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## *Focus Groups and the Research Toolbox*

In the time since Merton's pioneering work, focus groups have become an important research tool for applied social scientists who work in program evaluation, marketing, public policy, the health sciences, advertising, and communications. Focus group interviews are but one type of group research, however, though many of these group techniques have significant communalities. Other group research techniques are discussed in Chapter 9. This chapter provides an overview of the basic elements and issues involved in focus group research.

### **FOCUS GROUP BASICS: STRUCTURE, PROCESS, AND DATA**

A. E. Goldman (1962) differentiated group depth interviews from other techniques by examining the meaning of the three words in the name. A *group* is "a number of interacting individuals having a community of interest" (p. 61); *depth* involves "seeking information that is more profound than is usually accessible at the level of interpersonal relationships" (p. 63); and *interview* implies the presence of a moderator who "uses the group as a device for eliciting information" (p. 64). The term *focus* in the full title simply implies that the interview is limited to a small number of issues. The importance of the group as a means for eliciting information has been emphasized by G. H. Smith (1954) in his classic definition of group interviewing: "The term *group interviewing* will be limited to those situations when the assembled group is small enough to permit genuine discussion among all its members" (p. 59).

The contemporary focus group interview generally involves 8 to 12 individuals who discuss a particular topic under the direction of a moderator who promotes interaction and ensures that the discussion remains on the topic of interest. Experience has shown that smaller groups may be dominated by one or two members and that larger groups are difficult to manage and inhibit participation by all members of the group. A typical focus group session will last from 1.5 to 2.5 hours. Although they can be conducted in a variety of sites ranging from homes to offices and by conference telephone, it is most common for focus groups to be held in facilities designed especially for focus group interviewing. Such facilities provide one-way mirrors and viewing rooms where observers may unobtrusively watch the interview in progress.

Focus group facilities may also include equipment for audio- or videotaping the interview and perhaps even a small transmitter for the moderator to wear (a “bug-in-the-ear”) so that observers may have input into the interview. Such facilities tend to be situated in locations that are either easy to get to, such as just off a major commuter traffic artery, or in places like shopping malls where people tend naturally to gather. Over 1,000 such facilities exist in the United States today.

The moderator is the key to ensuring that the group discussion goes smoothly. The focus group moderator is generally (but not always) well trained in group dynamics and interview skills. Depending on the intent of the research, the moderator may be more or less directive with respect to the discussion and often is quite nondirective, letting the discussion flow naturally as long as it remains on the topic of interest. Indeed, one of the strengths of focus group research is that it may be adapted to provide the most desirable level of focus and structure. If researchers are interested in how parents have adapted to the child care requirements created by dual careers, the interviewer can ask very general and nonspecific questions about the topic in order to determine the most salient issues on the minds of the participants. On the other hand, if the interest of the researchers is parents’ reactions to alternative concepts for child care, the interviewer can provide detailed information about the concepts and ask very specific questions about each one.

The moderator might also be more or less directive in this example by drilling down from an initial series of general questions about child care, then moving the discussion to more specific issues as the group proceeds. In fact, it is quite common for an interviewer to start a group with some general questions and then switch the focus of the group to more specific issues as the discussion progresses.

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

There is also a balance that must be struck between what is important to members of the group and what is important to the researchers. Less structured

groups will tend to pursue those issues and topics of greater importance, relevance, and interest to the group. This is perfectly appropriate if the objective of the researcher is to learn about those things that are most important to the group. Often, however, the researcher has rather specific information needs. Discussion of issues relevant to these information needs may only occur when the moderator takes a more directive and structured approach. It is important to remember that when this occurs, participants are discussing what is important to the researcher, not necessarily what they consider significant.

Although focus group research can produce quantitative data, focus groups are almost always carried out with the collection of qualitative data as their primary purpose. This is their advantage, because focus groups produce a very rich body of data expressed in the respondents' own words and context. There is a minimum of artificiality of response, unlike survey questionnaires that ask for responses expressed on 5-point rating scales or other constrained response categories. Participants can qualify their responses or identify important contingencies associated with their answers. Thus, responses have a certain ecological validity not found in traditional survey research. This often makes the data provided by focus groups idiosyncratic, however. It also makes the results of focus group research more difficult and challenging to summarize and generalize. This does not mean that quantitative tools cannot be applied to the analysis and interpretation of focus group data, however. Quantitative methods can be used to analyze focus group data, and we will discuss how this might be done in Chapter 7. Also, quantitative data (e.g., simple surveys) can be gathered in focus groups to anchor respondents' viewpoints as a basis for further dialogue and elaboration.

Focus group research has been the subject of much controversy and criticism. Such criticism is generally associated with two concerns: first, the view that focus group interviews do not yield "hard" quantitative data and, second, the concern that group members may not be representative of a larger population, because both the small sample numbers and the idiosyncratic nature of the group discussion. Such criticism is unfair, however. Although focus groups do have important limitations of which the researcher should be aware, these limitations are not unique to focus group research, and they are not "fatal flaws," as all research tools in the social sciences have significant limitations.

The key to successfully using focus groups in social science research is ensuring that their use is consistent with the objectives and purpose of the research. Indeed, this is also true of the successful use of all social science research methods. Focus groups may serve a variety of purposes, depending on where in the research agenda they are applied and how. For example, focus groups are often a useful starting point for the design of survey questionnaires because they provide a means for exploring the way potential respondents talk about objects and events, identifying alternatives for closed-ended survey items, and determining

the suitability of various types of scaling approaches. Although they are most often used for such exploratory research, they do have a place as confirmatory tools. For example, the responses of the members of one or two focus groups who are representative of a larger population may be sufficient to determine whether the humor used in an advertising execution is on the mark or lost on the respondents. Focus groups are also sometimes used later in a particular research process. For example, when quantitative marketing research of a set of new product concepts yields inconclusive (tie) results, focus groups can often tease out the subtler sources of a concept's appeal or lack of it.

If focus groups can be used for both exploration and confirmation, the question arises of how focus groups differ from other tools of science and what purpose(s) they serve that are not served by other methods. The answer lies in the nature or character of the data generated by focus group interviews. Krippendorff (2004) distinguishes between two types of data: *emic* and *etic*. *Emic data* are data that arise in a natural or indigenous form. They are only minimally imposed by the researcher or the research setting. *Etic data*, on the other hand, represent the researcher's imposed view of the situation. Little of the research that is actually carried out can be described as completely *etic* or completely *emic*. Even the most structured type of research will be influenced to some extent by the idiosyncratic nature of the respondent and his or her environment. On the other hand, even the most natural of situations may not yield data that are completely *emic* because the researcher must make decisions about what to attend to and what to ignore. Thus, it is perhaps more useful to think of a continuum of research, with some methods lying closer to the *emic* end of the continuum and some techniques lying closer to the *etic* end.

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

Neither *emic* nor *etic* data are better or worse than the other; they simply differ. Each has its place in social science research; each complements the other. Each serves to compensate for the limitations of the other. Indeed, one

way to view social science research is as a process that moves from the emic to the etic and back in a cycle. Phenomena that are not well understood are often first studied with tools that yield more emic data. As a particular phenomenon is better understood and greater theoretical and empirical structure is built around it, tools that yield more etic types of data tend to predominate. As knowledge accumulates, it often becomes apparent that the explanatory structure surrounding a given phenomenon is incomplete. This frequently leads to the need for data that are more emic, and the process continues.

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

### **USES OF FOCUS GROUPS: APPLICATIONS, ADVANTAGES, AND LIMITATIONS**

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

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

1. Obtaining general background information about a topic of interest
2. Generating research hypotheses that can be submitted to further research and testing using more quantitative approaches

3. Stimulating new ideas and creative concepts
4. Diagnosing the potential for problems with a new program, service, or product
5. Generating impressions of products, programs, services, institutions, or other objects of interest
6. Learning how respondents talk about the phenomenon of interest. This, in turn, may facilitate the design of questionnaires, survey instruments, or other research tools that might be employed in more quantitative research.
7. Interpreting previously obtained quantitative results

This list illustrates the impressive breadth of application of focus group research, but it is hardly exhaustive. One of the most appealing features of focus groups is their robust versatility for shedding light on almost any topic or issue. Focus groups are also widely used because they provide useful information and offer the researcher a number of advantages. This information and the advantages of the technique come at a price, however. We briefly discuss the relative advantages and disadvantages of focus groups and then turn to a discussion of the steps involved in the use and design of focus groups.

### **Advantages of Focus Groups**

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

1. Focus groups provide data from a group of people much more quickly and often at less cost than would be the case if each individual were interviewed separately. They can also be assembled on much shorter notice than would be required for a more systematic and larger survey. In marketing studies, focus group data analysis often begins immediately after a session ends, yielding preliminary findings quickly.

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

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

4. Focus groups allow respondents to react to and build on the responses of other group members. This synergistic effect of the group setting may result in the production of data or ideas that might not have been uncovered in individual interviews. Differences of opinion among group members also help researchers identify how and why individuals embrace or reject particular ideas, communications, or products.

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

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

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

### **Limitations of Focus Groups**

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

1. The small numbers of respondents that participate in even several different focus groups and the convenience nature of most focus group recruiting practices significantly limit generalization to a larger population. Indeed, persons who are willing to travel to a locale to participate in a 1- to 2-hour group discussion may be quite different from the population of interest, at least on some dimension such as compliance or deference.

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

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

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

5. The moderator may bias results by knowingly or unknowingly providing cues about what types of responses and answers are desirable or seeking to achieve group consensus on particular topics.

Thus, we see that focus groups offer important advantages, but these same advantages have associated dangers and limitations.

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

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

Focus groups have a long history as an important tool for discovery and exploration. When little is known about a particular subject or a certain phenomenon, there are few research alternatives. Some type of orienting, human interview will be required. The options available are individual interviews or focus groups. Focus groups provide a more rapid and often cost-efficient means for completing interviews. On the other hand, focus groups are not always inexpensive because respondent recruiting and compensation costs vary considerably according to



the characteristics of the sample. For example, it is easier to find and cheaper to compensate a sample of individuals who eat potato chips than one comprised of neurosurgeons. Also, the view that focus groups are less expensive than other viable research alternatives often fails to take into account significant travel, food, and other costs associated with focus group road trips. Table 3.1 lists a number of other advantages of focus groups relative to individual interviews. The decision to use focus groups instead of individual interviews must recognize the potential for confounding of individual responses, however.

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

Research employing focus groups shares many of the same characteristics and procedures as other types of research. Figure 3.1 lists the sequence of steps in the design and use of focus groups. Like all research, focus group research must begin with a problem. Focus groups are designed to do exactly what the name implies: focus. A focus group is not a freewheeling conversation among group members; it has focus and a clearly identifiable agenda. Problem definition requires a clear statement of what kinds of information are desirable and from whom this information should be obtained. A clear understanding of the problem or general research question is critical because it gives rise to the specific questions that should be raised by the moderator and identifies the population of interest.

Once a clear statement of the problem has been generated, it is possible to move to the second stage of the research. Like any survey, it is important to identify a sampling frame. A sampling frame is a list of people (households, organizations) that the researcher has reason to believe is representative of the larger population of interest. The sampling frame is the operational definition of the population. The identification of a sound sampling frame is far more critical in large-scale survey research than it is for focus group research, however. Because it is inappropriate to generalize far beyond the members of focus groups, the sampling frame need only be a good approximation of the population of interest. Thus, if the research were concerned with middle-class parents of school children, a membership list for the local PTA might be an appropriate sampling frame.

The definition of the research question and identification of the sampling frame provide important information for the third step in the focus group design process: identification of a moderator and design of the interview guide. Both the moderator and the types and forms of questions included in the interview guide should be compatible with the group to be interviewed.

**TABLE 3.1**  
**Advantages of Focus Groups Relative to Individual Interviews**

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**Respondent Interaction Advantages**

1. *Synergism.* The combined effort of the group will produce a wider range of information, insight, and ideas than will the cumulation of the responses of a number of individuals when these replies are secured privately. (But note, some researchers suggest that this is not always the case.)
2. *Snowballing.* A bandwagon effect often operates in a group interview situation, in that a comment by one individual often triggers a chain of responses from the other participants.
3. *Stimulation.* Usually after a brief introductory period, the respondents get “turned on,” in that they want to express their ideas and expose their feelings as the general level of excitement over the topic increases in the group.
4. *Security.* In an interviewer-interviewee situation, respondents may not be willing to expose their views for fear of having to defend these views or of appearing “unconcerned,” “radical,” or whatever the case may be. In the well-structured group, on the other hand, “the individual can usually find some comfort in the fact that his feelings are not greatly different from those of his peers, and that he or she can expose an idea without necessarily being forced to defend, follow through or elaborate on it. He or she is more likely to be candid because the focus is on the group rather than the individual; the respondent soon realizes that the things he or she says are not necessarily being identified with him or her” (Hess, 1968, p. 194).
5. *Spontaneity.* Because no individual is required to answer any given question in a group interview, the individual’s responses can be more spontaneous and less conventional, and should provide a more accurate picture of the person’s position on some issue. In the group interview, people speak only when they have definite feelings about a subject and not because a question requires a response.

**Sponsor Advantages**

1. *Serendipity.* It is more often the case in a group, rather than an individual interview, that some idea will “drop out of the blue.” The group also affords the opportunity to develop it to its full significance.
  2. *Specialization.* The group interview allows the use of a more highly trained but more expensive interviewer because a number of individuals are being “interviewed” simultaneously.
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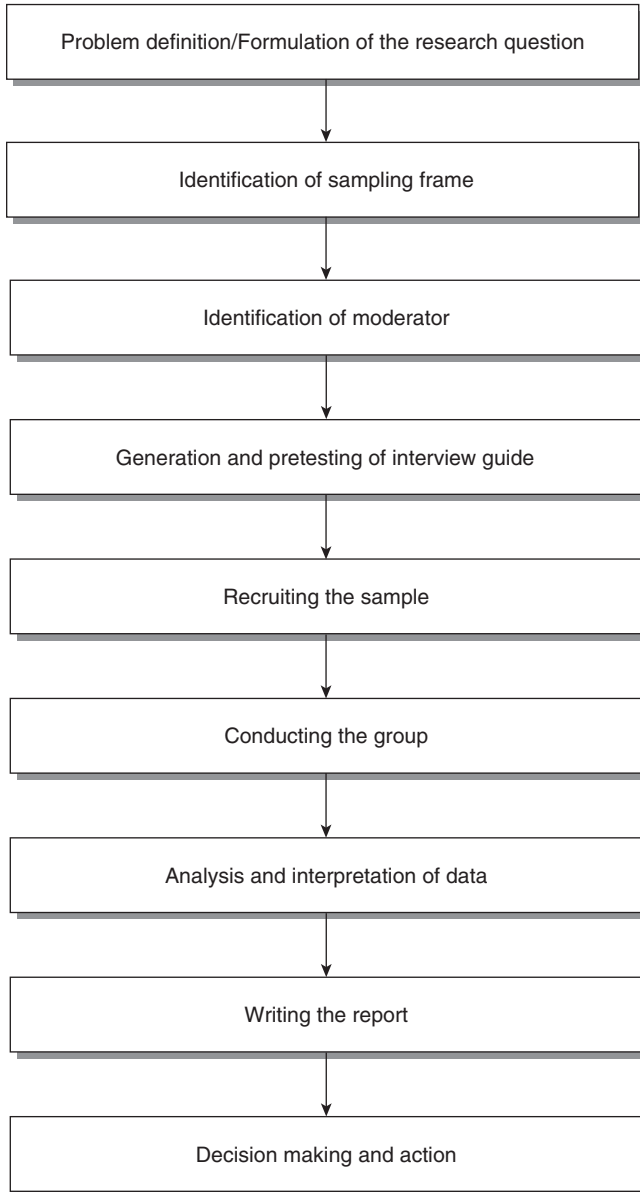
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3. *Scientific scrutiny.* The group interview allows closer scrutiny. First, the session itself can be observed by several others. This affords some check on the consistency of the interpretations. Second, the session may be tape recorded or even videotaped. Later, detailed examination of the recorded session allows additional insight and also can help clear up points of disagreement among analysts.
  4. *Structure.* The group interview affords more control than the individual interview with regard to the topics that are covered and the depth with which they are treated because the “interviewer” in the role of moderator has the opportunity to reopen topics that received too shallow a discussion when initially presented.
  5. *Speed.* Because a number of individuals are being interviewed at the same time, the group interview permits the securing of a given number of interviews more quickly than do individual interviews.
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SOURCE: Hess (1968)

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

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

It is generally best to recruit a few more participants than the number desired. Participants often cancel at the last minute, get stuck in traffic, have unexpected



**Figure 3.1.** Steps in the Design and Use of Focus Groups

emergencies, or otherwise fail to arrive at the designated time and place. After recruiting the participants, it is generally a good idea to follow up with a reminder by telephone or mail a day or two before the group is scheduled.

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

Each of the phases outlined above will be discussed in greater detail in later chapters.

## CONCLUSION

Focus group research is a useful research tool, but there are many other tools in the toolbox. It is important to recognize the unique strengths and limitations of focus group research. Focus group research produces very specific types of data that are at once very rich and diagnostic and limited. The use of focus groups can produce powerful insights, but such use is not a substitute for other research techniques.

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

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

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