Focus Groups

6 Conducting the Focus Group

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

Focus group sessions are usually stimulating and fun for participants, observers, and the moderator. We noted in Chapter 4 that having fun helps the flow of discussion and builds a sense of trust among members of the group. It must be recognized, however, that the primary purpose of a focus group is to obtain information. In the previous chapter, we emphasized the importance of ensuring that the group discussion stays on the topic of interest. It is the primary responsibility of the moderator to keep the group focused on the relevant topics and to ensure that the session yields useful information. As we have seen, the role of moderator requires training, experience, and a special blend of personality characteristics.

The initial job of the interviewer is to create a nonthreatening and nonevaluative environment in which group members feel free to express themselves openly and without concern for whether others in the group agree with the opinions offered. Once this environment has been established, it is the job of the moderator to keep the discussion on track, manage the time, and ensure the active participation of all members of the group. Moderating a focus group is hard work, and it requires that

the moderator be constantly alert. Every group takes on a unique identity, and no two groups behave the same way, even when discussing the same topic with the same questions. There are, however, issues and problems common to all focus group discussions.

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THE PHYSICAL ARRANGEMENT OF THE GROUP

In Chapter 3, we suggested that a focus group may be held in a variety of settings. We qualified this suggestion in Chapter 4, where we noted that the physical environment of the group can influence the nature of the interaction among group members and the types and amount of information obtained. In these earlier discussions, we noted the physical arrangement of the group within a given setting is especially critical to the success of the group discussion. Because the object of a focus group is discussion, the group members should be seated in a manner that provides maximum opportunity for eye contact with both the moderator and other group members. When a circular arrangement or reasonable approximation is not possible, Krueger and Casey (2000) suggest placing the least talkative individuals directly across from the moderator and the most talkative respondents and experts to the sides of the interviewer. This tends to increase the frequency of comments of the least talkative individuals and reduce the frequency of comments by the most talkative participants, providing greater balance for the discussion. On the other hand, it may be difficult to determine in advance how talkative different participants might be.

Most participants in focus groups feel more comfortable when seated around a table. There are a number of reasons for this. A table provides something of a protective barrier between respondents that gives less secure or more reserved members of the group a sense of security. It also helps establish a sense of territoriality and personal space that makes participants more comfortable. In groups consisting of both men and women, a table provides a shield for the legs, eliminating a source of distraction. Finally,

a table provides a place for resting one's arms and hands and when food is served, may eliminate gymnastics associated with handling plates and cups in one's lap.

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

INTERVIEWING STYLE

As we noted in Chapter 5, moderators of focus groups may use a wide variety of styles. Interviewing styles vary because of personality differences **[p. 91 ↓]** among moderators and because different types of groups and different research questions require different approaches. As we have already noted, one important dimension along which interviewing styles may vary is the degree of control or directiveness that the interviewer uses. Interviewing styles may range from extremely directive to very nondirective. At the extreme of the directive style is the nominal group. In the *nominal group*, there is only an interchange between the moderator and individual members of the group; little or no interchange among members of the group is permitted, and the interviewer exercises tight control over the agenda for discussion. At the other extreme, the moderator participates only at the start of the discussion and interjects him-or herself only when it is necessary to keep the discussion on the topic of interest. Both approaches have advantages and disadvantages.

The *directive* approach generally allows for greater coverage of topics or more detailed coverage of specific topics of interest in the time available but at the cost of group synergy and spontaneity. *Nondirective* approaches provide more opportunity for group interaction and discovery and greater opportunity for the individual participants' views to emerge, rather than the researcher framing of the issues imposed on them. Although this risks less coverage of the key research topics, it has the advantage of providing

a validity check on the researcher's understanding of the problem and its relevant dimensions.

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

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DISCUSSION AIDS

Interviewing style may also vary with respect to the use of discussion aids. Some interviews can be carried out with the moderator simply raising questions. In other cases, the discussion may be facilitated and enriched by presentations or demonstrations. In marketing research applications of focus groups, it is often useful to have respondents sample a product or watch the product in use as a means for stimulating discussion. Merton's early use of "focussed" interviews had respondents focus on positive and negative responses they had recorded at various points in a radio

program. Focus groups used to evaluate advertising or training programs often expose group members to the ad or program prior to the beginning of the discussion.

In addition to demonstrating or displaying the object for discussion, the interviewer may use a variety of other discussion aids. Projective techniques are often useful discussion aids, particularly when group members are reluctant to talk about an issue or the issue may involve deeply rooted values or feelings that respondents have difficulty identifying or articulating. Word association techniques and sentence completion tasks can be very useful for provoking discussion and are usually found to be very entertaining by many group members. Zaltman (2003) developed an elicitation technique that encourages respondents to identify pictures in magazines that represent their feelings and opinions. Responses to such association completion and picture identification tasks can be followed with additional questions to try to uncover reasons for a particular response.

Storytelling is another useful discussion aid. The interviewer may ask respondents to tell a story about a particular incident involving the object of the research. One way to facilitate storytelling is with pictures or cartoons. Respondents may be shown a picture of a situation, product, object, or person and asked to tell a story. Advertising and marketing researchers will occasionally use a set of pictures of people of various types and ask group members to identify the type of person who uses a particular product. Follow-up questions are then used to determine why a given person was selected. Sayre (2001) and Mariampolski (2001) provide extensive discussions of the uses of projective methods in both individual and group interviews.

INTIMACY

A third dimension along which interviewing style may vary is the level of intimacy on the part of the interviewer. In some cases, the interviewer takes an **[p. 93 ↓]** objective, distanced stance with respect to the group. In other cases, the interviewer may facilitate discussion by offering personal anecdotes and examples. In discussions of very sensitive topics, the more intimate approach may serve to relax respondents and stimulate discussion. For example, a moderator might use a personal situation relevant to the topic at hand or tell a personal story related to the topic as a way of helping group members overcome their embarrassment or sensitivity. By offering personal

information that is potentially embarrassing, the moderator legitimizes such information and provides an example for others. The danger of the more intimate approach is that the more the moderator becomes a participating member of the group, the more the group will provide the types of responses they think the interviewer wants. Use of an intimate interviewing style without biasing responses of the group is a difficult task, even for an experienced moderator.

OBSERVERS AND RECORDINGS

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

It is customary to inform group members at the outset of the session that observers are present and audio or video recording is taking place. Generally, group members are required to give their permission for videotaping and many institutional review boards require written consent. If observers are behind a one-way mirror, it is sufficient to simply tell the group that observers are present. When the observers are in the same room with the group, they should be seated away from the group as a reminder (to them and to the group) that they are observers, not participants. An introduction of the observers, by name only, is appropriate in this latter situation, along with an explanation that they are there to observe. It is usually not a good idea to identify the organization or title of the observers or the reason they are observing. Such identifying information, when provided at the beginning of a session, may reveal too much too soon about the nature of the interview and may bias responses of the participants. On the other hand, the end of the group discussion is sometimes a good opportunity to let the participants know why, and perhaps for whom, the research is being carried out. Debriefing participants at the end of a session is a matter of courtesy, though the amount of information revealed will vary by topic and security conditions. For example, a manufacturer contemplating a **[p. 94 ↓]** new product might not wish to reveal its plans but might tell participants that it is exploring opportunities for new product development.

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

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

Although the presence of observers or the use of recording equipment may make some group members self-conscious, at least initially, the stimulation and excitement of discussion generally causes the respondents to forget their presence. It is usually not a good idea for the moderator to remind group members of the presence of recording equipment by exhorting them to speak up, however. It is just as easy to ask a participant to speak up so that others in the group can hear or so that the moderator can hear.

The presence of observers is very useful as a tool for expanding the impact and salience of information obtained from a focus group. An observer's hearing respondents' comments directly is far more compelling than the summary provided by a moderator after the group is over (see Barabba, 1995, for a useful discussion of the power of direct observation). However, it is important that observers know their role and not become a source of distraction, especially when the observers are actually in the room. A quick route to a silent group is to have group members hear laughter coming from behind the observation window. One way to ensure that observers understand their role is to give each observer a specific set of responsibilities. If only one observer is present, this might involve detailed note taking. If multiple observers are present, each can be assigned responsibility for taking notes about one or more of the participants, including not only what the participants say but also their behavior, gestures, and other types of nonverbal responses.

BEGINNING THE INTERVIEW

The beginning of an interview sets the tone and agenda for all that comes later. The moderator should attempt to create an atmosphere of trust and openness **[p. 95 ↓]** at the very beginning. Reassurances of anonymity, of the value of all opinions, regardless of how different or unusual, and of empathy for the respondents are very important. The moderator should establish the agenda for the discussion and outline the ground rules for the session. Such agenda setting may be more or less directive, depending on the purpose of the group and the style of the moderator, but it will generally include some opportunity for respondents to introduce themselves. Typical openings might take the following form:

> Before we begin our discussion, it will be helpful for us to get acquainted with one another. Let's begin with some introductory comments about ourselves. X, why don't you start, and we'll go around the table, give our first names, and say a little about how we like to spend our leisure time.

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

Introductions of group members are a good way to build rapport and a sense of group. It is always a good idea to have group members introduce themselves and tell a little about themselves, such as their work, their families, or other nonintimate personal facts. In some groups, the moderator may want to limit the types of personal information

group members provide. For example, in a group of experts and novices on a topic, identification of occupation may serve to intimidate novices or give undue weight to the experts' opinions. There are no hard and fast rules with respect to the amount of information participants should be allowed to reveal about themselves, but if there is good reason to believe that such information might bias the group or otherwise influence the nature of the group's interaction, it would be wise for the moderator to ask the group not to mention it.

Once introductions are finished, the moderator should introduce the topic for discussion. Most often the moderator will introduce the topic in its most general form and leave more specific questions and issues for later questioning. This serves the useful function of getting the topic on the table without revealing all the specific issues that are of interest. Of course, this is a funnel approach to interviewing, which we discussed in Chapter 5. We also introduced several other approaches to interviewing in Chapter 5, and there are situations when other interviewing formats—and hence introductions to the topic for discussion—will be more appropriate. Nevertheless, the funnel approach **[p. 96 ↓]** tends to be the most commonly used. One reason for this is that it is often useful to know whether an issue is important enough for participants to raise it on their own. In addition, very specific questions about the topic, if asked too early, may set the discussion on a track that is too focused and narrow. Rather, it is better to funnel the discussion as it progresses by moving from the general to the specific. One way to engage the interest of participants quickly is to raise the topic for discussion and ask for personal anecdotes related to the topic. The sharing of stories tends to further build rapport and break down inhibitions.

ENSURING PARTICIPATION

Members of a focus group should be made to feel that their presence and opinions are not only valued but necessary for the success of the group. It is particularly important to establish this at the beginning of the interview. This will reassure the reticent, less forward respondents and provide a basis for dealing with dominant members of the group if it proves necessary. During the session, all members of the group should be encouraged to speak. This can be accomplished by asking direct questions of a member of the group. The simplest technique to ensure participation is to ask each

group member for his or her opinion in turn. This procedure cannot be used with each question because it tends to stifle interaction among the group members, but it can be used several times during the group to draw out reluctant respondents. Within the context of focus group research, such a "polling" procedure is appropriate only as a device for facilitating discussion. As noted elsewhere in this book, focus groups are inappropriate for "surveying" respondents to generate percentages or other statistics.

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

TIME MANAGEMENT

One of the most important skills of the moderator is time management. The moderator must gauge the extent to which a topic has been exhausted and further discussion will yield little new information. Knowledge of the relative **[p. 97 ↓]** importance of various specific questions to the research agenda is also helpful because it provides some guidance with respect to the amount of time that should be devoted to each question and which ones might be eliminated if time runs short. One critical point to bear in mind is that the participants have been recruited for a specific length of time. There is an implicit contract with the group that it will be finished on schedule. Groups that are kept beyond the appointed hour have been known to become surly and hostile.

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

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at the beginning of the group discussion are recorded. This written record can then be used for directing the group from topic to topic.

PROBING

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

The first response of a group participant is often incomplete. Initial responses are often glib and involve abstract shorthand terms that are not very meaningful. For example, a respondent who suggests his or her health care provider is unfriendly is likely responding to something very specific. It may be that the provider does not smile much, or it could be that the provider is hard to contact by telephone. Similarly, a consumer who indicates that a product is cheap or low in quality is most likely responding to some very specific characteristic of the product. It is very important to ask probing follow-up questions to identify the specific meaning of the group participants.

Follow-up questions, or *probes*, are an important part of extracting full information from respondents. Probes can take a variety of forms. They may **[p. 98 ↓]** simply acknowledge that a given participant has not given up the floor. This may involve continued eye contact with the participant and a simple "uh-huh," or it might involve telling the next person that speaks that X doesn't seem to have finished his or her thought. Another type of probe involves reflecting the respondents' thoughts back to him or her: "What I heard you say was…."

The moderator may also ask for more information by saying "Tell me more" or "I don't quite understand. Can you explain what you mean?" Asking for an illustration, an example, or a story is another way of obtaining further information. Other probes may be directed at the group at large. The group might be asked, "Does anyone have an

example of that?" or "Is this anyone else's experience?" It is generally not a good idea to probe by directly asking if anyone agrees or disagrees with the preceding statement. This results in a defensive respondent and sets the stage for conflict. Rather, the moderator might ask, "Does anyone have a similar (different) perspective?"

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

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

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

PROBLEMS

Problems can take a variety of forms in a focus group interview. It is impossible to identify or anticipate all of the problems that might come up during a session. Participants spill coffee, become ill, and receive emergency telephone calls. Cellular telephones have become so ubiquitous that the moderator should ask that they be turned off at the beginning of the session. The moderator must be prepared for anything that may happen and swiftly move the group back to its task if possible. Although it is not possible to anticipate all problems, several occur with sufficient frequency that they require some discussion.

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Experts

Two types of experts may be found in focus groups: legitimate experts and self-appointed experts (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Although there may be many occasions when a focus group composed exclusively of experts is useful, the presence of a legitimate expert among a group of novices may inhibit the discussion. Screening during the recruitment phase of the project may be the most effective means for eliminating this type of problem, but even the most rigorous screening will not prevent an occasional mistake. When such experts do appear in a group, it may be possible to co-opt them by making use of their expertise. This would involve asking the expert to withhold his or her opinions while at the same time occasionally requesting that the expert elaborate on matters of fact or provide detailed descriptive information. This approach often works well because the moderator is seldom as knowledgeable as the legitimate expert, who is placed in an important but clearly delineated role within the group. Use of this technique requires that the moderator not lose control of the group to the expert but use the expert as a resource to facilitate the group discussion.

Self-appointed experts are a more difficult problem for the focus group moderator. Such "experts" seldom have genuine expertise but offer their opinions as fact and often become dominant talkers in the group. These individuals may intimidate other members of the group, yet they cannot be placed so easily into a helpful role as the genuine expert. Nevertheless, it may be possible to control these individuals through a variety of means. The moderator's making it clear that he or she is interested in the views of all members of the group may be sufficient for solving problems created by the self-appointed expert. If this fails, however, the moderator may use more assertive techniques such as cutting the individual off in midsentence, avoiding eye contact, and not recognizing the individual when he or she wishes to speak. Nonverbal cues such as the moderator's looking bored or fatigued; drumming one's fingers; pretending to have a headache; or studying the ceiling, the floor, or anything other than the "expert" may provide a means for muting such individuals. Acting uninterested and immediately changing the subject after the expert speaks may also be useful for maintaining control of the group.

Friends

We have suggested in previous chapters that it is generally unwise to have friends participate in the same group unless the group is specifically designed to bring together individuals who are known to one another. Careful screening during the recruiting phase may reduce the frequency of this occurrence, but it **[p. 100 ↓]** is inevitable that friends will arrive together on occasion. In such cases, it is often appropriate to politely ask one of the individuals to leave.

Templeton (1994) identified a number of problems created by having friends in the same group: friends discourage anonymity; they impair group formation by not joining; they may engage in private conversations that deny their insights to the larger group and inhibit the expression of opinion by others; and friends may endorse one another's views, creating an imbalance of opinion in the group. There may be occasions when having friends (or spouses, other relatives, or persons known to one another) is perfectly consistent with the objectives of the research, but this should be determined at the outset of the research planning process.

Hostile Group Members

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

SPECIAL ISSUES

One of the advantages of focus group interviewing is that it can be adapted for almost any purpose. Such versatility means, however, that there are numerous issues and problems that may come up in the conduct of focus groups that are specific to a particular application. Researchers who are contemplating using focus groups for a specific purpose would do well to carefully think through the procedure and any problems that might be anticipated. In the remainder of this chapter, we deal with five special issues:

Children as Focus Group Participants

Children can make outstanding participants in a focus group, but they pose special problems. The moderator is especially important in ensuring the children are comfortable and relaxed. Children generally know when an adult is uncomfortable with them and this in turn makes them uncomfortable or hostile. Uncomfortable and hostile children do not talk much. Not all moderators, even very good ones, are well suited to the task of interviewing children. It is important then that the moderator be comfortable and experienced with children.

Young children especially are often more comfortable with a female moderator, though depending on the topic and whether the group is mixed or of a single gender, a male or female moderator may be appropriate. Generally, groups of girls will be more comfortable with a female interviewer. Groups of boys may be comfortable with a female interviewer but feel more open to talk about certain topics with a male moderator.

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

Children and adolescents also change quickly as they develop and don't mix well with those older or younger. Restricting the age range of participants in any particular group is likely to increase the cohesion of the group and facilitate the discussion. Questions also need to be worded in a way that is appropriate to the age of the participants and should address topics that are age appropriate. Finally, in most cases it will be necessary to obtain permission from parents, school authorities, or others as part of the recruiting process. More extended discussions of the unique issues associated with interviewing children can be found in Vaughn, Schumm, and Singagub (1996) and Krueger and Casey (2000).

Observational Techniques

Regardless of the composition of a focus group, it may be useful to record behavioral data as well as verbal responses. Recording of behavioral data poses **[p. 102 ↓]** special problems. The moderator is too busy running the group to record behavioral data, so one or more observers or recording equipment will be required.

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

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

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Dealing With Sensitive and Embarrassing Topics

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

The comfort level of participants may also be increased if the moderator uses a more intimate approach when appropriate. For example, the moderator might offer a personal anecdote such as, "The first time I ever saw a condom…." Another approach is to invite participants to discuss experiences or views of their acquaintances, friends, or neighbors. This eliminates some potential for personal embarrassment. Beginning a discussion by focusing on friends and acquaintances also helps create an atmosphere conducive to sharing personal experiences later in the discussion. More generally, projective techniques are often useful in eliciting data about sensitive topics, and they often inject humor into the group, which further reduces participants' resistance.

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

Focus Groups in International Settings

Focus groups are used around the world. Just as culture influences other types of human behavior and social interaction so too does it influence participation in focus groups. Many of the approaches that work in one country do not translate well to another. Serving food is often appropriate but may have a more facilitating effect in cultures like the United States and Japan where "grazing" is common rather than in cultures where longer sit-down meals are the custom. Similarly, some cultures are more accepting of status differences among group members. In hierarchical cultures where status is especially important (e.g., Thailand), groups will need to be more homogeneous with respect to status and power differences. Groups may work better for some topics in some cultures when the ethnicity of respondents is similar. This is especially true if there are very large differences in the behavior or issues on which the group focuses.

It is almost always best to conduct a focus group in the local language of participants. In some cases, there may be a common language that can be used by all participants, but this inevitably reduces the ability of respondents to articulate their opinions. Moderators should speak the language in which the group is conducted as a first language. Even the most fluent person in a second language will have some difficulty framing questions and following up responses. Interpreters create even greater problems and should be avoided whenever possible. It is often the case that the perceptions and opinions of the interpreter color the translation.

Other cultural differences that need to be considered are related to cultural differences about the importance of time. In some cultures, there will be a strong expectation that groups will start and end promptly at the scheduled times. Other cultures are more casual about time, and it may be necessary to plan to start a group discussion well after the scheduled start time. Depending on history and the current political environment, there may be a need to be especially reassuring with respect to the confidentiality of participants' opinions. Concerns for confidentiality, as well as general cultural norms related to audio or video **[p. 104 ↓]** recording, may also limit the ability to make permanent recordings of the group discussion. See Stewart and Shamdasani (1992)

for further discussion of issues related to the conduct of focus groups in international settings.

Virtual Focus Groups

Technology has made it possible to link people who are scattered across very broad geographic regions, allowing interviews with highly specialized groups that might be difficult to assemble in a single location. The potential anonymity of virtual groups may also improve participants' willingness when the topic is sensitive or potentially embarrassing. This latter advantage needs to be weighed against the prospect that group participants may not be who they represent themselves to be and the concern of some potential participants about sharing personal information with strangers in an electronic context.

Use of virtual groups greatly expands the pool of potential participants and adds considerable flexibility to the process of scheduling an interview. Busy professionals and executives who might otherwise be unavailable for a face-to-face meeting can often be reached by means of information technologies. Virtual focus groups may be the only option for certain types of samples, but they are not without some costs relative to more traditional groups. The lack of face-to-face interaction often reduces the spontaneity of the group and eliminates the nonverbal communication that plays a key role in eliciting responses. Such nonverbal communication is often critical for determining when further questioning or probing will be useful and is often an important source of interplay among group members. Use of virtual groups tends to reduce the intimacy of the group as well, making group members less likely to be open and spontaneous.

In virtual groups, the moderator's role is made more difficult because it is harder to control the participants. Dominant participants are more difficult to quiet, and less active participants are more difficult to recognize. On the other hand, the moderator's task can be aided by electronic monitoring equipment that keeps an ongoing record of who has talked and for how long. A visual display can keep the names and frequency of participation of group members before the moderator. Thus, the moderator can draw out the quiet participants, just as in a more typical focus group.

Virtual groups can take several forms. Telephonic groups (essentially conference calls) have long been used by researchers, but such groups are very awkward, and it is difficult to manage any serious group interaction. Spontaneity is highly constrained in such groups. Real-time videoconferences have become a common means for conducting virtual groups in the last several years. **[p. 105 ↓]** Videoconferencing via telephone lines or the Internet can provide an opportunity for the moderator to see participants and for participants to see the moderator and other participants. The success of such groups critically depends on the reliability of the technology. It is always important that technical support be available during the session.

Many research firms that specialize in focus group research now include virtual group capabilities as part of their facility offerings. Virtual groups conducted by videoconference are not a perfect substitute for on-site groups. The facial expressions and other behavior of group members may not be visible at all or may not be as visible as in face-to-face group encounters. Group interaction tends to be less spontaneous. Such groups are inevitably more expensive than more traditional on-site groups because of the cost of the technology, the need for a technician, and the cost of connect time.

Two other alternatives for conducting virtual groups involve the use of chat rooms, blogs, bulletin boards, and similar Web-based sites. Chat rooms involve real-time interaction among the moderator and group members. Bulletin boards are asynchronous, so questions can be posed and answers provided over some extended period of time. Blogs provide individual opinions and often elicit responses from others. Such virtual groups can be very real social groups, but many people remain uncomfortable with such online sharing. It is also the case that the moderator and participants cannot see one another, so information that might be present in facial expressions, tone of voice, and other nonverbal behavior is lost. These alternatives involve creating such sites for research purposes and require the same care and planning as any research project. An important element of the success of such alternatives is that respondents have the opportunity to interact with one another and to build on prior responses of group members. Observation of naturally occurring chat rooms, bulletin boards, and other online sites may reveal interesting information, but they are not substitutes for carefully designed research.

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CONCLUSION

Conducting a focus group is an art that requires considerable experience and training. The quality of the data obtained from a focus group discussion is the direct result of how well the moderator carries out the interview. This begins by establishing a high level of comfort for participants in an atmosphere that is perceived as nonevaluative and nonthreatening. In this setting, the moderator moves the group from topic to topic, probing as needed to extract the respondents' meanings. At the same time, the moderator must maintain control **[p. 106 ↓]** of the group, ensuring that the group is not dominated by one member and that all members actively contribute to the discussion.

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

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

[p. 107 ↓]

REVIEW QUESTIONS

Exercise: Assemble a group of four or five acquaintances and select a topic for discussion. Moderate a 20-minute discussion of the topic.

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