7

Focus Groups

Helen Finch and Jane Lewis

The use of focus groups in social research increased considerably over the last two decades of the twentieth century. (We use the phrase 'group discussions' as being synonymous with focus groups, as we described in Chapter 2.) They originated among social scientists working in applied and academic research settings. Fontana and Frey (1993) trace the origins of focus groups back to the 1920s, when they were used mainly in the development of survey instruments. Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton (Merton et al., 1956) adopted them in the 1940s and 1950s as an aid to the development of training and information materials, and Lazarsfeld originally used them for radio audience research (see Morgan, 1997).

Since the mid-twentieth century, focus groups developed as a research technique most strongly in market research (Bloor et al., 2001), where they have been used extensively for exploring issues such as brand images, packaging and product choice. They have also been adopted enthusiastically in political, and particularly party political, research. Their use here has perhaps been somewhat overenthusiastic, and they have sometimes been used and interpreted inappropriately, without due regard to their qualitative and group-based nature. But they are now well established as a mainstream method across the fields of social research, where they are widely used and are an extremely valuable research approach.

This chapter begins by exploring the unique features of focus groups, and describing different types of groups. We then look at the processes groups go through and the stages of conducting focus groups. We look at the techniques involved in handling discussion, and at how the group process can be harnessed to enrich data collection. Finally, we consider the context in which the discussion takes place, in terms of group size and composition, the physical environment and the organisation of focus groups. The chapter should be read in conjunction with earlier chapters, particularly Chapters 2 and 3 which distinguish the features and uses of focus groups from in-depth interviews. Much of the discussion in Chapter 5 (designing fieldwork strategies) and Chapter 6 (asking questions in in-depth interviews) will also be relevant.

Features and types of focus group

Key features of the focus group

The group context of focus groups creates a process which is in some important respects very different from an in-depth interview. Data are generated by interaction between group participants. Participants present their own views and experience, but they also hear from other people. They listen, reflect on what is said, and in the light of this consider their own standpoint further. Additional material is thus triggered in response to what they hear. Participants ask questions of each other, seek clarification, comment on what they have heard and prompt others to reveal more. As the discussion progresses (backwards and forwards, round and round the group), individual response becomes sharpened and refined, and moves to a deeper and more considered level.

A focus group is therefore not a collection of individual interviews with comments directed solely through the researcher. This is better described as a 'group interview', and lacks both the depth of individual interviews and the richness that comes with using the group process (Bloor et al., 2001; Bryman, 2001; Kitzinger and Barbour, 1999). instead, focus groups are synergistic (Stewart and Shamdasi, 1990) in the sense that the group works together: the group interaction is explicitly used to generate data and insights (Morgan, 1997), as we describe below.

A further feature of focus groups is the spontaneity that arises from their stronger social context. In responding to each other, participants reveal more of their own frame of reference on the subject of study. The language they use, the emphasis they give and their general framework of understanding is more spontaneously on display. As all this emerges from discussion within the group, the perspective is less influenced by interaction with the researcher than it might be in a one-to-one interview. In a sense, the group participants take over some of the 'interviewing' role, and the researcher is at times more in the position of listening in.

> The focus group presents a more natural environment than that of the individual interview because participants are influencing and influenced by others - just as they are in real life. (Kreuger and Casey, 2000:11)

This stronger social context offers an opportunity to see how ideas and language emerge in a more naturalistic setting than an in-depth interview, how they are shaped through conversation with others. It reflects the social constructions - normative influences, collective as well as individual self-identity shared meanings - that are an important part of the way in which we perceive, experience and understand the world around us (Bloor et al., 2001). But this does not lessen the researcher's load: focus groups need to be carefully managed for this to happen.

> Focus groups are naturalistic rather than natural events and cannot and should not be left to chance and circumstance; their naturalism has to be carefully contrived by the researcher. (Bloor et al., 2001: 57)

Types *of focus groups*

Typically, focus groups involve around six to eight people who meet once, for a period of around an hour and a half to two hours. This format can be used for a wide range of population groups and research objectives. As with in-depth interviews, there will be variation in the extent to which discussion is structured, if the researcher has a strong sense of the issues to be explored; or flexible, allowing the group itself to shape the agenda and the flow of discussion (see further Chapter 5). Chapter 3 also noted that group discussions can be used in combination with in-depth interviews, either before or after interviews, and with a different size and structure depending on their purpose within the overall research study.

There are further variations in the application of group-based discussion methods and the form that groups may take. Although focus groups generally meet just once, reconvened groups can be valuable when studies address issues that are intangible or unfamiliar to respondents. The group is reconvened perhaps a week or two after it first meets. The intervening period provides an opportunity for group members to reflect on what they have heard and for the issue to become more familiar to them. They may be asked to carry out tasks between the sessions (looking at materials, keeping a diary, discussing the issues raised with others) to aid this process.

Some group discussion settings may take the form of a workshop, implying a larger group, meeting for a longer session, with a more structured agenda involving specific tasks or activities, perhaps with small group work as well as the group coming together as a whole.

Since the last decade of the twentieth century there has been an emphasis on using research for consultative purposes, particularly as the shortcomings of traditional public consultation techniques (such as public meetings and written consultations) for reaching all social groups were recognised. This led to some innovations in the application of research methods, and particularly of group discussion methods.

For example, citizens' juries bring together groups of between 12 and 20 people who, over the course of several days, hear from 'witnesses', deliberate, and make recommendations about courses of action (Coote and Lanaghan, 1997; Davies et al., 1998; Stewart et al., 1994; White et al., 1999). Deliberative Polls (Fishkin, 1995) focus on measuring how views and attitudes change as the study group becomes better informed. They involve a baseline survey, followed by small group discussions and the opportunity to hear from expert panels over several days. The survey is repeated at the end of the deliberative session. Consultative panels have been conducted in different forms, and involve drawing people together in a series of sessions to deliberate and contribute to decision-making.

The common features of these methods are that they combine opportunities for accessing information with discussion and deliberation. Citizens' juries and consultative panels generally also require some sort of recommendation as an output. These new forms of groups are not without their difficulties. Making consultation accessible and attractive to people remains a challenge, particularly given the substantial commitment of time and thought required, and the validity of data is compromised if decisions or recommendations are forced by pressure of time or pressure to reach agreement. However, they are an interesting application of focus group research methods to decision-making, particularly useful in more unfamiliar, technical or complex areas where information provision is important.

Although group-based research usually involves a physical coming-together of participants this is not always the case. Nominal groups have been used for some time. Here, views are gathered from group members individually and collated and circulated for comment - the group may or may not meet at a later stage. The Delphi technique is a particular application of this. A panel of experts is asked individually to provide forecasts in a technical field, with their views summarised and circulated for iterative forecasting until consensus is reached (Stewart and Shamdasi, 1990; Barbour and Kitzinger, 1999).

Advances in technology are also leading to growing interest in virtual groups, where again participants do not physically meet. Teleconferencing technology allows telephone groups to be conducted, particularly with less mobile or particularly time-pressed populations. Online focus groups are also being used more (see Bloor et al., 2001). They may involve synchronous discussion, in which participants can log on at the same time and exchange views in real time, using online chat software. Alternatively, discussion may be asynchronous with people logging on to make comments as and when they want to. Clearly, here and in nominal groups the role of the researcher will be quite different from their moderation of a live group, an issue discussed by Bloor and colleagues.

Group-based research can, then, take many different forms. Although this chapter is primarily concerned with more typical forms, in which a small number of participants come together once only, it is important to consider whether other forms may be more appropriate, and how the techniques described below can be applied to other group contexts.

Group processes and the stages of a focus group

The group process

An understanding of group processes and models of small group behaviour is helpful to offer insight into what can happen in focus groups, and why. From this can be implied appropriate strategies to facilitate the group as it goes through different phases.

Based on an examination of studies of small groups, Tuckman (1965) in collaboration with Jenson (Tuckman and Jenson, 1977) identified five stages in small group development which demonstrate a sequence that groups tend to pass through. The model was based on examination of studies of small groups which were mainly therapy and training groups. However, it also resonates with the process of small groups assembled for research, and has proved valuable in informing moderation techniques (see Figure 7.1).

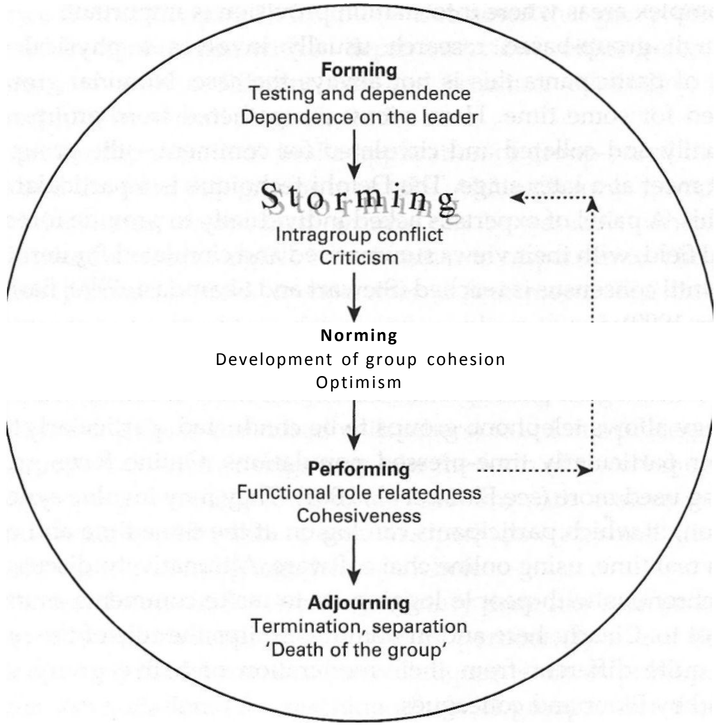

Figure 7.1 **A model of group phases (Based on: Tuckman and Jenson, 1977)**

In the 'forming' phase, individuals may be guarded, tense and anxious, and concerned about inclusion and acceptance. They tend to address comments solely to the moderator, not yet engaging with other group members. Occasionally, people respond to anxiety by overstatement, perhaps seeming confrontational or dismissive of the subject matter. In a group discussion, this is the stage at which background information is usefully collected so that participants are on familiar ground, introducing themselves to each other and beginning to get the measure of the researcher and the rest of the group. If substantial research topics are introduced in this phase it can be illuminating to see where people begin in addressing them, but it is important to bear in mind the possible influence of their uncertain feelings about the group environment on what they say.

'Storming' is a period of tension or criticism that may be shown up in a number of ways. It may be typified by dominance or one-upmanship from some individuals, by silent aloofness from others, or by the adoption of particular roles - the 'expert' perhaps - as a defensive position. Strong differences may emerge in this phase of the group which may provide useful material to return to, but these differences may diminish later as people express themselves with more complexity and subtlety. Again, it is important not to place too much reliance on strong statements made at this stage without reflecting on how the views expressed are articulated later in the discussion.

This is followed by the group settling down to a calmer phase of sharing, similarity and agreement, or 'norming', in which the norms of the group are established. The group begins to work cooperatively and may be particularly keen to find common ground, to agree with each other and to reinforce what others say. Participants may in this phase begin to put into practice the 'ground rules' that the researcher has set down (see below) - giving way to others, not speaking all at once. This is the stage at which social norms will be most influential, revealing what are seen as socially acceptable views or behaviours. These may be a valuable part of the research data although again it is important to reflect on how what is said compares with views expressed later, as group members gradually become more comfortable with the environment and feel able to express less normative views. But the researcher will need to find ways to prevent the 'norming' from masking attitudes and diversity (see below).

The 'performing' phase which follows finds the group working interactively in open discussion on the research issues. This is likely to be with energy, concentration, enjoyment and a less guarded stance, allowing both agreement and disagreement between participants. At this point the researcher can almost sit back, observe and listen, and let the group get on with the task in hand. The group will often return in a more reflective environment to points discussed earlier. They will be able to tackle the most challenging topics, working together with a synergy developing which achieves greater depth of insight. This is the most productive phase of the group process, but it takes time to reach it.

Finally, in the 'adjourning' phase, the group works towards ending. Participants may take the opportunity to reinforce something they have said earlier or to give their final thoughts. The researcher will thank them for what has been achieved. The group, or at least some members, may feel reluctant to leave - the stage is sometimes called 'mourning'.

The phases will be apparent by the mood and energy level of the group, indicated by both verbal and non-verbal behaviour. But as with all models, it does not always work out precisely like this in practice. Not all the phases will necessarily be discernible though it is likely that elements will be noted. Nor do the phases necessarily remain in this linear sequence, although it would probably be unhelpful to let the group move too far through the process without some 'norming'. There may be a circular process, with the group dynamic perhaps reverting back from 'performing' to 'storming' behaviour, for example on introduction of a new topic of discussion or a specific task. The essential point for the researcher, however, is to recognise that the phases are a normal part of the group process, to allow them to happen, to help them along, and to structure the discussion appropriately taking them into account.

The stages of a focus group

This section focuses on the stages that moderating a group discussion involves and the tasks for the researcher within each, reflecting the group development phases described above.

STAGE ONE! SCENE SETTING AND GROUND RULES

Management of the start of the session is of vital importance. Preparation on the part of the researcher for the handling of this stage can pre-empt difficulties later in the discussion. As participants arrive, the researcher thanks them warmly for coming, welcomes them and tries to put them at their ease by friendly conversation, avoiding the research topic. When the group is complete the researcher makes a more formal start to the session, with a personal introduction, outline of the research topic, and background information on the purpose of the study and its funder. Confidentiality is stressed, and an explanation is given of what will happen to the data and of proposals for reporting.

The researcher's introduction should not be too lengthy or too technical, but sufficient to reassure that this is a bona fide research study to which participants are invited to contribute. It should also emphasise points that may increase participants' motivation to take an active role in the discussion.

These might include more specific details on why the research is being undertaken or how it will be used; perhaps with emphasis on the opportunity that the forum provides for active consultation, or for involvement in decision-making.

The researcher also includes an indication of expected roles, and reassurance. It is explained that the session will be in the form of a discussion and that group participants should not wait to be invited before they step in. The researcher stresses that there are no right or wrong answers, that everyone's views are of interest, that the aim is to hear as many different thoughts as possible. They may add that there are likely to be different views or experiences among the group, and that people should feel free to say what they think, and if they agree or disagree with other participants' views, to say so. Explanation is given of the need to record the discussion in order to provide a full account of everything that is said. Participants are asked not to talk over each other. Depending on the subject area, it may also be helpful to ask the group to treat what other people say as confidential and not to be repeated outside the session. This will be particularly important if people know each other and are part of a wider network - colleagues or co-residents, for example.

At this stage, participants are likely to be feeling both curiosity and concern. Their unspoken fears - 'What's this all about?', 'Might there be a hidden agenda?', 'Might I be shown in an unfavourable light?' - need to be put to rest. The style and content of the introduction will need to be adapted to the type of people in the group though it will be necessary for all groups to take time over this important initial stage.

STAGE TWO.' INDIVIDUAL INTRODUCTIONS

Switching on the tape recorder, the researcher asks the group to introduce themselves in turn by saying their names and giving other simple background information (items usually specified by the researcher - see Chapter 6). As each individual speaks, the researcher might decide to probe a little, to draw out a fuller response and begin to set the tone of an in-depth discussion.

These background points serve a number of purposes. They allow participants to introduce themselves to each other, beginning to build up a degree of familiarity. They provide a chance for each individual both to speak and to listen, to rehearse two roles essential in the process of discussion. The information provided by individual participants may be used by the researcher during the discussion, for example as part of a probe to draw people out or to ensure that what might be different perspectives are drawn in. They also serve to link a voice (and its spatial location) with a name and other personal characteristics, on the recording tape. This is useful in the transcription process, particularly in research studies that require individual response to be tracked as far as possible through the discussion.

The researcher jots down a spatial diagram of participants' names (and perhaps brief background details) as the individual introductions proceed, for their own use as an *aide-memoire* to refer to throughout. For some groups, name-cards or badges can be useful, if participants are accustomed to this rather more formal set-up.

When the personal introductions are complete, the researcher may choose to make a brief comment about the composition of the group as a whole. They may highlight differences that have just been revealed, pointing out the benefit of this for contrasting views and experiences in the forthcoming discussion. Or they may note similarities, particularly as a prelude to exploring a sensitive issue in depth. This can reinforce the feeling of now being 'a group' and one in which all the group members are included, whatever their situation.

STAGE THREE: THE OPENING TOPIC

After the individual introductions, the researcher starts off the general discussion by introducing the opening topic. This may be something fairly neutral, general and easy to talk about, or it may be a more conceptual or definitional issue about which group members' spontaneous thoughts are sought (see Chapter 5).

The researcher's aim at this point is to promote discussion and to use the opening topic to engage as many of the participants as possible. At first their response may be faltering, between silences, perhaps with just one or two people speaking, directing their comments to the researcher. Or one individual may speak at length about their own personal views or situation; or a spirited discussion may start straightaway, spanning a range of topics.

The researcher continues to be verbally active, asking further questions (or rephrasing the same question) around the particular topic and enquiring generally about other people's views to open out the response. It is beneficial to get everyone to say something at this early stage in the group, as an individual's silence can become harder for them to break as the group proceeds and they feel more and more left out. Widening the discussion at this early stage also helps to wean off dependence on the researcher. But it can take time before individuals respond to each other rather than referring their comments directly to the researcher. The researcher encourages group interaction by allowing short silences to invite thought, or draws links between issues that different people have raised, perhaps highlighting differences and similarities in views. Non-verbal cues are also employed, for example maintaining eye contact around the group, leaning forward in an interested fashion, and perhaps gesturing with hands in a manner to invite the group to continue.

Issues will be raised early in this initial discussion that relate to key topics requiring full debate - indeed sometimes it can seem as if the entire topic guide has been covered within the first five minutes. The researcher might interject if this occurs, noting the points made, and explain that this important issue is something to return to later for fuller discussion. Or the researcher might judge that it would now be appropriate to select one of the issues mentioned and move the discussion on to it.

STAGE FOUR! DISCUSSION

At this point, following initial discussion, the researcher new to group discussions may feel things are getting out of control. Now what? Their role is one of juggling: balancing the need to promote group interaction against the need for some individual detail, and the value of free-flowing debate against the need for coverage of specified topics.

Through active listening and observation, the researcher will keep a mental note of what is being said and will probe both the group as a whole and individual members, using open questions expressed in simple language. The researcher listens to the terms used by respondents, explores their meaning to respondents and mirrors that language in formulating further questions or comments. It will be necessary to direct the flow over other relevant topic areas if they are not raised spontaneously by the group, and to keep the discussion broadly focused on the research subject. At the same time, attempts are made to include everyone and to balance the contributions of individual members, and the group process is engaged to generate new insights and thoughts. All these tasks are described in more detail in the sections which follow. The discussion will generally be lively at this stage, but if there are short silences it is best to avoid the temptation to fill them. Holding back usually means that someone in the group will take responsibility for keeping the discussion going.

STAGE FIVE: ENDING THE DISCUSSION

The final topic will have been decided in advance, with an eye to how it fits in with the overall shape of the discussion and group developmental phases. It is advisable to try to finish on a positive and completed note, as with individual interviews - for example covering ideas or suggestions about what might be done to improve a situation, following a discussion about problems (Chapter 5). This is particularly important if emotionally difficult material has been raised during the discussion.

Attention needs to be paid to pacing the end of the discussion in order to allow time for the group to prepare for it and to avoid too abrupt a finish. The researcher therefore signals its approach, for example with mention of 'the final topic', and finally, with questions that enquire about '- anything else to say before we finish?' or '- anything we've left out, or that people feel they haven't had a chance to say?'

Finally, the researcher ends the discussion and thanks the group, stressing how helpful the discussion has been. In some studies it may be advisable to reaffirm confidentiality, especially if sensitive issues have been covered, and to reiterate the purpose of the research and how it will be used. The researcher should be prepared to stay awhile after the tape recorder has been switched off. People often seem to enjoy the experience of a group discussion and, having become part of it, can be reluctant to leave.

Conducting the discussion

An overview of the researcher's role

The researcher uses the group process to encourage open, interactive discussion, but also controls it to bring everyone in, prevent dominance, and steer the group away from irrelevant areas. Yet the process in which the researcher is engaged remains one of gathering information on a specific topic of enquiry. The role of the researcher in relation to a focus group is therefore something of a hybrid. Partly it involves the role of a moderator with its connotations of restraint, as one who 'restrains or presides over a meeting'; partly it involves the role of a facilitator, as one who 'makes easy' or 'assists the progress of a process. This section describes the techniques used by researchers in conducting the discussion, and the following section looks at some further strategies for making effective use of the group process.

The necessary level of researcher interventions will vary between groups, and will depend on both the dynamic in an individual group and the nature of the research subject, particularly how much interest it holds for participants. Some groups are taciturn and unforthcoming (just as some individual respondents are) and require the researcher to maintain a more verbal presence: questioning, probing and drawing out. Others are lively. It is as if the group is the respondent.

The researcher's role is critical to the success of the group discussion. It requires energy and can be demanding and challenging. The sort of people who are good at it are able to relate well in groups and possess qualities to put people at ease, though the skills are able to be learned and come with practice. Many of the skills are those that are required for in-depth interviews (see Chapter 6), but also important are adaptability, confidence, the ability to project oneself in positive ways to encourage the group, and a combination of assertiveness and tact.

Flexibility or structure: controlling the discussion

How much the researcher needs to intervene to structure the discussion will depend partly on the type of research study. It will be necessary to impose some structure to ensure that issues are covered, but the balance between imposed structure and flexibility of discussion, in which the issues are generated from within the group, will vary between different studies (see Chapters 3 and 5).

The researcher's aim is to allow as much relevant discussion as possible to be generated from within the group while at the same time ensuring that the aims of the research are met. There is more scope in a focus group than in an individual interview for spontaneous emergence of issues, prompted by the variety of different people's contributions. This means that discussion is further removed from researchers' directions and led more by respondents. The way participants introduce topics is itself interesting and revealing - it is more 'grounded', or 'naturally occurring'.

The researcher will therefore remain as non-directive as possible but will nevertheless be pacing the debate to ensure that all the key issues are covered as fully as possible (though not necessarily in a predesignated order) within the allotted time. This will involve deciding when to move on to another topic; making a mental note of issues that arise early and which will need to be covered later in more depth; keeping the discussion relevant and focused; and choosing when to allow more free-ranging discussion with minimal intervention, and when to use silence as a means of promoting further reflection and debate. All of this becomes easier for the researcher when the subject matter and the way groups relate to it becomes more familiar, after the initial groups of the study have been conducted.

It is not uncommon for a group discussion to divert into irrelevant tangents, and this happens more easily than in in-depth interviews. At times the researcher will therefore need to steer it back by reminding the group of the topic, if it meanders too far into less relevant territory. For example, participants may dwell on an alternative topic, one that they would perhaps prefer to discuss, or they may relate repeated and lengthy anecdotes. Some tangential discussion will be inevitable, and necessary as it may contain nuggets of new information. It should therefore not be cut off too abruptly. But because time is limited, decisions will need to be made by the researcher about what is and is not relevant and when to move on.

Introducing a question linked to the relevant subject area will help to steer the discussion back. It may be necessary to draw attention to the fact that talk has veered away, and perhaps to remind people of the purpose of the research. A gentle touch, humour and perhaps an apology can be helpful here.

Probing for fuller response

As in individual interviews, the researcher probes to ensure issues are covered in depth. The aim is to clarify, to delve deeper and to cover all angles, rather than accepting an answer at its face value. Group members also play a part in this, questioning each other, but an additional purpose in probing in a group is to open out discussion and widen the range of response. A distinction between probing of the group as a whole rather than of individuals within the group therefore needs to be borne in mind. It is likely that both types of interventions will be needed, though too much of the latter can interrupt the flow of discussion. After probing an individual's comment if this is needed to understand it fully, the group researcher would then open out the discussion. There are a number of ways of doing this:

- asking generally 'How do other people feel?' or 'What does everyone else think?'
- repeating the question, or a fragment of it
- highlighting a particular comment that has been said and asking for thoughts on it
- asking the group directly, 'Can you say a bit more about that?'
- looking around or gesturing to the rest of the group to come in
- maintaining an expectant silence, to allow the group time to reflect further on the issue
- highlighting differences in views and encouraging the group to discuss and explain them.

Noting non-verbal language

Throughout the discussion, the researcher will be alert to group participants' body language. This important communication, additional to their verbal response, is noteworthy from two points of view. First, it adds views or emphasis relating to the discussion topic. People will often demonstrate their agreement or disagreement by nodding or shaking their head, or by utterances which may not be picked up by the person who transcribes the tape. They need to be encouraged to verbalise these indications of view - otherwise episodes of unanimity or strong agreement, which the researcher notes clearly at the time, are lost from the data. The researcher may, for example, say 'Everyone's nodding vigorously - why is that?' or 'You've all gone rather quiet! Why is this subject harder to talk about?' Secondly, body language provides an indicator of participants' feelings relating to the group process at any particular time. The researcher can see who is trying to interject, who is looking worried or lost, who is looking bored - and from this discern an appropriate way to bring them into the discussion.

Controlling the balance between individual contributions

CREATING SPACE FOR EVERYONE TO CONTRIBUTE

Part of the researcher's role is to ensure that every participant gets a chance to contribute to the debate. While it is unlikely that each individual will contribute equally, there will at times be a need to exert a degree of restraint or of encouragement, and to some extent to 'orchestrate' the flow of contributions. This can involve addressing dominance from one or more participants, reticence from others, or simultaneous over-talk within the group (see further below). Like the conductor of an orchestra, the researcher's use of non-verbal communication will be significant here, often with powerful effect. In facihtating the discussion, the role of the researcher is quite physical, far more so than in one-to-one interviews. Their body language - facial expression, glance, gesture and body posture for example - can often pre-empt the need for verbal intervention to control the balance between participants.

It can be tempting for the researcher to intervene too soon. By holding back awhile the group participants may regulate the balance themselves. It depends which phase the group is in. One individual's overbearing manner, or another's lengthy silence, may be a characteristic of the 'storming' phase of the group for example, which in time will probably settle down. Only later might the researcher need to take action, proceeding from indirect to increasingly direct means of addressing the problem if it persists, in ways described below. Until then, the maintenance of eye contact with each individual around the group will probably suffice, together with general requests for new contributions to the discussion.

ADDRESSING DOMINANT PARTICIPANTS

There will be occasions when it is necessary to restrain the contributions of an individual participant if they are dominating the discussion - for example, always the first to respond to a question, or making very lengthy or repetitive comments. The other participants may become increasingly silent and perhaps begin to look directly at the researcher, implicitly appealing to them to step in.

The researcher could try a range of strategies, first finding indirect ways to shift attention away from the dominant participant so that others may speak, but adopting a direct approach if this is unsuccessful. Non-verbal attempts might include withdrawing eye contact from the dominant person; leaning away; looking at others in the group, and gesturing to others to speak. If this still has little effect, verbal interventions would similarly first be general, inviting others to speak ('Let's hear some other opinions'), before becoming more specific, requesting that they be given an opportunity ('It's helpful to have heard your experience but I want to hear from others too').

It is important to avoid a confrontation. The public nature of the group means that, perhaps more than in an in-depth interview, respondents may feel rebuked. The researcher might therefore take pains to emphasise the value of the dominant person's contribution but also the importance of hearing from all participants, perhaps employing humour in the exchange, or apologising for having to curtail a response.

DRAWING OUT RETICENT PARTICIPANTS

It can be difficult to judge the cause of a silent group member's reserve, although if possible the response would be tailored to this. The person may be naturally quiet, or lack confidence in groups, or perhaps be uncomfortable due to the group composition, feeling significantly different in some way from other participants (see further below). It could be that he or she is just not able to get a word in edgeways during a voluble discussion, particularly in larger groups. But reticent participants often have viewpoints or experiences that are perhaps different from the main and therefore of particular interest to the research.

People who are shy or anxious will be encouraged by the researcher's reassurance, to the group as a whole or specifically to them, that anything people have to say would be useful. But this may not be sufficient. Although it would be counterproductive to pressurise an individual to contribute, it will sometimes be necessary to take more active steps, initially in an indirect manner, to provide encouragement.

Eye contact alone can give confidence. The researcher could ask the group as a whole, though looking in the direction of the silent individual, for further thoughts or ideas, or could look expectantly in their direction during a pause in the discussion. It may be possible to link a specific question with something that is already known about the person, from the introduction perhaps or from anything else that they may have indicated so far, that would make the question relevant to them. For example, the researcher might ask 'What about people here who have children?' - remembering from the introduction that the silent person does indeed have children. In a more direct way, a question would be put to the silent individual: 'You haven't had a chance yet to say what you think' or 'How did your experience compare with what's been said so far?' Any questions posed in this situation would need to be open questions rather than ones that might elicit a mere 'yes' or 'no' or a factual response.

If, having tried these strategies several times, the person remains uncommunicative, the researcher might decide to leave matters as they are and focus instead on the other discussants, especially if the group is quite large in size. The researcher would continue to look encouragingly towards the silent member of the group from time to time and include them in questions addressed to the group as a whole, but not use more direct approaches to try to draw them in.

AVOIDING SIMULTANEOUS DIALOGUE

At times it can be necessary to stop group participants talking over each other, in order to distinguish different views on the recording tape and to allow time for everyone to express themselves. This might be done by addressing one individual among those talking and asking for their view, or by asking the group directly to stop so that *each* point of view can be heard. It can be sufficient to look very attentively at just one person who is talking, and simply pointing to the tape recorder can sometimes work. Whatever tactic is used, it is important to make time to return to the individuals who were silenced, to hear their views.

Focusing on participants' personal views

A particular type of behaviour that emerges more in group discussions than in in-depth interviews is avoidance of expressing personal views, and this can be a type of resistance or 'storming' behaviour. It might be easier for group respondents to take a more distant or second-hand standpoint, such as that read in the media for example, or to present views known to be politically acceptable, than risk expressing a personal view. The researcher needs to get the focus back on the participant by asking them directly what *they* think. A gentler approach is needed if a participant is referring to third parties to introduce subjects that have an element of taboo (talking about 'other people's' experience of debt or relationship violence, for example). Here, rather than asking that person directly about their own experience, the group as a whole could be asked whether they have personal experience of these issues.

Using the group process: some further strategies

A good focus group is more than the sum of its parts. The researcher harnesses the group process, encouraging the group to work together to generate more in-depth data based on interaction. This section looks at some further ways in which the group process can be used to stimulate new thinking and reflective discussion.

Encouraging in-depth exploration of emergent issues

The researcher helps the group to create a reflective environment in which the group can take an issue, approach it as they choose and explore it fully. It is important to allow time for this, and to let the discussion flow. But the researcher also needs to be actively helping the group to achieve greater depth, encouraging them to focus on emergent areas that they think will be illuminating to explore. The researcher does this by engaging with the substance of what is being said, probing for more detail and depth, sometimes reframing what is said, or asking the group to reflect on a different angle of it. In doing so the researcher tries to stay close to the data as it emerges and to encourage the group to build on what they have generated.

There are a number of useful approaches here:

- If a potentially interesting issue has been raised by one group member, the researcher may allow discussion to continue, seeing whether others will pick up on it.
- The researcher may decide to draw attention more directly to the point, asking for more comments on it or asking a specific question about it of the group.

- They may encourage the group to reflect on the links or relationships between what individual participants are saying. For example, if respondents have given examples of poor service, the researcher might ask what the examples have in common, whether they stem from the same causes.
- If divergent views are being expressed (for example about the priorities a service should address), the researcher may ask whether these are in conflict with each other or can be reconciled; or what the appropriate priority within or balance between them is; or why such differences of view arise.
- They may encourage respondents to focus on the implications or consequences of what has been raised in individual examples.

An example of this comes from a study of concepts and experiences of disability in which a series of groups were held with non-disabled people (as well as groups and in-depth interviews with disabled people) (Woodfield et al., 2002).

One group of non-disabled people began by describing their images of disabled people, focusing on serious, visible, physical conditions and particularly wheelchair users. The researcher commented on the fact that this is what they had raised, and asked whether they had other images. The group began to discuss mental health and intellectual impairments. People also mentioned temporary conditions and long-term illness. The researcher commented on how diverse these examples now were, and asked how useful the umbrella term of disability was. The group began to question the appropriateness of administrative definitions of disability (for example in relation to benefit entitlement) given the broader way in which they were now understanding it.

The researcher then asked what the different conditions that had now been mentioned had in common. This led to respondents raising concepts of 'otherness', 'difference', 'incompleteness'. They then commented that these concepts could also apply to sexual orientation, ethnicity and gender, and began to discuss how these issues linked with disability. Without further questions from the researcher, the group moved on to discuss how disability and other forms of 'otherness' are reinforced by society through discrimination. The researcher asked whether this process works differently for disability in any way and they talked about discrimination being further entrenched through the physical inaccessibility of buildings and facilities. The group began to talk about legislation as the key to tackling discrimination and about the need to enforce physical access and employment rights through regulation. To return to the issue of the social construction of disability, the researcher asked whether the label 'disability' was meaningful or useful. The group talked about the way in which labels might impact on disabled people's self-image, and lead to reactions of pity among non-disabled people. This led several people in the group to a shared conclusion that social constructions and perceptions of disability are important, that wider social change is required and that legislation alone is not sufficient.

Having begun with images of wheelchairs, the group moved to a discussion of disability that was more layered. The researcher's questions sharpened the focus on different concepts or themes which emerged from the discussion. The resulting data was probably much richer than what would have emerged from in-depth interviews. With the researcher encouraging the group to work together and to build discussion from individual people's contributions, the group achieved more insight than they could have gained individually.

If the group is working well together they may deepen the commentary themselves, through asking questions of each other, reflecting and refining their own views, building on what others have said and developing more in-depth discussion of the issues that emerge. This happens when group members are really engaged with the research subject, and also if they are particularly articulate and informed about it. It may seem in these circumstances as if the researcher's interventions are relatively minor. However, the researcher will be making decisions all the time about what to probe to focus and deepen the discussion, and to include other participants or issues.

For example, in the study referred to in Chapter 5 which explored linkages between sexuality and homelessness among young lesbians and gay men (O'Connor and Molloy, 2001), group discussions with representatives of housing services were carried out after a series of in-depth interviews with young people. The groups were used to look at how organisations providing housing can respond to the needs of young lesbians and gay men, and key findings from the in-depth interviews were presented to the group. This, and the fact that participants were articulate and knowledgeable about the subject area, meant that the group largely carried itself through an in-depth discussion of a complex set of issues. The researchers probed to ensure that each issue was explored in detail, following up new points that emerged, and asking questions about the linkages between issues. The group began by discussing whether young gay and lesbian people could or should be housed together and moved through the following areas:

- the advantages and disadvantages of housing young lesbians and gay men together in designated housing, or making housing provision generic so that different groups live together
- the organisational difficulties involved in creating designated housing
- other ways of meeting young people's needs, such as housing lesbians and gay men in areas of towns where they are less likely to experience offensive treatment from neighbours
- questioning the assumption that lesbians and gay men are two groups that should be seen as similar, discussing how they differ and how sub-groups within each have specific and different needs (reflecting age, ethnicity etc.)
- how the individual circumstances of different young lesbians and gay men can make it difficult for them to make contact with housing services in the first place

- concluding by stressing the need for multiplicity in provision (of which designated and generic housing was just one part), for diversity in staffing, better outreach work, more effective networking between providers and better signposting of young people to specific providers who can meet their needs.

Although all these issues could have been raised by the researchers, the fact that they emerged from the internal reflections of the group made for a richer discussion, one in which the energy and ownership of the group, and the connections they made between different issues, was displayed.

Exploring diversity of view

The group context provides a key opportunity to explore difference and diversity. It is not only that differences will be displayed as the discussion progresses (and thus more immediately than across individual in-depth interviews). There is a particular opportunity in group discussions to delve into that diversity - to get the group to engage with it, explore the dimensions of difference, explain it, look at its causes and consequences.

The diversity of views may be quite apparent, in which case the researcher can draw attention to it and ask why it has arisen, or what underlies it. But sometimes difference is more subtle, and people in the group agree with each other's positions or statements although they are actually inconsistent or contradictory. Here a little theatre may be required: the researcher can look puzzled, say they are confused, and ask the group to clarify things. This encourages the group to confront and acknowledge diversity and to refine what is being said in the light of it.

Challenging social norms and apparent consensus

A common criticism of focus groups is that the group exerts a pressure on its participants to conform to a socially acceptable viewpoint and not to talk about divergent views or experiences. As the discussion unfolds, the group participants may focus on their similarities or present just one side of the issue, or their contributions may reflect prevailing social norms. This can be linked to the dynamics in the group, and is a particular characteristic of the 'norming' phase (see above), though it could happen at any time throughout the discussion. The researcher needs to be alert to what is going on, and to find ways of challenging social norms and apparent consensus. There are a number of ways of approaching this:

- asking whether anyone has a different view, or deliberately drawing out an individual respondent who the researcher thinks may feel differently

- stressing that disagreement or difference in view is both acceptable and wanted. This would be said in the researcher's introduction (see above), but might be reiterated during the debate
- trying to find the boundaries of social norms by asking whether there are circumstances or situations under which the group would feel differently
- playing the role of devil's advocate, or challenging unanimity by presenting an alternative viewpoint (though taking care not to present this viewpoint as the researcher's own): 'Some people might say ...' or 'So are you really all saying that you would *never* ...'.

It can also be helpful to encourage the group to recognise and confront the normative view, and in doing so implying that other views are permitted. For example a study looking at public perceptions of the appropriate priority of first and subsequent families in the child support payment levels set out by the Child Support Agency (O'Connor and Kelly 1998) involved group discussions with women whose partners had children from previous relationships. The group was stressing the importance of encouraging their partners to stay in touch with their children and to support their ex-partners, and suggesting that this was more important than providing for new partners and children. The researcher commented on how supportive they were all being, said that the Child Support Agency might be surprised by it, and asked whether that was how they always felt. The group began to acknowledge that their feelings were actually more complex and described occasions when they felt their partner had leant too far towards their first family. Some highlighted the particular circumstances that meant their partners were able to support the first family without compromising the second, and talked about how their views would change in other circumstances.

In practice, if the researcher is able to create an environment in which people feel safe and comfortable with speaking frankly, group-based research can be very effective for discussing topics which involve social norms. Once one person expresses an unusual or non-conformist view, others will often be emboldened to do the same, and there can be a more frank and open exchange than might happen in an individual interview.

Enabling and projective techniques

Finally, enabling and projective techniques - described in detail in Chapter 5 - can be used very effectively in group discussions. People respond well to them in a group, and they can seem less contrived than in an individual interview. The techniques help to focus discussion and to refine the formulation and expression of views. The material they generate can highlight variation in imagery and perspective, leading to fruitful discussion of similarities and differences and why they occur. The group process thus creates a particularly useful forum in which to use them.

Group composition and size

The size and composition of a group will be critical in shaping the group dynamic and determining how, and how well, the group process works. Features that are relevant here are the degree of heterogeneity or homogeneity within the group, existing relationships between group members, and the size of the group.

Heterogeneity versus homogeneity

As a general rule, some diversity in the composition of the group aids discussion, but too much can inhibit it. An element of diversity is like the grit in an oyster, important for the production of a pearl. Participants tend to feel safer with, and may prefer being with, others who share similar characteristics, but this does not necessarily make for the fullest discussion. Although it can facilitate disclosure, things can become too cosy and the researcher will need to work hard to tease out differences in views. Recognising their shared experience, participants can also assume that others know what they mean rather than articulate it fully.

Conversely, a very heterogeneous group can feel tlueatening to participants and can inhibit disclosure. If the group is too disparate, it is difficult to cover key topics in depth. In studies researching sensitive subjects, the shared experience of 'everyone in the same boat' is particularly important to facilitate disclosure and discussion. Sensitive topics therefore leave less scope for diversity, although some difference between group participants is nevertheless desirable. For example, in a study of women's decisions about terrninating a pregnancy, it would be essential that a group involved only women who had had abortions. It would be advisable to have separate groups for younger and older women, and perhaps also for those who had already had children at the point when they made their decision and those who had not. But within these parameters, it would be helpful to construct the group to ensure some diversity in circumstances such as age, social class and relationship status, and experiences of different healthcare providers in the public and charity sector.

The ideal is therefore usually a point of balance between the two extremes of heterogeneity and homogeneity, with as much diversity as the group can take but no more.

As well as the sensitivity of the subject, three further issues need to be considered in weighing up the extent of diversity to build into group composition. First, it is usually necessary for respondents in each group to have broadly the same proximity to the research subject. There needs to be a degree of commonality in how they relate to the research topic - something similar in their experience of it or their connection with it. For example, in a study about attitudes to the environment it might be decided to exclude from some focus groups people who are active in environmental groups, since other group participants might hold back in discussing particular views or behaviours or may defer to them as 'experts'. A group discussion might usefully combine users and non-users of a particular service if the purpose was to discuss the various types of help or services people had used and the reasons for using different types. But if the particular service itself, and experiences of it, were to be a key topic, non-users would have little to contribute to significant parts of the discussion.

Second, the socio-demographic makeup of the group can influence how frank and fulsome discussion will be - particularly in relation to characteristics such as age, social class, educational attainment, gender and ethnicity. People are likely to feel more comfortable among others who they see as being from the same broad social milieu, and it is unhelpful if there are significant imbalances in social power or status within the group.

A third consideration is that it may be a specific requirement of the research to look at differences between subgroups within the sample (see further Chapter 3) - for example, differences between age groups, between people with and without children, or between current and past service users. Although this could be addressed in a focus group which cuts across these sample categories, too much diversity would make it difficult to see subgroupings among participants and to ensure that the differences are drawn out in the discussion. The influences of particular circumstances or experiences can sometimes be explored with more subtlety and insight if they are reflected in focus groups of different composition, with for example past and current service users, or people with and without children, involved in separate group discussions. Diversity in other characteristics represented within each focus group would still, however, be desirable.

Token representation should be avoided - for example, one man in a group which otherwise comprises women, or one person from a particular minority ethnic group. If one participant is markedly different from others in the group then any discomfort they feel is likely to influence how much they disclose. They may feel that their own experience is too remote from that of the other participants and remain silent, or they may resent the implication that they alone are expected to speak for the broad group they represent. For these reasons, at least three people would generally be required to represent a particular subgroup, characteristic or circumstance which is likely to be significant within the group's structure.

However carefully group composition is planned, it is not always possible to achieve the balance planned: not everyone who says they will attend will actually do so. The researcher will need to be alert to possible feelings of 'difference' and should make special efforts to include participants who might feel they do not belong.

Strangers, acquaintances and pre-existing groups

Focus groups are typically held with strangers as this facilitates both open questioning and disclosure. People often speak more freely in front of others who they do not know and whom they are unlikely to see again: there is little fear of subsequent gossip or repercussion.

However, groups with people who already know each other are also common. For example, the purpose of the study might be to investigate a work-related issue among colleagues, views about institutional accommodation among co-residents, or attitudes towards an activity among people who carry it out together. In these situations it can be beneficial to work with a pre-existing group.

Kitzinger and Barbour see pre-existing groups as generally very helpful:

> These are, after all, the networks in which people might normally discuss (or evade) the sorts of issues likely to be raised in the research session and the 'naturally occurring' group is one of the most important contexts in which ideas are formed and decisions made. (Kitzinger and Barbour, 1999: 8-9)

Pre-existing groups can trigger memories of shared situations and are valuable for exploring shared meanings and contexts such as how an organisation understands a policy objective and how this translates into practice, or how the use of illegal drugs within a group of friends is shaped by their shared values. They can also provide an atmosphere in which participants can feel safe enough to reveal shared subversive behaviour which might be unsayable in front of strangers.

However, there is a danger that shared assumptions mean issues are not fully elaborated because their meaning is taken for granted, or that the group norms dominate in the session. The researcher may have to work hard to move discussion into new territory. Certainly substantial differences in status between group members who know each other should be avoided - an important consideration particularly when research is carried out in people's workplace.

What is more difficult is where the researcher finds, unexpectedly, that some participants are acquainted. The researcher would then be on the look-out for shared views and assumptions and might need to probe particularly fully to draw out differences. If the researcher becomes aware of the relationship before the group begins, asking acquaintances not to sit next to each other during the discussion might also help.

Group size

Focus groups typically involve around six to eight participants, but the optimum group size will depend on a number of issues:

- *The amount that group participants are likely to have to say on the research topic.* If they are likely to be highly engaged with or interested in it, or particularly articulate, a smaller group is desirable (for example, among professionals discussing an aspect of their practice).

- *The sensitivity or complexity of the issue.* Sensitive or complex issues are better tackled in smaller groups.
- *The extent to which the researcher requires breadth or depth of data.* If breadth is key, for example to reveal quickly the range or diversity in opinions on an issue, a larger group will be more effective. If depth is critical, a smaller group is better.
- *The population group involved.* Some are likely to feel more comfortable in a smaller group, such as children or, conversely, older people. A smaller group is also more accessible to people with communication difficulties.
- *The structure and tasks involved in the session. A* workshop approach, with specific tasks and subgroup work, is more effective with larger numbers.

If the group is larger - above about eight participants - not everyone will be able to have their say to the same extent. With less opportunity to speak, active participation will be uneven. There are more likely to be some participants who say very little, and there is greater potential for subgroups to emerge which can be unhelpful for group dynamics. This can make things harder to manage for the researcher who will need to be more of an active presence in controlling the balance between contributions. It may result in a somewhat faltering discussion or one that remains at a superficial level. Identifying individual speakers' voices on the recording tape also becomes more difficult.

In groups that are smaller than about five or six, the researcher may similarly need to be more active, but in the sense of energising or challenging the group (in the way that other members might, if they were there). If the group is smaller because some people did not attend on the day, the composition of the group may be skewed away from what was originally planned, perhaps with just one individual representing a certain subgroup or characteristic. The researcher will need to be alert to this, and may also need to put across other points of view to stimulate discussion.

If the group is very small, with fewer than four participants, it can lose some of the qualities of being a group, particularly if there is a lot of difference between respondents. However, paired interviews and triads (see Chapters 2 and 3) can be an effective hybrid of in-depth interviews and group discussions, useful for example for in-depth discussion among colleagues or people who know each other well. Here, more commonality between participants is likely to be necessary to avoid the process becoming a collection of interviews.

Practicalities in organising the group

The organisational details of the focus group need to be sorted out at the planning stage of the study, and before potential participants are approached, since they may affect willingness to attend. Decisions will always be informed by the proposed composition of the group and by the subject matter of the discussion. Rather than prescribe general rules therefore, this section highlights a checklist of points to bear in mind (summarised in Box 7.1). The guiding principle behind these decisions is to organise a setting to which the specially selected group of people will be happy to come, in which they will feel sufficiently at ease to take part in discussion, and where the discussion can be adequately recorded.

BOX 7.1 ORGANISING A FOCUS GROUP: A CHECKLIST OF PRACTICALITIES

Timing

Time of day
Day of the week
Time of year

Number of groups per day

Venue

Type of establishment (ethos)
Building (access)
Location (proximity, safety)
Room (size, comfort, privacy, quiet, ambience)
Availability of second room if needed
Physical arrangement (seating, table)

'Hosting' the group

Management of:
Transport/childcare
Refreshments
Incentives (cash, vouchers)
Other people who come with participants

Observers and co-moderators

Role
Seating

Recording

Quality of equipment
Familiarisation
Checking before and after group

Time and place

The time of day and day of the week when the potential participants are likely to be available to attend the group needs to be thought through in advance. Competing activities which could discourage attendance also need to be thought about (such as major sporting events) and certain times of year would be avoided - around Christmas or other peak holiday periods. Because it is not possible to suit everyone's timetable, especially for studies which involve mixed populations, the overall design of the study is likely to include group discussions at different times of day to accommodate a variety of schedules.

The researcher's own working schedule is a further factor to be taken into account. If more than one group per day is planned, sufficient time is required between each to allow for dispersal of the first group's participants, arrival of the next group, and for recovery time in between. It is rarely feasible to conduct more than two group discussions in succession per day unless they are very brief.

Choosing the venue involves thinking about its location and the type of place that it is: the type of establishment, building and immediate environment. The venue should be appropriate to the participants and to the subject of study in terms of its ambience or any likely associations that it may hold. For focus groups that are held with members of a pre-existing group, the venue may be the place where the group is already located and as such has the advantage of being familiar. Otherwise, options such as a hotel, a hired room within a pub or a community centre should be considered.

A further characteristic for consideration is the room in which the discussion takes place: its size, comfort and privacy. It is important to check out potential distractions such as background noise (as the group who competed with bell-ringing practice from a nearby church would testify). A second room may be necessary. If participants are accompanied by a family member or friend, these people would ideally wait outside the group room. It is also helpful to have a second room if two consecutive groups are scheduled, as a place where early arrivals for the second group can wait.

Provision at the discussion venue

The physical arrangement of the room needs to facilitate discussion, with chairs positioned in such a way that participants can all be seen by the researcher and can see each other - a circle or oval. A table in the middle of the group confers the practical advantage of a base on which to stand the tape recorder and refreshments and can also offer participants a feeling of psychological protection of sorts. It should be no larger than is necessary

Simple refreshments, such as tea, coffee or other drinks are usually served before the discussion starts, as group members arrive. Although the researcher moderating the group may be able to perform this role, it is ideally undertaken by a second person, such as the person who recruited participants for the group, or a co-moderator or observer. This person acts as a host to welcome people, to serve refreshments, and deal with any incentives or arrangements for transport or childcare (see Chapter 3) that may have been agreed beforehand.

Co-moderation is useful if exercises or projective techniques are to be used, and in the early part of fieldwork to test and review fieldwork strategies and the topic guide (see Chapter 5). If more than one person is moderating the discussion, they would sit beside each other in the circle. It is generally more effective to agree in advance which researcher will be responsible for leading the discussion, or for each to take responsibility for different parts, to avoid confusion over the flow of questioning and discussion. Any observers would be outside the circle and out of eyeshot of the majority of the participants, for example in a corner of the room. Observers should be introduced at the start and should maintain an unobtrusive presence. Any written notes they make (for example about the dynamic of the group, issues to take to other groups, reflections on the topic guide) should be kept to a minimum.

Recording

A good quality tape recorder is essential, with a remote multidirectional microphone, and is far more important in focus groups than for individual in-depth interviews. Otherwise, sections of the discussion, or softer voices, or the contributions of people sitting further away from the microphone may be lost. The tape recorder is usually positioned adjacent to the researcher, with the microphone in the centre of the table. The researcher should be familiar and comfortable with its use (see Chapter 6). People starting out often find that their biggest disappointment is not the way the discussion went, but that their recording of it has failed because they were unfamiliar with the equipment.

Before the participants arrive it is essential to check that the tape recorder is functioning: that the recording level is appropriate, the batteries charged, tape inserted, and that a spare tape is to hand. After the discussion has ended, checks should be made as soon as possible that no technical problems have prevented recording.

Focus groups, to conclude, call on a wide range of expertise, from the practical organisational skills described in this section to the ability to put people at their ease, respond sensitively to group dynamics and create a sense of joint endeavour. But the skills come with experience, and with that experience researchers will find focus groups a research technique which is highly stimulating and can bring real insight.

KEY POINTS

- Focus groups are more than a collection of individual interviews. Data are generated by interaction between group participants. Participants' contributions are refined by what they hear others say, and the group is synergistic in the sense that it works together. The group setting aids spontaneity and creates a more naturalistic and socially contextualised environment.
- The researcher needs to be aware of the different phases through which groups can pass, and to make use of each. A useful model identifies five sequential phases: forming, storming, norming, performing and adjourning.
- The interaction between participants is important in determining the flow of discussion, but the researcher guides it, probing both the group as a whole and individuals, trying to ensure that everyone has their say, that the research issues are covered, that discussion stays on track, and picking up on body language. Group participants take on some of the interviewing role, asking questions of each other.
- The group process is harnessed to enrich the discussion. This involves making time for reflection and refinement of views; focusing on and reframing emergent issues to encourage the group to go deeper into them; highlighting diversity within the group and encouraging people to explore its dimensions and causes, and challenging apparent consensus where this is led by conformity to social norms.
- Diversity in group composition enriches the discussion, but there also needs to be some common ground between participants - based on how they relate to the research topic or their socio-demographic characteristics. The ideal group size will be affected by how much people will have to say, the sensitivity of the issue, the balance required between breadth and depth of coverage, and the participant population. The role of the researcher will vary in groups of different sizes and degrees of diversity.
- Practical arrangements are also key to the success of group discussions: the time, the venue, the layout of the room and the quality of recording equipment are all important.

KEY TERMS

Group dynamics refers to the relationships between group members which change during the course of the group and influence the energy and direction of the group. They are shaped by **processes** which may be evident in any small group and which vary depending on the **stage**

of the group, and are also influenced by the **composition** of the group, the subject matter, the broader environment and the behaviour of the researcher.

Non-verbal communication refers to the physical behaviour of the researcher or participants: their facial expression, where their gaze is directed, their hand gestures and their posture. It gives the researcher important clues as to the possible feelings of individual participants, and is a useful tool employed by the researcher to control the discussion.

Norms are behaviours or beliefs which are required, desired or designated as normal within a group, shared by that group or with which members believe they are expected to conform. It is important to be alert to the ways in which adherence to social norms within a group might inhibit disclosure and open discussion.

Further reading

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