2. Designing and Conducting Focus Group Interviews

Richard A. Krueger and Mary Anne Casey

Market researchers have used focus groups to search for ways to improve and market their products to consumers since the 1950s. In the last 20 years, government agencies, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), academics, and nonprofit organizations have started using findings from focus group interviews to help make decisions about their products and services. International public health organizations were quick to make use of focus groups, particularly in social marketing efforts. Educational and environmental organizations also have used the technique to listen to their employees as well as to their current and potential users.

The techniques we share are based on what we have learned while running focus groups with nonprofit organizations.

Characteristics of Focus Group Interviews

A good focus group has the following characteristics: carefully recruited participants, interacting in a comfortable environment, led by a skillful moderator, followed by systematic analysis and reporting. When conducting focus groups:

Carefully Recruit Participants

- Invite individuals who have the characteristics, experience, or knowledge needed to provide rich information on the topic.
- Limit the size of the group to six to eight people. It is desirable to have enough people to generate diverse ideas but not so many participants that they do not have a chance to share.
- Hold three or four separate focus groups for each type of participant one desires to use as a unit of analysis. For example, to compare how men and women view a particular issue, one should conduct three or four groups with men and three or four groups with women.
- Avoid power differentials among participants. All participants in a group should feel comfortable talking with one another.

Create a Comfortable Environment

- Hold focus groups in familiar or neutral settings such as office buildings, libraries, schools, homes, cafes, or community gathering spots.
- Seat people so that they can easily see one another.
- Interview people in their language. Do not use an interpreter in the group. Using an interpreter stilts the discussion and turns the process into serial interviews rather than a lively discussion among participants. It is better to train someone who knows the language to moderate the groups than to have someone who knows how to moderate work through an interpreter. After the group is over, if necessary, translate the discussion back into the analyst's language.

- Record the discussion for analysis. Take field notes and, if possible, make an audio tape recording. Sometimes a laptop computer can be used to make a transcription during the focus group. Explain why the focus group is being recorded and who will have access to the data.

Choose a Skillful Moderator

- Pick moderators who make people feel comfortable and who are good at listening. For groups of people who are used to being in powerful positions, pick a moderator who can keep the group on track and control dominant participants.
- Use predetermined questions. The moderator should be prepared to ask a set of questions designed to get the information needed by decisionmakers.
- Establish an open environment. It is the moderator's job to create the feeling that it will be safe to talk in the focus group.

Record and Analyze Data Systematically

- Develop a systematic approach to recording and analyzing data. The analyst should be sure that he or she can describe the process to others.
- Use a verifiable process. This means the analysis process should be documented and there should be evidence to support the findings. Another researcher should be able to review all the data and see how the analyst arrived at the findings and conclusions based on those data.

A focus group is working well when participants begin to talk to one another and build on one other's comments rather than continually responding directly to the moderator. Ideally, participants become engaged, and the focus group becomes a forum for their own discussion. The moderator should begin to play a less central role as participants share experiences, debate ideas, and offer opinions. Some groups arrive at this point quickly; others never reach it.

Roles in Conducting Focus Groups

There are different roles in a focus group study: organizer (leads planning and developing questions), recruiter (invites participants), moderator (leads the groups), assistant moderator (handles logistics and captures data), and analyst/reporter (summarizes the data and prepare reports).

One person can fill all the roles. However, we prefer working with a team of four or five people. Team members work together to complete the study, but individuals may take primary responsibility for certain tasks. For example, one may have multiple moderators who speak different languages to better reach the groups being addressed. Each of these moderators would be responsible for the outcome of his or her focus group.

Finally, although one person may be responsible for organizing the study, the plan and questions are usually stronger when several people are involved in their development.

Planning

The main challenge during the planning stage is to design a study that will answer the key questions within the time and budget constraints. The task manager and the team must be clear about the purpose of the study. The task manager must decide whether focus groups are the appropriate method. If focus groups are the best method, then the task manager must decide how many to do and to whom he or she wants to listen.

First Steps with Focus Group Studies

In developing and planning a focus study group, five key steps should be followed:

1. Decide whether focus groups are appropriate. Focus groups work particularly well for the following tasks:

- Understanding how people see needs and assets in their lives and communities.
- Understanding how people think or feel about an issue, idea, behavior, product, or service.

- Pilot testing ideas, reforms, or projects. Focus groups can be used to get reactions to plans before large amounts of money are spent in implementation.
- Evaluating how well programs or projects are working and how they might be improved.
- Developing other research instruments, such as surveys or case studies.

Focus group interviews are *not* meant to be used as:

- A process for getting people to come to consensus
- A way to teach knowledge or skills
- A test of knowledge or skills.

If the task manager answers yes to any of the following questions, he or she likely will need to consider other methods to use in conjunction with, or instead of, focus group interviews:

- Do you need statistical data? Focus groups cannot provide statistical data to project to a population. The number of people listened to is too small to be statistically representative.
- Will harm come to people who share their ideas in a group? Although the task manager can guarantee that he or she will keep information shared in the group confidential, the moderator cannot promise that other participants will do the same. If harm may come to people who openly share in the group, choose another method, such as individual interviews.
- Are people polarized by this topic? It is difficult to conduct focus groups if people holding opposing views on controversial issues are in the same group.
- Is there a better, more efficient way to get the information?

2. Clarify the purpose of the study. Team members may disagree about the information that the study should produce and what should be done with the results. They should come to agreement on a clear purpose for the study. This will make the entire process simpler.

3. Decide what types of people to listen to the (target audience(s)). What types of people have the experiences or characteristics that will allow them to provide input on the study topic? The target audience may not consist of the most highly educated or the most influential people in an area, but its members have direct experience with something about which the task manager wants to learn more. For example, young people who drop out of school know a great deal about what it would take to keep other young people in school. Teachers, counselors, and parents may give the task manager different perspectives on the same issue.

The task manager should consider the usefulness of listening to a wide variety of people. These include elected officials, influential local figures, the people most affected by the change, the people who must buy into the change before it can happen, and employees (both frontline staff and management) of the organizations that will implement programs or services to support the change.

4. Get advice from the target audience(s). The task manager should find a few people similar to those whom he or she wants to invite to the focus groups and tell them about the study. The task manager can ask for their advice on several issues: Who can ask these kinds of questions, that is, who should moderate the focus groups? Where might the groups be held? What days or times would work well for people? How does one find people with these characteristics? What would it take to get people to come?

*5. Put thoughts in writing***.** The task manager should develop a plan that includes the study's purpose, the number of groups, the potential questions, a timeline, and a budget. This plan will clarify one's thinking and provide a basis for further discussions. Then this plan should be shared with colleagues and their feedback invited.

Sampling and Number of Groups

The basic sampling strategy is to conduct three or four focus groups for each audience category that is of interest. If after the third or fourth group the team is still hearing new information, the team might continue conducting focus groups until no new information is elicited.

Do not use a statistical formula to determine sample size. Instead, use the concepts of *redundancy* or *theoretical saturation*, in which the researcher continues interviewing until no new insights are presented. In effect, the researcher will have exhausted the range of views on the topic, and continuing the interviews would only yield more of what the researcher already knows. Theoretical saturation tends to occur regularly in focus group research after three or four groups with one audience.

For example, suppose a researcher were doing a study in a country with several larger urban areas and a sizable rural population and wanted views that reflected the entire country. He or she might decide to conduct three or four focus groups in the cities and three or four in the rural areas. If the country had a multilingual and multiethnic population, the researcher likely would want to conduct three or four groups for each language and each ethnicity in both the urban and rural areas. Clearly, the number of focus groups needed can multiply quickly, and the budget and timeline will force the researcher to restrict the size of the study.

Questions

Developing questions carries several challenges. The aim is to ask questions that address the purpose of the study. Nevertheless, many study teams get swept away inventing questions that would be interesting to ask but whose answers would not address the study's purpose. A good set of questions focuses on getting information that directly relates to the study's objectives. The questions must be conversational and easy for the participants to understand. The researcher must have the right number of questions—neither too many nor too few. He or she must start with questions that allow the participants to get ready to prepare the participants to answer the most important questions.

Developing a Set of Questions

A set of questions developed for the focus groups is sometimes called a "questioning route." In a two-hour focus group, the researcher can expect to ask about a dozen questions. The questions should be written in the form that they will be asked in the groups. There are three steps to develop a questioning route: (1) hold a brainstorming session, (2) use the brainstorming questions to draft a questioning route, and (3) send the draft questioning route to the team for feedback (box 1).

1. Hold a brainstorming session. The researcher should begin by inviting four to six people who are familiar with the study to a one- or two-hour meeting. Ask these people to suggest questions that should be answered in the study. Questions may be lightly discussed but do not get stuck debating the merits of a single question. Have one person record all these questions, and adjourn when ideas dry up.

2. Use the brainstorming questions to draft a questioning route. Groups are good at brainstorming, but they are not efficient at developing questioning routes. Have one person use the questions generated in the meeting as the basis to draft a questioning route. Select the questions that seem most likely to provide useful information. Rephrase these questions according to their order in the questioning route. Sequence the questions in a logical flow from general to specific.

Say the questions out loud. Are they easy to ask? Do they seem like questions the target audience will be able to answer?

There is no magic in having approximately 12 questions. However, beginning focus group researchers often develop questioning routes with 20 to 30 questions—which is far too many. The result of too many questions will be shallow data. Participants will not have enough time to go into depth on any of the questions. Once we have a draft questioning route, we estimate how much time we think the group should spend on each question. Not all questions deserve the same amount of time. Some questions are simple, or not as important, and

Box 1. Examples of Questioning Routes

Pilot testing new materials

1. Take a few moments and look over the materials (the materials presented to the group should include a brief description of a program and examples of handouts that participants would receive).
2. What one thing do you like the best?
3. What one thing do you like the least?
4. If you could change one thing about the materials, what would it be?
5. What would get you to participate in this program? (Under what conditions would you participate?)
6. Suppose that you were trying to encourage a friend to participate in this program. What would you say?
7. Do you have any other advice for us as we introduce this new program?

Basic questions for formative program evaluation

1. Tell us how you participated in the program.
2. What did you like best about the program? (What has been most helpful to you?)
3. What did you like the least about the program? (What was least helpful to you?)
4. What should be changed?
5. What should be continued… as is (keep it the same) or with revision (continue it but fine tune).
6. What other advice do you have about the program?

Evaluating a service for children

1. Introduce yourself and tell us how you learned about this service.
2. Think back to when you first became involved with these services. What were your first impressions of the service?
3. What has been particularly helpful about the services your family has received?
4. What has been frustrating about the services?
5. What has your child liked about the experience?
6. What has your child *not* liked about the experience?
7. Some of you may have had experiences with other services for your child. How does this approach compare with other services you've experienced? Is it any different? How so?
8. What would make the services work better?
9. Is your child any different because they have received these services? If so, how?
10. Is your family life any different because you received these services? How?
11. If you had a chance to give advice to director of this program, what would you say?
12. Based on your experiences, would you recommend these services to other parents?

can be easily covered in five minutes. Key questions may be complex or include activities. A key question can take 15 to 20 minutes to answer. Once we have estimated times for each of the questions, we add up the total to determine whether we should add or delete questions.

3. Send the draft questioning route to the team for feedback. Ask the brainstorming team the following questions: Will these questions get us the information we need? What have we missed? What can be deleted? Are these the words participants would use? Does the flow make sense? Then the researcher can revise the questioning route based on feedback.

It is important to remember that the same questions are asked in all the interviews with the same audience. However, if separate groups are going to be conducted for different audiences, a slightly different questioning route might be used for each. For example, the researcher might ask students a question that he or she does not want to ask parents or teachers. Nevertheless, the researcher needs to keep a core set of questions the same in each questioning route so that responses can be compared across audiences.

Phrasing and Sequencing Questions

Care is needed in the phrasing and sequencing of the questions. Focus group questions are distinctive. When developing questions, the researcher should keep in mind several guidelines:

Use open-ended questions. Most of the questions in the focus group are open-ended or nondirective. These questions deliberately give the participants as much latitude as possible for their responses. Be cautious of phrases such as "how satisfied" or "to what extent" because these words limit the range of responses.

Examples of open-ended questions include: 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?

Avoid questions that can be answered with a "yes" or "no." If the question can be answered with one word, the researcher should revise the question. One-word answers usually lack the desired detail.

Avoid "why?" questions. "Why?" seems demanding and makes people defensive. Instead, the researcher can ask about attributes and influences. Attributes are characteristics or features of the topic. Influences are things that prompt or cause action. Try questions such as: "What prompted you to try…?"

Use "think back" questions. Take people back to a specific time to get information based on experience. "Think back to the last time you visited the clinic…." "Think back to when you had your first baby…." "Think back to when you first planted…."

Use different types of questions. Five types of questions are asked in focus groups: (1) opening questions (answered by everyone), (2) introductory questions, (3) transition questions (move participants to key questions), (4) key questions (address one of the fundamental issues of the study), and (5) ending questions (get a final viewpoint from participants on key topics). Not all questions are the same. Some are designed to get people talking. They are easy for everyone to answer. Others move participants to the key questions that are the most important. At least half of the focus group's time should be spent on key questions. Ending questions help wrap up the discussion (box 2).

Use questions that get participants involved. Participants can do more than talk. Ask them to try a product or a task and talk about it. Or ask them to draw a person who uses the program or service that is the subject of the focus group. Have them rate different ideas. Remember to take into consideration reading and writing abilities before using certain types of questions.

Box 2. Examples of Ending Questions

Several questions are particularly effective at the end of the focus group. These questions help the researcher get a final viewpoint from participants on key topics. Consider using one or more of these ending questions:

All-things-considered question. This question asks participants to reflect on the entire discussion and then offer their positions or opinions on topics of central importance to the researchers. For example: "Suppose that you had one minute to talk to the head of X about this topic. What would you say?" Or "Of all the things we discussed, what to you is the most important?"

Summary question. The assistant moderator often gives a short summary of the focus group near the end. After the brief oral summary, the moderator asks: "Is this a good summary of what was said here today?"

Final question. The moderator reviews the purpose of the study and then asks the participants: "Have we missed anything? Is there anything we should have discussed that we didn't?"

Focus the questions, sequencing them from general to specific. As a rule, the questions tend to begin with general and broader topics and move to more specific categories. For example, if a researcher were doing a focus group on a specific brand of cola, he or she might begin by asking about beverages, then sodas, then colas, and finally about the specific brand.

Recruiting

The researcher has the plan and knows the questions that he or she is going to ask. The next challenge is to find the right people and get them to attend the focus groups.

The first step in recruiting participants is to identify as precisely as possible the characteristics of the target audience. A basic principle of focus groups interviewing is that the researcher controls attendance. The researcher invites people because they meet the "screens" or qualifications of the study devised in the planning stages. Participants are selected and invited because they have certain experiences or qualities in common, not simply because they are interested in attending. Participants may have taken part in a community program that the researcher is evaluating; they may be residents in a community in which the researcher is doing a needs assessment; or they may be farmers who have adopted improved agricultural practices.

One of the challenges of focus group research is getting people who are not interested in the study to participate. They may be apathetic, indifferent, or even consider the topic to be irrelevant. However, if the researcher limits the study to those who show interest in the topic, the results may be biased. To be successful, the researcher will need to do three things: (1) find a pool of participants, (2) develop a sound recruiting procedure, and (3) devise incentives to increase attendance.

Finding a Pool of Participants

Typically, we find a pool of people who meet our selection requirements, and then we randomly select individuals to invite from that pool. For example, we might invite every fifth name on a list or every tenth person who enters a health clinic. Here are several different ways to find a pool:

- *Find a list of people who fit the selection criteria.* Think about community members (or organizations) who might have a list.
- *Piggyback on another event that attracts the type of people desired.* Do all farmers in a certain area get together for a particular event?
- *Recruit on location*. Invite every fifth person who arrives at the clinic.
- *Encourage nominations.* Ask key people, such as elders, educators, or service providers, whom they know who fit the selection criteria.
- *Snowball samples.* Once the researcher finds some people who fit the selection criteria, ask them for names of other people who fit the selection criteria. Put the names in a pool.
- *Place advertisements in newspapers and on bulletin boards.*

Developing a Recruiting Procedure

Successful recruiting has two distinct qualities. First, the process should be personalized. Each invited person should feel that he or she has been personally asked to attend and share his or her opinions. Second, the invitation process is repetitive. Invitations are given not just once, but two or three times. A typical recruiting process follows:

Set meeting dates, times, and locations for group interviews. Most groups with adults are scheduled for two hours. Focus groups with children are usually shorter. Do not schedule more than two groups in one day unless you have multiple moderators.

Recruit potential participants by telephone or in person. Before beginning the recruiting, the researcher needs to be clear on how he or she will describe the study. People will want to know the purpose of the discussion, who wants the information, what the sponsor of the study is going to do with the information, and why they are being asked to participate.

Usually, we do not use the word "focus group" when inviting participants, as the term can be intimidating. Instead, we say we are getting together a few people to talk about the topic. Do not use jargon in the invitation. In most cases, the invitation should sound like it will be an easy, comfortable, interesting conversation.

Think about who should offer the invitation. Will people be more willing to participate if someone from their community or village invites them than if a stranger invites them? Or would people feel honored to be invited by a head of a local organization? People are more likely to say yes if someone they know and respect invites them to participate. If that is not possible, it helps to be able to refer to a person whom they know and respect as supporting the study. An invitation with this phrasing brings results: "The deputy minister (or the community health nurse) said you might be able to help us. We are getting together some people to talk about (name of topic)."

Soon after the person has agreed to participate, send him or her a personalized letter. Do not use a generic salutation such as "Dear friend." This letter should thank the person for agreeing to participate and confirm the date, time, and place of the focus group. In certain cases, the recruitment and the meeting time are close together in time. In these cases, the personalized letter is not possible, but it may be helpful to give those agreeing to participate a one-page fact sheet with the details of the study.

Telephone or contact each person the day before the focus group to remind him or her of the group. "I'm looking forward to seeing you tomorrow at…."

Sometimes recruiting is done just before the focus group is held. For example, the researcher might find the pool of participants at a festival or community event at which many people have gathered. As people arrive at the event, a limited number can be invited to join the discussion. If many qualified participants are present, the researcher might randomly select those who will participate. In this scenario, it would be a good idea to arrange for a special place to hold the focus group where the participants will not be disturbed by the surrounding events.

Getting People to Attend: Incentives

The researcher should think about what might make it hard for people to attend and try to eliminate these things. If appropriate and possible, provide transportation and childcare.

The researcher should also think about what might entice people to participate and offer some or all of these things. He or she can ask a few people who are similar to the target audience what it would take to get them to come. Incentives that have been used to encourage people to participate include:

- Money (we will pay you).
- Food (there will be something to eat).
- Gifts (we have a gift for you).
- Compliment (others value your insights).
- Honor (we value your opinions).
- Enjoyment (you will have a nice time).
- Community (your participation will help the community).

Moderating

The challenge of moderating is making people feel comfortable enough to share in a group what they think and how they feel. Participants must trust the moderator, the process, and the sponsoring organization, and they must believe that the results will be used in a positive way. The moderator must know when to wait for more information and when to move on. The moderator must be able to control dominant speakers and encourage hesitant participants. The moderator must respect the participants, listen to what they have to say, and thank them for their views even when the moderator may personally disagree with those views.

Moderator Skills

The moderator should have enough knowledge about the topic to understand what the participants are saying. He or she does not need to be an expert on the topic but should understand common terms that will be used in the discussion.

It sometimes helps to have a moderator who looks like the participants. This can make the participants more comfortable and give the impression that "this person will understand what I have to say." The researcher should consider things like gender, age, race, and ethnicity. For some topics, these issues may not matter, but for other topics they are very important. For example, women may be more willing to talk about breastfeeding with a woman than a man. As mentioned before, the moderator should be fluent in the participants' language.

Other things that the moderator should do include:

Be mentally prepared.

- Be alert and free from distractions. The

moderator should arrive early so he or she is relaxed and ready to listen.
- Have the discipline to listen. Beginning moderators are often delighted that people are talking and do not notice that the participants are not really answering the questions. As the moderator listens, he or she needs to determine whether participants are really answering the question. If not, the moderator should refocus their attention on it.
- Be familiar with the questioning route. Know which questions are the most important and which can be dropped if time is running out.

Work with an assistant moderator.
- An assistant moderator improves the quality of the groups.
- The assistant helps by handling details (for example, taking care of refreshments, monitoring recording equipment, integrate latecomers into the group).
- More importantly, the assistant helps ensure the quality of the analysis by taking careful notes, summarizing the discussion at the end, and acting as another set of eyes and ears for analysis.

Record the discussion.
- It is impossible to remember everything that is said in a focus group. The focus group can be recorded through field notes, tape recording, or with a laptop computer. The moderator will not be able to take comprehensive notes and guide the discussion at the same time.
- The responsibility for recording the focus group falls to the assistant moderator.

Use purposeful "small talk" before the group begins.
- Create a warm and friendly atmosphere. While the moderator is waiting for participants to arrive, he or she can engage those who arrive first in "small talk." These informal discussions precede the focus group interview, help put participants at ease, and foster conversation among the group. Small talk often occurs while people are standing around and before the official discussion begins.
- Small-talk topics should be easy to discuss. They can focus on what is happening locally (if it is off the topic of the focus group). If the moderator is new to the area, he or she can ask participants about the weather, geography, transportation, places to eat, or their families. The moderator's job is to make people feel welcome.

Give a short and smooth introduction.
- Welcome everyone.
- Give an overview of the topic.
- Provide any ground rules for the discussion.
- Ask the first question.

Use pauses and probes to draw out more responses.
- Be comfortable using a five-second pause. Beginning moderators are sometimes uncomfortable with silence. However, pauses encourage people to add to the conversation.
- Use probes to get more detail. Generally, more detailed information is more useful. Consider using these questions and comments: "Would you explain further?" "Can you give an example?" "I don't understand." "Tell me more."

Control one's reactions to participants.
- Do not lead participants by giving verbal or nonverbal clues as to what you do or do not like. The moderator should avoid showing signs of approval or disapproval. For example, it is often tempting for the moderator to give a broad smile and nod his or her head when hearing certain comments. Participants quickly spot this behavior and then assume that more of these "approved" comments are wanted.
- Avoid head nodding and verbal cues like "That is good" or "Excellent."
- Do not correct participants during the group discussion. If they share information that is harmful, offer the correct information at the end of the discussion.
- Do not become defensive if participants say that they think the program is horrible. Instead, the moderator should try to get information that will help him or her understand their perspective.

- Save unplanned questions for the end. Sometimes new and unanticipated questions will occur to the moderator. There is a risk in asking these questions during the focus groups, as they might interrupt the sequence of the planned questions and throw participants off topic. Save these questions and ask them at the end of the focus group discussion.

Use subtle group control.

- The moderator's job is not to make sure everyone speaks the same amount in a group. However, everyone should have the opportunity to share. Some people will have more to say. If they are answering the question and giving new and useful information, let them continue.
- Control dominant talkers by thanking them for their input and asking for others to share. Remind the group that it is important to hear from everyone.
- Call on quiet participants. They are often reflective thinkers and have wonderful things to offer. Invite them to share with something like, "Maria, I don't want to leave you out of the discussion. Is there something you would like to add?"

Conclude with a summary and final questions.

- Summarize the key points of the discussion and ask for confirmation. Usually, the assistant moderator does this. (Do not summarize the entire focus group, but instead summarize three to five of the most important points.)
- Review the purpose and ask if anything has been missed.
- Thank the participants and conclude the session.

Beginning the Focus Group Discussion

The first few moments in a focus group discussion are critical. In a brief time, the moderator must create a thoughtful, receptive atmosphere; provide ground rules; and set the tone of the discussion. Much of the success of group interviewing can be attributed to creating an open environment.

The recommended pattern for introducing the group discussion includes a welcome, an overview of the topic, the ground rules, and the first question (box 3).

Expectations of the Assistant Moderator

It is helpful to have a second member of the research team present in the focus group. We call this person the assistant moderator or the reporter. Because there is so much going on in the focus group the moderator often is not able to lead the discussion, observe, and take notes at the same time. The assistant helps with the arrangements, takes careful field notes, and assists with the analysis.

Assistant moderators typically take responsibility for the following:

- *Equipment.* Ensure that needed equipment is available and working. This includes recorders, microphone, tapes, and handouts.
- *Refreshments.* Arrange for food (either complete meals or snacks) and beverages to be available on time.
- *The room.* Arrange chairs and table and be attentive to background noises that would affect the audio recording as well as room temperature and lighting.
- *Welcoming participants as they arrive.* Act as the hosts and make participants feel welcome and comfortable.
- *Sitting in a designated location.* Sit outside the circle, opposite the moderator, and closest to the door, so that they can greet those arriving late, briefly telling them what has been discussed so far, and find them a place to sit.
- *Taking notes throughout the discussion.* Capture the details of the group interaction in their notes.
- *Not participating in the discussion.* Speak only if invited to by the moderator. Control their nonverbal actions no matter how strongly they feel about an issue.
- *Asking questions when invited.* At the end of the discussion, ask questions of amplification or clarification when invited to by the moderator.
- *Giving an oral summary.* Provide a brief oral summary (about three minutes) and invite

Box 3. Example of a Typical Introduction

"Welcome! Thank you for joining us to talk about education. My name is Richard Krueger, and this is Peter Wyet. We are working with the Department of Education. We know that most teenage boys from this school district do not graduate from high school. We want to find out what can be done to help these young people stay in school. The Department of Education will use the information we get from these discussions to design new programs specifically for boys.

"You have been invited because you are all fathers of junior high school boys. Also, each of your sons has missed several days of school in the past month. We would like your thoughts on what might be causing this and what could be done to keep your sons in school. We will also be talking to junior high age boys, mothers, teachers, and community leaders.

"There are no wrong answers. We expect that you will have differing points of view. That is okay. You do not have to agree. Please feel free to share your point of view even if it differs from what others have said.

"You have probably noticed the microphone. We are tape-recording the session because we do not want to miss any of your comments. People often say very helpful things in these discussions, and we cannot write fast enough to get them all down. We will not use any names in our reports, and we will keep what you say confidential.

"I have about a dozen questions to ask. My job is to listen and to make sure everybody has a chance to say what he wants to say. You do not need to respond directly to me all the time. Feel free to follow-up on something someone else says. You may want to add something or share a different experience. I will ask a question, and then you can feel free to have a conversation about it.

"Well, let us begin. Let us find out some more about one another by going around the table. Please tell us what grade your son is in and one of his favorite things to do when he is not in school."

Note: After the first question is completed, it is helpful to say, "We will not be going around the circle anymore, so just feel free to jump into the conversation whenever you want." If the moderator continues to go around the table, discussion becomes boring, and participants tune out.

participants to offer additions or corrections to the summary.

- *Discussing the focus group with the moderator.* Discuss overall impressions, notable quotes, key ideas or insights presented, and how this group compared to other groups.
- *Giving feedback on the analysis and report.* Offer valuable insights into the analysis. In some circumstances, assistant moderators may actually provide leadership for the analysis. At a minimum, the assistant should be in close contact with the person coordinating the analysis and be one of the first readers of the finished report.

Capturing the Data

Thought must be given to capturing the comments of the focus group participants. Multiple methods are recommended because no single method is perfect. An examination of alternative methods of capturing data follows:

- *Memory* is the most fallible. Memories of the moderator and the assistant fade quickly and can be prone to distortion. Memory will be one of the methods used, but it should not be the only method.
- *Field notes* can capture meaningful quotes plus the content of the discussion. The field notes of the assistant moderator should be expected to capture details of the group, whereas the field notes of the moderator will be sketchy.
- *Audio tape recording* is recommended whenever possible. Standard audiocassette recorders are low cost and reliable. To ensure the best sound quality, use a microphone that is separate from the audiocassette recorder.
- *Video cameras* are useful in some circumstances, but be cautious because there is a tendency for people to be apprehensive and less candid on video.
- *Laptop computers* used by a fast typist can be used to capture a nearly complete transcript in real time.

The researcher's choice of methods will depend on resources and circumstances. At minimum, we recommend memory, field notes, and audio tape recording.

Analysis

The analyst must take the data and find what is meaningful to the purpose of the study, so that the results can be used. Not all studies require the same level of analysis. One of the skills that beginning analysts must learn is to match the level of analysis to the problem at hand. Some of the choices are listed in table 1. A complex study in which the researchers are trying to understand how different types of people think or feel about a cultural practice may require transcript-based analysis. However, if researchers are trying to determine which of three sets of educational materials is more appealing, analysis based on notes may be all that is required. No matter what level of analysis is selected, breaking analysis into manageable chunks keeps the material from becoming overwhelming. The analyst must look for the major themes that cut across groups as well as a key insight that might have been shared by only one person. This is possible only if the analyst has a clear understanding of the purpose of the study.

Systematic Analysis Process

Focus group analysis should be systematic. Analysts should develop a protocol that follows a predetermined and verifiable set of steps. There is no single "best" systematic process. Box 4 gives an example of a systematic analysis process that we have often used. Notice that the process begins while the first focus group is still being conducted and continues past the last group.

Focus Group Analysis Tips

When analyzing focus group data, the analyst needs to consider many different aspects of the focus group and its participants' responses, including words the participants use in the discussion, context, internal consistency of the participants' views, frequency of comments, degree of agreement on a topic, intensity of

Table 1. Analysis Choices

Analysis type	Memory-based analysis	Note-based analysis	Tape-based analysis	Transcript- based analysis
Description	Moderator analyzes based on memory and past experiences and gives oral debriefing to client.	Moderator prepares a brief written description based on summary comments, field notes, and selective review of tapes.	Moderator prepares written report based on an abridged transcript after listening to tapes, and consulting field notes and moderator debriefing.	Analyst prepares written report based on complete transcript, with some use of field notes and moderator debriefing.
Oral or written reports	Usually oral report only.	Usually oral and written report.	Usually oral and written report.	Usually oral and written report.
Time required per group	Very fast: within minutes following the discussion.	Fast: within 1-3 hours per group.	Fast: within 4-6 hours per group (includes time for completing abridged transcription).	Slow: about 2 days per group (includes time for completing full transcription).
Perceived level of rigor	Minimal.	Moderate.	Moderate to high.	High.
Risk of error	High.	Moderate--depends on quality of field notes.	Low.	Low.

Box 4. Example of a Systemic Analysis Process

The analyst(s) should:

1. Start while still in the group.

- Listen for vague or inconsistent comments and probe for understanding.
- Consider asking each participant a final preference question.
- Offer an oral summary of key findings and inquire if the summary is correct.

2. Prepare for analysis Immediately after the focus group.

- Draw a diagram of seating arrangement.
- Spot check tape recording to ensure the recorder picked up the discussion. If the tape does not work, immediately take time to expand written notes. Recreate as much of the discussion as possible.
- Turn the tape recorder back on and record the observations of the moderator and assistant moderator.
- Discuss issues such as: What seemed to be the key themes of this discussion? What was surprising? How did this group compare with prior groups? Do we need to change anything before the next group? Note hunches, interpretations, and ideas.
- Label and file field notes, tapes, and other materials.

3. Analyze the individual group within hours of completion of the focus group.

Analysts can proceed with or without transcripts.

Option 1: Transcript-based analysis
- Make back-up copy of tapes and send tape to transcriber if necessary.
- Listen to the tape, review field notes, and read transcript if available.
- Use transcripts as the basis for the next steps.

Option 2: Analysis without transcripts
- Prepare summary of the individual focus group in a question-by-question format with amplifying quotes.
- Share report with other researchers who were present at the focus groups for verification.
- Use summaries as the basis for the next steps.

4. Analyze the series of focus groups within days of the last group.

- Analyze groups within a category (for example, first analyze the groups of parents, then the groups of teachers, then the groups of students).
- Analyze groups across categories (for example, compare and contrast the parent groups with the teacher and student groups).
- Look for emerging themes by question and then overall.
- Construct typologies or diagram the analysis if appropriate.
- Describe findings and use quotes to illustrate.

5. Prepare the report.

- Consider narrative style versus bulleted style.
- Use a few quotes to illustrate each important point.
- Sequence could be either question by question or by theme.
- Share report with other researcher(s) for verification of findings.
- Revise and finalize report.

feeling toward a topic, specificity of responses, and "big ideas" that emerge from the discussion.

Words. Think about both the actual words used by the participants and the meanings of those words. Some words are powerful, colorful, or very descriptive. Different participants will use different words and phrases, and the analyst will need to determine the degree of similarity among these responses.

Context. Participant responses were triggered by a stimulus—a question asked by the moderator or a comment from another participant. Examine the context by finding the triggering stimulus and then interpret the comment with its environment in mind. The response should be interpreted in light of both the preceding discussion and the tone and intensity of the oral comment.

Internal consistency. Participants in focus groups sometimes change, and even reverse, their positions after interaction with others. This phenomenon rarely occurs in individual interviews due to a lack of interaction from other participants. When there is a shift in opinion, the researcher typically traces the flow of the conversation to find clues that might explain the change. What seems to have prompted the change?

*Frequency***.** Frequency is the measure of how often a comment was made. Frequency alone does not tell us how many *different* people made this particular comment. Indeed, the same person may have made the same, or similar, comments 10 times within the course of a single discussion. Do not assume that frequency is an indicator of importance. It is not necessarily true that items that are discussed most often are most important.

Extensiveness. Extensiveness is the measure of how many different people made a particular comment. This measure gives the analyst a sense of the degree of agreement on a topic. Unfortunately, it is impossible to determine extensiveness using only the transcript unless names are attached to comments. If the analyst was present in the focus group, he or she will have a sense of the degree of extensiveness, and this can be captured in the field notes. In focus group analysis, extensiveness is a more useful concept than frequency.

Intensity. Occasionally, participants talk about a topic with a special intensity or depth of feeling. Participants will sometimes use words that connote intensity or tell the moderator directly about their strength of feeling. Intensity may be difficult to spot with transcripts alone because the voice tone, speed, and emphasis on certain words are key to communicating emotion. Individuals will differ in how they display strength of feeling. Strong emotion may be evident in fast, excited speech in some people and in slow, deliberate speech in others. Pay attention to what is said with passion or intensity.

Specificity. Responses that are specific and based on experiences should be given more weight than responses that are vague and impersonal. To what degree can the respondent provide details when asked a follow-up probe? Greater attention is often placed on responses that are in the first person as opposed to those in the hypothetical third person. For example, "I feel the new practice is important because I have used it and been satisfied" has more weight than "These practices are good and people in the area should use them."

Finding big ideas. One of the traps of analysis is focusing so much on the detail that the analyst misses the big ideas. Step back from the discussions by allowing extra time for big ideas to percolate. For example, after finishing the analysis, the researcher might set the report aside for a brief period and then jot down the three or four of the most important findings. Assistant moderators or others skilled in qualitative analysis might review the process and verify the big ideas.

The Old-Fashioned Analysis Strategy: Long Tables, Scissors, and Colored Marking Pens

An analyst who has not analyzed focus group data before may want to try this strategy. It is a concrete way of categorizing and "seeing" the data. After the analyst understands this method, it is easier to understand how this process can be accomplished using computer software. The equipment needed includes two copies of all transcripts, scissors, tape, lots of room with long tables and possibly chart stands, large sheets of paper (flip charts, newsprint paper), colored marking pens, and stick-on notes. This analysis strategy has 10 components:

1. Prepare the transcripts for analysis. The analyst will save time and agony later if he or she is careful in preparing the transcripts. Be sure they follow a consistent style. For example, single-space comments and double-space between speakers. The moderator's comments should be easily identifiable by bolding, capitalizing, or underlining.

2. Make two copies of each transcript. One will be cut up, and the other one stays intact for later reference. At this point, the analyst may want to follow a tip that will be useful at later stages of the analysis. Consider printing transcripts on different colors of paper and color-coding by audience type or category. For example, copy the comments of teenagers on blue paper and those of parents on green paper. In addition, use a marker to put one line down the right margin of each page of the first parent transcript, two lines down each page of the second parent transcript, three lines down each page of the third parent transcript. This way, once the analyst has all of the transcripts cut up, he or she can easily see that a quote on green paper with two lines down the side came from the second parent group. To take this one step further, most word processing programs allow numbering each line.

3. Arrange transcripts in an order. The order can be based on the sequence in which the groups were conducted, but transcripts are more likely to be arranged by category of participant or by the demographic screening characteristics of participants (for example, users, non-users, and employees, or teens, young adults, and older adults). This arrangement helps the analyst to be alert to changes that may be occurring from one group to another.

4. Read all transcripts at one sitting. This quick reading reminds the analyst of the entire scope of the focus groups and refreshes his or her memory of where information is located, what information is missing, and what information occurs in abundance.

5. Prepare large sheets of paper. Use a large sheet of paper for each question. Place the large sheets on chart stands, on a long table, or on the floor. Write the question at the top of the sheet.

6. Cut and tape. Read responses to the same question from all focus groups. Cut out relevant quotes and tape them to the appropriate place on the large sheet of paper. Look for quotes that are descriptive and capture the essence of the conversation. Sometimes there will be several different points of view, and the analyst can cluster the quotes around these points of view. The quality and relevance of quotes will vary. In some groups, the analyst may find that almost all of the quotes can be used, but in other groups, there will be few usable quotes. Set the unused quotes aside for later consideration. If a participant's comments are really addressing another question, tape the comment under the question it addresses.

7. Move similar quotes into categories or "piles." As the analyst reads each quote, he or she needs to reflect on whether it is similar to or different from other quotes already assembled and put similar quotes together. If a quote raises different issues or ideas, then create a new category and a separate pile for this information.

8. Write a statement about each question. Look over the quotes and prepare a paragraph that describes responses to that question. A number of possibilities may occur. For example, the analyst may be able to compare and contrast differing categories. There may be a major theme and a minor theme. The analyst may discuss the variability of the comments, or even the passion or intensity of the comments. Following the overview paragraph, several additional paragraphs may be needed to describe subsets of views or to elaborate selected topics. Compare and contrast how different audiences (for example, parents, teachers, students) answered the question. (If the analyst color-coded the transcripts, then the colors easily help him or her "see" how the different audiences answered the questions.) When finished, go on to the next question.

9. Take a break. Get away from the process for a while. Refocus on the big picture. Think about what prompted the study. It is easy to get sidetracked into areas of minor importance. Be open to alternative views. Be skeptical. Look over the pile of unused quotes. Think about the big picture.

10. Prepare the report. Invite a research colleague to look over the report and offer feedback.

Transcribing Focus Group Interviews

In transcribing focus group interviews, keep these suggestions in mind.

Use quality playback equipment. The typist should avoid tape players with small speakers and awkward buttons. Earphones sometimes provide greater sound clarity. Focus group interview tapes *always* have background noise, and participants speak with different tones and voice levels. Therefore, these tapes will require concentration and the best quality playback equipment that can be obtained. If possible, use equipment with a tape speed control and foot-operated rewinding.

Minimize distractions. Type transcripts in a place with minimal distractions or interruptions.

Identify moderator statements. Use bold print for the moderator's statements and questions. If needed, type the name of each speaker followed by his or her comment. (If the person doing the analysis was not in the groups, it will be helpful to have the names attached.) Single-space the comments and double-space between speakers.

Type comments word for word. People do not talk in complete sentences. Insert punctuation where it seems appropriate. Avoid the temptation to add or change the words, or to correct the grammar. If some of the words are unintelligible, type an ellipsis ("...") to indicate that words are missing from the transcript.

Note special or unusual sounds that could help analysis. For example, note laughter, loud voices, or shouting in the transcript in parenthesis.

Allow sufficient time. Typically, it takes about 8 hours to transcribe a 60-minute tape. But the time will vary with the typist's speed, the quality of the tape recording, the length of the session, the experience of the typist with focus groups, and the complexity of the topic.

Special Topics

Involving the Community in Focus Group Research

In the past decade, a variation of focus group research has emerged that engages the community in the study. In these studies, the researcher takes on a different role. Instead of being the outside expert coming in to conduct the study, the researcher becomes the facilitator, teacher, coach, and mentor. The researcher works with, teaches, and guides one or more people from the community who, in turn, recruit participants, conduct focus groups, and help with the various aspects of the focus group study. These community members can be volunteers but often are employed for the duration of the study.

Many of these community-based studies have been on topics relating to policy development, community development, or prevention (drugs, teen use of alcohol, teen pregnancy, violence). In these studies, the researcher trained and supervised local people who took on specific tasks in the focus group study. As mentioned earlier, if the researcher does not know the language of the target audience, he or she should seek out a local person who is trusted by the target audience and fluent in the local language. This person should receive training and coaching from the researcher and then be sent out to conduct the focus groups.

Some tasks are easier to share with people in the community than others. Among the easier tasks are:

- *Recruiting.* Invite people to attend the focus group (in person or on phone) with written follow-up reminders.
- *Moderating.* Guide the discussion in several focus groups using predetermined questions.
- *Recording.* Take notes, listen to the focus groups, and assist the moderator.

Other tasks can be more complicated and require more time, skill, and practice. These include:

- *Planning.* Develop the overall strategy and determine the time schedule, budget, and groups to be conducted.
- *Developing questions*. Determine the questions to be used for a focus group study.
- *Testing questions.* Pilot test the focus group questions with a specific audience.
- *Transcribing.* Type the results of a focus group while listening to the audio tape.
- *Reporting.* Share written results and present an oral report with a specific audience.

Still other tasks are among the most complicated and difficult to share. These skills require considerable time to develop and perform, and they include:

- *Analyzing.* Prepare a three- to five-page question-by-question summary of the focus group or analyze across the groups and write the report.
- *Coordinating.* Overall coordination of the entire project must include all budgets, time-schedules, logistics, and equipment.

The researchers need to weigh what is gained and what might be lost if the community becomes engaged in the study. Involving the community gives several major advantages:

- Focus groups can be conducted in different languages and dialects by moderators who are trusted by the participants.
- Focus group participants (and especially the research team) feel a sense of ownership of the study.
- Because the community members have muted the bias that might occur from the sponsoring organization, results can be more authentic.
- The results are deemed more believable and trustworthy by local residents because they were familiar with the people conducting the study.
- Local team members gain skills.

However, involving the community in focus group research has some disadvantages. For example, the studies may take more time because the researcher must recruit, train, and supervise the team. In addition, the research team members may interpret results differently than would the expert researchers (although this could also be an advantage).

Involving the community in focus group research often works best in situations in which local people are able to obtain information otherwise unavailable to researchers, help stretch scarce resources, increase the likelihood that the results will be used, and develop new skills or insights about their community.

Telephone Focus Groups

Focus group discussions can be conducted on the telephone. With a conference call, a moderator can carry on a focus group discussion with people scattered around the country. The primary advantage of a telephone focus group is that it allows greater potential for participation. This is particularly true for busy people or people who are geographically dispersed.

The principle disadvantage of telephone focus groups is that the researcher misses the nonverbal communication. Much is gained in focus groups by bringing people together and being able to observe the participants' reactions—head nodding, signs of boredom, smiles, frowns, alertness, interest in the topic—all of which are lost on the telephone. In effect, a telephone focus group will lack the richness of in-person focus groups.

In comparison to in-person focus groups, telephone focus groups are shorter and have fewer participants and questions. In most situations, two hours is too long to be on the telephone. We recommend one-hour telephone focus groups. Because we have less time, we recruit only four to six people for a phone focus group and limit the number of questions. We also send out the questions ahead of time, which seems to make the limited time more productive. The advance preparation helps the participants know the direction in which we are heading, know what they want to say, and stick with us mentally, even when we are not together physically.

Some have argued that telephone focus groups are less intimidating because participants cannot see one another. As a result, there may be greater clarity of language because of the absence of eye contact, gestures, and nonverbal signals. Participants cannot detect signals of approval or disapproval from other participants or the moderator. The difficulty is that the moderator has limited ability to detect whether someone is "tuning out" of the conversation and paying more attention to reading the newspaper, reviewing documents, or working on a computer. In summary, the moderator has no reliable indicator of the degree of attention that a participant is giving to the discussion.

If the researcher chooses to use telephone focus groups as the discussion format, it is useful to keep several suggestions in mind (see box 5).

International Focus Groups

Increasingly, focus group research is being conducted in cross-cultural and international situations. The focus group, which has gained considerable popularity among Western developed countries, has been found to have distinct advantages in developing countries as well:

- Participants do not need to be literate.
- Focus groups do not depend on mail service or telephone systems.
- The process is familiar in that it resembles the decisionmaking process of many cultures. Having a small group of people talk about a current topic of interest is a very basic interaction.

However, the task of conducting focus groups in developing country settings is beset by a number of challenges that researchers should consider.

Power differentials. The first and most important challenge is the power differential between focus group participants and the sponsor. The sponsors of most international focus groups are organizations that control resources, people, or power. This power differential in conjunction with cultural differences has the potential to create communication problems.

These power differentials almost always cause difficulties in focus group research. For a focus group to work, participants must be able to talk without feeling threatened or fearing future reprisal. The researcher must set up the focus group so that there is no obvious advantage or disadvantage to providing either positive or negative information. The researcher must clearly communicate that all points of view are valued and appreciated. This clear communication of openness begins with the first contacts with community leaders, continues as participants are recruited, and is repeated when the group begins. Researchers should anticipate that they might hear points of view that are critical of the sponsoring agency or upsetting to themselves. The moderator must take care not to show emotional reactions when participants offer negative views on a program. It is often advisable for the moderator *not* to be a person who has traditionally represented the international organization, because there is a tendency for participants to hold back

Box 5. Tips for Telephone Focus Groups

- Invite a small group of only four to six people.
- Send questions or discussion topics to the participants in advance of conducting the focus group. Include any visuals, with each item labeled and in the order that they will be used.
- Limit questions to five to eight.
- If voices are not recognizable, ask participants to identify themselves before speaking.
- Limit discussion to about 60 minutes.
- Call on people who are not audibly participating.
- Consider asking participants to reflect for a moment or to jot down something on a piece of paper and then read the comments. It is fine to include questions that ask participants to rate or assign values to ideas or things. Keep the scales simple and logical.
- Include ending questions such as the "all things considered" or the "have we missed anything?" question.

from giving negative feedback to people in influential or powerful positions.

In some cultures, the norm is to avoid criticism, particularly when outsiders are present. There are at times severe consequences for openly sharing one's views, and such sharing is restricted to the closest relationships. A questioning strategy that sometimes works is to depersonalize the answer by asking what others are saying. For example, "What do others say about this topic?" or "When people are critical of this program, what do they say?"

The researcher should think carefully about who is the best person to moderate the group and avoid anyone who occupies a position of power. Sometimes local residents are able to lead the group discussion, and in other situations the international guest researcher is quite capable and non-threatening.

Local language. Language also can be an issue. It is important that the researcher conducts the groups in the primary language of the participants and avoids interpreters. This means that the moderator should be fluent in the language. If the moderator is not fluent, then the researcher must find someone who is fluent and train him or her to lead the group. Notes should be taken in the same language that the moderator is using, and then the notes or tape recording translated back into the language of the report.

Sense of control. One area in which variation can occur is the participants' sense of control. Some individuals feel that they have control over their social, political, and economic environment and that individuals can and ought to make needed changes. Others feel that someone has control, but that they personally do not. Still others feel that no one has control, or that one should not tamper with fate but rather accept what occurs as the will of a higher power. If the researcher is examining a public program or the consequence of a policy decision, focus groups might offer different perspectives based on their philosophical orientation. In fact, we argue the participants may not even understand the questions posed to them because they are so different from their worldview. Questions need to be constructed carefully, and the study introduced in a manner appropriate to the cultural environment.

Therefore, the researcher needs to plan the study carefully and talk to locally influential figures early in the planning process. It is also important to listen to local wise people about timing, locations, and other factors relevant to the study.

Sense of time. It is important to be sensitive to how the participants relate to punctuality and time schedules. Starting times and the length of the group may take on different levels of importance in various countries.

Feeling of exclusion. When doing focus groups in villages or close-knit communities, some special problems may emerge. One concern is that some people will feel left out of the process. People may be offended because they were not invited. Suppose the researcher is doing a study on new farming practices and is inviting farmers who have been slow or reluctant to adopt new practices. Progressive farmers may feel upset because they were not invited to talk about this topic that has been of great interest to them. Locally important figures may also be upset because traditionally they have been involved in local decision-making, and they were not involved in the focus group. Finally, some people do not feel that the results are believable unless they personally have given their views.

The researcher should give thought to these potential problems and consider one or more of the following solution strategies:

- *Do focus groups with local experts or influential figures even if they are not the target of the study.* They may have valuable insights into the problem that could enrich the study; moreover, they could block progress if they are not involved. (Later, the analyst will want to keep the groups separate and not aggregate results across groups.)
- *Gather information in other ways.* The researcher can use a combination of focus groups, individual interviews, surveys, and group meetings. He or she can explain that

people are being involved in a variety of ways: some will be in focus groups, while others will be asked to be in individual interviews or surveys.

- *Add several additional focus groups at the end of the study.* These focus groups are different in that they are open to anyone in the community. Concentrate the analysis on the early focus groups that are conducted using careful procedures. At these final groups, listen particularly for points of view that have not been expressed in the earlier focus groups. Some caution is needed in interpreting the comments given at group meetings because the tendency is for certain individuals to "perform," to give positions for political reasons, or to give views to impress others in the community.
- *Invite the community to attend a meeting at which the results of the focus groups are presented.* Present the themes and trends found in the focus groups to the community and invite the members of the community to comment on the findings and discuss strategies to deal with the issues raised.

Benefits for the participants. Finally, consider how the study can benefit the participants. Will study results be shared with participants? Will the study inform policy or future decisions?

Summary

Focus groups can be a powerful learning tool. They can help organizations listen to their employees and to the people whom they serve. They can be used to assess needs and assets, develop social marketing efforts, pilot test ideas and products, and evaluate services or programs. However, researchers must carefully recruit participants, create a comfortable environment so that people feel safe to talk, choose the right moderator for the group, and record and analyze the data systematically. Above all, the researchers must respect the participants. The researchers must believe they have something to learn from the participants and be open to hearing what is shared.

References

Debus, M. 1990. *Handbook for Excellence in Focus Group Research.* Washington, D. C.: Academy for Educational Development.

Glaser, B. G., and A. L. Strauss. 1967. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research.* New York: Aldine De Gruyter.

Goldman, A. E., and S. S. McDonald. 1987. *The Group Depth Interview: Principles and Practice.* Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall.

Greenbaum, T. L. 1998. *The Handbook for Focus Group Research.* Thousand Oaks, Cal.: Sage.

Guba, E. G., and Y. S. Lincoln. 1990. *Fourth-Generation Evaluation.* Newbury Park, Cal.: Sage.

Hayes, T. J., and C. B. Tatham, eds. 1989. *Focus Group Interviews: A Reader.* 2d ed. Chicago: American Marketing Association.

Krueger, R. A. 1998a. *Developing Questions for Focus Groups.* Thousand Oaks, Cal.: Sage.

———. 1998b. *Moderating Focus Groups.* Thousand Oaks, Cal.: Sage.

———. 1998c. *Analyzing and Reporting Focus Group Results.* Thousand Oaks, Cal.: Sage.

Krueger, R. A., and M. A. Casey. 2000. *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research.* 3d ed. Thousand Oaks, Cal.: Sage.

Krueger, R. A., and J. A. King. 1998. *Involving Community Members in Focus Groups.* Thousand Oaks, Cal.: Sage.

Merton, R. K., M. Fiske, and P. L. Kendall. 1990. *The Focused Interview.* 2d ed. New York: The Free Press.

Morgan, D. L. 1997. *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research.* Newbury Park, Cal.: Sage.

Patton, M. Q. 1990. *Qualitative Evaluation And Research Methods.* 2d ed. Newbury Park, Cal.: Sage.

Tesch, R. 1990. *Qualitative Research: Analysis Types and Software Tools.* New York: Falmer.