must reinforce the initial role designation or the moderator will lose his or her leadership position to others in the group.

The traditional approach to studying leadership—called the trait approach—has been based on the assumption that leaders possess certain
Table 4.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traits</th>
<th>Skills</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adaptable to situations</td>
<td>Clever (intelligent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alert to social environment</td>
<td>Conceptually skilled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambitious and achievement-oriented</td>
<td>Creative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assertive</td>
<td>Diplomatic and tactful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooperative</td>
<td>Fluent in speaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decisive</td>
<td>Knowledgeable about group task</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependable</td>
<td>Organized (administrative ability)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominant (desire to influence others)</td>
<td>Persuasive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Energetic (high activity level)</td>
<td>Socially skilled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistent</td>
<td>Self-confident</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tolerant of stress</td>
<td>Willing to assume responsibility</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


According to the path-goal theory of leadership (House & Mitchell, 1974), leaders can increase the motivation of their subordinates by clarifying the paths to rewards or by increasing rewards. There are different ways to go about doing this; four kinds of leadership behaviors or styles have been identified that vary according to situational factors, group member characteristics, and work environment characteristics. Group members may differ according to their motivation, abilities, self-confidence, and willingness to work together. The situation itself can be either structured or unstructured. Accordingly, one of the following styles would be more appropriate (Daft & Steers, 1986):

- **Supportive Leadership**: Show concern for the well-being and personal needs of subordinates; be friendly and approachable; be considerate; create a friendly climate; and treat group members as equals.
- **Directive Leadership**: Tell subordinates what they are expected to do; give guidance and direction; provide standards and schedules; set performance targets; and ask group members to follow rules and regulations.
- **Participative Leadership**: Consult with group members about activities, schedules, and targets; ask for opinions and suggestions; allow for participation in decision making; and take group members’ views into account.
- **Achievement-Oriented Leadership**: Set challenging goals; seek improvements in performance; emphasize excellence in performance; and show expectation and confidence that group members have the ability to attain high standards.

The primary responsibility and challenge for a leader is, therefore, to analyze the requirements of the task and characteristics of the group and adopt the appropriate leadership style that would be most effective for accomplishing the task. Moderators of focus groups are no different from other types of leaders in this respect. In fact, their leadership tasks can be viewed as more challenging: They are dealing with strangers most of the time. They have little power (in the traditional sense) to influence participants. While a work manager can always appeal to the reward structure to encourage productivity, moderators of focus groups have to use persuasion and tact to encourage group participation and maintain interest in the topic. Thus, the leadership style that is likely to be most appropriate for a successful focus group moderator is most likely to be of the supportive nature, though certain groups may require other types of styles. It is not clear that individuals move easily from one leadership style to another, so there may be occasions when a moderator will need to be matched with a given group based on his or her leadership style.
FOCUS GROUPS

INTERVIEWING STYLES AND TACTICS

A substantial amount of literature on interviewing principles and practices, communication styles, and questioning strategies can be found in various fields, such as counseling and psychotherapy, personnel management, communication, and marketing research. Stewart and Cash (1982), for example, identify and discuss at least five major types of interviewing: informational, persuasive, employment, appraisal, and counseling. Each is similar in terms of the need to follow certain communication principles and strategies, but each differs in terms of the basic objective and use of the interview data.

Focus groups—as discussed in Chapter 1—have different uses and, because of this, the interviewing style, the type of questions, and the amount of interaction among participants desired will vary according to the purpose. Furthermore (as noted in Chapter 2), the composition of a group may necessitate a particular style of interviewing and most certainly the purpose of a group will determine the style of interviewing required. For example, a less structured and freewheeling approach to focus groups would be desirable if the purpose is to generate new ideas or to encourage creativity. On the other hand, a more structured approach with occasional in-depth probing may be required when the objective of the interview is to generate research hypotheses or to diagnose potential problems with a new program, product, or service, particularly when the topic is sensitive or potentially embarrassing. We will return to the issue of structure in Chapter 5.

Questions play an important role not only in getting at answers to research problems but also in setting the tone or climate for interaction. As noted in earlier chapters, the opening questions in a group interview can help put participants either at ease or on the defensive. Stewart and Cash (1982) provide a fairly detailed discussion of different types of questions and their uses. Basically, questions fall into one of two categories: open or closed. Open-ended questions tend to be broader in nature and allow respondents a great deal of freedom to provide the amount of information they want to give. Closed-ended questions are more restrictive and tend to limit the answer options available to respondents. Both types of questions may be appropriate, but closed-ended questions in focus groups are more often used as the basis for polarizing opinions for further discussion, rather than for closing discussion of topics. Thus, a moderator might ask for a specific opinion regarding a topic as a means of demonstrating that the group does not agree. This initial polarization of the group can be used to create interest and provide a foundation for a discussion of the reasons for the disagreement.

THE FOCUS GROUP MODERATOR

There is a trade-off in terms of amount and reliability of the information generated by open-ended versus closed-ended questions. The amount of data obtained tends to increase with the openness of the questions; however, the reliability of the data and the possibility of replication decrease as the questions get more open-ended. In survey research, where reliability and replicability are critical, there is a greater need to increase structure in the questions and to constrain the variety of responses. In focus group interviews, however, the usefulness of information is gauged more frequently by the ability to draw valid conclusions about the topic under discussion than by the ability to replicate findings across many focus groups. Thus, less structure may be most appropriate for many applications.

We can also classify questions into primary and secondary questions (see Kahn & Cannell, 1964). Primary questions are designed to help introduce topics or new areas within a topic in an interview, and tend to be open-ended. Secondary questions can be either open or closed, and are designed to follow up primary questions or probe in greater detail answers given to primary questions. Both types of questions play important roles in the focus group interview. Generally, focus group discussions start with primary questions and move to secondary questions.

Another important distinction is between directed ("loaded") and neutral questions. In comparison to neutral questions, directed questions tend to pressure or to force respondents to answer in a particular manner or to choose one answer over another. According to Stewart and Cash (1982), the direction provided by the interviewer or moderator may be "intentional or unintentional, implicit or explicit, verbal or nonverbal" (p. 87). Directed or leading questions can be distinguished from neutral questions by evaluating the context and manner in which they are asked. Leading questions may be valuable when the intent is to probe into sensitive topics such as alcohol abuse (where respondents tend to adopt a neutral stance in replying to questions), or where there is a need to push respondents beyond simple or surface responses. Although such questions are sometimes necessary, excessive use tends to place respondents into a reactive mode in which they simply respond to the interviewer's questions rather than generate their own freewheeling ideas in response to one another. This, in turn, tends to shift the research perspective from a more emic view to one that is largely etc.

As noted in earlier chapters, the structure of questions is dictated in large measure by whether the emic or etic perspective is adopted. Focus groups generally utilize the emic perspective, which often sacrifices reliability and statistical projectability for a more dependable understanding of the idio- graphic processes that give rise to respondents' opinions and feelings. The contingencies and qualifications of opinions and attitudes that frequently
accompany discussions in focus groups often are lost in surveys that require simple agree-disagree responses. On the other hand, the nuances of such qualifications make it difficult to draw firm conclusions about attitudes. There are, then, inevitable trade-offs in selecting one style of interviewing or mode of questioning over another. Ultimately, the style selected must match the purpose of the research.

Another aspect of interviewing style is the sequence in which questions are asked. It is most common to begin questioning with a general question and move to more specific questions, but this is not always the most appropriate approach. The interviewer or moderator may pursue any of several potential sequences of questions (see Gorden, 1969; Kahn & Cannell, 1964). Certain sequencing strategies may be more appropriate than others, and the choice of a sequence may vary with the topic and availability of time. Furthermore, there may be a need to adopt more than one sequencing strategy for different subtopics within a single interview, or for different types of groups based on the anticipated or revealed dynamics of the groups.

The funnel approach to questioning—as the name implies—begins with broad questions followed by gradually more narrow questions. It is generally most appropriate for topics that are considered fairly sensitive, and where the interviewees are quite knowledgeable but need more time and freedom to express themselves in the beginning of the interview before they can be probed effectively. In the inverted funnel sequence, closed questions are followed by increasingly more open-ended questions. The objective is to motivate respondents gradually to talk more freely about the subject. Opening questions are designed to assist interviewees by either aiding recall or making it easier for them to answer.

The quantamensional design approach (Gallup, 1947) was developed to determine the intensity of respondents’ opinions and attitudes. It involves a five-step approach, with questions designed to measure: (1) the degree of awareness; (2) uninfluenced attitudes; (3) specific attitudes; (4) reasons for these attitudes; and (5) the intensity of these attitudes. For example, in the context of an interview on disposal of hazardous chemical waste, the questions might be:

1. “Tell me, what do you know about current methods of disposing of hazardous chemical waste?”
2. “What, if any, are the factors that contribute to the growing stockpile of hazardous chemical waste?”

3. “Do you approve or disapprove of these methods of disposing of hazardous chemical wastes?”
4. “Why do you feel that way?”
5. “How strongly do you feel about this—strongly, very strongly, something that you would not change your mind on?”

Like the funnel and inverted-funnel approach, this sequence of questions allows for a great deal of probing. This approach tends to move from a very general discussion of what the respondents know about a topic to their general opinions and feelings, then to respondents’ attitudes and feelings about specific dimensions of the topic.

In contrast, the funnel sequence is designed to get at interviewees’ attitudes or opinions in a manner that will facilitate quantifying the data. It involves asking a series of similar questions where respondents have to rate people, objects, or places. Little probing is possible under the funnel approach, because probing may influence subsequent ratings. This latter type of approach has more in common with traditional survey interviewing strategies than with traditional approaches to focus group interviewing. Nevertheless, such interview strategies may be appropriate in certain situations.

The behavior of the moderator within the group communication network can influence the effectiveness of different interviewing styles. When the objective of the focus group is to encourage ideas, a one-on-one interaction would tend to stifle creativity. The more productive approach would be to get all participants to feed off each other, with the moderator’s role being relegated to that of being one of the discussants (with occasional clarifying or directional questions). On the other hand, the moderator may need to take a more directive approach when the research agenda includes many very specific questions.

The positioning of the moderator within the group also affects the kind of leadership influence that can be exerted on group participants. When greater direction or focus is desired, being central in the communication network would be more likely to facilitate the exercise of moderator influence than would being on the periphery of the network.

In short, leadership style and interviewing strategies go hand in hand to produce effective moderating. The appropriate leadership style often dictates the effectiveness of different interviewing strategies. Different topics require different styles of moderating. Therefore, it is important to ensure that moderating style and ability are compatible with the demands (scope and depth requirements) of the research topic.
MODERATOR SELECTION AND PREPARATION

A useful starting point for selecting a moderator is to examine personal characteristics (e.g., age, sex, personality), educational background and training, and amount of moderating experience. Generally, certain types of educational backgrounds—such as those in marketing, psychology, or other social sciences—or training in psychotherapy are useful preparation for a moderator. These requirements, however, are not necessary or even sufficient qualifications for effective moderating. Individuals with similar training and background often vary in moderating styles, which are shaped largely by personality factors. Langer (1978) notes that “moderating is essentially a creative act which must be practiced by those with a certain ‘flair.’ These talents relate not just to years of training but to something deeper” (p. 10). Langer highlights eight characteristics of good qualitative researchers that are functions of both personality and training; these are summarized in Table 4.2.

One concerned qualitative researcher (Axelrod, 1975) expressed skepticism about the quality and qualification of moderators now offering their services: “Actually, one of the most frustrating aspects of my job and that of anyone either buying or offering qualitative services is that there now are no professional requirements for being a qualitative researcher. No special educational or experience goals are demanded” (p. 11).

Another factor aggravating the problem of quality control is that there are few special courses or programs designed to improve skills or to train researchers in moderating. Much of the “training” of moderators takes place in-house (as in some big research agencies), or is idiosyncratic to a researcher’s personal experience and abilities. This makes the task of selecting an appropriate moderator even more difficult, because an unqualified moderator may be difficult to identify and easily can undermine the reliability and validity of focus group findings. Awareness of some general personal qualities (as in Table 4.2, for example) and relevant educational background, however, can be a useful starting point in the moderator selection decision process. It is worth noting that what makes an individual a successful researcher or scholar is not necessarily the same thing that makes an individual a good moderator. Many researchers considering the use of focus groups would be well advised to obtain the services of a professional moderator rather than moderate the group themselves.

The effectiveness of a moderator also is determined by situational variables such as sensitivity of the problem, conduciveness of focus group

---

**Table 4.2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Good qualitative researchers:</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Are genuinely interested in hearing other people’s thoughts and feelings</td>
<td>A good moderator is someone who in “real life” really is interested in finding out about people. Asking questions—and listening to the answers—does not start when someone sits in the moderator’s chair.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Are expressive of their own feelings</td>
<td>They do not talk only about concrete, objective events but also give their personal reactions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Are animated and spontaneous</td>
<td>Someone with a dull personality will not be able to control focus groups. Spontaneity is vital for a moderator to take advantage of the great many stimuli during a session.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Have a sense of humor</td>
<td>Not telling canned jokes but finding latent humor possibilities in ordinary situations. This quality, more important that it may seem, is strongly related to imagination, creativity, and spontaneity, all needed in qualitative research.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Are emphatic</td>
<td>This ability to understand how others feel and to see life from their perspective is essential.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Admit their own biases</td>
<td>Complete objectivity is impossible, but we can aim for recognition of our own feelings towards the subject with which we are dealing. If qualitative researchers talk about their own experiences or feelings related to a project, a client does not necessarily have to get nervous about their objectivity. The key point is whether we can be honest and introspective enough to understand these biases and professionally detach ourselves from them in our work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Are insightful about people</td>
<td>A true researcher is always exploring, asking why. You do not turn on the psychological probing and turn it off afterwards. Good qualitative researchers are truly intrigued with understanding people. This analytical bent shows through in their conversation, whether in personal or professional observations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Express thoughts clearly</td>
<td>The moderator must frame questions quickly, and, if these cannot be stated simply, the session will not succeed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Are flexible</td>
<td>They must respond quickly and be able to take new directions before or during sessions. They often face last minute changes and should be adaptable to recommend changes if a technique is not proving productive enough or if a concept needs revising.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Langer (1978)
facilities, time constraints, amount of probing required, and the interaction between the demographics (e.g., age, sex, and race) of the moderator and those of the focus group participants. There also may be a decision to be made regarding the efficacy of using an older person to moderate a teenage group, a male moderator for distinctively female topics, a culturally incompatible moderator for ethnically sensitive topics, or an expert to moderate highly technical subjects.

Research on the impact of group homogeneity and compatibility on group dynamics, which we reviewed in Chapter 2, seems to suggest that the more compatible the group members (including the moderator), the greater the interaction and the more open the communication. But there is no conclusive evidence that in fairly cosmopolitan or racially integrated cultures, demographic differences between the moderator and the focus group participants will bias the research findings.

Furthermore, studies of environmental influences on group behavior (see Chapter 2) suggest that certain layouts or seating arrangements can affect desirable interpersonal distances, and therefore the nature and frequency of interaction among focus group participants. The composition of the group in terms of gender or the social sensitivity of the topic, for example, may suggest the appropriate venue and seating arrangement to produce a comfortable environment for focus group interaction.

In addition to variations in the focus group participants' characteristics and the adequacy of focus group facilities, a moderator frequently encounters constraints or deadlines for conducting focus group interviews. The funds available for research often determine the number and duration of focus group interviews that can be conducted meaningfully. The depth of probing required versus that actually achieved is often a function of the scope of the problem, the sensitivity of the topic, and the comfort levels of the participants. Thus, making allowances for resource constraints are as important as ensuring a proper composition of focus group participants and comfortable focus group surroundings.

With training and experience, moderators can become more aware of these types of situational interactions and their impact on the usefulness and validity of focus group data. Such awareness often encourages or facilitates preplanning on the part of the moderator to develop strategies to overcome problems—such as noncooperative or disruptive behaviors—that may arise from participants' sensitivities. The unintended consequences of moderator behavior that may bias the integrity of the data also may be mitigated by adequate preparation and planning.

MODERATOR PREPARATION

Moderator preparation should involve an understanding of both the nature of the research problem and the potential nature of the group dynamics that may arise as a result of group composition, the topic to be discussed, and the physical setting of the group. An understanding of group dynamics and leadership emergence may help the moderator anticipate problems and design strategies to moderate the disruptive behavior of emergent leaders among focus group participants. Because in most instances, such behaviors are unavoidable, the more productive approach would be to seek the assistance of emergent leaders in generating discussion and increasing enthusiasm among group members. This would be a more viable approach in situations where participants have a great respect for a particular group member by virtue of his or her experience or expertise with the topic being discussed. We will discuss more specific strategies for dealing with these problems in Chapter 5.

An important aspect of moderator preparation involves learning how to deal with focus groups of different sizes. The size of the focus group may affect the effectiveness of moderators. Using the number of ideas generated as a measure of effectiveness, Fern (1982) found that eight-member groups generated significantly more ideas than four-member groups. There is really no hard and fast rule, however, about the optimal size of the focus group. As noted in Chapter 1, the ideal range seems to be between 8 to 12 people. Fewer than eight respondents may result in the discussion being somewhat narrow and biased in favor of a few individuals in the group. On the other hand, 10 to 12 people may be too many, depending on the composition of the group and the nature of the topic to be discussed. Levy (1979) provides a succinct description of the problems associated with increasing group size:

As the group grows in size, opportunities to address it decline, people have to wait more for their turns, and are frustrated by more views that they have less chance to respond to. They are also more widely dispersed in the room or around the table. The tendency for the group to fragment becomes great, and, as a result, the problems of controlling the conversations are magnified. There are likely to be distractions, frequent murmuring, dissipation of remarks in side conversations, sly antagonisms. The moderator is pressed toward the role of disciplinarian and classroom behavior, cautioning the group to be quiet, asking for a show of hands, questioning individuals in turn to be sure everyone gets a vote. The problems grow without necessarily enlarging the pool of information or range of themes that emerge. (p. 34)
Thus far, the discussion has focused on demographic and behavioral influences of moderator effectiveness. We have noted, however, that preparation on the part of the moderator must also involve understanding the nature and scope of the research problem, prioritizing the different objectives of the research; determining the appropriate depth of probing; being up-to-date and familiar with the topic or object of discussion; deciding on the strategy and sequencing of questioning that will facilitate discussion; and ultimately the analysis and interpretation of the data. The moderator also must be prepared both to deal with premature stagnation of participation by renewing interest and enthusiasm and to handle new or unexpected information by adapting the interview guide. A part of the preparation of the moderator should include identification of those points in the interview where interest may lag, or where discussion may become very intense. Such preparation provides strategies for moving the group on to new topics or discussion of the same topic at a different level of detail or abstraction.

One major dimension of moderator preparation is developing a good questioning strategy. Our brief review earlier in the chapter highlighted different types of questions and sequences of those questions. The primary purpose of any questioning strategy is to address problems or issues for which the focus group interview was designed. When the objectives of the focus group are clear, moderators can use different kinds of questions to get at different aspects of the topic or problem. Wheatley and Flexner (1988) provide a useful typology of questions and their usage situations, which is summarized in Table 4.3.

There are, however, situations when an "unfocussed" approach may be more appropriate. This approach is especially useful when respondents need to learn about a new concept or category, for idea generation or for separating good ideas from bad. In these circumstances neither the researcher nor the moderator may know enough about the topic to be able to come up with a detailed list of questions. Sometimes the purpose of the "unfocus" group is to find out the type of questions to ask, which may then be used for another focus group or for designing a survey instrument. This would be the case where a rolling interview guide such as that discussed in Chapter 3 would be appropriate.

Schonfeld (1988) provides guidelines for using the "unfocused" approach to group interviewing:

- Throw away the outline
- Provide the panelists a wide variety of ideas or stimuli to stimulate them
- Never call on panelists directly or force a response out of them
- Warm up panelists—not on the subject or topic—but by practicing disagreement.

### Table 4.3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Questions</th>
<th>Purpose/Usage Situation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Main research questions</strong></td>
<td>Focus discussion on issues directly at the purpose of the session. Exactly how you are going to ask these questions should be thought out beforehand.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Leading Questions</strong></td>
<td>Useful for carrying a discussion toward deeper meaning and are especially useful if the group seems hesitant to pursue it. Formulate the questions using the group's words and ideas and by asking, &quot;Why?&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Testing Questions</strong></td>
<td>Used to test the limits of a concept. Use the group's words and ideas to formulate the question, this time feeding the concepts back to participants in a more extreme, yet tentative form, as though you may have misunderstood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Steering Questions</strong></td>
<td>Used to nudge the group back onto the main research questions, following its frequent excursions into what it wants to talk about</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Obtuse Questions</strong></td>
<td>Often the discussion will go into territory uncomfortable to the group. To further pursue topics into such areas, you need to back the questions off one level of abstraction, allowing the group to discuss other people's reactions or opinions, not necessarily their own: &quot;Why do you suppose somebody else would feel this way?&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Factual Questions</strong></td>
<td>Questions that have a factual answer and permit the group to answer without personal risk. These questions can be useful for neutralizing emotionally charged group or discussions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>&quot;Feel Questions&quot;</strong></td>
<td>Used to ask for opinions surrounded by personal feelings. Feel questions ask participants to take risks and expose their personal feelings. They are the most dangerous and most fertile of question types. The rule to remember here is that every person is entitled to his or her feelings, and no one else can disagree with or discount them, though many will try</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Anonymous Questions** | Used to get a group talking, comfortable with each other, or refocused on a key question. They generally take the form, "Please take the index card in front of you and write down the single idea that comes to mind regarding this issue."
| **Silence** | Often the best question is no question. Many group leaders tend to fill in every void in the discussion. Simply waiting for a response allows those who are a little slower or uncertain to formulate their ideas |

FOCUS GROUPS

Thus, we see that just as leadership styles need to be varied according to the purpose of the research, the composition of the group, and the task situation, moderating style also needs to be adjusted for these same factors. Certain moderating styles, however, may introduce biases that affect the validity of the focus group research findings. We now turn our attention to some of the sources and nature of moderator-induced biases.

MODERATOR BIAS IN FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS

One important aspect of moderator preparation is developing an understanding of the sources and nature of biases that can affect the validity of the focus group data, as well as an understanding of the steps that might be taken to cope with these biases. Moderator bias can be introduced both intentionally and unintentionally. Kennedy (1976) highlights three different sources of bias that threaten moderator objectivity:

- **Personal bias**: The all-too-human predisposition to welcome and reinforce the expression of points of view which are consonant with our own
- **Unconscious needs to “please the client”**: The predisposition to welcome and reinforce the expression of points of view which are consonant with those of our clients, those for whom we are doing the research
- **The need for consistency**: The predisposition to welcome and reinforce the expression of points of view which are internally consistent. (p. 19)

Some examples of how these different sources of bias are manifested in practice include (Kennedy, 1976):

Most often, by greeting favorable comments with appreciative nods, smiles or reinforcing comments, and by responding to unfavorable comments with indifference, perplexed stares, or body movements which reflect discomfort.

By being patient, permissive and encouraging when someone finds it difficult to articulate a favorable thought, but by providing no such assistance to one who finds it difficult to express an unfavorable position.

By initiating a round of questioning with a favorably-inclined respondent, so that a favorable view will set a precedent and context for subsequent inquiries.

THE FOCUS GROUP MODERATOR

By failing to probe for contrary sentiments when favorable comments are expressed, but by probing actively when unfavorable comments are articulated.

By more actively directing questions to those who seem most likely to hold favorable views, and by ignoring those who seem most likely to hold unfavorable views.

By “turning on the charm” so that respondents will tend to go along with the position you have unconsciously conveyed you want to hear.

By permitting “out of context” favorable comments, while telling those who offer an unfavorable view out of context that “we’ll talk about that later.”

In periodic summaries of group positions, understating or omitting “minority” points of view. (p. 21)

Possessing the appropriate training and experience does not guarantee a bias-free focus group session. The researcher and research sponsor need to take an active role to understand the pressures being applied on the moderator, and to work closely with him or her both during the preparation and post-interview phases to avoid biasing the outcome of a group.

SUMMARY

In this chapter, we have reviewed a variety of issues related to the training, preparation, and selection of focus group moderators. We have considered the importance of leadership style, approaches to questioning of respondents, and moderator characteristics and behaviors that may bias the results of a focus group. An important aspect of moderator training and preparation involves learning how to deal with situational variables such as disruptive focus group participants, emergent leaders, different focus group sizes, deadlines, and other resource constraints. Personal characteristics, educational background and training, and amount of moderating experiences are important considerations in selecting a moderator. We have suggested, however, that there is no one best style for leading a focus group, nor is there a single best “type” of moderator. Rather, both the moderator and the strategy for conducting the interview must be matched with the purpose of the research and the characteristics of the group.
REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Is there such a thing as an ideal or best moderator? Discuss.
2. How can an understanding of leadership qualities and behaviors improve our ability to select good moderators?
3. Compare and contrast effective leaders with effective moderators.
4. How can the personal characteristics (e.g., age, sex, personality) and physical appearance of the moderator influence his or her ability to moderate effectively?
5. Knowing what questions to ask and when to ask them is an important quality that a good moderator should possess. Discuss the various types of questions and the situations for which they are appropriate.
6. An important aspect of interviewing style is the sequence in which questions are asked. For sensitive topics (e.g., racially sensitive issues), what approach would be most appropriate? Are there situations where the sequencing strategy really does not matter?
7. Indicate, briefly, how situational variables such as the physical setting, time constraints or the seating arrangement can influence the effectiveness of a moderator.
8. Moderator preparation involves more than just having a good understanding of the nature and scope of the research problem. What are some of the procedural and behavioral problems that a moderator needs to anticipate and prepare for before actually conducting the focus group?
9. The validity of focus group findings can be easily compromised by the presence of moderator bias. Bias may be introduced either intentionally or unintentionally. What are some of the sources of moderator bias? Discuss their implications for focus group findings.

Exercise:

What type of moderator would be most appropriate for leading focus group discussions of each of the topics below? Why?

a. The use of condoms among lower socioeconomic males.
b. The desirability of a value-added tax to support public schools.
c. The value of a new operating system for mainframe computers.
d. Interest in a new convenience-baking product.
e. Reasons for shoplifting among a group of convicted shoplifters.

Conducting the Focus Group

In the previous chapter, we discussed the role of the moderator and some general strategies for conducting focus groups. These strategies include the leadership style, degree of structure, and sequencing of questions that are most appropriate for given research situations. The focus group research situation is itself a complex interaction of the purpose of the research, the composition of the group, and the physical setting in which the group takes place. Earlier in the book we have discussed how these individual factors may influence the character of a focus group discussion. We have not yet discussed the actual conduct of a focus group, nor have we offered strategies for coping with specific opportunities or problems that may arise in the course of an interview. The purpose of this chapter is to consider issues related to the actual conduct of focus group interviews.

Focus group sessions usually are stimulating and fun for participants, observers, and moderators. We noted in Chapter 2 that having fun helps the flow of discussion and builds a sense of trust among members of the group. It must be recognized, however, that the primary purpose of a focus group is to obtain information. In the previous chapter we noted that agreeing that the group discussion stays on the topic of interest and that the session yields useful information is the job of the moderator. As we have seen, the role of moderator requires training, experience, and a special blend of personality characteristics.

The initial job of the interviewer is to create a nontimidating and unthreatening and nonjudgmental environment in which group members feel free to express themselves openly and without concern for whether others in the group agree with the opinions offered. Once this environment has been established, it is the job of the moderator to keep the discussion on track and to assure the active participation of all members of the group. Moderating a focus group is hard work and it requires that the moderator be constantly alert. Every group takes on a unique identity, and no two groups behave the same way—even when discussing the same topic. There are, however, issues and problems common to all focus group discussions.
FOCUS GROUPS

THE PHYSICAL ARRANGEMENT OF THE GROUP

In Chapter 1, we suggested that a focus group can be held in a variety of settings. We qualified this suggestion in Chapter 2, where we noted that the physical environment of the group may influence the nature of the interaction among group members and the types and amount of information obtained. In this earlier discussion we noted that in particular, the physical arrangement of the group within a given setting is critical to the success of the group discussion. Because the object of a focus group is discussion, the group should be seated in a manner that provides maximum opportunity for eye contact with both the moderator and other group members. When a circular arrangement, or reasonable approximation thereof is not possible, Wells (1974) suggests placing the least talkative individuals directly across from the moderator, and the most talkative off to either side. This tends to increase the frequency of comments of the least talkative individuals and reduce the frequency of comments by the most talkative, thereby providing greater balance for the discussion.

Most participants in focus groups feel more comfortable when seated around a table. There are a number of reasons for this: A table provides something of a protective barrier between respondents that gives less secure or more reserved members of the group a sense of security. It also helps establish a sense of territoriality and personal space that makes participants more comfortable. In groups consisting of both men and women a table provides a shield for the legs, which at minimum may eliminate a source of distraction. Finally, a table provides a place for resting one’s arms and hands, and when food is served may eliminate the gymnastics associated with handling plates and cups in one’s lap.

Some moderators prefer that each member of the group have a name tag. To assure some protection of the privacy of the participants, only first names may be used. The availability of names provides a basis for building greater rapport among group members. At a minimum, the moderator should have a list of first names corresponding to the seating arrangement of the participants. This allows the interviewer to direct questions at group members by name with immediate and simultaneous eye contact. It also creates a greater sense of group identity and cohesiveness.

INTERVIEWING STYLE

As noted in Chapter 4, moderators of focus groups may use a wide variety of styles. The style of interviewing is different because of personality differences among moderators and because different types of groups and different research questions require different approaches. As previously noted, one important dimension along which interviewing styles vary is the degree of control or directiveness that the interviewer uses. Interviewing styles may range from extremely directive to very nondirective. At the extreme of the directive style is the nominal group discussed in Chapter 1. In the nominal group there is only an interchange between the moderator and individual members of the group. Little or no interchange among members of the group is permitted and the interviewer exercises tight control over the agenda for discussion. At the other extreme the moderator participates only at the start of the discussion and interjects only when necessary to keep the discussion on the topic of interest. Both approaches have advantages and disadvantages.

The directive approach generally allows for greater coverage of topics or more detailed coverage of specific topics of interest in the time available, but at the cost of group synergy and spontaneity. Nondirective approaches provide more opportunity for group interaction and discovery. Nondirective approaches provide greater opportunity for the participants’ views to emerge, rather than having the researcher’s framing of the issues imposed on them. Although this risks ignoring topics of interest to the researcher, it has the advantage of providing a validity check on the researcher’s understanding of the problem and its relevant dimensions.

Most focus group discussions involve an interviewing style somewhere in between the two extremes. A certain amount of direction and structure is useful for moving the discussion along, for controlling dominant group members, and for drawing out reticent respondents. Still, interviewing styles will vary in terms of directiveness, and it is useful for the moderator to have a clear understanding of the level of directiveness that is desirable for the research question and group of respondents. Because focus group discussions tend to move along spontaneously and because the interaction of participants within individual groups tends to differ, the ideal moderator is one who is comfortable using different styles of interviewing, ranging from nondirected to directed. As noted in the previous chapter, however, there will be cases when it may be necessary to select a moderator with a given interviewing style, because not all moderators can move easily from a directive to a nondirective style as needed. This requires knowledge of the particular strengths and weaknesses of moderators, which is one reason it is important either to have direct experience with potential moderators or to check their references carefully. Selection of a moderator is not just a matter of competence, but of competence for a particular type of task. Questioning potential moderators and their references with respect to interviewing style is an important element in the design of focus group research.
DISCUSSION AIDS

Interviewing style also may vary with respect to the use of discussion aids. Some interviews can be carried out with the moderator simply raising questions. In other cases, the discussion may be facilitated and enriched by presentations or demonstrations. In marketing research applications of focus groups, it is often useful to have respondents sample a product or watch the product in use as a means for stimulating discussion. Merton’s early use of focused interviews had respondents focus on positive and negative responses they had recorded at various points in a radio program. Focus groups used to evaluate advertising or training programs often expose group members to the ad or program prior to the beginning of the discussion.

In addition to demonstrating or displaying the object for discussion, the interviewer may use a variety of other discussion aids. Projective techniques often are useful discussion aids, particularly when group members either are reluctant to talk about an issue or where the issue may involve deeply rooted values or feelings that respondents have difficulty identifying or articulating. Word-association techniques and sentence-completion tasks can be very useful for provoking discussion, and usually are found to be very entertaining by many group members. Responses to these association and completion tasks can be followed with additional questions to try to uncover reasons for a particular response.

Storytelling is another useful discussion aid. The interviewer may ask respondents to tell a story about a particular incident involving the object of the research. One way to facilitate storytelling is with pictures or cartoons. Respondents may be shown a picture of a situation, product, object, or person and asked to tell a story. Advertising and marketing researchers occasionally will use a set of pictures of people of various types and ask group members to identify the type of person who uses a particular product. Follow-up questions then can be used to determine why a given person was selected.

INTIMACY

A third dimension along which interviewing styles may vary is the level of intimacy on the part of the interviewer. In some cases the interviewer takes an objective, distanced stance with respect to the group. In other cases, the interviewer may facilitate discussion by offering personal anecdotes and examples. In discussions of very sensitive topics, the more intimate approach may serve to relax respondents and to stimulate discussion. For example, a moderator might use a personal situation relevant to the topic at hand or tell a personal story related to the topic as a way of helping group members overcome their embarrassment or sensitivity. By offering personal information that is potentially embarrassing, the moderator legitimizes such information and provides an example for others. The danger of the intimate approach is that the more the moderator becomes a participating member of the group, the more likely the group will be to provide the types of responses they think the interviewer wants. Use of an intimate interviewing style without biasing responses of the group is a difficult task even for an experienced moderator.

OBSERVERS AND RECORDINGS

It is very common for focus groups to be observed by others and for sessions to be recorded on either audiotape or videotape. There is seldom reason to believe that observation or taping radically alters responses of members in a focus group; the group setting already makes all comments public. Nevertheless, there are some courtesies and precautions that are warranted.

It is customary to inform group members at the outset of the session that observers are present and whether any recording is taking place. If observers are behind a one-way mirror it is sufficient simply to tell the group that observers are present. When the observers are in the same room with the group they should be seated away from the group as a reminder to them and to the group that they are observers not participants. An introduction of the observers—by name only—is appropriate in this latter situation, along with an explanation that they are there to observe. It usually is not a good idea to identify the organization or title of the observers, or the reason they are observing. Such identifying information, when provided at the beginning of a session, may reveal too much too soon about the nature of the interview and may bias the responses of the participants.

On the other hand, the end of the group discussion is sometimes a good opportunity to let the participants know why—and perhaps for whom—the research is being carried out. Debriefing participants at the end of a session is a matter of courtesy, though the amount of information revealed will vary by topic and security conditions. For example, a manufacturer contemplating a new product might not wish to reveal its plans, but might tell participants that it is exploring opportunities for new product development.
FOCUS GROUPS

There are occasions when this debriefing exercise may be a stimulus for further discussion that may provide useful insights. For example, in a focus group conducted by one of the authors, revealing the identity of the sponsor of the group unleashed a stream of complaints that had not yet surfaced. Because the purpose of the group was to identify sources of dissatisfaction, the debriefing exercise provided information that was particularly helpful.

When recording equipment is used it is customary to acknowledge its presence while assuring group members that the recording will remain confidential and that its circulation will be limited. The moderator might suggest that the recordings prevent them from having to take notes and that they facilitate report writing. Group members who are uncomfortable with being recorded should be given the opportunity to leave the session without embarrassment.

Although the presence of observers or the use of recording equipment may make some group members self-conscious (at least initially), the stimulation and excitement of discussion generally causes the respondents to forget their presence. It usually is not a good idea, however, for the moderator to remind members of the group of the presence of recording equipment by exhorting individuals to speak up.

BEGINNING THE INTERVIEW

The beginning of an interview sets the tone and agenda for all that comes later. The moderator should attempt to create an atmosphere of trust and openness at the very beginning. Reassurances of anonymity, of the value of all opinions, regardless of how different or unusual, and of empathy for the respondents are very important. The moderator should establish the agenda for the discussion and outline the ground rules for the session. Such agenda setting may be more or less directive depending on the purpose of the group and the style of the moderator, but it generally will include some opportunity for respondents to introduce themselves. Typical openings might take the following form:

Before we begin our discussion it will be helpful for us to get acquainted with one another. Let’s begin with some introductory comments about ourselves. X, why don’t you start and we’ll go around the table and give our names and a little about what we do for a living.

CONDUCTING THE FOCUS GROUP

Today we’re going to discuss an issue that affects all of you. Before we get into our discussion, let me make a few requests of you. First, you should know that we are tape recording the session so that I can refer back to the discussion when I write my report. If anyone is uncomfortable with being recorded please say so and, of course, you are free to leave. Do speak up and let’s try to have just one person speak at a time. I will play traffic cop and try to assure that everyone gets a turn. Finally, please say exactly what you think. Don’t worry about what I think or what your neighbor thinks. We’re here to exchange opinions and have fun while we do it. Why don’t we begin by introducing ourselves?

Introductions of group members are a good way to build rapport and a sense of group. It is always a good idea to have group members introduce themselves and tell a little about themselves such as their work, something about their families, or other nonintimate personal facts. In some groups the moderator may want to limit the types of personal information group members provide. For example, in a group of experts and novices on a topic, identification of occupation may serve to intimidate novices or give undue weight to the experts’ opinions. There are no hard and fast rules with respect to the amount of information participants should be allowed to reveal about themselves, but if there is reason to believe that such information might bias the group or otherwise influence the nature of the group’s interaction, it would be wise for the moderator to ask the group not to mention it.

After introductions are finished, the moderator should introduce the topic for discussion. Most often the moderator will introduce the topic in its most general form and leave more specific questions and issues for later questioning. This serves the useful function of getting the topic on the table without revealing all of the specific issues that are of interest. This is, of course, a funnel approach to interviewing, which we discussed in Chapter 4. We also introduced several other approaches to interviewing in Chapter 4, and there are situations where these other interviewing formats and, hence, other introductions to the topic for discussion will be more appropriate. Nevertheless, the funnel approach tends to be the most commonly used. One reason for this is that it is often useful to know whether an issue is important enough for participants to raise it on their own. In addition, very specific questions about the topic—if asked too early—may set the discussion on a track that is too focused and narrow. Rather, it is better to funnel the discussion as it progresses by moving from the general to the specific. One way to engage the interest of participants quickly is to raise the topic for discussion and ask for personal anecdotes related to the topic. The sharing of stories tends to build further rapport and break down inhibitions.
ASSURING PARTICIPATION

All members of a focus group should be made to feel that their presence and opinions are not only valued, but also necessary for the success of the group. It is particularly important to establish this at the beginning of the interview. This will reassure the reticent respondent and provide a basis for dealing with dominant members of the group if it proves necessary. During the session, all members of the group should be encouraged to speak. This can be accomplished by asking direct questions of members of the group; the simplest technique is to ask each group member for his or her opinion in turn. Such a procedure cannot be used with each question, because it tends to stifle interaction among the group members, but it can be used several times during the group to draw out reluctant respondents.

The moderator needs to be particularly sensitive to the nonverbal cues used by group members. Facial expressions and gestures often suggest occasions when an individual is about to speak, disagrees, is puzzled by something that has been said, or requires reassurance that an expressed opinion is accepted. We have noted in previous chapters that the moderators' ability to recognize and respond to these cues can dramatically increase the balance of participation within the group.

TIME MANAGEMENT

One of the most important skills of the moderator is time management. The moderator must gauge the extent to which a topic has been exhausted and further discussion will yield little new information. Knowledge of the relative importance of various specific questions to the research agenda also is helpful, because it provides some guidance with respect to the amount of time that should be devoted to each question and which ones might be eliminated if time runs short. One critical point to bear in mind is that the participants have been recruited for a specific length of time. There is an implicit contract with the group that it will be finished on schedule. Groups that are kept beyond the appointed hour have been known to become surly and hostile.

The beginning of the interview is often the most difficult part to manage. Discussions usually develop a large range of ideas quickly. The moderator must try to record these ideas mentally or on paper so that they can all be dealt with in turn, if appropriate. Only one issue can be discussed at a time, and the moderator must keep the group on this one topic until discussion has been exhausted. This may involve telling group members that a particularly interesting—but not immediately relevant issue—will be dealt with later.

PROBING

Participants in focus groups do not always say everything they wish to say, nor do they necessarily readily articulate what they think. Sometimes participants will signal that they have more to say by using nonverbal cues such as stopping in mid-sentence, continuing to look at the moderator after finishing a statement, or through facial expressions. The moderator needs to recognize these cues and follow them up with an acknowledgment and encouragement to continue speaking. In other cases it may simply be unclear what the respondent meant. This, too, requires follow-up questioning.

Follow-up questions, or probes, are an important part of extracting full information from respondents. Probes can take a variety of forms. They may acknowledge simply that a given participant has not given up the floor: This may involve continued eye contact with the participant and a simple "uh huh," or it might involve telling the next person that speaks that X doesn’t seem to have finished his or her thought. Another type of probe involves reflecting the respondents' thoughts back to him or her: “What I heard you say was ...”

The moderator may also ask for more information by saying, “Tell me more,” or, “I don’t quite understand. Can you explain what you mean?” Asking for an illustration, example, or story is another way of obtaining further information. Other probes may be directed at the group at large. The group might be asked, “Does anyone have an example of that?” or “Is this anyone else’s experience?” It is generally not a good idea to probe by directly asking if anyone agrees or disagrees with the preceding statement. This results in a defensive respondent and sets the stage for conflict. Rather, the moderator might ask, “Does anyone have a similar (or different) perspective?”

In some cases, the moderator may wish to enlist the entire group in aiding one respondent’s explanation. This may be accomplished if the moderator plays dumb and asks, “You all seem to understand what she is saying, but I’m still confused. Can anyone help me?”

There are some things that cannot be articulated easily. Probes in such cases may need to take the form of requests for demonstration ("Can you show me?") or the use of analogy (“Tell me what it is like”). Finally, a good moderator will allow other group members to do the probing themselves
when possible. If someone looks puzzled at a comment by another group member the moderator might ask, “You look puzzled. Why? What don’t you understand?”

Probes are a crucial part of extracting information in focus groups. Good probes ask for more information without suggesting specific answers and without making the respondents defensive. Knowing when to probe and when further probing is unlikely to be helpful is also critical to managing the agenda for the discussion successfully within the allotted time.

PROBLEMS

Problems can occur in a variety of forms in a focus group interview. It is impossible to identify or to anticipate all of the problems that might come up during a session. Participants spill coffee, become ill, receive emergency telephone calls, and even start fires (napkins and cigarettes do not mix well in ashtrays). Sensitivity to smoking has become pronounced sufficiently that a group consisting of smokers and nonsmokers may deteriorate into a small civil war. This latter problem means that the moderator must state a policy on smoking at the outset of the meeting, or use an obvious sign to state the policy. The moderator must be prepared for anything that may happen and swiftly move the group back to its task if possible. Although it is not possible to anticipate all problems, several occur with sufficient frequency that they require some discussion.

Experts

Wells (1974) suggests that two types of experts may be found in focus groups: legitimate experts and self-appointed experts. Although there may be many occasions when a focus group composed exclusively of experts is useful, the presence of a legitimate expert among a group of novices may inhibit the discussion. Screening during the recruitment phase of the project may be the most effective means for eliminating this type of problem, but even the most rigorous screening will not prevent an occasional mistake. When such experts do appear in a group, it may be possible to co-opt them by making use of their expertise. This would involve asking the expert to withhold his or her opinions while at the same time occasionally requesting that the expert elaborate on matters of fact or provide detailed descriptive information. This approach often works well because the moderator is seldom as knowledgeable as the expert and the expert is placed in an important, but clearly delineated role within the group. Use of this technique requires that the moderator not lose control of the group to the expert, but use the expert as a resource to facilitate the group discussion.

Self-appointed experts are a more difficult problem for the focus group moderator. Such “experts” seldom have genuine expertise, but offer their opinions as fact. These individuals may intimidate other members of the group, yet they cannot be placed so easily into a helpful role as the genuine expert. It may be possible to control these individuals through a variety of means: The moderator can make it clear that he or she is interested in the views of all members of the group. This may be sufficient for solving problems created by the self-appointed expert. If this fails, however, the moderator may use more assertive techniques such as cutting the individual off in mid-sentence, avoiding eye contact, and not recognizing the individual when he or she wishes to speak. Wells (1974) suggests that nonverbal cues on the part of the moderator—such as looking bored or fatigued, drumming the fingers of one hand, pretending to have a headache, or studying the ceiling, the floor, or anything other than the “expert”—may provide a means for muting such individuals. Acting uninterested and immediately changing the subject after the expert speaks also may be useful for maintaining control of the group.

Friends

We have suggested in previous chapters that it generally is unwise to have friends participate in the same group, unless the group is specifically designed to bring together individuals who are known to one another. Careful screening during the recruiting phase may reduce the frequency of this occurrence, but it is inevitable that friends will arrive together on occasion. In such cases it is appropriate to ask one of the individuals to leave.

Templeton (1987) has identified a number of problems created by having friends in the same group: friends discourage anonymity; they impair group formation by not joining; they may engage in private conversations that deny their insights to the larger group and inhibit the expression of opinions by others; and they may endorse one another’s views, creating an imbalance of opinion in the group. There may be occasions when having friends (or spouses, relatives, or other persons known to one another) is perfectly consistent with the objectives of the research, but this should be determined at the outset of the research.
Hostile Group Members

It occasionally happens that a group member will arrive for a focus group session who is clearly hostile. This individual simply may have had a bad day, or they may find that the topic for discussion is not what they thought. There are also persons with genuinely hostile personalities who sometimes find their way into a focus group. The presence of such individuals in the group makes everyone uncomfortable and stifles discussion. If hostility is detected prior to the commencement of the group it would be wise to politely ask the individual if they would like to leave. If the hostility emerges during the group discussion, it might be helpful to invite the group to take a short break during which the individual may be invited to leave. If the individual does not wish to leave, then a lack of eye contact may discourage participation without directly evoking further hostility.

SPECIAL ISSUES

One of the advantages of focus group interviews is that they can be adapted for almost any purpose. Such versatility means, however, that there are numerous issues and problems that may come up in the conduct of focus groups that are specific to a particular application. Researchers who are contemplating using focus groups for specific purposes would do well to think carefully through the procedure and any problems that might be anticipated. In the remainder of this chapter we will deal with three special issues: (1) the use of children in focus groups, (2) the use of observational techniques, and (3) the discussion of potentially sensitive or embarrassing topics.

Children As Focus Group Participants

Children can make outstanding participants in focus groups, but they pose special problems. The moderator is especially important in assuring that the children are comfortable and relaxed. Children generally know when an adult is uncomfortable with them, and this in turn makes them uncomfortable or hostile. Uncomfortable and hostile children do not talk much. It is important, then, that the moderator be comfortable and experienced with children.

Young children especially are often more comfortable with female moderators, although depending on the topic and whether the group is mixed or of a single gender either a male or female moderator may be appropriate. Generally, groups of girls will be more comfortable with female interviewers.

CONDUCTING THE FOCUS GROUP

Groups of boys may be comfortable with female interviewers, but feel more open to talk about certain topics with male moderators.

Younger children have less verbal facility than older children and adults, so the use of more stimulus materials may be warranted. Children respond well to pictures and to role-playing activities that let them act out their responses. Making questions into a game adds a sense of fun and holds attention better. Younger children have especially short attention spans, so the interview will need to be abbreviated or divided into parts.

Observational Techniques

Regardless of the composition of a focus group, it may be useful to record behavioral data as well as verbal responses. Recording of behavioral data poses special problems. The moderator is too busy running the group to record behavioral data, so either one or more observers or recording equipment will be required.

When recording equipment (video cameras or film) is used, it is important to recognize that they record only a limited amount of all behavior. Even when multiple cameras are employed—which can be very expensive—their angle and placement will restrict what can be recorded. In addition, they typically will be used to capture multiple respondents’ behavior, so that close-ups of individual respondents’ facial expressions may be difficult to capture. Capturing behavior on film or videotape, however, is only the first step in using behavioral data; it ultimately will have to be coded for content and analyzed. When observers are used, coding systems for behavior must be developed in advance so that coders know what to record and how to record it. Whether coding is done from tape or live, it is a good idea to use multiple observers to assure reliability of the observations.

One technique for examining focus group behavior in response to a particular stimulus object is to have the moderator called out of the room for a few minutes. This allows respondents to talk freely and to interact with the object without the inhibiting presence of the moderator.

Dealing with Sensitive and Embarrassing Topics

Many focus groups deal with topics that are at least potentially sensitive and embarrassing. These topics may range from hemorrhoids to feminine hygiene products to the use of condoms. When dealing with such topics, it is useful for the moderator to inform the group that he or she knows the topic is a sensitive one that people generally are reluctant to talk about. This approach may be used to lead into a discussion of why this is so, rather than
an immediate discussion of the topic itself. This allows participants to become comfortable with the topic. The moderator may also need to spend more time talking about why it is important for the participants to share their insights on the topic, and express appreciation for the willingness of the respondents to be involved in the discussion.

The comfort level of participants also may be increased if the moderator uses a more intimate approach when appropriate. For example, the moderator might offer a personal anecdote, such as "The first time I ever saw a condom . . . ." Another approach is to invite participants to discuss the experiences or views of their acquaintances, friends, or neighbors. This eliminates some potential for personal embarrassment. Beginning a discussion by focusing on friends and acquaintances also helps create an atmosphere conducive for sharing personal experiences later in the discussion.

The moderator also may need to take a firm hand when a group member attempts to make light of the topic or embarrass another group member. On the other hand, it is important to recognize that humor is a very useful device for diffusing anxiety. A harmless comment or joke may serve to "break the ice" and let everyone know that it is okay to have a little fun with the topic, even when it is at one's own expense. A skillful moderator will use humor to the best advantage in such situations, while still being sensitive to the need to protect individual group members from unfair attempts at humor.

**SUMMARY**

Conducting a focus group is an art that requires considerable experience and training. The quality of the data obtained from a focus group discussion is the direct result of how well the moderator carries out the interview. This begins by establishing a high level of comfort for participants in an atmosphere that is perceived as nonevaluative and nonthreatening. In this setting the moderator moves the group from topic to topic, probing as needed to extract the respondents' meanings. At the same time, the moderator must maintain control of the group, and assure that the group is not dominated by any one member of the group and that all members contribute actively to the discussion.

The moderator must establish the ground rules for the discussion at the outset of the meeting. The moderator also must assure that all members of the group have opportunities to contribute to the discussion. This may require co-opting some members of the group or using negative sanctions to control the behavior of particularly assertive members of the group.

**CONDUCTING THE FOCUS GROUP**

The moderator must determine the appropriate level of directiveness, structure, intimacy, and use of discussion aids. These levels should be consistent with the purposes of the research. The use of recording equipment such as tape recorders and video cameras must also be explained to participants, as well as the presence of any observers of the group. Finally, the moderator has an obligation to debrief participants about the purposes of the group discussion.

**REVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. What is the best physical arrangement for a focus group discussion? Why? Would there be occasions where a different arrangement might be optimal?
2. How do directive and nondirective interviewing styles differ? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each style?
3. What types of discussion aids might be used in a focus group? Why are these useful?
4. What is meant by the level of intimacy on the part of the interviewer? How is intimacy related to the quality of the data obtained from a focus group?
5. What factors and issues must be considered when using observers and making recordings in focus group sessions?
6. Why is the beginning of the focus group interview so critical? What are the components of a good beginning?
7. How can the moderator of a focus group assure that all members of the group participate? What actions can the moderator take to facilitate participation?
8. What is a probe? List some examples and indicate how they might be used.
9. How does a moderator deal with a real expert on the topic of discussion? A self-appointed expert?
10. Why is it not usually a good idea to have friends participate in the same focus group?
11. What special problems are posed by children as focus group participants?
12. What issues must be considered when collecting observational data from focus group sessions?
13. What techniques can a moderator use to facilitate discussion of sensitive or embarrassing topics?

**Exercise:**

Assemble a group of four or five acquaintances and select a topic for discussion. Moderate a 20-minute discussion of the topic.
Analyzing Focus Group Data

The analysis and interpretation of focus group data require a great deal of judgment and care, just as any other scientific approach. A great deal of the skepticism about the value of focus groups probably arises from the perception that focus group data are subjective and difficult to interpret. The analysis and interpretation of focus group data, however, can be as rigorous as that generated by any other method. It even can be quantified and submitted to sophisticated mathematical analyses, though the purpose of focus group interviews seldom requires this type of analysis. Indeed, there is no one best or correct approach to the analysis of focus group data. As with other types of data, the nature of the analyses of focus group interview data should be determined by the research questions and the purposes for which the data are collected.

The most common purpose of a focus group interview is for an in-depth exploration of a topic about which little is known. For such exploratory research a simple descriptive narrative is quite appropriate. More detailed analyses simply are not necessary or efficient. There are additional methods of analysis, however, which may be appropriate for certain purposes. In this chapter we will consider the methods of data analysis that are used most frequently with focus group data. We will begin this discussion by considering the question of how much analysis is appropriate.

HOW MUCH ANALYSIS?

Like most types of research, the amount of analysis required with focus groups will vary with the purpose of the research, the complexity of the research design, and the extent to which conclusions can be reached easily based on simple analyses. The most common analyses of focus group results involve transcripts of the discussions and discussions of the conclusions that can be drawn. There are occasions, however, when transcripts are unnecessary. When decisions must be made quickly and the conclusions of the research are rather straightforward, a brief summary may be all that is necessary and justifiable. In some cases there may be time or budget constraints that prevent detailed analyses. In other cases, all interested parties and decision makers may be able to observe or participate in the group, so there may be little need for a detailed analysis or report.

When the results of a focus group are so obvious as to require little supporting documentation, detailed analysis is probably not worthwhile. One of the authors was involved in a series of focus groups on a new government program that was so clearly unacceptable that further analysis of any kind seemed unwarranted. In this case the decision about the program was made quite clear by the focus group discussions. This is, in fact, a good example of how useful focus groups can be as evaluative tools. It is often the case that government planners, product design engineers, and other professionals who design products and services believe that they understand what their clients or customers need or "should" want. Focus groups provide a tool for testing the reality of assumptions that go into the design of services, programs, and products. On the other hand, if the researchers in this example were interested in more than making a simple go/no-go decision about a product or program, and instead wished to explore in detail the reasons the program was unacceptable and the types of programs that might be acceptable, more detailed analyses would be needed. Thus, the amount of analysis and its level of detail and rigor ultimately depend on the purpose for which the research is carried out and the cost/benefit comparison of carrying out an analysis at a given level.

Aside from the few occasions when only a short summary of focus group discussions is required, all analytic techniques for focus group data require transcription of the interview as a first step. Thus, we will consider the issues surrounding the transcription process, then turn our attention to some of the more common tools for analysis of focus group data.

TRANSCRIBING THE INTERVIEW

The first step in almost all approaches to the analysis of focus group data is to have the entire interview transcribed. Transcription services are readily available in most cities and generally are able to provide relatively rapid turnaround at modest costs. Transcription not only facilitates further analysis, it establishes a permanent written record of the interview that can be shared with other interested parties.

The amount of editing that the analyst does on a transcribed interview is a matter of preference. Transcriptions are not always complete, and the moderator may want to fill in gaps and missing words, as well as correct spelling and typographical errors. There is a danger in this, of course, because
the moderator's memory may be fallible or knowledge of what was said later in the course of the interview may color his or her remembrance of what transpired.

Transcription also will faithfully pick up incomplete sentences, half-finished thoughts, pieces of words, odd phrases, and other characteristics of the spoken word in a group discussion. These characteristics are true to the flow of the discussion, but they may make it difficult for a reader to follow the text. Some editing may increase readability, but it is important that the character of the respondents' comments be maintained, even if at times they use poor grammar or appear to be confused. Because one use of focus group interviewing is to learn how respondents think and talk about a particular issue, too much editing and cleaning of the transcript is undesirable.

Once the transcript is finished it can serve as the basis for further analysis. It should be noted, however, that the transcript does not reflect the entire character of the discussion. Nonverbal communication, gestures, and behavioral responses are not reflected in a transcript. Thus, the interviewer or observer may wish to supplement the transcript with some additional observational data that were obtained during the interview. Such data may include notes that the interviewer made during the interview, the systematic recording of specific events and behaviors by trained observers, or the content analysis of videotapes of the discussion. Such observational data may be quite useful, but it will only be available if its collection was planned in advance. Pre-planning of the analyses of the data to be obtained from focus groups is as important as it is for any other type of research.

After the focus group discussions have been transcribed, analysis can begin. Among the most common analytic techniques among focus group researchers is the scissor-and-sort (or cut-and-paste) technique.

THE CUT-AND-PASTE TECHNIQUE

The cut-and-paste technique is a quick and cost-effective method for analyzing a transcript of a focus group discussion. The first step in applying the technique is to go through the transcript and identify those sections of it that are relevant to the research question(s). Based on this initial reading, a classification system for major topics and issues is developed and material in the transcript related to each topic is identified. Color-coded brackets or symbols may be used to mark different topics within the text. The amount of material coded for any one topic depends on the importance of that topic to the overall research question and the amount of variation in the discussion.

The coded material may be phrases, sentences, or long exchanges between individual respondents. The only requirement is that the material be relevant to the particular category with which it has been identified. This coding exercise may require several passes through the transcript as categories of topics evolve and the analyst gains greater insight into the content of the group discussion.

After the coding process is complete, the coded copy of the transcribed interview may be cut apart. Each piece of coded material can be cut out and sorted so that all material relevant to a particular topic is placed together. This cutting and sorting process may also be readily carried out on any computer with a word processing program. Regardless of whether scissors or a personal computer are employed in the process, they both yield a set of sorted materials that provide the basis for developing a summary report. Each topic is treated in turn with a brief introduction. The various pieces of transcribed materials are used as supporting materials and incorporated within an interpretative analysis.

The cut-and-paste technique is a very useful approach, but it does tend to rely very heavily on the judgment of a single analyst. This analyst determines which segments of the transcript are important, develops a categorization system for the topics discussed by the group, selects representative statements regarding these topics from the transcript, and develops an interpretation of what it all means. There is obviously much opportunity for subjectivity and potential bias in this approach. Yet, it shares many of the characteristics of more sophisticated and time-consuming approaches.

In some cases it may be desirable to have two or more analysts code the focus group transcript independently. The use of multiple analysts provides an opportunity to assess the reliability of coding, at least with respect to major themes and issues. When determining the reliability of more detailed types of codes is needed—such as the intensity of positive and negative emotion associated with various institutions and organizations—more sophisticated coding procedures are required. All are types of content analysis, a topic to which we now turn.

CONTENT ANALYSIS

The meaning of a focus group discussion, or for that matter any set of words, does not leap out complete with interpretation and insight. Rather, the content of the discussion must be examined and the meaning and its particular implications for the research question at hand discovered. Every effort to
interpret a focus group represents analysis of content. There are, however, rigorous approaches to the analysis of content; approaches that emphasize the reliability and replicability of observations and subsequent interpretations. These approaches include a variety of specific methods and techniques that are known collectively as content analysis (Krippendorf, 1980). There are frequent occasions when the use of this more rigorous approach is appropriate for the analysis of data generated by focus groups. In addition, the literature on content analysis provides the foundation for computer-assisted approaches to the analysis of focus group data. Computer-assisted approaches to content analysis are being applied increasingly to focus group data because they maintain much of the rigor of traditional content analysis while greatly reducing the time and cost required to complete such analyses. We will consider computer-assisted approaches to content analysis in detail later in this chapter. Before doing so, however, it will be helpful to define content analysis more rigorously and review the general approach employed in such analysis.

Krippendorf (1980) defines content analysis as "a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from data to their context" (p. 21). Janis (1965) defines it as

any technique (a) for the classification of the sign-vehicles (b) which relies solely upon the judgments (which theoretically may range from perceptual discrimination to sheer guesses) of an analyst or group of analysts as to which sign-vehicles fall into which categories, (c) provided that the analyst's judgments are regarded as the report of a scientific observer. (p. 55)

A sign-vehicle is anything that may carry meaning, though most often it is likely to be a word or set of words in the context of a focus group interview. Sign-vehicles may also include gestures, facial expressions, or any of a variety of other means of communication. Indeed, such nonverbal signs may carry a great deal of information and should not be overlooked as sources of information.

Content analysis has a long and rich history in the social sciences (see Krippendorf, 1980 for a concise history of the method). It has been applied widely to such varied phenomenon as propaganda, literature and newspapers, transcripts of psychotherapy sessions, and television programming. A rather substantial body of literature now exists on content analysis, including books by Krippendorf (1980), Gottschalk (1979), and Ericsson and Simon (1984). A number of specific instruments have been developed to facilitate content analysis including The Message Measurement Inventory (Smith, 1978) and the Gottschalk-Gleser Content Analysis Scale (Gottschalk, Winget, & Gleser, 1969; see also Gottschalk, 1979). The Message Measurement Inventory originally was designed for the analysis of communications in the mass media such as television programming and news magazines. The Gottschalk-Gleser Content Analysis Scale, on the other hand, was designed for the analysis of interpersonal communication. Both scales have been adapted for other purposes, but they are generally representative of the types of formal content analysis scales that are in use.

Janis (1965) has identified three different types of content analysis based on the purpose of the investigation:

1. **Pragmatic content analysis**, which includes procedures for classifying signs according to their probable causes and effects. In this type of analysis the emphasis is on why something is said.

2. **Semantical content analysis**, which seeks to classify signs according to their meanings. This type of analysis may take three forms:
   a. **Designation analysis**, which determines the frequency with which certain objects (or persons, institutions, concepts) are mentioned. This type of analysis tends to be a rather simple counting exercise.
   b. **Attribution analysis**, which examines the frequency with which certain characterizations or descriptors are used. Again, this is a simple counting exercise, but the emphasis is on adjectives, adverbs, descriptive phrases, and qualifiers rather than the targets of these parts of speech.
   c. **Assertions analysis**, which provides the frequency with which certain objects (persons, institutions, etc.) are characterized in a particular way. Assertions analysis involves combining designation analysis and attribution analysis. Such an analysis often takes the form of a matrix, with objects as columns and descriptors as rows.

3. **Sign-vehicle analysis**, which classifies content according to the psychophysical properties of signs (counting the number of times specific words, or types of words are used). For example, the degree to which a topic emotionally involves the respondents may be revealed by examination of the number of emotion-laden words used.

All of these types of applications may be found in the analysis of focus group data. For example, pragmatic content analysis may be employed when trying to understand the attributions of a group of consumers concerning product failures, or the beliefs of a group of teenagers concerning the transmission of AIDS. Semantical content analysis might be used to look at the number of positive and negative characterizations of the Democratic and Republican parties (this would be an assertions analysis). Finally, sign-vehicle analysis might be used to count the number of emotion-laden words that a group of union members use when referring to their employers. Indeed,
these are examples of three measures that have a long history of use: (1) the frequency with which a symbol or idea appears, which tends to be interpreted as a measure of importance, attention, or emphasis; (2) the relative balance of favorable and unfavorable attributions regarding a symbol or idea, which tends to be interpreted as a measure of direction or bias; and (3) the kinds of qualifications and associations made with respect to a symbol or idea, which tend to be interpreted as a measure of the intensity of belief or conviction (Krippendorf, 1980).

While content analysis is a specific type of research tool, it shares many features in common with other types of research. The same stages of the research process are found in content analysis as are present in any research project. Krippendorf (1980) identifies a number of these stages:

- Data Making
- Data Reduction
- Inference
- Analysis
- Validation
- Testing for Correspondence with other Methods
- Testing Hypotheses Regarding Other Data

DATA MAKING

Data used in content analysis include human speech, observations of behavior, and various forms of nonverbal communication. The speech itself may be recorded, and if video cameras are available at least some of the behavior and nonverbal communication may be archived permanently. Such data are highly unstructured, however, at least for the purposes of the researcher. Before the content of a focus group can be analyzed it must be converted into specific units of information that can be analyzed by the researcher. The particular organizing structure that may be used will depend on the particular purpose of the research, but there are specific steps in the structuring process that are common to all applications. These steps are unitizing, sampling, and recording.

Unitizing involves defining the appropriate unit or level of analysis. It would be possible to consider each word spoken in a focus group as a unit for analysis. Alternatively, the unit of analysis could be a sentence, a sequence of sentences, or a complete dialogue about a particular topic. Krippendorf (1980) suggests that in content analysis there are three kinds of units that must be considered: sampling units, recording units, and context units. Sampling units are those parts of the larger whole that can be regarded as independent of each other. Sampling units tend to have physically identified boundaries. For example, sampling units may be defined as individual words, complete statements of an individual, or the totality of an exchange among two or more individuals.

Recording units, on the other hand, tend to grow out of the descriptive system that is being employed. Generally, recording units are subsets of sampling units. For example, the set of words with emotional connotations would describe certain types of words and would be a subset of the total words used. Alternatively, individual statements of several group members may be recording units that make up a sampling unit that consists of all of the interaction concerned with a particular topic or issue. In this latter case, the recording units might provide a means for describing those exchanges that are hostile, supportive, friendly, and so forth.

Context units provide a basis for interpreting a recording unit. They may be identical to recording units in some cases, whereas in other cases they may be quite independent. Context units are often defined in terms of the syntax or structure in which a recording unit occurs. For example, in marketing research it is often useful to learn how frequently evaluative words are used in the context of describing a particular product or service. Thus, context units provide a referent for the content of the recording units.

Sampling units, then, represent the way in which the broad structure of the information within the discussion is divided. Sampling units provide a way of organizing information that is related. Within these broader sampling units the recording units represent specific statements, and the context units represent the environments or contexts in which the statements occur. The way in which these units are defined can have a significant influence on the interpretation of the content of a particular focus group discussion. These units can be defined in a number of different ways. Table 6.1 distinguishes five such approaches to defining these units. Focus group research is most often concerned with referential, propositional, and thematic units, but there may be occasions when the use of physical or synthetical units are appropriate.

The definition of the appropriate unit of analysis must be driven by both the purpose of the research and the ability of the researcher to achieve reliability in the coding system. The reliability of such coding systems must be determined empirically, and in many cases involves the use of measures of inter-rater agreement.

It is seldom practical to try to unitize all of the discussion that arises in a focus group. When multiple focus groups are carried out on the same general topic, complete unitization becomes even more difficult. For this reason, most content analyses of focus groups involve some sampling of the total
Table 6.1. Approaches to Defining Content Units

- **Physical Units** divide the content of a medium by such physical properties as size, place, time, length, etc. For example, a book, a billboard, and a single issue of a magazine would all be examples of physical units. The boundaries of these units are defined by time and space.

- **Syntactical Units** divide the content of a medium based on its natural grammar. Words, individual television programs or news items, and chapters within books are examples. These units tend to be defined by the source of the communication.

- **Referential Units** are defined in terms of a referent. An expression, regardless of length, that refers to or describes the same person, object, or event.

- **Propositional Units** (also called kernels) are referential units that possess a particular structure and offer a particular thought about the referent object or person. Thus, the statement "he is a bright, but dishonest man" includes two propositions: (1) the man is bright and (2) the man is dishonest.

- **Thematic Units** include more global interpretative or explanatory sets of statements. Recurring systems of beliefs or explanations represent thematic units. Thus, one might find that in a focus group there is a recurring theme that sales people are dishonest. Alternatively, analysis of the news over time might reveal themes related to economic changes and political conflict.

Adapted from Krippendorf (1980), pp. 60-63.

group discussion for purposes of analysis. The analyst may seek to identify important themes and sample statements within themes, or use some other approach such as examining statements made in response to particular types of questions or at particular points in the conversation. Like other types of sampling, the intent of sampling in content analysis is to provide a representative subset of the larger population. It is relatively easy to draw incorrect conclusions from a focus group if care is not taken to assure representative sampling of the content of the group discussion. Almost any contention can be supported by taking a set of unrepresentative statements out of the context in which they were spoken. Thus, it is important for the analyst to devise a plan for sampling the total content of group discussions.

The final stage of data making is the recording of the data in such a way as to assure their reliability and meaningfulness. The recording phase of content analysis is not simply the rewriting of a statement of one or more respondents. Rather, it is the use of the defined units of analysis to classify the content of the discussion into categories such that the meaning of the discussions is maintained and explicated. It is only after this latter stage has been accomplished that one can claim to have actual data for purposes of analysis and interpretation.

The recording phase of content analysis requires the execution of an explicit set of recording instructions. These instructions represent the rules for assigning units (words, phrases, sentences, gestures, etc.) to categories. These instructions must address at least four different aspects of the recording process (Krippendorf, 1980):

1. The nature of the raw data from which the recording is to be done (transcript, tape recording, film, etc.);
2. The characteristics of coders (recorders), including any special skills such as familiarity with the subject matter and scientific research;
3. The training that coders will need in order to do the recording; and
4. The specific rules for placing units into categories.

These rules are critical to establishing the reliability of the recording exercise, and the entire data-making process. Furthermore, it is necessary that these rules be made explicit and that they be demonstrated to produce reliable results when used by individuals other than those who developed them in the first place. Lorre and McNair (1966) question the practice of reporting high inter-rater reliability coefficients when they are based solely on the agreement of individuals who have worked closely together to develop coding systems. Rather, they suggest that the minimum requirement for establishing the reliability of a coding system is a demonstration that judges using only the coding rules exhibit agreement.

After a set of recording rules has been defined and demonstrated to produce reliable results, the data-making process can be completed by applying the recording rules to the full content of the material of interest. Under ideal circumstances recording will involve more than one judge, so that the coding of each specific unit can be examined for reliability and sources of disagreement can be identified and corrected. There is a difference between developing a generally reliable set of recording rules and assuring that an individual element in a transcript is coded reliably.

The assessment of the reliability of a coding system may be carried out in a variety of ways. As noted above, there is a difference between establishing that multiple recorders are in general agreement (manifesting a high degree of inter-rater reliability) and establishing that a particular unit is coded reliably. The researcher must decide which approach is more useful for the given research question. It is safe to conclude that in most focus group projects, general rater reliability will be more important because the emphasis is on general themes in the group discussion rather than specific units.
Computation of a coefficient of agreement provides a quantitative index of the reliability of the recording system. There exists a substantial literature on coefficients of agreement. Treatment of this literature and issues related to the selection of a specific coefficient of agreement are beyond the scope of this book. Among the more common coefficients in use are kappa (Cohen, 1960) and pi (Scott, 1955). Both of these coefficients correct the observed level of agreement (disagreement) for the level that would be expected by chance alone. Krippendorf (1980) offers a useful discussion of reliability coefficients in content analysis, including procedures for use with more than two judges (see also Spiegelman, Terwilliger, & Fearing, 1953).

Data making tends to be the most time-consuming of all the stages in content analysis. It is also the stage that has received the greatest attention in the content analysis literature. The reason for this is that content analysis involves data making after observations have been obtained, rather than before. Content analysis uses the observations themselves to suggest what should be examined and submitted to further analysis, whereas many other types of research establish the specific domain of interest prior to observation.

The difference in the emphasis accorded the data-making phase by different types of research methods is similar to the difference between essay questions and multiple-choice questions. In both types of questions there are certain issues of interest, but in the case of essay questions the answers are not provided. Thus, the answers are in the words of the respondent. Whoever evaluates the examination must devote time to analyzing the answers and to determining how "correct" the response is. This evaluation stage is unnecessary for multiple choice questions because the available answers are identified for the respondent and the evaluator need only determine whether the correct answer was selected. Multiple-choice questions require greater preparation prior to administration, because the correct answer must be identified along with reasonable alternatives—but incorrect—responses.

In survey research, much of the data making occurs prior to administration of the survey. Such data making involves identification of reasonable alternatives from which a respondent selects an answer. Thus, data making is a step in survey research, and all types of research, but it occurs prior to observation. In content analysis, data making occurs after observation.

**ANALYSIS**

The recording or coding of individual units is not content analysis. It is merely a first stage in preparation for analysis. The specific types of analyses that might be used in a given application will depend on the purpose of the research. Virtually any analytic tool may be employed, ranging from simple descriptive analyses to more elaborate data reduction and multivariate associative techniques. Much of the content analysis work that occurs in the context of focus group data tends to be descriptive, but this need not be the case. Indeed, although focus group data tend to be regarded as qualitative, proper content analysis of the data can make them amenable to the most sophisticated quantitative analysis.

It is common for focus group interviews to be used for purposes of developing hypotheses that then are tested or validated with other types of research. For example, a focus group may yield hypotheses that are tested through a survey of the population of interest. This is, of course, a perfectly appropriate approach. On the other hand, the need for validation is not unique to focus group research. This is well illustrated in a study by Reid, Soley, and Wimmer (1980) of replication studies in the field of advertising. Although the majority of the studies they examined in this research were replications of survey and experimental research findings, there was an equal probability of the replication producing results contrary to the original study as there was of the replication finding support for the original study. Such findings are not unique to advertising and suggest that replication and validation are necessary steps in any scientific endeavor. There is a need for validation of focus group results, just as there is a need for validation of other types of research findings. Such validation may involve content analysis of additional focus group data, or may employ other methods and measures such as survey research or formal experiments.

**COMPUTER ASSISTED CONTENT ANALYSIS**

Content analysts were quick to recognize the value of the computer as an analytical tool. The time-consuming and tedious task of data making can be facilitated greatly through the use of computers. Computers can be programmed to follow the data making rules described earlier; the importance of assuring that these rules are designed well is made even clearer in the context of their use by a computer. In recent years, computer-assisted interpretation of focus group interviews has received attention and built upon the earlier foundations of research on content analysis.

The earliest uses of computers in content analysis involved counting and sorting units of analysis. A straightforward counting of the number of words and number of different words is programmed easily on a computer, and the
program can be written to ignore grammatical endings and count only
different word stems. Such counts and listings are useful in data making
because they provide indications of the word content of materials. After
particular categories of words have been defined the computer can count
words quickly in these identified categories and be used to identify their
location. Search-and-find routines now exist on virtually every word process-
ing software package. These routines, coupled with the "cut-and-paste"
capabilities on many word processors now make it easy to automate the
cut-and-paste technique described above.

The computer is capable of a great deal more than automation of search,
find, cut, and paste activities. One problem with simple counting and sorting
of words is that these procedures lose the context in which the words occur.
For example, a simple count of the frequency with which emotionally
charged words are used loses information about the objects of those emo-
tional words. Because the meanings of words frequently are context depend-
ent it is useful to try to capture context. This is one reason content analysts
recommend the identification and coding of context units as a routine part of
content analysis.

One computer-assisted approach to capturing the context as well as
content of passages of text is the Key-Word-In-Context (KWIC) technique.
The KWIC approach searches for key words and lists each key word along
with the text that surrounds it. The amount of text obtained on either side of
the key word can be controlled by specification of the number of words or
letters to be printed. One of the earliest computer programs for KWIC
analyses was The General Inquirer (Stone, Dunphy, Smith, & Ogilvie, 1966;
Stone & Hunt, 1963), which is still in use today. The General Inquirer uses
a theoretically derived dictionary for classifying words. A variety of similar
systems have been developed since and often use specially designed diction-
aries for particular applications. Some of these programs are designated
simply as KWIC, while others are named for particular applications for which
KWIC may be used. Among the more frequently cited software programs for
content analysis are TEXTPACK V, about which we will have more to say
shortly; The Oxford Concordance Program (Hockey & Marriott, 1982); and
the Key-Word-in-Context Bibliographic Indexing Program (Popko, 1980).
Software for text analysis is reviewed frequently in the journal Computers
and the Humanities, published by Paradigm Press. Specialized dictionaries
for use in conjunction with text analysis programs like the General Inquirer
and TEXTPACK V are also available. Weber (1985) provides a brief intro-
duction to several of these specialized dictionaries.

More recent work on content analysis has built on the research on artificial
intelligence and in cognitive science. This more recent work recognizes that
associations among words often are important determinants of meaning.
Furthermore, meaning may be related to the frequency of association of
certain words, the distance between associated words or concepts (often
measured by the number of intervening words), and the number of different
associations. The basic idea in this work is that the way people use language
provides insights into the way people organize information, impressions, and
feelings in memory and, thus, how they tend to think. The view that language
provides insight into the way individuals think about the world has existed
for many years. The anthropologist Edward Sapir (1929) noted that language
plays a critical role in how people experience the world. Social psychologists
also have had a long-standing interest in the role language plays in the
assignment of meaning and in adjustment to the environment (see, for
example, Bruner, Goodnow & Austin, 1956; Chomsky, 1965; Sherif &
Sherif, 1969). In more recent years the study of categorization has become
a discipline in its own right and has benefited from research on naturalistic
categories in anthropology, philosophy, and developmental psychology and
the work on modeling natural concepts that has occurred in the areas of
semantic memory and artificial intelligence (see Mervis & Rosch, 1981, for
a review of this literature).

This research has been extended recently to the examination of focus
groups. Building on theoretical work in the cognitive sciences (Anderson,
1983; Grunert, 1982), Grunert and Bader (1986) developed a computer
assisted procedure for analyzing the proximities of word associations. Their
approach builds on prior work on content analysis as well. Indeed, the data
making phase of the approach—which is illustrated in Figure 6.1—uses the
KWIC approach as an interactive tool for designing a customized dictionary
of categories. The particular computer program they use for this purpose is
TEXTPACK V (Mohler & Zull, 1984), but other computer packages are also
available for this purpose.

The construction of a customized dictionary of categories is particularly
important for the content analysis of focus groups because the range and
specificity of topics that may be dealt with by focus group interviews is very
broad, and no general-purpose dictionary or set of codes and categories is
likely to suit the purposes of a researcher with a specific research application.
For example, in focus groups designed to examine the way groups of
respondents think and talk about computer workstations, there will be a need
to develop a dictionary of categories that refer specifically to the features of
workstations, particular applications, and specific work environments. In
focus groups designed to examine the use of condoms among innercity
adolescents, it is likely that a dictionary of categories will be required to
capture the content of the discussion that includes the slang vernacular of the
analysing focus group data

Figure 6.1. Data Making Prior to Analysis of Associative Proximities
Source: Grunert and Bader (1986).

particular groups of respondents to discuss specific objects within given contexts almost always means that the focus group analyst will have to develop a customized categorization system.

Once the data-making phase is complete, the associative structure of the discussion content can be analyzed. This is accomplished by counting the distances between various cognitive categories. Distance, or the proximity of two categories of content, is defined as the number of intervening constructs. Thus, two constructs that appear next to one another would have a distance of 1. To simplify computations, Grunert and Bader (1986) recommend examining categories that are at a maximum value of 10. This maximum value is then used as a reference point and distances are subtracted from it in order to obtain a numeric value that varies directly (rather than inversely) with intensity of association. This procedure yields a proximity value rather than a distance measure—that is, the higher scores represent closer associations among categories. Because most categories appear more than once, the measures of association are summed over all occurrences to obtain a total proximity score for each pair of constructs. These proximity data then may be used for further analysis.

Grunert and Bader (1986) provide an illustration of their procedure in the context of focus groups designed to learn something about differences in the way laypersons and experts talk and think about cameras. Focus group data obtained independently from laypersons and experts were submitted to analysis. Of particular interest were differences in the two groups with respect to associations between particular attributes and uses of cameras—that is, the frequency with which particular characteristics of cameras (such as autofocus and lens variety) were mentioned in the context of specific uses of cameras (represented by an attribute--uses matrix [AUMA]); between particular brands of cameras and uses—that is, the frequency with which specific brands of cameras were mentioned in the context of different uses such as action photography, slides, portraits, and so forth (represented by a brand--uses matrix [BUMA]); and between particular brands and attributes—that is, the frequency with which specific brands of cameras were associated with particular features (represented by a brand--attribute matrix [BAMA]).

Figure 6.2 provides a summary of the results of this application. Not surprisingly, there were far richer associative structures among experts than among laypersons. The particular character of these structures can also be illustrated. For example, Figure 6.2 provides an illustration of the associative structures of experts and laypersons for the brand Canon. The lengths of the lines in the figure are related inversely to strength of association. The graphical illustration in Figure 6.2 provides a comprehensible means for summarizing the information obtained through content analysis. Note that

respondents. Although the dictionaries developed for other applications may provide some helpful suggestions, the specificity of the language used by
Figure 6.2 Graphic Representation of the "Canon" plane for Experts and Laypersons
Source: Grunert and Bader (1986).

Figure 6.2 provides information about the types of associations made as well as the frequency of these associations, which are represented by the numbers within the circles.

Obviously, the amount of effort required to complete the type of analysis summarized in Figure 6.2 and Table 6.2 is considerable. Whether the amount of effort is justified in other applications depends on a variety of factors: time and budget constraints, the nature of the research questions, and the availability of computers and necessary software. The important point to be made is that the level and detail of analysis of focus group data can be increased considerably through use of the computer. At the same time, the computer can be an extremely useful tool for data reduction. It also can be used for uncovering relationships that might otherwise go unnoticed. Thus, like most

---

Table 6.2
Summary Information on Camera Associations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AUMA characteristics</th>
<th>Laypersons</th>
<th>Experts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total # of attributes</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of attributes linked to uses</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total # of uses</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of uses linked to attributes</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absolute # of links</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relative # of links</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BAMA characteristics</th>
<th>Laypersons</th>
<th>Experts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total # of attributes</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of attributes linked to brands</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total # of brands</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of brands linked to attributes</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absolute # of links</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>274</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relative # of links</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BUMA characteristics</th>
<th>Laypersons</th>
<th>Experts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total # of attributes mentioned</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of attributes linked to brands</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total # of brands</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of brands linked to attributes</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absolute # of links</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relative # of links</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Grunert and Bader (1986).
of the research tools in the social sciences, the focus group interview has benefited from the advent of computers. Users of focus group interviews also have become increasingly facile in the use of computers as aids to the analysis, summarization, and interpretation of focus group data.

SUMMARY

The analysis of focus group data can take a wide variety of forms. These may range from very rapid, highly subjective impressionistic analyses to very sophisticated computer assisted analyses. There is no best approach. Rather, the approach selected should be consistent with the original purpose of the research and the information needs that gave rise to it. It is unfair to suggest that all focus group research involves highly subjective analysis. This is certainly the case in many applications, but there exist an array of sound procedures for assuring reliable and objective results and for quantifying outcomes.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What factors should be considered when determining how much analysis of a focus group discussion is worthwhile?
2. How much editing of a transcription of a focus group is useful? Why?
3. Describe the cut-and-paste technique. How can this technique be automated on a computer?
4. What is content analysis? Why is it appropriate for analysis of focus group discussions?
5. What is data making? Why is it important?
6. What are the steps in data making?
7. What are recording rules? How does one determine whether a set of rules is useful?
8. What is the Key-Word-In-Context (KWIC) approach? How would it be used to analyze focus group data?
9. What is meant by associative structure? How does one examine associative structure? How might analysis of associative structures be useful in the context of focus group research?

10. Identify research situations where the following types of analysis might be most appropriate:
   a. a quick impressionistic summary
   b. a thematic analysis using the cut-and-paste approach
   c. assertions analysis
   d. pragmatic analysis
   e. analysis of associative structures

Exercise:

Find a news story in a popular magazine. Develop a categorization system for coding the content of the story. Share your content analysis with a friend who has not read the magazine. How much of the content of the story does your friend obtain from your content analysis? What does this suggest to you about the uses of content analysis?
Focus Groups in Practice

We have come a long way since focus groups first were used in the evaluation of audience responses to radio programs during the early 1940s (see Merton 1946, 1987). Focus groups now are used widely for a variety of purposes and in many different settings. Common uses of focus groups include obtaining general background information about a topic, generating research hypotheses, stimulating new ideas and creativity, generating impressions of products or programs, diagnosing potential problems, facilitating the interpretation of previously obtained quantitative results, and obtaining new insights and knowledge about phenomena of interest. Focus group settings range from well-equipped research laboratories to the casual, more relaxed surroundings of residences.

Before we illustrate some applications of focus groups—and in view of the five decades of "research tradition" of focus groups—we need to pause and ask ourselves the following questions:

- Has the conduct of focus groups changed over the years?
- Is focus group research more rigorous than it was 10 or 20 years ago?
- Do we have more confidence in the findings of focus group research in terms of its validity and usefulness as a result of 50 years of experience with the method?
- Do we have better trained and knowledgeable professionals to moderate focus groups than in the past? Do we have a better understanding of the role of the moderator and the factors that should be considered when selecting a moderator for a particular group?
- Are present facilities more conducive to focus group participation?
- Do we have a better understanding of the dynamics of groups and the factors that can facilitate and limit participation and the quality of focus group data?
- Are the users of focus group research more aware of the purposes and strengths as well as the limitations of focus groups?

Insofar as science is a cumulative endeavor, and focus group interviewing is a scientific method, the answers to all of these questions should be yes. Although it is undoubtedly true that there is a great deal of art in the actual practice of focus group research, this is true of the practice of all scientific methods. That there is a certain art to conducting focus groups, or designing good experiments, does not make these methods less scientific. The ultimate test of a method as a tool of science is its ability to produce useful knowledge. By this test one would have to consider focus group interviewing a well-established and rigorous tool of science. One would also have to answer "yes" to each of the questions posed above, but in most cases the answer would have to be qualified because focus group interviewing has been, and remains, one of the most widely abused of scientific tools.

The abuse of focus group interviews is in large measure a result of their apparent ease of use and low cost relative to other tools for social science research. This is, of course, an illusion because a properly designed focus group is not any easier than a survey or experimental design—and, indeed, may be more difficult in some situations.

Throughout this book we have emphasized the need for adequate preparation and empathy in conducting meaningful focus groups. We have also appealed regularly to the wealth of theory and research in group dynamics, social psychology, and clinical psychology to guide the preparation, conduct, and interpretation of focus group research. We not only have a repertoire of interviewing and analytical techniques, but also a wealth of experience in the form of case histories and theoretical literature in a variety of contexts to help improve the efficacy of focus groups as a research technique and increase the validity of focus group data. The higher levels of training and preparation required of the moderator, the increased sophistication of analytical tools applied to interpreting focus group data, and the availability of modern, well-equipped interviewing facilities have helped raise the standards of focus group research in general.

Misunderstanding of the basic purpose and design of focus groups, inadequate moderator training and preparation, contrived settings, and overzealous users of focus group results, among other things, undermine the integrity of focus group research. Focus groups are not a substitute for survey research or experimentation when these latter techniques are more appropriate for the research question. By the same token, a survey or experiment is not a substitute in those situations for which focus group interviewing is appropriate. Throughout this book we have delineated the role of focus group research in the social sciences and have identified those types of research questions for which focus groups are appropriate. Problems arise when focus group interviewing is used for purposes for which it was never intended. Such abuse is not unique to the focus group interview, however; it is true of virtually all research techniques. Nevertheless, focus groups may be somewhat more vulnerable to abuse simply because they appear easy to use, they are less structured than most other research tools both in terms of their design.
and method of analysis, and they produce data that lend themselves more readily to impressionistic interpretation.

A greater frequency of abuse does not render an approach less scientific or less rigorous. It does urge the user to exercise greater caution and vigilance when designing, conducting, and interpreting the results of a focus group. At the same time, it would be shortsighted to dismiss the use of focus group interviewing—or any other method—because it is abused.

In the remainder of this chapter we will illustrate the utility of focus group interviewing by providing several examples of its use. These examples are taken from several different domains in order to highlight the versatility of the method. One example is from the political domain; a second example is taken from the world of advertising; a third example considers a social policy issue (impulsivity and shoplifting). The last example deals with consumer perceptions of their experience as shoppers for a new automobile. This final example is longer than the others and is designed to provide an example of how a focus group report looks. The report provided in this chapter is an abbreviated version of the original, but it should serve as a model for potential users of focus groups.

**REAGAN, GORBACHEV, AND FOCUS GROUPS**

Focus groups figured prominently in President Reagan's 1988 trip to Moscow for a meeting with Soviet leader Mikhail S. Gorbachev. It was the first trip by an American president to Moscow in 14 years, and the theme of the visit was: "A brighter future and safer world for all people."

The preparation for the U.S.-Soviet summit provides an excellent example of how focus group research can be utilized effectively to understand the nature and degree of the perceptual gap between the American public and government officials regarding U.S.-Soviet relations. According to news reports (see Figure 7.1), determining the theme and positioning of the message received "all the care that Madison Avenue devotes to an advertising campaign for a new bar of soap" (Gerstenzang, 1988). Although quite a few of the details about the focus group sessions are missing from the report, it can be surmised that the White House advisors to President Reagan went through a fairly systematic process similar to one suggested in Figure 1.1 in Chapter 1.
FOCUS GROUPS

Notice in this example that focus group research followed other types of information gathering, including survey research. In fact, in this particular application the focus groups were used to test theories about reactions of the public at large to actions by a government leader. The idea behind this test was that if actions and communications designed on the basis of information obtained from a variety of sources did not play well with a small group that was relatively representative of the American population, however small, there was a need to reconsider those actions. Questions concerning the roles of the United States and the U.S.S.R. in world peace, how to facilitate more cultural exchanges between the two countries, and how to stress the importance of religious freedoms were some of the issues tested with the focus group participants. Thus, we see in this example that focus groups can serve a confirmatory function. They need not be used only in an exploratory mode.

TELEVISION ADS
THE PUBLIC WILL NEVER SEE

From the reports on the President’s desk in the Oval Office to the desks of CEOs of corporate giants like General Electric and AT & T, focus group research has provided the kind of insights that have prevented costly oversights and mistakes that may have led to foreign policy blunders and “dinosaur” advertising campaigns.

Although more than $100 billion was spent on television advertising in the United States in 1988, this figure hides the fact that a surprising number of commercials—costing millions of dollars—never made it to the television screens. According to a Los Angeles Times article, some of these costly commercials were scrapped or cancelled even after companies already had spent a great deal of time and money on their production and prelaunch testing. For example, an extremely powerful commercial featuring General Electric’s role in enabling American companies to fight back and regain their international competitiveness by providing cost-saving suggestions for automated factory operations was produced, but never made it to the air.

Despite the time and expense that go into the making and testing of commercials, corporations do not hesitate to axe those ads that do not cut it because, as executives say, “it is far better to swallow the $200,000 production costs of a commercial than to spend $20 million on media time for an ad that misses the mark” (Horowitz, 1988, p. 1). Properly timed and executed focus groups can reduce or eliminate the expense that goes into producing and filming a commercial. There is still a risk of “ineffective” ads being aired, however, because the costs of creating commercials are so high, most companies air whatever ads their agencies produce. Ten years ago, most commercials were filmed for well under $100,000. Today, most 30-second network spots cost at least twice that much, and some may cost upwards of $1 million such as several of the Pepsi ads, starring pop singer Michael Jackson. (Horowitz 1988, p. 15)

To a certain extent, the risk associated with this cost-driven approach to advertising decisions can be reduced through properly conceived and executed focus groups at different stages of the advertisement development and testing process.

The findings of focus group research were one of the major reasons cited for axing or radically changing some of these commercials, and in some instances even led to the decision not to introduce a product: As Horowitz explains, “Sometimes, the products themselves just don’t cut the mustard, so the ads are dumped with them—as with liquid Alka-Seltzer” (p. 15). The liquid Alka-Seltzer ad, which had all the makings of a successful commercial, will never be seen by audiences despite the great expense and technology that went into its production. This ad—which was made by the same studio that made the famous dancing clay California raisins—showed the reactions of a human-like stomach (made from clay) that gets noisily upset over spicy foods. This was done through a process known as clay animation that can cost $5000 or more per second to film. Focus group research in this case was utilized for two purposes: (1) to test the effectiveness of the liquid Alka-Seltzer ad; and (2) whether or not consumers would actually buy the product. Although consumers were favorable toward the ad, management decided not to introduce the product because they discovered that consumers were averse to buying the product.

IMPULSIVE CONSUMERS, SHOPLIFTERS, AND FOCUS GROUPS

Focus groups are particularly useful for investigating topics that are considered to be sensitive and socially undesirable, such as the reasons why consumers give in to their impulses to buy or the reasons why people shoplift. When investigating such topics, focus groups provide a facilitating effect for
eliciting consumer motivations and circumstances behind actions that are not found in either phone or personal interviews, or even in anonymous surveys. The admission by other group members that they, too, have particular problems or engage in certain behaviors often legitimizes discussions and provides a level of candor not found in other settings. Using focus groups for such research objectives is not only more efficient, it may be the only means for eliciting motivations that underlie behavior. With some warm-up, pre-session briefing, and clever moderating, it is possible for any group of people to talk openly about their experiences. Sometimes the group, through a shared sense of experiences (both positive and negative), can enhance the breadth and depth of discussion beyond that of personal interviews.

Focus groups may be more effective than telephone interviews, given the sense of impersonality and insecurity that often accompany answering questions to strangers over the phone. Surveys have the advantage of preserving respondent anonymity, but fall short in offering the depth of discussion that can only come about through probing and clarifying. Furthermore, as noted in earlier chapters, the anonymity barrier may be broken down easily through certain warm-up and interviewing strategies that make the participants more at ease about relating their experiences.

In a focus group investigating students' attitudes toward shoplifting, it was discovered that it was fairly easy to get students to talk openly about their attitudes as well as their shoplifting experiences. A mere demonstration of empathy and willingness to learn was sufficient to elicit focus group participants' motivations for shoplifting. In comparison, when conducting a series of in-depth interviews on impulse buying, it often was difficult to break down the rationality or defensive element in respondents' recollections of their impulsive experiences. Pacification strategies—such as reminding respondents that "there is nothing irrational about buying something on impulse" and "I am sure most of us have bought one thing or another on impulse before"—were used often for the in-depth interviews to facilitate discussion of impulsive tendencies.

Focus groups could have offered a much more efficient and less time-consuming way of probing consumers' impulsive tendencies: first, by starting the focus group session with a personal anecdote; and second, by adopting a nonjudgmental moderating style. Additionally, in such situations, focus group participants tend to feel more relaxed as they feed off each others' experiences and find that they are not being isolated for in-depth scrutiny as would be the case with personal interviews. This experience highlights the effectiveness of using focus groups for probing consumers' sensitive experiences.

FOCUS GROUPS

FOCUS GROUPS IN PRACTICE

A REPRESENTATIVE FOCUS GROUP REPORT: BUYING A NEW CAR

In order to provide some sense of what a focus group report looks like, the following representative report is included in this chapter. As noted at the beginning of the chapter, this report is abbreviated somewhat and includes only a descriptive analysis. Nevertheless, it should provide a useful illustration for anyone contemplating writing such a report. The report deals with a topic with which many individuals can identify: the purchase of a new automobile. The report summarizes the results of four focus groups carried out for a major automobile manufacturer who was interested in learning about the shopping experiences of consumers within a particular metropolitan area. This manufacturer had a special interest in how dealerships in the area performed and how consumers viewed their experiences with the dealerships. Much of the discussion dealing with the manufacturer's own dealerships has been eliminated.

New Car Purchasing Experiences:
A Sample Report

Purpose

Four focus group interviews were conducted in a major metropolitan area for the purpose of exploring the experiences, perceptions, and attitudes of new car purchasers in the area. Members of the groups were asked to discuss the factors that influenced their most recent car purchase, their perceptions of competing makes and models, and the types of shopping activities in which they engaged. They were also asked to discuss their experiences with the new cars after the sales, including their service needs and overall satisfaction with the automobiles. A copy of the interview guide is provided in Table 7.1.

Composition of the Groups

The groups were composed of 9 to 12 individuals who had purchased new passenger vehicles within the past twelve months. Participants were selected randomly from a list of new car registrants as compiled by R. L. Polk and Company, which uses vehicle registration information supplied by state motor vehicle bureaus. This random-selection procedure assured a mix of ages, income levels, and types of vehicles purchased. Individuals who worked for or had immediate family members who worked for local automobile dealerships were excluded from participation. All participants were
Table 7.1
Interview Guide for New Car Purchasers

1. All of you here recently purchased new automobiles. As a way to get started, let’s talk about the factors that influenced your decision to buy the car that you purchased (if not raised by the group, probe for the importance of each of the following):
   a. Dealership, including the specific location of the dealership
   b. Sales personnel
   c. Friends, relatives, or other significant individuals
   d. Prior experience with make or model or with dealer
   e. Type of vehicle desired and purpose it would serve
   f. Service expectations
   g. Deals (special prices or packages, special financing, trade-in allowances, etc.)
   h. Price
   i. Advertising

2. Let’s discuss how you feel about the experience. Was it a pleasant or unpleasant experience? (Probe: Why? What factors were most important in making the experience positive or negative?)

3. If you could change the purchasing experience in any way, what would you change? (Probe: Why? Why would this change make a difference?)

4. Do you feel you got a good deal in your last purchase? (Probe: Why or why not? What makes you think this?)

5. Some of you bought American automobiles, while others bought foreign cars. Do you see any differences in the process of buying American versus foreign-made cars? (Probe: Why do you think these differences exist?)

6. Have any of you had contact with the dealer since you bought the car? (Probe: What kind of contact? Was this contact pleasant or unpleasant? Why?)

7. What do you expect of an automobile dealer during and after the sale? (Probe: How many of you feel these expectations have been met by your dealer?)

8. Is there anything else about your purchase experience that you would like to share that we have not yet touched upon?

either the primary decision makers in the vehicle purchases or the primary users of the vehicles. All participants were compensated for participation. Two locations were selected to provide some geographic diversity to the groups. All group interviews lasted approximately 90 minutes.

Major Factors Influencing Vehicle Purchase

Each group discussion began with consideration of the factors that were influential in the purchase of the automobiles. Participants were given the opportunity to volunteer the specific factors most important in their own decisions. Other specific factors were offered by the moderator for discussion if they were not identified spontaneously by members of the group. Among the factors raised by the moderator were the dealership (including the specific location of the dealership), prior experiences with various vehicles, the specific type of vehicle desired, service expectations, and deals offered.

Members of the groups offered a wide variety of opinions regarding the relative importance of various factors that influenced their purchases. Price appeared to be uniformly important in the purchase decision, but participants differed as to whether sticker price, monthly note, price less trade-in, or some combination of these factors was most important. In general, it appeared that these new car purchasers selected general types of vehicles (and, in some cases, specific makes and models), then sought acceptable deals. Despite the perceived importance of price, the degree of price shopping and comparison of deals varied widely among participants. Most of the participants appeared to have acceptable reference prices for the automobiles they were seeking. Some of these reference prices were obtained by comparing deals offered at competing dealerships. Reference prices were also obtained from Consumer Reports by a number of the participants. Among the comments regarding the importance of price were the following:

“It is everything. It’s the most important thing.”

“Monthly note was most important to me. I needed to be sure I could afford the notes.”

A number of participants expressed frustration with the process of obtaining a firm price, while others reported difficulty in determining the bottom line after such factors as option packages and trade-ins were factored into the price. This was not a uniform problem for all respondents, but among those who reported experiencing it the problem was a source of considerable displeasure and often resulted in their taking their business elsewhere. Among the statements regarding this problem were the following:

“Why can’t they just tell you the price?”

“Why do they always have to go to the sales manager to check the price? They ought to be able to quote a price without making you wait.”

“It’s just a game they play to make you anxious. They shouldn’t play games.”

There was much suspicion among the participants that salespeople never provided the actual dealer cost to the buyer. Rather, there was considerable
sentiment that the invoice the buyer is shown is not an accurate reflection of dealer cost:

"The invoice they show you is not what they really pay for the car."

Financing was mentioned frequently as an important reason for having bought a particular make. Many of the participants had taken advantage of special low-rate dealer or manufacturer financing. The importance of financing was revealed in a variety of statements:

"I've always bought Ford before, but they turned me down for financing."

"They offered 8.8% financing, so I bought."

The importance of the dealership in the purchase decision varied considerably among the participants. Members of the groups for whom price was the most important factor did not place much emphasis on the location or characteristics of the dealership:

"I was looking for the lowest price."

"I figure I can get the car serviced anywhere, so I bought where they gave me the best deal."

On the other hand, there were a number of participants for whom the dealership was very important. These individuals were either concerned about service after the sale and desired to do business with a dealer in a convenient location, or had previous positive experiences with particular dealerships:

"I wanted a convenient place to take my car for service."

"I have always gotten good service from Jones, so I always go there."

There was general agreement among all the respondents that their loyalty to particular dealerships was limited. Even with a positive prior experience at a particular dealership, respondents indicated that they typically shopped around. In most cases, a positive previous experience was sufficient for the dealership to be contacted the next time a purchase was planned, but it was insufficient reason to buy:

"It's such a big investment now. You have to shop around."

Advertising appeared to play a very limited role in the purchases of the group members. Many individuals reported that they looked at prices and financing advertised in the paper, and a few individuals reported using magazine and television advertising to obtain information about styling. Advertising appeared to be used for information very early in the search process, and did not appear to be a strong factor in the purchase decision itself. On the other hand, the salespersons with whom the participants dealt were perceived to be quite critical to the purchase decisions. Participants reported a wide variety of experiences with sales personnel and made it quite clear that their treatment by sales personnel was influential in their purchase. Aggressive, pushy salespeople were disliked uniformly, but so were nonchalant and indifferent sales personnel. For most respondents there appeared to be an optimal level of sales assistance that was perceived as helpful without being pushy.

Participants felt that the sales personnel with whom they had positive experiences were able to provide information about the cars they sold and would work with the buyer to determine price, financing, and options packages. They did not like sales personnel who "attacked" them as they came on the lot. Neither did they like being followed about by sales personnel. Sales personnel who could not or would not answer questions about particular makes were perceived in a very negative light. Representative comments concerning sales personnel include:

"She knew everything about the car and could answer all my questions. She wasn't pushy, but she really worked with me." (from a male participant)

"He wouldn't even let me sit in the cars... He really made me mad."

"He wasn't pushy. He worked with me and answered my questions."

"A good salesman ought to know about the car he's selling. He ought to be able to explain things."

"He kept telling me what I should buy and not buy. He cut his nose off to spite his face."

"He wouldn't talk to me. I wanted him to tell me about the car. He seemed to take the attitude that I could buy if I wanted to."
About half of the participants reported that their salespeople had been in touch with them since the purchase. Some had received telephone calls, letters, or Christmas cards. In a few cases the salesperson had assisted with service problems that had occurred. Virtually all of the respondents indicated that they appreciated this contact and indicated it would probably make them consider the salespersons or dealerships the next time they purchased. They also indicated, however, that such contact would be insufficient reason to purchase from the salespersons on the next purchase occasion:

"Sure it's nice and I'll probably consider the dealer the next time I buy, but he'll still have to offer me a good deal."

A number of participants noted a difference between import and domestic dealers:

"The import salesman is more like an order taker. You have to wait to get the car, so they really don't have to sell you."

Several of the participants indicated that their salespersons had introduced them to the service departments at the time of the sales. Most participants felt this was important, and several remarked that they wished their salespersons had done so. This was perceived as unimportant only by participants who were already acquainted with service personnel or who had no plans to have their car serviced at the dealership.

Friends and acquaintances were important in the purchase process of virtually all of the participants, but their roles varied. Friends were a common source of information about the reputation of cars and dealerships. In some cases friends or relatives had accompanied the purchasers to showrooms to assist in purchases. This appeared to be more often the case among female purchasers, and the response of salespersons to these "purchase pals" often influenced the outcome of the sales:

"He answered my questions. It was my truck, not my fiance's, so he talked to me."

"I got so mad. He wouldn't talk to me and I was the one buying the car. I didn't buy from him."

Warranty and service after the sale were important to a substantial subset of the participants. Extended warranties were mentioned as important factors in the purchase decisions of a number of participants. Several participants reported that they returned to dealerships from which they had bought previously because of their positive experiences with the service departments. Others indicated that they had not returned to particular dealerships because of problems with service on previous cars:

"I have bought from three different Buick dealers and none of them provided good service, so I won't buy a Buick."

"We had an experience that could have been terrible... a car that we had a lot of trouble with, but the dealer stood behind it. When we bought again we went back to that dealer."

The automobile itself was reported to be quite important in the purchase process, and most respondents had particular models or sets of models in mind prior to beginning their purchase processes. Many of the participants reported consulting friends and publications such as Consumer Reports. Participants who changed their minds and bought cars outside of their original sets indicated that they did so because of unpleasant experiences in the purchase process or because they discovered other models in the course of their searches.

Few participants regarded the purchase process as unpleasant, but many did feel that it was unnecessarily complex. These individuals complained of being unable to obtain information easily, of being unable to obtain a firm purchase price, or being unable to identify a "fair" price. There was also considerable objection to situations in which a salesperson was unable to make a deal without consulting with the sales manager. Most respondents wanted simpler, more straightforward shopping experiences. Several commented that it should be like retail shopping, where the price is posted and you buy off the shelf. The negotiation process appeared to be a source of discomfort and/or irritation to a number of the participants. Female participants were particularly likely to report that the experience was traumatic:

"It makes me sick to my stomach every time I go in."

"I do a thing up front with them. I tell them they aren't going to take advantage of me just because I am a woman."

Participants reported a range of experiences with service after the sale. All participants had strong views about what would constitute acceptable service:

"They ought to fix the problem the first time. I shouldn't have to take it back for the same problem."
"They should be willing to answer questions. I ought to be able to call if the car doesn’t sound right and get an answer about whether it should sound that way."

"I expect them to be prompt. If they tell me to be there at 7:00, they should be ready for me. I shouldn’t get there with 20 other people and have to wait."

"They should honor the warranty and they should provide a car."

"A dealer shouldn’t have to order a part, they ought to have parts in stock."

"They’re too expensive. If I bought my car from them, they shouldn’t charge me more than a shade-tree mechanic."

Participants felt very strongly that the dealer had an obligation to provide timely service with a minimum of inconvenience. If the car was under warranty, they felt that the dealer should provide alternative transportation. Several participants felt that dealers should provide free or inexpensive rental cars even when the car was no longer under warranty, as a gesture of good will:

"If they want me to come back they ought to provide a car."

There was a general perception that service costs are too high, particularly for minor items:

"I had to have a hubcap snapped back on and they charged me six dollars. Imagine what they do to you on a big job."

The expertise of service departments was questioned by several participants:

"I’d rather take my car to a specialist. If I have a transmission problem, I’d rather take it to a transmission place that does transmissions all the time. And they’re cheaper."

"They couldn’t solve the problem... because they’re stupid."

Members of all the groups expressed a near-consensus that service departments should make appointments for routine work, and should honor those appointments. They felt that work should be explained to them and that when a commitment is made to complete work by a specified time, that commitment should be met. They felt that cars should be returned clean and free from dirt and grease.

There was a strong sense among the participants that their purchase of an automobile from a dealer created an obligation to provide service over and beyond that provided to a nonpurchaser. They felt that purchasers should be given priority treatment.

Service seemed to be a sore point for many of the participants. For some there was a sense that American automobiles required too much service to begin with, so service should be prompt and convenient.

Participants in the groups uniformly agreed that import automobiles are superior to American automobiles in dependability, styling, and workmanship. Participants suggested that the quality of American cars began to deteriorate in the early 1970s when a shift to smaller, more efficient automobiles was caused by the energy crisis. Most participants agreed that the quality of American automobiles had improved in recent years, but they still perceived imports as superior. Several of the import owners suggested that the durability and reliability of imports were the reasons for their purchase. This perceived superiority was strong enough to lead purchasers to wait for the delivery of their new automobiles. Virtually all of the import purchasers reported having ordered their cars and waiting from one month to seven months for delivery.

In addition to the perception of poorer mechanical reliability, participants suggested that the quality of ride offered by imports was superior. They suggested that American cars felt light and hollow, did not handle as well, and offered less comfort. In addition, several participants criticized the styling of American automobiles:

"They all look alike. They are too concerned with aerodynamics. I don’t like the way they look."

"They don’t spend enough time on design."

The group members generally did agree that American manufacturers made good large cars, and those participants who had bought American cars frequently indicated that they were looking for larger cars.

Even among those participants who believed that they should “buy American,” there was resentment of being made to feel guilty about buying imports. Ford and Chrysler both were mentioned as American manufacturers who had done the most to improve quality, but these two manufacturers also received the most negative comments concerning quality. Participants suggested they would buy more American cars when quality improved. They indicated they would use the experience of friends and the ratings of such publications as Consumer Reports to determine whether the quality of American automobiles had improved.
Summary

Members of four focus groups reported their experiences in purchasing new passenger vehicles. These experiences ranged from very positive to very negative. In general, positive purchasing experiences were associated with helpful and informative salespeople who did not employ high-pressure sales tactics. Purchasers reported that they appreciated salespeople who were knowledgeable about the products they sold, volunteered information, and answered questions readily and directly. They were put off by salespersons who were either pushy or nonchalant, and salespersons who either tried to tell them what to buy or who were not direct in answering questions.

Although price, product, dealership, and service all were mentioned as important reasons for purchases, the attitudes and approaches of the salespersons appear to have been the primary factors in the final purchase decisions.

Service was an important factor in the purchases of many, but not all, of the participants. Indeed, where an individual was a repeat purchaser from the same dealership, the service they had received on a previous car appeared to be the primary reason for the repeat purchase. On the other hand, numerous participants stated that they were price shoppers who were looking for the best deal. For these individuals, service was not a primary consideration when deciding whether to purchase from a particular dealer. Participants generally felt that service should be prompt and done right the first time. They felt that when cars were under warranty they should be provided with alternate transportation when the cars were being serviced.

American automobiles were evaluated less positively than their imported counterparts. This perceived difference was sufficiently strong that a number of the purchasers were willing to wait several months for imports to be delivered. Salespeople at import dealerships were perceived more as order takers than as persons trying to make sales. Thus, they were regarded as less helpful—but at the same time less pushy—than salespersons at dealerships that carried American-made automobiles.

SUMMARY

This chapter provides examples of the use of focus groups for several different purposes. It provides an illustration of the use of focus groups to test hypotheses and several other more exploratory applications. The chapter also provides an extended example of one application which includes a representative report.

Review Questions

1. Focus groups often are considered to be most appropriate for exploratory research. The example in this chapter which deals with the Reagan-Gorbachev visit, however, suggests that focus groups also may be used for hypothesis testing. Why were focus groups used for hypothesis testing in this illustration? Was this an appropriate use of the focus group interview?
2. Why are focus groups often used to evaluate advertisements? What information does a focus group interview provide that could not be obtained in a survey or an experiment designed to measure the effect of an ad?
3. Earlier in the book it was suggested that focus groups could be used even for sensitive topics. One of the illustrations given in the chapter deals with a discussion of an activity, shoplifting, that is a criminal offense. Why do you think people are willing to discuss such activities in group settings? Do you see any ethical dilemma for the researcher in this example?
4. Critique the interview guide used in the car-buying illustration. Revise the guide in a fashion that resolves any criticism you have of the guide used.
5. What additional types of analyses might have been carried out in the car-buying illustration? Under what circumstances might these additional analyses be justified?

Exercise:

Re-read the focus group report on automobile purchasing. If you were a new car manufacturer, what actions might you take based on this report? What type(s) of further research might you pursue? How would the results of the focus group interviews assist you in designing this additional research?

Note

1. The examples and quotes are from a Los Angeles Times article dated August 3, 1988 (pp. 1, 15) by Bruce Horowitz. Used with the permission of the Los Angeles Times.
Conclusion

Focus groups are among the more common forms of research in a wide array of disciplines. They are used by academic researchers, by government policymakers, and business decision makers. Focus groups provide a rich and detailed set of data about perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and impressions of group members in the members' own words. They represent a remarkably flexible research tool in that they can be adapted to obtain information about almost any topic in a wide array of settings and from very different types of individuals. Group discussions may be very general or very specific; they may be highly structured or quite unstructured. Visual stimuli, demonstrations, or other activities may be used within the context of a focus group in order to provide a basis for discussion. This flexibility makes the focus group a particularly useful tool and explains its popularity.

The decision to use a focus group or some other research tool must be based on the appropriateness of the method for obtaining answers for specific research questions. It has been noted before that to a man with a hammer, everything is a nail. All too often researchers are like the man with a hammer; one method or technique becomes the means by which all research problems are addressed, and other methods either are ignored or discounted. So it has been with focus group interviewing. For other researchers, focus groups are never appropriate. The truth lies somewhere in the middle. Focus groups are useful for particular purposes and specific situations—for exploring the way particular groups of individuals think and talk about a phenomenon, for generating ideas, and for generating diagnostic information. For these purposes, focus groups represent a rigorous scientific method of inquiry.

Focus groups are not the most appropriate means for obtaining an estimate of a parameter of a population with a small band of confidence. Neither are they the most appropriate tool for exploring the effect of an intervention on thoughts or behavior. On the other hand, descriptive survey data are not particularly useful for this latter purpose either, unless they are obtained in the context of an experimental design. Survey data as a rule do not identify important qualifiers or contingencies that may be associated with answers to structured questions, nor do they offer opportunities for feedback from and response to the comments of others. Focus groups are more useful for these latter purposes.

The spontaneous interaction of focus group members often produces insights that are not obtained readily, if ever, in individual surveys or experiments. Surveys and experiments tend to provide feedback about the world or specific phenomena as conceptualized by the researcher. This etic approach is quite useful, but it must be recognized that such conceptualizations may be at variance with the way individual respondents conceptualize the world. Focus groups are designed to help understand how individuals conceptualize and categorize phenomena. As such, the data generated by focus groups are more emic than etic.

Much of the power of the focus group as a method of inquiry grows out of the spontaneity and synergy of the group dynamic. Although this dynamic may be somewhat idiosyncratic and group specific, there are few areas in the social sciences that have been studied as carefully and intensively as the dynamics of small groups. Chapter 2 provided a review of this voluminous literature and drew implications from it for the design and conduct of focus groups. This literature makes obvious the fact that much is known about how groups behave and how groups may be managed to produce particular outcomes. Likewise, Chapter 4 reviewed the literature on interviewing and interviewer characteristics and makes plain the basis for interviewer selection and training and the influence of the interviewer on the group. The purpose of these chapters has been to show the very solid and extensive foundation on which group interviewing is based. Although it is undoubtedly true that there is great deal of art involved in the moderation of focus groups, there is also a firm scientific base upon which the method rests. Finally, Chapter 6 suggests that the analysis and interpretation of data generated by a focus group need not be subjective and impressionistic. Rather, such data are amenable to objective analysis which may range from simple qualitative description to complex quantitative analysis of cognitive networks.

One purpose of this book is to show that focus group research is not subjective and lacking in rigor. Indeed, the focus group interview rests on an extensive body of empirical research and theory, as well as practice. It is not appropriate for all research questions, but it is well suited for problems involving clarification of perspective, opportunity, and hypothesis generation, and a whole range of exploratory analyses. It is also useful as a tool for obtaining a better understanding of the results of more quantitative analyses based on formal survey research or experimentation. The opportunity for focus group participants to express opinions and ideas in their own words is a particularly attractive feature. Another attractive feature of focus groups—and one virtually unique to them—is the fact that the group is itself a research instrument. The dynamic interaction of the group under the subtle but firm
direction of a skilled moderator can yield insights not obtained easily by other means.

In addition to providing the theoretical foundations on which the focus group interview is based, we also have provided a description of how focus group research is carried out. Practical issues related to recruiting participants, designing the interview guide, analyzing data, and reporting results have been addressed, and an illustrative example of a focus group project was presented in the previous chapter. We also have provided a discussion of the process of conducting a group and of techniques that may be useful in dealing with various problems that may arise during the course of an interview.

This book is intended as a place to begin learning about focus group interviewing; ultimately, the best teacher is experience. Like most other research tools, proficiency comes with practice. Individuals who wish to add focus groups to their set of research tools would do well to observe several groups under the direction of an experienced moderator before attempting one on their own. This provides an opportunity to see a variety of groups interact, as well as the way in which the moderator handles specific problems as they arise. It also provides a means for reducing anxiety associated with moderating a group, because focus groups tend to be lively and fun for both participants and moderators.

Throughout this book we have drawn attention to the limitations of focus group interviews, as well as to their advantages. We would be remiss if we did not once more draw attention to these limitations. Perhaps the greatest drawback associated with focus groups is that each group really represents a single observation. Simply because 12 people are involved in a group discussion does not mean that there are 12 independent observations. By definition and by design, the statements of focus group participants are influenced by the group interaction and the opinion of others. As a result of this influence—as well as the fact that it is seldom the case that more than a few groups are conducted on any one topic—statistical estimation is not possible, nor is it appropriate to generalize about specific population parameters based on focus group results. This is not to say that all generalization is inappropriate. We would not use focus groups if they did not yield some insights about individuals beyond those who participate in the group discussions. Rather, the types of generalizations that arise from focus group results tend to be more general than specific, more tentative, and more descriptive.

Other limitations of focus groups tend to be similar to those of other research techniques that employ human beings. These include problems associated with nonrepresentative samples, interviewer bias, and demand effects. In the case of focus groups the demand effects are likely to result from the composition of the group, the presence of a particularly dominant member of the group, or some other group-related factor. Thus, focus groups share many of the same limitations as many other research tools, including survey research and experimentation. The sources of these limitations and problems may differ somewhat, but the problems are the same.

Throughout this book we have suggested that the focus group interview is a powerful and useful tool when used appropriately and for the purposes for which it is intended. This is true of all research techniques. Ultimately, the true test of the validity of a research technique is determined by the frequency with which it yields useful, interesting, and actionable results. The persistence of the focus group interview for almost 50 years, its rapid growth as a tool for social science research, and the breadth of fields and applications to which it has been applied suggest that it has met this standard of validity.
References


REFERENCES

REFERENCES


FOCUS GROUPS


Acquaintances, 34. (see also friends)

Advantages of focus groups, 16, 19

Advertising, 126-127

Ascendant tendencies, 39

Assuring participation, 94

Attribute-Uses Matrix (AUMA), 117-120

Automobile purchasing, 129-138

Beginning the interview, 92-93

Brainstorming, 24-28

Brand-Uses Matrix (BUMA), 117

Bug-in-the-ear, 10

Business executives, 58-59

Children, 98-99

Closed-ended questions, 74

Clothing, 38

Computer assisted content analysis, 113-120

Conformity, 37

Content analysis, 105-120

Content units, 110

Context units in content analysis, 109

Cut-and-paste technique, 104-105

Data making, 108-112

Delphi Technique, 23-25; Flowchart of, 25

Demographic variables, 36

Dependability, 39

Design of focus group, 18, 20

Discussion aids, 90

Embarrassing topics, 99-100, 127-128

Emic data, 13, 141

Emotional stability, 40

Etic data, 13, 141

Experts, 96-97

Friends, 97. (see also acquaintances)

Funnel approach to questioning, 76

Group cohesiveness, 33, 41-42

Group compatibility, 33, 42-44

Group depth interview, 10

Group dynamics, 33-49; Interpersonal influences, 33, 40-47; Intrapersonal influences, 33, 36-39; Environmental influences, 33-34, 47-49

Group facilitation, 71

Group homogeneity, 33, 42-44

Group sociability, 71

Hard-to-reach groups, 58

Hostile group members, 98

Impulsive consumers, 127-128

Incentives, 55-56

Individual depth interviews, 13

Individual prominence, 71

Interpersonal distance, 48-49

Interpersonal orientation, 39

Interview guide, 60-66

Interviewing styles, 74-77, 88-89

Intimacy, 90-91

Introductions, 92-93

Inverted funnel approach to questioning, 76

Key-Word-in-Context (KWIC), 114

Lazarsfeld, Paul, 9

Lazarsfeld-Stanton Program Analyzer, 9

Leader, 71-77

Leaderless discussion group, 28-29

Leadership, 70-73

Leadership style, 73, 77

Leading questions, 75

Levy, Sidney, 81

Limitations of focus group research, 16-17

Loaded questions, 75

Location (of focus groups), 56-57

Merton, Robert, 10, 32

Mixed-gender groups, 43-44

Moderator bias, 84-85

Moderator preparation, 81

Moderator selection, 78-80

Nominal group technique, 22-23

Nonverbal communication, 46-47

Observers/observing, 91-92, 99. (see also recording)
FOCUS GROUPS

Open-ended questions, 74
Oxford concordance program, 114
Path-goal theory of leadership, 73
Personality of group members, 39
Personality of Moderators, 78-80. (see also interviewing styles, leadership)
Physical characteristics of group members, 38
Physicians, 58
Pretesting, 66
Primary questions, 75
Probes (Probing), 95-96
Problem definition, 51
Problems, 96-98
Quantum dimensional design, 76-77
Rapport, 34
Recording, 91-92, 99, 108 (see also observers/observing)
Recording units in content analysis, 109
Recruiting participants, 55-55
Reliability, 111-112
Repetition, 113
Research agenda, 52
Sampling, 53-54, 108
Sampling unit in content analysis, 108-109
Sapir, Edward, 115
Secondary questions, 75
Sensitive topics, 99-100
Shaw, M. E, 39, 70
Shoplifters, 127-128
Sign-vehicle, 106
Size of focus groups, 57-58
Social power, 44-46
Social sensitivity, 39
Spatial arrangements, 48-49, 88
Stereotypes, 40-41
Stouffer, Samuel, 9
Structure (of interview guide), 63-65
Syneectics, 24-28
Teleconferencing, 60
Territoriality, 48
TEXTPACK V, 114-120
Time management, 94-95
Trait approach, 71-72
Traits of good moderators, 79
Traits of successful leaders, 72
Transcripts (transcription), 103-104
Tunnel sequence of questioning, 77
Typology of questions, 83
Unfocused approach, 82-84
United States-Soviet relations, 124-126
Unitizing in content analysis, 108
Uses of focus groups, 15
Wells, William D, 96
Wording of questions, 65-66
Working mothers, 59

About the Authors

David W. Stewart is professor of marketing at the University of Southern California. Prior to moving to Southern California he was the senior associate dean and an associate professor of marketing at the Owen Graduate School of Management, Vanderbilt University. Dr. Stewart is a past president of the Society for Consumer Psychology and a Fellow of the American Psychological Association. He is currently a member of the Council of Representatives of the American Psychological Association, the governing body of the association. He has served as a consultant to numerous organizations, including the Federal Trade Commission, Hewlett Packard, Bell Communications Research, and Weyerheuser, among others.


Prem N. Shandasani is Lecturer at the School of Management, National University of Singapore. He received his Ph.D. in marketing from the University of Southern California, Los Angeles. His publications have appeared in the Singapore Marketing Review, Journal of Consumer Satisfaction, Dissatisfaction and Complaining Behavior, and other international journals and published proceedings. His teaching interests include international marketing, consumer behavior, marketing strategy, and advertising.