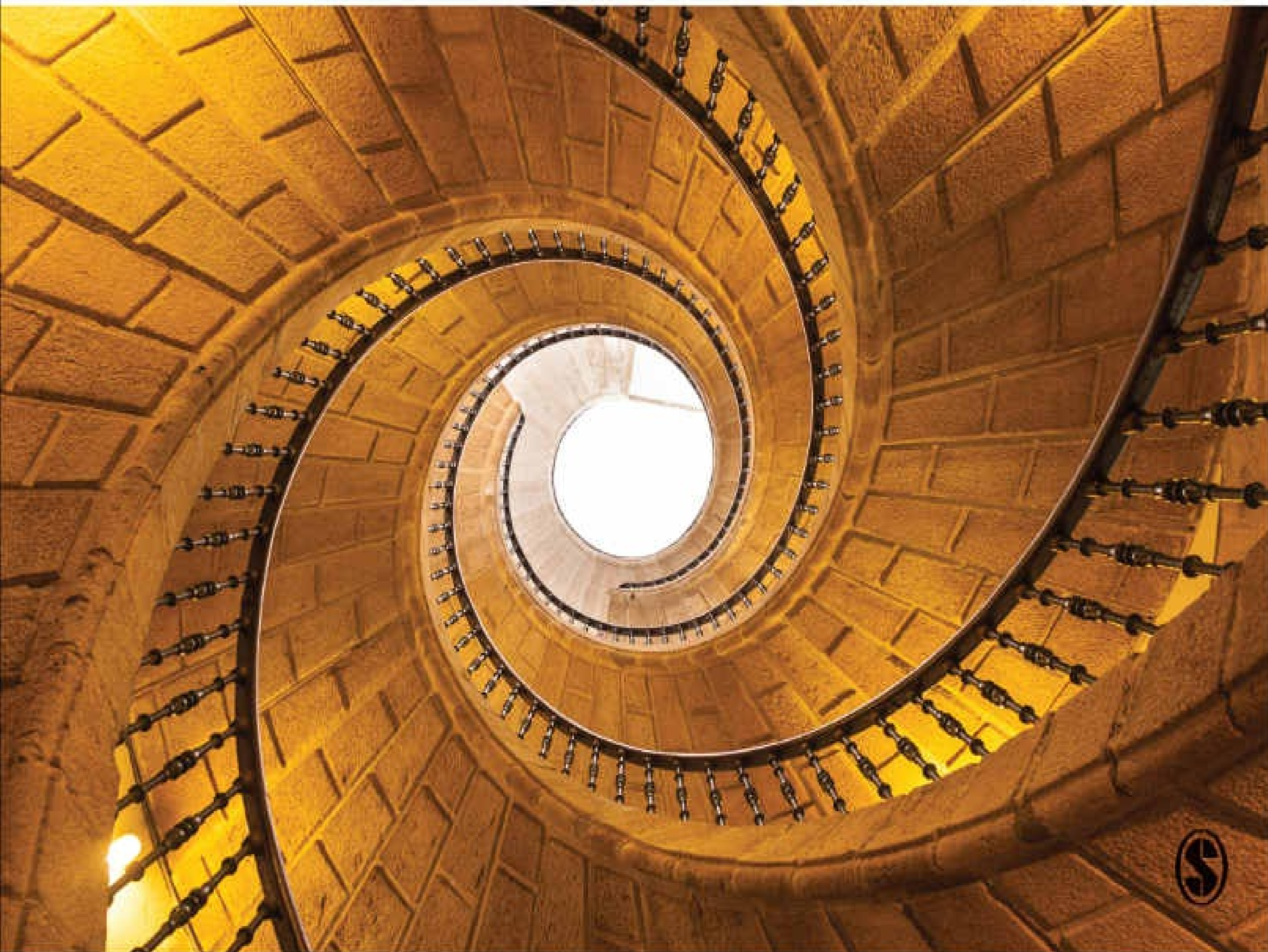
RICHARD A. KRUEGER | MARY ANNE CASEY

FOCUS GROUPS

A Practical Guide for Applied Research

5 EDITION



Focus Groups

5th Edition

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Richard A. Krueger
University of Minnesota, Professor Emeritus
Mary Anne Casey
Consultant

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Detailed Contents

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is professor emeritus at the University of Minnesota. He is an internationally recognized authority on the use of focus group interviewing within the public environment. For 25 years he served as evaluation leader for the University of Minnesota Extension Service followed by 10 years teaching graduate courses in program evaluation and research methodology. He is a former president of the American Evaluation Association and a member of the Qualitative Research Consultants Association. He holds a PhD from the University of Minnesota. In his spare time he repairs his motorcycle, swaps stories with friends, and shops for tools at the local hardware store. Maybe you've seen him there.

Mary Anne Casey

is an evaluator, qualitative researcher, and adjunct professor. She has been a consultant at the international, national, state, and local levels on topics relating to health, public policy, community development, agriculture, and the environment. Mary Anne has had the privilege of asking questions and listening and the challenge of providing useful, enlightening results to clients. She relishes analysis and finding just the right way to convey what people have shared. She weaves the lessons she's learned into her work, writing, and teaching. Mary Anne previously worked for the W. K. Kellogg Foundation and the state of Minnesota. She received her PhD from the University of Minnesota. She gets her best insights while gardening or on long walks.

Preface

Years ago, we were asked to conduct a needs assessment for a group of vocational colleges that was interested in increasing offerings to farmers. We designed a survey, mailed it to farmers far and wide, waited for returns, and then analyzed the data. Based on the results, we recommended that the colleges develop several new courses. But when the colleges offered the courses, no one came! What went wrong? We assumed the problem was sampling error, so we devised an elaborate sampling strategy and repeated the study. Alas, findings from the second survey were almost identical to the findings from the first.

Perplexed, we did something almost unheard of at the time—we asked the survey respondents to help us understand what was happening. We organized focus groups with farmers, showed them the needs assessment findings, and said, “Farmers told us they needed information on these topics and that these were the best times to hold classes. But, when the vocational colleges offered courses in those topics, no one came. Help us understand what’s happening.”

In the first group a farmer replied, “We do need those things, but just because we need it doesn’t mean we are going to go” to your classes.

That single comment changed the way we saw the world. As educators, we had naively assumed that, if people felt a need to learn something, they would instantly make efforts to fill the need.

The farmers helped us understand the issue from their perspective. They were making choices about how to use their precious time. They were choosing between classes and going to their child’s basketball game, or their volunteer commitments, or just relaxing at home. Classes were competing with other ways that the farmers could use their time.

So we asked, “What would it take to get you to go to a course offered by the vocational college?” Again, the farmers gave answers that shook the way we looked at things. Farmers said things like this:

- “The classes should be fun!” (It never occurred to us that classes should be fun. Informative? Yes. Fun? No.)
- “The instructors should have dirt under their fingernails.” (A poetic way to say that farmers wanted instructors who had recent experience. Don’t we all?)
- “Don’t waste your money on those glossy brochures that you send out. I go to a class because my veterinarian, or my banker, or another farmer has said it’s good and I should go.” (Pointing out the power of word-of-mouth advertising for the target audience.)

We analyzed the data from the focus groups and shared recommendations with the vocational colleges. Based on those recommendations, the vocational college instructors again offered several new courses. This time, the courses were a huge success.

Those early focus groups opened up new territory for us. We were stunned by what we learned by gathering a group of people, asking questions, and listening. We learned about the topics, and we learned how to conduct focus groups. We made plenty of mistakes. But over time, we learned how to get people to show up (it's harder than you think). We learned the importance of being good hosts—making strangers feel comfortable. We learned to keep our judgments at bay and create a permissive and nonthreatening environment. We learned how to encourage shy people to talk and how to manage the talkative. We learned what makes a good focus group question. We developed different ways of analyzing the data, based on the purpose of the study. We got dirt under our fingernails—and we keep getting them dirty. Now we want to share what we've learned with you.

How Is This Edition Different?

This fifth edition of *Focus Groups* builds on the first four. In this edition, we've updated a number of the strategies and concepts. The basic premises of focus group research are largely the same. But, we've also noted how focus groups are evolving in a variety of ways.

The book is still full of advice based on years of experience conducting focus groups. It is designed as a guide and a reference book for those who are conducting focus groups, contracting for focus groups, or teaching about focus groups. We've included examples. We've outlined processes.

When compared to earlier editions, this fifth edition is more complete in several respects. In Chapter 2 we expanded the discussion on planning with attention to analysis and obtaining quality results. In Chapter 3 we've expanded the discussion on developing questions. In Chapter 4 we've expanded the discussion on recruiting to include more recent strategies that have proven to be effective. In Chapter 5 we've added a section on hosting the focus group—a skill that researchers need to consider in order to be effective. And we've expanded the discussion on Internet focus groups to reflect current practices and technology.

Here is how the book is organized: Chapter 1 is intended to set the stage for focus group research. It helps us understand the history of focus groups and identify those essential elements that are needed to truly call it a focus group. Chapters 2 through 7 contain the best practices for conducting focus group research. Quality focus groups demand effective planning (Chapter 2), good questions (Chapter 3), selecting the right participants (Chapter 4), skillful moderating (Chapter 5), systematic analysis (Chapter 6), and appropriate reporting (Chapter 7). The final chapters concentrate less on how-to strategies and more on special concerns and adaptations. Focus group research continues to evolve; in Chapter 8 we suggest features and characteristics of four distinct paths. Chapter 9 gives an overview of focus groups with young people, and then in Chapter 10 we discuss international and cross-cultural focus groups. In Chapter 11 we describe recent trends in telephone and Internet focus groups, and in Chapter 12 we discuss focus groups within organizations. In the final chapters, we discuss how the focus group can be modified (Chapter 13) and how to answer questions about focus group research (Chapter 14).

This book is particularly intended for aspiring researchers, so we give a lot of how-to advice—the same kind of advice we give to friends, graduate students, and clients. But when talking to a friend or a client, we modify our advice to fit the situation. We can't be that specific in this book. So think about how our advice fits your audience and environment. The age, culture, lifestyle, or occupation of your participants may mean you have to modify the practices. For example, having precise beginning and ending times may be important in a corporate culture but inappropriate in certain community settings. We don't mean for our advice to be rigid. Instead, use it as a way to get started, think about how it needs to be adapted, and get advice from wise ones.

What Have We Learned?

Sure we learned about the process. These are the kinds of things we share in this book. We learned to plan, to recruit, to moderate, and to analyze. And we keep learning new things about the process. That is the head stuff. It is important because it allows us to learn the more important stuff: the things that change us as people.

Through focus groups, we have gotten tiny glimpses of worlds that we otherwise do not experience: what it is like to suffer from psychosis, what it is like to live with someone who has severe and chronic depression, what it is like to be a veteran, what it is like to be a new mom, what it is like to be a parent of a child who attends special education classes, what it is like to be beaten and degraded by someone you love, what it is like to be a second grade boy, why farmers feel they are unjustly blamed for environmental issues, how young black urban men view guns, how environmentalists are torn between publicizing treasured resources so people can enjoy them and keeping them a secret so they won't be destroyed, how the views of frontline health care providers differ from views of management, what it is like for Hmong parents who have to rely on their children to read letters from school because the parents can't read English.

Some of the stories we have heard have been funny, some have been uplifting, and some have haunted us for years. These stories have changed us. We have learned that there are always multiple realities. Depending on where a person is in the world, he or she sees things differently. By carefully listening, we get an image of how other people think and feel and why. Because of this, we hope we've learned to be less judgmental. We hope we've learned more about how to treat people with respect. We hope we've learned to hear the wisdom that people share. We hope we've learned to be trustworthy messengers. We know we have learned that it is an honor to sit with people and hear their stories.

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1 Overview of Focus Groups

What Lies Ahead

In this chapter we describe:

- The Focus Group Is a Special Type of Group
- The Story Behind Focus Group Interviews
- Why Do Focus Groups Work?
- Characteristics of Focus Groups
- The Uses of Focus Groups
- How Focus Groups Can Be Used With Other Research Methods
- Criticisms of Focus Groups

Being in groups is a common experience. We find ourselves invited, herded, or seduced into groups for planning, decision making, advising, brainstorming, learning, sharing, or self-help. Groups can be fun and fruitful; they can also be agonizing experiences that are unnecessary, unproductive, and time-consuming.

We believe there are two reasons that group experiences turn into wasted time: an unclear purpose or inappropriate processes. The purpose of the group may be to suggest ideas, to clarify potential options, to nominate candidates, to react to ideas, to recommend a course of action, to make a decision, to plan, or to evaluate. Each purpose is considerably different from the others. If leaders aren't clear about the purpose of the group, or if they say it is one thing but lead the group in another direction, people get confused and frustrated. It is tough to fulfill your purpose if you don't know what it is.

Even if the leader is clear about the purpose, he or she may not have the skills needed to guide the group. Group process skills are essential if the group is to accomplish its purpose. But, the skills necessary for leading one type of group experience may not work in another. The processes used to get participants' reactions to ideas are different from the processes used for group decision making. The purpose of this book is to help you—the reader—learn to do focus group research. We share what we have learned—what has worked for us. We hope that, as a result, you will be clearer about the purpose of focus groups and the processes used to conduct focus group research.

The Focus Group Is a Special Type of Group

A focus group isn't just getting a bunch of people together to talk. A focus group is a special type of group in terms of purpose, size, composition, and procedures. The purpose of conducting a focus group is to better understand how people feel or think about an issue, idea, product, or service. Focus groups are used to gather opinions.

Participants are selected because they have certain characteristics in common that relate to the topic of the focus group. The researcher creates a permissive environment that encourages participants to share perceptions and points of view without pressuring participants to vote or reach consensus. And the researcher doesn't do just one focus group. The group discussion is conducted several times with similar types of participants, so the researcher can identify trends and patterns in perceptions. Then, careful and systematic analysis of the discussions provides clues and insights as to how an idea, product, service, or opportunity is perceived by members of the groups.

A focus group study is a carefully planned series of discussions designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, nonthreatening environment. Each group is conducted with 5 to 10 people led by a skilled interviewer or moderator. The discussions are relaxed, and often, participants enjoy sharing their ideas and perceptions.

The Story Behind Focus Group Interviews

The label *focus groups* has been applied to many different group encounters. We have heard town meetings, reading groups, and study circles called focus groups. A local newspaper ran a photograph of a man dressed in a suit standing in front of a school auditorium full of people. The caption said it was a focus group. These aren't focus groups. They don't contain the essential elements of focus group interviewing.

In the late 1930s, social scientists began investigating alternative ways of conducting interviews. Some social scientists doubted the accuracy of information gathered through traditional individual interviews that used a predetermined questionnaire with closed-ended response choices. This approach had a major disadvantage: The respondent was limited to the choices offered, and therefore, the findings could be unintentionally influenced by the interviewer through oversight or omission. Stuart A. Rice (1931) was one of the first social scientists to express concern. He wrote:

> A defect of the interview for the purposes of factfinding in scientific research, then, is that the questioner takes the lead. That is, the subject plays a more or less passive role. Information or points of view of the highest value may not be disclosed because the direction given the interview by the questioner leads away from them. In short, data obtained from an interview are as likely to embody the preconceived ideas of the interviewer as the attitudes of the subject interviewed. (p. 561)

As a result, social scientists began exploring strategies whereby the researcher would take on a less directive and dominating role. Respondents would be able to comment on the areas they thought were most important. In effect, the emphasis of nondirective interviewing was to shift attention from the interviewer to the respondent, placing considerable emphasis on getting in tune with the reality of the interviewee. Nondirective interviews used open-ended questions and allowed individuals to respond without setting boundaries or providing clues for potential response categories. The open-ended approach allowed the subject ample opportunity to comment, to explain, and to share experiences and attitudes. Nondirective interviewing increased in appeal in the late 1930s and 1940s. Roethlisberger and Dickson (1938) cited it in studies of employee motivation and Carl Rogers (1942) in psychotherapy.

During World War II, social scientists began using the nondirective interviewing technique in groups—this was the beginning of focus groups. In one of the first focus group studies, Robert Merton explored morale in the U.S. military for the War Department. He found that people revealed sensitive information when they felt they were in a safe, comfortable place with people like themselves. Many of the procedures that have come to be accepted as common practice in focus group interviews were set forth in the classic work by Robert K. Merton, Marjorie Fiske, and Patricia L. Kendall (1956) in *The Focused Interview*.

Although Merton was a respected sociologist, most academics did not embrace the focused interview. In fact, Merton's pioneering work laid dormant in the social sciences for decades. The acceptance of focus groups, and of qualitative research methods in general, was stymied in academic circles for a variety of reasons including a preoccupation with quantitative procedures, assumptions about the nature of reality, and a societal tendency to believe in numbers. Social science research paid attention to experimental designs, control groups, and randomization. This sojourn with numbers has been beneficial in that we gained in our experimental sophistication, and it also has nurtured a desire for more understanding of the human experience. Too often, quantitative studies were based on imperfect assumptions about people, about things, or about reality in general.

Even though academics weren't interested in focus groups, market researchers embraced focus groups beginning in the 1950s. Business was booming after the war, and market researchers were charged with finding out how to make their companies' products attractive to potential customers. Businesses used focus groups to design new products, improve existing products, understand customers, and test advertising campaigns. The sensible strategy was to listen to people and stay in touch with current and potential customers. For example, soft drink companies discovered via focus groups that consumers often drink beverages because of the sociability features associated with the product, not because they are thirsty. It is no wonder then that slogans promoting these beverages highlight how "things go better" or bring about increased personal popularity on the beach (Bellenger, Bernhardt, & Goldstrucker, 1976). Focus group interviews are widely accepted within marketing research because they produce useful results at a reasonable cost.

Since the 1950s, a whole industry has been created to support for-profit focus group research. In every major city across the United States, there are market research firms that provide services relating to focus groups: finding the right participants, recruiting them, providing rooms with one-way mirrors and video and audio recording options, arranging for catering services for clients and groups. In every major city, there are also professional focus group moderators who spend their lives conducting focus groups for businesses. Most of these professionals learned to do focus groups through apprenticeships. Initially, the technique was used to get information from white, middle-class people with disposable incomes.

Academics rediscovered focus group interviewing in the 1980s, often learning from market researchers. But, some of the accepted practices in business focus groups just didn't work well in academic or nonprofit settings. Academics took the strategies used in market research and adapted the technique to work in other settings. These scholars also returned to the work of Robert Merton to learn how the technique was originally used.

There are several approaches to focus group interviewing. Consumer-oriented, market research focus groups use different strategies than focus groups conducted for academic or scientific purposes. Academic focus groups might use different strategies than those conducted in nonprofit and public environments. And focus groups conducted in a participatory research environment, where community members or volunteers are involved as researchers in the study, use different strategies. Yet another approach is used in international environments, where major disparities occur between the sponsor and the participants in terms of culture, language, income, and traditions. Other approaches continue to evolve and employ telephones or the Internet instead of face-to-face discussions. Each approach is distinctive, but they all have common elements of focus group research. These different approaches are discussed in greater length in Chapter 8.

Why Do Focus Groups Work?

Focus groups work when participants feel comfortable, respected, and free to give their opinions without being judged. The intent of the focus group is to promote self-disclosure among participants. We want to know what people really think and feel. For some individuals, self-disclosure comes easily—it is natural and comfortable. But for others, it is difficult and requires trust, effort, and courage. Or disclosure may be easy in some settings but not others. Children have a natural tendency to disclose things about themselves, but through socialization, they learn the value of dissemblance. Over time, the natural and spontaneous disclosures of children are modified by social pressure. Sidney Jourard (1964) expands on this tendency:

> As children we are, and we act, our real selves. We say what we think, we scream for what we want, we tell what we did. These spontaneous disclosures meet variable consequences—some disclosures are ignored, some rewarded, and some punished. Doubtless in accordance with the laws of reinforcement, we learn early to withhold certain disclosures because of the painful consequences to which they lead. We are punished in our society, not only for what we actually do, but also for what we think, feel, or want. Very soon, then, the growing child learns to display a highly expurgated version of his self to others. I have coined the term "public self" to refer to the concept of oneself which one wants others to believe. (p. 10)

A familiar story, especially for mothers, is that of a child running home to tell of an exciting and possibly a dangerous experience. Mom is horrified at the tale and tells the child to never, never do that again. Mom's unexpected response leaves an indelible impression, and the child learns one of two things: Either never repeat the experience or, if you do, don't tell Mom!

A young mother was visiting the Sunday school class of her 6-year-old daughter. The lesson was on proper behavior in church. The teacher asked the children to name places where we should not run. Kids waved their hands wildly, and the teacher called on one child at a time. The children offered their answers—school, the library, grocery store—but no one mentioned church. The visiting mother proudly noticed that her daughter's hand was still waving in the air, undoubtedly armed with the answer the teacher sought. Finally, the teacher called on the daughter. With great enthusiasm, the 6-year-old responded, "The liquor store—my dad said that I should never run in the liquor store because I'll knock down the bottles." The mother was momentarily speechless, as liquor stores were held in disrepute by this church. The child had not yet developed a public self, at least as far as the church was concerned.

So when do people self-disclose? When do they say what they really think and feel? When they feel comfortable. Think about bus, train, or plane rides. People are seated close to strangers for hours. It is not unusual for travelers to strike up a conversation where they share information about themselves. In some circumstances, travelers reveal information to strangers—personal attitudes and feelings about work, family, or life that they might not share with acquaintances. People are more likely to share when they perceive that they are alike in some ways. It may be that they have one or more characteristics in common, such as age, gender, occupation, marital status, or hold similar attitudes on a topic of discussion. Jourard (1964) has found that individuals decide to reveal based on their perceptions of the people they are with. In his studies of self-disclosure, he found that "subjects tended to disclose more about themselves to people who resembled them in various ways than to people who differ from them" (p. 15).

Our goal is to create a comfortable, permissive environment in focus groups. Occasionally, the focus group is composed of strangers—people who probably won't see each other again. In other situations, the participants may be acquainted. But, we always select participants who have something in common, and we emphasize that aspect in our introduction. In a focus group, the interviewer underscores the commonality of the group by saying something like this: "You were invited because you have certain things in common that we're interested in. You all farm within this watershed, and you've all tried different soil conservation measures. We want to tap into those experiences."

The interviewer is not in a position of power or influence. The interviewer encourages comments of all types —positive and negative. The interviewer is careful not to make judgments about the responses and to control body language that might communicate approval or disapproval. The role of the moderator is to ask questions, listen, keep the conversation on track, and make sure everyone has a chance to share.

The groups are held in locations where the participants will be comfortable. This will be different for teens than for corporate employees. It may be someone's home, the church basement, a pizza joint, a community center, a neighborhood coffee shop, or a business conference room. Often, when talking to participants, we call it a small group discussion rather than a focus group, so the process doesn't seem intimidating or like a big mystery to people. We try to make people feel comfortable.

Characteristics of Focus Groups

Focus group interviews typically have five characteristics or features. These characteristics relate to the ingredients of a focus group: (1) a small group of people, who (2) possess certain characteristics, (3) provide qualitative data (4) in a focused discussion (5) to help understand the topic of interest. Other types of group processes used in human services (delphic, brainstorming, nominal, planning, therapeutic, sensitivity, advisory, etc.) may also have one or more of these features but not in the same combination as focus group interviews.

Focus Groups Involve People

Focus groups are typically composed of 5 to 8 people, but the size can range from as few as 4 to as many as 12. The group must be small enough for everyone to have opportunity to share insights and yet large enough to provide diversity of perceptions. When the group exceeds a dozen participants, there is a tendency for the group to fragment. Participants want to talk but are unable to do so because there is just not a sufficient pause in the conversation. In these situations, the only recourse is for participants to share by whispering to the people next to them. This is a signal that the group is too big. Small groups of four or five participants afford more opportunity to share ideas, but the restricted size also results in a smaller pool of total ideas. These smaller groups—sometimes called *mini-focus groups*—have a distinct advantage in logistics. Groups of four or five can easily be accommodated in restaurants, homes, and other environments where space is at a premium. The quality of the discussion is greatly affected by the group size. This is examined in detail in Chapter 4.

The focus group is not an open meeting. Participants are invited to participate. The invitation ensures that participants have the required characteristics and that the group is the right size. This is in contrast to public forums or meetings where anyone and everyone can attend.

The People Possess Certain Characteristics

Focus groups are composed of participants who are similar to each other in a way that is important to the researcher. The nature of this homogeneity is determined by the purpose of the study. This similarity is a basis for recruitment, and participants are typically informed of these common factors at the beginning of the discussion.

This homogeneity can be broadly or narrowly defined. For example, suppose an adult community education program wanted to know more about how to reach people who haven't participated in their programs. In this case, homogeneity could be defined broadly as adults who live in the community who have not yet attended community education sessions. Group members could vary by age, gender, occupation, and interests, but they have the commonality of being adults, community members, and nonusers. If, however, the community education staff are interested in attracting more parents of children under 5, or residents in specific neighborhoods, or people who work at home, then the researcher would use a narrower definition of homogeneity in selecting participants. The issue is, then, who can give you the type of information you need.

Focus Groups Provide Qualitative Data

The goal of a focus group is to collect data that is of interest to the researcher—typically to find the range of opinions of people across several groups. The researcher compares and contrasts data from across groups. In order to do this, at least three groups are needed. This differs from other group interactions where the goal is to come to some conclusion at the end of a discussion—reach consensus, provide recommendations, or make decisions among alternatives. The data in the focus group are solicited through open-ended questions. The focus group presents a more natural environment than that of an individual interview because participants are influencing and influenced by others—just as they are in life. The researcher serves several functions in the focus group: moderator, listener, observer, and eventually analyst.

Focus Groups Have a Focused Discussion

The questions in a focus group are carefully predetermined and sequenced. The questions are phrased and sequenced, so they are easy to understand and logical to the participant. The moderator uses open-ended questions. These questions appear spontaneous but are carefully developed after considerable reflection and input. The set of questions—called the *questioning route* or *interview guide*—is arranged in a natural, logical sequence. Questions near the beginning of the group are more general. As the group continues, the questions become more specific—more focused. The beginning questions help get people talking and thinking about the topic. Questions near the end of the group typically yield the most useful information. There is no pressure by the moderator to have the group reach consensus. Instead, attention is placed on understanding the feelings, comments, and thought processes of participants as they discuss the issues.

The Uses of Focus Groups

Focus groups work particularly well to explore perceptions, feelings, and thinking about issues, ideas, products, services, or opportunities. Here are some of the ways the information gathered in focus groups is used. These categories are not intended to be mutually exclusive or all inclusive. Instead, they present a beginning way to think of the variety of uses of focus group interviewing.

Focus Groups Can Help With Decision Making

Earlier we said focus groups aren't used for decision making. Now, we're saying they are. Here is the difference: When using focus groups, decisions are made after all the focus groups are completed, not during individual focus groups. The study sponsor uses the findings from the focus groups to make decisions. The focus groups are used to gain understanding about a topic, so decision makers can make more informed choices.

Focus group findings have been used to advise decision making before, during, or after an event or program. When focus groups are used to gather information before a program, we call it *needs assessment, asset analysis, a climate survey, planning,* or *pilot testing*. When focus groups are used during a program, we call it *formative evaluation, process evaluation, feedback, monitoring,* or *reporting*. When it is used for decision making after an event, it might be called *summative evaluation, outcome evaluation,* or just *feedback*.

Focus Groups Can Guide Program, Policy, or Service Development

This model originated in the business and manufacturing environment, but we have been cheerleaders for the idea in the nonprofit and public sector. This is one of our favorite concepts.

There are three points in the development of a program, policy, or service when focus groups are helpful. At the first point, focus groups are used by the researcher to gain understanding—to see the issue (e.g., breast-feeding, recycling, getting a mortgage) through the eyes and hearts of the target audience and the staff who will have to implement the program, policy, or service. The researcher's goal with these focus groups is to learn how a target audience (and staff who will implement it) sees, understands and values a particular topic and to learn the language used to talk about the topic. How do they think about it? How do they feel about it? How do they talk about it? What do they like about it? What do they dislike about it? What are their perceptions of people who do it or who don't do it? What keeps them from doing it (e.g., recycling), using it (your program), or buying it (your product or service)? What are the barriers? What would it take to get the audience to do it, use it, or buy it? What are the incentives? Design experts then use these findings to create alternative prototypes for the program or product. Typically, they develop three different designs of varying cost, intensity, or duration based on what was learned from the first-phase focus groups.

The second point in program, policy, or service development at which focus groups are useful is to pilot-test the prototypes created by the design experts based on information from the first focus groups. Potential users are asked to compare and contrast each prototype. They are asked what they like and what they don't like about each option. This information helps the planners fine-tune ideas, concepts, or plans before spending a lot of resources on implementation. The designers then take what they learned from the pilot test focus groups to create the final plan for the program, policy, or service. If the redesign is major and there are substantial financial risks, then additional focus groups might test the final design before it is produced or implemented.

The third point where focus groups can be helpful is after a program, policy, or service is up and running. They can be used for evaluation. How can the program be improved? Does it achieve the expected results? What works well and what doesn't?

This three-stage process of focus group research (shown in Figure 1.1) was first used to develop consumer products, but it has now been used to design nonprofit and government agency programs and policies.

On the surface, this design strategy seems so reasonable that we assume that it is regularly done. In fact, it has been our observation that the method most often used to design and deliver programs in the public and nonprofit sectors is quite different. It often looks like the process illustrated in Figure 1.2.

Too often, it begins with an influential person, typically a person who controls budgets and organizational decision making, who has a hot idea. The idea is often reasonable and, on the surface, sounds logical. Because the boss is excited, and because the boss controls the resources, the subordinates jump on board and work on the idea. Because of limited feedback, the program doesn't meet expectations and needs revisions. It is modified and implemented a second and third time, each time incurring considerable expenses. Worse, when the implementation fails, morale is affected. This status quo strategy occurs far too often. Occasionally, it is successful, but more often, it wastes time, money, and morale and could be easily solved with careful listening and feedback during the design stages.

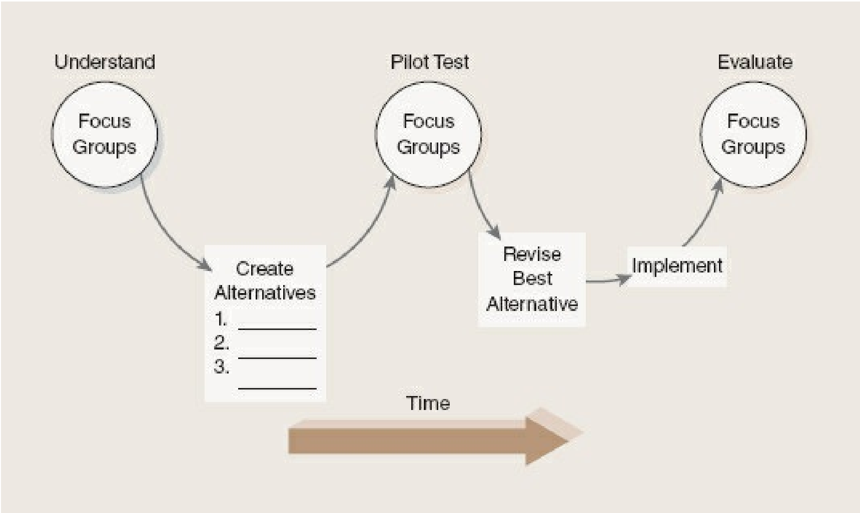

Figure 1.1 Recommended Strategy for Program, Policy, or Service Development

Figure 1.2 Status Quo Strategy for Program, Policy, or Service Development

Examples of questions in the development process

When using focus groups with the developmental process, the questions will vary depending on the purpose of the group. Here are examples.

Questions to seek understanding typically look like these:

- Tell me about your experiences with . . .?
- When people talk about . . . what do they say?
- What are the barriers that people face? What keeps people from . . .?
- What are the incentives that get people to . . .?
- What would it take for you to . . .?
- Tell me about the last time that you tried to change.

Questions used to pilot-test often include the following:

- Here are examples of (e.g., curriculum materials, logos, Web sites, policies, building plans). Take a moment, and place them in order of your preference.
- What do you see as the advantages of each?
- What do you see as the disadvantages of each?
- Which one do you like least? What is it that you do not like about it?
- Which one do you like best? What features or qualities does it have that you like?
- What could be done to improve your first choice?
- Tell me about situations when this first choice might not work.

Questions used for evaluation might be like these:

Think back to your experiences with this program and tell me:

- How did you first hear about this program?
- What attracted you to participate in the program?
- What did you find most helpful about the program?
- What did you find frustrating?
- Now, after participating, what were the benefits of the program?
- What difference did this program make to you or to others?
- How could the program be improved?
- How would you describe this program to others?

Focus Groups Can Help Capture Insights on Behavior

Focus groups provide insights into behavior. Market researchers have been using them for years to discover how to get consumers to change their behaviors: to try a new product, to buy more of the product, or to switch brands. Practitioners in fields like health and medicine struggle with similar issues: How do they get people to start healthy behaviors or stop unhealthy behaviors? Here's an example of how one medical team used focus groups to promote change. Doctors were having limited success helping low-income, inner-city African Americans who were newly diagnosed with high blood pressure. They wondered if advice from other African Americans in the community would have a bigger impact. The team conducted focus groups with patients who were successfully managing their blood pressure and asked them to share stories about how they changed their behaviors and what worked for them. The team analyzed the data for themes and to identify individuals with strong stories about lifestyle changes. They then invited key individuals back and videotaped them sharing their story. These success stories were produced on DVDs then used as intervention. The focus groups produced authentic and credible stories of how patients overcame barriers, such as unhealthy diet, lack of exercise, or poor medication adherence. The stories worked because the target audience saw individuals like themselves describe how they overcame obstacles and obtained healthy benefits. The focus groups were beneficial because they created an environment where stories could be told and that in turn sparked others to remember and describe their stories. These stories told by culturally relevant members of the community were particularly persuasive. DVDs of the stories were shared with those in the treatment group and resulted in significant improvement (Houston et al., 2011).

In another study, Simon Rosser and his colleagues (2011) at the University of Minnesota have been using Internet focus groups to gain insight from men who have sex with men. His team is interested in how to reach the target audience with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) prevention information. Because this audience tends to be tech savvy, it made sense to use Internet focus groups to obtain insights. Rosser used synchronous and asynchronous focus groups that afforded researcher confidentiality and participant anonymity. The permissive and nonthreatening environment of the focus groups produced useful insights for developing e-public health messages.

Focus Groups Can Provide Insight on Organizational Concerns and Issues

Certain topics or issues regularly interest organizations, and some of these topics lend themselves to focus group studies. Let's highlight a few:

Customer Satisfaction

Focus groups are often used early in a customer satisfaction study to define the concept of satisfaction, identify the ingredients of satisfaction, and discover the conditions or circumstances that influence satisfaction. Armed with this information, survey researchers can then design instruments that can quantify satisfaction by region, type of use, customer demographics, or other relevant variables. Designing the survey instrument without listening to customers has been found to be hazardous to organizational health and well-being.

Organizational Development

Focus groups can offer valuable insights on an array of organizational issues like morale, engagement, productivity, or employee satisfaction. There is a tendency for organizations to engage prematurely in a human resources effort without an adequate understanding of the language, culture, and working situations of the target audience. Certainly, experts and savvy leaders have valuable insights into these matters, but we must not ignore insights and opinions of employees. Care is needed in listening so that employees feel they can honestly share their experiences without fear of reprisal. Focus group interviews have proven beneficial in understanding the dimensions of employee engagement, identifying and testing strategies for increasing productivity, helping the organization identify ways to meet its goals, developing the criteria and process steps of benchmarking, understanding the informal organizational culture, and improving working conditions.

Understanding Employee Concerns

Public-nonprofit organizations have many of the same types of employee concerns as for-profit organizations. There are concerns about employee morale and motivation, incentives and barriers to productivity, the influence of merit pay and compensation procedures, how welcoming the environment is to different kinds of diversity, and a host of other topics relating to human resource development. Focus groups with employees have been helpful in understanding the perspectives of staff and also in identifying or testing potential policies or solution strategies.

Planning and Goal Setting

Public institutions are expected to be inclusive in their planning and goal setting. Some organizations use focus groups to help them be inclusive. They purposefully and systematically listen to clients and employees to learn how these groups see the organization and where it should head. What are its strengths? Weaknesses? What's missing? What opportunities exist? What are the advantages and disadvantages of moving in this particular direction?

Over time, organizations tend to institutionalize, streamline, or abridge the planning processes, often with the best of intentions. Unfortunately, these changes begin to fracture the relationship between the client and the organization. Clients begin to feel that the organization is not responsive to their unique needs because the evidence used for planning by the organization is not visible and sometimes not understood or valued by the client. Ironically, the organization may be using sophisticated procedures for discerning public needs, but the individual perceives them as ineffective because there are no obvious indications that the organization is listening. In this environment, focus groups have two advantages: They yield valuable insights from customers and clients, and they convey that the organization wants to listen.

Another way that organizations are using focus groups for planning is in identifying scenarios that could result from policies, programs, future events, or disasters. Experts, often from differing backgrounds or disciplines, are asked to reflect on the potential aftereffects of these situations. Listening to others with differing expertise and allowing focus group participants opportunities to interact foster new insights and solutions not available with traditional strategies.

Needs Assessment

Arguably, one of the most difficult tasks facing nonprofit or public organizations is needs assessment. What on the surface seems so simple—a discovery of needs—is often remarkably complex. Focus groups have proven helpful mostly because they provide an interactive environment. Focus groups enable people to ponder, reflect, and listen to experiences and opinions of others. This interaction helps participants compare their own personal realities to those of others. This is particularly evident when conducting focus groups on training needs, where an interesting pattern regularly occurs. What begins as a listing of training needs quickly evolves into a discussion of what it would really take to get employees to do more X or be better at X—topics such as rewards and motivation, communications, overall organizational culture. To organizational leaders, training and related educational experiences are often seen as solutions, whereas the participants of focus groups regularly see a disconnect between the problem and the solution. Training is one way of changing employee behavior, but employees are often frustrated by organizational barriers or a lack of incentives that thwart change.

Quality Movements

Focus groups have been helpful in developing and maintaining quality improvement efforts. These quality efforts depend on widespread involvement, open communications, feedback, and a nonthreatening environment. Focus groups are one of the strategies used to define quality, test monitoring procedures or solution ideas, and generally understand issues relating to quality.

Policy Making and Testing

In the past decade, a number of public organizations have used focus groups to help develop and test policy strategies prior to implementation. Focus groups have been helpful in identifying the criteria needed for successful rules, laws, or policies. By understanding these criteria, the policy makers can build in elements that will lead to successful outcomes. Then, by using focus groups to pilot-test the policies or procedures, the public organization can determine which options are easiest for the public to adopt or follow, easiest to understand, and easiest for the agency to enforce.

How Focus Groups Can Be Used With Other Research Methods

Focus groups are used to lay the groundwork for subsequent survey research. Some research begins by using focus groups to learn about language, concepts, and factors that might be included in later research procedures. With this insight, survey researchers can then develop meaningful instruments that allow for larger samples and statistical analysis. In other situations, focus groups have been used after other research methods to help interpret or to develop recommendations for later action or study.

Criticisms of Focus Groups

There have been a number of criticisms leveled at focus group interviewing, and it is instructive to listen to these. Some arguments are sound and deserve attention; others are superficial and lack substance. Let's examine these criticisms and reflect on what it means for those contemplating focus group interviewing.

We'd like to preface our examination by suggesting that no method is perfect and that research methods are highly situational, in that they are highly dependent on how they are used, the expertise of the researcher, and the environment in which the research is undertaken.

Focus Group Participants Tend to Intellectualize

When focus group participants discuss their behaviors, there is a tendency for them to portray themselves as thoughtful, rational, and reflective individuals. Behavioral experts tell us that not all behavior is thoughtful and reflective and that a substantial amount of human behavior may be unthinking or unconscious. Gerald Zaltman (2003), in his work on *How Customers Think,* argues that 95 percent of consumer decision making is unconscious. In fact, Zaltman argues that that is the reason many market research strategies, such as focus group interviewing, yield incomplete and erroneous results.

This criticism deserves careful attention particularly for those who want insight on behavior. This concern applies to all research methods that are based on questions and answers, including individual interviews, surveys, or electronic inquiries. Astute researchers address this problem by using a variety of methods, including observation and experiential exercises along with the questions. This problem is minimized when researchers use multiple strategies of inquiry.

Focus Groups Don't Tap Into Emotions

If your goal is to get people to change their behavior, you might consider strategies that identify emotions attached to that behavior. When discussing behavior, it is easy for people to intellectualize and give well-meaning answers. Often, individuals are unaware of what really drives their behavior. For some individuals and in some situations, behavior is a result of a thoughtful, reflective, cognitive process. But, those who study behavior argue that many decisions are nonrational and often emotional responses. Steven Reiss (2004) identifies 16 motives that drive behavior, and Barry Feig (2006) argues that emotions are the key drivers or hot buttons of behavior. These models identify emotional motives that influence behavior, and these can offer insight into how behavior is changed.

Individuals may not be aware of the emotions that influence their behavior or may be unable to articulate the emotions. As a result, focus group moderators have used several strategies for obtaining these insights. Projective questions, questions that ask about feelings as opposed to thoughts, as well as exercises in sorting, arranging, drawing, and similar activities, can give insights into these emotions. Leading a focus group in which attention is placed on emotions can be exciting, challenging, and unpredictable. Some moderators are uncomfortable with displays of emotion in the focus group; you have to be ready for people crying, getting tense, or getting defensive or angry. There is an art to leading these groups, and before using these strategies, you as a moderator must be comfortable with emotional displays, be sensitive to how others share their feelings, and have a tolerance for ambiguity.

Some individuals will be reluctant to share their feelings. The researchers should consider using individual interviews as well as focus groups when examining emotional concerns. For some, the individual interview is a more appropriate place to share emotions; others find that supportive groups sanction and encourage this type of sharing.

Focus Group Participants May Make Up Answers

Focus group participants are sometimes asked questions about topics or behaviors where they have limited or no experience. The truest response ought to be "I don't know," but that answer can be embarrassing or reflect negatively on the individual. So, instead of admitting lack of knowledge, the individual invents an answer that seems plausible and would likely be the response if he or she had actually encountered the experience.

Market researchers tell us that focus group participants have described how they purchase groceries for their families and that the quality of the food is the most important factor. However, when researchers examine their pantries and freezers, the foods on hand are sometimes quite different from what the shopper had described. Some have said that the focus group tends to give us a picture of how the consumer wants to be seen by others, as opposed to their actual lives.

Savvy market researchers have been aware of this tendency for decades and are cautious in how they ask questions so as not to elicit intellectualizing. These strategies are discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

Focus Groups Produce Trivial Results

Yes, this can certainly happen. It tends to occur when the groups are too large and the topic is complicated. In general, focus groups of 10 to 12 participants are risky when the topic is complicated. When you truly want a conversation and when you want to observe how participants discuss an issue, you clearly need to restrict the group size. Or, in circumstances where time is limited and you must complete the focus group in 60 to 90 minutes, then the size must be restricted, or you are likely to get superficial and trivial comments.

Dominant Individuals Can Influence Results

Yes, this does happen, but a skillful moderator can minimize the risk and even turn it into a beneficial learning experience. In Chapter 5, we discuss moderator skills; one of those important skills is handling individuals who wish to dominate the group. One of the benefits of the focus group is to observe the influence of various arguments and points of view on other participants. Much can be learned by watching situations in which a participant seeks to persuade others. The critical role of the moderator is to serve as a leveling force that allows participants to reflect on various arguments without pressure.

You Can't Depend on the Results of Focus Group Research

Malcolm Gladwell (2005) makes this claim in *Blink.* He uses the example of how focus group participants panned the Aeron chair developed by Herman Miller—a chair that later turned out to be a great commercial success. Gladwell argues that the focus groups were at fault. But as Judith Langer (2007) and others point out, it is more likely that other factors were involved, such as if the participants actually sat in the chair. It is not the most attractive chair to look at, and perceptions might change with experience. How many focus groups were held? And were those participating the appropriate sample? When information is lacking, it is easy to place blame.

Summary

Focus groups are special creatures in the kingdom of groups. In terms of appearances, focus groups look very much like other kinds of group experiences. On closer inspection, however, focus groups have a distinctive cluster of characteristics: Focus groups collect qualitative data from homogeneous people in a group situation through a focused discussion. Focus groups have been found useful prior to, during, and after programs, events, or experiences. They have been helpful in assessing needs, generating information for constructing questionnaires, developing plans, recruiting new clientele, finding out how customers make decisions to use or not use a product or service, testing new programs and ideas, improving existing programs, and evaluating outcomes.

2 Planning the Focus Group Study

What Lies Ahead

In this chapter we describe:

- Determining the Purpose
- Deciding Whether Focus Group Interviewing Is the Right Method
- Determining What Types of People Can Give You the Information You Want
- Determining How Many Groups to Conduct
- Balancing the Design With the Resources Available
- Designing the Focus Group Study
- Planning in Phases
- Planning With Analysis in Mind
- Listening to Your Target Audience
- Considering Consent, Human Subjects, and Ethics
- Developing a Written Plan and Determining Resources Needed
- Anticipating Problems

Planning helps the researcher, the research team, and the client or sponsor of the study. It ensures that everyone on the team is aware of the purpose of the study, that the expected outcomes of the study are identified, and that the study design matches the available resources.

Successful planning requires that we commit our thoughts to paper and invite others' feedback. Successful planning keeps promises reasonable, time lines efficient but doable, and budgets balanced. Planning helps prevent costly mistakes.

Determining the Purpose

Planning is crucial, but sometimes, people quickly skip over it. In fact, people often begin focus group studies by drafting questions. It is better to back up, think about your purpose, and ask some fundamental questions.

Planning begins by being clear about the purpose of the study. At times, the request for the study might originate from someone relatively unfamiliar with focus group interviews. For example, a director of an educational organization might want to find out how to reach new clientele; a curriculum coordinator might want to test ideas for new programs; or a coordinator of county human services may want to get residents' perceptions of the organization. When the idea or request for a study is handed to a research unit, the researchers often need more information on the nature of the problem, what information is being requested, and how the information will be used. Failure to clarify the problem can result in a study that misses the mark.

We begin planning by meeting with the person requesting the study, and we encourage this person to bring along several colleagues. Typically, the meeting involves people who will be on the research team and people who will be responsible for doing something with the results. This meeting usually includes two to seven people. We begin by having the people in the meeting discuss questions like these:

What is the problem that the study is to address?
What led up to the decision to do this study?
What is the purpose of the study?
What kinds of information do you want?
What types of information are most important?
Who wants the information? (Or, who do you want to give the information to?)
How will you use the information? (Or, what do you want others to do with the information?)
What is the next step the organization wants to make with the information?
Are there any ethical, legal, economic, or social considerations that lead researchers to favor one research procedure over another?

Our goal is to understand clearly what the client wants and to make sure the people requesting the study agree on the problem and the types of information needed to address the problem. Sometimes, we work on projects where the decision makers are extremely clear about what they want, why they want it, and how they intend to use it. These meetings are straightforward. Other times, the meetings are messier, and it takes more effort to arrive at agreement on the purpose of the study. This is particularly true when working on community issues. For example, after several fatal drinking and driving accidents, a group of community members came together to do something about the problem. But, people didn't agree on what the problem was. Was it drinking? Or, was it drinking and driving? Some people thought the purpose of the study was to get information to help design programs to decrease teenage drinking and driving, while others felt the purpose should be to design programs to decrease teenage drinking. These different purposes would take the study in different directions. If the decision makers don't agree on the purpose of the study, someone is going to be disappointed with the results.

It may be beneficial to ask, in several different ways, why the information is needed. For example, "Tell me about the background of the proposed study." "What prompted you to consider the study?" "Who is interested in the study results?" "What do you want those individuals to do with the study results?" This pattern of questioning lets the researcher get a better picture of the information needs of intended users and thereby keep the study on target. It can also help highlight differences and similarities in people's thinking about the study. Sometimes, part of the researcher's role is to help people see differences in their thinking about the project and come to agreement. Hidden agendas, organizational politics, and fuzzy thinking hinder agreement.

Two challenges regularly occur in public-nonprofit environments. Watch for them. First, don't be surprised if the sponsors are unclear or fuzzy about what they want, especially in exploratory studies. It sometimes takes several meetings to clarify the purpose. Second, the sponsors may have exaggerated expectations of what can reasonably be delivered.

Deciding Whether Focus Group Interviewing Is the Right Method

Once you determine the purpose of the study, you can begin thinking about what methods to use. People come to us and say they want to do focus groups. After talking with them about the purpose of their study and the resources they have, we sometimes recommend that they use another method of data collection that is better suited for their situation. Just because someone wants to do focus groups doesn't mean it's a good idea.

Before launching a focus group study, it may be helpful to think about when focus groups work well and when they don't.

When to Use Focus Group Interviews

Consider focus group interviews when:

- You are looking for the range of opinions, perceptions, ideas, or feelings that people have about something like an issue, behavior, practice, policy, program, or idea.
- The purpose is to uncover factors that influence opinions, behavior, or motivation. Focus groups can provide insight into complicated topics when opinions or attitudes are conditional or when the area of concern relates to behavior or motivation. Under what conditions would a health care provider admit a mistake? What factors influence a new mom's willingness to have a home visit from a public health nurse? What makes a successful smoking cessation program?
- You are trying to understand differences in perspectives among groups or categories of people. People in decision-making positions may see a situation or issue differently than those who are not. Professional people (medical, educational, scientific, technical, business, legal) can lose touch with the very people they are trying to serve. And top management often sees issues differently than frontline providers. These differences can cause major problems, particularly when they aren't recognized and understood.
- You want ideas to emerge from the group. A group possesses the capacity to become more than the sum of its parts, to exhibit a synergy that individuals alone don't possess.
- You want to pilot-test ideas, materials, plans, or policies.
- The researcher needs information to design a large-scale quantitative study. Focus groups have provided researchers with valuable insights into conducting complicated quantitative investigations. What words do people use to talk about this issue? What do they see as the range of options for answering a question? What would it take to get people to respond?
- The researcher needs information to help shed light on quantitative data already collected. Annual measures show employee satisfaction to be decreasing. What do employees attribute these changes to?
- The clients or intended audience place high value on capturing the comments or language used by the target audience.

When Not to Use Focus Group Interviews

Focus group interviews should not be considered when:

- You want people to come to consensus.
- You want to educate people.
- You want to test knowledge to find out how much people know about a topic.
- You don't intend to use the results but instead want to give the appearance of listening.
- You are asking for sensitive information that should not be shared in a group or could be harmful to someone if it is shared in a group.
- You need statistical projections. Findings from a focus group study can't be used to make statistical projections. There aren't enough participants involved, and sampling isn't done in a way to support projections.
- The environment is emotionally charged, and a group discussion is likely to intensify the conflict. This occurs in situations where people are polarized on an issue, trust has deteriorated, and the participants are confrontational.
- The researcher will not have control over critical phases of the study. When the researcher relinquishes control to other individuals or groups, the study may be prone to manipulation and bias. The researcher should monitor participant selection, question development, and analysis protocol. This will be a constant challenge when conducting focus groups in a participatory mode within communities. For more discussion, see *Involving Community Members in Focus Groups* (Krueger & King, 1998).
- Other methodologies can produce better-quality information.
- Other methodologies can produce the same quality information more economically.
- You can't ensure the confidentiality of sensitive information.

Determining What Types of People Can Give You the Information You Want

Another part of planning is figuring out what types of people could give you the information you want. At this point, we aren't thinking of names of individuals; we are thinking of what characteristics the people should have. For example, suppose a college is interested in attracting students. On the surface, this might appear straightforward: Just talk to students. But, it may be more complex. Are decision makers interested in current students, students who have tried the programs and left, potential students, parents of students, or employers who hire their students? Are the perceptions of students with certain demographic characteristics more critical than others for this study? A precise definition of what type of student they are trying to attract is essential to get the needed information.

It sometimes helps to think of this as identifying the informationrich cases. Patton (2002) describes these informationrich cases as "those from which one can learn a great deal about the issues of central importance to the purpose of the research" (p. 46). The question the researcher asks is, "What types of people have the greatest amount of insight on this topic?" In the previous example, potential students—perhaps people who requested information but never enrolled—may be rich with information about their perceptions of the college, what keeps them from enrolling, or what might get them to enroll.

Different types of people can give you information from different perspectives. For example, a public health agency and a school were working together to figure out what it would take to get elementary school children to eat more fruits and vegetables while at school. They conducted focus groups with parents, teachers, food service workers, and second and fourth grade students. Each type of participant was able to give a different view of the problem and offer potential solutions.

Determining How Many Groups to Conduct

The accepted rule of thumb is to plan three or four focus groups with each type or category of participant. After you have conducted these first three or four groups, determine if you have reached saturation. *Saturation* is a term used to describe the point where you have heard the range of ideas and aren't getting new information. If, after three or four groups, you were still getting new information, you would conduct more groups. The reason you plan three to four groups is that focus groups are analyzed across groups. The analyst looks for patterns and themes across groups.

If you want to compare and contrast how certain types of people talk about an issue, you must separate these people into different groups. For example, if we wanted to know how men's and women's opinions are similar or different on a certain issue, we would conduct three groups with men and three groups with women. That way, we can analyze across the men's groups, analyze across the women's groups, and then compare and contrast the findings. If we mixed men and women in the same groups, it would be much more difficult to analyze based on gender.

If you want to ask slightly different questions of different types of people, divide them into different groups. For example, a university wanted to evaluate a model of public engagement. It wanted feedback from faculty, community board members, and grant recipients who often worked together and were comfortable with one another. However, administrators wanted to ask slightly different questions of these different types of participants. So, faculty, community board members, and grant recipients were divided into different groups.

Sometimes we divide groups based on certain characteristics just to create a more comfortable environment for participants to share. For example, in a study examining barriers to colorectal cancer screening, we divided men and women into different groups because we believed that people would be more comfortable discussing the topic with others of the same gender.

If we believe different types of participants have strong but conflicting opinions on the topic, we may conduct a study in two stages: an early stage in which different types of participants are separated and a later stage where they are brought together. For example, a state was getting complaints from different users of its recreational paths; some users felt others were not being respectful. So initially, hikers, bikers, and horseback riders were divided into separate groups, so researchers could hear different perspectives and limit confrontation. Based on what they learned in the early focus groups, they developed plans to address the problems. They then mixed hikers, bikers, and horseback riders in groups to get their reactions to the new plans related to mixed-use trails.

Also, when planning groups, we avoid mixing people who may feel they have different levels of expertise or power related to the issue. We want to create an environment where all participants feel comfortable saying what they think or feel. If there is a power differential, some participants may be reluctant to talk. When structuring groups, we probably wouldn't include supervisors and their employees in the same group. We probably wouldn't include teachers and students or teachers and parents in the same groups. We probably wouldn't mix seventh grade boys with eleventh grade boys. We are saying *probably* because our experience tells us that, in most cases, it isn't a good idea, but we wouldn't say that we would never do these things. Again, the study and situation would dictate what we would do.

You can see that the number of groups could grow rapidly. Recently, a state agency was interested in finding out how people with diabetes from different communities of color felt about their diabetes, how they coped with the disease, and what they thought their health care providers could do to help them stay healthy. The agency conducted 16 groups—four focus groups with each of the following types of people: African Americans, American Indians, Hispanics, and Southeast Asians. This decision came after considerable discussion about the pros and cons of additional subdivisions, such as urban versus rural, age, gender, and fluency in English. Each decision influenced resources needed, the time line required, and the skills needed by the research team.

Nonprofit and service organizations typically have three categories of people who are especially important to listen to: advisory groups, employees, and clients. Each of these can be subdivided into additional categories. Organizations often conduct focus groups with clients to find out how to design new programs or services, but they forget to ask frontline employees for their input about what it will take to make the program or service work.

Market researchers use terms like screens and screeners

In the environment of market research, the word *screen* is used to identify the factors used to select participants in a focus group. A *screener* is a set of questions that is used either in person or over the telephone to select participants. The challenge is to use just a few questions and to complete the process quickly. For example, the screener survey might use either open-ended or closed-ended questions that seek to identify a specific type of mother:

- Who works outside the home at least 20 hours per week
- Who lives in an identified geographic area
- Who has a child who wears disposable diapers
- Who has a family income more than $40,000

Think about the next steps

When trying to figure out how to configure focus groups, think about what the client wants to do with the information. What are their next steps? If the client plans to develop materials to help people quit smoking, do they plan to develop generic materials for any smoker, or do they want to target certain types of smokers (e.g., youth, new parents, people who work in public buildings)? If they plan to develop generic materials, your only screen may be that participants are smokers. However, if they plan to develop materials for youth and materials for new parents, you would keep these people in different groups.

Think about the final report: What type of people do you want to be able to say something about?

When trying to figure out how to configure focus groups, think about what types of people you want to be able to say something about in your final report. Do you want to be able to say something about how new moms feel about a program, or is it important to be able to say how new moms who are teenagers feel versus new moms who are more than 30? If you just want to say something about how new moms feel, you could do three to four groups with various kinds of new moms. But, if it is important to be able to compare and contrast perceptions of new moms based on age, you would complete at least three groups with each age category you select. It would get even more complicated if it were also important to know how moms of different races or ethnicities feel about the program. Or, do you want to be able to talk about how dads feel about the program? Thinking about the final report may seem premature at this stage, but it really helps clarify how many groups might be needed.

Balancing the Design With the Resources Available

One of the challenges of focus group research is to balance what you ideally might like to do, or are asked to do, with the realities of time and budget. When the budget and time line are fixed, the challenge is to produce the best study within these constraints. It gets more complicated when the sponsor isn't clear about the budget or time line.

A planning strategy that we recommend is to develop a preliminary plan that fits the best estimates of existing resources and then to offer incremental additions that enhance the study, plus estimates of additional costs and time needed for those additions. For example, suppose you were asked to submit a proposal to examine factors that influence upper-elementary students' lunch choices in the school cafeteria. Those who requested the proposal ask for focus groups with children. After some reflection, you believe the study would be stronger if additional focus groups were conducted with others. You prepare a proposal that presents the cost of the study that was requested and attach a rationale for and additional costs of conducting focus groups with parents, or teachers, or food service workers, who might have insight into the behavior.

Planning is a balancing act between what would be nice to do and what is doable with the resources at hand. Resources include the time available for the project, financial resources, and the talent and creativity of people on the study team. If resources are limited (short time line, limited dollars, or few staff or volunteers who can work on the project), then fewer groups can be conducted. Usually, we are working with not-for-profit groups where financial resources are limited. In contrast, just because resources are plentiful doesn't mean one should conduct more groups. We have heard of organizations that have conducted 60, 70, or 80 focus groups on one topic using the same questions. From a research perspective, this isn't a wise use of time and money. Seldom do we conduct more than 30 groups on a topic, even for national studies. The key advantage of these large-scale designs is that it demonstrates that the organization is serious about listening to people. This design option is discussed later in this chapter.

Allocate the appropriate amount of resources to a project. Fit the resources to the decision being made. One can usually conduct fewer groups when there is little risk to making the decision, such as whether to change the format of your newsletter. The format of the newsletter is easily changed, people won't be seriously affected by the change, and it doesn't involve big expenditures. If the decision involves a great deal of risk, one would increase the number of focus groups and consider enhancing the study with quantitative data.

Often, we first decide how many groups can be conducted with the resources available and then decide how to configure the groups. If we have the resources to conduct 10 groups, how many different types of participants should we listen to? How many groups should we conduct with each type of participant? What configuration will give us the most useful information?

Here is an example. In the study designed to find out how to get kids to eat more fruits and vegetables while at school, there were enough resources to conduct 12 groups at the pilot elementary school. The planners decided it was most important to listen to the kids because they had the most information about what it would take to get them to eat more fruits and vegetables. They decided to conduct three groups with second graders and three groups with fourth graders. They also knew input from food service workers was crucial to making changes. There were only a handful of food service workers in the school, so they could all participate in one group. The researchers also wanted to hear from teachers and parents. They decided to conduct two groups with teachers and three groups with parents.

Expect to struggle with the design a bit. It takes time to figure out how to configure the groups.

Single-Category Design

The ideal design for a focus group study is to conduct focus groups until you have reached theoretical saturation—the point where you are not gaining new insights. The number of groups needed to reach saturation varies. Usually, the researcher will plan for three or four focus groups with a particular type of participant and then decide if adequate saturation has been reached or if additional groups should be conducted.

Although theoretical saturation is a great concept and useful in academic work, as a consultant, you won't land many contracts if you say you plan to conduct groups until you reach theoretical saturation. Clients want to know how many groups are needed, how long the study will take, and how much it will cost. Few clients will give you a blank check to conduct groups until saturation is achieved. Therefore, we typically plan at least three or four groups for the most important participants we want to listen to. Veteran focus group researchers have discovered that, after three or four groups, they have a much clearer idea if and when saturation might occur.

Example of single-category design

Let's say you wanted to use focus groups to evaluate a leadership development program for youth. You decide the informationrich people are youth who have completed the program in the past two years. You don't want to compare or contrast based on any other features. So, you use a Figure 2.1). You conduct three or four groups with youth who completed the program in the past two years and determine if saturation is achieved. If saturation is achieved, then the study is completed, and reports are prepared. However, if critical new information is being obtained after the third or fourth group, the researcher will need to decide if additional groups should be held or if the report should indicate that saturation was not achieved. Perhaps it is enough to know that people hold widely different views on the topic.

Category of participant	0	0	0	0	Saturation?
0 = one focus group					

Figure 2.1 Single-Category Design

Multiple-Category Design

A variation of the traditional design is to conduct groups with several types of participants, either sequentially or simultaneously. This design allows the researcher to make comparisons in two ways: from one group to another within a category (younger youth to older youth) and from one category to another category (e.g., comparing what youth said to what parents said).

Example of a multiple-category design

Let's continue the youth leadership example but make it more complex. Let's say it is important to hear the reactions of youth who have completed the program as well as parents of youth who have completed the program, mentors involved in the program, and staff members. It is important to be able to compare and contrast the reactions of these different groups. Let's suppose that you have enough resources to conduct only 10 groups.

You believe feedback from youth and parents will be most useful for your study, so you place more emphasis on getting information from them. You conduct three with parents. It is important, but not critical, to get feedback from both mentors and staff. You decide to conduct two groups with mentors. There are so few staff members that you are able to get their input in one focus group.

This multiple-category design would look like Figure 2.2.

Youth	0	0	0	0
Parents	0	0	0	
Mentors	0	0		
Staff	0			

0 = one focus group

Figure 2.2 Multiple-Category Design

Double-Layer Design

A more complex version of the traditional design involves multiple layers, which might involve geographic areas as one layer and different participant types as another layer. With this design, the researchers can make comparisons across any of the layers in the design. (The analyst can compare and contrast based on geographic regions and can compare and contrast between participant types.)

Example of a double-layer design

Suppose that a nationwide health service wants to better understand what patients who suffer from severe depression consider to be good health care. The results of the study are to be used, along with numerous other sources of data, to develop clinical guidelines for care of patients who suffer from depression. The study team decides it is most important to talk with patients who are being treated for severe depression but who are not currently hospitalized. They also want to listen to family members who are close to these patients. This might include spouses, parents, or adult children of patients. The health service has four geographic regions that they want represented in the study. One facility is selected to participate in each region. This is called a *double-layer design* because it allows the research to compare and contrast results by geographic region as well as by the participants' relationships to the health service (see Figure 2.3).

	East	West	North	South
Patients	0 0 0	0 0 0	0 0 0	0 0 0
Family Members	0	0	0	0

Figure 2.3 Double-Layer Design

Broad-Involvement Design

Occasionally, studies have widespread public interest. In these studies, people interested in the topic may be concerned if people like themselves are left out. The design strategy consists of first anchoring the study with the groups of the primary type of participant. In fact, this information-rich source is often purposefully oversampled and exceeds the point of saturation. This is often done to include geographic representation (e.g., a state agency wants one group done in each of its seven regions). After patterns are detected across the primary participant focus groups, each additional participant type is compared back to the primary type of participant. If a particular type of participant provides key information that is not included in the analysis of the primary groups, then the researcher might add a second or third group to that particular secondary type of participant to determine if the pattern appears again in similar groups.

Example of a broad-involvement design

Let's say a state department of education is proposing policy changes in special education. They want to know what kind of implications the proposed changes may have for what takes place in the classroom. The proposed changes directly affect special education teachers; therefore, the study team believes special education teachers are the people who can best provide the needed information: how the changes will affect the classroom. Yet, the team knows that other people can also provide feedback: regular education teachers, parents, students, advocates, school administrators. In some studies, particularly in the public sector, there are groups that feel they must be listened to before decisions are made or policy is established. These groups may feel that the study would be incomplete unless their views are heard and recorded. The study team may agree that listening to these groups would enhance findings, but they have limited time and resources. In these situations, the strategy begins with the primary type of participant (special education teachers) and listens broadly to establish a clear baseline. Perhaps they conduct one group with special education teachers in each of seven education districts in the state. Then, one or two focus groups are conducted with each of the additional types of participants (regular education teachers, parents, students, advocates, administrators). Results of these groups are compared back to the baseline established by special education teachers. Occasionally, unique and crucial information may emerge from the focus groups with these secondary groups. Then, additional focus groups can be conducted with that type of participant.

This design might be depicted as shown in Figure 2.4.

Special education teachers	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Regular education teachers	0	0					
Parents	0						
Students	0						
Advocates	0						
Administrators	0						

0 = one focus group

Figure 2.4 Broad-Involvement Design

Large-Scale Design

In certain circumstances, organizations conduct large-scale studies involving scores of focus groups. These organizations typically have objectives beyond obtaining research information, including to convey a sense of widespread listening. From a research perspective, this may not be the most economical way to obtain results; it is costly and time-consuming while producing few additional insights. But, the major advantage is that it demonstrates that the organization wants to listen and is willing to make considerable effort to hear from the target audience.

Example of a large-scale design

A state legislature wanted input from county government about funding issues. The legislature commissioned a study that involved a focus group with county commissioners within each of its 90 counties. Each county was asked to set aside one of its meetings for the focus group. Because all counties were involved in the study, the researchers were able to compare and contrast various views and potential solutions. And the legislature could say they got input from every county.

Implementing in Phases

When developing a time line, some people are tempted to set aside a block of time to conduct all of the focus groups in quick succession and then go on to analysis. This tactic has some fundamental weaknesses. A better plan is to conduct the focus groups in phases with time for early analysis, reflection, and redirection built in. We conduct a few focus groups, transcribe, analyze what we have, and then make decisions on how to proceed.

Conducting the groups in phases allows us to reflect on and fix logistics. Are people showing up? Is the location working well? Are the people we thought would be information rich really information rich? Do we need to make any changes?

Conducting groups in phases allows us to study our moderating and fine-tune our efforts. Are participants actually answering all the questions, or are they tending to go off topic on some? (Sometimes, this is hard for a moderator to spot during the focus group.) Does the moderator need to press for more examples about a particular topic? Is the moderator talking too much or rushing through a key question?

Conducting groups in phases gives us time to reflect on the kind of information we are getting and revise questions if needed. Is there a question that is confusing? Is there a question that is less useful than we had anticipated? Does something we are hearing suggest that we have missed a key question? Should we drop a question that is not working and replace it with a question that will take the discussion to a higher level? If we are pilot-testing materials, is one option turning out to be such a dud that we should replace it with another option?

If we collapse a time line and conduct all the focus groups at once, we lose our ability to make adjustments along the way. Some researchers cringe when we say we make adjustments along the way—they believe you should stick with the study protocol no matter what. We have a different philosophy. If we learn something along the way that can improve the quality of the information, we discuss it with the client and then decide whether to make changes. We don't change everything. We want to keep the majority of the questions the same, but if one or two don't work—they don't work. We prefer to change the questions to get better information.

Here are some times when conducting focus groups in phases contributed to better quality results:

We were asked to conduct a series of focus groups with government employees across the country. The purpose of the focus groups was to find out what kind of training employees needed to take on a new role that the organization had planned. In the first focus groups, we asked questions about training, what makes training successful, and what topics should be covered. In each of the first few focus groups, participants said that training alone wouldn't change their behavior. They told us "just because you train us doesn't mean we'll do it." It quickly became clear that we had made a crucial error in our thinking. We had assumed that, if employees received good training on how to conduct a new task, they would take on the new task; we had limited the focus of our questions to training needs. After the second focus group, we conferred with the sponsor and suggested that we revise the questioning route to include questions about this key issue—what it would take to get employees to take on this new role. We were able to revise the questions and get better information for the sponsor because we scheduled the focus groups in phases.

In another study, we were pilot-testing materials that were going to be used in a statewide mail survey of smokers. We were conducting four focus groups on a short time line. But, rather than conduct all the focus groups in one week, we developed a time line with a week between the first two groups and the last two groups. It was a good thing! It was clear after the first two groups that participants were misinterpreting the cover letter to the survey—thinking the survey was not aimed at them. Testing the same letter in two more focus groups would be a waste of time and resources. Because we planned the focus groups in two phases, we had a week to discuss the problem with the study team and draft a new cover letter. We tested the new cover letter in the last two focus groups. We were able to get more useful information because we conducted the focus groups in two phases.

Planning With Analysis in Mind

Some researchers fail to plan for analysis. They plan for selection, recruiting, moderating, and other aspects of the study but fail to consider analysis. But, analysis is often the most time-consuming part of a focus group study. This tends to be more a problem for novices who have limited experience in qualitative analysis or for quantitative researchers who make decisions based on their statistical experience. For example, it is possible to double the size of a quantitative study without incurring a sizeable time demand in analysis. The cost is typically for entering data into the computer, but the time needed for analytic routines doesn't substantially rise. But, with qualitative research, it is quite different. Doubling the number of focus groups may more than double the time needed for analysis.

Here are some thoughts to consider:

- Qualitative analysis can be conducted in a variety of different ways. (These are described in Chapter 6.) In some studies, the findings are clear and precise. The participants are articulate, and patterns occur early and reappear consistently. In these situations, the analyst's job is relatively easy. But other times, the situation is very different. The problem is that you just don't know what you will face until you've actually conducted the focus groups.
- Pilot-test your questions before conducting the study. These early groups can give you clues of how challenging the analysis will be. In these beginning groups, you can get a sense of the resources needed for analysis.
- Plan to include an oral summary at the end of each focus group, where you present the relevant findings in two minutes and then ask if this summary is complete or if anything has been missed. This provides a degree of insurance that some major issue is not being overlooked.
- Examine available research and evaluation results from other studies to get an idea of potential findings. If there are results from other studies that are compelling but missing in the discussion, you might surface this at the end of the focus group. For example, "Tonight in our discussion, we have not talked about (name the topic), and I was wondering if that is something that is important to you?"
- Develop your questions carefully. If you have limited time for analysis, consider including several questions that ask participants to rate using a numerical scale or to arrange or organize things in a pattern or continuum. These items lend themselves to quantification and can be done quickly, sometimes while participants are still in the group. These results can lead to further discussion and can help participants pinpoint key factors or important aspects of the study. And they can save analytic time by highlighting critical factors.
- Use qualitative computer software judiciously. Qualitative software for analysis generally does not save time. This is especially true for beginning researchers.
- Don't promise to deliver what you've never done before. Occasionally, a novice researcher will propose a study with a complex analytic strategy that he or she has never done before. This is tolerable if you are not on a time schedule or budget. It is better to propose what you have done before, what you can confidently deliver in the time and budget constraints.

- If you haven't done qualitative analysis before, estimate how much time you think it will take—then double that.
- Qualitative analysis can be conducted at various levels of depth and rigor. The depth and rigor should correspond to the nature of the problem and the amount of attention the decision maker wants to place on the topic. Some analysts will opt for a rapid strategy using memory and field notes, whereas others may make the case that the problem deserves more analytic attention. (This is discussed further in Chapter 6.)

Listening to Your Target Audience

Once you have a plan in mind, seek out and visit with several people who have the characteristics of your participants. For example, if you're going to listen to special education teachers, find some special education teachers, and get their advice on your plan. (It would be even better to have a special education teacher or two on your research team. But if that isn't possible, make sure to do the listening step.) Perhaps share a meal with them and ask their advice on how to undertake the study. Describe the purpose of the study and the design. Ask questions like these:

- How can we get the names of people like this?
- How do we find people like this?
- How are people in this general category alike or different? If we want to invite people who feel like they have this in common, what advice do you have?
- What would it take to get people to come to a discussion like this?
- Who should invite people to participate?
- When would it be easiest for these people to come? (Time of day, day of week)
- Where would be the best place to hold the discussion?
- What would be some good questions to ask?
- What do you think of these questions? (Try out a few questions.)
- What kind of person should ask the questions? (Moderate)

Listen. You're trying to find out what it will take to make this study work. You are looking for pitfalls or roadblocks. This is really important if you are working with a type of participant with whom you are unfamiliar. Perhaps you want to conduct focus groups with migrant workers or teenagers who smoke or men with prostate problems. Conduct several informal conversations with your target audience or with community gatekeepers and ask the questions listed. It is amazing what you can learn.

Considering Consent, Human Subjects, and Ethics

When you conduct focus groups in the public arena for a research institution, you often need approval from institutional review boards (IRBs) or human subjects committees. This process involves submitting your proposal along with details of the study for review to ensure that the standards of human subject research are met. In essence, the study must involve research (which is precisely defined) and human subjects. Those who participate in the study must be informed of the study's rewards and risks, told the study is voluntary and confidential, and told they can quit participating at any time. In addition, the participants sign a statement that they are aware of these features.

Focus groups present some unique concerns in human subject research. In fact, increasingly, academic researchers are questioning the role of IRBs in naturalistic research (Church, Shopes, & Blanchard, 2002; Tierney & Corwin, 2007). Human subject protocol may not apply in all settings. A careful examination of the rules and history of your institution can shed light on this issue. Human subjects committees operate differently across institutions, and it is impossible to make generalized statements about how they operate and how they interpret their missions. Here are some tips that may help you as you work with human subjects committees:

1. We have found that savvy, experienced professionals have valuable insight on questions of ethics and propriety. Get advice from knowledgeable researchers about how to protect your participants and how to successfully navigate an IRB. Human subjects committees and procedures seek to protect human subjects. The IRBs carry out this function by ensuring that participants are informed about the nature and conditions of the research project. The IRBs want to make sure the subjects know what they are getting into, but these committees may lack the experience, grounding, and ability to know what is, or is not, in the interest of the participants. This means that the propriety or ethics of the study is really in the hands of the researcher. Approval from a human subjects committee doesn't mean that the study ought to be conducted or that participants won't be harmed directly or indirectly. Conversely, disapproval from human subjects committee doesn't necessarily mean that the study shouldn't be done. You as the investigator, researcher, evaluator—along with your colleagues—must make this decision.

2. When using human subjects forms in a focus group, we recommend presenting these materials when participants first arrive for the discussion and before the focus group begins. We set up a special registration table where we complete all necessary paperwork. We gather important background information about the participants (if necessary) and discuss human subjects protocol. Sometimes, human subjects committees recommend that the forms be discussed once everyone has arrived and everyone is seated around the table. However, this process tends to put a damper on the beginning of the focus group. It takes on a more legalistic tone, which works against our efforts to create a permissive and nonthreatening environment. By dealing with the forms and materials as participants arrive, a member of the research team can explain the protocol to each individual and invite and answer questions confidentially. Occasionally, participants have literacy concerns and prefer that a member of the research team orally explain the procedures. We believe this is a more sensitive and more appropriate way to address consent. If someone comes late, a member of the research team steps

outside and provides the individual briefing before escorting the participant into the focus group.

In market research focus groups, two types of permission are routinely used. Interestingly, neither of these protects the participant. They protect the sponsor. The first type of permission grants the sponsor any ideas, suggestions, or artwork that emerge from the focus group. All ideas become property of the sponsor. The participant is informed that they are being recorded and that this recording can be used by the sponsor for advertising, research, or in client presentations. The second type of permission indicates that the moderator is a consultant and that information received before, during, and after the focus group is regarded as confidential. The moderator can't share this information with outside parties and can't publish results without permission of the sponsor.

Developing a Written Plan and Determining Resources Needed

After we have discussed the purpose, talked about whom to listen to, and gotten advice from people like the audiences we want to listen to, we develop a written plan. The value of the written plan is threefold.

- A written plan forces the researcher to think through the study in a logical manner and clarify ideas. Ideas that make sense in discussions sometimes have glaring shortcomings on paper.
- The written plan allows decision makers to provide feedback. Written plans can be circulated and discussed. Plans can also highlight differences in understanding—such as different views of the purpose of a project—before the project goes too far. The plan helps us make sure everyone is in agreement and that we understand the client's needs.
- Plans ensure that adequate resources and time are available to obtain needed information.

Our plans include the purpose, background information, types of information needed, types of participants to be invited, number of groups to be conducted, a plan of action, products or deliverables, a time line, and a budget. A time line should contain the following elements: dates, steps, persons responsible, people assisting, and comments. The time line presents the sequence of steps and identifies which tasks are to be completed by which team members. Administrators have regularly criticized evaluators and researchers for not respecting the time requirements of decision making. At some point a decision will be made, regardless of whether the findings are available. The time line provides decision makers with a timetable for information—a timetable that must be prepared in advance and then respected by both the researcher and the decision maker.

The plan should be shared with colleagues, particularly those who are familiar with the issue or program being studied. It is also helpful to share the plan with colleagues or professionals familiar with focus group interviewing procedures. When we ask others to review the plan, we ask them to point out areas where things could go wrong—aspects that are illogical, impractical, or unclear.

Ask for help

Early in the planning process, you will need ideas. Invite a small group of researchers or the clients to discuss options and choices about the study. This discussion could involve more than one meeting and, at times, will become a brainstorming session. Avoid locking in on specifics too early. Talk about the purpose of the study, whether focus groups are appropriate, the types of people who can give you the information you need, how many focus groups to conduct, and the resources available.

Anticipating Problems

When planning, it is wise to reflect on what will take time and be challenging as you engage in a focus group study. Veteran moderators learn this by experience and then write more realistic plans.

There are three challenges regularly encountered by novice focus group researchers: recruiting, planning for analysis, and working with community decision makers. Recruiting is often the most challenging and takes more time than people anticipate. Solutions to this problem are discussed in Chapter 4.

A second task that is challenging for novices is in planning for analysis. It is difficult to anticipate how long analysis will take. With experience, analysts become better able to anticipate how much time a study will require. They develop strategies and become more efficient in completing the complicated tasks of analysis. They learn how the purpose of the study, design of the study, types of questions asked, and types of reports required influence analysis time.Plans can be difficult to create without coaching from veterans. See Chapter 6 for insights about analysis.

A third challenging task is working with community groups. In these groups, the decision making may be rather informal and fluid and involve consensus of the currently convened task force. This decision making is in sharp contrast to that involving commercial products in the private sector or even in traditional organizations with clearly delineated decision making. The scenario that sometimes occurs is that the researcher is invited to meet with a community group that is interested in conducting a focus group study. After listening to the community group, the researcher prepares a plan and returns in a few weeks to present it at the next meeting. But, the attendance has changed slightly, and some people who weren't present at the first meeting raise additional suggestions that need attention. Again, the researcher revises the plan and returns in a few weeks to discover that the group continues to change. It is about this time that the researcher considers other careers! Community groups are notorious for having fluid membership and consensus decision making. Veteran researchers learn to diplomatically point out that planning and then revising the plan requires resources that must be compensated.

Summary

Don’t overlook the critical importance of planning. The planning process begins by identifying the purpose of the study. Then, we decide whether focus group interviewing is the right method for the study. If it is, we identify information-rich types of participants and decide on the number of focus groups to be conducted. Idealistic designs are easy. Far more difficult is the challenge of developing an effective design using scarce resources. Feedback from colleagues, researchers, clients, and your target audience helps you identify problems before they occur.

3 Developing a Questioning Route

What Lies Ahead

In this chapter we describe:

- Qualities of Good Questions and a Good Questioning Route
- Categories of Questions
- Strategies That Evoke Conversation
- Questions That Engage Participants
- Listening to the Brain or the Heart
- The Process We Use to Develop a Questioning Route
- Changing Questions: The Importance of Consistency

Developing good questions seems like it should be easy. But this is one of the areas where budding (and experienced) focus group researchers run into problems. Often, beginners generate interesting questions, but it isn't clear how answers to those questions will help achieve the purpose of the study. Or questions are phrased in ways that don't beg for discussion. As a result, researchers get simple yes or no answers. Or they develop a list of 30 questions to be answered in a two-hour group. Developing good focus group questions requires time, help from buddies, and attention to a few guidelines.

The series of questions used in a focus group study—the questioning route—looks deceptively simple. Typically, a questioning route includes about a dozen questions for a two-hour group. If you asked these questions in an individual interview, the respondent could probably tell you everything he or she could think of related to the questions in just a few minutes. But when these questions are asked in a group environment, the discussion can last for several hours. Part of the reason is in the nature of the questions and the cognitive processes of humans. As participants answer questions, their responses spark ideas from other participants. Comments provide mental cues that trigger memories or thoughts of other participants—cues that help explore the range of perceptions.

Asking questions is a foundational method of research, but there are circumstances and situations where the process is severely limited.

What happens if you ask a question and the person doesn't understand the question? Or if the person is embarrassed to answer? Or if the person feels the question is inappropriate for the environment?

For a successful interview, we must assume the following:

1. The respondent understands the question.
2. The environment is conducive to an honest answer.
3. The respondent knows the answer.
4. The respondent is able to articulate an answer.
5. The interviewer understands the answer.

If any of these links is broken, the quality of the interview suffers.

Questions that rely on memory

Focus group research relies on memory of past events, experiences, and conversations. This is different from natural science research, where there is an objective measurement that tells us quite precisely how much, when, and where an event has occurred.

Suppose an earthquake occurs. The natural scientist can tell us the epicenter, the severity (Richter scale), and the time when it occurred. If the instruments are accurate, there is no quibbling about these details. But another way to gain insight about the earthquake is by listening to those who experienced it. This would give us different information: the physical sensations they experienced, personal perceptions, emotions, and the insights of others around them. They socially construct the event and bring insight that was not available on the scientific instruments. Neither source of information is superior to the other. Both streams of information give us an understanding of what happened.

The focus group isn't intended to give us measurements of the natural sciences, but it is quite effective in capturing the insights and experiences of individuals. An area that requires thought and preparation is how to best tap into the memories of participants. This is the challenge faced when developing the questions for a focus group. The questions are specifically designed to draw out memories and perceptions and to elicit conversation about the topic being studied.

Here are a few basic guidelines to consider:

1. *Do they really have the experience?* Be certain that the focus group participants have experienced the phenomenon being studied. If you are evaluating a past training event, did they actually attend? If you want to know the barriers to quitting smoking, have they been smokers? Too often we make assumptions without actually checking that each participant really belongs in the group.
2. *Are they ready for the discussion?* If possible, alert participants in advance of the focus group to do something and also record details. Perhaps you are asking parents about their child's diet. If so, ask them to pay careful attention during mealtime the week before the focus group. Or, you want to talk about physical activity and exercise. You might ask them to keep a daily log of their physical activity in the week or two before the focus group. These requests help participants concentrate their attention on details that might otherwise be overlooked or missed.
3. *Can you use examples or artifacts?* Memory is improved when physical objects remind focus group participants of the experience. It might be an agenda of a past meeting, a photograph of an event, or a brochure on the topic of interest. Sharing these artifacts in the focus group helps people recall their experiences.
4. *Can the conversation enhance the memory?* When others in the group mention a past experience or perception, it may trigger memories for others. Allow time in the focus group for the topic to be discussed in some degree of detail to help others remember their own experiences.
5. *It is OK to see it differently.* Remind the participants that people may see and remember things differently. These differences

are altogether reasonable and are to be expected. Encourage participants to share their perceptions even if they differ from what others have said.

6. *Opinions can change*. As a result of conversation, people may change their minds. The facts and experiences that others bring to the conversation may change the way others remember the situation. Be attentive to these changes. Listen for people saying that now they see it differently. Or you might just ask if they have changed their minds as a result of the conversation.

Qualities of Good Questions and a Good Questioning Route

Good focus group questions do the following things.

Evoke Conversation

The focus group is a social experience, and conversational questions help create and maintain an informal environment. We try to encourage participants to have a conversation in response to a question, building on one another's comments, rather than directing each comment to the moderator. But this usually takes time. The early questions in a focus group tend to be factual, and often the comments are directed back to the moderator. But then, slowly the questions begin to take on a conversational tone, and participants begin to talk to each other. The moderator becomes less central as participants build on the comments of others or compare their personal experiences. The advantages of a conversation are that it allows for more spontaneity, it relaxes the participants, and it creates a more natural atmosphere. But, the biggest advantage is that the most useful information typically comes out of these conversations when participants take the discussion to new and deeper levels. The disadvantages are that allowing for these types of conversations takes time, and the participants may not stay on topic.

Use Words the Participants Would Use When Talking About the Issue

Acronyms, jargon, and technical lingo are deadly—unless you are talking to a group of experts. Professionals are sometimes unaware that their language is not understood by everyone. They may inadvertently use technical terms or jargon that sounds highfalutin and confuse and put off lay audiences. To avoid this, have the questions reviewed by people similar to your participants to make sure the language is clear.

Are Easy to Say

Good questions are written so the moderator won't stumble over words or phrases. Some questions are great in written form but are awkward or stilted when asked orally. We see this occurring in a number of research studies when the questions are prepared by technical staff and then are given to the moderators to use in the focus groups. It is imperative that the words flow smoothly from the lips of the moderator.

Are Clear

When the question is asked, participants should understand what you're asking. This sounds pretty basic, but it is surprising how confusing some questions are. Sometimes moderators give long preambles to questions, or offer lengthy background, or use a long segue from one topic to another. Instead of clarifying the question, it is actually more confusing. Listeners may key on trivial phrases or words intended to build the case for the question, but these same phrases and words can confuse the focus group participant or take the discussion off on a tangent. Again, the question might be clear when one is reading it off the page but confusing when one hears it. When questions are unclear, they either don't make sense to the participant or they can be interpreted in different ways.

Are Short

Lengthy questions can be confusing to respondents. Participants have a hard time distinguishing the core intent of the question. In general, clarity decreases as the length of the question increases.

Are Usually Open-Ended

Open-ended questions are a hallmark of focus group interviewing. These questions imply that a few words or a phrase are insufficient as an answer. They beg for explanations, descriptions, or illustrations.

Are One-Dimensional

Inadvertently, moderators might include words that they think are synonyms but are seen as entirely different concepts by participants. While the moderator means well, the participants get confused. For example, “How was the program useful and practical to you?” For some *useful* and *practical* may be very different concepts. Other times moderators might add a second sentence or phrase that intends to amplify the question but confuses the respondents because it introduces another dimension. For example, “Which of these is most important to you? Or which should be acted upon first?” Again the moderator assumed that what was important should be acted upon first, but this may not be the view of participants.

Include Clear, Well-Thought-Out Directions

When asking participants to do something, provide clear instructions. For example, if you are asking participants to list something, do you want them to write it down on paper before they discuss? How much time should they take? Practice the instructions whenever the tasks are complicated, such as when using small breakout groups or activities that have multiple steps.

A Good Questioning Route

A questioning route is a list of sequenced questions in complete, conversational sentences. A good questioning route:

- Begins with a question that is easy for everyone in the group to answer
- Is sequenced so the conversation flows naturally from one question to another
- Starts with general questions and narrows to more specific and important questions
- Uses time wisely

Questioning route versus topic guide

There are two different questioning strategies used by focus group moderators: topic guide and questioning route. The *topic guide* is like an outline with a list of topics or issues to be pursued in the focus group. This list consists of words or phrases that remind the moderator of the topic of interest. By contrast, the *questioning route* is a sequence of questions in complete, conversational sentences. The topic guide tends to be used by professional moderators in marketing research studies, whereas the questioning route is often preferred in public-nonprofit and academic environments. The advantages and disadvantages of each approach are described in Chapter 2 of *Developing Questions for Focus Groups* (Krueger, 1998). We prefer the questioning route because it forces the moderator or research team to think about the words and phrases to be used ahead of time, and it helps the sponsor more clearly understand what will occur in the focus group. In addition, it increases consistency in the way questions are asked across groups.

Categories of Questions

Not all questions are equal. We use different types of questions at different times during the focus group. Each type of question has a distinct purpose. Some questions exist only to help people get prepared to answer later, more important questions. The moderator may move through some questions rapidly and devote more time to others. The level of importance influences the amount of time spent on the question as well as the intensity of the analysis. Not all questions are analyzed in the same way. Some questions, like the opening question of the group, may not be analyzed at all.

Essentially there are five categories of questions, each with a distinctive function in the flow of a focus group interview. We call these question categories opening, introductory, transition, key, and ending.

Opening Question

All participants are asked to answer the opening question at the beginning of the focus group. The purpose of the question is to get everyone to talk early in the discussion. The longer it is before someone says something in a group, the less likely he or she is to say something, so we want everyone to talk early in the group.

The opening question is designed to be easy to answer. And it should be easy to answer quickly (in about 30 seconds). Usually it is best to ask for facts as opposed to attitudes or opinions of participants at this point. Questions of attitude or opinion take time to answer, require examples or stories, and beg for discussion. The opening question is not a discussion question but strictly a process of getting everyone to talk early in the group. Opening questions typically aren't analyzed. The intent of the question is not to get information but rather to get people talking and to help people feel comfortable.

It is important that the question not highlight power or status differences among participants. We don't ask teenagers how old they are or what grade they are in because young people are very sensitive to age differences. We don't ask occupation or level of education. We don't ask farmers the size of their farming operations. We don't want to emphasize differences because some people may simply defer to others in the group who they feel are older, wiser, more experienced, or whatever.

Opening question

Here is an opening question that was used with dentists. “Tell us your name, where you practice dentistry, and what you most enjoy doing when you’re not practicing dentistry.” The question was easy to answer, established that all participants had dentistry in common, that they were all practitioners, and that they were human beings with interests, hobbies, and families.

Introductory Questions

Introductory questions introduce the topic of discussion and get people to start thinking about their connection with the topic. Sometimes the introductory question asks participants to remember when they first experienced or encountered the organization or topic under investigation and to describe the experience. Or a question could ask people to describe how they use a product or service. Or, “What is the first thing that comes to mind when you hear the phrase . . .?” Introductory questions begin to give the moderator clues about participants’ views.

Transition Questions

Transition questions move the conversation into the key questions that drive the study. They serve as logical links between the introductory questions and the key questions. During these questions, the participants are becoming aware of how others view the topic. These questions set the stage for productive key questions. Often transition questions ask participants to go into more depth than introductory questions about their experiences and use of a product. While the introductory question surfaces the topic, the transition questions move the conversation closer to the key questions.

Key Questions

Key questions drive the study. Typically there are four to six questions in this category. These are usually the first questions to be developed by the research team and the ones that require the greatest attention in the analysis. It's important for the moderator to know which questions are key questions. The moderator needs to allow sufficient time for a full discussion of these questions. While only a few minutes might be allocated for each of the earlier questions, the key questions may need as much as 10 to 20 minutes each. Furthermore, the moderator will likely need to use pauses and probes more frequently with key questions. Key questions usually begin about one-third to half of the way into the focus group.

Ending Questions

These questions bring closure to the discussion, enable participants to reflect back on previous comments, and are critical to analysis. Three types of ending questions are valuable: the all things considered question, the summary question, and the final question.

The all things considered question is used to determine the final position of participants on critical areas of concern. This question asks participants to reflect on the discussion and then identify which aspects are most important or most in need of action. Often we ask each person in the group to answer this question. Examples include: "Suppose you had one minute to talk to the governor on the topic of merit pay. What would you say?" Or "Of all the needs we discussed, which one is most important to you?"

This all things considered question is helpful in analysis because it is used to interpret conflicting comments and assign weight to what was said. Sometimes trivial concerns are talked about frequently during the focus group, and it can be a serious mistake if the analyst assumes that the concern discussed most frequently is the most important. If the analyst wants to know what participants consider important, then the moderator must ask that question, and one way to do that is to ask it as an ending question.

The summary question is asked after the moderator or assistant moderator has given a short oral summary (about two minutes) of the discussion. After the summary the participants are asked about the adequacy of the summary. This question also plays a critical role in analysis. The question can be asked in several ways, such as, "Is this an adequate summary?" Or "How well does that capture what was said here?" Or "If you were summarizing the conversation, what would you change?"

The final question in a focus group is an insurance question. Its unique purpose is to ensure that critical aspects have not been overlooked. The question begins with a short overview of the purpose of the study. This overview may be slightly longer and more descriptive than what was said in the advance letter or oral introduction to the focus group. Following this overview, the moderator asks the final question: "Have we missed anything?" Or "Is there anything that we should have talked about but didn't?"

Save time for the ending questions, or they won't work. It is best to have several minutes remaining before the promised adjournment time. This question is particularly important at the beginning of a series of focus groups to ensure that the questioning route is logical and complete. This final question can also be used to get feedback on your moderating skills. If something isn't working, the participants are often willing to tell you if you ask with a smile and explain that you want to improve. We sometimes explain, "This is the first in a series of groups like this that we are doing. Do you have any advice for how we can improve?"

A questioning route

Here is the questioning route used in focus groups with parents. These parents had recently been involved with an intensive family therapy program, and the purpose of the focus group study was to evaluate the program.

Opening	1.	Tell us your name, and tell us how long you have been working with (name of family service or program).
Introduction	2.	How did you learn about this program?
Transition	3.	Think back to when you first became involved with this program. What were your first impressions?
Key	4.	What was the start-up process like for you?
	5.	What was particularly helpful about the services?
	6.	What was particularly frustrating about the services?
	7.	Is your child any different because he or she received these services? If so, how?
	8.	Is your family life any different because you received these services? If so, how?
Ending	9.	If you had a chance to give advice to the director of this program, what advice would you give?
	10.	We want you to help us evaluate these services. We want to know how to improve the service and what differences the service makes to kids and families. What did we miss? Is there anything we should have talked about but didn't?

Strategies That Evoke Conversation

Earlier we talked about the importance of conversational questions. These questions tend to produce additional insight as participants build on comments of others. Improving the conversational level in a focus group involves several components. They include the following:

Begin the Conversation Before the Focus Group Begins

As participants arrive the research team welcomes each individual and helps them get acquainted with other participants. In these moments before the focus group begins, the moderator might nudge participants toward a conversation. Avoid making declarative statements, and instead, pick a neutral topic and ask someone to offer their views. And then ask others if they have thoughts or experiences on this topic. Avoid politics, religion, and love lives.

Starting a conversation with teens

In a recent focus group with teens, the research topic was on nutrition and exercise. In an effort to get teens to begin sharing their views, we selected a neutral and fun topic for early discussion. We asked the question: "Who is making the best music today?" We might pick someone for the first answer and then turn to others and ask if they would like to share their views. Rather quickly we had the teens talking about music, performers, and entertainment. Just the experience of sharing a view on something easy and then listening to the views of others was great practice for the later focus group.

Have a Pocketful of Conversational Questions

As you meet and welcome participants to the focus group, be armed with several questions that promote conversation and encourage participants to tell short stories. "I love your necklace. What's the story behind it?" Or, "Based on your cap, it looks like you're a Twins fan. How are they doing?" Select a topic where they feel comfortable making a comment—a topic where they have some experience or insight. If you know they are parents, you might ask about their children, such as, "What are your secrets for getting children out of bed in the morning?" "What are your thoughts about having a designated bedtime for your children?" Or, ask about their names. "What's the story about your name? Did your parents tell you why you were given the name you have?" The idea is to start a conversation from the time they come through the door. This makes people more comfortable and ready to share in the focus group.

Use a Checklist for Conversational Questions

As you think about potential conversational questions, here is a checklist that may help. Avoid questions that are obvious or controversial. Look for this instead:

- ☐ Does an answer quickly come to mind?
- ☐ Is it intriguing? Does it raise your curiosity?
- ☐ Do the answers of others interest you?
- ☐ Do people have experience with the topic?
- ☐ Do people feel encouraged to speak?

Use Strategies to Encourage Conversation

Ask the question and look at someone. Let your eyes linger on someone. Keep looking as they answer. Look at someone else as if you are expecting that person to talk. Or thank the first person and ask if someone else would like to comment. Don't let others squelch the discussion. The moderator keeps the discussion moving and tries to keep one person from dominating the conversation.

Tell Them You Would Like a Discussion

Use a statement like, "We'd like to hear from everyone—we'd like to make this into a conversation, and it is OK to build on what others say or to present a different point of view." You might comment on the importance of a discussion as you make your introduction and also later in the focus group if they need a reminder.

Pause and Look at Participants

Act as if you are waiting for others to share their views. You might be tempted to jump into the conversation, but control yourself. Use your eyes to signal others to talk.

Questions That Engage Participants

Up to now, we've discussed examples of questions that only required people to talk. Consider going beyond oral questions and using strategies that require greater involvement. This changes the pace of the focus group and can produce new and insightful information. People can be engaged in a variety of ways. Ask people to do things like listing, drawing, creating, arranging, and more. These engaging questions tap into different parts of the brain or heart. Some provide wonderful images and symbolism. Other questions are effective in eliciting emotional responses. Also participants often have fun with these questions.

Listing Things

Perhaps the easiest way to engage people in a different way is to ask them to make a list. This can be done in several ways. We typically ask them to jot down a list on a piece of paper. When everyone has completed a list, we ask them to tell us what they've written down. We then record the results on a flip chart. Sometimes we quickly categorize or sort the items as we place them on the flip chart. In other situations we might have the moderator or assistant moderator immediately record the results on the flip chart. The flip chart is valuable because it helps participants remember what has already been said. This listing process helps identify duplicate items and give a sense of how frequently items are mentioned. The silent listing on paper before transferring to the flip chart also affords the participants a few moments to reflect before they offer an answer. Consider these examples:

> "Think back to when you've had excellent customer service. What makes customer service excellent? Write your answers on a piece of paper. In a moment we'll share these with each other."
>
> "On the paper in front of you, jot down three characteristics of successful youth workers."
>
> "On the paper in front of you, jot down behaviors that tell you that your colleagues are not fully engaged in their work."

The list can be used simply to identify the range of responses. Or the list can be used to move to a deeper level. After the group has generated a list in response to "What makes customer service excellent?" the moderator can refer to the list and ask each person, "Which item do you consider to be the single most important on the list?" Or "If you had to pick one thing from this list that is most important to you, what would it be?" After circling each person's choice for most important, the moderator could focus the following discussion on those items that the participants chose as most important.

Be careful with flip charts

We use flip charts sparingly in focus groups because they can stifle conversation. People can talk much faster than a recorder can write. Sometimes participants will stop talking, so the recorder can finish writing down the idea. Also, people tend to offer phrases that are easy to list rather than longer, more descriptive examples that are usually much more useful during analysis. In addition, when the moderator stands in the focus group, the dynamics can change. Participants' attention focuses back on the moderator and breaks the conversation among participants. As a result, we selectively use flip charts to record answers to certain questions but never for the whole discussion. Later, in Chapter 6, we suggest a strategy of data capture that uses flip charts.

Rating Items

Rating scales can help identify which items should be discussed in more detail. Usually the researchers develop the rating scale; however, sometimes the criteria to be rated are developed by participants. The rating scale should be simple, and participants should be able to complete the exercise within a few minutes. Consequently, there is a limit to the number of items that can be rated. The idea behind the rating exercise is that each person rates a series of items without discussion, and then the results are tabulated and used as a basis for further discussion.

We prefer interval-appearing scales that we can code on a four- or five-point scale, for example:

Very satisfied = 5
Satisfied = 4
Neutral = 3
Dissatisfied = 2
Very dissatisfied = 1

This allows us to calculate a mean score quickly, which can be helpful in comparing a number of different items. Once tabulated we invite comments from the participants.

One variation of the rating approach is to ask participants to place colored dots on the flip chart or large sheets of paper displayed around the room. You could use three-quarter-inch dot stickers, small colored sticky notes, or markers. Each color corresponds to a rating. For example, you might use a five-point scale that corresponds to the colors of the rainbow: red = strongly agree, orange = agree, yellow = neutral, green = disagree, blue = strongly disagree. Participants are asked to place their dots, sticky notes, or marks on the flip chart that represents their views.

The flip charts must be easy to read from where participants are sitting. The color coding makes it easy for the moderator and participants to quickly see overall ratings. It is easier for people to quickly see trends if color ratings are used rather than numbers.

When finished with the rating, we ask participants to look over the completed sheets and offer comments. We may ask questions such as: "What patterns do you see?" "Is there anything that surprises you?" Or "Which item has the highest rating, and why was it rated so highly?"

At times there is value in asking participants to help develop the items to be rated. In these situations, keep the response scale constant, but have participants identify the items to be rated on their own. The researcher can then compare ratings of items and array these from high to low.

Suppose we are interested in how customers rate a local restaurant. We could use an instrument previously developed by the restaurant, and if we did so, we could compare results to earlier findings. But the predetermined scale might miss some critical elements of customer concern. Most often these rating forms ask about quality of food, quantity of food, speed of service, or friendliness of service. Suppose, however, that areas of greater concern to customers are parking lot congestion, food prices, presence or absence of smoking areas, or background noise. We suggest that you weigh the pros and cons of having criteria determined by the researcher versus criteria developed by participants. An advantage of using criteria developed by participants is that you get closer to their reality. The disadvantage is that these are difficult to analyze across groups when groups develop and rate different sets of items.

When participants have completed the exercise, the ratings should then be discussed. If you aren't going to discuss the results, then do the rating before or after the focus group, and don't waste time having it completed while the group is meeting.

Examples of response categories

When using a rating scale in a focus group, select response categories that are common. Examples include:

Very satisfied

Satisfied

Neutral

Dissatisfied

Very dissatisfied

Excellent

Good

Fair

Poor

Strongly agree

Agree

Neutral

Disagree

Strongly disagree

Question involving rating—Report card

Here is an example used with students in a high school: "We'd like you to develop a report card for your school. You're familiar with grades—A, B, C, D, and F—that you get for school subjects like English, history, and algebra. We want you to make a report card for your school, but you get to pick the subjects or the areas, and you get to give the grades. Pick subjects or things that are important to you. It could be something about people, the building, activities, or anything connected with the school. Pick subjects, and give each subject a grade from A to F. So, each of you take one of these cards, and make a report card for this school." Once the students were done, they shared their lists and grades, which were recorded on a flip chart. Then students were asked to pick out and discuss things that were rising to the top—getting As. Then they were asked to pick those things that were failing. Students were then asked how the things that were failing could be improved.

There is a difference between rating and ranking

Rating and ranking are different concepts, and these words are not interchangeable. *Rating* means that you use a common scale and respondents assign a value. Often we use a 5- or 10-point scale or a scale that ranges from strongly agree to strongly disagree. *Ranking* on the other hand means that you place items in an order or in a sequence. There is a first choice, a second choice, and so on. Rating scales are often considered to be interval data, and you can calculate a mean score. This is an advantage because then you have one number that represents the category. By contrast, ranking is considered an ordinal number and mean scores are not possible. Often rating scales are preferred because they offer a mean score and they are mentally easier than ranking exercises.

Choosing Among Alternatives: Pilot-Testing Ideas

This is a great use for focus groups. Participants are offered several choices, usually at least three but no more than five. The participants are then asked to look over the alternatives, talk about the advantages and disadvantages of each, what they like and don't like and select the one that they like the best. In addition to making the selection and announcing the choice, the participants also offer a reason for why they decided the way they did and how that option could be improved. This strategy is often used in selecting from among visual displays, advertising layouts, promotional or educational materials, logos, or even program options. We've used this strategy to evaluate different delivery options for higher education in a community, to review proposed social service programs, and to get feedback on different formats for educational materials. In some situations the participants were given short descriptions to read. In others, participants watched short videos or reviewed materials or mock-ups. Participants discussed the options, asked questions, and then each participant selected the one she or he most preferred.

Picture Sorting

The picture sort begins with a stack of photographs, typically from magazines. For example, it might be a stack of pictures of women, men, or teens. The pictures depict different types of people doing a variety of things. The moderator asks the participants to sort through the pictures and pick out those that match certain characteristics. For example, "Look through these pictures, and pick out the people that would participate in community education." "Here are some pictures of women. Sort the pictures into two categories. One category is women you think would breast-feed their child, and the second category is women who you think would bottle feed their child." After the sorting exercise, the moderator asks participants to talk about what it was about the pictures that caused them to put them in certain categories. The images help us understand an issue in a different way than words.

Drawing a Picture

Each focus group participant is given a blank piece of 11×17–inch paper and colored pencils, markers, or their own box of crayons. Each participant is then asked to draw a picture that might offer insights on a behavior or attitudes. Use stick figures for those anxious about the difficulty of drawing people. A variation is to hand out a roughed-out sketch and ask participants to add words or narratives to the pictures.

After participants have drawn their pictures, they are asked to hold them up and describe. When the group is finished sharing, the moderator might ask the group what they saw in the different approaches. What is similar? What is different?

As with all these participatory exercises, the benefit is in the discussion following the picture drawing. The picture is merely the stimulus that helps participants collect their thoughts and explain how they see a concept or idea. However, the pictures can be incredibly helpful in sharing the focus group findings with others. We often include a few of these pictures in the final report.

Picture-drawing questions

Here are examples where participants are asked to draw pictures.

1. *The urban youth center participant*

"We want you to draw someone who uses the youth center. First draw a picture of the youth center, and make the front door large. Then draw a picture of this person standing at the door of the youth center after having spent the evening there. Draw the person. [Give participants some time.] This person has something in his or her hand. What is it? Draw something in his or her hand. [Give them some time.] OK, the person is saying something. Write down what the person is saying. [Give some time.] Now, over on the side of the paper, give the person a name, an age, and tell where they live. [Give some time.] Write down where they go to school and what they do in their spare time."

2. *New moms' images of an ideal home visit from a public health nurse*

"Imagine an ideal home visit from a public health nurse. What would that be like? We want you to draw your ideal home visit. Draw yourself, your baby, and whoever else would be at this ideal home visit. Put a little arrow to the baby, and tell us how old the baby is when this ideal visit occurs. [Give some time.] The ideal nurse comes, and he or she brings a gift for you and a gift for the baby. What does the nurse bring? Draw the nurse, and draw what he or she brings for you and the baby. [Give some time.] The nurse has a name tag with the name of his or her organization on it. What organization is listed on the name tag in this ideal visit? Give the nurse a nametag, and list the organization. [Give some time.] The nurse does something while he or she is there that is really helpful. What does the nurse do? Draw it. [Give some time.] The nurse leaves you with a message that you really wanted or needed to hear. Draw a bubble from the nurse's mouth, and write down the message. [Give some time.] Finally in a corner, jot down three characteristics this ideal home visit has that are important to you."

3. *Moms who work outside the home*

"Draw a picture of yourself. You don't have to be an artist; a stick figure is just fine. Now draw an arrow to your mouth, an arrow to your head, and an arrow to your heart. When someone asks you, 'What's it like to be a mom who works outside the home?' what do you say—what comes out of your mouth? Write down what you say next to the arrow to your mouth. [Give some time.] When someone asks, 'What's it like to be a mom who works outside the home?' what do you think to yourself—what does your head say? Write that down next to the arrow going to your head. [Give some time.] When someone asks, 'What's it like to be a mom who works outside the home?' what does your heart say? Write that down next to the arrow to your heart. [Give some time.]"

We draw an example of the picture on a flip chart and have people copy the picture and fill in the blanks. We don't give examples of what they say, think, or feel because we don't want to lead or bias people. Ask people to share their drawings. Use the drawings as a basis for discussing the issues further.

Drawing a Diagram or Flow Chart

A variation of the picture drawing is asking participants to take a sheet of paper and show how something works. You might ask them to create a diagram that shows how something moves or changes over time. Some individuals are very familiar with flow diagrams, and others are not. You might offer simple directions that place the words *beginning* and *ending* at opposite ends of the page. Sometimes we place a time line at the bottom of the page. We ask participants to identify the steps, stages, or phases that help a person, group, or organization move from beginning to end. For example, employees in a large organization might be asked to depict the steps involved in the promotion process. Or a foundation might ask about the steps involved in obtaining a grant. Or former smokers might be asked to identify the steps they took to quit smoking. You might need to explain that you understand that people experience setbacks and that you are interested in those too. If they took three steps forward and two steps back, you are interested in all of their journey.

After individuals have prepared their diagrams, they are asked to hold them up and describe the steps they identified. When finished, the moderator might ask what steps were most often cited, what patterns group members see in the diagrams, what steps were particularly difficult or challenging, or other questions depending on the purpose of the study. Often the most valuable aspect of this exercise is in the discussion following the creation of the diagram.

Mind Mapping

A mind map is a visual depiction of how an individual thinks about a topic or issue. It can be done in a variety of ways, but one of the most popular is to give participants a blank sheet of paper and ask each person to write the topic in the middle of the page. For example, you might do a mind map of an organization, a familiar program, or product or a service that you wish to evaluate. They write the name in the middle of the page (e.g., "our organizational promotion policy"), and then they attach lines or nodes as thoughts come to mind around the topic.

When the maps are completed, participants are asked to describe them. Sometimes the moderator will ask each participant to indicate which node is most important, or most difficult, or most rewarding. The most productive part of the exercise is the discussion that follows the mind mapping. The moderator might begin by asking the group if they spotted any patterns or themes in the maps. Or, "What are the important things we need to remember about the topic?"

Using Your Imagination

Occasionally moderators will ask participants to imagine or dream about how things could be different. The challenge for the moderator is to establish the timing of the experience so that participants are ready for the exercise. For example, after participants have talked about the pros and cons of an alternative, the moderator might tell participants that there is a magic wand that makes their dream come true. The moderator passes around the wand, and as participants hold the wand, they share their dreams. Or, participants might be asked to close their eyes and imagine that they are on a special journey in a faraway land. Along the way they discover a special box that holds answers to great problems and difficulties that people have. When you open the box, you find the answer to the problem. What is in the box?

The moderator begins the experience by changing the pace of the group discussion. Up to this point participants were answering questions and conversing with others. Now, the moderator changes the mood of the conversation, perhaps by asking for a moment of silence, by using music to create a period of relaxation, or by guided imagery. This question often works well because it is different from what participants expect. The request seems unusual, unexpected, and sometimes even goofy. If you decide to use it, plan carefully for how you introduce the question.

Imagination questions

Here are three examples of questions that ask participants to use their imaginations.

1. *Planning an event*

A moderator was seeking creative suggestions for developing an educational event for food service workers. Designers had come up with the theme of having a carnival. She asked participants to close their eyes, listen to carnival music, and imagine themselves at the carnival. They were led through a guided imagery exercise and asked to jot down notes or try to remember what came to mind for each question. The group participants (who were helping design the carnival) were asked to do the following:

- Imagine promotional materials you have seen for the carnival that got you excited to go. How did they get your attention?

What did they say? What did they look like?

- Imagine arriving at the carnival. What do you hear? What do you see? What do you smell?
- Imagine walking around the carnival and being excited about certain exhibits. What do the exhibits look like? What are they about? What are people doing?
- Imagine going back to work and telling coworkers that the event was great and incredibly useful. What made it great? What made it useful?

After the participants had been guided through the exercise, the moderator asked each question again and asked participants to share what they had imagined for each step.

2. *Solving problems*

An organization was exploring solutions to employees' child care problems. The moderator said, "Here is a magic wand. I'll pass it around the table, and when you receive it, give your magical solution to the problem. By waving the wand, your solution will come true. Take the wand, and tell us your solution."

3. *Planning*

Other studies have asked people to imagine ideal futures: "Close your eyes for a moment. Imagine that you have been cryogenically frozen and you wake up 20 years in the future. You are completely OK, and you awake to an ideal world. What is the university like in this ideal world?"

Developing a Campaign

Several youth focus group studies have used a campaign questioning strategy. The session begins with the moderator asking questions of the youth about campaigns. “What is a campaign?” “Tell us about where you’ve seen campaigns.” “What happens in a campaign?” “What are the things that make up a campaign?” During this first part the young people typically talk about political campaigns and sometimes campaigns for schools, teams, or local causes. Campaigns have slogans, speakers, banners, songs, balloons, and celebrities. The moderator then asks the participants to develop a campaign that will get other young people to do something—perhaps eat more fruits and vegetables, get more exercise, or avoid drugs and alcohol. The campaign is aimed at other kids. Those in the focus group plan the strategy, complete with slogans, speakers, music, or whatever they think is needed to be effective. There is a supply of materials like markers and colored paper for the kids to use in developing their campaigns. The group can be divided into two groups of three to five participants to work for 45 minutes to an hour and then reassemble. Kids then share their campaigns and talk about what they like best about each campaign.

This strategy works well with youth because it allows them to be active, to use their expertise, and to have fun. You can get creative with this. One researcher provided T-shirts and caps to the kids so they could identify themselves as their own marketing groups. The researcher gets ideas and learns which strategies the target audience finds to be effective. This campaign strategy also works with adults in promoting social issues, community activities, wellness campaigns, and a host of other efforts.

Doing Something Before the Focus Group

Sometimes focus group participants are asked to complete a task before coming to the focus group. The task helps the participant prepare for the group discussion. This task could consist of visiting a location, reviewing materials or a website, keeping a log of activities, taking photographs of the topic of interest, or trying an activity that provides experience with the research topic.

Photos in a scrapbook

A friend of ours was offered $100 to participate in a focus group, but she had to complete an assignment before attending. The sponsor sent her a scrapbook with labels attached. She had to look over the labels, take pictures that fit those titles, and put her photos in the scrapbook. It was a lot of work, but she agreed to do it.

The topic was automobile repair. The scrapbook pictures asked for photos of her car, who usually rode in her car, where she got fuel, where she got the car repaired, how she felt when the car was in the shop, among other things. The focus group was composed of all women, and it was an engaging discussion with each participant showing pictures and telling of their experiences. At the end the moderator thanked the women and kept the scrapbooks.

Keeping a log

In a study of mosquito control, focus group participants were asked to keep a 14-day log of their experiences with mosquitoes. The forms for the log were sent to participants in advance. Participants were paid to complete the log and attend the focus group. The logs helped participants recall their experiences in the previous two-week period, and the researchers collected the documents for later content analysis.

Listening to the Brain or the Heart

As you develop questions, consider whether you want to listen to the brain, the heart, or both. Traditionally, focus group interviews have sought insights from the brain—insights that are results of a logical, thoughtful process. More recently, researchers have been interested in the emotional factors that influence behavior. This change resulted from the discovery that many decisions in life are not made as a result of a rational process but instead emerge from emotions and feelings associated with the product or topic. And in some studies the goal is to obtain both brain and heart types of information.

When you ask participants what they think about the topic, you're asking for a rational answer—from their brains. These questions are often used when we are seeking an array of possibilities, such as discovery of the array of needs within a community. People respond in a more detached way. For example, if you ask, "What are the barriers that prevent people from participating in the weight loss program?" then you will tend to get intellectual answers. But, if you show a picture of an overweight person walking into a weight loss center, and ask, "Tell me about this person. How do they feel walking into this center?" you are more likely to get an answer that taps into feelings.

When listening to the heart, the focus group procedures change. The moderator asks for less-factual information and encourages discussion on feelings. The questions use projection, drawings, sorting, and a variety of action experiences to get participants more in touch with their feelings. Participants look at something, try something, or see a prototype, and then they discuss it. The moderator is looking for "emotional hot buttons" (Feig, 2006) related to the product or behavior.

We have found it helpful to include both thinking and feeling questions because together they provide better understanding. On some studies we favor the intellectual aspect, such as in needs assessments or in obtaining descriptions of how things work in the community. But in studies where participants need to take action, make a choice, purchase, enroll, or make a commitment, then we tend to favor the emotional factors.

Again, the argument is that we don't make decisions rationally; we make decisions based on emotions. Steven Reiss (2004), a professor of psychology, developed a taxonomy of motives that drive behaviors. Some focus group researchers try to identify which motives are related to the topic they are studying. If they find that people feel powerful when using a particular product, they may decide to develop an advertising campaign around power. This same idea is used in social marketing campaigns to sell ideas. Reiss's 16 motives are listed in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1 Steven Reiss's 16 Motives

Name	Motive
Power	Desire to influence (including leadership, related to mastery)
Curiosity	Desire for knowledge
Independence	Desire to be autonomous
Status	Desire for social standing (including desire for attention)
Social contact	Desire for peer companionship (desire to play)
Vengeance	Desire to get even (including desire to compete, to win)
Honor	Desire to obey a traditional moral code
Idealism	Desire to improve society (including altruism, justice)
Physical exercise	Desire to exercise muscles
Romance	Desire for sex (including courting)
Family	Desire to raise own children
Order	Desire to organize (including desire for ritual)
Eating	Desire to eat
Acceptance	Desire for approval
Tranquility	Desire to avoid anxiety, fear
Savings	Desire to collect, value of frugality

SOURCE: Reiss (2004), p. 187.

So if you want to discover the important factors that influence decisions, you might favor gathering insight on the emotions that influence those decisions. If on the other hand your purpose is merely to identify or categorize, then the logical and rational answers would be most helpful.

The Process We Use to Develop a Questioning Route

So how does one go about developing a questioning route for a focus group study? Here is a process that works well for us. Typically we do the following:

1. Brainstorm.
2. Sequence the questions.
3. Phrase the questions.
4. Estimate time for each question.
5. Get feedback from others.
6. Revise the questions.
7. Test the questions.

We've listed these as a series of steps, but the exact order you use depends on your circumstances. In addition we find that we regularly loop back to make revisions throughout the development process. Consider these steps:

Step 1. Brainstorm

We invite a few people who are familiar with the purpose of the study to meet to brainstorm questions. We have found it beneficial to include people with different experiences and backgrounds. Usually the team includes us, the client, and others whom the client invites. Often we plan for four to six people at a one- to two-hour meeting. We begin by reviewing the purpose of the study and types of participants to be invited. Then we ask people to take five minutes to write down questions that could be asked. Next we ask people to share their ideas, and then, we open it up to more brainstorming discussion. One person records all the ideas. People are allowed to comment on questions as they come up, but we try not to get stuck talking about one question. Sometimes the ideas for questions dry up quickly. Then we ask for ideas in different ways: What would you like to know after we are done? What kind of decision do you want to make? What kind of information would be helpful to you? At this point we are looking for key questions—those questions that will drive the study. We don't worry too much about the other kinds of questions. After an hour or two, we typically have plenty of questions to begin the next phase.

A group is great for generating ideas for questions, but a group isn't efficient for refining the questions. Therefore, we adjourn our brainstorming meeting, and then one or two people take responsibility for the next steps: working on the sequencing and phrasing the questions.

Step 2. Sequence the Questions

After brainstorming we begin to think about the question sequence. Focus group questions are not just thrown together. The researcher arranges the questions with care. This question sequence is the reason we use the word *focus* in the name. This focused sequence is sensible to participants. It provides an opportunity for participants to anchor their opinions and then build on those views. Here is how we sequence.

Key Questions First, Then Work Backwards

Begin by identifying your key questions. Likely you will have several, and you will need to place these key questions in a logical sequence. After you have established these key questions, you need to work backwards to develop the additional questions. Think about the question that might immediately precede your first key question. This is a question or topic that might naturally lead the conversation into the key questions. Then identify each of the earlier questions, so there is a natural and logical flow to the conversation. It is much more difficult to identify your questions from beginning to end. Starting at the end and working backwards is more efficient and results in better questions.

General Questions Before Specific Questions

The most common procedure in arranging questions is to go from general to specific—that is, begin with general overview questions that lead to more specific questions of critical interest. Avoid presenting participants with key questions without first establishing the context created by more general questions. For example, suppose a series of focus group interviews will be held with young people. The purpose is to learn their perceptions of youth organizations and eventually to identify an effective means of advertising a particular organization. It would be premature to begin with questions on advertising the organization. Instead the moderator might ask the participants to describe their favorite youth organization or to describe what they like about youth clubs. Later in the discussion the moderator might narrow the topic to focus on a specific youth organization under investigation. Perhaps toward the end of the discussion, the moderator might solicit opinions on several different approaches that are being considered for advertising the youth group.

The analogy of a funnel is helpful because it presents the researcher with a visual guide for arranging questions. The funneling concept is used to move the discussion from broad to narrow, from general to specific, or from abstract to specific. The funneling begins with fairly broad discussion and is followed by a series of narrower, more focused questions. Steadily the questions become more and more focused. Just how broad should the beginning questions be? Part of that depends on the number of questions you have and the amount of time scheduled for the focus group.

Moving from general to specific questions

This example of going from general to specific comes from focus groups conducted in Hawaii. To gain insights into how consumers use Kona coffee, the moderator began with questions about gourmet foods then asked about gourmet beverages. When a participant suggested Kona coffee, the moderator then encouraged discussion of how and when this type of coffee was used.

Positive Questions Before Negative Questions

If you want to ask a negative question, first ask the question phrased in a positive way. For example, if you want to ask, "What don't you like about eating in the cafeteria?" first ask, "What do you like about eating in the cafeteria?" Give participants the chance to comment on both positive and negative experiences or observations. This strategy usually works better when the first request is for positive items. Perhaps it was our mothers' exhortation that we shouldn't say something bad unless we've first said something good.

The benefit of using both positive and negative questions is that it allows participants to comment on both sides of the issue—and in some situations, this is particularly important. At times focus group participants get in a rut and become excessively critical. It's reasonable for employees of an organization, students in an educational setting, or military personnel to launch into criticism of those who have control and power. In situations where participants begin with negative features and tend to dwell on the undesirable factors, there is value in turning the tables and asking for opposite views. "So what are the benefits of working around here?" "What's positive about being a student here?" "What could you do to make this neighborhood better?"

Often the transition from positive to negative aspects is smooth and comfortable, but care is needed so that it isn't premature. One rather predictable scenario is that, while positive attributes are being discussed, a participant might disagree with the positive statement and want to offer a contrary point of view. This can easily lead into the discussion of negative attributes without further exploration of the positive features. Here the moderator will need to exercise mild control and encourage the group to complete the discussion of the positive attributes before shifting to the less-desirable features.

Uncued Questions Before Cued Questions

The rule of thumb is to ask the uncued question first and then follow up with cues to prompt additional discussion. For example, a moderator could ask as an uncued question, "What are the needs in this neighborhood?" After people discuss this question, the moderator could then use cues to elicit more comments. Perhaps the moderator might present a list on a flip chart that helps spur additional thoughts (like children, teenagers, young families, older families, the elderly, or safety, health, child care, jobs) and ask, "When you think of these categories, do any other needs come to mind?"

If the moderator does not offer cues and a certain topic is not mentioned (e.g., child care), then it is impossible to determine if it was an oversight or if it was just not important. The moderator can only determine the difference by offering cues. For example, if the researcher is particularly interested in needs of teenagers, but those needs don't come up in the discussion, the researcher has no way of knowing whether needs of teenagers aren't really important in that neighborhood or if they were just overlooked in the discussion. The researcher has to ask. The cues themselves require some thought. They are developed before the focus group. They are limited in number yet are also reasonably exhaustive.

When using uncued and cued questions, it may also be helpful to include an all things considered question, described earlier. In this question the participants are asked to identify the one factor (need, concern, etc.) that they consider to be the most important (critical, necessary to address, etc.). Responses to this question greatly aid the analysis. An analysis error sometimes made in focus groups is to assume that what is most frequently mentioned is also most important.

Group Insights Before Expert Research, Then Group Reflection

You may want to get the reactions of focus group participants to the research of experts. Does the research seem credible? Is anything missed? Does this apply to your situation? But the danger is that expert research tends to intimidate some participants and also tends to limit the creative thinking of participants. A better strategy is to begin by asking the group for their insights. This might be done by making individual lists and then placing the results on a flip chart. The second step might be to look over the findings from previous research. Often we avoid calling it *expert research,* and instead we merely say, "Here are some things that others have said." We invite participants to then look over both lists and offer their comments. They might identify the topic they are most concerned about, the items that we need to pay attention to, or perhaps list them in order of their importance.

Step 3. Phrase Questions

The researcher examines the list of questions and begins by identifying those questions that seem key to the study and editing them (phrasing them), so they will work in a focus group (e.g., take out jargon, make them open-ended). Then as the researcher adds questions, he or she begins to build the questioning route.

Use Open-Ended Questions

Open-ended questions allow the respondents to determine the direction of the response. The answer is not implied and the type or manner of response is not suggested. Individuals are encouraged to respond based on their specific situations. The major advantage of the open-ended question is that it reveals what is on the interviewee's mind as opposed to what the interviewer suspects is on the interviewee's mind. For example, consider these open-ended questions:

> What did you think of the program?
> How did you feel about the conference?
> Where do you get new information?
> What do you like best about the proposed program?
> What do you like least about the proposed program?

Some questions are deceptive and appear to be open-ended but are really closed-ended questions in disguise. Questions that include phrases like *how satisfied, to what extent,* or *how much* imply answers that fall within a specified range, such as *very satisfied, to a great extent,* or *a great deal.* Compare the question "How satisfied were you with the services you received?" to "How did you feel about the services you received?" The more open-ended question begs for more description, more explanation.

Closed-ended questions aren't totally off limits. They can provide very helpful information. You may want very simple information, like asking kids in a study of school lunch, "How many of you usually bring a bag lunch?" Or toward the end of the group interview, it may be productive to narrow the types of responses and bring greater focus to the answers by shifting to closed-ended questions. Also, bounding the questions may be helpful to a moderator trying to regain control of a rambling discussion or in situations where the topic requires more specific insights. For example, the moderator might ask, "Which of these three options do you like best?"

Selecting useful questions

Sometimes after a brainstorming session, you have many more questions than could actually fit in a questioning route. Where do you start? Which ones do you include? It helps to have mental screens for the questions like these:

- Is this a nice-to-know or a need-to-know question? Nice-to-know questions often arise from curiosity but aren't crucial to the study. Need-to-know questions arise out of a need for information. We include need-to-know questions first.
- A variation of the preceding question is this: What would you do with this information if you had it? Is it going to help you move closer to your goal? We sometimes ask clients these questions to help us understand what would be useful to them. We start with questions that seem to have more potential to provide useful information.

Ask Participants to Think Back

The think back question asks participants to reflect on their personal experiences and then respond to a specific question. "Think back to when you began working at the public health service. What attracted you to the position?" Or, "Think back to the last time you registered for a course at the university. What was that experience like?" The think back phrase helps establish a context for the response. These words let participants know that you want them to be specific and grounded in their experiences as opposed to hearsay from others or just repeating community beliefs and values. People often give great examples of their experiences.

There's a tendency for participants to respond to the more immediate interviewing experience—the here and now—unless you ask them to shift themselves to another time frame. This focus on the past increases the reliability of the responses because it asks about specific experiences as opposed to current intentions or future possibilities. The question asks what the person has done as opposed to what might be done in the future. The shift is from what might be, or ought to be, to what has been. This time shift cues the respondent to speak from experience as opposed to wishes and intentions.

Questions about future behaviors are often unreliable. Participants tend to answer as they wish the future would be, or as they would like to be seen, as opposed to the harsher reality of how it actually is.

The limit of think back questions

Think back questions should be limited to events or experiences that are fairly recent or particularly memorable. If the participants can't readily remember the experience, the question won't work.

Avoid Asking Why

The why question has sharpness to it that can remind one of interrogations. The respondent tends to feel confronted and defensive. Also, why questions imply a rational answer, but in real life, people make decisions based on impulse, habit, tradition, or other nonrational processes. When asked why, respondents feel like they should have a rational answer appropriate to the situation. The participant intellectualizes the answer and speaks from the brain and not from deeper forces that motivate behavior.

If the researcher decides to use a why question, it should be specific. Paul Lazarfeld (1986) has called this "the principle of specification." Lazarfeld's principle of specification is that why questions are answered in two ways. When asked why, the respondent may respond on (1) the basis of influences that prompted the action, or (2) the basis of certain desirable attributes. Why questions can be messy to analyze if participants aren't clear whether you are asking for influences or attributes.

Let's use Lazarfeld's model to examine the responses to a seemingly simple question: "Why did you go to the zoo?"

Influence Answer: "Because my kids really wanted to go."

Attribute Answer: "Because I wanted to see the Beluga whale."

What seems like a straightforward and simple question can really be answered on several dimensions. The first answer describes an influence, and the second answer relates to a feature or attribute of the zoo. The preferred strategy is to break the why question down into different questions, for example:

Influence: "What prompted (influenced, caused, made) you to go to the zoo?"

Attribute: "What features of the zoo do you particularly like?"

A less direct approach is to ask people what or how they feel about the object of discussion. Often people can describe the feelings they had when they considered using a particular product or program. In addition, they can probably describe the anticipated consequences from using the product or program.

Keep Questions Simple

Beginning researchers tend to make focus group questions too complex. Simple questions are essential. For example, don't ask, "What are the ingredients that are associated with healthy living?" Instead say, "Describe a healthy lifestyle." Think of the shortest way to clearly ask the question. The best focus group questions are simply stated. When these questions are asked, the participants immediately know what is asked for, and within seconds, they are on their way to providing an answer. By contrast, avoid questions that have multiple interpretations. The participant hesitates because the question is confusing. Then, while thinking, he or she becomes distracted by the comments of other participants and forgets his or her train of thought.

Simple questions do not yield simple answers! It is often the simple question that gets the participant to bring shape and form to the discussion. It pulls out assumptions and lays bare core principles. You can spot simple questions because they typically have few words and no jargon or insider language. The simple question is not condescending or childish. It's a sophisticated question that gets at the core of the topic.

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of simple questions is that they are memorable. Too often participants forget the question, in part because it is too complex. The memorable question is one that continues to ring in their heads. Even if one participant gets off topic, another participant remembers the question and brings the discussion back on track.

Make complex questions visual

If you have a question that is difficult to put into few words, write it on a flip chart before the group begins, and flip to it when you get to that question in the discussion. The visual cue helps people understand and remember complex questions.

Make Questions Sound Conversational

Sometimes we get caught up in our own jargon or the language of our profession. This doesn't work well in focus groups. Insider language is offensive and doesn't communicate well to outsiders. We always try to ask questions in a way that sounds conversational. And we try to use language that is comfortable for the types of people we are asking. If we are talking with special education teachers, we may use more technical language than if we were talking with parents or students. If we are working with health care providers, we may use more technical language than if we are talking to patients or their family members. Sometimes we imagine, *OK, if I was in the backyard talking to the neighbors, how would I ask this?* We don't use acronyms unless they are well known or we explain them. Our goal is not to baffle participants with our vocabulary or puff up our egos but to seek to be enlightened by them.

Be Cautious About Giving Examples

Examples are like mental ruts. While they provide ideas for the type of response, they also limit the thinking of respondents. Suppose you are doing a study of customer satisfaction and because the topic is broad, you decide to use the example of how complaints are handled. Well, handling complaints is only one facet of customer satisfaction, and because it evokes memories and vivid experiences, it can dominate the conversation and prevent other dimensions from emerging. If you do give examples, give them as probes after participants have already given their insights.

Step 4. Estimate Time for Each Question

Another common error of beginning focus group researchers is to try to ask too many questions. We have seen questioning routes with 30 questions. In a two-hour group, that is less than four minutes per question—much too little time to expect in-depth discussion or useful information. Researchers tend to get superficial, top-of-the-mind information if they don't allow enough time for discussion.

Focus groups are typically two hours long. Successful groups have been conducted in less time, particularly with children or teenagers or on narrowly focused studies. We also occasionally hear of focus groups lasting more than two hours. The two-hour time limit, however, is a physical and psychological limit for most people. Don't go beyond two hours unless there is a special event or circumstance that makes it comfortable for participants, such as providing lunch or dinner.

Once we have a draft questioning route, we estimate how much time we should spend on each question, typically 5, 10, 15, or 20 minutes. When planning a two-hour group, we allow a little flexible time at the front end, about 15 minutes. If everyone is there on time, we start right away. But occasionally we will have to wait until enough people arrive to begin the group. We wait about 15 minutes and then begin with whoever is there. We also allow time at the end of the group for ending questions and summarizing (at least 15 minutes). This leaves about 90 minutes for the opening, introductory, transition, and key questions. We estimate how much time should be spent on each question, add up the time we have assigned the questions, and decide if we need to add or delete questions.

When estimating time for the questions consider:

- *The complexity of the question.* Some questions can be answered in a matter of seconds. For example, we occasionally ask very simple questions, like, "How many of you usually eat school lunch? Raise your hand if you usually eat school lunch." Other questions demand more time and discussion, like "What do you think of the school cafeteria?"
- *The category of questions*. Opening and introductory questions typically don't take much time. Allow the most time for key questions.
- *The level of participants' expertise*. A group of experts will have more to say than a group of nonexperts on any topic, and you want to give them time to say it. One way to deal with this is to limit the number of questions to be asked of experts. For example, we may include 14 questions in a discussion with nonusers of a program but include only 10 questions in the questioning route for users of the program.
- *The size of the focus group*. A group of nine participants will usually discuss each question longer than will a group of six participants.
- *The level of discussion you want related to the question*. If you don't want in-depth information about a particular question, allow less time for it. If you want in-depth data or insights, allow enough time for participants to wrestle with the question.
- *The amount of time required to complete an activity.* Questions that ask participants to draw, sort, or make a collage typically require more time.

Step 5. Get Feedback From Others

Once the questioning route is completed, it is time to send it back to the team that brainstormed the questions for their review. Usually it isn't necessary to physically get back together to review the questions. E-mail works well for getting the draft questioning route back to people. Ask people to think about these questions:

- Are these the right questions? Will they get the type of information you need?
- Are these the words that people in the groups would use to talk about the issue?
- Do you understand the questions? Are any of them confusing to you?
- Do any of the questions seem redundant?
- Do the questions seem to flow from one topic to another?
- What have we missed?
- What can we delete?

Ask team members to get feedback to you by a certain date, usually within a week.

Step 6. Revise the Questions

Revise the questions, and repeat the feedback step. Send the revised draft to the team, and ask for their feedback. It is not unusual to run through several drafts before the team feels comfortable with the questions. If you get to a point where people start to nitpick, it is definitely time to test the questions.

Put the date on each draft to minimize confusion

With multiple revisions it is easy to get confused about which draft is the latest. Numbering the draft versions is helpful, but it also helps to date each draft.

Step 7. Test the Questions

We test questions before using the questions in a group. It is important to test them orally! Sometimes it is as simple as finding a few people who fit the focus group screen and asking them the questions. At this point we ask the questions as if we were conducting an individual interview. We pay attention to two things:

1. How easy is it to ask the question without reading it? Do the words flow smoothly, or do we stumble when we ask it? A question that seemed simple when we wrote it on the page may be awkward when we ask it aloud. If we stumble, we rephrase it to make it easier to say—more conversational.

2. Does the question seem confusing to the participants? Do they hesitate too long? Do they look confused? Do they give an answer that shows the question is confusing? Do they ask for clarification? If so, we ask them to tell us about what is confusing and ask for their help in making the question simpler.

After we have tested the questions with a few people, we hold the first focus group. We don't pilot-test the questions in the group. It is so time and labor intensive to set up a group that we want to be able to use the results from the discussion rather than consider it a pilot. If a question doesn't work in the first group, we revise it before the second group. At the end of the first group, we may ask the participants to help us revise a question that seemed awkward or confusing.

Changing Questions: The Importance of Consistency

Remember, if you wish to compare and contrast responses across groups, you must keep the questions consistent. If you change questions from group to group, you lose your ability to compare. The general rule is to maintain as much consistency as possible throughout the series of focus groups because it is in comparison and contrast that themes and patterns emerge from the data. Information obtained from a single focus group can yield interesting and helpful insights, but the researcher just doesn't know if similar findings would occur in another group. In analysis, the researcher strives for theoretical saturation that is only possible with consistency of questioning.

But what about studies where you have several different types of participants—groups of parents, students, teachers, and food service workers. Should you use the same questioning route for all groups? If you want to compare how teachers, students, and parents see or feel about a particular topic, you must have a core set of questions that remain consistent across groups. Often most of the key questions will stay the same, so you can compare and contrast how different types of participants answer the question. However, you may want to ask some questions that tap into the expertise or experience unique to a particular group. For example, in a study of how to increase kids' consumption of fruits and vegetables while at school, we asked the food service workers, "What makes it tough to serve fruits and vegetables at school?" This is an important question that highlights barriers for food service personnel, and they have unique expertise to answer this question. However, it wouldn't make sense to ask the other groups this question.

Circumstances When Questions Might Change

Occasionally it is wise to change or eliminate a question in a focus group interview; here are two circumstances when it should be considered.

1. Change the question if it clearly doesn't work. This is often spotted in one of the first focus groups. Here are three signals that a question doesn't work: (a) There is silence, and participants look baffled; (b) participants tell you that they don't understand the question; and (c) participants talk but aren't answering the question.

2. Change the question if saturation has clearly occurred, and the responses are of limited use. In many studies, theoretical saturation occurs somewhere between 3 and 12 focus groups. When conducting a sizable number of focus groups, such as more than 12, there is little to gain by continuing to ask questions of the same type of participants when the responses are predictable and of limited use. There is considerably more to gain by changing questions to build on what you have learned in the earlier groups. Based on what we have heard in the early groups, we may adapt a question to move it to another level.

Summary

There is no topic so important and yet so overlooked in focus group research as developing questions. Too often questions are hastily put together because they sound good to the researchers. Poor questions are confusing to participants and virtually impossible to analyze, and they waste precious resources. In this chapter we've highlighted the qualities that result in good questioning routes. These questions are conversational, clear, and short—among other things. Not all questions are alike, and five distinct types of questions were discussed: opening, introductory, transition, key, and ending questions. We shared some questions that ask participants to go beyond the sit-and-talk response. Finally, we shared a process for developing questions.

Appendix 3.1

Example of Questions to Understand an Issue

These questions were used with supervisors of county employees to understand the issue of diversity in the workplace.

		Minutes
1.	Tell us your name and what area you supervise.	5
2.	What is your definition of diversity?	5
	Messages	
3.	What do you hear people saying about diversity a. over coffee breaks? b. at staff meetings or in publications?	5
4.	Who cares about diversity, and how do you know they care? Probe: Is diversity a priority of management? How can you tell?	10
	Retention	
5.	What makes diverse employees stay?	10
6.	What makes diverse employees leave?	10
	Barriers and Incentives	
7.	As supervisors, what incentives are there for you to create and maintain a diverse workforce?	10
8.	As supervisors, what makes it tough to create and maintain a diverse workforce?	10
	Resources	
9.	How comfortable are you with the amount you know about different races or cultures you might hire?	5
10.	Do you have resources for handling tense diversity issues? If so, where do you go?	5
	Improvements	
11.	What could be done to make the work environment more inviting for diverse employees?	15
12.	What could the county do to help make supervisors more effective in managing diversity?	15
	Closing Question	
13.	If you had one minute to give advice to (name of person), the director of diversity programs, about how to retain a diverse workforce in the county, what would you say?	5
	Total	110 min.

Appendix 3.2

Example of Questions for Pilot-Testing Materials

Here is an example of questions used to pilot-test materials designed to recruit veterans into a quit-smoking program.

		Minutes
	Materials Presented: Brochure #1 (handout) Brochure #2 (handout) Brochure #3 (handout)	
1.	Tell us your name and what town you live in.	5
	Brochure #1 (Hand each participant an envelope stuffed with the brochure and cover letter, just the way they might receive it in the mail.) Here is a package of materials that might be sent to veterans. Take about three minutes to look at the packet. Think about what you like and what you don't like about it. You can write on it. In a few minutes, I will ask for your reactions.	
2.	Now, what are your reactions to the package? What's your reaction to: a. The envelope (probe: size and color of envelope, return address, type of postage) b. The letter c. The brochure	10
3.	Here is a handout with two questions. Please answer each of these, and when you are done, you can pass them back to me. The first question is: a. If you got this in the mail, what would you do with the *letter*? Toss / Put aside for later / Read quickly / Read thoroughly / Read & call b. The second question is, what would you do with the *brochure*? Toss / Put aside for later / Read quickly / Read thoroughly / Read & call (Collect the answers. Tabulate on flip chart. Discuss. For those of you who said you would toss the letter, let's talk about that. What would prompt you to toss it?)	15

		Minutes
4.	What would make the letter better, so you would be more likely to read it and call?	10
5.	What would make the brochure better, so you would be more likely to read it and call?	10
	Brochure #2 Now we are going to look at another version of the brochure. [Hand out brochure #2]. Take a few minutes to look through this brochure. Again, think about what you like and don't like. You can write on it. In a few minutes, I will ask for your reactions.	
6.	What's your reaction to: The content How it looks	10
7.	What would make this better, so you would be more likely to read it and you would call?	5
	Brochure #3 We have one more version of the brochure for you to look at. [Hand out brochure #3]. Again, take a few minutes to look through it, and then we'll ask for your reactions.	
8.	What's your reaction to: a. The content b. How it looks	10
9.	What would make this better, so you would be more likely to read it and you would call?	5
10.	Which brochure do you like the most and why?	10
11.	What would it take to get you to sign up for this telephone coaching to help you quit smoking?	10
12.	What would keep you from signing up for this telephone coaching?	10
13.	The VA is trying to recruit veterans to participate in a telephone coaching system to help veterans quit smoking. Today we are trying to figure out what it will take to get veterans to sign up for the program. What have we missed?	5
	Total	115 min.

Appendix 3.3

Example of Questions for Evaluating Services

This was an evaluation of a county program that provided intensive support to families who had a child with complex needs. The focus groups were conducted with mothers of children who had received the services.

		Minutes
1.	Tell us your name and how you first learned about (name of program).	5
2.	What were your first impressions of (name of program)?	5
3	What was particularly helpful about (name of program)?	10
4.	What have you found to be particularly frustrating?	10
5.	What does your child like about (name of program)?	10
6.	What doesn't your child like about (name of program)?	10
7.	How does this compare with other mental health programs?	5
8.	Do you feel like you are an equal member of the team?	5
9.	What happens if you disagree?	5
10.	What would culturally appropriate services look like to you and your family? Do you think these services are culturally appropriate?	10
11.	Is your child any different because they received these services? If so, tell us how your child is different.	10
12.	Is your family any different because they received these services? If so, how?	10
13.	If you had a chance to give advice to the director of the program, what would you say?	10
14.	Would you recommend (name of program) services to other parents?	5
	Total	110 min.

4 Participants in a Focus Group

What Lies Ahead

In this chapter we describe:

- The Purpose Drives the Study
- Sampling Procedures for Focus Groups
- The Composition of the Group
- The Size of a Focus Group
- Strategies for Finding Participants
- Selecting Participants
- Recruiting Strategies
- Incentives to Participate

Who should be invited to a focus group? How many people should participate? How should participants be identified? What does it take to get people to attend?

Market research firms spend sizeable amounts of thought, time, and money refining their recruiting efforts. They know if they don't deliver enough of the right people for a focus group, their reputation in the business world suffers. They know the art of recruiting.

In contrast, public sector organizations tend to underestimate the importance and difficulty of recruiting participants. Public and nonprofit organizations operate within different environments. Most can't spend huge amounts of money on recruiting. They operate under different traditions, constraints, rules, and procedures.

Employees in public organizations may feel that their traditions and values require them to conduct meetings open to the public. In some instances, decision makers may want to allow anyone and everyone to participate in a group discussion. These sessions resemble public hearings, where citizens come to ventilate or to watch others as they share their enthusiasm or wrath. But focus groups are not open public meetings, because this runs counter to critical characteristics that are essential for the focus group to work, such as having homogeneous participants, a permissive environment, and a limited number of people.

To illustrate the difficulties that can occur, consider the story of a suburban community. The city council wanted to build a new fire station. The old station needed major improvements in communications, storage, heating, and electrical facilities. It would cost more to repair the old building than to build a new station. The city needed to pass a bond issue to build the new station—a tough task. Twice before, the city council had placed the bond issue on the ballot, and twice the referendum was defeated. To avoid an embarrassing third defeat, the officials commissioned a research firm to study the possibility of a favorable vote. The research firm conducted "focus groups" within the municipality. The public was invited to attend any or all of the discussions held in various places in the community. The people responsible for recruiting announced the upcoming "focus groups" on cable TV, placed posters in public buildings and on bulletin boards in grocery stores and pharmacies, and put special ads in newspapers. Naturally, the attendance varied, and the discussions were more like town meetings. The research firm's findings indicated that the vote would now be favorable, and the city council decided to move ahead with the election. The election results were a huge disappointment to the elected officials. The bonding bill was resoundingly defeated. In hindsight, the city council discovered the opponents to the fire stations were largely senior citizens who were quite concerned about increased property taxes. Seniors didn't attend the open meetings, but they did vote!

Those who supported building a new fire station showed up at the "focus groups." Residents who were against the new station just ignored the meetings but showed up for the election. In this situation, the lack of careful procedures for selecting respondents produced embarrassing and erroneous results. Also, generalizations or projections to a population based on limited focus group interviews are risky.

Successful recruitment requires special efforts. When working with focus groups, nonprofit and public organizations should forget their traditional means for recruiting and substitute instead a systematic and deliberate process. Nonprofit employees regularly invite people to participate in meetings and events. These employees figure they can use these same techniques to get people to attend focus groups. But conventional methods such as newsletters, form letter invitations, or announcements at meetings just don't work well. If the organization is truly interested in getting quality information, then these methods should be set aside because they will not be effective in getting the right number of the right people to attend.

Not-for-profit organizations often have difficulty recruiting

Nonprofit and public organizations that do their own focus group recruiting often have difficulty, because they assume focus group participants are like volunteers. However, volunteers are typically more aware of and committed to the organization's mission than are others. Yet, these organizations often need to recruit people who aren't already committed to the issue and who have other interests and responsibilities competing for their time. Organizations underestimate how difficult it is to get participants to agree to attend, and they overestimate the likelihood that those who agree to attend will actually show up at the appointed time.

The Purpose Drives the Study

When deciding what types of people to invite to the group interviews, think back to the purpose of the study. Usually the purpose is to describe how certain people feel or think about something—people who have something in common. What kind of people do you want to make statements about? What kind of people can give you the information you are looking for? The purpose should guide the invitation decision. The statement of purpose may require some additional refinement and clarification to ensure that the participants have the degree of specification needed for the study. For example, the researcher might have initially identified community residents as the type of participants to be invited, but later, after some thought, restricted participants to unmarried residents between the ages of 18 and 40. In other situations, participants might be identified in broad terms, such as parents, teenagers, or residents of a geographic area.

The purpose of the study is the first of three ingredients that influence the decision of whom to invite. The second includes everything your team knows about the type of people you intend to recruit as well as groups that are close to them. Are the types of people you intend to recruit distinctive, identifiable, and reasonable to locate? In focus groups, the goal is to have a homogeneous audience. There are no precise rules that determine homogeneity, but rather it is a judgment call based on your available knowledge about the type of participants and the situation.

Third, the budget influences the degree of specification. Simply put, how many different groups can you afford to conduct? Or another way of asking the question is this: How much are you willing to invest in this study? If resources are scarce and only three focus groups can be conducted, you will need to decide what type of people will give you the most meaningful information.

Caution is needed when the focus group participants represent diverse categories of people. It is a fallacy to assume that any one individual can represent his or her neighborhood, race, gender, or culture. Each person speaks for himself or herself. When asked, however, these individuals may attempt to offer insights about the opinions of an entire category of people. If you want to capture the opinions of a certain category of people, then you'll need to conduct a sufficient number of focus groups with that particular category of people. A focus group comprised of diverse people is not sensitive enough to pick up trends of subcategories of people.

Let's suppose that a religious group wants to attract new members. They decide to use focus groups to discover what would prompt new people to attend. The religious group would need to decide what type of members it wants to attract: teenagers, young families, single-parent families, seniors, residents living within a geographic area, people who have just moved to the area, and so on. If several different audiences are sought, then it is advisable to conduct a series of focus groups with each audience category: teens, single-parent families, and so on. A strategic decision is needed regarding the research budget. What is this information worth? With X resources, one audience category might be investigated, but 2X resources are needed to include two audiences, 3X for three audiences, and so on. The research budget should include the actual costs of conducting the focus group and the volunteer time needed to conduct the study.

Market segmentation: An idea to consider

Market researchers use market segmentation to identify types of consumers and then to develop messages and advertisements targeted to certain segments. What is persuasive to a teenager may be different from what appeals to a young parent. What appeals to someone in one income category may be quite different from what appeals to people in other income categories. The idea is to identify carefully the audience you want to reach and then seek out that audience and listen to them. After listening, marketing messages are designed to appeal to that particular audience. Public and nonprofit organizations tend to use mass communication, whereby the same message goes out to everybody. But mass communication messages aren't as effective as messages targeted at specific audiences. Public and nonprofit organizations ought to consider segmenting their markets.

Sampling Procedures for Focus Groups

When researchers approach focus group interviewing, they carry with them many of the traditions, wisdom, and procedures that were intended for experimental and quantitative studies. Some of these procedures readily transfer; others do not.

Random sampling is one procedure that is effective in experimental research but of limited value in focus group research. Randomization essentially removes the bias in selection—that is, all participants possess an equivalent chance to be involved in the study. Random selection is particularly appropriate when inferences are made to a larger population because of the assumption that opinions, attitudes, or whatever is being studied will be distributed normally within that population. Therefore a random sample of sufficient size will be an adequate substitute for surveying the entire population.

Keep in mind that the intent of focus groups is not to infer but to understand, not to generalize but to determine the range, and not to make statements about the population but to provide insights about how people in the groups perceive a situation. While a degree of randomization may be used, it is not the primary factor in selection. When randomization is used in focus groups, it is often to eliminate the selection bias inherent in some forms of personal recruitment. For example, the researcher might first identify a pool of prospective participants using a purposeful sample. And then use a random procedure to select individuals from that pool. Caution is needed because randomization of participants without the preliminary purposeful sample can lead to error.

With all sampling strategies, you must be concerned about the degree to which that strategy could lead to distortions in the data. Anticipate questions about the means of selection and be able to provide the rationale for those decisions.

The Composition of the Group

The focus group is characterized by homogeneity but with sufficient variation among participants to allow for contrasting opinions. By *homogeneity*, we mean they have something in common that you are interested in, like these categories:

- An occupation (You want to explore professional development needs of practicing dentists in the state.)
- Past use of a program or service (You want to evaluate an educational program, so you decide to conduct groups with people who completed the program in the past year, groups of people who dropped out of the program in the past year, and groups of program staff.)
- Age (You want to talk to 14- and 15-year-old smokers to find out how they get cigarettes.)
- Gender (You want to talk to men who have had false positives on prostate screening tests to find out how this impacted their quality of life.)
- Family characteristics (You want to talk to women who have had babies in the past year to get help in designing a program for new moms.)

The guiding principle is the degree to which these factors will influence sharing within the group discussion. Some mixes of participants do not work well because of limited understanding of other lifestyles and situations. Be careful about mixing individuals from different life stages and styles unless the topic clearly cuts across these life stages and styles. For example, we conducted focus groups with women who were pregnant to get their help in designing a health and education program for new moms. Our only screens were that they be pregnant and from the participating county. We had teenagers who didn't want to be pregnant in the same groups with 40-year-old women who were ecstatic about being pregnant for the first time. The young women tended to be quiet and deferred to the others in the group. In hindsight, it would have been better if we had held separate groups for the teenage moms. You strive for a balance between having enough variation within the group to get contrast and yet not so much variation that some participants are inhibited and defer to those whom they perceive to be more experienced, knowledgeable, or better educated.

At times it is unwise to mix genders in focus groups, particularly if the topic of discussion is experienced differently by gender. Men may have a tendency to speak more frequently and with more authority when in groups with women—sometimes called the *peacock effect*. This can irritate women in the group.

A related topic is the involvement of spouses or partners in the same focus group discussion. There is a tendency for one spouse to remain silent and defer to the talkative spouse. Even if the silent spouse disagrees, it appears that he or she is reluctant to comment even when their comments are solicited from the moderator. As a result, we have found that focus groups of four couples tend to be a discussion of four dominant people with four quiet partners.

The Size of a Focus Group

The traditionally recommended size of the focus group within marketing research is 10 to 12 people. This is too large for most noncommercial topics. The ideal size of a focus group for most noncommercial topics is five to eight participants. Don't plan focus groups with more than 10 participants because large groups are difficult to control and they limit each person's opportunity to share insights and observations. In addition, group dynamics change when participants want to but aren't able to share their experiences. For example, if people do not have an opportunity to talk, they may lean to the next person to whisper. This is a signal that the group is too large. Small focus groups, or mini-focus groups, with four to six participants, are becoming increasingly popular because the smaller groups are easier to recruit and host and are more comfortable for participants. The disadvantage of the mini-focus group is that it limits the total range of experiences simply because the group is smaller. Four people will have had fewer total experiences than eight people.

The purpose of the study and participant characteristics yield clues as to the ideal size of the groups. If the study is to gain understanding of people's experiences, the researcher typically wants more in-depth insights. This is usually best accomplished with smaller groups. Also, smaller groups are preferable when the participants have a great deal to share about the topic or have had intense or lengthy experiences with the topic of discussion. For example, parents of children in special education programs have a lot to share when talking about special education. They feel strongly about this experience. And they often want to share tips and information with the other participants. Because of their passion and experience, it is wise to plan for smaller groups so everyone has a chance to share. Larger groups (eight people) work well when the study is designed to pilot-test materials or ideas and when the participants don't have a lot of knowledge about the topic. For example, users of a program will have more to say about a program than nonusers. Therefore, you can recruit larger groups of nonusers than users.

Consider these factors when deciding how many people to recruit to a focus group:

- *The purpose of the study.* If the purpose is to understand an issue or behavior, invite fewer people. If the purpose is to pilot-test an idea or materials, invite more people.
- *The complexity of the topic.* More complex, invite fewer people.
- Participants' level of experience or expertise. More experience, fewer people.
- Participants' level of passion about the topic. More passionate, fewer people.
- The number of questions you want to cover. More questions, fewer people.

Determine the ideal size of your focus group

The ideal size of a focus group is usually between five and eight participants. If the topic is of minor concern to participants, and if they have little experience with the topic, then a group size of 10 could be productive. But, as the topic becomes more important, or as people have more expertise on the topic, or when they are likely to have strong feelings about the topic, then the group size should be restricted to five or six people.

Strategies for Finding Participants

Once you know what type of participants you want, you need to find individuals who fit those characteristics. Several strategies are used to identify participants for focus group interviews:

Lists

The best way to begin is to think about whether there is an existing list of people fitting your screens. A list is fast and economical. This could include existing lists of clients, members, employees, or those who use services of the organization. If possible, try to get more than the name, phone number, and address. The organization may have a database of customers' sociodemographic characteristics or employees with years of experience, age, and educational level. These additional demographics may be of use in screening participants. Make sure the list is up-to-date. Some lists are well maintained and reflect changes, but other lists contain substantial errors. It is embarrassing to call for deceased people.

Once the characteristics for selection have been determined, the researcher might contact organizations in the community to find if they have members with these characteristics. Are there religious groups, recreational groups, or community groups who might have members like the people you are seeking? Most groups will be reluctant to release names or will have restrictions on releasing member lists. Organizations are more cooperative when the researcher explains the study and how the participants, the organization, or the community will benefit from the study. Explain that there is no selling, that people can decline to participate, and that participants will receive something for their time. In some situations in the nonprofit environment, a contribution to the organization's treasury, tactfully offered, can be a reflection of the value placed on assistance in obtaining names of potential focus group participants.

Organizations are sensitive about releasing names on lists. Think about how you will ask for the list. Who makes that decision? What benefits may come to the organization? Sharing a list of names is a major policy decision and is typically not made by secretarial or support staff. Often the chief executive or the organizational board makes the decision. If you seek cooperation on a list, make your request at the upper levels of the organization.

Nominations

Perhaps the most effective strategy in community studies is to ask neutral parties for names. These neutral parties are often people who know many other people. They might be local merchants, clergy, elected officials or community influentials, or they could be local residents selected at random. The first step is to identify the specifications for participants in observable terms. For example, it might be a parent who has a child in elementary school. But you may want to avoid a characteristic such as an income below $15,000 per year. The reason is that these characteristics will be mentioned in the recruiting and it is safer to use criteria that can be readily observed. When using nomination you should solicit names from multiple sources. Only a few names are sought from each source to ensure an adequate mix of participants. Names are placed in a pool and then randomly selected for the invitation to the focus group. For example, if you wanted to find senior citizens who live within a community and who drive a car, you might seek nominations from local service stations, other senior citizens, or merchants who do business with seniors. If you wanted to find parents from the community who have at least one child in high school, you might ask park and recreation staff, clergy, or perhaps randomly selected teens. When asking for nominations, make sure to briefly describe how the results of the study will benefit the participants or the community. Also ask the nominator for permission to mention his or her name when making the invitation. This makes recruiting much more effective. When inviting participants, we tell them who recommended them and that this person thought they had valuable insight on the topic and recommended that we invite them. "This is Dick Krueger from the University of Minnesota. Deb Brown gave me your name and said you might be willing to help us with a project. She said you have a lot of experience with community gardens . . ."

Snowball Sample

A variation of the nomination process is the snowball sample. In a snowball sample, you ask those who have already passed through the selection screen for nominations. The logic is that people know people like themselves. The study must have obvious benefit to the community, or individual or another type of incentive must be used. Snowball sampling could be used at two different times: (1) When making initial contact with the potential participants, you might ask if they know of others who meet the qualifications, or (2) you might ask at the conclusion of the focus group.

Piggyback Focus Groups

Piggyback focus groups are added to another event, meeting, or occasion. The participants are gathered for another purpose, and the focus group is held during free time, during a meal, or after hours so as not to interrupt the primary purpose of the gathering. This strategy works well with professional associations or special interest associations, especially when national representation is desired. For example, if you want to conduct focus groups with school principals from around the state, find out when principals get together for regional or statewide meetings. Then arrange to conduct the focus groups while the principals are at the meetings.

Focus Groups on Location

Increasingly focus groups are being held on location—at the place where the participants come for recreation, shopping, or other purposes. Recruiters stop participants as they pass through a gate, turnstile, or hallway; ask several screening questions; and then offer an invitation to the focus group. The focus group is then held soon after recruitment in a convenient location. Care must be exercised in using this method so that those selected have the requisite characteristics. This is the method of choice when the purpose of the study relates to their attendance. Some nonprofit organizations are able to recruit on location by inviting people using the services to participate in a discussion. For example, a nature center, zoo, or recreational center might intercept a random assortment of people passing through the gate and invite them to a special discussion. The incentive for participation might be free tickets for another visit.

A state department of natural resources wanted to learn more about visitors' experiences at state parks. Park employees were trained to conduct focus groups with park visitors. At designated times when a vehicle entered the entrance to the park, a park employee offered a special invitation. "We'd like to invite one adult from your party to join us for an hour discussion at 7:00 p.m. tonight. We will be talking about the park, and we would like your suggestions. If someone is willing to join our discussion, we'll give you a free bundle of firewood."

Screening and Selection Services

These services are available in most metropolitan areas around the country and are used by commercial market research firms. These agencies usually have existing databases of potential focus group participants categorized by sociodemographic characteristics. In addition, they are often able to supplement their existing lists with telephone screening if needed. Do an Internet search for *market research* to find recruiting services in your area. Screening and selection services can be expensive.

Random Telephone Screening

In the past, commercial market research firms used random telephone screening. The procedure typically begins with a random selection of names from a telephone directory. A series of screening questions are used to determine if those called meet the criteria established for the focus group. In the past decade, telephone screening has become increasingly difficult. More people have unlisted phone numbers or use caller ID to screen calls. And many people are on a do-not-call list. As a result, cold calling is an inefficient way of recruiting.

Organizational Recruiting

The most effective recruiting strategy is sometimes overlooked; people are more likely to agree to participate and show up if someone they know invites them. This works well for recruiting employees, volunteers, clients, or others who are connected to an organization. Instead of having an outside consultant or a third party recruit participants, it is less costly and more efficient if the sponsoring organization does the recruiting.

There are several factors to consider before using this option. Among them are the trust between the individual and the organization, having the right person make the contact, how to describe the benefits of the study, and the risk of bias.

The success of insider recruiting depends on the perceived trust between the employee or volunteer and the organization. Insider recruiting may not be effective if trust has recently been damaged or has historically been awkward.

Some insiders are better at recruiting than others. Avoid the temptation to give this task to the newest or lowest-ranking employee. The type of person who makes the initial contact communicates a great deal about the importance of the study. Don't give the job to the intern! Instead, think about asking someone at a high level within the organization to make the first contact. The weight and status of the position convey that the study is important.

Describe the purpose of the study, and identify the benefits of conducting the research in ways that help the organization, the employees, or others. Link the invitation to a benefit that participants respect and value. "We want to reduce errors in manufacturing." "We want to know more about balancing work and family life." Also, be sure to describe the level of confidentiality in the discussions, that participation is optional, and that they are free to share their views.

Be specific about how to select participants. It is risky to use convenience samples or to select individuals from memory. Use a predetermined systematic process to ensure an adequate sample. Give thought to which participants are most information rich. And give thought to practical issues such as location, timing, and the ability of these individuals to actually get together. Often some type of random sampling strategy from within the information-rich pool is most effective.

Another way to recruit is to identify nonprofit organizations that have members who fit your screens and ask the organizations to recruit their members in return for a donation to their organization. For a pilot-test study we were conducting for the University of Minnesota, we needed women between 25 and 45 who had children in school. We teamed up with a Catholic elementary school and two community recreation centers and asked them to recruit participants for us. (We worked with three different organizations to limit bias that might creep in if we recruited from only one organization.) For example, we worked with the parent–teacher association (PTA) president at a Catholic school. We told her that we wanted to conduct a focus group at the school, that we wanted eight moms between the ages of 25 and 45, and that for each mother who attended, we would donate $50 to the school. We wrote a recruiting script, plus bullet points, to make sure she described the study in the way we wanted. On the appointed day, everyone showed up. We believe the reason this method of recruiting works so well is because the participants said yes to someone they know and respect (the PTA president) and that the money was going to something they valued (the school). Afterward, the PTA president asked if they could participate in any more studies because it was so much easier than a bake sale!

Selecting frontline workers

We were invited to conduct focus groups with postal service employees. The United States Postal Service (USPS) wanted to listen to frontline workers at a number of sites around the country. Based on our study design, the postmaster at the site would recruit the participants. We realized the task was more complicated than we imagined when a postmaster on our study team asked this:

> "What kinds of employees do you want to listen to? Just off the top of my head, I can think of four rather different groups of employees:
>
> - I can pick those who have similar opinions to my own.
> - I can pick the most productive—but that will slow down the processing of mail.
> - I can pick the least productive—they will not slow down the process, but they tend to have less motivation in their work.
> - I can pick the complainers, and it will show people at headquarters how difficult my job really is."

We needed a clear, workable, and simple strategy, otherwise each postmaster would select participants based on their own interests rather than a cross-section of workers. In this situation, we developed instructions that postmasters were to identify all employees with a certain job classification, then arrange the names in alphabetic order and assign a number to each person. Then select every *n*th person on the list to participate in the focus group.

Ads or Announcements in Newspapers and on Bulletin Boards

A recruitment strategy that is used by some marketing agencies is the media ad. For example: "Bought a new car lately? If so, call Debbie at 765-4321." Or an ad placed on the apartment bulletin board might read: "Wanted: Apartment residents who recycle cans, glass, and paper to participate in a market research study. No sales. $25 if you qualify. Call 876-5432 for more information."

Within the past few years there has been a substantial increase in focus group recruitment ads in electronic media such as Craigslist as well as in local or regional print media. These ads invite participants into a *research study*, or a *focus group* or to participate in *paid market research*. Interested individuals are asked to complete a screener questionnaire, and then if they qualify, they may receive $50, $75, or more to join a discussion. An unfortunate consequence has been the rise of focus group repeaters who see this as an interesting part-time job and cheaters who provide false information on the screener in order to qualify for the group.

These ads can be effective in certain situations, but the primary draw is often the financial incentive for participation. As a result there is a risk that those motivated by the $75 incentive are different in some way from those who do not call.

Veteran focus group moderator Judith Langer (2001) writes:

> One week I did a focus group in New Jersey with women who were supposed to use aspirin frequently. A particularly memorable respondent was a red-haired woman wearing tinted glasses with her initial in rhinestones on one lens. The next week at the same facility, the same woman showed up for a group of non-users. Clearly, at least one of these times, she was lying. (p. 68)

The process of identification and recruitment for focus groups is considerably easier when you have names, phone numbers, and background information about potential participants. Existing directories, membership lists, or organizational records can help identify potential candidates. If you don't have a list, recruiting may take more time and effort.

Be cautious with recruiting strategies

Recently researchers have been using Craigslist and other media to recruit focus group participants. This process has some degree of risk. Using these media channels presents an opportunity for people to supplement their incomes. Some even see it as a part-time job. There have been cases where individuals gave incorrect demographics so they might qualify for the focus group. Market researchers call these individuals *cheaters*. They jeopardize the quality of the focus group results. If you suspect this is happening in your research, it is time to reconsider your recruiting strategies.

Selecting Participants

We offer the following general steps to guide the selection process.

Step 1. Set Exact Specifications: The Screens

As precisely as possible, identify the demographic and observable characteristics of the people you want in the group. These characteristics are called the *screens.* Here is an example of screens: A participant must be a woman (screen 1) from Dakota County (screen 2) with a baby under the age of one (screen 3) and who is a first-time mom (screen 4). Be cautious when making selections on unobservable factors such as attitudes, opinions, or values. Use these unobservable factors only if you have nonbiased empirical data with which to make your decisions. And remember, the more screens you use, the more difficult it will be to locate people.

Step 2. Carefully Design the Recruiting Process

The researcher should carefully design and outline the recruiting process. At times the researcher won't be doing the recruiting and must rely on others to invite participants. When others are doing the recruiting, they should fully understand the purpose of the study and the strategy they should use for selecting and recruiting participants. Write out precise directions and explain why it is important to stick to the process.

Sometimes we work with health care providers who want to listen to their customers, but they are not allowed to give out the names of those customers. Therefore, we can't do the recruiting—they must do the recruiting.

In addition, it is often less expensive for organizations to do their own recruiting rather than hire researchers to do the recruiting.

We always outline a recruiting strategy, but when we are relying on others to carry out the strategy, we are even more explicit. We describe these activities specifically:

- Selecting participants: The screens
  - How to select names from the list
- Strategy for filling the groups
  - Available dates and times for the groups
  - Strategy for filling the groups—which groups to fill first
- Contacting potential participants
  - What to say—talking points
  - How to describe the study, the sponsor, the social benefit
  - How to describe the study protocol
  - How to describe the incentives
  - Answers to frequently asked questions
- Sending out the confirmation letter or memo
  - When to send the confirmation letter
  - What information to include (We provide a draft)
- Making the reminder phone call
  - When to make it
  - What to say
- Sharing the list with the moderator

Suppose a college wanted to conduct focus groups with alumni to discover the ways alumni prefer to be informed about developments at the school. Also, suppose that the budget is tight and the college could contract for additional focus groups if their alumni office did the recruiting. The researcher might want to use the resources of the alumni office: the class lists by year with demographic data to screen the participants, the staff to make the phone calls, the name of the school and the alumni office to establish credibility and legitimacy. While a research firm could do all of these tasks, the costs would be greater. However, the researcher must be explicit in laying out the steps needed for selection, giving instructions to staff about how to make the telephone request and preparing the official letter of request.

Step 3. Generate a Pool of Names of Potential Participants

A pool is the list of names of people who fit your screens. You might have generated your pool through a list, nominations, ads, or announcements.

Step 4. Randomize Names in the Pool to Reduce Bias

Randomization helps ensure a nonbiased cross-section, essentially giving everyone in the pool an equal chance of selection. Randomization is an effective strategy to minimize selection bias. Randomization is not recommended for the entire population but rather of those passing the selection screens. Typically, lists provide more names than needed, and either a systematic or random sampling procedure should be used in picking the actual names to recruit. In a systematic sample, each *n*th number is picked. For example, if 10 names are needed from a list of 200, every 20th person on the list is selected. A random sample consists of drawing names or ID numbers out of a hat or using a random number table to select from the list of 200 people.

No Selection Process Is Perfect

We make the best choices we can with the knowledge and resources we have available at the time of the decision. Selection is limited by our human capacities as well as our budgets and schedules. A test of the selection process is whether you are able to defend the selection process to colleagues and clients successfully.

Recruiting Strategies

Some of our first experiences with focus groups were disastrous because so few people showed up. We invited people the same way that we had invited people to other types of meetings, seminars, or workshops. As we analyzed what was wrong, we compared our strategy with the strategies used by market researchers. We discovered our flaws: We were asking people to take a leap of faith and commit time to a topic that wasn't a priority for them, our invitations weren't personalized, we had no follow-up, we ignored the seasonal time demands on some audiences, we didn't build on existing social and organizational relationships, and we didn't offer incentives. It is surprising that anyone showed up.

1. Think Through and Practice the Invitation

Before starting to recruit, be ready to clearly and conversationally describe these details:

- The study
- Who is sponsoring the study
- Why the study is important
- What will be done with results; who will benefit from the study
- How you got the person's name
- Why you are inviting them
- How they might benefit from participating (What is the incentive for participating?)

These are topics that recruiters need to discuss easily when recruiting participants for public-sector focus groups. Test the invitation by practicing on colleagues or neighbors or relatives. How does the explanation sound? Honest? Straightforward? Intriguing? Complete enough to make potential participants feel comfortable?

Personalize the invitations. Participants should feel that they specifically are needed and wanted at the interview. Recruiters should practice so they are completely comfortable explaining the study and making the invitation. Calls (or in-person invitations) should be warm and sincere. While we may prepare talking points (see Appendix 4.1), we want recruiters to use them only as an outline. We don't want them to read the points because that sounds insincere and disengaged. The invitation should stress that the potential participant has special experiences or insights that would be valuable to others.

E-mail invitations tend to be less effective than telephone or in-person contacts. E-mail is less personal and doesn't allow for immediate answers to questions or for clarification of confusing points. If you decide to use e-mail, send the messages out one at a time, specifically mention why their presence is needed, and be sure the message comes from someone they know and respect.

Identifying the sponsor

Market research firms traditionally don't reveal the sponsor of the study for two reasons: They are often comparing products and don't want to bias participants, and their research is proprietary. Instead, they describe the type or category of product, such as soft drinks, credit card services, or automobiles. Often the client wants to find out how their product, service, or organization is positioned in relation to the competition. If the participants knew the sponsor of the study, they might be biased in their rankings. Market researchers anticipate that people will ask about the sponsor of the study, and they have a generic response that provides an answer without influencing later responses. At the end of the focus group session, the participants might be provided more specific information on the sponsorship and purpose of the study.

Nonprofit and public organizations need to be much more transparent. In most situations, complete openness is preferred. While it might be acceptable for a private corporation to be coy about sponsorship or purpose, this approach can backfire in the public environment. The public does not respond favorably when a public agency is evasive or appears to be deceptive.

2. Set the Meeting Date, Time, and Location

Select dates, times, and places that are convenient for the participants. Select meeting dates that don't conflict with popular activities or functions. Some people have schedules that change on a predictable basis. Farmers, tax consultants, certain small businessmen in rural communities, and teachers are a few examples. Focus groups are best conducted during their slack or off seasons. For example, we avoid conducting focus groups with Midwestern farmers from mid-April to early August and again from early September to late October. We also avoid dates that conflict with popular sporting events (local or college teams, the World Series, Monday Night Football, etc.), national events (political conventions, elections, etc.) or periods of high television viewing (rating weeks, beginning of fall network shows, etc.). We typically avoid Mondays and Fridays in work settings.

Think about what time of day will work best for the types of people you are recruiting. Faculty members are easier to recruit over lunchtime, especially if a box lunch is provided. It may be easier to recruit small business owners to breakfast sessions. New moms might prefer late mornings. Seniors might be more willing to come to a focus group held during the day than one after dark.

Think about locations that are easy to find and comfortable for the types of people you want to invite. Think about where people generally gather to talk in the community. You might gather in the back room of a local restaurant, the community room at the library, or someone's living room. You want a room that is big enough for everyone to be comfortable but not so big that your group seems dwarfed. Participants should be able to see one another easily. Think of a room about the size of a typical conference room. Look for a quiet place with few distractions.

Remember, you are trying to create a comfortable, inviting situation. You are trying to decrease any barriers that would keep people from attending and increase incentives for people to attend.

If we haven't worked with a certain type of participant before, we seek advice on what will work. We ask a few people who pass the screens to meet with us while we are planning the focus groups. We ask them for advice on when and where to hold groups. We ask what will keep people like them from participating and what it will take to get them to attend.

If we are conducting three focus groups with a particular type of participant, we will set the date, time, and place for each group then start making contacts. Some people try to contact people first and then come up with a date and time that works for everyone; this is a scheduling nightmare! It is far more efficient to select your focus group times and invite people to one of those sessions.

When recruiting, we start by inviting participants to attend any one of the scheduled times. "We have three dates scheduled. Which one of these would be most convenient for you?" When one group is filled, we continue recruiting for the other two groups.

3. Make Personal Contacts With Potential Participants

Once you have set the meeting times, contact potential participants. It is important that this contact be direct and personalized. Usually this first contact is two weeks before the focus group session. If you are contacting professionals or other people with busy schedules, you may need to make this contact a month or longer in advance.

People are leery of cold calls these days. It helps if you can make a personal connection with the potential participant early in the call, such as, "Jim Smith of Neighborhood Connections said you might be interested in helping us," or "I got your name from Sue Turner. She is helping us with this project."

Give thought to who extends the invitation to the focus groups. In nonprofit and public environments, there is a tendency to give this task to staff or volunteers who have a limited understanding of the study, incomplete knowledge of the organization, or little passion for the project. Instead, avoid the temptation to delegate to a lower-level employee or volunteer, and instead, seek a volunteer from high up in the organization. Look for a person who is recognized, trusted, and respected.

If appropriate, ask the chief executive, the block leader, or the head nurse to make initial contacts. You don't want potential participants to feel coerced—like they can't say no to this person. But often people think this study must be really important if this influential person is taking time to invite them to do this. We have had people tell us it was an honor to be invited by a certain person. Also participants are more likely to show up if they have said yes to this person they trust and respect.

If the topic or incentive is lackluster, or if our past experience with this type of participant dictates it, we sometimes slightly over recruit, inviting one or two people more than we actually want. Over recruiting is usually not necessary if the participants see the group as nonthreatening and incentives to participate are good or if the groups are with employees who will be released from work responsibilities to attend the focus groups.

4. Send a Personalized Confirmation Letter

Just after the participant agrees to be in the focus group, follow up with a personalized follow-up letter—not a form letter. For many groups this is sent one week before the session. The letter is sent on official letterhead with a personal salutation, an inside address, and a signature of someone related to the study (e.g., the moderator, the head of the unit sponsoring the study, the head of the agency sponsoring the study). It provides additional details about the session, location, and topic of discussion. An example of the letter is included as Appendix 4.2 at the end of this chapter. At the time of initial contact, you might ask if the participant prefers confirmation through U.S. mail or e-mail.

5. Make a Reminder Phone Contact

Phone participants the day before the focus group to remind them of the session and confirm their intention to attend. This dentist-style phone call serves two purposes. It reinforces the importance of the group ("This must be an important session because you've invited me three times!"), and it reminds participants who might have forgotten about the session. This phone call can be as simple as saying, "We are looking forward to seeing you tomorrow at 2:00 p.m. at the library to talk about neighborhood recycling. Are you still able to make it?"

Incentives to Participate

Incentives are needed because it takes effort to participate in a focus group. The participants must promise to reserve time on their schedules. For individuals whose lives are unpredictable or who are subject to the wishes of others, this can be a big promise. Furthermore, the participant incurs financial and emotional expenses to participate: child care, travel, having to leave their kids when they feel like they don't spend enough time with them anyway, having to be inside on a beautiful day, having to leave home after they have just settled into their favorite chair, the apprehension of talking about something dear to them. Finally, the participant spends a designated amount of time in the focus group. This level of individual contribution exceeds that needed for other forms of data gathering. The mail-out survey and the telephone interview are conducted in the participant's home or office, and no travel is necessary. With the mail-out survey, and to a lesser extent the telephone interview, the participants have some choice about when they will respond. Furthermore, surveys and telephone interviews rarely take two hours. Individual interviews come closest to the focus group in terms of the investment the participant must make. However, with individual interviews, the participants are partners in setting the time and location of the interview, usually within the home or office of the interviewee at a time convenient for them.

Focus groups are unique from other data-gathering processes in terms of the investment that must be made by the individual. It is therefore no surprise that a tradition has been established to provide an incentive for participation. From a practical aspect, it would be next to impossible to conduct focus groups without incentives in some situations.

The incentive is not a reward and not really an honorarium or salary. It is an incentive! It serves as a stimulus to attend the session. The primary function of the incentive is to get the participants to show up for the focus group—and to show up on time. The motivational influence of the incentive hasn't worked if the participants are surprised when they receive it. Imagine yourself coming home from a hard day's work. You're tired. You're hungry. Your day didn't go well. You're looking forward to a relaxing evening at home. But, you promised someone a couple of weeks ago that you would go to a small group discussion tonight. This is where the incentive kicks in. You recall what was promised if you attend, and you decide that it will be worth the effort to go. Another way the incentive works is to encourage participants to hold open the time of the scheduled focus group. Some people will receive a number of last-minute requests for the same time period. The incentive serves to protect the promised time slot from being preempted. The third function of the incentive is to communicate to the participants that the focus group is important.

Money as an Incentive

By far the most common type of incentive is money or a gift card to a big box store or movie theater. These have several advantages. Participants immediately recognize and understand the value, it is portable, it will fit into small spaces, and most important, it works. When considering money, several principles apply. We give each participant a gift card or an envelope with cash in it at the conclusion of the group. We have each person sign a form with the date and name of the sponsoring organization that says something like “I received $50 for participating in a discussion about nature areas.” Don’t promise a check in the mail within a few weeks. Participants will leave disappointed.

Each person within a particular group, and sometimes within the total study, should receive equivalent payment. You don’t want to create the impression that some people’s opinions are worth more than others. When considering the amount of payment, the researcher should be mindful of the workable range. At the lower end of the range, the researcher risks insulting the participants with a payment that is too small. While each person will vary, often promises of payments in the range of $10 to $20 may be too low and a detriment to the project. When time and travel are considered, it may be below minimum wage and just not enough to be taken seriously. Better to be creative and come up with another type of incentive. At the upper end of the range, the researcher will find that the study can quickly get too expensive and the participants may feel awkward receiving what they perceive to be an excessive payment—especially from a public or nonprofit organization.

Generally, as the incentive goes up, recruiting time goes down. In some studies, it may be more efficient to pay more for incentives and thereby reduce the recruiting time and increase the likelihood that people will show up. At the time of this writing, amounts of $50 to $75 usually work for public and nonprofit studies. As the amount approaches $100, an interesting phenomenon begins to occur. If participants have last-minute conflicts, they are more likely to call the moderator and offer to send replacements in their absence. When working with elite categories of focus group participants, the amounts may need to be adjusted upward.

Money is not the only incentive that works, and in some cases it can be inappropriate or illegal. Employees released from work to attend a focus group are already being compensated, and financial incentives are usually deemed inappropriate, if not illegal.

Nonmonetary Incentives

The incentive is symbolic, and other symbols may be worthy substitutes. Food, which can range from light snacks to a full meal, can be effective. Gifts can work well, but they must be adequately described in advance to avoid disappointment when they are presented. Sometimes gifts can be of limited financial value but have significant emotional or psychological value.

A positive, upbeat invitation, the opportunity to share opinions, meals, or refreshments, and tangible gifts are all incentives we've used. So is a convenient, comfortable, and easy-to-find meeting location. For some target audiences, it is important to know they will be participating in a research project where their opinions will be of particular value. They feel honored when they are asked to provide opinions for a research project. Finally, people are more likely to attend a focus group if the invitation builds on some existing community, social, or personal relationship. Thus, an invitation might mention the connection between the study and a local organization, social cause, or respected individual.

Also consider the barriers to participation: those factors that would prevent people from attending. Start by making attendance easy and comfortable. Remove barriers that might inhibit participation—child care, transportation, starting time, distance, and so on.

An effective nonfinancial incentive

This example isn't from a focus group study, but it is a good illustration of providing a gift that doesn't cost much but that people treasure. A researcher was sending out a burdensome survey to private forest landowners; the research team was concerned that the landowners would not reply. Considerable discussion was given to an incentive to participate. A number of items were suggested and then rejected. Finally one of the team members had a clever idea:

"At the Forestry School we have a garbage can full of tree seeds. We interbred red, white, and blue spruce, and we called the result the All American Spruce. The new tree didn't possess the features we wanted, and as a result we didn't commercially market the tree. We have lots of the seed, and we could put this seed in small envelopes along with a note describing the development. Maybe forest owners would think it is interesting."

The comment was a huge understatement. Inadvertently we discovered that we had given the forest owners an object of major value. It reinforced their values and couldn't be obtained anywhere else at any cost. The respondents wrote back and asked for more seeds.

They put the packets on their coffee tables and told their friends about it. Some even framed the seeds. The seeds were about to be dumped out because they were considered garbage by the researchers, but to those receiving the seeds, they were a gift of great value.

Effective focus group incentives

- Gift cards for $20 for teens in a drug prevention study
- A 50-pound bag of rice for Southeast Asian Americans in a cancer study
- A manicure during the focus groups for New Orleans female prostitutes
- Results that will help other veterans who suffer from depression
- A chance to contribute to a study that will improve local schools
- A box lunch at noon and the chance to hear how other faculty members are thinking about this
- A $30 stipend for child care
- A chance to hear how other farmers are dealing with corn rootworms
- Two tickets to an event on campus (options included sporting events, concerts, and lectures)
- An opportunity to help a profession, an organization, or a cause
- Being recruited by someone you know and respect

Unique Recruiting Advantages of Public and Nonprofit Organizations

There is a tendency for nonprofit and public organizations to assume that cash incentives are the most effective incentives in getting people to show up for focus groups. While this is often true in market research environments, it is less true in nonprofit, public, educational, and academic environments. The financial incentive is effective, but there may be other factors that are even more powerful incentives than money.

In the noncommercial environment, there are several factors that prompt people to attend focus group interviews. Spend time listening to people you want to invite, and brainstorm possible incentives. For some, food might be effective. Breakfast, lunch, or dinner meetings where people can chat and share thoughts can be stimulating and refreshing as well as a way to connect with colleagues. In some communities, ethnic food prepared by a talented chef might be a meaningful incentive. Gifts need not be expensive or elaborate, but they do need to be seen as meaningful and as a symbol that attendance at the group was appreciated.

In our experience, one of the most powerful incentives is that individuals are invited by someone who respects their wisdom and they are nominated to attend the discussion. The invitation is an honor. Someone thought they were insightful or wise and could offer advice on an important issue.

Another recruiting advantage of nonprofit organizations is the possibility of teaming up with another organization. Your agency or organization may want to reach people in a particular neighborhood or individuals with a certain set of experiences. And there may be another organization that has regular contact with this type of individual. But, before you contact this organization, give thought to what you want them to do and the benefits of working together. For example, a local church might be asked to help recruit participants in a public health study on diabetes prevention. The church might be asked to invite people who have certain risk factors of diabetes, and the benefit of participating is that participants receive prevention information at the end of the group. And, at times we've provided a stipend to the organization for their efforts in locating participants and hosting the focus group.

The challenge for the recruiter is to make the case for how participation creates a social benefit. Describe clearly and honestly what might improve, what might change, and how others might benefit if they attended the focus group.

In some studies, one of the incentives is to get a copy of the results. On some community issues or with specialized audiences, one of the benefits is getting access to information.

Consider all that is available to you. You are not limited to financial incentives but are able to use an impressive array of other factors to entice people to attend.

Use careful protocol when using cash incentives

When money is promised for attending a focus group, the accepted practice is to provide cash to the participants at the conclusion of the discussion. Each participant is asked to sign that they have received the incentive, and sometimes they are requested to add an address or a telephone number. Do not ask for Social Security numbers (SSNs).

Many public organizations are hesitant to pay cash and even more hesitant about providing money without having a Social Security number. The dilemma for the researcher is that you just don't want the responsibility of carrying around this type of personal information in the field. In a perfect world with adequate security, collecting the SSN might be reasonable, but when you are on the road and traveling by car, taxi, or plane the security of information becomes a major concern.

In addition, when money is promised in a focus group, it is assumed that it will be in cash offered at the end of the group. Don't be surprised if this is difficult for public and nonprofit organizations. They will prefer offering a check and having it mailed out in several weeks. Be thoughtful as you seek authorization to provide cash incentives.

Summary

Who should be invited to participate in a focus group? How do you find them? How do you get them to show up? These are the questions answered by this chapter. You need the right number of the right people to show up at the right place for a focus group to be successful. Homogeneity is the guiding principle for focus groups, and the researcher must determine the nature of that homogeneity based on the purpose of the study. Potential participants can be located in a variety of ways, including lists or directories, through cooperating organizations or individuals, or on location at an event or activity.

Be thoughtful about setting the screens for recruitment. These are what help you ensure that you are getting the right people. Think carefully about how you want to describe the study and its benefits to potential participants. Does it sound inviting? Worthwhile? Nonthreatening? Use a systematic recruitment strategy that is repetitive and personalized. Use a combination of incentives to get people to say yes to the invitation and to get them out of their recliners and to the focus group. Incentives can vary and need not be limited to money, although cash does work well. If you don’t have cash, be creative.

Appendix 4.1

Telephone Screening Questionnaire Department of Health Focus Groups Recruitment Script

(NOTE: THIS IS MEANT ONLY AS A GUIDE. DON'T READ THIS AS YOU INVITE PEOPLE. YOUR CALL SHOULD BE CONVERSATIONAL)

Name of person ____

Phone number ____

Time called ____

Hi, this is [your name], and I'm with [name of agency]. We're working with the State Department of Health to design a program for new parents. I got your name from [name a person or agency], and they said you might be interested in what we are doing. We want to talk with new moms.

You're a new mom, right? [Could chat about how old the baby is, and so on]

We're getting together a small group of moms to give us input on how to design a new home-visiting program. We are trying to get ideas about what new moms would like. We plan to get about eight moms together. It will be:

Date, day

Time (two hours)

Place

We will have a few refreshments, and we will have $50 for you as a thank-you for giving us your time and ideas. We will also have child care available, if you want to bring your children.

Would you be able to join us?

No _______ OK. Thanks for your time.

Yes ________ Great. I'd like to send you a letter just to confirm everything.

I have [check spelling of the name from above and get address]

Address

____

____

Will you need child care?

No _____________________________

Yes _______ OK. Just to help us plan for the child care, what are the names and ages of the children that you will be bringing along?

Great. I'll send out the letter, and we look forward to seeing you at the discussion.

Appendix 4.2

Confirmation Letter

[Date]

[Name and address of participant]

Thanks for agreeing to join us for a conversation about designing a home-visiting program for new parents. The State Department of Health is funding this program, and we want advice from people like you about what will work and what won't. It doesn't matter if you have had home visits or not. We're interested in the ideas of all moms with new babies. The group will be held:

Tuesday, May 14

From 2 to 4 p.m.

Burns County Department of Health Building

1494 Idaho Ave West in Spooner, just around the corner from Nick's Café

Room 102—just inside the front door and to the right

It will be a small group, about eight people. We've got great child care arranged for Megan and Max. Several teachers from the Early Childhood Family Education program have agreed to watch the little ones. We'll be bringing a few snacks for you and the kids, and we'll have $50 for you at the end of the session. It should be a nice time to get together with other new moms and hear what they have to say.

If for some reason you won't be able to join us, please call as soon as possible so we can invite someone else. If you have any questions, please give me a call at 651-623-2222.

We are looking forward to meeting you, Megan, and Max next Tuesday. See you then.

Sincerely,

[Your name]

[Title]

5 Moderating Skills

What Lies Ahead

In this chapter we describe:

- What's Needed When Planning
- What's Needed Just Before the Group
- What's Needed During the Group
- Responding to Participants' Questions
- Be Ready for the Unexpected
- Concluding the Focus Group

Interviewing looks deceptively simple, but it requires mental discipline, preparation, and group interaction skills. Much of the success of the focused interview depends on well-developed questions asked of the right respondents, but another ingredient is essential: a skillful moderator.

This chapter describes techniques used by successful moderators. A to-do checklist for focus group interviews is provided at the end of the chapter as Appendix 5.1.

What's Needed When Planning

Selecting the Right Moderator

Sometimes, not much thought is given to selecting the moderator; it is automatically the principal investigator, the head researcher, the person who did focus groups last time, or the staff member who wants to gain experience with focus groups. Before choosing the moderator, consider the skills needed for the task as well as the preferences and characteristics of the participants. Here are some factors that we've found to be important.

The Right Moderator Respects the Participants and Shows It

The moderator's respect for participants may be one of the most influential factors affecting the quality of focus group results. The moderator must truly believe that the participants have wisdom, no matter what their level of education, experience, or background. Indeed, participants may have limited knowledge about the topic, hold opposing values to that of the researchers, or seem to use fuzzy logic, but the moderator listens with sensitivity, trying to understand their perspectives. Moderators must believe they have something to learn from each group. After the fourth or fifth group, the moderator will have heard the topic discussed in a variety of ways. At this point, some information is old stuff to the moderator, but each group deserves the respect and active listening that was present in the first group. Lack of respect quickly telegraphs to the participants and shuts down meaningful communication. Why share your feelings when the moderator seems dismissive?

Respect can be communicated in a variety of ways. Little things let participants know that you care about them. Before the group begins, the moderator interacts informally with participants. The moderator shows interest in their lives and what is happening in their environment. At the beginning of the focus group, the moderator tells the participants that he or she is interested in hearing from each person and that everyone's input is important. During the focus group, the moderator looks at participants and shows that he or she is actively listening. Some moderators lean forward as they listen; some take notes of key points. The moderator makes an effort to listen to each person in the group. The moderator shouldn't see moderating as a job that needs to get done but as a special opportunity to better understand these individuals.

The Right Moderator Understands the Purpose of the Study and the Topic

The moderator must be fully grounded in the purpose of the study and understand enough about the topic to know what type of information will be most useful to the study. The moderator guides the discussion, deciding where more information is needed and when to move on. The best moderators are masters at this because they understand what kind of information will be most useful to the client.

The moderator must have adequate background knowledge on the topic of discussion in order to place comments in perspective and follow up on critical areas of concern. Usually the moderator does not need to be a content expert on the topic, but it is important to get up to speed quickly on insider language and key issues. You don't need to be a special education teacher to moderate focus groups with special education teachers, but you do need to be familiar with their jargon and key issues that might arise.

Some successful moderators are able to use naïveté to an advantage by prompting participants to amplify their comments, but if used in excess it can become tiresome and inhibit complicated responses. Naïveté is a double-edged sword. In some circumstances it elicits considerable new information, and it can produce eloquent statements that place the topic of discussion into a larger context. Unfortunately, this same tactic can become infuriating to knowledgeable participants who feel the moderator has not yet earned the right to ask questions or is not qualified to lead the discussion.

The Right Moderator Communicates Clearly

The moderator must be able to communicate clearly. Sometimes participants will not immediately respond to a question. Some moderators assume the participants didn't understand the question, and in an effort to be helpful, they deviate from the questioning route and rephrase the question, give a lot of background information, or ask the question in several different ways. The moderator assumes that this strategy helps the participant, but it often does the opposite. In an effort to clarify the first question, the moderator uses different words. But these words might sound like a different question to the participant. If the questions are perceived as different, then respondents become confused about the intent. Moreover, it makes analysis difficult because you are not sure which question was actually answered.

The Right Moderator Is Open and Not Defensive

Moderating requires the ability to listen and the self-discipline to control personal reactions. We have seen focus groups fall apart because the moderators could not hold back their own opinions. Moderators need to keep their personal views to themselves and focus on understanding the perceptions of the group participants. It's hard to listen to people who don't know a program as well as you do or who criticize a program near and dear to your heart. Harder yet is to smile and say thank you after they've ripped up your sacred program. Some moderators make the mistake of trying to defend or explain rather than saying "Tell me more" and trying to understand. Once the moderator begins to explain or defend, it changes the dynamics of the discussion, and the moderator becomes the expert rather than the participants being the experts. Professional focus group moderators have a distinct advantage in this respect because they are emotionally detached from the topic of the study.

The Right Moderator Is the One Who Can Get the Most Useful Information

There is a balancing act to moderating. Participants must feel comfortable enough with the moderator to share what they think and feel and not so comfortable that they assume they don't need to explain comments or that certain things can go unsaid. So if you have a homogenous group, should the moderator share the same characteristic that makes the group homogenous? Consider gender, race, age, language, social or economic characteristics, past experiences, and technical knowledge. Each of these characteristics, depending upon the circumstances, has the potential for inhibiting communication, especially when there is a perceived power differential between the moderator and the participants.

Here are things we consider:

- How sensitive is the topic? Participants don't really care what the moderator looks like if they are discussing toothpaste. But if the topic is mammograms, women may be more comfortable talking to a female moderator.

- Are we trying to understand a culture, a role, or a behavior? If so, it may be helpful for the moderator not to share that culture, role, or behavior. That way, participants will explain more, and the moderator will ask for more amplification and examples. If the moderator doesn't share the homogeneity, he or she must clearly make the case for why the questions are being asked and how the information will be used. Often we will use a moderating team consisting of one person who matches the culture, role, or behavior and one person who does not.

- What language will the groups be conducted in? If the participants are all Spanish speakers, it is better to select a Spanish-speaking moderator and conduct the group in Spanish than to use a translator in the focus group.

- Who has a natural affinity with that type of participant? Some groups are more challenging to moderate than others. For example, when conducting groups with teenagers, we first look for moderators who have a gift for working with teens and then consider whether other factors like gender, age, or race are important.

- How gifted is the moderator? Some moderators are so good at making people feel comfortable and respected that the topic and the type of participants don't seem to matter.

- As a researcher, you may want to change the moderator to see how that influences the results. You might want to discuss this with savvy people who are familiar with the types of participants in the focus groups and ask about how the characteristics of the moderator might influence the participants.

It's the dogs!

We were conducting focus groups at several Indian reservations on the topic of cardiovascular health. A state health department and the Indian Health Service were partnering to develop a new program to encourage healthy behaviors. We were asking about diet, exercise, and the barriers and incentives to a healthy lifestyle. In this study we used different teams of moderators. Some teams were composed of American Indians from the reservation, and other teams were composed of Caucasians from outside of the reservation. When we compared transcripts, we found an interesting difference in the amount of detail on certain key points. For example, when we asked about the barriers to exercise, in the groups with American Indian moderators, one frequent answer was "the dogs." The participants didn't explain what they meant, and the moderator didn't ask for more. Everyone on the reservation knew the problem, so it didn't need explanation or amplification. However, the Caucasian moderator didn't know about the problem with dogs so asked for an explanation, which elicited many stories. For example, "We don't have a leash law here on the reservation. And we've got a lot of fierce dogs that run in packs, and they can be dangerous. The local police say that it isn't their job to catch the dogs. And when you go walking on the roads and trails, it can be frightening to be followed by the dogs. Because we're afraid of the dogs, we don't exercise outside. It's even dangerous to leave the kids outside playing." If you are designing a program to increase exercise, this is crucial information. In this example, there were two factors that gave us the greater detail. First, when the moderator heard cryptic answers such as "the dogs," she asked for more information, and this prompted participants to give more background information. The other factor is that they knew the outsider wasn't familiar with the reservation and that they had to explain more about the influence of the dogs.

Here to be enlightened

Empathy and positive regard are critical qualities of the moderator. This attitude must permeate the entire focus group environment. Here's a meditation developed by Jack Kornfield (1993), presented in *A Path With Heart*, that reflects the spirit of moderating focus groups. We hope that those planning to moderate might find it beneficial.

> Picture or imagine that this earth is filled with Buddhas, that every single being you encounter is enlightened, except one—yourself! Imagine that they are all here to teach you. Whoever you encounter is acting as they do solely for your benefit, to provide just the teachings and difficulties you need in order to awaken.
>
> Sense what lessons they offer to you. Inwardly thank them for this. Throughout a day or a week continue to develop the image of enlightened teachers all around you. Notice how it changes your whole perspective on life. (p. 82)

Using a Moderating Team

We always use a moderator team when conducting focus groups: a moderator and an assistant moderator. Each person performs certain tasks. The moderator is primarily concerned with directing the discussion and keeping it flowing. The assistant is responsible for the audio recorder, handles the environmental conditions and logistics (refreshments, lighting, and seating), responds to unexpected interruptions, and takes comprehensive notes. Near the end of the discussion, the moderator may ask the assistant to ask additional questions or follow up on topics of interest. The assistant may also be asked to give a short (two-minute) summary of the key points of the discussion. In addition, the assistant plays an important part in the debriefing session that follows the focus group. An example of assistant moderator responsibilities is included in Appendix 5.2 at the end of this chapter.

Private-sector market researchers seldom use assistant moderators due to the additional labor and travel costs and their extensive use of video and audio recording. Assistant moderators are well worth the investment in the public and nonprofit environment, particularly in situations where you do not have special rooms with one-way mirrors. A second set of eyes and ears increases both the total accumulation of information and the validity of the analysis. Furthermore, an assistant can deal with distractions (e.g., latecomers, unwanted background music, or monitoring the recording), so the moderator can concentrate on the discussion.

The assistant moderator is not a subordinate role, even though we use the term *assistant*. We think carefully about who to pair up in our teams. Sometimes a member of the community and a researcher work together. In some cases an outside moderator may work with a person within an organization on organizational focus groups. Sometimes someone with moderating expertise works with someone who is an expert in the topic. In these cases, the assistant moderator plays a key role as content expert. If the participants get stuck and need more factual information to move forward, the moderator may ask the assistant moderator to provide the needed information. The assistant moderator gives enough information to answer the question, careful not to go on and on. The moderator then resumes the discussion. The assistant moderator can also play a key role in analysis.

Within many public and nonprofit organizations, there are individuals who want to sit in on focus groups due to curiosity or concern. These individuals may have valuable insight into the topic or program and could be assigned the role of assistant moderator. Care must be taken to ensure that these assistant moderators understand the role and responsibilities and don't inadvertently upstage the focus group. This can be solved by explicitly outlining the purpose and rules of the session. While there may be a number of people who want to sit in on the focus groups, we allow only one assistant moderator in a group. Participants get uncomfortable if there are too many people watching the group.

What's Needed Just Before the Group

Mental Preparation

Moderators must be mentally alert and free from distractions, anxieties, or pressures that limit their ability to think quickly. Moderating a group discussion requires concentration and careful listening. Therefore, plan your schedule to minimize pressures that would limit your ability to concentrate (e.g., get enough sleep, don't argue with your teenagers, and don't moderate more than two groups in one day). Moderators must be able to give their full attention to the group. They must be fully present.

The moderator should be completely familiar with the introduction and the questioning route. Practice saying the introduction and questions aloud while in the shower or while driving. Get comfortable with the questions. Know why you are asking each question. Know how much time you expect to spend on each question. Know which questions are key questions. You want to sound conversational. You don't want to sound like you have it memorized, and you don't want to read it word for word. Glancing at the questioning route to remember the next question is tolerable, but reading the question (and taking eyes off the participants) destroys the spontaneous flow of the discussion.

We recommend that a digital recorder be the only electronic device on the table. Leave your computer, tablet, and phone somewhere else. Participants pay attention to what the moderator pays attention to. If the moderator's eyes are glancing at screens, it suggests that he or she is not fully present to the conversation.

Another aspect of mental preparation is the discipline of listening and thinking simultaneously. It is just not enough to be an empty vessel, listening and absorbing the comments of participants. If you do you will end up with a fair amount of trivia. The skillful moderator listens and then knows just when to push the participants a bit farther or ask a probing question. This skillful moderator doesn't automatically believe everything that is said, but instead he or she compares it to what was expected or to what was said by others in previous focus groups. One of the critical moderator skills is knowing when and how to seek amplification. Sometimes participants intellectualize an answer—talk about how something could or should be done or give theoretical responses instead of being based on their actual experiences. Other times participants will speak in clichés. Or, sometimes the participants' responses seem to be completely disconnected from the question. These digressions and mental detours are relatively easy to spot when you leisurely listen to the audio recording the next day, but they can be difficult to catch at the moment they are said. With practice this becomes easier.

Also consider how much energy you bring to the group. If the moderator is tired or is not excited to hear what the group has to say, the group tends to have less energy and be less conversational. If the moderator is rested, upbeat, and interested in hearing what participants have to share, then the group tends to be livelier, more talkative, and more interactive. (One of our colleagues always serves coffee and chocolate as a way to boost energy.)

Moderating is hard work. Because of the mental and emotional discipline required, we don't conduct more than two focus groups on the same day. By the third group, it is hard to remember if something was said in this group or an earlier group. Allow sufficient time between focus groups to recharge your batteries.

Practice small talk

Qualities that make someone good at academic research may be different from qualities that make for good field research. Some researchers are uncomfortable and feel awkward when they meet people, and it shows. Let members of the research team practice small talk with each other. Let those who have this gift coach others who seek to develop it.

Presession Strategy

What happens before the focus group starts sets a tone for the entire discussion. Your job, from the minute the first participant steps in the door, is to make people feel welcome, comfortable, and at ease. We treat participants coming to a focus group the same way we treat guests to our house. We greet them at the door. We welcome them. We introduce ourselves. We introduce them to one another. We offer refreshments. We make small talk. We try to make them comfortable.

Sometimes the moderator and assistant moderator will split roles. One person will act as the host; the other will take care of any paperwork. Occasionally each participant is asked to fill out a short registration form that asks questions about demographic characteristics, particularly those characteristics that we don't want to discuss within the group. In some situations, we have human subjects forms for them to sign as they arrive. (See the example in Appendix 5.3.) Even if we have them filling out paperwork, the emphasis is on creating a friendly, warm, and comfortable environment.

For this to work well, everything should be set up and ready for the group when the first participant arrives. If you are still fiddling with the recorder or writing on the flip chart, it makes some people uncomfortable. You want everything ready so you can focus your attention on the participants.

Small talk helps put the participants at ease. But, avoid the key issues to be discussed later in the session. If participants explain their perceptions in the informal part of the meeting, they may be reluctant to repeat their observations during the group. Small talk avoids the focused issue and instead concentrates on common human experiences such as the weather, children, or sports. Avoid controversial topics (religion, politics, or sensitive local issues) and topics that highlight differences within the group (income, education, political influence, etc.).

Participants arrive at different times, so the small talk maintains the warm and friendly environment until enough participants are present to begin the session. In most situations this small talk period will last only 5 to 10 minutes, and the two-person moderating team should plan their welcoming strategy in advance. Often, if no paperwork needs to be taken care of, the moderator or assistant moderator meets participants at the door and brings them into the social gathering while the other person on the team visits with the group.

During this period, the moderator and assistant are observing participant interaction and noting individuals who tend to dominate the group, who consider themselves as experts, or who seem shy or quiet. Individuals who talk a lot may later dominate the conversation and should be seated to the moderator's side if possible. Then, if necessary, the moderator can turn slightly away from the domineering individuals, thereby giving a nonverbal and diplomatic signal for others to talk. Shy and quiet participants are best placed immediately across from the moderator to facilitate maximum eye contact. The moderator might expect that about 40 percent of the participants would be eager and open to sharing insights and another 40 percent would be more introspective and willing to talk if the situation presents itself. The remaining 20 percent might be apprehensive about the experience and rarely share (Kelleher, 1982).

To strategically position participants, follow these steps:

- Before participants arrive, prepare a name tent for each individual who is expected to attend. (You can easily make name tents from five-by-eight-inch index cards, folded in the middle with first names handwritten in bold marker on both sides. Last names aren't necessary. Name tents are better than name tags because they are larger and easier to read.)

- Right before the group is to be seated, the moderator will casually drop the name tents around the table in a seemingly random manner. In fact, the moderator has arranged the cards using observations from the informal presession and then places the name tents.

Serve quiet food

Veteran moderators have found that some foods are noisy and make it difficult to get clear sound on the audio recorder. Recorders pick up sound from the table, and glass, china, cans, and silverware can create unwanted noise. Paper products make less noise. Also avoid single-serving potato chip bags. The crinkling will drive the transcriptionist wild.

Snacks and Meals

Food can help the focus group. Eating together tends to promote conversation and communication within the group. Most focus groups offer snacks such as cookies or pastries or fruit and vegetable trays, but full meals also can be effective. Snacks and light refreshments are typically placed on a table to the side of the room and are enjoyed during the presession small talk and during the discussion. Full meals require additional planning. If the focus groups are conducted in restaurants, then advance arrangements are needed to ensure speedy service. Meals can be catered or delivered (such as pizza, box lunches). Thought should be given to when the meal is served. Traditional protocol was that the meal should occur before the focus group as a way for the participants to get to know each other. This can be awkward as the moderator tries to avoid the central topic of discussion. An alternative strategy is to provide the meal after the focus group, during which time the moderator continues to listen for relevant comments concerning the study. A third strategy that works well with light meals (pizza, buffets, or box lunches) is to eat throughout the focus group. About halfway through the focus group, the meal is completed, the boxes, plates, and other items are removed, and the focus group continues.

People Who Haven't Been Invited

Sometimes people you didn't expect show up, and you have to decide quickly what to do. Do you let them in the focus group or not?

Small children can make conducting a focus group tough. Young children running in the room or babies crying can completely upstage the discussion, at least from the moderator's perspective. Ideally, you anticipate and plan for this problem. The researcher should expect that parents will need child care and provide options (e.g., providing a stipend for child care and making it clear that child care will not be provided or hiring certified child care providers to watch the children in a room near the focus group). If it wasn't planned for, there are other options. The moderator might make a quick assessment of the child's activity level and decide on the potential for interruptions. If the child is reasonably quiet and not too active, the moderator might decide to include the parent and the child in the discussion (e.g., babies who can't yet crawl are usually fine in a group.) Or the assistant moderator might function as a babysitter and take the child into another room. Puzzles, crayons, and coloring books can provide some diversions for children, but it is unreasonable to expect them to be quiet for the entire discussion.

Often a spouse, a family member, a friend who provided transportation, someone who thought it was a public meeting, or someone in a position of authority who is interested in the study shows up. What should you do? The first rule of thumb is not to let the visitor decide whether they stay. Chat with anyone who doesn't belong in the group during the presession. Then make a decision. If they fit the screen, we sometimes allow them in the group. When we are doing groups with seniors, we expect that couples will come together because often one is the driver. We bring along magazines and newspapers and ask the spouses to wait in the lounge or another place while the focus group is taking place. Some people, like reporters for small-town newspapers, are told that this is a research interview and not an open meeting. We tell them we would be willing to talk to them after the group or that we can send them a written report when the study is completed.

What's Needed During the Group

Capturing the Group Discussion

The discussion in the focus group can be captured in multiple ways: memory, field notes, flip charts, audio recording, computer-based rapid transcripts, and video recording. Each added method can enhance the total body of information gathered but may also add costs. Let's examine these:

1. *Memory*. Memory has great advantages and serious disadvantages. It is invaluable when time is short and results are needed quickly, but it is the most fragile of all means of capturing data. Memory fades quickly and must be captured in writing or by audio recording before the next focus group. Usually this is done by using a procedure called the *debriefing,* which is a 15- to 20-minute oral review by the research team immediately following the focus group. This is discussed more in Chapter 6.

Be attentive to factors that limit memory, such as preoccupation with a personal issue, fatigue, or medications, as well as factors that can enhance memory, such as careful field notes and mental preparation.

2. *Field notes*. Typically, the assistant moderator takes the field notes. The moderator may take notes, but those notes are used to help guide the conversation—not for analysis. The moderator may note that Betty mentioned something related to a question that comes later in the questioning route—so when the conversation gets to that point the moderator can say, "Betty, earlier in the conversation you mentioned X. Let's spend some more time talking about that now." Then the moderator asks that question. Or the moderator may note the topics mentioned by participants to see what gets left out. The moderator takes notes to improve moderating. The assistant moderator takes field notes for analysis.

Most people don't know how to take useful field notes. They record impressions, interesting ideas, perhaps a few choice words or notes similar to minutes of a meeting. These notes are fragmented and incomplete for analysis. Effective field notes require work. Notes are often used several days or weeks after the focus group when memories have faded; if notes are too cryptic, they are worthless. The first step is for the individual responsible for analysis to give instructions as to what needs to be captured in the field notes. Just what does the analyst want? Are you tracking the major trends? Are you interested in knowing if and when people change their opinions? Do you want numerical tabulation on certain items? Do you want to identify and record the types of emotional responses? Do you want to capture as much of the discussion as possible as a backup to the audio recording? Or do you want to capture themes or key ideas along with some quotes?

Here are four variations of taking field notes:

A. *Record notes and quotes*. Draw a vertical line down the page and on the left side write the word *notes* and on the right side write *quotes*. The assistant moderator captures key points and concepts in the notes section using check marks to indicate when an idea or topic reoccurs. Insightful quotes are captured as completely as possible on the right side of the page. When the moderator moves to the next question, the assistant moderator draws a horizontal line and writes the number of the next question. By using this method the analyst can go back and locate comments to specific questions and identify both the key points and the notable quotes. This type of note taking works well when the study is not too complex, like pilot-testing materials or ideas.

B. *Capture details and rich, descriptive information*. In this variation, the assistant moderator captures the conversation word for word to the extent possible. The assistant moderator essentially writes down everything that is said, putting space between speakers and a line between questions. These notes are particularly helpful if the audio recording fails. If the audio recording fails and you don't have detailed notes, there is little for the analyst to work with. This type of note taking works well when a study is complex, like trying to understand an issue or behavior.

C. *Capture names of speakers*. If it is important to identify each speaker in a transcript, the assistant moderator may focus his or her attention on documenting who is speaking, along with the first few words said. The note taker may use a code to identify each speaker and the first few words of each speaker or the key ideas of each speaker. The transcriptionist can then use these notes to help identify who said each quote. It is almost impossible for a transcriptionist who has not been in the focus group to recognize different voices. The transcriptionist can pair the coded field notes with the audio recording to develop a transcript of quotes identified by speaker. We sometimes use these types of transcripts for academic research that is meant to be published.

D. *Use a flip chart to capture key points*. A team member in the back of the room takes notes on a flip chart and then posts each page on the wall when completed. This gives participants a running account of the key points in the discussion and allows them to glance at the charts of the earlier discussion and build on previous comments. This note taker must be able to write legibly, quickly glean key concepts, and remain unobtrusive.

No matter what method you use, the first page of your notes for each group should include the following:

- The name of the study
- The date of the focus group
- The time of the focus group
- The location of the focus group
- The type of participants
- The number of participants
- The name of the moderator
- The name of the assistant moderator
- A diagram of the seating arrangements, including the first name of each participant or a code for each participant (for example, 1–8 or A–H).

Consider using one of these methods or creating your own strategy. Remember, the goal is to capture the results in a written form that will be useful to the analyst.

3. *Paper products: flip charts, pictures, rating sheets*. We collect all the information produced in the group, including flip charts, drawings, sketches, flow diagrams, mind maps, and rating sheets. When we use a flip chart to help guide the discussion, we always collect the sheets to be used in analysis. Be careful with flip charts so they don't slow the conversation, limit description, and bring attention back to the moderator rather

than the group. We put all items in a folder and label the folder with the group's information.

4. *Audio recording*. Digital recorders offer remarkable sound quality. On most recorders you can choose what type of sound file you want. The MP3 or WMA formats are often used and tend to require a relatively small amount of space. As soon as possible after the focus group, we download the digital recording to our laptop computer and save it in several different locations. If we are on the road, we send it via e-mail back to ourselves. We recommend using professional-quality recorders instead of the low-cost options. Select a recorder that is easy to operate and download to your computer. Practice with the recorder before using it in a focus group. Also, consider using a transcription kit that attaches to your computer and allows you to use a foot pedal to prepare complete transcripts.

We don't recommend using your phone to audio record. We have heard too many horror stories about people discovering after a focus group was over that their phone only captured the first part of the discussion (again, usually the least useful part) because it ran out of power or memory. It takes so much time and effort to organize and conduct a focus group that you want to make sure you capture the data. Buy a designated digital recorder, and practice using it.

Some assistant moderators use a digital pen to capture an additional audio recording. The audio is synchronized with the notes taken on special writing paper. The audio quality tends to be less than that of the digital recorder, in part because the pen is in the hands of the recorder who is often seated slightly away from the discussion table. By contrast, the digital audio recorder is typically placed at the center of the discussion table. The beauty of this device is that it will play back the section of the recording related to the notes.

The important point is that the person responsible for analysis makes the decision about what notes are taken and the format of those notes.

5. *Laptop computer transcripts*. In some groups we have had an individual sit close to the group and quickly transcribe the comments using a laptop computer. A fast typist can capture about 70 to 80 percent of the focus group in real time. Naturally, punctuation and spelling are less important than speed. Later, in a short amount of time, the typist can complete the transcript by listening to the audio recording.

6. *Video recording*. Video cameras are smaller than ever and can capture excellent footage of the focus group. But, we've found that video still intimidates some participants. Unless you are using a specially designed room with multiple cameras, you will get only one wide-angle shot that has the faces of half of the participants and the backs of the other half. Video recording is rarely worth the trouble.

Moderators always inform participants at the beginning of the focus group that the discussion is being recorded. The recording process is introduced as a way to help capture everyone's comments. Avoid excessive attention to the audio recording. Occasionally a novice moderator will appear nervous at this point—avoiding eye contact, stumbling over the explanation of the recording, and commenting at length about the recording. Inadvertently the moderator creates sensitivity due to overattention to recording. It is usually best to mention the recording and confidentiality then move on to the next topic. There are some exceptions. Employees in a work setting and teenagers may need more information to feel comfortable, like who will get to listen to the recording and how it will be used. Teenagers may want to be assured that their teachers and parents won't hear the recording. The audio recording indicates that the researchers are carefully and respectfully listening to what is being said.

Is it important to attach names to the transcript?

We are often asked, "How important is it to have speakers' names on the transcript?" There are several issues. One concern is cost. Adding names will take more time and add to the overall cost of the focus group. It is nearly impossible for a transcriptionist who has not been in the focus group to discern voices. That means you need to have a designated observer whose task is to record names of speakers along with the first few words spoken by each individual (this could be the assistant moderator but then he or she will not be taking full field notes). Then the transcriptionist uses these notes to match the names to the quotes. It will take more resources to add names to transcripts.

The second concern is how much value will be added by attaching names. Identifying speakers makes transcripts more valuable to the analyst in these situations:

- You want to track the comments of individuals to determine if they changed their views.
- You want to piece together comments to illustrate an individual's story.
- You want to analyze based on demographics or certain characteristics. (For example, we did a study with farmers where we

were asking about their farming practices. It was important to have names on transcripts because we wanted to understand how their practices varied by the type of farm they ran.)
- You want to track extensiveness.
- The analyst was not present in the groups.

In these, and in other situations, transcripts with names can be beneficial. Here are other options:

- If the moderator transcribes the recording immediately after the group, he or she will often remember who made each comment—either by name or by where the participant sat around the table—and can easily attach names.
- Or expand the debriefing at the end of the focus group to include a discussion of the group participants. Some of the dynamics that are of interest can be readily observed by the research team and should be described in the debriefing session.

Also, if you are interested in tracking changes in opinions, you might actually ask that question of the participants at the conclusion of the focus group.

Our bottom line: Attaching names to a transcript can result in improved analysis, but with thought and planning, you can often get the same results with less time and effort.

Getting consent to audio record

Occasionally researchers will seek the consent of the participant before beginning the audio recording. We encourage researchers to be thoughtful about this practice because the absence of an audio recording can seriously jeopardize the quality of the research. Here are several different ways to handle this situation:

Option 1: Ask for permission when the group begins. This is the most risky option because it opens the researcher to unexpected delays and potentially awkward situations. If you gather together the participants in the focus group and ask for permission, you are creating a difficult situation. If one person objects, it is often difficult to remove that person from the group, and then the discussion goes unrecorded.

Option 2: Ask for permission before the group begins. In this option the researcher asks permission before they gather together in the focus group. If an individual wishes not to be recorded, the researcher can exempt him or her from the focus group and offer an individual interview at a later time that is not audio recorded.

Option 3: Inform participants that the discussion will be recorded and it is part of the research protocol. Another option is to inform the participants that the group discussion will be recorded in order to accurately capture the key points but that no names will be attached to the comments. In this situation, the audio recording is considered a necessary part of the research, and the researcher merely informs the participants of this protocol. This option could be done in a formal manner as in an informed consent form where other aspects of the study are also cited, or it could be done in an informal manner.

In market research focus groups, the typical procedure is to announce that the discussion is being recorded and that they are being observed from behind a one-way mirror.

The decision you make will likely be based on legal, ethical, and practical aspects. Legally, in the United States this area of law is considered unsettled, and increasingly technology is pushing the boundaries and making clear decisions difficult if not impossible. The ethical aspect is rooted in the maxim of "do no harm." The researcher needs to weight the pros and cons of audio recording and its potential for causing harm to participants or the community. The practical aspect hinges on the degree to which the research can accurately capture the discussion without audio recording.

Say it out loud

Sometimes we will ask a question that doesn't require a verbal answer. We might ask, "How many of you do X? Raise your hand." It is important for the moderator to describe what he or she sees, so it can be captured on the audio recording and in the notes of the assistant moderator. "OK. Six of the eight of you do X." If the moderator doesn't say it out loud, that data can be lost.

Beginning the Focus Group Discussion

The first few moments in a focus group discussion are critical. In this brief time the moderator must give enough information so people feel comfortable with the topic, create a permissive atmosphere, provide the ground rules, and set the tone of the discussion. Much of the success of group interviewing can be attributed to this three- to five-minute introduction. Being too formal or rigid can stifle interaction among participants. By contrast, too much informality and humor can cause problems because participants might not take the discussion seriously.

The recommended introduction includes these parts:

1. The welcome
2. The overview of the topic
3. The ground rules (or things that will help our discussion go smoothly)
4. The opening question

Here is a typical introduction:

Welcome

"Good evening and welcome. Thanks for taking the time to join our discussion of airplane travel. My name is Mary Anne Casey, and I represent the Happy Traveler Research Agency. Assisting me is Dick Krueger, also from the Happy Traveler Research Agency."

Overview of the Topic

"We've been asked by the airline industry to help them get information about how public employees feel about airline travel. The airline industry wants the information to help them improve the service they provide.

"You were invited because you're all government employees who work here in the area and you've all flown at least four times in the past year. We want to tap into those experiences and your opinions about airline travel."

Ground Rules

"There are no wrong answers. We expect that you will have differing points of view. Please share your point of view even if it differs from what others have said.

"We're recording the session because we don't want to miss any of your comments. No names will be included in any reports. Your comments are confidential.

"We have name tents here in front of us tonight. They help me remember names, but they can also help you. Don't feel like you have to respond to me all the time. If you want to follow up on something that someone has said, you want to agree, or disagree, or give an example, feel free to do that. Feel free to have a conversation with one another about these questions. I am here to ask questions, listen, and make sure everyone has a chance to share. We're interested in hearing from each of you. So if you're talking a lot, I may ask you to give others a chance. And if you aren't saying much, I may call on you. We just want to make sure all of you have a chance to share your ideas.

"If you have a cell phone, please put it on the quiet mode, and if you need to answer, step out to do so. Feel free to get up and get more refreshments if you would like."

Opening Question

> "Let's get started. Let's find out more about each other by going around the table one at a time. Tell us your name and some of the places that you've flown to in the past year."

The opening question is designed to get all participants to say something early in the conversation. It breaks the ice. After the participant has said something once, it is more likely that he or she will speak again. In addition, the first question underscores the common characteristics of the participants and that they all have some basis for sharing information. This first question must be the type that can be answered in about 30 seconds, and as a result it will often consist of factual information. This first question should be easy for everyone to answer.

After everyone has answered the opening question, the moderator typically invites a more open discussion by saying, "We aren't going around the table anymore, so just jump into the conversation whenever you want." The moderator asks the second question and waits for a response. From this point on, the moderator takes on the role of questioner, listener, and guide rather than leader. The moderator gives more control to the group and encourages the group to have a conversation about each question. The moderator typically sits at the table rather than stands in front of the group, which draws attention to the moderator and away from the group.

Don’t invite questions at the beginning of the focus group

Some moderators want to ask, “Before we begin, does anyone have any questions?” This is asking for trouble. Participants may ask, “Who really wants this information? Are you really going to use what we tell you? Who else are you talking to? Why aren’t you talking to X? What did X say?” Answering some of these questions might bias the participants or preempt the discussion. Not answering the questions makes the moderator appear defensive, less than forthcoming, and perhaps not trustworthy. To avoid this, don’t invite questions during the introduction. Instead, ask participants if they have questions when they complete the required paperwork. For more discussion of this, see the section later in this chapter on Responding to Participants’ Questions.

Anticipating the Flow of the Discussion

Group discussions are unpredictable. The discussion might flow precisely as planned, or it might take leaps and detours. Try to anticipate the various directions the discussion might take and recognize beneficial topics of discussion as opposed to dead ends. For example, in focus groups relating to community organizations, we have found that the discussion often leads to an evaluation of agency professionals—a topic that isn't the purpose of the study. In these cases it is helpful to include a comment in the introduction about the scope of the study. "We are more interested in your opinions about programs, building facilities, and activities and less concerned about the people who deliver those services." Often a mock discussion with colleagues familiar with the participants will help identify potential responses.

Sometimes participants will jump ahead and start talking about a question that comes later in your questioning route. They may start talking about question 7 when you are still on question 4. You need to decide whether to let the conversation move to question 7 (which may be perfectly fine, but you'll want to return to questions 5 and 6) or whether you want to bring them back to question 4 right away. Expect these leaps. Know where you are going well enough to know if altering the flow matters.

Giving License to Expressing Differing Points of View

Participants may need to be reminded of the value of differing points of view. The introduction provides the first suggestion that all points of view are welcome. A second reminder is helpful if the moderator senses that participants are simply echoing the same concept. After several echoes on the same idea, the moderator might ask, “Does anyone see it differently?” or “Has anyone had a different experience?” or “Are there other points of view?” or “No one has mentioned it here, but in other groups we heard X. What’s your reaction to that?”

Two Essential Techniques: The Pause and the Probe

Moderators of group discussions should be familiar with two essential techniques: the five-second pause and the probe. Both techniques are easy to use and helpful in drawing additional information from group participants. The five-second pause is often used after a participant comment. This short pause often prompts additional points of view or agreement with the previously mentioned position. There is a tendency for novice moderators to talk too much or to move too quickly from one topic to another, usually because they feel uncomfortable with silence. Often the short pause will elicit additional points of view, especially when coupled with eye contact from the moderator. Practice the five-second pause on family, friends, and coworkers to become comfortable with the technique.

The second essential technique is the probe—the request for additional information. Some people may offer phrases or vague comments that could have multiple meanings, or say, "I agree." These answers aren't very useful and don't give the analyst much to work with. A probe is used to draw out additional information. Common probes include questions and statements like these:

> Would you explain further?
> Can you give us an example?
> Would you say more?
> Tell us more.
> Say more.
> Is there anything else?
> Please describe what you mean.
> I don't understand.

Use the probe a few times early in the interview to communicate the importance of elaboration. For example, if a participant indicates agreement by saying, "I agree," then the moderator should follow up with "Tell us more" or "What experiences have you had that make you feel that way?" A few probes used in this way underscore the impression that more-detailed answers are wanted. Excessive probing, however, can be time-consuming, annoying, and unnecessary.

Be alert: Are they answering the question?

Beginning moderators are so darn glad that people are talking that they sometimes miss that people aren't answering the question they asked. Participants may be answering an earlier question. Or they may be off on a tangent. Or they may be skirting the question. It may all be fascinating, but it may not be answering the question. Moderators have to be mentally alert to spot this and must bring the group back to the question.

Think past, present, and future

Successful moderators think about what has already been discussed, what is currently being said, and what still needs to be covered. This helps them take in the whole scope of the focus group and keep the discussion on track and on schedule.

Experts, Dominant Talkers, Shy Participants, and Ramblers

One of the exciting aspects of focus group discussions is that it brings together people with different backgrounds and characteristics. However, individual characteristics can present challenges for the moderator. Four types of participants—the expert, the dominant talker, the shy participant, and the rambler—present challenges.

Self-appointed "experts" can inhibit others in the group. Participants often defer to others who are perceived to have more experience or are better informed on a topic. Some people consider themselves experts because they have had considerable experience with the topic, because they hold positions of influence in the community, or because they have previously participated in this type of session. Often the best way of handling "experts" is to underscore the fact that everyone is an expert and all participants have important perceptions that need to be expressed. In addition, the introductory question should avoid responses that would highlight participants' levels of education, affluence, years of experience with the topic, or social or political influence.

Dominant talkers may or may not be experts, but they do like to talk. Often dominant talkers are spotted in presession small talk. As indicated earlier in this chapter, try to seat the dominant individual to one side of the moderator in order to exercise control by the use of body language. When this strategy does not work, then the more frontal tactic of verbally shifting attention is required; for example, "Thank you, John. Are there others who want to comment on the question?" or "Does anyone feel differently?" or "That's one point of view. Let's hear what others have to say" or "Claire, you look like you want to say something." Avoid eye contact with the talker, and look at others in the group to invite them to talk. Most important, be tactful and kind because harsh comments to the talker may limit all conversation.

Shy participants and reflective thinkers tend to say little. It seems that these participants think carefully first and then speak. By contrast, others in the group are thinking and speaking at the same time. "I don't know what I think until I say it." Shy and reflective participants often have great insights, but it takes extra effort to get them to elaborate their views. If possible, the moderator should place shy participants directly across the table to maximize eye contact. Eye contact often provides sufficient encouragement to speak, and if all else fails, the moderator can call on them by name. "Tom, I don't want to leave you out of the conversation. What do you think?" "Megan, you haven't had a chance. How do you feel about this?"

Rambling participants use a lot of words and take forever to get to the point, if they have a point. These individuals like to talk, but are offtrack a fair amount of the time, and eat up precious discussion time. As a rule of thumb, we put down our pen and discontinue eye contact with the rambler after about 20 to 30 seconds. The assistant moderator should do likewise. Look at your papers, look at the other participants, turn your body away from the speaker, but don't look at the rambler. As soon as the rambler stops or pauses, the moderator should be ready to fire away with the next question or repeat the current question to get the conversation back on topic. In the remainder of the discussion, the moderating team may want to limit eye contact with the rambling individual. Don't completely ignore the person, but don't give him or her free license to talk as much as he or she would like.

Some moderators include a statement in the introduction that alerts participants to the importance of hearing from everyone. “From past experience in groups like this, we know that some people talk a lot, and some people don’t say much. We really want to hear from all of you because you’ve had different experiences. So if you are talking a lot, I may interrupt you, and if you aren’t saying much, I may call on you. If I do, please don’t be offended. We have a lot to cover here tonight, and it’s just my way of making sure we get through all the questions and that everyone has a chance to talk.”

Don’t assume that everyone should talk the same amount in a focus group. Some participants will just have more to say than others. If a participant is on track and giving helpful information, we usually let him or her continue to talk. However, if the participant is rambling or limiting the opportunity for others to talk, we will then take action.

Responding to Participant Comments

Moderators should be attentive to how they respond verbally and nonverbally to comments from participants. Often moderator responses are unconscious habits. Self-discipline and practice are needed to make sure head nodding and short verbal responses are not leading. We aren't suggesting you sit like a block of ice or stone, totally unresponsive in fear of biasing the participants. That doesn't contribute to a conversational environment. Just be aware that, if you were a teacher at one time, the "That's great!" or "Excellent!" that may have worked well in the classroom might be leading here.

Head Nodding

Some moderators continually nod their head as comments are being made. If it is a slow continuous nod given to everyone, it often signals encouragement, "I'm listening. I understand. Keep going." However, if it is a fast head nod, it probably signals agreement and, as a result, tends to elicit additional comments of the same type. As a rule of thumb, beginning moderators should try to restrict head nodding.

Short Verbal Responses

In many of our social interactions, we have become conditioned to provide short verbal responses to signal approval or acceptance. Neutral responses such as "OK," "Yes," or "Uh-huh" are acceptable. But avoid responses that suggest accuracy or agreement. Avoid "Correct," "That's good," or "Excellent" because they imply judgments about the quality of the comment.

Humor

A friendly manner and a sense of humor are valuable assets. Just a smile from the moderator can help people feel like this might be an OK experience. Smiles typically connote warmth, caring, and empathy and are powerful factors in promoting conversation. Humor is a powerful bonding agent, particularly when it is spontaneous and not at anyone's expense. Excessive efforts at humor can fall flat, be misinterpreted, and be counterproductive. However, if someone says something funny, don't hold back your laugh.

Incorrect or Harmful Advice

Sometimes participants share incorrect or harmful information in the group. We suggest that the moderator use the following procedure. When something is said that the moderator knows to be incorrect, the moderator considers whether the inaccurate information is harmful; could someone be injured directly or indirectly?

Comments may be incorrect but not harmful. If the comment is not harmful, the moderator usually takes no action. Sometimes participants will correct one another; that's fine. Or sometimes the participants do need the correct factual information to proceed with the discussion. In that case, the moderator can interject the correct information, but the point is to try not to make the moderator the expert or to point out that some answers are wrong. Another option is to have an assistant moderator who is a content expert. The moderator can then ask the assistant moderator to give the correct information and resume the conversation.

If the comments could be harmful, the moderator waits until the end of the focus group and brings up the topic again. This time, the moderator presents the topic as a matter of fact as opposed to the opinions that were shared earlier. The moderator describes the topic, provides the answer, and cites the source. The moderator might even offer to send participants a copy of the information or facts if they are interested. This strategy removes the harmful information from the domain of opinion, resurfaces it later in the focus group when it has more attention, and provides participants with access to the source data.

Sometimes based on the topic, we know people will have lots of questions and may be sharing incorrect information. We don't want to send people home confused or fearful, so we ask an expert on the topic to come in for the last 15 minutes of the focus group to answer questions, share information, and provide contact information in case they have questions once they get home. For more on this, see Questions at the Conclusion of the Group later in this chapter.

Harmful information in focus groups

Occasionally participants will share advice in the focus group, and sometimes that advice has the potential for being harmful. Here are some examples we've heard:

> "You know, it is really not important to use gloves, a mask, and all that stuff when you mix pesticides. My dad has been doing that for years, and it hasn't hurt him a bit."
>
> "When I go camping, I purify my drinking water by adding a small amount of household bleach. Sure, it tastes a little funny, but it really kills the germs."
>
> "At Thanksgiving time my grandmother prepares the turkey at her house and then wraps a blanket around the roaster and brings it to our house. She lives about four hours away, so we reheat it when she arrives."

Responding to Participants' Questions

Participants sometimes ask questions of the moderator. Expect this. It is natural, and it can actually be beneficial to the discussion. Questions occur before the focus group, just after the introduction to the focus group, during the focus group, or at the conclusion of the discussion. The strategy of answering may differ depending on when the question is asked.

Questions Before the Focus Group Begins

Individuals often ask questions during the recruiting process or just prior to the discussion. The strategy for answering should be to provide sufficient information to put the participant at ease but not to give information that might be leading. Often the questions are about the purpose of the focus group, about who's using the results, or about the timing or location.

Questions After the Introduction

Don't invite questions during the introduction. The moderator's introduction usually takes only a few minutes, and you should move directly into the opening question. During the introduction don't say, "Before we get started, are there any questions?" Inviting questions at this point is risky because there are a number of questions that you may not want to answer until the end of the group. This can make the moderator appear defensive, evasive, and apologetic. The rule of thumb is not to invite questions, but if someone does ask a question, decide if it should be answered or postponed until later. If it is a straightforward question that won't bias the discussion, we answer it. But if it could influence the group (e.g., what previous participants have said), we delay, saying something like, "I'd love to answer that question at the end of our discussion. Remind me, and we'll talk about it then."

Can I see a copy of the final report?

Perhaps the most frequently asked question at focus groups, particularly for public and nonprofit organizations, is, "Can we get a copy of the results?" Be ready for this question, and have a direct answer. Rarely, if ever, are reports shared in the private market research environment because the results are proprietary. However, in the public-nonprofit environment it is wise to allow open access to final reports. Sharing results conveys that you really did listen. Sharing results conveys a sense of openness and fosters positive attitudes that all sides must work together to achieve results. So, anticipate this question, and discuss it with the sponsoring group. We recommend that you eagerly share copies of the results. To do this, be sure to maintain a list of names and addresses of all focus group participants. We do not share transcripts, audio recordings, field notes, or reports of individual focus groups because of our promise of confidentiality. What is shared is a full report or executive summary of the entire study. We encourage organizations we work with to include a cover letter that says, *We listened. Here are the three, four, or five most important things we heard. This is what we are going to do about it. Or this is why we can't do anything about it. Thanks for your input. Call us if you want to tell us anything else.*

Questions During the Focus Group

These questions can relate to a variety of topics or concerns. The moderator will need to consider each of these individually. Some should be answered, some should be deflected back to the participant or the group, and some should be postponed.

Questions at the Conclusion of the Group

These questions are welcomed and encouraged. If a question was postponed, be sure to bring it up at the end of the focus group. Here you can tell more about the study—who else you are talking to, what other groups have said, how they can get copies of the report. Questions asked at the end of the focus group can give clues about additional information that you might include in the introduction of future focus groups.

Sometimes we invite a content expert in at the end of a group to answer questions that came up during the group. This is where you can share information fully. Or we might put together a packet of information for each participant with names and phone numbers of experts to contact. For example, when we conducted focus groups with young mothers about lead exposure in the home, we expected lots of questions. The questions were important because they helped to determine what type of information should be in new educational materials. But we didn't want to send mothers home with misinformation or unanswered questions. We invited an expert to sit in on the focus groups and listen to the questions and conversations. Then at the end of each focus group, she sat with the moms, answered their questions, handed out information sheets, and gave out her card so they could contact her later if they had more questions. We got the information we needed and got more information about lead poisoning out into the community.

Anticipate running out of time

Before you do the focus group, pretend that you've only asked half of the questions and only 10 minutes remain. (We hope this never happens to you.) Think about options that you might try to get the most useful information you can in the remaining minutes. Think about how to avoid the situation. Know which questions are the most important. Focus on those.

How to Answer Participant Questions

When participants ask questions in the focus group, there are two things that go through our minds: Is this really a question? Do I need to give an answer?

Some people use questions to make statements. It sounds like a question, but it isn't. They don't really want an answer. If you sense that the person really wants to make a point, you might respond by, "Tell me more about that," or "That's a good question; how would you answer it?" or simply "Why do you ask?"

If the question is indeed a question, then you have several strategies: answer it, ask participants to answer it or postpone the question.

If participants need an answer to the question to move forward with the conversation, answer it. Often these are factual questions related to the topic. However, as the moderator, you don't want to take on the role of expert, spending a lot of time explaining, defending, educating. When this happens, the moderator is talking, and the participants are listening—a reversal of roles. This means you aren't getting valuable data. Sometimes people have a lot of factual questions about the topic. For example, in focus groups on nutrition, participants often ask lots of questions related to proper nutrition. Rather than turning the focus group into a nutrition class, we may keep track of the questions that come up during the group and have a dietitian answer the questions at the end of the focus group.

Another strategy is to invite someone else to answer the question. "Would someone like to answer that question?" This is often a good strategy if the question is about opinions rather than facts. It is important that the moderator doesn't appear evasive. If the question is specifically directed to the moderator, then it is more difficult to give it away.

Another strategy is to postpone the answer. If the topic is going to be discussed in more detail later in the focus group, you might use a statement like this: "We're going to be talking about that in a few minutes." If the topic is not on the questioning route, you might use this approach: "We'll be talking about things like that at the end. Remind me to talk about that then. But right now our topic is. . . ."

Be Ready for the Unexpected

Prepare for the unexpected by thinking about things that could go wrong and how you might deal with them. Here are some of the things that might go wrong and possible courses of action:

Nobody Shows Up

Review your letter of invitation to be certain you are at the right location, right date, right time. Telephone several participants to see if they received the invitation. Always take a list of invited participants with their phone numbers to the discussion location. Try to figure out what went wrong so you can correct it before future groups.

Only a Few Attend

Conduct the session anyway, but after the meeting check to be certain that all people received the follow-up letter and telephone reminder. Try to find out what kept people from attending.

The Meeting Place Is Inadequate

Improvise, but try to spot this early. Arrive at the interview location well in advance of the participants, especially if it is a location that you have not used before. This gives you time to improvise.

The Group Doesn't Want to Talk

Consider calling on individuals or going around the group to answer a specific question. Use pauses and probes. Take a 10-minute break and reconvene. Ask participants for advice.

The Group Gets So Involved That They Don’t Want to Leave

This is a delightful problem that does occasionally occur. Stay awhile and listen to the conversation if time permits. If you absolutely must leave, then formally adjourn the focus group, pack up, and depart. If possible, let the participants remain.

Hazardous Weather Occurs Just Hours Before the Meeting

Phone each person to let him or her know the session has been canceled.

The Early Questions Take Too Much Time, Leaving Little Time to Ask the Final Questions

Pace the questions, and monitor the clock during the interview to allow enough time for your key and final questions. Often the later questions are the most important. You may have to skip some of the middle questions to have time for the key questions.

Concluding the Focus Group

The moderator has several options for closing the focus group. Perhaps the most common procedure is simply to thank the group for participating, provide them with the gift or cash if promised, and wish them a safe journey home. A better alternative is for the assistant moderator or the moderator to briefly summarize the main points and ask if this summary reflects what they heard in the group. This is helpful in the subsequent analysis process. It is the first opportunity the research team has to pull together a summary of the group discussion. When presenting the brief summary, the researchers should watch the participants for signs of agreement, hesitation, or confusion. When the two- to three-minute summary is completed, the moderator invites comments, amendments, or corrections.

An additional tactic for closure is asking the final question that was described in Chapter 3. The moderator provides an overview of the study and then asks the participants, "Have we missed anything?" A variation of this strategy is useful if participants are reluctant to talk because of sensitivity to the recording equipment. An alternative is to turn off the recording equipment, indicate that the discussion is now completed, thank them for their assistance, and then ask, "Do you think we've missed anything in the discussion?" This closure may uncover some avenues of thought that were not anticipated.

Summary

There is a lot to think about in preparing to moderate a focus group interview. The logistics and equipment should be checked out in advance and then crossed off your worry list. Some novice moderators worry about too many things just before the group session and consequently begin the discussion with high anxiety and ignore critical social skills. The best advice for beginning moderators is to over prepare several days before the focus group and then relax just before the discussion.

It's hard to predict in advance how a focus group will go. Groups vary greatly, and flexibility is essential. Throughout the discussion the moderating team should remember that they are visitors in the world of the participants, and for a brief time they are sharing the reality of the participants' environment. The permissive moderator allows the discussion to flow, and topics may be introduced in a different sequence from what was originally anticipated. Anticipate things that can go wrong. Practice pauses and probes and interrupting participants to move the conversation along. Consider the various strategies for bringing closure to the discussion.

Appendix 5.1

Checklist for Focus Group Interviews

Advance Notice

_____ Select locations, dates, and times that are convenient for participants.
_____ Contact participants two weeks (or more) before the session.
_____ Slightly over recruit the number of participants.
_____ Send each participant written confirmation of the time, date, and place.
_____ Give the participants a reminder phone call prior to the session.

Questions

_____ Questions should flow in a logical sequence.
_____ Key questions should focus on the critical issues of concern.
_____ Estimate how much time you will spend on each question.
_____ Use follow-up questions as needed.
_____ Limit the use of why questions.

Logistics

_____ Arrive early.
_____ Make sure the room is satisfactory (size, tables, comfort, etc.).
_____ Check background noise so it doesn't interfere with audio recording.
_____ Have name tents for participants.
_____ Place the digital recorder or a remote microphone on the table.
_____ Bring extra batteries, name tents, lists of questions.
_____ Bring pens and copies of handouts and visual aids.
_____ Arrange food.
_____ Plan topics for small-talk conversation.

Moderator Skills

_____ Practice the introduction without referring to notes.
_____ Practice the questions. Know the key questions.
_____ Be well rested, alert, and fully present.
_____ Welcome participants.
_____ Create a comfortable, open atmosphere.
_____ Use probes and pauses.
_____ Manage the time.
_____ Make sure everyone has a chance to share.
_____ Avoid head nodding.
_____ Avoid verbal comments that signal approval.

_____ Avoid giving personal opinions.

Immediately After the Session

_____ Check to see if the recorder captured the comments.

_____ Download the digital audio files to your computer.

_____ Debrief with the research team and audio record the debriefing.

_____ Prepare a brief written summary of key points if needed.

Appendix 5.2

Responsibilities of Assistant Moderators

1. **Take responsibility for all equipment and supplies.** Make sure you have enough of all the items needed. Consider designating a focus group box or briefcase to hold all the necessary equipment and files.

   ____ List of participants with phone numbers

   ____ Consent forms (if needed)

   ____ Extra sets of the questioning route

   ____ Visuals or handouts

   ____ Name tents

   ____ Extra five-by-eight-inch cards

   ____ Honorariums

   ____ Receipts for honorariums

   ____ Audio recorder

   ____ Microphone (if needed)

   ____ Marking pens

   ____ Pens, pencils, crayons, paper

   ____ Notepaper, tablet

   ____ Spare batteries

   ____ Flip chart
2. **Take responsibility for refreshments.** Arrange for the refreshments, and set them up in the room.
3. **Arrange the room.** Arrange chairs and table so everyone can see each other. Be attentive to background noises that would affect the audio recording.
4. **Set up the equipment, and verify that it is working properly.**
5. **Welcome participants as they arrive.**
6. **Sit in a designated location.** Sit outside the circle, opposite the moderator, and close to the door. If participants arrive after the session begins, meet them at the door, take them outside of the room, and give them a short briefing as to what has happened and the current topic of discussion. Then bring the late participant into the room and show him or her where to sit.
7. **Take notes throughout the discussion.** Be attentive to the following areas of concern.
   - *Well-said quotes.* Capture word for word as much of the statement as possible. Listen for sentences

or phrases that are particularly enlightening or eloquently express a particular point of view. Place quotation marks around the statement or phrase and indicate name of speaker. Place your opinions, thoughts, or ideas in parenthesis to keep them separate from participant comments. If a question occurs to you that you would like to ask at the end of the discussion, write it down in a circle or box.

- *Nonverbal activity.* Watch for the obvious such as head nods, physical excitement, eye contact between certain participants, or other clues that would indicate level of agreement, support, or interest.
- Make a sketch of the seating arrangement.

8. **Monitor recording equipment.** Occasionally glance at the recorder to see if the recording light is on.
9. **Do not participate in the discussion!** You can talk only if invited by the moderator. Control your nonverbal actions no matter how strongly you feel about an issue.
10. **Ask questions when invited.** At the end of the discussion, the moderator will invite you to ask questions of amplification or clarification.
11. **Give an oral summary.** At the end of the discussion, the moderator or assistant should provide a brief summary (about two minutes) of responses to the important questions. Invite participants to offer additions or corrections to the summary.
12. **Hand out the honorariums.** Be sure that participants sign that they have received the payment and then thank the participants for attending.
13. **Debrief.** Following the focus group, participate in the debriefing with the moderator. Record the debriefing.
14. **Provide feedback on analysis.** Read and provide feedback on the analysis.

Appendix 5.3

Example of a Focus Group Consent Form

Name of Sponsoring Organization

Address of Organization

Name of Research Study

Name of Principal Investigator

Information on the Focus Group Discussions

What Is the Research?

You have been asked to take part in a research study sponsored by (name of organization). The purpose of this study is to find out (describe goal of the study). This study will benefit others in the community in the following ways: (cite direct and indirect benefits to participants and organizations).

Why Have I Been Asked to Take Part?

You have been invited to participate because you have important insights about this topic (e.g., you have observed or participated in the program, you have experience with the topic, someone close to you has experience with the topic, etc.).

Voluntary Participation

This discussion is voluntary—you do not have to take part if you do not want to. If you do not take part, it will have no effect on services or opportunities proved by local organizations and agencies. If any questions make you feel uncomfortable, you do not have to answer them. You may leave the group at any time for any reason.

Risks and Benefits

We do not think any risks are involved in taking part in this study. This study may include risks that are unknown at this time. There are no personal benefits for taking part in this research. Your insights and that of others may be helpful to researches as they seek insights on this topic.

Audio Recording

The discussion will be audio recorded to ensure that we have accurately captured the comments of each individual. Your privacy will be protected. No names will be used in any report. The discussion will be kept strictly confidential. The audio recording will only be available to the research team. The recordings will be stored in a secure location and will be erased when the analysis is completed.

Payment (if applicable)

For participating in the discussion, you will receive (state the incentive).

Questions

Do you have any questions regarding this study? If you have any additional questions about the study, you may call (cite the phone number).

If you agree to these procedures, please check the box and sign your name in the space below.

□ Yes, I agree to take part in the focus group study

Name ______________________________________

Signature ___________________________________

Date _______________________________________

6 Analyzing Focus Group Results

What Lies Ahead

In this chapter we describe:

- The Purpose Drives Analysis
- Understanding Analysis
- How Focus Group Analysis Is Different
- The Analysis Process
- Forms of Data
- Preparing Focus Group Transcripts
- The Classic Analysis Strategy
- Analyzing Via Computer
- Analytic Frameworks
- Some Tips to Consider

The analyst has an obligation:

> Do your very best with your full intellect to fairly represent the data and communicate what the data reveal given the purpose of the study. (Patton, 2002, p. 434)
>
> This is a story of what data analysis is not:
>
> Once upon a time, an institution of higher learning set out to hire a new president. The governing board of the institution sought applications from far and near but, because of the limited travel budget, only the near applications were considered. It turned out that three professors were among the final candidates to be interviewed by the board. The first was a professor of accounting, the second was a professor of engineering, and the third was a professor who regularly served as a management consultant. After completing all interviews, the board was deadlocked. In an attempt to resolve the dilemma, the board decided to invite all three professors back to answer one final question.
>
> The accounting professor was the first to be asked, "What is two plus two?"
>
> The professor immediately replied, "With great confidence I can tell you that the answer is exactly four."
>
> The engineering professor was the second candidate to be asked, "What is two plus two?"
>
> After a moment of reflection, the engineer replied, "In the field of engineering, we are accustomed to problems such as this. We frequently must deal with numbers that are rounded. Therefore, the first two could be any number between 1.50 and 2.49, and the same is true of the second number. This means that the sum of two plus two could be any number between 3.00 and 4.98."
>
> Finally, the board invited the management consultant into the boardroom and asked, "What is two plus two?"

> The consultant slowly got up from the chair and went over to shut the door, then over to the window to close the blinds, and finally back to the board table. The consultant leaned across the table and with a low voice, slightly over a whisper, asked, "What do you want it to be?"

Qualitative analysis is not whatever you want it to be. Unfortunately that is a perception some people hold. The intent of this chapter is to present an overview of focus group analysis—analysis that is practical, systematic, and verifiable.

The Purpose Drives Analysis

Throughout the analysis process, remember the purpose of the study. The purpose will guide the direction, depth, and intensity of analysis. Difficulties emerge in both qualitative and quantitative analysis when there is a mismatch between analysis resources and the problem. This can result in elaborate analysis of trivial data or inadequate analysis of a complex problem of major concern. The researcher must remember the intent of the study and regularly weigh choices against two factors: available resources and the value of more in-depth analysis.

We know beginning qualitative researchers who have been overwhelmed with the vast quantity of data and distracted by all the details. Some have a hard time getting started because the task seems daunting. Some get started but can't decide what to pay attention to—everything seems interesting. Everything might have potential. They get distracted. If you get bogged down or stuck, go back to the plan for the study and reread the purpose. This should help you decide how to move forward. If that doesn't work, talk to colleagues.

Purpose, Purpose, Purpose

This chapter is about analysis—identifying themes. So have you picked up on this theme? Throughout the book, we keep pointing to purpose. That's because the purpose is our guiding star. If we follow it, it keeps us on track. If we are clear about it all along the way, we are more efficient and effective at getting the needed information. The purpose influences everything. It guides the planning. It suggests how much time and resources should be put into the study. It gives us clues as to what type of people should be recruited to participate. It guides the development of the questions. It helps the moderator know what to focus on. It helps us set the analytic framework. And it helps the analyst separate the wheat from the chaff. We emphasize this because beginning researchers sometimes get so excited about all the different things they could learn from a study or all the fascinating things that are said in focus groups that they get lost. Our focus on purpose doesn't mean we aren't open to different things. We don't put blinders on. But we know when we are looking at something beyond the purpose, and we weigh the potential benefit of exploring it.

Understanding Analysis

There are four critical qualities of focus group analysis: It is systematic, verifiable, sequential, and consequential. Let's examine each of these.

Analysis Is Systematic

Systematic analysis means you follow a prescribed, sequential process. The process is deliberate and planned—not capricious, arbitrary, or spontaneous. Systematic analytic procedures help ensure that findings reflect what was shared in the groups. Processes could vary from one study to another, but they are always systematic.

We use systematic protocol to avoid making mistakes or overlooking critical factors. Consider the process used by a commercial pilot in preparing for takeoff. Even though the pilot has flown hundreds of times and can remember each step in the takeoff sequence, systematic procedures are followed faithfully—because takeoff procedures are complex and lives are at risk. Knowing that pilots follow strict procedures helps us trust that they are doing their jobs correctly and that we are safe. Systematic protocol reminds the focus group analyst of upcoming steps and communicates to the users of the study that the analyst attempted to be logical and orderly.

Systematic analysis means that the analysis strategy is documented, understood, and can be clearly articulated by each member of the research team. You are ready for the question, "How did you come up with that?" You can describe the process. You can point to the trail of evidence at the drop of a hat. The process is transparent and open for inspection.

Analysis Is Verifiable

Your analysis is verifiable if another researcher can take your data and arrive at similar findings. As humans, we tend to selectively hear comments that confirm our point of view and to miss or avoid information that we don't understand or that causes us dissonance. Our training, our backgrounds, and our experiences influence what we notice and what we attend to. Researchers must be careful to avoid the trap of selective perception. Verification in analysis is a critical safeguard.

To verify findings, there must be sufficient data to constitute a trail of evidence. The data stream begins with field notes and recordings taken during each focus group and at each debriefing and includes transcripts if used.

Suggested questions for the debriefing

Here are some questions that you might consider when conducting the debriefing:

- What were the themes?
- What are the most important points that we've learned from this group?
- What was surprising or unexpected?
- What quotes were particularly helpful?
- How was this group similar to or different from earlier groups?
- Does anything need to be changed before the next group?

Analysis Is Sequential

Analysis is a sequential process—an evolving process of enlightenment. Good analysis begins with good planning, recruiting, questions, and moderating:

- Groups must be configured in a way that allows for the type of analysis that is wanted. The study design begins to emerge by making decisions about the needed qualities of focus group participants. Again, if you want to analyze how women versus men feel, you need separate groups based on gender to make statements with confidence.
- Information-rich participants must be identified and recruited. Otherwise, you will be analyzing the wrong data.
- The questions must be written with analysis in mind. Which questions are key? Which questions deserve the most time? If we don't have unlimited time for analysis, should we frame the questions in ways that take less time to analyze?
- The moderator must understand what will be helpful to the analyst, for example, that the later questions are the most important, that deep description is usually more helpful than simple phrases, that ending questions help nail down the main points of participants, and that a short verbal summary at the conclusion of the discussion allows for verification.

The analysis sequence continues after the focus group with an immediate debriefing with the moderator and assistant moderator. At this time, the moderator makes a quick check to ensure the recorder worked and that the field notes are complete. Then the moderator turns the audio recorder back on and the team discusses what they heard.

The analytic sequence continues but may take a number of different paths from here.

Analysis Is Continuous

Focus group analysis is different from quantitative analysis in a number of ways. One distinctive difference is when analysis begins. When analyzing numbers, the typical strategy is for the researchers to wait until most forms, surveys, or documents are obtained. When everything is available, or at least a reasonable amount is available, data entry begins. At a certain point, data collection and entry stops, and analysis begins. The separation between collection and analysis is clear in quantitative studies. By contrast, focus group analysis begins in the first focus group. Data collection and analysis are concurrent.

Doing analysis as you go improves data collection in focus groups. Consider scheduling focus groups so you can transcribe one group before conducting the next. (Or review the field notes and listen to the audio recording if you aren't using transcripts.) Also consider writing a short summary of the group, going question by question. This can help to spot whether you need to get more information on a particular question. You will see where the group didn't really answer a question so you can be alert to that in the next group. You can spot a question that isn't getting useful information and adapt the question in later groups. You can see where you need more examples or explanation. Analyzing along the way provides opportunities to collect better data. If you wait until all the focus groups are completed before you transcribe or begin to analyze, you've missed a huge opportunity to learn and improve.

How Focus Group Analysis Is Different

There is not one way to do qualitative analysis. There is an umbrella of strategies. Focus group analysis has some subtle differences from analysis of other forms of qualitative data.

As data, speeches, and individual interviews have some similarities, however, speeches are typically premeditated and flow in a more logical form. Speeches are more like essays, written correspondence, or open-ended survey responses in that the speaker or writer can organize his or her thoughts, edit, and revise, thereby presenting a more reflective statement.

Individual interviews are different. The speaker doesn't know the upcoming question and has to present an answer quickly and without the benefit of editing and reflective revision.

Here are some of the features of focus group interviews that have implications for analysis:

Table 6.1 Features of Conversations and Implications for Analysis

Characteristic	Description	Analysis Implication
Spontaneous comments	Participants do not anticipate the questions, and responses are not premeditated. Responses may not be carefully organized or logically presented.	Opinions may not be fully formed and are subject to change. Watch for modifications later in the discussion.
Inconsistent comments	Participants offer different opinions during the course of the focus group	Opinions may be changing, or new insights may result in different points of view. Or if conversation is excessively abstract, the differing points may be the result of ambiguous conversation.
Specific versus general comments	Often in focus groups the comments relate to a specific event or situation and may not be intended to be generalized.	Follow-up questions might be needed to clarify whether a comment can be generalized to other situations.
People change their minds	Participants might persuade others to a particular point of view	Listen for changes in opinion. Ask participants if they have changed their views and seek insights about the cause.
Words used differently	Individuals vary in how they use words.	Listen for words describing important concepts. Are words used in similar ways? Clarify these ambiguous words while you are still in the group. When doing analysis, code similar comments with the same code.
People repeat comments	Occasionally a participant will feel that a point of view needs more emphasis and will repeat the concept several times. Or someone will remember an important point and present it later in the focus group.	Be alert to the difference between frequency and extensiveness. Names on the transcript can be helpful in these situations.
Conversations tend to wander	Conversations wander, go off track, and loop back to previous comments.	The moderator needs to maintain the focus without being too heavy handed. Occasional off-topic conversations can yield insights but also eat up precious time.
People present a view with intensity or emotion	Intense emotions in a focus group tend to influence other participants. This intensity is less prevalent and tends to be less influential in other forms of qualitative data.	Watch for indicators of intensity in body language and in comments. Attempt to get comments from participants on how they are feeling and how this influences their views. Examine the field notes for indications of intensity or emotion.

These differences between focus groups and other forms of qualitative data have subtle influence on analysis. Analysis that relies primarily on counting might work in an essay or speech but miss the mark when examining focus group interviews. Some analytic procedures tend to micro-analyze comments that were simply a characteristic of a discussion. For example, in a conversation an individual might overemphasize a relatively minor point if he or she feels the point is being disregarded or discounted by others. The individual takes the dismissal personally and becomes invested in pointing out the logic of the argument. As a result this minor point grows both in intensity and in frequency of discussion, yet it remains a minor point.

In some environments (speeches) we know a considerable amount about the person making statements, and this can influence the analysis. We can look for patterns or trends over time. But in focus groups, we have limited insight into each person's background. As a result body language interpretation is limited, and we don't have a foundation of past statements for comparison.

Focus groups are similar to discussions or conversations that are informal and spontaneous. Some people who like to reflect before they speak may be caught off guard and make statements that they later amend or revise. In these situations the likelihood of inconsistency increases. Participants may be changing their minds, they may be commenting on a specific situation versus a general principle, or they may even hold several seemingly inconsistent views at the same time. A focus group interview reflects a fluid environment not a static presentation.

The Analysis Process

Here is an example of an analytic process for focus group interviews. While we list the steps in numerical sequence, we find that we occasionally modify the order and revisit or change earlier decisions.

As you read this section, you'll notice that, when we describe the analysis process, we go all the way back to planning. It may seem like we have covered this territory. But we include it on purpose. We strongly believe that all these steps are part of good analysis.

1. Decide Who Will Coordinate the Analysis

Early in the study, identify the person who will take leadership for analysis. This person must be intimately involved in the entire study. She or he must have a clear concept of the purpose, be involved in study design, question development, participant selection, and be present in the focus groups. This person might be the moderator or the note taker, but she or he should observe the groups and be well aware of both what is said and how it is said. In our opinion, you can't do first-rate analysis if you weren't in the focus groups.

2. Look Over Your Questions, and Specifically Think About Analysis

a. Are your key questions clearly identified? These are the questions that are at the heart of your study. Be sure that everyone on the team is aware of these questions. Look over your time estimates for all questions, and be sure you are spending adequate time on your key questions.
b. Give thought to how you anticipate analyzing each question.
   - Are there questions where you want everyone to answer? If so, do you need to keep track and identify the names of the respondents?
   - Are there areas where you anticipate intensity and energy in the response? How will you identify this passion or energy?
   - Are you interested in knowing if people change their minds during the discussion? If so, how will you identify and track the responses? Or will you just ask them if they changed their opinions?
   - If you are using projection, drawings, or other exercises, how will you analyze the results? Will you give respondents a chance to describe their responses?
c. Are you concerned that early respondents will unduly influence others in the group? If so, ask participants to make a list on paper before responding and then list all responses on a flip chart followed by group discussion.
d. Are you watchful of words that are different but sound similar? Some words sound similar but can have important differences. For example, words like *helpful*, *useful, valuable, important,* or *practical* can have subtle differences. Words like *rating* and *ranking* are different concepts that are regularly confused. In health studies, *exercise* and *being active* may have different meanings. Use precise language as you ask questions, and listen attentively to the words used by the respondents.

3. Anticipate the Discussion

Conduct a practice group to anticipate what might be said, where probes might be used, and how questions might be answered. The first focus group is always the hardest. You don't know if participants will understand the questions and how engaged they will be in the discussion. Pilot-test the questions with friends, neighbors, and colleagues to get a sense of how questions might be answered. This practice gives you insight as to where you might need probes or follow-up questions as well as the time needed to answer the question.

4. Use Multiple Strategies for Data Capture

Plan your strategy for capturing data. The most common strategy is to use memory, field notes, handouts, and flip charts, along with audio recording. Have you checked your equipment to be sure it is working properly? Have you practiced using it? Do you have the right settings selected on your digital audio recorder? Do you have a strategy for how you plan to file and store each type of data?

5. Work With the Note Taker to Ensure the Right Data Are Captured

The person responsible for note taking should be completely familiar with the questions. Each question should be numbered and the key questions clearly identified. The note taker needs to know if names needs to be linked with comments, if body language is to be described, whether to capture the big ideas or to capture word for word as much of the conversation as possible. If the notes are critical to the analysis, then be extra attentive to the style and format of the notes. And be certain that the note taker is well aware of the purpose of the study.

6. Some Analytic Tasks Occur During the Focus Group

Be attentive to certain circumstances, such as the following:

(a) Identify situations that need further exploration. Use probes and follow-up questions.

Listen for special moments that might be particularly insightful:
• Someone changing his or her mind
• Someone showing emotional intensity
• A subtle change in group energy or enthusiasm

Participants appearing to lose interest

In these situations, attempt to get comments from the participants that explain the behavior or reaction.
(b) If superlative language is used, you might seek out an indication of degree. For example, suppose someone says, “This was an outstanding program!” or “It was really wonderful!” You might ask them to put their response on a 10-point scale with 10 being the very best and 1 being the very poorest. And you might invite others in the group to respond as well. Consider having them jot down their responses on pieces of paper before they announce the numbers. Interestingly, some people will use superlative language to denote normal and ordinary occurrences.
(c) Use an ending question that asks each person to identify what they consider to be the most important topic discussed. These round-robin questions at the conclusion of the group give the analyst a sense of where participants are placing importance. This insight may suggest the order in which the results are depicted in the final report.
(d) Offer an ending summary and ask for verification. Briefly overview the key points of the discussion in two minutes or less, and ask participants if this summary is an accurate overview of the important points. Invite anyone to amplify or elaborate.

7. Debrief Soon After Group

The research team should conduct a 15- to 30-minute debriefing after participants leave the room. This gives the researchers a chance to compare notes, share highlights, and consider what others on the team have observed or heard. Audio record the debriefing. If an oral or written report is needed following the group, this team might outline the key points.

8. List, File, Copy, and Document All Materials

Organize your data immediately. If rating sheets or drawings were produced during the group, they should be identified by group and placed in the file. Catalog and file flip charts, field notes, and seating diagrams. Label and back up digital audio recordings. Consider photographing flip charts and drawings produced in the groups.

9. Decision: Should You Transcribe?

Likely this decision has been made earlier, but now is the time to review and adjust the decision. The decision is one of these options:

a. Prepare a full transcript
b. Prepare an abridged transcript
c. Transcribe selected quotes
d. Just listen to the audio recording
e. Not listen and not transcribe but keep the documents on file

In most research situations, it is important to be consistent across all focus groups. This is also a wise strategy for beginning analysts. But in evaluation studies the analyst is acutely aware to the time and resources needed and may decide to use a mixed approach. In some studies, we planned to do analysis based on field notes, but after listening to a particular focus group, the research team decided we needed a complete transcript to accurately capture the nuances of the conversation. In other large studies, we anticipated using full transcripts of all the groups, but we reached saturation early. We used complete transcripts for the early groups but only transcribed selected quotes from the final groups.

If you decide not to use a transcript, then your analytic process is based on data derived from memory, field notes, and debriefings.

10. Begin the Coding Process

Now the sorting begins. Coding consists of placing similar labels on similar things. The task is to sort comments into similar categories. This job is best performed by several people working together. Take the first transcript. Read the entire transcript. Then select the first question you want to analyze. (You may not want to analyze the opening question.) Examine the first response. If it is an answer to the question, then give it a title or code that describes the comment. Examine the second response, and if it is a similar answer, give it the same code. If it differs, give it another code that best describes the response. This process continues with all responses until the data are exhausted, and then the researcher moves on to the next question. (We describe this process in more detail later in this chapter. Look for the section titled The Classic Analysis Strategy.) This technique is called the *constant comparative method,* based on the work of Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967), and is described in their classic work, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*.

When all data have been coded, the researcher prepares a statement that describes the findings.

11. Prioritizing the Analytic Themes

When the data have been categorized, the researcher begins preparing the written analytic report. The constant comparative strategy gives the analyst a sense of the frequency of themes, but the analytic process is more than arriving at the number of times a comment was said. At this stage the analyst gives thought to a cluster of concepts:

- Frequency—How often was a concept mentioned?
- Extensiveness—How many different people mentioned the concept?
- Intensity—How much passion or force was behind the comments?
- Specificity—How much detail was provided by respondents?
- Internal consistency—Did individual participants remain consistent in their views?
- Participant perception of importance—Did participants cite this as an important concept?

The task of the analyst is to develop an analytic report that grows out of the purpose of the study. It could involve arranging the concepts in a descending order based on the above-mentioned analytic factors. Or it could take other approaches, such as documenting how opinions change in the process of the conversation, presenting the logical arguments for action, or the developing thought processes of the participants.

12. Write the Report

The typical report contains these elements:

1. Cover page
2. Executive summary
3. Table of contents
4. Purpose and procedures (background)
5. Findings
6. Interpretations
7. Recommendations or suggestions
8. Appendix

But most researchers write the sections in this order:

1. Purpose and procedures (background)
2. Findings by themes or questions
3. Recommendations or suggestions
4. Executive summary
5. Cover page
6. Table of contents
7. Appendix

The executive summary is prepared near the end. By this time some researchers are ready to be done with the project and don't put much time or energy into the executive summary. This is a mistake. The executive summary may be the only part of the report that ever gets read by some people. Take your time. Make it shine. The first paragraph should grab people.

Forms of Data

As we said before, data can be captured in different forms as the basis for analysis: transcripts, abbreviated transcripts, notes, and memory. Each of these provides a different level of specificity, detail, and completeness. Some studies require the highest level of detail for quality analysis. Other studies can be highly effective with much less detail.

Transcript Based

Transcript-based analysis uses complete transcripts of the focus groups as a basis for analysis. The transcripts are prepared using the audio recording of the focus group. These transcripts can be supplemented with field notes taken by researchers. Soon after a focus group is conducted, the analyst or a typist completes the transcript, which could easily be 30 to 40 pages of single-spaced text. The transcript of a two-hour focus group can require anywhere from 4 to 12 hours to prepare.

Transcript-based analysis is useful for studies being conducted in academic settings, for complex studies, and for studies where the risk of being wrong is high. The disadvantage of transcript-based analysis is that it requires more resources than other methods.

Abridged Transcript

Abridged transcript-based analysis is slightly less time-consuming than the transcript-based strategy. This approach relies on listening to an audio recording of each focus group and developing an abridged transcript of the relevant and useful portions of the discussion. Instead of a 30- to 40-page complete transcript, the abridged transcript might consist of only 10 to 30 pages. It is an abbreviated transcript; only relevant conversation is included. The introduction and first question are not transcribed. Excessive moderator directions are not transcribed. Comments that don't directly relate to the purpose of the study are not transcribed. Only someone who thoroughly understands the purpose of the study can develop an abridged transcript. Some comments may seem irrelevant or redundant to those who do not understand the purpose of the research. Or they may think an abridged transcript is like taking minutes of a meeting (it isn't). This abridged transcript should be prepared by a member of the research team, preferably the analyst. In essence, the researcher is doing analysis while listening to the recording and transcribing only those comments that will be useful in analysis. One must consider whether it is more efficient and cost-effective to pay for complete transcripts or to have the analyst create abbreviated transcripts.

Note Based

Note-based analysis relies mainly on field notes. The focus group might have also been audio recorded, but the audio is only used as a backup or to clarify confusing aspects of the notes.

The quality of the note-based approach is directly related to the ability of the assistant moderator to capture relevant notes. For this reason, it is often beneficial for the assistant moderator to also serve as the analyst. See the discussion of note taking in Chapter 5.

Note-based analysis may be sufficient when the purpose of the study is narrowly defined, for example, when pilot-testing ideas or materials or when the decisions to be made are low budget and easily reversible. The great advantage of the note-based analysis is speed.

Memory Based

Memory-based analysis requires considerable skill and experience and has substantial potential for error in the hands of a novice. It is best left to professionals. This type of analysis is used by professional moderators in special focus group rooms with one-way mirrors. After the focus group, the moderator goes to the back room and offers a memory-based summary of the critical points. The moderator may have made a few sketchy notes, but the summary is largely from memory.

This type of analysis unquestionably lends itself to those studies where the results are rather clear-cut, such as a choice between products or the potential success of a new product. The strategy also works better when the focus group questions are concrete.

This first report is oral (it may be followed with a written report) and allows time for questions and reflections from the clients who watched the focus group.

Preparing Focus Group Transcripts

Preparing focus group transcripts is a time-consuming ordeal, and yet it is an important phase of producing quality analysis. How the transcript is prepared can have a profound effect on the later analysis. There is some confusion about what a transcript is. This is what a focus group transcript is NOT:

- a summary
- minutes of a meeting
- an edited and corrected summary
- a document prepared by looking at the field notes

A focus group transcript IS:

- a word-for-word written record of the focus group discussion, based on the audio recording

Consistent formatting will allow the reader to navigate the document quickly. Everything the moderator says should be bolded, capitalized, or underlined. This enables the reader to quickly scan the document and locate the discussion on specific questions. Comments of participants are single-spaced, with double spacing between speakers. When preparing the transcript, don't worry about punctuation. Often, people speak in incomplete sentences. Use punctuation where it seems to make sense. Place periods at what seem to be the ends of sentences.

Type comments word for word. If someone repeats what was said earlier, be sure to type it again. Don't change the words or correct the grammar. If some of the words are unintelligible, type three periods ". . ." to indicate that words are missing from the transcript. Number all pages. Place a header on all pages indicating date and group name.

Note any special or unusual sounds that could help analysis. Use parentheses to indicate laughter, loud voices, shouting, someone being interrupted, or long pauses. We suggest leaving out verbal pauses such as *umm* or *ah*.

We believe that the person coordinating the analysis should prepare the transcripts. We are aware that this is a time-consuming task, but it allows the researcher to get an in-depth experience with the data. By transcribing our own focus groups, we have improved our moderating in subsequent focus groups. Yes, we know that it is far easier to hire a transcriptionist. And in some situations this may be a preferable option. But in situations where there is complexity and care is needed in the analysis, the safest strategy is for analysts to prepare their own transcripts.

Give thought to when you begin and end the transcript. Typically, the audio recorder is turned on before the focus group begins and then turned off after the participants have left the room. You may not need to transcribe the introduction to the focus group, and usually we end the transcript when the discussion ends.

Speeding up the transcription process

Special equipment can greatly speed up transcribing. Transcription kits that include foot pedals and special software can plug into your computer and allow you to control the playback speed with a foot device. The software allows you to regulate the speed of playback to match your keyboard skills. Other software features include noise reduction and elimination of other background sounds. Check the website of your digital audio recorder for more information.

Another way to speed up the transcription process is to use voice recognition software. This software will transcribe a voice into words in your word processor. But note that this software will not recognize the variety of different voices in the focus group. It will only identify the voice for which it is trained. So here is how it has been used:

- The focus group is recorded on a digital audio recorder.
- The voice recognition software is trained to the voice of the transcriber.
- The transcriber listens to the audio recording with earphones—often at a slower speed.
- The transcriber turns on the voice recognition software and using a microphone repeats everything that was said at the focus

group (this includes the comments of the moderator as well as the other participants). The transcriber leaves a space between different speakers and bolds the comments of the moderator.

Note: This will seem awkward at first, but after several hours of practice, your speed will increase. Also, we've used this method for preparing translations of focus groups from other languages into English.

The Classic Analysis Strategy

The classic approach is a process that has been used in countless analysis projects. It allows the analyst to identify themes and categorize results. It is low-tech. It isn't elegant or sophisticated looking, but it works. And if you've never done qualitative analysis before, this is a great way to start. The process is systematic. It breaks the job down into doable chunks. It helps make analysis a visual and concrete process. Once you have mastered this approach to analysis, you have a better idea of how to adapt the process to other efforts.

This is what you need:

- A room where you can spread out your work and where it can remain undisturbed until you are done with analysis. It helps to have a long table. Lots of floor space will substitute nicely, if you don't mind bending down and you can keep the kids and dogs out of the area. Walls work too if you don't mind taping things to them.
- Two paper copies of each transcript (one to cut up and one for reference)
- Scissors
- Colored marking pens
- Colored paper for printing the transcripts
- Flip chart or newsprint paper

You are going to cut the transcripts apart. But once they are cut into individual quotes, you may want to know where a quote came from originally. Here are a couple of tips that can help you identify where quotes came from after you cut your transcripts into hundreds of little pieces.

> **Tip 1:** *Number each line of each transcript*. Most word processing software has a feature that will do this for you. The line numbers will help you quickly locate a quote within a transcript.
>
> **Tip 2:** *Print transcripts on different colors of paper*, thereby color coding the transcripts by audience type, category, and so on. For example, let's say your study consists of four focus groups with teachers. You could print each of the four transcripts on a different color of paper. Then you could immediately identify where a quote originated from if you numbered each line (tip 1) and color coded.
>
> But, let's say your study consists of 12 focus groups—4 with students, 4 with teachers, and 4 with parents. Keeping track of 12 colors of paper could be complicated. Instead, you could print all the teachers in blue, the parents in green, and the students on white and then add the following tip.
>
> **Tip 3:** *Use a marker to identify groups within a type of participant*. Continuing from the previous example, once you have all the teacher groups printed on blue paper, use a marker to draw one line down the left margin of every page of the first teacher group transcript. Then make two lines down the margin of each page of the second teacher group, three down the third, and four down the fourth. Do the same with the parent and student groups. Now if you have a quote on blue paper with three lines down the margin, you know it came from the third teacher group.

Arrange the transcripts in a reasonable order. It could be in the sequence in which the groups were conducted, but more likely it will be by categories of participants or by some demographic screening characteristics of participants. For example, if you did three groups with students, three groups with parents, and three groups with teachers, you would work with all three transcripts of one kind (e.g., students) before moving to the next. This arrangement helps you be alert to changes that may be occurring from one type of audience group to another.

Before cutting, do a quick reading of all transcripts. This quick reading is just to remind you of the whole scope and to refresh your memory of what was said in the groups.

Place flip chart or newsprint paper on long tables, on the floor, or on the walls. Write one of the focus group questions to be analyzed on the top of each page of newsprint. If you had 10 questions to analyze, you now have 10 pages of newsprint surrounding you. You may also want to divide the newsprint page into categories to represent different types of focus group participants. For example, on one part of the page, you could place comments from student focus groups; in another location you could place comments from parent focus groups; and in a third section you could place comments from teacher focus groups.

Now it's time to begin the cutting and categorizing.

Start with the first question you want to analyze. Read each quote, and answer these questions:

1. *Did the participant answer the question that was asked?*

   IF YES → Go to question 3.

   DON'T KNOW → Set it aside and review it later.

   NO → Go to question 2.

   (If you are undecided or unclear about any answers, then take the conservative approach and save the comments for later review.)

2. *Does the comment answer a different question in the focus group?*

   IF YES → Move it to that question.

   IF NO → Put in discard pile (but don't throw the discard pile away until you are done with analysis).

   (Caution: Don't assume that answers will follow the questions. Occasionally, participants will provide answers to questions asked earlier or to questions that have not yet been asked. When this occurs, move the answer to the appropriate location.)

3. *Does the comment say something of importance about the topic?*

   IF YES → Tape it to the newsprint under the appropriate question. (Or if you are working on a horizontal surface, just start a pile.)

IF NO → Put in discard pile.

(Tip: Don't use a lot of tape because you will want to move the quotes around later.)

4. *Is it like something that has been said earlier?*

   IF YES → Start grouping like quotes together. Basically, you are making piles (categories) of like things.

   IF NO → Start a separate pile.

   You are constantly comparing and making decisions. Is this similar to or different from other things?

Soon the newsprint page is filling up with participant quotes. Not everything necessarily fits neatly into categories. In focus groups, people regularly get off topic or expand in detail on an aspect of minimal importance to the study. There's a good chance that you won't use this information and you will want to set it aside to clear the clutter, but don't toss these out. Instead, create storage areas so you can later review these quotes again. You might rearrange categories or create new categories and want to review these unused quotes to see if they fit your new categories. Sometimes the storage area is a box in the middle of the room with unused quotes.

When you are done categorizing the quotes from the first question, move to the second. After you've cut up all the transcripts and have your initial categories, you're ready to begin analysis of specific questions. Make sure you have all the quotes that say similar things together. Rearrange until you're satisfied. You might have categories and subcategories. You may get so many quotes about one thing that you make subcategories. Or you may decide to combine categories. You may want to talk with someone else about how you are categorizing certain things. Or you may want to show them. When you've finished arranging quotes into categories, you are ready for the next step.

Go back to each newsprint page, and write a descriptive summary of what each type of group said in response to the question. Write a description of what students said in response to the question. Then write a summary for the parents and then the teachers. Then compare and contrast across groups. How are students, parents, and teachers similar? How are they different? At this point focus on the findings—just describe what was said in the groups. Later you may want to go further and offer an interpretation of what it means or a recommendation.

During this process you will need to decide how much weight or emphasis to give comments or themes. We look at several factors:

- *Frequency*. Although we pay attention to how frequently something is said, it is a mistake to assume that what is said most frequently is most important. Sometimes a really key insight might have been said only once in a series of groups. You have to know enough about what you are studying to know a gem when it comes along. People have trouble with this concept: How could something that was said only once be important? Suppose you are discussing needs in a particular community. One person may be a visionary thinker and identify something that no one else has spotted or thought about yet. This cutting-edge thinking may have only been voiced once in a series of groups, but it may be crucially important to the study.

- *Specificity*. Typically, we consider giving more emphasis to comments that are specific—that provide detail. For example, if we were asking what people dislike about flying, we would give more weight to a quote that described in detail a time when a participant lost her bags, what she did, and what the carrier did than to a comment of "Oh, I hate it when they lose your bags."

- *Emotion*. We typically give more weight to comments or themes where participants show emotion, enthusiasm, passion, or intensity in their answers. Transcripts rarely capture this adequately. You need to be in the groups to see, feel, and hear it.

- *Extensiveness*. Frequency and extensiveness are related but different. Extensiveness is how many different people said something. Frequency is how many times something is said. We have had groups where one person keeps returning to the same theme. Although the theme was mentioned a fair amount, it was brought up by only one person. We pay attention to extensiveness. However, you can identify this only if you were in the groups or you have names on the transcripts.

When you are done writing a descriptive summary for each of the questions, look across the questions to see what themes cut across the questions. Are there things that repeatedly come up? If so, consider structuring your written report around these themes rather than around the questions. Or perhaps some questions can be combined.

Now take a break. Get away from the data for a couple days. This is a chance to refocus your attention on the big picture. What prompted the study? Who's going to use the results, and have you located the information that will be helpful? How can you frame this information so it best conveys what participants shared? It's easy to get sidetracked into fascinating areas of minor importance. After a few days you can go back to conclude the analysis.

When we write a report, we structure it around the questions or the themes. Then we use the summaries we wrote earlier to describe what was said about the question or the theme. If we are writing a narrative report, we then select quotes from those categories that illustrate what was said. The quotes are used as evidence. We look for quotes that capture the essence of what was said. They give the reader an idea of how the participants talked. We typically use about three quotes per category or theme.

When we have completed this level of analysis, we may go on to include our interpretations or recommendations. However, we clearly separate the findings from interpretations and recommendations.

This classic approach has been around a long time, but it is still effective. Quite a number of variations are possible, but the core elements are cutting, sorting, and arranging through comparing and contrasting. The beauty of this approach is that there are manageable steps to take. It makes analysis seem less overwhelming and more doable. It is a way of starting with the specifics (quotes) and working toward bigger themes.

Analyzing Via Computer

Computer programs can help analyze transcripts.

Analysis With Transcripts

Researchers use computers in a variety of ways in focus group analysis. We are aware of three distinct approaches, but likely more exist. For each approach, it is assumed that you have transcripts.

One approach is simply using the word processor as another way to cut and paste. Essentially, it is using the computer to perform the classic analysis described earlier. When used in this way, give thought to the need for tracing the source of each quote. It's easy to cut and paste similar quotes together and then lose sight of where they came from. Sometimes knowing the source is critical. This can be solved by developing a coding system that allows you to identify each quote by group (e.g., font color) or participant.

A second approach is to use something like Excel or Access, employing macros to sort the coded data. Some researchers choose to use software they already own and know how to use. This system may not be as elegant or powerful as the specialized software, but many people have used it successfully.

The third approach is to use software specially designed for qualitative analysis. Two popular programs are ATLAS.ti and NVivo. These programs open the doors for analysis possibilities that are not reasonably possible with other strategies. For example, these programs allow you to nest codes. This means that a chunk of data—a sentence or a longer quote or an interchange between three participants—can be coded in multiple ways. The classic approach limits you to placing quotes in one location, but with these special computer programs, there is no limit. Or, you might want to examine comments from participants with certain demographic characteristics that you've coded into your computer. It can be done with other analysis strategies, but it is difficult and awkward. But don't be confused. These analysis programs don't actually do analysis. They help you deal with large sets of data. You still code the data. And you still make sense of it.

The advantage of these specially developed computer programs is that they help manage large sets of text. It helps an analyst look very carefully at the data. As a result these programs are popular in academic settings. A colleague of ours analyzes sets of focus group data over years to build theory, looking for new or different nuances. Special qualitative software is required for this level of analysis. The downside is the time needed to learn and operate the program. Also, this type of software provides a level of analysis not often needed. Most clients want to know the three to five things they should pay attention to. Special software is not needed for this level of analysis.

Analytic Frameworks

Give thought to various analytic frameworks. These frameworks allow you to examine the problem from different vantage points and have the potential for bringing focus to your analysis. Base your choice of framework on the purpose of the study and what you are seeking to discover. There is no right or wrong framework.

The examples of analytic frameworks in Table 6.2 are not intended to be exhaustive but rather to point out how your data collection strategies and process of analysis will differ depending on the purposes of your study. For example, if you are intent on uncovering factors that might influence change, then you will need note taking strategies that allow you to identify the participants who make each comment. And then you will need to trace that individual's comments throughout the discussion in order to identify indications of consistency or change.

Some Tips to Consider

Suppose that, in the near future, you have to analyze a series of focus groups. What would be the most valuable advice that we could offer? We suggest the following:

Table 6.2 Analytic Frameworks

Analytic Framework	Objective	Typical Uses	Key Task	Process
Constant Comparative	Identify patterns in the data, and discover relationships among ideas or concepts.	Development of theory. Identification of patterns or trends.	Compare one segment of data with another to identify similarities and differences.	(1) Data are grouped together on a similar dimension. (2) This dimension is given a name; it then becomes a category. (3) These patterns are arranged in a relationship to each other.
Identifying Individual Change	Identify change or movement in opinions, preferences, or attitudes. Discover the factors that prompt people to modify or change their views.	Testing out possible ideas or approaches to see which is persuasive or convincing.	Track an individual's comments throughout the course of the focus group.	(1) Watch for indications of stability or movement in the views and opinions of each participant. (2) Incorporate opportunities throughout the interview for participants to share their views. (3) Ask participants at the end of the discussion if they have changed their views.
Critical Incidents	Discover important and critical events that have shaped later decisions or actions as well as the logic and emotional forces that surround the incident. Less emphasis on patterns and more attention on the logic and rationale offered by each individual.	Development of theory. Identifying important ingredients related to success or failure of a program, organization, or concept. Identifying infrequent but important causes or triggering events.	Identify events, actions, or situations that were influential to individuals, organizations, or society.	(1) Ask participants to identify critical incidents. (2) Listen for the logical arguments used in identification of critical events. (3) Observe the manner in which participants describe the events (e.g., passion, intensity). (4) Listen for nuances or special situations that might alter a critical incident.
Key Concepts	Identify the factors that are of central importance, not critical, but of moderate importance.	Discovery of the core ideas. Understanding of how participants view a topic.	Identify a limited number of important ideas, experiences, or preferences that illuminate the study.	Ask the participants to help identify the key concept—the important lessons learned from the focus group.
Testing Alternatives	Identify the most preferred choice among several alternatives.	Pilot-testing alternative options.	Show participants examples, descriptions, or actual products, and ask them to choose.	(1) Show choices and invite comparison. (2) Encourage participants to identify their choices and then provide reasons.

Know What Is Needed in Your Environment

The approaches to focus group analysis can vary greatly. One form of analysis can be completely acceptable in one setting and inappropriate in another. Analysis for a dissertation is a world apart from analysis for a small, nonprofit agency with a shoestring budget. If this is the first time you've analyzed focus groups, seek advice from colleagues about how similar research has been conducted.

Being There Is Best

Nothing beats being present in the focus group. We highly encourage that analysis be done by someone who was physically present in the room when the focus groups were conducted. It's been estimated that 80 percent of the content is found in the transcript and the remaining 20 percent are all the other things that occur in the room. Being in the groups gives the analyst a sense of the energy, passion, and emotion that doesn't come through in transcripts.

Not Everything Is Worthy of Analysis

Beginning analysts often make the mistake of assuming that they must use all the data. In some focus groups, much of the discussion may be of marginal value. In other groups, almost all the comments are rich and insightful. Certain questions are more important than others, and you must know one from the other. Place your attention on the most relevant conversation.

Much Analysis Is Based on Pattern Identification

An elementary teacher had an interesting way of teaching classification systems. The teacher would bring out a large box full of keys and dump the keys in the center of the room. The teacher told students to arrange the keys. The students would ask questions about how they might do it. The teacher said that there could be many ways and they should think about it and then place the keys in categories. The kids eagerly got into the task, discussing possibilities, comparing strategies, changing directions several times, and then finally coming to agreement about a preferred method. Sometimes they would abandon one method and use something different. It was always an interesting exercise. Some kids would sort the keys by color or metal (brass, iron, nickel), and others would sort by size (small, medium, large), and others by the key type (automotive, house, padlock, luggage). There were no wrong answers, and after a while a student would ask about the purposes of classification systems (the teachable moment!). Was it to arrange keys for future use? Was it for an aesthetic display? The way we categorize depends on our purpose.

Sometimes Pattern Identification Might Not Be Appropriate

In certain situations, such as identifying critical incidents, an event might occur only once and yet be of great consequence. Pay attention to unique or rare events that have major consequences. When reporting results of these occurrences, it is important to convey that it was infrequent and provide a rationale for why you chose to include it in the report.

Beware of Personal Bias and Preexisting Opinions About the Topic

People differ in how they analyze. Some have hunches about what they might find, and when they find evidence that confirms that hunch, they leap to conclusions. Sometimes the leap is premature. Always challenge yourself. Seek evidence that disproves or presents counter-information. Seek insight from colleagues, particularly those with different backgrounds. Be ready to release your grip on an interpretation and embrace alternatives. Be open to multiple realities.

You Are the Voice of the Participants

Consider yourself the voice of the participants. Your task is to communicate clearly how participants felt about the topic. In a way, you are their spokesperson. There may be different voices and multiple views that need to be presented, and your task is to accurately represent the range of views.

Visually Represent the Findings

Give thought to creating a representation of your findings. Sometimes flow charts, matrixes, and diagrams are helpful in depicting results. Other times sketches, drawings, images, cartoons, or analogies are helpful. The visual representation is helpful both in forming the analysis and then later when results are communicated.

Be Cautious With Numbers

We pay attention to frequency, but we are cautious about counting, and we rarely include numbers in reports. Numbers can be misleading in focus group reports. Readers often want to turn numbers into percentages and then project to the population. This is unwise. The sample size is too small. Not everyone answers every question. Some people may comment three times on one issue. Other people may not comment at all. Instead we encourage the use of modifiers like *no one*, *a few*, *some*, *many*, *most*, or *all* to describe how many people talked about an issue in a particular way.

Be Careful Interpreting Body Language

Interpreting body language is tricky. In a focus group, much can be observed, but the challenge is in interpretation. What does it mean when someone leans forward, slouches, looks out the window, or taps her fingers? Some people will tell you they know what those gestures mean, but do they really? We suggest that you use body language as a signal. Instead of assuming that the participant who is talking fast and raising his voice is passionate about the topic, ask him how he feels. Try to get the individual to express his or her feelings in words. Then you have the concrete language of the participants to use in analysis as opposed to the subjective observation of the researcher. Use phrases like, "You seem concerned about this topic; tell me how you feel." Or "You look like you have an opinion on this. Tell us about it." Or "You look like you are frustrated with this discussion. Are you?"

If you see others nodding their heads in the focus group when one participant argues a particular point, you might say, "I see others nodding their heads. Tell me what that means."

What does laughter mean? (It can mean you are taking great delight in what you are hearing, or it could mean you are cynical and dismissive.) What does it mean when someone changes tone and speed and speaks quietly and slowly? What do tightly crossed arms or legs indicate? (Are you being defensive, or are you cold?) If you were able to observe individuals for a longer period and compare their body language to a baseline, you might be able to make a statement with confidence. The focus group, however, is but a glimpse and is hardly sufficient time to understand the pattern.

So our advice is this: Go easy on reading body language. It is easy to misinterpret the action, especially when conducting cross-cultural or international focus groups.

Should It Be Analyzed as a Conversation or an Interview?

One of the ways in which focus groups can vary is in the degree of conversation that is present. Some focus groups resemble serial interviewing, where all comments are directed back to the moderator. Other focus groups are more like unstructured interviews, where the moderator allows and encourages participants to talk to each other, build on comments of others, and agree or disagree with others. Most focus groups fall somewhere in the middle, often with earlier questions being more directive and later questions more conversational. Which is better? It depends on the purpose of the study. Both can yield insightful information. Conversations take longer, but they have the advantage of observing how individuals respond to others in the group, which might also be a predictor of how they respond when they leave the group. The serial interview is a faster way of obtaining information and is preferred when time is at a premium and when your goal is to understand various points of view. The conversation dialogue allows the researcher to use conversational analysis procedures identified by Harvey Sacks, Paul ten Have, and others (Have, 2007; Sacks & Jefferson, 1995).

Summary

Focus group analysis is a deliberate, purposeful process. It consists of four distinct and critical qualities. It is systematic, uses verifiable procedures, is done in a sequential manner, and is a continuing process. Analysis can be based on complete transcripts, abridged transcripts, notes, or memory. The classic analysis strategy helps make analysis doable, bite-sized, and concrete. Once people have mastered the classic approach, they may want to move on to computer-based analysis. Other strategies or combinations of these elements are possible and even encouraged, providing they are systematic, verifiable, sequential, and continuing.

7 Reporting

What Lies Ahead

In this chapter we describe:

- Five Principles of Reporting
- Written Reports
- Types of Written Reports
- Oral Reports

Five Principles of Reporting

Five principles serve as the foundation of reporting. Everything else in this chapter builds on these points:

1. Know the Point, and Get to It Quickly

No matter what type of report—written or spoken, formal or informal, one-to-one or a large group—always know the point, and get to it quickly. Everything in the report should have a purpose. If something doesn't have a clear purpose, take it out. And more specifically, be attentive to what purposes your client or reader might have instead of those envisioned by the researcher.

2. Clear, Effective Writing Takes Time

In 1657 Pascal wrote, "I have made this letter longer than usual, only because I have not had the time to make it shorter." Clarity and crispness take effort.

3. Provide Enlightenment

The primary purpose of a report is to enlighten someone—to expand knowledge, help understand feelings, or convey information. Ask yourself, "What findings are new, important, or valuable to my audience?" The best reporters spend time considering what may be enlightening to their readers.

4. Involve End Users Throughout the Study

Focus groups that involve decision makers throughout the study tend to produce results that are more useful. Involve the end users in conducting the study—in planning, recruiting, moderating, analyzing, or reporting aspects of the focus group study. The benefit is clear. If you want people to use the results of the study, make it their study instead of your study.

5. Use Multiple Reporting Strategies

Researchers often assume that other people like to get information in the same way they like to get information. But people have different preferred learning styles. In addition, a few of us will get the message the first time, but most of us need reinforcement and reminders. Successful reporting uses multiple methods such as one-to-one meetings, oral briefings, written reports, presentations, media reports, or reports presented by a variety of people. Reports can be complemented with audio or visuals—charts, photographs, audio or video recordings, drawings made by focus group participants, diagrams. Using multiple media help ensure that the message is effectively communicated. The combination of methods accommodates individual learning preferences and reinforces findings.

Written Reports

People have better ways to spend their time than laboring over dry, confusing reports. At least we do. We constantly try to improve the ways we communicate ideas. We've picked up these tips from colleagues. Try them.

Study Popular Writing

Read the *New York Times* "Science Section." Find reporters you like. Dissect how they write about research. Study popular news magazines. Notice how the writing flows and entices the reader to continue. Note how boxes, sidebars, and visuals help convey the messages. Consider what strategies you can use in your writing.

Realistically Assess Your Own Ability

When was the last time you had a professional help you with your writing? Take a refresher class. Seek out a group to give you feedback. Consider finding a writing coach. Hire an editor to give you feedback. At a minimum, use the computer to get an estimate of the reading level of your text.

Give Yourself an Early Deadline

We create false time lines. If a client wants a project completed by June 1, we give ourselves an earlier deadline—say May 15—to have a written report completed. When the analysis and draft report is completed, we set it aside for a few days and work on something else. Our subconscious continues to work on how best to present the findings or illustrate a point. Often in those first few days after completing the report, we will get insights on how to improve it. These insights typically come while we are taking a walk or a shower or on the cusp of sleep. Then we go back to the report and incorporate the idea. We purposefully create early deadlines so we have time for this process.

Create an Environment That Supports Your Writing

Some people thrive as deadlines zoom closer. Others crumble. Some writers have a special time of day when words leap out. Some have a special place. Some write from outlines and others from inspiration. A few can write anytime, anywhere, under any conditions. For most of us, it is important to limit distractions. Examine the days you are most productive. Did you write at the library? Did you write for an hour before everyone else got up? Did you go to a place with no Internet access? Figure out what you do on your best days and repeat.

Little goals help us write. They make the task seem doable. Then we give ourselves little rewards. Like, "I have to write three pages a day until this is done. After three pages I can do anything I want." Or, "If I write for four hours I'll take a motorcycle ride." Often we exceed our little goals because, once we get going, it seems easy. The little goals and rewards get us started. It's a lot easier to face writing three pages today than it is to think about writing a whole report, article, chapter, or book. Those feel overwhelming. "It will take forever, and I will never get to see sunlight again." However, "Three pages? No problem. I'll see sunlight this afternoon!" Reflect on what helps you write. If something isn't working, try a different approach.

Let Yourself Write a Crummy First Draft, Then Edit, Edit, Edit

Never assume that the first draft will be your final draft. In fact, let your first draft be crummy. Just get it down. Then edit. Quality writing comes from feedback loops. Build in these loops from the beginning, allow time in the schedule for feedback, and seek out constructive comments.

Use headings to answer the question

We know that some readers of our studies will want narrative reports with rich details and lots of quotes. We know others want the big ideas. So we try to make our reports easy to skim by creating section headings that actually answer the key questions.

Here is an example. In a study completed for the Department of Veterans Affairs, a key question we asked veterans was, What are the ingredients of good health care? We labeled the findings in ways that answered that question.

Veterans said ingredients of good care include the following (only a few examples are shared here):

- Access to care when they need it
- Medications that work
- Information that helps them understand and cope with their conditions
- An emphasis on wellness not illness

We could have labeled the sections *Access, Medications, Information,* or *Wellness.* But those labels wouldn't be helpful to busy readers.

Dazzle With Your Ideas—Not With Fancy Words

Some writers use complex, arcane language instead of clear, straightforward prose. Don't overshadow the ideas, the concepts, and the findings with showy language. (Incidentally, the parallel in the oral report is when something about the speaker draws attention away from the content.) In focus groups, we phrase questions using the words the people in the group would use to talk about a topic. Consider doing the same thing with the report. When conveying the results, use language the audience would use. Your goal is to communicate to others. Make your report easy for them to understand. This is not the same as dumbing down the report.

Make the Report Visually Attractive

Whether we like it or not, books are sometimes judged by their covers. The look and feel of the written report is important. Does it look professional? Does it look like care and attention went into the document? Is it designed to keep the readers' attention? Does it guide their eyes over the document? Seek professional help in design, take a class to improve your skills, and keep a file of attractive, well-designed reports to serve as models.

Use the Cousin Test

George Grob (2010) suggests that researchers get so involved in the details of a study that they fail to convey the critical points. He recommends the cousin test. It goes like this. You go to a family reunion and see a cousin you haven't seen in ages. He asks what you have been up to. When your cousin hears that you've completed a report, he smiles as asks, "What does it say?" You tell your cousin what it says in one sentence—two at the most. Grob says: "Your summary has to be simple but also specific, insightful, inspiring, and interesting, and it must elicit a response something like, 'Well I sure hope they do something about it'" (p. 595). (In this chapter, Grob called this the Mom Test, but he has renamed it the Cousin Test.)

Types of Written Reports

Focus group reports have traditionally been written in a narrative style. Alternatives include the top-line report, the bulleted report, and the letter report. We show clients different types of reports and ask them what type they prefer. Let's discuss each of these.

Narrative Report

The narrative report is recognized by its length and use of quotations. Typically these reports are between 15 and 30 pages long, but occasionally a report might become lengthy, reaching close to 100 pages. The drawback of excessive length is that it limits readership; only the most interested and enthusiastic clients will read the whole report.

Example of an outline for written report

1. *Cover page*. The front cover often includes the title of the report, names of people or organization receiving or commissioning the report, names of the researchers, and the date the report is submitted.
2. *Summary*. The brief, well-written executive summary describes why the study was conducted, outlines major findings, and lists recommendations. The summary is often limited to two pages and should be able to stand alone. Although this section is placed first in the written report, it is often written last.
3. *Table of contents*. This section isn't needed if the report is short, but it does help readers navigate longer reports.
4. *Purpose and procedures or background*. Describe the purpose of the study, and include a brief description of the study. Remember your audience. Academics may want a detailed description of procedures, but most readers aren't interested in much beyond the number of groups, types of people included as participants, and where the groups were held. The questions are not included here but may be included in the appendix.
5. *Findings*. Findings are usually organized around key questions, themes, or big ideas. The conventional style is to take the

questions in sequence. The limitation is that this style begins with the least important information (the more valuable results usually occur later in the focus group). Also, information is often redundant because the same themes appear in several questions. Therefore, consider organizing by themes and begin with those points that are most beneficial to the reader. The findings section of a narrative report often includes quotes that illustrate key points.

6. *Recommendations*. Researcher recommendations are optional and not automatically included in focus group reports. The decision on whether to include recommendations should occur in the planning process, and sufficient time must be allocated to complete this task. The recommendations provide suggestions as to what might be done with the results. Sometimes this section is presented as *suggestions* or *ideas to consider* or other words that convey less formality. If participants made recommendations in the focus group, they are considered findings and belong in the findings section.
7. *Appendix*. The appendix is optional. It includes additional materials that might be helpful to the reader. For example, you might include the questioning route and the screening questionnaire. Additional quotations may also be included. In some situations the author might wish to include limitations and alternative interpretations.

Top-Line Report

The top-line report conveys critical points quickly. These brief, bulleted reports are prepared using field notes and moderator memory and are presented back to the client within a day or two of the focus group. These reports are also called top-of-mind reports, which is actually more descriptive of the process. Top-line reports are oriented toward the particular decision or problem that gave rise to the focus group. As a result, this report won't contain information unless it is specifically relevant to the purpose of the study. The top-line report is usually an interim or preliminary report that is prepared quickly and provides immediate findings that are expanded upon in the later narrative report, sometimes called the *full report*. Top-line reports vary in length but are usually several pages long.

The top-line report is sometimes confused with the executive summary because both are short. The executive summary is prepared after the narrative report is complete and highlights critical points. By contrast, the top-line report is prepared quickly without benefit of careful analysis. The emphasis of top-line reports is speed in reporting.

Top-line reports are standard in market research because sponsors want immediate results. Sponsors often view the groups from behind a one-way mirror and will make decisions based on their own impressions if the analyst doesn't quickly provide a report. In many cases in market research, the study is completed by a seasoned moderator and is very focused (e.g., which ad has greatest appeal?), which makes top-line reports straightforward. They are prepared with minimal time for reflection or analysis so there is great danger of error for novice researchers. The top-line report exists for a particular function: providing rapid results to concerned clients.

Bulleted Report

The bulleted report is like an outline of the narrative report but with careful choice of phrases and words to convey the concepts clearly. The bulleted report is gaining popularity because of the speed with which it can be prepared and consumed. Some market researchers are now using 20 to 40 bulleted PowerPoint slides as their report.

Thank You Report Letter to Participants

Often participants in focus groups will ask if they can get a copy of the report or find out what happened based on their input. If no results are evident, there is a tendency for the participants to assume that the organization ignored their input. For example, in some communities and in some organizations, people are reluctant to participate in focus groups because they haven't seen results from past listening. They don't believe their input will make a difference because they haven't seen any evidence that the organization paid attention to earlier input.

Usually public and nonprofit organizations freely share focus group findings with participants. We encourage the sponsoring organization to write a thank you report letter based on one of the reports described above. This report letter is sent to people who participated in the focus groups. It is one or two pages long and tells participants "We heard you, and this is what we plan to do based on what we heard." Often this report letter is sent as a cover letter for an executive summary or a narrative report. The information in the report letter can cover all audiences in the study or can be adapted for a particular audience, emphasizing items of concern for that particular type of group. For example, one letter might be written for parents, a different one for teachers, and yet a different one for students if these audiences raised different concerns in the study.

Consider including four items in the report letter. First, thank participants for sharing their ideas and taking the time to participate. Second, include a very short summary of key findings—perhaps three or four bulleted points or a couple of paragraphs. Third, tell what you are doing or what you plan to do to address the key findings. If for some reason you can't do anything about a key point, explain why. Finally, if it seems appropriate, invite participants to call and share their reactions to the report or ask for more information. Include a name and phone number. Attach some version of the report—typically an executive summary.

Oral Reports

For some people giving an oral report is a terrifying experience. It brings up fears of dry mouth, hostile audiences, and questions that are impossible to answer. Here are some tips that have helped us prepare for oral reports. Experts tend to use these strategies, and indeed we've learned them by observing people who are good at giving oral reports.

Allow Time for Questions

Before preparing the oral briefing or presentation, find out how much time is available, where the report will be given, and who the audience will be. Those receiving an oral report usually want to discuss findings, respond to the results, or ask questions. The most successful oral reporters allocate only onethird to onehalf of the time for the presentation, and the remainder is spent in followup discussion. Therefore, a 15-minute report may include a 5-minute presentation and 10 minutes for questions, clarifications, and discussion of future action.

Cite the Most Important Things First

The first few minutes in an oral report are critical, and the speaker will need to set the stage quickly. Carefully describe why the study is important to the audience. Focus the oral presentation on the key points. Cite the most important finding first and then move to less important findings. Within these first few moments, highlight several key factors; for example, why was the study needed? What do we know now that we didn't know before? How can these finding be used? Quickly engage the audience to hook them into the study, and explain clearly why the research is important.

Some communications experts recommend that the most important points be presented at the end of an oral presentation—that lesser points build toward a crescendo. This does not work well in evaluation or research reporting where people receiving the report often have time restrictions and limited patience and where interruptions regularly occur. In these situations, be concise. Place the most important findings at the top of the list.

Also, the outline used in the written report does not transfer well to oral reporting. Often researchers assume that a report is a report, whether it is oral or written and that the sequence of information presented should be consistent in both kinds of reports. Oral reports are different and require special thought and preparation.

Be Careful of Ho-Hum Syndrome

When planning for the oral report, it is helpful to consider the hohum syndrome. Hohum is characterized by the questions going through the minds of the audience: “Did we really need this study?” “Don’t we know this already?” “We paid somebody to study this?” “Shouldn’t this staff member be doing something important instead of conducting these studies?” To us the results might seem enormously important with far-reaching implications, but to a busy decision maker, they might sound like hairsplitting and avoidance of real work. Often the best procedure is to address it headon by saying, “This study is important because. . . .” Or tell the audience what the other possible hypotheses were, that we now know the correct course of action, and as a result, time and resources are saved.

Limit Your Points

Try to limit your report to fewer than seven points. Studies in cognitive psychology suggest that most people can only remember five to seven items in short-term memory. Use short, active phrases to describe points as opposed to complete sentences. These brief phrases are designed to do two things: to convey the important concepts and be easily remembered.

Use Visuals and Quotes

Key points and quotes tend to be memorable when displayed visually. Share drawings from the groups if you used this type of question. Selected quotations or even brief audio recordings of actual comments can also be very effective in the oral report, but they must be used in moderation. (Also, the audience members shouldn't be able to identify the voices because you promised confidentiality. Therefore, don't do this in a work environment where colleagues could identify one another.) If you use PowerPoint to frame key points, keep the visuals simple. Don't use too many words, colors, or doodads. The point is to communicate content clearly, not draw attention to the wizardry of your visuals.

Tell Your Audience What You Want Them to Do

Sometimes the purpose of the oral report is unclear to the audience. We have seen sessions where group members just looked at one another for a few awkward moments when the report was done. This uncomfortable silence was followed by action typical of elected bodies. Someone usually moves that the report be approved or accepted. Then they can move on to really important matters. In these situations, the group was never told why they were receiving the briefing. At the beginning or end of the report, the reporter should indicate what action is recommended or why the report is presented, such as to provide a briefing, to form a study committee, to continue discussion later, to seek funds to implement the findings, or to approve a new course of action. It is dangerous to assume that the audience will know what to do with the report.

Select the Right Reporter

Some people have a talent for preparing written reports. Others are great at presenting oral reports. Select your reporter based on ability and credibility and not because of his or her role in the focus group study. Some individuals are gifted in presenting findings. Consider these people. As important, however, is the credibility of the reporter. At times a volunteer or someone from outside of the agency or organization is more credible. ("Of course the project director is going to say they need more money for special education. That's her job!") The best choice is to have an individual who is both skillful and credible present the results.

Naturally, the reporter will need to be sufficiently acquainted with both the process and findings. The reporter should practice the oral report and allow sufficient time for preparation and collegial feedback. Hastily prepared reports often have awkward construction, vague points, misspellings, and other problems that limit their acceptance by users.

Summary

Many judge the quality of a focus group study by the report. Take the time and effort needed to produce top-quality reporting. We offer five principles of reporting that have served as a valuable checklist during the reporting phase of the study. The focus group researcher will need to make a decision about which types of reporting to use. Use a combination of approaches whenever possible.

8 Styles of Focus Group Research

What Lies Ahead

In this chapter we describe:

- Market Research Approach
- Academic Research Approach
- Public–Nonprofit Approach
- Participatory Approach

During the past 70 years, focus group research has evolved so that we now have several different approaches: market research, academic, public–nonprofit, and participatory. Knowing these approaches can be helpful when reviewing focus group literature, contracting for focus group research, or just learning about alternative approaches. If you don't know these different approaches exist, you may be confused by differences you see in focus groups. Let's compare these approaches.

Market Research Approach

Market researchers adopted focus groups for their practicality, usefulness, fast turnaround, and economic benefit. Businesspeople were driven by straightforward economic concerns. Does the information help us produce a better product? Can our business profit from the information obtained?

Market research focus groups have gotten a lot of publicity, and their procedures may be what most people imagine when they think of focus groups: special facilities, rooms with one-way mirrors, data banks for recruiting participants, groups with 10 or more participants, cash incentives, and professional moderators.

Let's look at for-profit market research focus groups.

In the early years, most market research groups were conducted with white, middle-class suburban and urban residents with disposable income because the goal was to learn how to sell more of a product or service. In recent years, marketers have begun seeking greater diversity in race and age, providing, of course, that the groups are target markets for the product or service.

Market research focus groups are typically held in commercial focus group facilities, which can be found in any major city around the country. These facilities offer rooms with one-way mirrors and viewing rooms, audio and video recording options, screening and recruiting services to locate focus group participants, meeting rooms for clients to use, and catering services for the clients and participants.

Sponsors of the research and others (advertising team, marketing staff, engineers, product developers) watch consumers talk about the product from behind the one-way mirror. This firsthand observation is highly instructive for executives who are often unfamiliar with the day-by-day realities of ordinary consumers. Watching the groups allows the sponsor to see their product through the eyes of the customer. Moreover, it provides new ideas for designers as they create new products and services.

Recruiting participants is big business for these facilities. Recruiters phone people, screen them, and invite them to the groups. Participants are offered money as an incentive to show up. The harder the type of participant is to find, the more they are paid to show up. Some market researchers are concerned about how often people participate in focus groups. Some participants enjoy the opportunity to talk, listen to others, and get paid! In the past, people who made an effort to get into focus groups were known as *focus groupies*. There is a fear that repeat participants will alter the results of focus group research. In the past decade, screening services have become available nationwide that allow researchers to discover whether a potential participant has been in a focus group in the past few months. This particular concern is unique to commercial market research focus groups.

Consumer focus groups have 10 to 12 participants. This appears to be based on the field experiences of moderators. It may have been that moderators found that often a portion of participants were reluctant to talk, sometimes as many as 30 percent, and if you invited a dozen people, you would almost always have enough talkers to get useful information. Moderators found that groups larger than 12 were harder to manage, tended to fragment into smaller conversations, and did not yield proportionally more insights.

Businesses hire professional focus group moderators to conduct their studies. There is a network of these people throughout the country. People learn to be market research moderators by taking classes and by being apprentices to master moderators. Some firms require aspiring moderators to observe and assist for several years before they moderate a group. They receive practical experience and coaching. Because of the added expense, this is the only time assistant researchers are used in commercial focus groups. They sit behind the one-way mirror, take notes, and may be responsible for writing a first draft of a report.

Speed is essential in market research groups. Clients want final reports within days of the last focus group. Professional moderators do not have time to do elaborate analysis based on transcripts. Reports are proprietary information and are rarely available to the public.

More on market research focus groups

If you would like to read more about focus groups using a market research approach, you might consider these sources:

Bystedt, J., Lynn, S., & Potts, D. (2003). *Moderating to the max*. Ithaca, NY: Paramount Market Publishing.

Greenbaum, T. L. (1999). *Moderating focus groups*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Langer, J. (2001). *The mirrored window*. Ithaca, NY: Paramount Market Publishing.

Academic Research Approach

For some time, academics dismissed focus group interviews as a research tool. They feared that allowing participants to hear one another produced contaminated data and analysis problems. Participants were not always consistent! Were people influencing each other? Was this an example of contamination? Were some people with strong personalities dominating others? This phenomenon does not occur in individual interviews. The group process seemed messy, confusing, and too complex. Academics weren't able to neatly isolate influencing factors.

In the early 1980s academics began looking at focus groups again. Some were wondering if focus groups could tap into a different kind of information than individual interviews or surveys. They could. For example, in our work on needs assessments with Midwestern farmers, we found that the survey process wasn't providing useable results. Later we discovered in focus groups that we weren't asking the right questions. We thought farmers would attend educational sessions if they indicated they needed the information on a needs assessment survey. In fact, farmers told us in focus groups, "Just because I need it, doesn't mean I'll go." The right question became "What would it take to get you to go?" They said they were more likely to go for these reasons:

- The experience seemed like it would be fun and useful.
- There was an opportunity to meet other farmers.
- The instructor had practical experience ("grease under their fingernails").
- They were personally told it would be a good course by someone they trusted, like their veterinarian, banker, or another farmer.

These findings made sense, and we wondered why we hadn't thought of them earlier. We had trapped ourselves into thinking that attendance was primarily influenced by a perception of need for the subject matter.

When academic researchers began doing focus groups, they built on their rich experiences with individual interviewing and content analysis. Academics looked at what market researchers were doing then adapted the process to include accepted academic research strategies and traditions.

Academics incorporate more transparency. They present the research planning, process and results for others to see. They invite outside comments and peer review, essential elements of academic research. Findings are available to academic colleagues as well as to the public. This is a major shift from market research focus groups. Market research reports are confidential, and access is severely restricted for fear of helping the competition. The position of the academic is this: "Unless my colleagues know how I recruited participants, conducted the groups, and performed the analysis, how can they adequately critique my work?" Academic promotion is influenced by peer review and publication in refereed journals, and these factors demand that colleagues be able to see the details of the process.

Rigor is expected. Analysis has to be defensible, systematic, and verifiable. Some of the earlier market research analysis was done mentally in the heads of moderators based on memory and a few notes. This is not acceptable in an academic environment. Researchers use transcripts and computer analysis programs to code, categorize, and interpret the findings.

Time lines are different. Academics are under very different timeframes than market researchers. Academic research studies often take months or years to complete. By contrast, market researchers needed to have studies completed in weeks.

People in academic environments learn to do focus groups by reading, taking courses, and doing the research. At times, the goal of academic research is not just to provide defensible results but also to enhance the capacity of graduate students. In market research, apprentices may watch for a year before conducting a focus group and then get another year of mentoring. This doesn't happen in academic training unless the graduate student is very lucky. But sometimes faculty add elements to the design to enrich the learning opportunities of the graduate student. For example, sometimes graduate students are asked to transcribe their focus groups. Not a popular thing to ask of a graduate student! A professional transcriptionist could type it faster, but then the graduate students would miss opportunities to closely review their moderating and become more intensely familiar with the data.

The location of the focus groups changes for academics. Focus group facilities are often not conveniently located, too expensive, or intimidating. A one-way mirror (that hides unknown viewers) probably doesn't limit consumer discussion of toothpaste, but it may be intimidating when community members discuss more sensitive topics. As a result, academics hold focus groups in low-cost, convenient locations such as community meeting rooms, restaurants, and homes.

The participants are different. Academics use focus groups to study community issues, solidarity, public health, education, the environment, policy issues, needs assessment, or morale. As a result, many different types of people are invited to focus groups. This includes low-income audiences, people of color, people who don't speak English, youth, international audiences, and others.

Academics may also provide incentives for participation. Although monetary incentives have been used to encourage people to participate in medical research, it's been less common in other fields. Researchers developed processes for providing these incentives.

More on academic focus groups

If you would like to read more about focus groups using an academic research approach, you might consider these sources:

Bloor, M., Frankland, J., Thomas, M., & Robson, K. (2002). *Focus groups in social research.* London: Sage.

Morgan, D. L. (1997). *Focus groups as qualitative research.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Vaughn, S., Schumm, J. S., & Sinagub, J. (1996). *Focus group interviews in education and psychology.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Public–Nonprofit Approach

At about the same time that academics were beginning to use focus groups, the public–nonprofit sector became interested. In the academic approach, the intent is to develop theory or to contribute to a body of research in a particular area. In the public–nonprofit approach the purpose is usually more immediate and practical.

Some organizations are concerned about how well they are doing, how to improve, how to attract more members, or how to keep members. Some want to know how to improve their community. Others want to know how to design a policy or program so people would use it. The studies are sometimes called *needs assessments, formative evaluations, process evaluations, climate studies,* or *customer satisfaction studies*. The purpose is not to develop theory but rather to make decisions, improve services or programs, and be responsive to customers. These groups have some similarity to the market research focus groups, except the product has changed.

Public health professionals were among the first to embrace focus group interviewing. Those working in prevention campaigns or in the emerging field of social marketing were quick to see the potential that focus groups offered. The social marketers borrowed many of the strategies from consumer marketing and adapted them to new products, services, and audiences. It was these public health professionals who were most aggressive in reaching new audiences. Academics had made some inroads, but it was the public health professionals who went into the neighborhoods, schools, Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) clinics, and migrant worker camps and listened. Low-income, disadvantaged, young, and other marginalized populations were included when new programs were designed. Public health professionals listen widely when they design programs to increase breast-feeding or vaccination rates or to prevent tobacco use, teen pregnancy, and violence.

Educational and service organizations use focus groups to determine what customers or potential customers want. How do adults want to learn? What topics are important? How should the agency deliver its services or products?

Government agencies began to use focus groups. Sometimes the studies related to employee satisfaction, such as when the postal service was concerned about employee morale. Other times, a unit of government wanted insight into customer satisfaction. In still other situations, focus groups were helpful in developing policies, rules, guidelines, and laws that were understandable and reasonable to the public. There is nothing more expensive to enforce than an unreasonable or ambiguous law. Focus groups provide clarity.

Religious groups ask about what their members or potential members want. What is worship? How can a religious group add meaning to your life? How can the church help you? What would it take to get you to participate in religious activities? In ways this was a switch because many of these religious organizations historically told participants the answers to such questions instead of listening to their members.

Some organizations are interested in designing new programs or services and want to understand how potential participants see an issue. Or they want to pilot-test ideas for programs. What do you like about this idea? What don't you like? What will it take to make this work?

These public–nonprofit groups are different in several ways.

- These groups are smaller than traditional market research focus groups. Instead of 10 to 12 participants, the groups tend to have 5 to 8 participants, similar to academic groups. Smaller groups allow each person a greater opportunity to talk. It allows for more in-depth conversation. Also, most tables are more suitable for five to eight people than for a dozen people.

- The moderator is changed. Instead of a professional moderator or an academic, the moderator is often an internal person with skills in evaluation, group process, or interviewing. Sometimes it is a volunteer from the community who is trusted and respected by the participants. Regularly, in these groups the most critical moderator skill is to develop a trusting environment. On sensitive topics—how I feel about merit pay, morale within the organization, or alcohol or drug use among people of a specific age, gender, race—participants are often more comfortable with a moderator who seems like them or is someone they trust.

- The location is typically within the community. One-way mirrors don't work with these topics. These focus groups are not a spectator sport. They are trusting, confidential sharing experiences in small groups.

- The time spent on analysis ranges from the quick market research approach to the academic approach depending on the audience and purpose of the groups. Often these groups want to know what the five to seven most important things are to pay attention to. This usually doesn't require detailed analysis using specialized computer software. But because decision makers often don't get a chance to see the groups (no one-way mirrors), they do want a report that provides enough evidence to make the findings credible.

- These organizations are usually quite open. Researchers let the participants and the community know the results of the study and the subsequent action steps. Care is taken to ensure confidentiality of each respondent, but findings are freely shared. In effect, this is an opposite approach to sharing than the marketing research environment.

More on public–nonprofit focus groups

If you would like to read more about focus groups using a public–nonprofit approach, you might consider these sources:

Debus, M. (2007). *Handbook for excellence in focus group research.* Washington, DC: Academy for Educational Development.

Morgan, D. L., & Krueger, R. A. (Eds.). (1998). *The focus group kit.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Participatory Approach

By the early 1990s, another approach to focus group research was emerging: that of involving nonresearchers as researchers. Up to this point, the prevailing wisdom was that only researchers could do research. Research had to be done in a particular way. Researchers believed it required years of training and experience to do it well.

The evolution is a bit fuzzy, but many of the early participatory focus group studies were driven by lack of resources. Information was needed, budgets were restricted, and some creative researchers began to enlist the help of volunteers. These volunteers offered their time and talent and thereby saved precious resources. They obtained useful data, and the process offered some unexpected benefits. The volunteers were changed! The process often influenced the volunteers in ways that were not anticipated. The volunteers now had greater insight into the program or topic. They became committed to the study and were tenacious in seeing that recommendations were followed. This was a surprising discovery. For years evaluators and other researchers were concerned about how to get people to use research or evaluation results, and now the answer seemed to emerge. If you want them to use it, then involve them in the process. The involvement couldn't be just tokenism but had to be a real, sincere sharing of power in the research study. The volunteers were not just workers but were partners and coresearchers. Often this meant the researchers needed to provide training, considerable coaching, lots of coordination and had to give up some control.

The participatory approach does have serious limitations. Consistency and coordination are major issues. The team members sometimes change a few questions or leave out some questions. Questions are sometimes asked differently from one group to another. Keeping the team working together is a major challenge. Training is critically important, especially hands-on experiences where volunteers get to practice their skills. Decision making sometimes becomes an issue. How does the academic researcher work within a community that wants and demands a shared role in decision making—including decisions about the research design and protocol? For some researchers it is frustrating and stressful. Others relish the opportunity.

Table 8.1 offers some highlights of the distinctions between these four focus group approaches.

Table 8.1 Characteristics of Focus Groups

Characteristic	Market Research	Academic	Public-Nonprofit	Participatory
Where popular?	Marketing research, particularly consumer products.	Universities, government agencies, foundations.	Local and state governments, community groups, religious organizations, foundations.	Community groups, foundations, local government, schools.
Group size?	10–12 people.	5–8 people.	5–8 people.	5–8 people.
Should participants know each other?	No. Strangers preferred in order to limit influence of past experiences.	Not an issue. Finding strangers may be impossible. People may know each other but should not be in positions of control over each other.	Not an issue. Sometimes it is an advantage, providing they are not in positions of control over each other.	Sometimes an advantage. People regularly know each other and trust has already developed within the group.

Characteristic	Market Research	Academic	Public–Nonprofit	Participatory
Are participants invited back for another focus group?	Avoided. The goal is to get respondents who are new to the topic.	Rarely.	Occasionally. This is a design used to determine perceptions of change over time.	Occasionally. This is a design used to determine perceptions of change over time.
Who moderates?	Professionals.	Faculty, graduate students, or qualified staff.	Qualified staff and occasional volunteers with special skills.	Volunteers from the community.
Where are focus groups held?	Special rooms with one-way mirrors and quality acoustics usually located in large cities or suburbs.	Public locations, classrooms, sometimes homes, sometimes special rooms with one-way mirrors.	Locations in the community such as schools, libraries, and so on.	Community locations and homes.
How are data captured?	Observers behind mirrors, audio and often video recording.	Field notes and audio recording. Sometimes video.	Field notes and audio recording.	Field notes and audio recording.
How are results analyzed?	Variable but often rapid first impressions given by the moderator or analyst. Sometimes transcripts.	Usually transcripts followed by rigorous procedures.	Usually abridged transcripts and field notes.	Participatory analysis: team members meet to share what they heard through oral and written summaries of groups they moderated. Field notes and audio tapes available.
Who gets copies of reports?	Only the sponsor. Reports are proprietary.	Academics or public officials. Results appear in academic journals.	Reports used within the organization and sent back to the community. Shared with participants.	Team members share results with the community often at open meetings as well as in written format.
Who is the decision maker?	Small number of corporate executives.	Not applicable. Study not intended to result in specific decisions.	Many decision makers including boards, task forces, and the general public.	Many decision makers.
Time needed to complete study?	Short time period. Usually completed in a month.	Long time period. Often six months or more.	Time needed will vary. Usually several months.	Long time period. Often four to six months or more.
Who can watch the focus group?	A number of observers are possible but only behind the one-way mirror.	One or two other academics or staff.	Very limited. Usually only an assistant moderator who takes notes.	Very limited, usually only an assistant moderator to take notes.
Style of reports?	Oral reports or brief written reports. The sponsor observes the group and interprets results through a debriefing with moderator. Increasing use of CD reports with video clips.	Written reports following an academic style or journal format.	Written and oral reports in conversational style.	Oral reports by team members. Longer written report completed by team analyst.

Is it a focus group?

There is a tendency to lump various group processes together and call them focus groups. We've seen this trend in media reports as well in market research and in academic research. It is tempting to cluster similarly looking things together, but this can be misleading. The objectives and goals might be markedly different from that of focus group interviewing. For example, we believe it is a mistake to label the group processes of Paulo Freire as focus groups. Freire conducted homogeneous groups where individuals shared their thoughts and ideas with a critical friend for the purpose of achieving self-awareness and social or political action. The term of *participatory action research* is more accurate. Focus groups by contrast are different. Focus groups have predetermined questions that focus the conversation. This focus is determined by the researcher, and the goal is not immediate action but rather later decisions by those who are conducting the study.

More on participatory focus groups

If you would like to read more about focus groups using a participatory approach, you might consider this source:

Krueger, R. A., & King, J. A. (1998). *Involving community members in focus groups.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Summary

We have described four different styles of focus group research. The market research approach is by far the most popular and widely recognized. In fact, market research focus groups have become a well-established, extensive industry with professional moderators, special focus group facilities, and services to assist in recruitment, screening, recording, transcribing, and analyzing results. When people talk of focus groups, it is the market research focus group that typically comes to mind. These groups are distinguished by their tendency to include about 10 participants gathered in a special room equipped with a one-way mirror.

But other styles have emerged and are making distinct contributions to our understanding of focus group research. The academic research approach incorporates openness, rigor, and peer review.

The public–nonprofit approach borrows elements from the academic research tradition in terms of careful analysis and openness but then seeks to be more decision oriented as opposed to developing theory.

The participatory approach invites nonresearchers to be part of the research team, thereby increasing commitment, interest, and the likelihood that the results will be used.

We offer these categories as a way of letting people know that not all focus groups studies use the same approach. Of course these categories aren't mutually exclusive. We have been involved in studies where academics are working with a public agency. They want to publish, and they want to make practical decisions based on the study. Or public agencies often engage community groups in participatory focus groups.

Throughout all these styles, the focus groups still retain their distinctive quality of having a planned discussion using predetermined questions, guided by a skillful moderator, conducted in a permissive and nonthreatening manner, for the purposes of providing insight.

9 Focus Group Interviewing With Young People

What Lies Ahead

In this chapter we describe:

- Get the Right Moderator!
- Keep Age Range Within Two Years
- Avoid Close Friends and Kids Who Hang Out Together
- Get Them Talking to Each Other
- Ask Age-Appropriate Questions
- Be Aware of Age-Related Behaviors
- Shorten the Time of the Group
- Use Food
- Find a Friendly Location
- Get Permission
- Hang Loose

Focus groups can help you discover how young people think about issues, programs, and opportunities; however, they require special moderator skills and attention to logistics. (When we say *young people,* we mean upper grade school through high school.) Here are tips that will make these groups more successful.

Get the Right Moderator!

Some adults have a special gift for interacting with kids. They like kids. They have a knack for getting kids to talk. They exude trust, respect, tolerance, humor, and a willingness to listen. They know how to talk to kids, how to listen to them, how to joke and have fun with them. Often teachers, youth workers, and volunteers in scouts or 4-H have these skills. These adults are easy to spot because kids will be around them, there will often be laughter, and they will be talking to each other. If you want to conduct focus groups with young people and you've not been around them recently, find one of these adults and get his or her help.

Another alternative is to consider having an older teen conduct the group. Maybe a high school- or college-age person moderates the group of younger people. It is important to provide the teen moderators with special instruction and considerable practice before they conduct the focus groups. In our experience the decision of youth versus adult moderators is a toss-up. In several prevention efforts, focus groups with youth in grades 7 through 11 were conducted by high school-age moderators. The results were impressive and convinced the sponsoring organization of the wisdom of involving youth moderators. The teen-led groups were successful in part because they had removed the image of adult authority, and that prompted sharing on sensitive topics. The decisive factor in conducting successful focus groups, however, is less likely to be the moderator's age and more likely to relate to his or her ability to get young people to feel comfortable with the topic, the process, and the environment.

Keep Age Range Within Two Years

Be attentive to the age range of participants. The generally accepted rule is to have an age range of no more than two years among participants. Developmentally, youth change a great deal over a period of two years, and their interests, experiences, and socialization can be dramatically different. Also, youth can be very age conscious and have been known to dismiss valuable comments merely because a younger person said them. And younger participants may defer to older participants.

Avoid Close Friends and Kids Who Hang Out Together

When you ask young people who should be invited to a group discussion, the most frequent answer is "my friends." Teens will tell you that they are most comfortable when they are with their buddies. However, we have found that this selection strategy limits the range and quality of the comments. In most of these groups of friends, only a few pack leaders talk. Consequently, listening to a clique of six teens is about the same as listening to the leader. We've had more success with mixed groups than with intact groups.

Get Them Talking to Each Other

Youth may be uncertain about how adults expect them to act. Should they talk to each other? Or is that frowned upon? Do you have to raise your hand? In a number of situations, kids get punished if they talk to other kids. So, the moderator must not only say that they can talk to each other, but the moderator must also model the behavior and encourage the kids to share ideas. Skillful moderators of youth focus groups make extra effort to get young people talking to each other at the beginning of the group. Faith Gibson (2007) cites the benefits of using a chart to list favorite bands, TV programs, or three items to take to a deserted island.

Young people may be skeptical of the moderator's claim that all opinions are wanted and that both negative and positive views are appreciated. Young people regularly find themselves in situations where adults seemingly want feedback but then react in an unpleasant manner when contrary or negative ideas are expressed. Ask the young people to be respectful of other opinions, and listen to what others have to say, but then share their points of view.

Young people are able to communicate in many ways, such as through art, drama, pictures, music, and fantasies. Sometimes the most powerful questions are those where young people act out the answers, tell stories, or use projective questions.

Screening youth on their ability to express themselves

Some market research firms that specialize in conducting focus groups with young people conduct a special screening before the focus group. They over recruit by a substantial amount. If they are conducting a focus group with 6 to 7 youth, they will recruit until they have confirmations from 15 to 20 youth. They invite the youth, along with a parent, into a larger informal meeting room where food is available. For about 20 to 30 minutes, members of the research team walk around and chat with the potential participants. They deliberately ask the children or teens a number of questions that go beyond factual answers. These questions ask for opinions, comparisons, judgments, and critical thinking skills. Recruiters listen to identify the young people who are able to articulate how they feel and provide sufficient descriptive background for their positions. Then, the handful of youth who are articulate are invited to come into another room where the focus group begins. The remaining youth and parents might be asked to complete a short written survey, given the incentive for participating, thanked for coming, and dismissed.

This strategy solves one of the persistent problems of youth focus groups: respondents who are unable or unwilling to articulate their opinions. However, one of the risks of this strategy is that those who are articulate might be different and unrepresentative of the target audience.

Ask Age-Appropriate Questions

One of the challenges of youth focus groups is to get participants used to talking to each other in a conversational manner. Conversations, which seem so easy for adults, can be challenging for young people. Rarely are they in formal groups where conversation is encouraged. Most of their experience with groups involves one person talking at a time to the person in charge.

In order to get off on the right foot, we will invest 10 to 15 minutes on conversational topics of interest to the youth participants. We might discuss music, favorite celebrities, video games, or other topics that are easy to talk about just to get them in the habit of talking to each other. Then, once they are comfortable with the conversational mode, we will move into the questions guiding the study.

Keep in mind that, when asked for their opinions, young people will have fewer life experiences to draw upon than those of adults. “I don’t know” can sometimes be the truly accurate answer.

When developing the questions, keep the following in mind:

- Avoid questions that can be answered with a single word or a phrase. If a question can be answered yes or no, revise it. Adults may assume that the moderator really wants elaboration on the answer, but young people often give one-word answers.

- Avoid questions that threaten the independence and freedom of young people. For example, suppose the moderator wanted to know how decisions are made about which high school courses to enroll in. In this situation the moderator should avoid asking who makes the decision, for few teens want to admit in front of their peers that their parents influence the decision. Instead, it may be more productive to ask teens to think back to the last time the decision was made and describe what happened.

- Avoid questions that are incriminating. Don’t ask young people to describe their illegal activity. Instead, ask young people to describe what others do. “How do young people in this community get alcohol?”

Be Aware of Age-Related Behaviors

Veteran moderators of youth focus groups tell of specific age-related behaviors. Focus groups with kids younger than nine are difficult because kids of this age haven't had many group experiences where they are expected to listen to others before they respond. Focus groups at junior high age (ages 12–14) are chaotic, and it's wise to keep boys and girls separate, even on mundane topics. After age 14 or 15, young people seem to be better at listening and sharing views and slightly less affected by gender differences than those of junior high age. However, some moderators always separate kids by gender.

Elementary age boys goof off a lot. Get yourself ready. You won't believe what they do unless you've got one of your own. Boys will put the name tents on their heads, fall off their chairs, compete in performance nose blowing, and play with anything on the table. They wave their hands wildly while someone else is talking, only to say, "Uh, I forgot," when called on. They seem to have a need to attract the attention of others. When you've got eight little guys who want attention at the same time, you're gonna have fun. By contrast, elementary-age girls generally won't engage in such behavior. They seem to be better at listening to one another and participating in a discussion.

Shorten the Time of the Group

Youth focus groups are shorter and have fewer questions than focus groups with adults. Instead of the standard 10 to 12 questions in a two-hour focus group, you might have 6 to 8 questions in a one-hour focus group. Young people repeatedly find themselves in environments where change or relocation takes place every 45 to 60 minutes. If the researcher has a two-hour focus group discussion, it is likely that there will be a bunch of bored kids for the second hour. Therefore, limit the questions and incorporate things to touch, do, or respond to.

Use Food

Food is magic. Don't overlook the influence of food with young people. Pizza, snacks, and soda make the discussion more comfortable, relaxed, and enjoyable. Talk to young people before you select the food. Get their advice on what to serve.

Find a Friendly Location

Be cautious about the location. Some locations, such as schools, represent places where young people are subordinate to adults. Homes of other youth, restaurants, and public meeting places are usually considered more neutral. In many studies the location may not be important, but in certain places adults are clearly in authority and may have rules about the topic, like smoking. Then it is best to leave the adult-controlled environment and use a neutral location.

Consider having the young people sit on the floor or in lounge chairs rather than at a table. This sends the message that this conversation is comfortable and casual.

Get Permission

Typically, you need parental permission when conducting youth focus groups. The researcher should contact the sponsoring and cooperating organizations to determine proper protocol regarding parent or guardian approval. In some cases when the focus group is part of ongoing organizational activity—such as in fitting within objectives of the school and conducted during school hours, then permission may not be essential. The need for permission for youth focus groups has a double purpose. The first purpose is to meet legal expectations of informing the child and parent. The second purpose is to inform the parent of the proposed focus group interview. In a number of cases, researchers have wisely gone beyond the letter of the law and provided considerable background information to parents or guardians.

Consider the potential of increasing the value of youth focus groups by inviting those who drove them to the focus group to participate in a focus group. These parents, grandparents, and older siblings regularly have valuable insights into the topic affecting the target youth audience. We have found that these individuals often appreciate knowing more about the study. Of course, when you use this procedure, you have separate focus groups for the target youth audience and for those who drove them to the location.

Hang Loose

Finally, be ready to hang loose. Youth focus groups are fun, in part because the unexpected regularly happens. The variation from group to group is greater than with adult groups, and there is excitement around every corner. Keep your sense of humor, show respect, and be ready to improvise.

When we work with teams of researchers, we often suggest that the moderators of youth focus groups take special steps to get themselves ready. Spend time in conversations with young people of the age of your target audience. Get acquainted with the language, the mannerisms, and how they express themselves. Go to locations where youth of the target age hang out, and watch what is happening. The more familiar you are with this audience, the greater will be your comfort level.

Summary

Focus groups with young people are an effective way of obtaining insights, but the researcher must have the right moderator, engaging questions, the proper procedures, and an environment that promotes conversation. When the researcher meets these expectations, the focus group yields impressive results.

10 International and Cross-Cultural Focus Group Interviewing

What Lies Ahead

In this chapter we describe:

- Ethnic or Minority Racial Groups
- International Groups and Organizations

Ethnic or Minority Racial Groups

Market researchers are expanding their interests beyond white, middle-class consumers. They are now listening to communities of color; businesses are recognizing the huge potential of these markets. In addition, public-sector organizations are using focus groups with ethnically diverse communities to better understand needs, develop appropriate intervention strategies, and address concerns. Researchers are using focus groups to listen to people from various backgrounds, cultures, and nationalities.

When planning and conducting focus groups with ethnic or minority racial groups, there are several factors to consider:

Sample Carefully

When planning racial or ethnic groups, the researcher should keep in mind that there are many ways in which people of one ethnic or racial category are alike and different. Too often the researcher assumes that the homogeneity should be primarily by race or ethnicity. Caution: Assuming race or ethnicity is the primary distinguishing factor may cause you to overlook other critical factors such as income, education, age, gender, culture, or language. In focus group interviews where ethnicity or race is the primary factor for inclusion in a group, then there is a tendency for participants to identify race or ethnicity as the dominate issue and for other factors to become subordinate. However, when race or ethnicity is mixed in the focus group, the discussion becomes more nuanced and complex.

A strategy to consider is to use several different groupings of participants. Some groups might be based on racial or ethnic categories, but then others might be based on geography, income, age, or other factors. This allows the researcher the opportunity to compare and contrast the results.

Focus groups with ethnic or minority racial groups

- Sample Carefully
- Get the Right Moderator
- Ask for Advice
- Work With Local Groups and Organizations
- Be Aware of Recent Events and History
- Consider Using Rituals
- Select Respectful and Appropriate Foods
- Ask People to Speak for Themselves

Get the Right Moderator

Usually one of the first areas of concern is who should moderate these groups. There are often advantages in having a moderator with characteristics similar to the participants. Some groups have historically been controlled and guided by white people in positions of power and influence. Within some groups there is a tendency to be cautious about talking to outsiders and particularly outsiders who are in power. Researchers who adhere to this argument tend to favor a moderator of the same ethnic or racial background as the participants.

But just because moderators have a skin color or ethnicity similar to participants doesn't guarantee that they will be trusted and effective. Indeed, we've had disasters with academics from a racial or ethnic background who weren't trusted by people within the local community or when we thought the key factor was race or ethnicity and later found that the moderator was seen as an outsider because he or she came from a different tribe, clan, or community. Repeatedly we've been told that the race or ethnicity of the moderator is not as important as the ability to be sensitive and respectful of the target audience.

Ask for Advice

Ask people like those you want to invite to the focus group for advice. This is a key step in planning focus groups within different cultures, communities, races, and backgrounds. Every community and neighborhood has wise people who should be sought out when planning a study. These people are aware of the traditions, customs, and local circumstances that will make the study successful. Go to them and seek their wisdom. Don't stop with one. Go to several. Ask who should lead these groups. Ask about scheduling, incentives, food, and also try out some of the questions. Don't expect that they will all agree, but listen for the reasons behind the advice.

Who can sanction the study? Without approval the study may not be feasible. A task force or group of elders, influentials, or respected leaders might be invited to provide advice. Also, who can best offer advice on improving the study design, offer feedback on recruitment strategies, or assist in developing questions? These individuals may be different from the first group in that they may be more similar to the participants, more familiar with research protocol, or more familiar with the topic of the study. These individuals ensure that the focus group methodology is culturally sensitive and acceptable. Finally, who can assist with certain critical tasks in the focus group process, such as recruitment, moderating, or analysis and interpretation? The researcher might want to involve talented local individuals who are willing to receive instruction, offer their advice, and assist with these tasks.

Work With Local Groups and Organizations

Consider working with local organizations, institutions, and groups. Religious groups, athletic organizations, neighborhood agencies, and other organizations may be established and trusted in the community. A number of successful focus group studies have been conducted by developing linkages with these established local organizations and working with boards, professionals, and volunteers who are known and trusted in the community.

Be Aware of Recent Events and History

Local residents can also help you find out about recent events or traditions that might influence the study. Occasionally, there are events that might change the plan, timing, types of participants, or questions of the study. In some communities there can be long-standing issues relating to trust, respect, or past experiences that are critical for the researcher to understand.

Consider Using Rituals

Ritual and tradition are important. When conducting focus groups it is essential that researchers understand the culture and history. The researcher should consider when and where people talk, who is present during discussions, who is entitled to ask questions, and what protocol is used when asking questions.

Select Respectful and Appropriate Foods

Be attentive to foods. The food may take on special meaning and serve as a unifying factor or a trust-building experience. Listen to local advice when selecting foods. Food seems to be a consistent factor in promoting discussion across ethnic communities.

Ask People to Speak for Themselves

Finally, remember that each person in a focus group really only speaks for him- or herself. No one person speaks on behalf of any group of people. Don’t expect that one person can tell you what is appropriate, offensive, tasteful, or wise. People speak from personal experiences and values, which may vary widely. It is critical to seek multiple viewpoints.

Focus groups with international groups and organizations

- You Are an Outsider—You Need the Help of Insiders
- Get Permission and Authorization to Conduct the Study
- Organize the Focus Group So It Seems Natural to the Community
- Discourage Onlookers
- Be Thoughtful About Advanced Preparation
- Use a Local Team
- Use the Local Language
- Be Less Concerned About Time
- Provide Adequate Confidentiality
- Provide Benefit to Participants

International Groups and Organizations

On the international scene, focus groups are becoming increasingly popular for social marketing efforts, for identifying concerns, and for determining solution strategies for issues relating to public health, poverty, education, and others. These international studies are conducted by a variety of sponsors, ranging from private corporations, governmental agencies, international assistance programs, as well as private religious and philanthropic foundation and groups.

You Are an Outsider—You Need the Help of Insiders

Here is a way of thinking about international focus group research. There are two categories of people: insiders and outsiders. Insiders have traditions, customs, and norms that help people relate to each other. Insiders know what can be said, how it ought to be said, and the range of normal behavior for that village, neighborhood, or community. Those who live there or who have deep roots in that community know the procedures, rules, and customs that have served their community for many, many years. You are the outsider, and you have special challenges to overcome in order to complete your study.

You might look like the people in the community. You might even use the same language, but you are likely still an outsider. In fact, you might have been born in that community, but you might still be considered an outsider. As an outsider you will get filtered information. Local residents will make assumptions about you, your motives, and what might result from the focus group, and it may be difficult to change these perceptions. The degree to which participants filter what they say is unknown and is often situational depending on the topic, the risks of revealing, and the residents' perception of the purpose of the research. For you to be successful in your research effort, you need the help of insiders. Within communities there are often insiders who serve as gatekeepers. These individuals are able to open the doors for the researcher. These insiders vouch for the outsider. They may be present at the beginning of the focus group or even serve as a host for the focus group. They often are asked to assist with the recruiting. And they offer useful advice on timing, location, incentives, and other logistical concerns.

Poultry farmers in Thailand were interviewed about the procedures they follow when there is an outbreak of avian flu in their flocks. When the governmental veterinarian was present in the focus groups, the answers were slightly different, likely because the presence of the veterinarian conveyed signals that there was a proper and correct answer. Insiders can help you spot things like this that might influence how participants talk.

In some international studies you want to find out about things that might be sensitive, personal, or private. There may be questions that are not asked, even by insiders. Sharing information could make others in their family or community vulnerable. The information that is given to the outside researcher might affect future resources or opportunities. There are thousands of reasons why the people in a village may be cautious about sharing.

Get Permission and Authorization to Conduct the Study

Several different levels of permission may be needed when conducting international research and evaluation studies. First, you may need formal permission to undertake the study within the country. Often there may be a partner agency or organization within the country that can take leadership in obtaining this permission. Second, you may need permission from regional or district-level officials who might have interest or concerns about the study. Third, consider the role of local gatekeepers who are needed to sanction the study at the local level. Your success at the local level may depend on the endorsement of local individuals, elders, or leaders.

Organize the Focus Group So It Seems Natural to the Community

Organize the focus group so that it resembles natural group discussions within the community. When using focus groups, give thought to how people in the village normally talk about a topic. Reflect on the topic of the focus group. On topics such as this, when and where are they discussed? Who is present in the discussion, and who is not present? Are there certain protocols that guide the discussion? For example, do certain people function as elders, where they listen to alternative views and, when they offer an opinion, it is the final statement and no discussion is expected after the elder has spoken? Are there certain individuals who act as opinion leaders who tend to have a disproportionate role in guiding opinions?

Years ago researchers were studying decision making in rural villages in India. There was a perception that certain men in the village were the decision makers because it was the men who made the public pronouncements. But, after careful research, the actual decision-making process was different from expected. In the villages studied, the topic would tend to originate in the discussions among the men, and usually the matter was not decided immediately. Instead, the discussion was postponed, and the men then discussed the issue with the women in their families. The women then continued the discussion while washing clothes at the river and often arrived at a consensus. The women told the men of the discussion and the men then met together to announce the results. To an outsider, the men seemed to be making the decisions. But in reality, it was the women washing clothes at the river who arrived at the decision. In this situation, it would have been a mistake to conduct focus groups only with the men in the village. More insightful discussions could be conducted while women were washing clothes.

Interviewing in a remote village

On a recent visit to a developing country, the author had to travel some distance to conduct a series of interviews with local residents in a remote village. It took a while to travel to the village, and the mere arrival in the village attracted attention because few vehicles arrived that day. When walking to the interview site, the researcher was surrounded and followed by a number of curious children and adults. While the interviews were being conducted, the researcher noticed that there were local residents with their heads in windows and doors listening and watching the interview. Consider how the interviewee must feel. You have a special visitor in your home. This is a rare occasion because the visitor speaks only English, arrives in a car, and is accompanied by local influentials. You are asked questions while all of your neighbors are watching and listening. Is this a permissive and nonthreatening environment? No.

Discourage Onlookers

International focus groups are conducted in a wide variety of settings. It could range from a classroom, a home, or an open field to a public meeting space. One of the problems that occurs is when others notice that a discussion is being held, and they walk over to listen and perhaps even participate. Sometimes this will have no influence on the discussion, but in other situations it could greatly alter the conversation. The researcher ought to give thought to this and consider how this situation might be handled. For example, you might consider holding the discussion in a private location where visitors are unlikely or where the group is not visible to outsiders. Or, the moderator might be attentive to the presence of onlookers and avoid sensitive questions while onlookers are present. Or, another member of the research team might engage the onlookers in a conversation to deflect attention from the focus group. Hennink (2007) has an excellent discussion of this concern.

Be Thoughtful About Advanced Preparation

Learn all you can about the village from interviews, written materials, and other sources. Learn about the history, issues, concerns, and people and how the topic of your research is regarded by village members.

In most communities around the world, the researcher's visit is arranged by someone in advance. Someone (often from a nongovernmental organization [NGO] or governmental agency) makes contact with the local village authorities and arranges and schedules the interviews. Village leaders are told of the purpose of the study. It is at this time that subtle clues are given about the types of responses that are desired. Someone in the village must select the participants to be interviewed, and care is needed to ensure that the people identified fit the screens of the study. Inadvertently, participants might be selected because they speak English, will give positive comments about the government, will support the village leaders, or perhaps are related to the village leader. Give careful thought to how people are selected to participate.

Questions asked of the researcher

Recently one of our colleagues, Pam, was invited to conduct focus groups in rural Pakistan on the topic of safe drinking water. The focus groups were designed to listen to women in the village. Before she began the study, she visited an influential local woman who could sanction the study and offer advice on how to proceed. In this visit, the influential woman asked Pam three questions:

Q1: What is your motive for doing this study?
Q2: When you pray, what do you pray for?
Q3: Who tells you what to pray for?

These are not questions that researchers normally expect, but they were important to the women in the village, and the answers gave clues about the researcher and the study.

Use a Local Team

Consider using a team of insiders to help you conduct the focus groups. You are the coach, trainer, mentor, and cheerleader for the team. Select individuals for the team because of their connections, because they are trusted insiders, and because they have people skills. Spend time with them demonstrating how a focus group works and how to use the questions. Pay particular attention to achieving moderator neutrality whereby moderators do not share their personal views on the topic. Conduct the focus groups in the local dialects and have the local moderator translate the focus groups into the language of analysis. For more insight into how to identify, prepare, and mentor a team see *Involving Community Members in Focus Groups* (Krueger & King, 1998).

Use the Local Language

Conduct the groups in the primary language of the participants. Avoid interpreters in the focus group. This means that the moderator should be fluent in the language of the participants. If the moderator is not fluent, find someone who is and train him or her to lead the group. Have notes taken in the same language the moderator is using. Then translate the notes or audio recording back into the language used for analysis and reporting.

Be Less Concerned About Time

Each culture has a distinct sense of time. The group may not begin at the designated time, and the two-hour time limit may be unimportant. The critical factor is the quality of the information that the researcher is obtaining. Researchers conducting focus groups in Inuit villages in Arctic regions conduct focus groups that last most of the afternoon and into the evening. The focus group is scheduled at a certain time in the early afternoon, but participants arrive when they are ready and continue discussing until they feel they are done. The only way out of the village is the small plane that arrives the next day, so the researcher conducts the groups in a relaxed time schedule that is respectful of local customs and traditions.

Provide Adequate Confidentiality

Don't forget the importance of confidentiality. Depending on what has happened in the past, participants may not necessarily trust the researchers. Avoid group discussions on topics that can put individuals at risk after the researcher leaves the village or community. And remember that the researcher cannot guarantee that others in the group will maintain confidentiality. Participants might leave the group and repeat comments to others in the community. Be attentive to the importance of personal safety. In some societies, it may be risky to be critical of those in positions of power, and the researcher ought to avoid placing individual participants in positions of risk. This is where individual interviews ought to be used instead of focus groups.

Provide Benefit to Participants

Reflect on how the study might benefit local participants. Consider the manner in which the results might be communicated back to the community. Be thoughtful about honest promises of benefit, and be ready to articulate these to local influentials and participants. Consider conducting an exit visit with local influentials before leaving the community to share what you have learned.

More on international focus groups

If you would like to read more about focus groups in the international environment, you might consider this source:

Hennink, M. M. (2007). *International focus group research: A handbook for the health and social sciences*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Hennink offers valuable insights on a variety of topics that concern the international researcher.

Summary

The focus group is able to produce meaningful information and do so in a manner that shows respect for traditions and uses language differences and culture as an advantage. The researcher must approach each audience with respect, seeking their wisdom. The researcher must be sensitive to establishing an environment where these individuals feel comfortable in talking. When the researcher meets these expectations, the focus group yields impressive results.

11 Telephone and Internet Focus Group Interviewing

What Lies Ahead

In this chapter we describe:

- Focus Groups on the Telephone
- Focus Groups on the Internet
- Incentives in Telephone or Internet Focus Groups

Focus Groups on the Telephone

Focus group discussions can be conducted on the phone—a great option for listening to people who are geographically dispersed. With a conference call hookup, the moderator can lead a focus group discussion with people scattered around the country. Participants, who would be difficult to get together physically, can interact without the time and cost associated with travel.

Telephone focus groups work particularly well for getting opinions and feedback from busy professionals. We have used phone focus groups to better understand a problem, assess needs, pilot-test ideas, and evaluate programs and policies. We have used them to listen to state foresters, genomic researchers, pastors of different denominations, and farmers dealing with pests—busy people who were unlikely to drive or fly great distances for a two-hour conversation but who were more than happy to fit in an hour conversation.

The principle disadvantage of telephone focus groups is that the researcher can't observe the nonverbal communication. Much is gained in focus groups by having people together, watching participants for signs of agreement, interest, or boredom, smiles, frowns, excitement, delight, or anger. The moderator can't see if someone is tuning out of the conversation and paying more attention to the newspaper, reviewing documents, or working on the computer. A telephone focus group lacks the richness of evidence characteristic of in-person focus groups. However, some people argue that telephone focus groups are less intimidating for participants precisely because they can't see one another and can't see signs of approval or disapproval from other participants or the moderator.

Telephone focus groups can be conducted with varying levels of sophistication. At one extreme, the group can be conducted with limited resources and resemble a conference phone call. With more sophisticated telephone equipment, it is possible to have a console with lights and names to identify speakers, special switching devices that allow only one person to speak at a time, and lights that indicate when others are attempting to talk. The more complicated conversations will likely be restricted to organizations that are able to set up and maintain the necessary equipment that is needed for successful operation. The basic telephone focus group, however, is robust, reasonably low cost, and provides an excellent alternative to the face-to-face focus group.

When we do telephone focus groups, we decrease the time, number of participants, and number of questions. Two hours is too long to be on the phone. We recommend one-hour telephone focus groups. Because we have less time, we recruit only four or five people for a phone focus group, and we limit the number of questions we ask. There is something else that we do for phone groups that we don't usually do for in-person groups: We send out the questions ahead of time. This seems to make the short time we have more productive. People know where we are going, know what they want to say, and will stick with us mentally, even when we aren't together physically. Sending questions in advance provides participants with clues about the time schedule and the level of detail needed in the questions. We've found that telephone focus groups without sharing questions tend to be more rambling, unfocused, and harder to moderate.

Some have argued that telephone focus groups are less intimidating because participants cannot see each other. Participants cannot detect signals of approval or disapproval from other participants or the moderator.

The Sequence of the Telephone Focus Group

Let's examine the chronological sequence of setting up and conducting a telephone focus group.

Before the Telephone Focus Group

- Determine your logistics. Set the time. Decide how the call will be made. Will someone call participants, or will participants call in? The options for how this can be done are changing quickly. Ask your organization's technology person for help.
- Use the focus group as one of your incentives. Experts are often interested in what other experts have to say on the topic. We promote that as one of the incentives, "and you'll have a chance to hear what three or four other foresters have to say on the topic."
- The invitation to participate can be made by phone, mail, or e-mail to participants several weeks in advance. (With certain types of experts, you may need to get on their calendar earlier.) At the time of invitation, confirm their direct line phone number and e-mail address.
- Soon after the invitation is accepted, send a confirmation letter reminding participants of date, time, and instructions for connecting with the conference call. Let people know that you expect to begin promptly.
- Anticipate the amount of time you will allow for each question.
- Decide how you will record the conversation. Ask if your conference call vendor is able to record the conversations. Or consider recording devices that attach to your phone. Or put your phone on speaker and use a digital recorder. Test the recording device to make sure it works and that you are not picking up unwanted background noise.
- Encourage participants to use a phone where they will be comfortable for an hour and have some privacy. We gently discourage cell phones and speaker phones because of sound quality, comfort, and security.
- Sometimes we will have visuals, handouts, or illustrations that we want participants to discuss during the call. We send these out in advance via e-mail or regular mail. Be sure each visual is clearly labeled for easy identification.
- Optional: Consider making a reminder call 15 minutes before the focus group.

During the Telephone Focus Group

- The participants call into a designated number, or the operator calls and connects the participants.
- Ask a research colleague to take notes during the discussion. This individual doesn't participate in the discussion but takes field notes and may pass notes to the moderator during the focus group. This second member of the research team is the thoughtful listener who helps determine what topics are missing or in need of more discussion.
- Listen for clarity and sound volume when participants join the session. If problems exist, contact the operator or reconnect the participant. Be sure that you can hear each participant and that each participant can hear other participants. If the clarity or volume is poor, you might have the person hang up and call back, perhaps on a different phone. If the problem persists, you may need to switch the

person to an individual interview to be conducted at a later time.

- Welcome participants, and have them identify themselves as they sign in.
- Small talk is appropriate while waiting for others to join the discussion. In fact it serves a valuable function in ensuring uniform sound quality as well as causing the participants to relax and feel comfortable. Stick with noncontroversial topics, and try some lighthearted questions on all participants. "What's the weather like today in Cleveland?" "What do you most like to do in your free time?" "What's your location?"
- Once a sufficient number have joined the discussion, you should begin the focus group. Begin as soon as possible because you only have one hour.
- Welcome the participants once again.
- Give a short overview of the study.
- Give the ground rules. (Note the suggestions in the Possible Ground Rules box.)
- Begin the focus group questions.
- Monitor time carefully and keep on schedule. Estimate the amount of time needed for each question. Allocate more time for your more important questions.
- Bring closure to the group by asking ending questions (see Valuable Questions box).

Following the Telephone Focus Group

- Check the audio recording to be sure that you have a useable and clear recording of the focus group.
- Conduct a debriefing with research colleagues who took field notes during the conversation.
- Label and file your field notes for analysis.
- Analyze the results using an analytic strategy discussed in Chapter 6.

Possible ground rules for telephone focus groups

- If for some reason you get disconnected, call XXX-XXX-XXXX to reconnect.
- Let me know if you need to unexpectedly leave our discussion. Just go ahead and interrupt.
- The discussion will last XX minutes. Please stay with us until we end. Some of the most important questions will occur at the end of our discussion. We will adjourn promptly at XX:XX.
- You should have the following items in front of you. (Name the items.) If you do not have them, let us know immediately; we will e-mail them to you.
- I will be asking a limited number of questions. The questions (or topics) are listed in front of you. I don't expect that everyone will answer every question. But I don't want to leave anyone out of the conversation. If you have an opinion that has not been expressed, I encourage you to share it. If I don't hear from you on some important questions, I may call on you.
- We are recording our conversation so we don't miss any of the comments. No names will be attached in any report that is prepared.
- It's helpful if you state your name before you make your comment. For example, "This is Dick," and then make your

comment. This helps us, and it also helps the rest of you keep track of the conversation.

- We would like to be on a first name basis. Let's take a moment and get acquainted.
- I'll do a roll call, and when you hear your name, I'd like you to introduce yourself and tell us where you are located.

Questions in the Telephone Focus Group

The questions in a telephone focus group differ slightly from those used for in-person focus groups in several respects. The questions are often given out in advance of the telephone focus group, in part to inform participants of the scope of the discussion and to convey a sense of time remaining in the discussion. Because of the absence of visual clues or body language in the telephone focus group, the only way participants can get a sense of the remaining time is to have a list of questions.

The number of questions must be limited in 60-minute telephone focus groups to five to eight questions. Always have a few extra questions in the event that the questions move more quickly than you anticipated. Just as in the normal focus group, the first question is answered by each participant and consists of a nonthreatening, often factual question that doesn't denote status or hierarchy.

Focus your questions, and place the more important questions later in the script. Sequence your questions so that they flow smoothly from one question to the next. Consider asking questions that invite participants to take a moment to reflect and to list or rate items before they speak. The moderator might want to keep track of who is answering and not answering questions and consider calling on those who are less talkative. Some moderators use a round-robin strategy where they ask each participant to comment on each question. Rather than having a discussion, participants just wait until they are called on and may tune out until the next question. Occasionally, the moderator might encourage the discussion by saying, "Let's take a few minutes and discuss this topic." Or "Any other thoughts?" Include one or more ending questions as you conclude the group. The all things considered question works well at the end of the telephone focus group.

Telephone focus group questions with state public health leaders in genomics

1.	Tell us your name and what state you work in.	5 min.
2.	We want to talk about both the opportunities and barriers related to integrating genomics into public health programs. Let's start with the barriers. What are the barriers to integrating genomics into ongoing public health programs?	10 min.
3.	What opportunities are there for integrating genomics into ongoing public health programs?	10 min.
4.	What is necessary or needed to accomplish this integration? (Resources, skills, knowledge, policies?)	10 min.
5.	Suppose you had an IDEAL resource kit on genomics. This is one that you would really use. What would it be like? Off the top of your head, what words would you use to describe the tool kit?	10 min.
6.	What would make the tool kit successful?	10 min.
7.	What to you has been the most important thing that was said in this conversation today?	5 min.
	Total	60 min.

Special Moderator Skills for the Telephone

Certain moderating skills that are effective in face-to-face groups cannot be used on the telephone (e.g., looking at people to encourage them to talk), and instead the moderator now must clearly articulate these intentions. For example, instead of using the long pause to elicit comments, the moderator might use one of these statements:

- "I'm waiting for more comments on this topic."
- "Perhaps there is something more that could be said about this."

One of the major challenges for the moderator is to keep the conversation on topic and moving along. Occasionally participants will get stuck on a particular topic, or the conversation will wander into other areas. When this occurs, the moderator should bring it back on track and keep it moving toward the key questions.

Valuable questions to ask at the conclusion of the telephone focus group

Consider incorporating one or more of these questions at the end of the focus group, as time allows.

1. "Of all the things we talked about, what to you is the most important thing that was said?" This question is helpful in analysis and gives the researcher a sense of what the participants considered to be most important.
2. "The purpose of our study is to . . . (Briefly describe purpose.) Have we missed anything?" Occasionally the questions used in the focus group will inadvertently leave out an important concept. This question helps ensure that the topic was adequately covered.
3. "We are conducting several of these discussions. This is one of the first. What advice do you have for us as we listen to others?" This question can surface protocol or procedures that seemed awkward or were ineffective.

Guiding principles of telephone focus groups

- Small-sized group: four to five people
- Share questions or discussion topics in advance
- Limit questions to five to eight
- Ask a colleague to listen to the conversation and take notes
- Have participants identify themselves each time they speak
- Limit the length to about 60 minutes
- Encourage participants not to use speaker phones
- Call on people who aren't actively participating
- Periodically ask for round-robin responses
- Include ending questions

Focus Groups on the Internet

Focus groups have moved to the Internet. Two basic strategies are used: the chat room and the bulletin board. This method of inquiry is evolving. Here are some thoughts to consider.

The Chat Room Focus Group

The chat room focus group consists of a limited number of people who sign on to a designated Internet site at a particular time and then a moderator presents a series of questions to the participants. These synchronous sessions (everyone online at the same time) are often limited to six to eight participants and last 90 minutes or less. These chat room groups tend to elicit top-of-mind answers and emphasize speed over thoughtful response. They offer the excitement of a live exchange, but they are also environments where some participants can dominate the conversation.

Several guidelines can make these session more productive. For example, the moderator might enter his or her questions or comments in capital letters—thereby making it easier to identify probes, questions, and transitions. The participants should be encouraged to watch for moderator comments, questions, or instructions so the discussion can move along in an orderly manner. The moderator should remind participants that the questions will change regularly and that each participant is invited to comment. The moderator might offer periodic reminders of the time remaining.

During the chat, the participants can be asked to take a few minutes to check out, review, or evaluate items on another website and then offer their responses to the chat group. Or the group could pause while the moderator sends e-mail messages with attachments for participants to review. If incentives are offered, they are sent out within a few days following the discussion.

The disadvantage of the chat room focus group is that it favors participants who type fast and quickly submit their replies. Participants who wish to spell-check and edit before sending might find that the moderator has moved on to the next question. It is also difficult to read other peoples comments and respond, making it less like a conversation and more like responding to a survey.

An advantage of the chat room focus group is that it allows relative anonymity of responses and can minimize the perception of power differentials that can plague in-person focus groups. In addition, the chat room can connect people across considerable geographic distances who otherwise would not be able to participate.

The Bulletin Board Focus Group

In the bulletin board focus group, a limited number of people agree in advance to participate in an asynchronous (people participate at different times) electronic discussion over the course of several days. Participants agree to sign in each day and check the bulletin board, read the questions for the day, look over the comments of other participants, and formulate their responses. Often participants are invited to spend 15 to 30 minutes each day for several days as they review the questions and make their responses. The focus group is actually a series of postings from the moderator and the participants who follow a sequence or path.

When bulletin board focus groups are conducted for commercial products, the market research consultants contract with a firm that specializes in setting up bulletin boards. Special software helps participants respond to other participants by linking comments to themes. To the participants in the bulletin board, the comments appear in chronological order and list the author, date, and time. The participant can choose to make a specific comment in response to another participant or to respond to the general theme of the discussion for that day. The bulletin board format over a period of several days allows participants to do some activity or assignment related to the discussion and then report back results the next day. For example, participants might review certain materials on the Internet, visit a store, use a product, or discuss a topic with friends and neighbors before making their next bulletin board comments.

For those on a budget, a bulletin board site can be developed using existing software services. Various vendors provide bulletin board access. When using these adapted systems, it is important to be able to restrict access to the bulletin board site by using a password or a special address known only to participants. These improvised sites will not have all of the special features of the professional sites, but the cost savings can be substantial. If you do develop your own site, you might provide some ground rules to help organize the discussion. For example, you might ask people when responding to another participant to clearly indicate who or what they are responding to.

Bulletin board focus groups allow more reflective discussion than the chat room discussion. Because participants have more opportunity to think about the topic, the comments have the potential to be more in-depth and reflective than those in either the chat room or in a face-to-face focus group. Like the chat room, it allows people to participate across geographic distances and time zones and affords the opportunity to be relatively anonymous. In addition, with the bulletin board format, the compilation of posting becomes a useful and organized collection of comments on specific themes. Still another advantage is that the participants can sign in at any time of the day and participate from any location, as long as they can connect to the Internet.

A disadvantage of bulletin board groups is that the participants might not be able to remain in the discussion for several days. Emergencies or travel might interfere with timely Internet contributions. Another disadvantage is that the discussion tends to be linear and not include spontaneous (and sometimes helpful) detours that are more likely to occur in a face-to-face focus group. Still another disadvantage that relates to both the bulletin board and chat room is that the participants are not physically in one location where the moderator can observe intensity, body language, and other clues about the conversation.

In a recent research project at the University of Minnesota, a team of focus group moderators conducted a series of online groups using different software options. At the completion of the effort, the team offered the following suggestions relating to technology, the environment, participants, and moderating.

Technology

In market research, moderators hire businesses to provide the platform and technical support for online groups. Technical consultants set up and monitor the systems. They make sure that participants have all the technology they need to participate and that they are able to use it. They provide tech support, so when someone can't log in, the tech support people take care of it. The moderator only moderates. In the nonprofit, educational, and academic environments, you can hire one of these firms—the problem is that they can be expensive—or you can adapt available technology to conduct the groups. Consider these topics:

Ask for help

—There is an array of options available for conducting online focus groups, and these choices are continuously being updated. Consult with colleagues on the potential platforms that are available and supported in your environment that allow people to link together.

Keep the tools simple

—As you examine potential platforms, you will likely encounter a variety of bells and whistles that seem intriguing. Don't incorporate unnecessary technology and features. Extra things are confusing to participants.

Stay behind the curve

—Choose platforms and features that participants have the maximum amount of familiarity with. Remember: Focus groups are about getting rich information and not about demonstrating the latest technology. If all goes well, the technology should be as transparent as possible.

Keep the technology support quiet

— Technology should remain as invisible as possible. Let the participants speak. Don't have the technology dominate the conversation. Don't use technology for the sake of using technology; make sure it meets the purpose of what you are trying to accomplish.

Searching for the perfect platform for online focus groups

We assembled a team of tech-savvy experts to identify the best platform for conducting online focus groups. This perfect platform should be easy to use, cheap, reliable, secure, and use minimal bandwidth. After looking, reading, reviewing, and testing platforms, we concluded that, at the time of our investigation, there was no perfect platform. Each platform had advantages as well as limitations. The decision was clearly a tradeoff and with each positive feature there were disadvantages. Often the trade-off was between ease of use and complexity. Vendors sell platforms that can do many different things, but these many things also mean complexity (and frustration) for the researcher and the online participant. Another concern was the trade-off between ease of use and protecting the security of the participants. We examined Adobe Connect, Google Groups, Ning, Moodle, Skype, and others. Each platform has interesting and attractive benefits and options. We had to think about what we wanted to accomplish, the technological sophistication of our participants, bandwidth, the manner of interaction (video, visual, audio, text, or combinations), and the level of internal technology support available.

Our conclusion. We did not find the perfect platform. At this particular time, there may not be a platform that meets the variety of online focus group needs. But you might find one that is good enough for your situation. This area is changing rapidly. We encourage you to share your experiences at professional meetings, in journals, and in online discussion groups.

Environment

By environment we are referring to how the site looks to the participants. You will likely have participants with a range of technological skills, and if you want everyone to participate, then it has to be appealing to the least skilled in your group. We suggest the following:

Make it welcoming

—Take some time to think through the way the interface of your online environment (site) looks. Is it inviting? Is it user-friendly? Make sure you only have on the site what is necessary for conducting the focus group. Your job is to make the participant's online experience as easy and enjoyable as possible.

Personalize it

—Allow your participants to make their presence personal. In some groups (such as experts) it will be an advantage to have participants identify themselves. But in other groups you may want to provide confidentiality by allowing participants to pick a fun avatar. For example, it could be identified by the name of a breed of dogs, a type of tree or flower, or a cartoon sketch. Or you might make a video introduction, and if appropriate, the participants might make one as well.

Keep layout and design clean and simple

— Make it easy to find things on the site (good instructional design) and not too cluttered (good graphic design).

Participants

The organization and protocol of the online group need to be appropriate to the participants. Issues like the group size, incentives, and recruitment need to be considered when making technological decisions.

Keep the group small

—Somewhere around five participants can be ideal. This reduces the amount of reading for asynchronous text-based focus groups and reduces the bandwidth and troubleshooting issues for synchronous voice or video focus groups. Professional market research moderators will sometimes have 10 to 15 or more participants in groups, but the topics are typically reactions to consumer products with few in-depth discussions.

Know your audience

—Make sure the platform you choose and the features you use will be appropriate for your participants. There are some generational and even gendered patterns in the ways people prefer to engage with technology that may be helpful to consider when selecting a platform. Try to get a general sense of the technological skills of your intended audience.

Consider how you recruit

—Recruiting for an online focus group can be very different than a face-to-face group. You have to consider motivations and ability. Do the people you are recruiting like communicating online? Or is communicating online the only way to participate in the group? When are good times to get together? What is their level of technology sophistication and technology availability?

Furnish the right incentives

—Incentives keep participants involved, especially if they are a bit tired and the initial excitement of the group has worn off. The incentive could be intangible ("You are helping the community." Or "This research project will help others in need.") or tangible (a gift card from a popular store or a movie ticket). An often-overlooked incentive is the knowledge and insight provided by other participants. Participants selected because of their expertise often appreciate listening to others with similar expertise. The incentive helps participants stay engaged throughout the online focus group. If the incentive is intangible, be sure to describe the benefit. Don't assume that it is obvious.

Moderating

Moderating online focus groups requires skills slightly different from the in-person focus group. Much depends on all of the technical aspects working smoothly and having each participant comfortable with their expectations. Clear rules along with ongoing communication and feedback are important. Moderators often use back-channel communications such as personal e-mail messages or even phone calls to provide additional instruction, encouragement, or to clarify protocol.

Establish rules of engagement

—Provide instructions for how the conversation will proceed. For example, for asynchronous discussions indicate when the questions will be posted each day, and also identify the time of the response window. Describe how a response can be either a general answer to the moderator's questions or a specific comment to another individual. Asynchronous environments can be improved by giving some guidelines for how you would like the participants to respond. One suggestion is to have the participants lead with a sentence, in bold type, that states their point and then follow with an explanation. This keeps people from rambling. If someone is unable to answer for one day, indicate what they might do to keep abreast of the conversation.

In synchronous discussions the bandwidth and other technical aspects can make it difficult for some to keep up with the conversation in real time. In these synchronous discussions some moderators take on a dominant role with clear rules of who talks and when. This is often a trade-off between having spontaneity in the discussions and ensuring that all have a chance to be heard.

Be socially present

—As a moderator, it is important to appear present in the conversations. Synchronous environments should be constantly monitored with redirection of questions by the moderator. Asynchronous environments can be enhanced by periodic encouragement, daily summaries, and even chat room hours to answer questions or even socialize.

Have multiple moderators

—Having two or more moderators is extremely helpful, if not essential. You may want to split up roles into talk moderator (who guides the discussion) and tech moderator (for helping with troubleshooting and tech questions).

Be prepared to manage interactions

—As a moderator, staying on top of all interactions is key. Be prepared to interject, redirect, and answer a question.

Managing the Bulletin Board Focus Group

As you contemplate conducting a bulletin board focus group, here are some steps to consider. First, decide how you are going to operate the forum or bulletin board. Do a dry run with colleagues on the Internet to identify any unique features, problems, or situations that need special instruction or modification. Once you are confident that the bulletin board is working to your satisfaction, give thought to the participants and how you might recruit these individuals. The major advantage of Internet focus groups is that you are not limited by geographic location. The major limitation is that each participant must have access to the Internet on a daily basis and must invest 15 to 30 minutes on the bulletin board. When contacting potential participants, be clear about what you are asking for, the time line, and be ready to describe the benefits of participating. In some situations an incentive to participate is offered. If so, this is sent to participants at the conclusion of the session. For a number of participants in the public, educational, or research environment, the major benefit may be the chance to communicate with others on an important topic, especially if the discussion might be useful and beneficial. For example, educators from around the country who are experts on a given topic might be delighted to participate in a discussion that furthers that topic. In these cases, the moderator might offer to send each participant a copy of the final report or a summary of the discussion. However, under other circumstances those same individuals might refuse a request if they were not convinced that the results would be used, if it resulted in profit for some individual or organization, or if the request seemed too time-consuming. In these cases, having a financial incentive might be needed to encourage participation.

In early contacts with potential participants, be clear about the benefit of the study, the sponsor of the study, and how the participants were selected to participate. These early phone calls or e-mail messages set the stage for the study and help ensure active participation.

Developing Questions for a Bulletin Board Focus Group

The questions in a bulletin board group should have a focus and move in a general direction over the course of several days. For example, some use an outline that looks like this:

Day 1 Discuss the problem.

Day 2 Narrow the discussion of the problem.

Day 3 Discuss possible solutions.

Day 4 Identify the preferred solution.

Day 5 Offer advice on implementing a solution, moving ahead, and so on.

Other strategies are also possible, but the questions should be focused and provide a natural and reasonable link from one day to the next.

The moderator could offer a short paragraph summarizing key content from the previous day or direct attention to certain aspects of the responses and then present the question for the current day. After the first day, consider using questions that go beyond short comments and that ask respondents to rate, rank, list, or do something that requires an active mode.

In some situations researchers use a combination of synchronous and asynchronous methods. For example, Professor Simon Rosser and his colleagues at the University of Minnesota have been using Internet focus groups to get insights from a hard-to-reach audience. This team of epidemiological researchers is investigating how men who have sex with men receive information on the Internet. The research team used a combination of synchronous chat rooms and asynchronous bulletin boards to gain insights and preferences among this population. They found that the Internet focus groups worked well because it was familiar, provided confidentiality (including anonymity to other participants), removed geographic barriers, and allowed researchers to follow up with individuals. The insights helped HIV-prevention researchers craft effective messages that can be delivered via technology channels (Rosser et al., 2011).

Online focus group questions

Developed by Lindsay Larson

Topic: Museum Visits

Day 1

Hi! Thank you for taking time to participate in my online focus group about museums. Whether you prefer art, history, science, or other museums, I want to find out what factors contribute to your attendance. I also want to understand what makes you dislike museums and what they could do to entice you to visit.

This is meant to be a fun, creative, and open dialogue. I look forward to your responses!

Please think about a memorable museum visit. The museum can be any type (art, history, science, etc.) and can be anywhere in the world.

Q1a: What museum did you visit?
Q1b: Who was with you at the museum?
Q1c: What made the experience memorable?

Day 2

Q2a: What do you like about museums?
Q2b: What do you dislike about museums?

Day 3

Thank you for your opinions. Now I'd like to talk about museums in the Twin Cities, even if you have never been.

Q3a: How do you feel about museums in the Twin Cities? In other words, what's your impression of these museums?
Q3b: What prompts or would prompt you to attend museums in the Twin Cities?

Day 4

You all offered some interesting ideas, and I appreciate your honesty. I'd like to talk about what museums in the Twin Cities could do to encourage attendance.

Q4a: What are the barriers to attending museums in the Twin Cities? Some of you provided answers to this question already; please add any additional ideas if you have them.
Q4b: What could these museums do to entice you to visit more often?

Online focus group questions

Developed by Leslie Ashton

Topic: Wedding Receptions

Day 1

Thank your for participating! Over the course of the next few days, I will be asking you to discuss wedding receptions you've attended. I am conducting this on behalf of couples planning their weddings. They are hoping to learn from you and your experiences about what makes a wedding reception enjoyable. Please reply to this question directly, but do feel free to comment on others' responses too! Let's get started with our first question.

> Q1: Please take a moment to think about your favorite wedding receptions. What about these receptions made them some of your favorites?

Day 2

Some common themes from favorite wedding receptions include: a well-planned event with good food that was easy for guests, free quality drinks, and personalized activities.

Think now to a future evening reception where the couple has taken these suggestions to heart. The reception has an open bar and plenty of good food. The couple getting married likes to dance and would like their guests to join them.

Q2a: What elements do you think are important to set the stage for a good dance floor?
Q2b. What kind of music is playing?
Q2c. And, how is it being played (band, DJ)?

Day 3

I appreciate the thoughtful feedback. It sounds like a variety of music and appropriate setting is a good way to set the atmosphere (dimmer lights, something festive like a disco ball or lights). Realizing that a couple can't please everyone, think about yourself for a moment.

Q3a: What would it take to get you to want to join the dance floor? (Please be as specific as possible.)
Q3b: And, do you think a full dance floor is necessary at a reception for it to be a fun reception?

Day 4

Your comments are very helpful for couples looking to create the right atmosphere to encourage dancing. Now we'll discuss it from a different perspective.

Q4a: What makes you want to leave the dance floor? Please describe an event if this has happened to you or what may happen that would cause you to go sit down. Please provide specifics. . . . Is it a song, a feeling, a style of dance . . .?
Q4b: Also, as you respond to this, is there anything we've forgotten in our discussion? We covered the necessary elements to make a fun reception, how to set the stage for a good dancing experience, and what it would take to get folks moving. Is there anything else couples should consider?

Incentives in Telephone or Internet Focus Groups

The incentive to participate in telephone or Internet focus groups often differs from that of in-person focus groups. Participants don't need to travel, and the time commitment is often less than in-person focus groups. When the topic of the study is noncommercial (i.e., no one is seeking to make a profit from the study), then the intangible incentives often take on greater importance. "This study will help improve health care for local residents." Or, "This study will help professionals allocate resources to the greatest needs." In these studies, the promise of receiving a copy of the results and a description of how the results might be used may be all the incentive needed.

However, offering a financial incentive helps ensure that each participant takes the discussion seriously and invests time in offering opinions. One incentive that is easy to overlook is the power of being invited to the discussion by an influential individual. When some important person recommends you as someone who has wisdom and insight into a particular topic, there is a greater likelihood that this will cause you to give it greater attention.

The bulletin board focus group is slightly different in that the participants are expected to sign in each day for a series of three to five days and then spend 15 to 30 minutes responding to questions or comments. As a result, a daily stipend is sometimes used to encourage regular participation. For example, in market research groups on consumer products, participants might be offered $25 for each day they participate—to encourage participants to check in daily.

Summary

Telephone and Internet focus groups offer advantages that make them attractive to researchers. The lower cost, the ability for participants to become involved across distances, and the speed make these attractive options. But you also sacrifice the opportunity to be in the same room as the participants, see the body language, and get a sense of the degree of engagement. For some studies, these options might be the only viable choices, and when they are used carefully, they can offer considerable potential. Technology will continue to evolve and will influence how these techniques are used in the future.

The Internet focus group pushes the limits of what a focus group is. Is it really a focus group, or is it merely a chat line or a bulletin board discussion? Internet groups become focus groups when the questions are focused, when participants are screened and invited to participate, when participants can freely and openly communicate without inhibitions or fears, and when the moderator maintains control and moves the discussion in such a way so as to provide answers to the research question.

12 Focus Group Interviewing Within the Organization

What Lies Ahead

In this chapter we describe how to:

- Control the Sampling Strategy
- Avoid Power Differentials
- Avoid Pre-Established Small Groups
- Be Aware of the Environment and Recent History
- Select the Right Moderator
- Provide Adequate Confidentiality
- Consider the Appropriateness of Focus Groups
- Provide a Benefit to Participants
- Do a Reality Check After Each Group
- Analyze With Group Dynamics in Mind

While the focus group process is robust, there are several situations where additional attention is needed. One area is with existing groups, especially workers within an organization. In these environments participants not only know each other, but they are often familiar with the values, habits, and interests of their colleagues. It may be a challenge to create an environment where employees are willing to openly and honestly share their concerns, anxieties, and suggestions. The organizational climate may restrict open communication and discourage or even punish alternative points of view. Also, while knowing one another may promote sharing with one group, it may inhibit sharing in another group.

In spite of these difficulties, focus groups can be used effectively within organizations and even in work groups. Here are suggestions to consider:

Control the Sampling Strategy

Perhaps the foremost problem facing the researcher is the manner in which participants are selected to participate in the focus group. Convenience samples—that is, selecting people because they are easy to recruit—are risky with internal groups. In the same vein, another risky practice is relying on insiders to select people by memory, past experiences, or other criteria. Memories are faulty, and bias can easily creep into the selection. The researcher should develop a sampling plan specifying the screens or criteria for participation in the focus group and follow it carefully. We suggest using the old standby process of developing a pool of people who meet screening requirements and then randomly selecting from this pool. Often the researcher is unfamiliar with the organization and must rely on insiders to provide advice on sample selection.

Avoid Power Differentials

Participants should feel that they are in a group with people of equivalent position. Avoid having supervisors and subordinates in the same focus group. Sometimes those differences are not obvious. When doing focus groups with support staff within an organization, we assumed we could put all secretaries in the same groups. Only later did we realize that the secretaries had a hierarchy, and lower-ranking secretaries were deferring to higher-ranking secretaries.

Avoid Pre-Established Small Groups

Discussions among members of pre-established small groups are difficult to analyze. Communication is exceedingly complex. Therefore, avoid doing focus groups with these small work groups, and instead, if possible, place people with other colleagues. This forces participants to explain their comments more fully and completely and to rely less on the cryptic communication.

Be Aware of the Environment and Recent History

Outside researchers are often unfamiliar with the culture, traditions, and communication styles within organizations. To what extent is this an organization where people openly share ideas? Do they value the insight of others, and are they respectful of divergent views? Interestingly, sometimes even internal staff may not be aware of these messages (regarding respect, tolerance, valuing opinions of others, listening, openness to new ideas) that are informally communicated within the organization. Here are some views that we've found within organizations that limit focus group usage.

> "If you see the problem and say something about it, then you are expected to find the solution. Therefore, don't mention the problem."
> "Management says they want advice, but they've already made the decision."
> "It's OK to be critical but only with certain other insiders. Certain topics are so sacred that they are talked about with only the closest of friends."
> "If you say anything negative about the organization, they assume you're not engaged."

Perhaps the most effective way to become grounded in the organizational climate is to conduct individual, informal interviews with a variety of staff as the study is being designed. By chatting with employees, the researcher can get advice about a number of logistical aspects of the study, test potential questions, and generally discover what is needed to make the study a success.

It takes extra effort to create a nonthreatening, permissive environment in internal groups. Employees need to feel comfortable with the study. We go to extra lengths to let people know who asked for the information, what prompted the study, what kind of decisions are going to be made based on the information, and who is going to listen to the tapes. Avoid creating the impression that the organization will do what one group suggests. Remind participants that you are gathering information from a number of groups and that, after all the groups are completed, you will combine perceptions and share them with the decision makers.

Know the limits of focus group research. In these organizational environments it may be impossible to create the necessary focus group conditions, and in these situations the researcher should know when to avoid focus group research. If participants don't trust the sponsor or their colleagues, see the study as a threat, are unwilling to share their views, or are unwilling to listen to views of others, then focus groups won't work.

Select the Right Moderator

Who should moderate? Moderators from outside the organization have the advantage of being neutral, but they may be unfamiliar with the organizational culture. External moderators may see things internal moderators wouldn't because they have a chance to compare this environment with others. Internal moderators are familiar with the organization but need to be viewed as someone who can listen, who can be trusted, and that it makes sense they would be asking about the topic. For example, it would make sense for someone from the human resources department to be asking about morale or benefits. When selecting a moderator, weigh the advantages and disadvantages of internal and external moderators.

Provide Adequate Confidentiality

Confidentiality is a sensitive issue with internal focus groups. Once again, the concern over confidentiality will likely be triggered by the topic, the organizational culture, and traditions. Does the organization welcome divergent and different ideas? Do employees trust their colleagues? In the past, what has happened to people who have been critical? No promise from the moderator will be trusted if past promises haven't been kept. The moderator should be clear, precise, and open about the nature of the promise. Be absolutely clear about who has access to participant names. This usually means that those requesting the study will not know names of focus group participants.

Confidentiality also needs to be respected by others in the focus group. The moderator must be clear about what behaviors are expected in the group. It defeats the purpose when the moderator promises confidentiality, but a focus group participant later tells everyone they know what others said in the group. Consider including these things in your introduction to the focus group:

- Describe the study. Include who asked for it and why.
- Tell who has access to the results.
- Describe how results will benefit participants or the organization.
- Promise confidentiality by the researchers, which means no names are attached.
- Tell how audio recordings will be used. Who will have access to them?
- Request that the group also maintain confidentiality for each other.
- Explain that the moderator's role is to guide the discussion and keep it on track.
- Explain that you may want to follow up with participants individually on some topics after the group.
- Explain that no names are wanted—so please don't mention names of colleagues.
- Tell them that you will summarize key points of the discussion at the end and then ask for their help to ensure that you've captured the most important points.

Consider the Appropriateness of Focus Groups

Give thought to whether focus groups are appropriate for your particular situation. Organizations present special concerns and pressures that are not evident in other focus group environments. You cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality because what is said in organizational focus groups might be repeated in the hallways or at the water cooler after the focus group. Certain topics will be delicate, such as illegal behavior at the worksite, sexual harassment at work, or detailed examples of employee nonengagement. These topics may be more appropriate for individual interviews where confidentiality can be assured. And then later you might use focus groups to test out solution strategies but not get into the details of the specific behaviors.

Provide a Benefit to Participants

Be able to describe the benefit of the study. In particular, describe how the participants and their colleagues will benefit directly or indirectly. In many cases the benefit is for colleagues, neighbors, and friends. "What is learned from the study will improve services to other veterans," "This study will help top management make decisions about merit pay and employee benefits," or "This study will help us better serve our patients." The promise must be reasonable and sufficiently specific to be credible. At the end of the study, the researchers should deliver on this promise by describing the results and showing how it is linked to the goals.

Do a Reality Check After Each Group

At the end of the focus group, add a few questions about the study. We've found it helpful to ask the ending questions, provide a brief summary, ask for verification, and then turn off the audio recorder. But don't excuse the participants just yet. Tell them that you are finished with the more formal part of the discussion and now you would like their advice on the process. Indicate that this is just to help the research team improve later discussions. Then, ask a few questions about the process. It could be as simple as, "Well, what did you think of the discussion?" Or "What can I do to improve the discussion?" Or "What can I do to make people more comfortable?" If you suspect they may have held back, you might ask, "Do you think people will hold back and not tell us what they are really thinking?"

Analyze With Group Dynamics in Mind

When doing the analysis, keep in mind that certain discussion patterns are common to existing groups. Veteran analysts have noticed that, when all participants are members of the group, there is a tendency to be overly harsh on the sponsoring organization or institution. If participants feel there is a mix of insiders and outsiders, they may be more restrained in their criticism. In addition, insiders know more about how the organization works, what has been promised, and what promises haven't been met. All of this can fuel cynicism, provoke anger, and make participants skeptical of the study's intent. Participants may have another agenda that they wish to follow in the focus groups, such as persuasion, blocking, or promotion. Because participants know each other, the discussion can be affected in a variety of ways. In effect, the focus group participants are reacting to both the ideas expressed as well as to the people expressing those ideas. It may be difficult or impossible to determine if the reaction is to the other person or the idea of that person. Be watchful and alert.

Summary

Focus groups within organizations have been exceedingly valuable, but they must be done carefully. Be particularly concerned about how employees are placed in focus groups, and avoid power differentials. Remember that a core principle of focus groups is to have a homogeneous group in a permissive and nonthreatening environment. Make special efforts to make sure participants know who asks for the study, why they asked for it, how they plan to use the results, and who has access to the tapes and notes.

13 Modifications of Focus Groups

What Lies Ahead

In this chapter we describe:

- Periodically Repeated Focus Groups
- Two Moderators
- Media "Focus Groups"
- Issues When Adapting Focus Groups

OK. So, we've been telling you there are certain procedures to follow when conducting a focus group study. We've been prescriptive. That's because we have seen too many studies where people with no training in focus groups plan and conduct focus groups and then crash and burn.

To the casual observer, focus groups do seem quite simple. Successful focus groups are supposed to look easy. They are similar to the seemingly effortless grace of a master gymnast or the comfortable, relaxed stride of an Olympic marathon runner. They look easy because the researcher has command of the fundamentals and executes the basic principles with expert skill. This aura of simplicity has been a curse to qualitative research in general and focus groups in particular. People try out focus groups with little or no preparation, training, or experience and then often have disastrous results. While we have emphasized a careful approach to focus groups, we also recognize the benefit of flexibility when it comes to focus group research.

We believe a researcher should understand and use accepted practices. Then, with wisdom that comes from experience, the researcher can adapt these practices for different situations, considering the advantages and disadvantages of these adaptations.

Some modifications have merit in certain situations including periodic focus groups repeated with the same participants, focus groups with dual moderators, as well as telephone and Internet focus groups. Other modifications just shouldn't be called focus groups. This includes groups where consensus is sought or media "focus groups."

Periodically Repeated Focus Groups

Periodically repeated focus groups can be done with the same participants or with different participants. Typically these are used when organizations need ongoing feedback on questions like, “How are we doing?” Or “How can we improve customer satisfaction?” Some organizations invite different participants each time. For example, a community center might conduct quarterly focus groups with different people who use the facilities, or a state park system might conduct weekly focus groups with campers. In each of these situations, the organization is able to monitor user perceptions and take corrective action as needed.

Repeated focus groups can be conducted with the same participants with a time interval between sessions. This is helpful when the researcher wants to track changes in perceptions over time or to tap into opinions of a somewhat more informed group. For example, a museum brings in the same group of patrons each quarter and asks them for their perceptions. Participants in these groups become more sensitized to issues concerning the organization because they know they will be asked for their opinions. Over time they become more like key informants than average customers.

Two Moderators

Focus groups can be modified to accommodate two moderators. Moderators work together but represent different levels of expertise with focus groups and the topic of discussion. For example, one moderator may be an expert in conducting focus groups and a generalist on the topic of discussion, whereas the second moderator might know less about focus groups but be a specialist in the topic. In effect, this procedure allows for a subject matter expert in the focus groups but not in a manner that will unduly influence the group. Suppose that a community center wants to build a new recreational unit and decides to conduct a series of focus groups with members of the community. The moderator with expertise in focus groups might be complimented with a moderator with an architectural background who could present information on various alternative ideas suggested by the participants. This differs from the normal moderator and assistant moderator role because the second person regularly talks and presents information in the focus group, whereas normally the assistant moderator is primarily a listener and note taker.

A variation of the use of complimentary moderators is to have the sponsor of the focus group serve as the second moderator. This might include the director of the nonprofit agency or a member of the board of directors. These situations require caution, as these individuals tend to be rather defensive and overreact when they hear negative comments. When leaders hear comments about things that are untrue, they often want to correct the focus group participants. This changes the dynamic of the group. (The leader can offer corrections at the end of the group, if the corrections are deemed important.) Furthermore, if this second moderator is an individual with local prominence or is in a respected position, the participants may be reluctant to provide candid feedback. If you decide to use this approach, be sure to select the person carefully and then explicitly review expectations and remind him or her of appropriate and inappropriate behavior.

Media "Focus Groups"

The media have discovered the appeal of focus groups. Newspaper readers and television viewers like to read about or see others share opinions and ideas. These media groups have a few common points with focus groups as described in this book: The questions may be focused, participants may be preselected based on established criteria, and the moderator might be skillful in conducting the group. But these groups are about as far as possible from one of the primary characteristics of a focus group: a permissive, nonthreatening environment where confidentiality is assured. These media events are called focus groups, but they aren't.

The purpose of these media sessions is to capture sound bites that are shared with the world. The individual has no assurance that comments will be used in context and no recourse if they are not. The participants are at the mercy of the media. These media "focus groups" typically have several methodological flaws that limit their value as serious research:

- They often consist of only one focus group.
- Results from this one focus group are implicitly or explicitly generalized to a wider population.
- The sessions are not conducted in a permissive, nonthreatening environment.
- There is no confidentiality. Video and still cameras capture images throughout the session, constantly reminding participants of their potential for publicity. Recording devices capture everything said. Names and photographs may appear in the paper.
- Participants are not allowed to talk to one another. Each participant responds to the moderator—much more like serial interviews.
- The basis of selection is often to achieve a cross-section of residents or voters. But only the most self-assured would submit to this type of group.

We encourage media to exercise caution and make a few adaptations. If the media are serious about conducting focus groups and wish to call these sessions focus groups, then they should consider a sequential series of discussions with varying levels of formality to determine the influence of cameras and recording equipment. For example, several groups might initially be conducted using the traditional focus group procedure without cameras, with homogeneous selection and with explicit assurances of confidentiality. Then, after the initial groups had been analyzed for themes, a second series of focus groups could allow cameras and seek public quotes. In this manner the media could gain some sense of whether the participants modify their comments when they are on record, taped, and photographed.

Media events called focus groups are entertainment, not research.

Issues When Adapting Focus Groups

When adapting focus groups to other types of situations, the researcher should bear in mind what the focus group can do and what it can't do. While there is elasticity in the procedure, too much stretch may snap the process. When adapting focus groups, consider the following:

- *The purpose.* It is appropriate to use focus groups to collect information, to listen, and to learn. Focus groups are not intended to teach, to inform, or to reach consensus.
- *Recruiting.* Focus groups participants are preselected. Open invitations to the public or blanket invitations to a group are not used in focus group interviews.
- *The nature of the discussion*. A focused interview is comprised primarily of open-ended questions that allow participants to select the manner of their response. But the topic is focused, and it is not an open discussion of anything of interest.
- *The environment*. The focused interview is conducted in a permissive environment conducive to sharing, listening, and responding.

Summary

Researchers have modified focus group interviews in a variety of ways. Focus groups can be conducted with the same people over a period of time, with multiple moderators or in a variety of creative ways. These adaptations preserve the essential characteristics of focus groups; a limited number of homogeneous people are invited to participate in a focused discussion to provide insights on a particular topic. The purpose is not to teach, to provide therapy, to resolve differences, or to achieve a consensus but to obtain information in a systematic and verifiable manner. With that purpose and those characteristics in mind, the researcher can twist it a bit and discover just how robust and hardy focus group interviews really are. Media, on the other hand, may need to examine what they have called focus groups and either change the name (truth in advertising) or make modifications to ensure that the media environment does not influence comments. For now, these media-based “focus groups” are best classified as entertainment—not research.

14 Answering Questions About the Quality of Focus Group Research

What Lies Ahead

In this chapter we answer:

- Frequently Asked Questions
- Is This Scientific Research?
- How Do You Know Your Findings Aren't Just Subjective Opinions?
- Isn't This Soft Research?
- How Do You Determine Validity?
- Can You Generalize?
- Why Don't You Use Random Sampling?
- How Big Is the Sample, or How Can You Make Those Statements With Such a Small Sample?

We want to talk about questions that are regularly asked about focus group research. As a field researcher, you need to have answers to these questions. Not having answers gives the impression that you are unprepared, haven't thought about potentially critical topics, or don't have the qualifications needed for the task.

You're going to get questions. Some questions will be about the topic, and other questions will be about your research methods. The vexing questions aren't about results but about the research procedures and the philosophical underpinnings of the study. These questions can be hard to answer when they come unexpectedly. You've been concentrating on the results, and these process or philosophical questions catch you off guard.

There are many ways to answers these questions. Here are some suggestions. The ones we suggest are just a beginning—a jumping-off place. We encourage you to come up with even better answers.

Anticipate questions. By anticipating questions you can think through answers to maximize clarity and conciseness. Anticipating questions begins with being thoughtful about your audience.

Know your audience. Are they community people? Top management? Academics? Think about the traditions of the organization and the environment of the report. One tradition is the hierarchical model in which the study has been blessed and approved by top management. Top management typically asks the tough questions in the planning stage and, by the reporting stage, are just eager to hear the results so they can take action. (Unless the findings don't fit with what they already believe or aren't convincing. Then expect push back in the form of questions about your procedures.) Community members who weren't involved in the design of the study often want some information about the process but are typically more interested in the findings. Both the corporate environment and community settings are distinctly different from the academic environment. Often academics are as interested in your process as they are your findings. When reporting at academic conferences and professional associations, expect questions on both your findings and methods. These are some differences we've seen, but undoubtedly more exist. The circumstances should influence the way you answer questions. The degree of detail and the manner of response will differ slightly in each environment.

Consider the reason for the question. Don't assume that the question necessarily reflects a desire for information. Ask yourself, Why is this question being asked? You'll never be completely certain of the reasons, but you will have a hunch that is based on past questions, the context of the report, or the person asking the question. We've seen several types of questioners.

- Some individuals who ask questions truly want answers. They are curious and interested in what you are doing. They may have struggled themselves and are eager to learn new strategies and skills. These individuals may want more information about particular findings or the future uses of the study.

  Response strategy: Give a clear and concise answer as best you can. If appropriate, ask the person for his or her thoughts.

- Some will ask questions, but they are really making statements. It may be a statement for or against your study, or it could be a statement on an entirely different topic. Don't assume that you need to have an answer.

  Response strategy: You may want to say, "Why do you ask?" Often they will then make their statement, then you can thank the person for the comment and continue with other questions.

- Some ask questions to fill time, to get attention, to ventilate, or out of a desire to help you.

  Response strategy: Answer the question, invite someone else to answer, or suggest that you discuss it in more detail after the session.

- For some, the question is the beginning of a trap. The questioner is seeking to find fault or to expose a perceived inadequacy of the study.

  Response strategy: State or repeat the rationale for the study and why the methodology was deemed appropriate. Describe the systematic procedures. Clarify the limitations.

Sometimes questions reflect beliefs that someone holds about the nature of research and the scientific method. For some, research approaches are like religious beliefs. Religious groups hold a variety of views, and some contend that their group alone has the correct answers and approaches to life. Another view is that there is one preferred view among a number of other worthy beliefs. Still others will hold multiple views, not seeing any belief system as exclusive, holding to the view that one could hold different beliefs simultaneously. Our mantra is to be respectful and honoring of alternative views. We don't try to persuade people to abandon their beliefs. This is not the moment for conversion.

Frequently Asked Questions

Let's begin by examining questions about focus group research methodology. At some point, you will be asked questions such as these, and your answers will need to be tailored to the specific situation. Besides the questions and our answers, we've also included some background information and thoughts about the question.

Is This Scientific Research?

Scientific research takes several forms. In biological and physical science research, the intent is to discover cause and effect, to find relationships, to find predictability, or to discover laws of nature. In these forms of scientific research, control and proof through replication are crucial. There are several underlying assumptions. One is that the researcher has control over the environment. For example, the researcher can add more moisture or light and document the consequences on plants. Another assumption is that there are laws of nature and these laws are consistent, understandable, and predictable.

Social science research uses many of the same approaches but makes adaptations to fit human experiences. Yes, focus group research is scientific research because it is disciplined inquiry that is systematic and verifiable. It is not the type of scientific research that seeks to control and predict but rather the type that seeks understanding and insight.

Background

For decades, social scientists have sought to improve the quality of their research by perfecting scientific procedures. Social scientists adopted experimental design strategies used in physical and biological sciences. Randomization, control groups, and experimental designs became popular. However, scientists were soon disappointed, for while they learned a great deal, they found that this positivistic approach actually limited their thinking and overlooked valuable data. Consequently, other scientific procedures emerged that proved more applicable to social science inquiry. One category is qualitative research.

Thoughts

This question regularly comes from someone who has been told that there is only one right way to conduct scientific research, and that way is a positivistic method, whereby we set hypotheses, control the experiment, and then project to a population. We owe a great deal to logical-positivistic scientific methods. They have produced many major discoveries. In fact, this way of thinking is so traditional and predominant within the United States that some people don't know there are other ways of knowing or of doing research.

How Do You Know Your Findings Aren't Just Your Subjective Opinions?

We've approached this study recognizing the importance of two guiding principles: researcher neutrality and systematic procedures. We've addressed researcher neutrality in several ways. A team of people with differing backgrounds conducted the research to ensure we had internal checks and balances. Our research team was aware of the need for neutrality and the importance of capturing all participants' views.

Throughout the study, we've used accepted systematic procedures for data collection, data handling, and data analysis. We've used field notes and electronic recordings to capture the comments, which were then reviewed and used in the analysis process. During the focus groups we asked participants to explain their responses if we did not clearly understand. At the end of the discussion, we offered a summary of key findings and asked participants to verify or amend the summary. Our later debriefing and reports involved a team approach. We used accepted systematic steps in the analysis to identify key points and then compared results to other groups to identify patterns. For each point identified in our results, we have established a trail of evidence that can be verified. We have been careful and are confident that the findings are an accurate reflection of what the focus group participants said. We are open to discussing alternate interpretations of the findings and recommendations.

Background

A study that is subjective is one where researchers are so close and familiar with the study that their judgment influences the results. Objectivity, on the other hand, makes use of instruments or standardized procedures that precisely measure something without human influence.

We use teams and standardized procedures to help us gather and analyze the data, so we aren't just paying attention to things that support our expectations or worldviews or things we like or to things we understand. We are careful to distinguish the findings—what was said in the group—from our interpretations and recommendations. We expect more subjectivity in the interpretations and recommendations. But these are also the parts of the study that are open to debate. People with different backgrounds and experiences may very well come up with different interpretations and recommendations.

Thoughts

It is hard to judge the intent of this question. Sometimes this is a friendly question where someone wishes to help the researcher. Other times, this is a cynical question inferring disrespect for certain types of research. Therefore, give thought as to how you answer. Be respectful and honoring of other points of view or research philosophies, even if others do not show respect for your views. Also, avoid becoming defensive as you give your answer. In general we avoid words such as *subjective* versus *objective* or *soft* versus *hard*.

Answering questions on subjectivity

- Don't be surprised.
- Be respectful.
- Don't get defensive.
- Assume they really want the answer.
- Tell how people worked together to ensure neutrality.
- Describe how data were captured.
- Describe how data were verified.
- Describe how data were analyzed.

Now, do all the above in less than two minutes!

Isn't This Soft Research?

If by *soft* you mean we haven't quantified people's reactions, then yes, you're right, we didn't quantify them. It wasn't our intent to quantify. Our intent was to find the range of feeling and opinion on this topic. We did that. If by *soft* you mean without standards or rigor, then no, it isn't soft.

This study sought to obtain perceptions of people on a complex topic. No instrument is available to measure the multiple views of this changing and complex concept. We believed the best way to study it was to obtain the in-depth perceptions of participants.

Another way to answer this is to discuss the value of observing but not controlling the population. Our answer might look like this: "In positivistic research the emphasis is placed on achieving control. Research is hard if it uses sufficient controls that document what has happened. The environment is controlled, people are controlled in terms of what treatment they receive, and also the variables that affect the study are controlled. Many human environments, outside of the laboratory, cannot and should not be controlled. Our intent in this study was to observe, to listen, to document, and to report the perceptions of our target audience. Establishing controls would not have been appropriate."

Moreover, conducting research by controlling people is not only risky but regularly leads to false results. At times human beings resist control and go out of their way to exercise independence and free will. The safest, most defensible, and most valid approach is to emphasize careful observation that seeks to understand individual behavior.

Background

The words *soft* or *hard* are imprecise and misleading. Hard tends to refer to numbers, especially those coming from standardized sources of testing, measurement, surveys, or experimental design. On the other hand, soft typically refers to descriptive, observational, or interview data. Increasingly scientists are avoiding these terms. The colloquial language of *hard research* and *soft research* is pejorative, simplistic, and sometimes inflammatory. These words imply a superior–subordinate relationship.

How Do You Determine Validity?

We look at our procedures to determine whether we have used procedures that ensure that the results are trustworthy. Our research team was concerned about the quality of the information and that the results be an accurate reflection of how the participants felt and thought about the topic. We've taken several steps to ensure accuracy of the results.

We pilot-tested the questions to ensure that they were understood. We listened to participants when designing the study to understand the conditions needed for free and open sharing. We used a team of moderators who were appropriate for the situation because of their training, experiences, background, and sensitivity. We listened carefully to participants, observed how they answered, and sought clarification on areas of ambiguity. Then, at the conclusion of each focus group, we asked participants to verify our summary comments. We used systematic analysis procedures. In summary, we've followed accepted protocol to ensure that results are trustworthy and accurate.

Background

Essentially this is a question about trusting the results. In the positivistic tradition, it has been important to determine validity because a test or instrument was created to measure something and occasionally it would measure the wrong thing. In these quantitative studies, the instrument was a proxy for what was really measured. By contrast, in focus group research there are no proxies. Words of the participant are used to find out participants' feelings, thoughts, or observations about the topic of discussion. The researcher is able to draw upon multiple sources of information that are not normally available to the quantitative researcher. The focus group researcher observes the answers and has opportunities to follow up and probe to amplify or clarify the response. Moreover, the focus group researcher can feed back the key points and seek verification from participants.

Joel Reish (2007), past president of Qualitative Research Consultants Association, has written an article about the validity of qualitative research that might provide more insight.

Thoughts

The goal of the researcher is to understand the respondents' points of view and to be able to communicate these to the audience. For this to occur, a researcher must be concerned with conducting quality studies. Good practices are described in Chapters 2 through 7 and include planning, asking questions, moderating, finding participants, analyzing, and reporting. These actions aren't meant to be lockstep, cookie-cutter procedures but rather guiding principles that inform researcher behavior. They must be modified and adjusted as the environment and situation warrants.

In summary, we suggest that the researcher worry less about the traditional concerns of validity and instead be ready to answer the following question: "What are you doing to ensure that you have followed the steps associated with quality research?"

Can You Generalize?

This study is not intended to generalize. Our goal is to go in-depth into a topic, and therefore we spend a sizeable amount of time conducting research with a small number of people. Other research methods, by contrast, do not go in-depth but use closed-ended questions with limited response choices that offer breadth instead of depth. The studies that offer breadth are the ones used to make generalizations. So from a strict sense, one cannot generalize, but what we suggest is the concept of transferability. That is, when a person wants to use the results, he or she should think about whether the findings can transfer into another environment. What we suggest is that you consider the methods, procedures, and types of participants and then decide the degree to which these results fit the situation you face.

Background

Transferability, according to Lincoln and Guba (1989), is parallel to the positivistic concept of generalizability, except that it is the receiver (not the sender or researcher) who decides if the results can be applied to the next situation. The person reviewing the research looks over the conditions, situations, and procedures and then decides the degree of fit to the second situation.

More on transferability

For more information see this source:

Lincoln, Y., & Guba, E. (1989). *Fourth generation evaluation.* Newbury Park, CA: Sage. (Especially Chapter 8, "Judging the Quality of Fourth Generation Evaluation.")

Thoughts

Expect questions about generalizability. It is a nifty concept. Through randomization and adequate sampling, a researcher is able to promise generalizability. With generalizability, the researcher describes the degree to which these results are expected to occur in other places. By contrast, focus group research involves only a limited number of people who may not be selected randomly. Therefore, don't promise generalizability. Instead suggest that those who seek to use the results look over the study; examine the procedures, methods, and analysis strategies; and then decide the degree to which this might be applied to their situations.

Why Don't You Use Random Sampling?

Because random sampling isn't appropriate. In focus group research the strategy is to use purposeful sampling whereby the researcher selects participants based on the purpose of the study. For example, the purpose might be to study users of a program, teenagers in the community who have experienced violence, or men over the age of 50 with diabetes. In each situation, we are seeking out these kinds of people because they have special knowledge or experiences that are helpful in the study. They are what Michael Q. Patton (2002) calls "information-rich" cases. Focus groups are composed of homogeneous groups of people—people with something in common that is relevant to the topic of study. Random sampling of the population would be a waste of time and resources. However, the researcher often assembles a pool of potential participants and then randomly selects from within this pool of qualified individuals. This level of randomization is regularly done, and it helps minimize selection bias.

Thoughts

Considerable attention is placed on random sampling in quantitative research. The reason is that randomization helps ensure that a sample is a snapshot of the larger population. The size and the randomness determine the quality of the sample. If the size is small and the sample not random, it will be suspect. Therefore, it is no surprise that quantitative researchers are concerned about the size and randomness in focus group studies.

More on sampling

Be able to give the logic as cited by experts. Consider looking over the following sources:

Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2015). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing theory* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory.* Chicago, IL: Aldine. (Note discussions of theoretical sampling.)

Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. (Read Chapter 5 on "Designing Qualitative Studies.")

How Big Is the Sample, or How Can You Make Those Statements With Such a Small Sample?

In this form of research, the quality of the study is not dependent on the size of the sample. The intent is to achieve theoretical saturation, which is akin to redundancy. We are watching for patterns in our interview results, and we will sample until we discover that we have saturated the theory or found redundant information. In focus group research, the rule of thumb has been to conduct three or four focus groups with a particular audience and then decide if additional groups (or cases) should be added to the study. Large-scale studies with divergent populations often require more groups, but our goal is to determine the variability of a concept or idea.

Background

Patton (2002) offers an example that might be helpful in your answer.

Piaget contributed a major breakthrough to our understanding of how children think by observing his own two children at length and in great depth. Freud established the field of psychoanalysis based on fewer than 10 client cases. Bandler and Grinder founded neurolinguistic programming by studying three renowned and highly effective therapists. . . . Peters and Waterman formulated their widely followed eight principles for organizational excellence by studying 62 companies, a very small sample of the thousands of companies one might study. . . .

The validity, meaningfulness, and insights generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information-richness of the cases selected and the observational/analytical capabilities of the researcher than with sample size. (p. 245)

Thoughts

Small sample size will be hard for some researchers to swallow. Quantitative research procedures have repeatedly called for randomization and adequate sample size. Indeed, sample size is an indicator of quality in quantitative research. The logic of sampling in qualitative research is different. The purpose of the study and the nature of the topic determine the sample type and size.

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