Advanced Focus Group Research

Edward F. Fern

ADVANCED FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH

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Sage Publications
International Educational and Professional Publisher
Thousand Oaks ■ London ■ New Delhi

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Sage Publications, Inc.
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320
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SAGE Publications Ltd
1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road
London EC1Y 1SP

SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd
B-42, Panchsheel Enclave
Post Box 4109
New Delhi 110 017

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Fern, Edward F.
Advanced focus group research / by Edward F. Fern.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-7619-1248-7 (c: acid-free paper) —
ISBN 0-7619-1249-5 (p: acid-free paper)
1. Focus group interviewing.
2. Social Sciences—Research—Methodology. I. Title.
H61.28 .F47 2001
001.4'33—dc21 00-012632

01 02 03 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Preface

Over the past 20 years, the use of focus groups has grown tremendously. In 1977, there were no more than a couple dozen published reports on this popular research method. Most of these reports are published in the marketing literature, and relatively few of them are journal articles. Today, there are more than 1,000 focus group reports ranging from how-to articles in trade publications to controlled empirical studies published in major journals across many disciplines.

The reference list at the end of this book provides an indication of the fields and journals that have published these reports. Keep in mind that the citations throughout this book are mainly journal articles or books. I had neither the resources nor the time to review the many conference proceedings articles on focus groups research that have been published in North America and Europe. These omissions do not reflect quality judgments on my part. I simply had to draw a line somewhere, limiting my effort to journal articles made the literature search easier, although incomplete.

This book was written with several potential audiences in mind. A major objective was to provide useful information for both academicians and practitioners. Thus, I distinguish between applied and theoretical research. This distinction is more clearly defined in Chapter 1. For now, let us think about applied research as that which is used to make decisions related to an organization's goals, strategies, and day-to-day operations. There are two major audiences in this population: (a) decision makers who are the clients of focus group researchers and (b) the researchers themselves, including focus group contractors and moderators. Academics typically do theoretical research. This group includes professors and graduate students across a variety of disci-

plines. I have tried to make this book relevant to both audiences. Because of this effort, the language used in the manuscript has been adapted to those with relatively little knowledge of the terminology used in the research streams from which the theoretical ideas are borrowed. Some precision has been lost, but I hope the plain language will enhance understanding.

This book has several unique features. First, it is an advanced book and is specifically written for those who already have a fundamental knowledge of this qualitative method. As such, it goes beyond the many how-to books that researchers have relied on in the past to guide them in using this flexible methodology.

Second, it is a cross-discipline examination of focus group research. It draws from focus group research projects in many disciplines to provide direction for the future and examples from the past. From these examples, researchers can learn about what to do and what not to do in designing their own research projects.

Third, the book critically examines commonly accepted beliefs about the limits of focus groups and suggests new uses. I look at situations where researchers should be concerned about generalizing focus group findings and situations where generalizability may be warranted. The $n = 1$ argument and the lack of independence of focus group research where theory verification may be acceptable are considered.

Fourth, I present and discuss different focus group research tasks for different research purposes. I make suggestions about which uses are appropriate for which purposes and under what control conditions. For example, it appears that theoretical research designs must subscribe to more rigorous standards than designs for applied research, depending on what is on the line. Even so, the quality of a research project depends on a series of choices that the researcher must make. These choices result from the fact that no research design is without problems and the researcher must deal with this dilemma. This book helps identify these critical choices.

Acknowledgments

I respectfully acknowledge the help and encouragement of several people who helped this book become a reality. First, David Brinberg provided encouragement for this project and reviewed drafts of the book. Yeqing Bao did most of the library and computer research, which yielded masses of focus group research reports. Finally, I am grateful to my wife and best friend Jill whose support made this book possible.

Chapter 1

Introduction and Conceptual Framework

This is an advanced book about focus group research. Several books are available on how to conduct focus groups (Goldman & McDonald, 1987; Krueger, 1988; Morgan & Krueger, 1998; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990; Templeton, 1994; Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996). In addition, a focus group kit is available that makes it easy for the novice to pick up the fundamentals of conducting focus groups (Morgan & Krueger, 1998). These books are pedagogical and provide excellent starting points for learning about the complexities of focus group research.

This book goes beyond teaching researchers how to do focus groups. Instead, it deals with complex issues that researchers consider when planning a focus group research project. Therefore, I assume that the reader has at least a working knowledge of focus groups. The following chapters examine the focus group research process in depth. They uncover and address many of the complexities that the researcher encounters in conducting focus group research. However, rather than providing an exhaustive list of these complexities and prescriptions for their resolution, I attempt to provide a systematic way of thinking through many of the decisions the researcher faces when using this method.

For simplicity's sake, assume that there are three different research purposes, three moderating styles, three group sizes, and three gender or minority mixes to choose from. A factorial array of all the different combinations of these factors would require 81 combinations to choose from, not considering the different proportional representations of gender and minority status. Rather than attempting to cover all these combinations, I will present ways of

thinking about focus groups to help the researcher make informed decisions about how to plan a focus group research project. It is the researcher's responsibility to weigh the relative importance of these complexities within the research context and to make informed judgments about their resolution. To aid in this endeavor, I develop and examine a conceptual framework as a guide for addressing some of these thorny research issues.

Goals of the Book

The goals of this book parallel those discussed by Morgan (1993). First, more research on focus group methods is needed. Consequently, one goal is to motivate researchers to test the veracity of the many hypothesized relationships that will be presented. Second, because focus group interviewing has become ubiquitous, another goal is to foster more informed use of this method by facilitating sharing of focus group researchers' experiences with the method for the benefit of those in other disciplines. A third goal is to move researchers beyond the traditional generic focus group method and toward the development of specific methods for specific research purposes. Fourth, I critically examine many technological issues and offer new perspectives, some of them antithetical to past practices, with the aim of guiding the use of this method. To help accomplish these four goals, I provide a descriptive conceptual framework for focus group processes. This framework will specify relationships between factors that affect focus group processes and outcomes and will provide criteria for evaluating both theoretical and applied focus group research projects.

A Caveat About the Generality of Findings

Although much of the material in this book draws on empirical research and experiences of qualitative researchers in the United States, there is some evidence, albeit meager, to suggest that research using focus groups is conducted elsewhere as well. For example, McDonald (1994), in surveying focus group moderators in the United States, Germany, and Japan, found that focus groups tended to be used for the same kinds of purposes regardless of the country in which they were conducted and that Western marketing practices tended to have a homogenizing effect on the role of researchers, the research process, and research assumptions across countries.

Nevertheless, common wisdom is often in error. Throughout this book, I challenge the traditional and common assumptions that have guided focus group practice. In the spirit of breaking from tradition, I encourage new uses of focus group methods across different cultures. Where possible, I provide examples of these new uses in the hope of increasing readers' knowledge about this popular research method.

Different Focus Group Designs for Different Research Tasks

In reviewing focus group research, I have found it virtually impossible to derive a workable typology of focus groups in which the categories are both mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive. Furthermore, because each focus group project is unique, I have found that it is not productive to offer methodological prescriptions for different types of focus groups. Rather, I depend on the research task to provide clues for how to design the focus group project. Therefore, I distinguish between reported focus group tasks, consider them in theoretical and applied contexts, and provide some rough guidelines to help researchers plan focus groups for their particular purposes and research tasks. Each researcher can adjust the methodological factors of his or her group research to fit the unique characteristics of the research task.

The differentiation between theoretical and applied focus group research is important because many of the concerns about methodological issues such as generalizability, degrees of freedom, quantification, reliability, and validity pertain to theory-testing research. I argue that, contrary to common beliefs, it is appropriate to use focus group research to support a theory if the researcher addresses these methodological issues adequately.

Focus Group Uses

In the late 1970s, the only discipline reporting the use of the focus group method with any frequency was marketing. Fern (1982a, 1982b, 1983) and Calder (1977) report virtually no focus group studies outside marketing research. Since 1981, the use of focus groups has increased tremendously, not only in the number of studies but also in the number of disciplines using them. In some research projects, focus groups are the only method used to collect information. Therefore, I reexamine commonly held assumptions about the

conduct of focus group research. This effort results in a typology of focus group tasks and extends the use of focus groups into new research areas.

In the following sections, I distinguish between theory applications and effects applications. In particular, I advocate some departures from traditional focus group uses. This leads to the consideration of focus groups without moderators, focus groups with informal moderators, and focus groups for validating theoretical notions. I also discuss how focus group research can be adapted for three different types of research tasks: exploratory, experiential, and clinical.

Theory Applications Versus Effects Applications

The distinction between theory applications and effects applications seems to account for the general differences in the research projects that I uncovered. *Theory applications* or *theoretical research* is conducted for the purposes of theory development and theory confirmation. *Effects applications* or *applied research* is conducted for decision-making purposes. Theoretical research is primarily, but not exclusively, done by academics. Theory applications include triangulation and theory evaluation. Applied research is done by both academics and practitioners. Moreover, some focus group projects do applied research but are theory based. I consider these studies to be theory applications despite the interest in effects. See Calder, Phillips, and Tybout (1981) for an informative discussion of the differences between theory and effects applications.

Theory applications help us understand phenomena so that we can generalize beyond the specific applications under study. For example, consumer researchers study how people make choices regarding a variety of products. This research has uncovered several decision schemes that consumers routinely use to make choices. On the other hand, researchers in applied settings typically do not concern themselves with generalizing beyond the populations relevant to their specific applications. For example, a decision maker may be interested in how a certain group of people make choices among specific birth control methods but not in how people make choices generally. Therefore, generalizability beyond the populations (i.e., people and products) included in the focus group research is not a concern. Throughout this

book, I attempt to distinguish between these two types of applications and make normative prescriptions for each type of research task.

The research task provides the cue for designing the research project. Table 1.1 shows six task groupings that result from combining the two applications (theory and effects) with three types of tasks uncovered in my extensive review of the focus group literature: exploratory, experiential, and clinical. These classifications, however, are not mutually exclusive.

Exploratory Focus Group Tasks

Focus group tasks can be distinguished in terms of the research purpose they serve, the types of information and knowledge they produce, their scientific status, and methodological factors. Exploratory tasks differ from both clinical and experiential tasks in terms of the research purpose. Creating, collecting, identifying, discovering, explaining, and generating thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are all purposes of exploratory research.

In applied research, exploratory tasks include creating new ideas; collecting unique thoughts; identifying needs, expectations, and issues; discovering new uses for existing products or discovering new products; and explaining puzzling results from quantitative research. For example, in attitude research exploratory groups are used to uncover populations of salient beliefs, likes and dislikes, opinions, and attitudes about products, policies, and programs. The purpose in these tasks is to uncover all the different thoughts that people have, not just those that they have in common. Follow-up cross-sectional quantitative research can measure these attitude components for various segments of the population.

Much of the information generated in exploratory research is unique. It comes either from the focus group participants' creative efforts and unique experiences or from the creativity of the researcher. In brainstorming sessions, focus group participants explicitly try to generate creative ideas. In thought-collecting tasks, the participants provide their thoughts and the researcher's creativity determines their use. These applications generate everyday knowledge that can be used subsequently in designing research projects, developing various aspects of marketing programs, or understanding the results from prior research or communication programs.

In exploratory effect applications, for example, the decision maker may have only a naive hunch about criteria that people use to accept a particular

TABLE 1.1 Focus Group Tasks

Exploratory		*Clinical*		*Experiential*	
Effects Applications	*Theory Applications*	*Effects Applications*	*Theory Applications*	*Effects Applications*	*Theory Applications*
• Creating New ideas • Collecting Unique thoughts • Identifying Needs *Expectations* Issues • Discovering New uses for existing products New products for existing uses • Explaining Puzzling survey results	• Generating Theoretical constructs Hypothesized relationships • Developing *Models* Hypothesis Theories	• Unveiling Motives • Exposing Resistance to persuasion • Uncovering *Predispositions* Biases Prejudices • Analyzing Predilections toward aberrant behavior	• Explaining Beliefs Feelings Behaviors • Revealing Reasons for *preferences*	• Sharing Life experiences • Eliciting shared Attitudes Preferences Intentions *Behavior* • Understanding Language Knowledge Experiences • Evaluating Strategies and programs Advertising Surveys Product/service concepts Media habits	• Triangulating Mail surveys Telephone interviews Face-to-face interviews • Confirming Models Hypotheses Theories

viewpoint. The purpose of focus groups in this case is to develop a list of criteria to either confirm or reject the decision maker's prior hunch. The information is the sum of all the unique individual criteria mentioned during the course of the group discussion. This type of knowledge may be sufficient to solve the decision maker's problem. Such findings need not meet rigorous scientific criteria so long as they are useful.

Exploratory tasks for theory applications include generating theoretical constructs, causal relationships, models, hypotheses, and theories. The purpose is to stimulate the thinking of the researcher. Early in a theory-based research application, exploratory focus groups may be used to uncover everyday knowledge and experiences (Calder, 1977). From this knowledge, the research may abstract scientific concepts that seem to explain relationships. It is not uncommon to identify several competing explanations for the theoretical relationships of interest. The researcher may generate theory from focus group observations through an inductive process.

The knowledge that comes from exploratory tasks, both effects and theory applications, does not have scientific status; it is everyday knowledge. The status of this knowledge depends on the creativity of the researcher. Calder (1977) characterizes this focus group approach as "creative prescientific intellectualization" (p. 359). I discuss methodological factors later in the book.

Experiential Focus Group Tasks

Experiential tasks are also partitioned into applied and theoretical tasks. The research purposes of experiential tasks, however, are somewhat different from those of exploratory and clinical tasks. Applied experiential tasks allow decision makers to observe the "natural attitudes" of focus group members from a predetermined population (Calder, 1977). *Natural attitude* refers to the learned behaviors that we take for granted in our lives. These attitudes are manifest through shared life experiences, preferences, intentions, and behaviors. These behaviors are what people have in common with each other. The closer that individuals are socially, the more experiences they will have in common. For example, family groups have more in common than members of the same civic organization. Focus groups are also used for gaining a better understanding of individuals' language, knowledge, and experience. Finally, they have been used to evaluate strategies, programs, concepts, and habits.

According to Calder (1977), the experiential, or *phenomenological,* focus group approach differs from the exploratory and clinical approaches only

in terms of the partition between scientific and everyday knowledge. Otherwise, the phenomenological approach is not much different from the exploratory and clinical approaches. Exploratory, experiential, and clinical tasks can differ in at least two other ways. First, as mentioned earlier, the research purposes are different. Experiential tasks draw out shared life experiences rather than those that are unique or unshared. Calder refers to this as *intersubjectivity,* which is "the common-sense conceptions and ordinary explanations shared by a set of social actors" (p. 358). From these tasks, the researcher can learn about the focus group participants' life experiences through either unstructured interviewing or by becoming a participant observer.

For both exploratory and clinical purposes, the researcher is likely to be more interested in differences across individuals (i.e., intrasubjectivity) than in their sameness (i.e., intersubjectivity). Therefore, focus groups for these purposes can be heterogeneous with respect to individual characteristics. For experiential purposes, however, focus groups should be homogeneous with respect to the relevant characteristics of the population of interest. Heterogeneity for these tasks is best achieved across several homogeneous groups.

Two points are relevant to experiential effects applications. First, usually the researcher is not interested in generalizing beyond the populations of interest. Second, shared beliefs, opinions, likes and dislikes, attitudes, and perceptions—not necessarily their underlying dimensions—are the focus of inquiry. Our discussion of experiential effects applications assumes that the groups are used for uncovering everyday knowledge for its own value, not for how it can be aggregated into higher-order theoretical constructs.

Experiential focus groups are used in two ways for theory applications—triangulation and confirmation. Unlike effect applications, theory applications are useful when a researcher wants to compare results across different methods, also known as *triangulation.* This approach can also be used for theory confirmation purposes. By theory *confirmation,* I mean comparing the information gathered from focus groups with the researcher's prior beliefs. It is not theory testing in the same way that one uses statistical significance testing procedures, although under certain circumstances statistical significance testing could be used on the output from experiential groups. Later in the book, I discuss these circumstances and defend the position taken on theory confirmation when using experiential groups (see Chapter 6). For the purpose of supporting one's theory, the design of the focus group research project becomes much more critical, as do the number of groups and group composition.

Clinical Focus Groups Tasks

The clinical approach is widely used in marketing for effect applications by practitioners. This approach, also known as the group depth interview (Goldman & McDonald, 1987) or group dynamics (Leonhard, 1975), has been used in motivation research. It is currently used for other purposes and in many cases used improperly. I uncovered no use of this approach in disciplines other than marketing. The clinical approach is based on two notions: (a) The reasons for many of our behaviors are unknown to us; they are either suppressed or are simply not known, although they may be obvious to others. (b) These unknown reasons for our behavior can be understood only through clinical judgment. Calder (1977) refers to this approach as quasiscientific. It is presumed to provide the analyst with scientific knowledge, but as Calder points out, clinical groups may provide no more than everyday knowledge disguised as scientific knowledge.

Clinical tasks for effect applications try to uncover individuals' motives, predispositions, biases, and prejudices. Often, we are not consciously aware of these thoughts and feelings. Presumably, through a process I will describe later, moderators with clinical training can help individuals to bring this information to the surface for discussion. Arguably, clinical groups have been used to uncover motives for purchasing specific brands within a product category (e.g., beer). This information is then used to plan promotional strategies for the brand.

The type of information and knowledge acquired through the use of focus groups for clinical tasks is also different from that obtained from the other two research types. Clinical groups concentrate on *intra*subjectivity and the factors that are personal to the individual rather than on intersubjectivity (Calder, 1977). Whether the factors are unique or are shared across group members should be of little consequence to the researcher. Interest is primarily in causes of behaviors that often are either suppressed or unknown to the individual, although some of them may be obvious to others. The goal in clinical research is to make this information known by bringing it forth in the conversation.

For theory applications, clinical tasks might involve uncovering relationships between, motives, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. Differences between effect and theory applications within clinical tasks are less clear than for the other two types of research tasks. The major distinction is whether the focus group output is to be used for planning strategies and programs, which

are effects applications, or to be used in theory development. Clinical and exploratory tasks have one thing in common: They both study the intrasubjectivity of the individuals in the group. They both differ from experiential groups in this respect also.

Scientific Knowledge and Focus Groups

Before continuing, I digress a bit into the scientific status of focus groups. Scientific theorizing is a two-way process. We abstract the real world into scientific concepts and relationships, but "one must be able to use constructs to interpret whether real objects and behaviors possess the properties and relationships embodied in scientific theory" (Calder, 1977, p. 354). This process is theory-testing research. We accept scientific knowledge provisionally because it cannot be proven. However, our confidence in scientific knowledge increases when we use qualitative common sense to cross-validate it (Campbell, 1988). Cross-validation considers the consistency between our observations and the theory that attempts to explain them. If the qualitative findings are inconsistent with the scientific explanation, researchers must choose between the findings and the theory: For example, sometimes consumers' explanations for their choices may be favored over the theory (Calder, 1977; Campbell, 1988).

Calder (1977) asserts that exploratory and clinical focus groups may be accorded prescientific and quasiscientific status, respectively. He argues that phenomenological (experiential) research with focus groups provides everyday knowledge and is therefore not scientific. I disagree and further argue that focus groups can be used in experiential research to determine the consistency between scientific explanations and everyday knowledge. This, of course, depends on the methodological choices of the researcher. I am not referring to cross-validation alone (i.e., triangulation), although the purpose of cross-validation should be a sufficient basis for according scientific status to focus group data. The question is whether a theory can be accepted or rejected on the basis of focus group research. In some instances, focus groups may produce knowledge that is more scientific than that gained from quantitative surveys (e.g., in determining the resistance of beliefs to the influence of a reference group). Because a theory can never be proved, repeated disconfirmation from a series of focus groups may have more scientific meaning

than the quantitative survey method, which is commonly believed to the more "scientific." Just as quantitative research can be classified as scientific or descriptive (i.e., in using or not using theoretical constructs and causal hypotheses subjected to scientific methods), so, too, can qualitative research such as focus group research.

The Conceptual Framework

The Research Purpose

The research purpose is important because it frames the focus group task and all the subsequent decisions that the researcher must make about the research project. Decisions about the focus group methods depend on the research purpose. If the researcher is concerned about uncovering theoretical explanations for shared opinions among a population of interest, within-group homogeneity probably makes sense. If his or her interest is in generating potential items for a survey, within-group heterogeneity may be best. The research purpose is critical because it affects other choices among factors that affect the focus group process and outcomes—for example, choices about the types of individuals to be included in the study, the composition of the groups, and the relevant characteristics of the moderator.

The number of groups required for a focus group project may range anywhere from 1 to 30 or more depending on the research purpose. One group may be sufficient for determining the adequacy of survey instructions, but 50 or more may be necessary for a cross-cultural comparison on a health-related issue. In any case, the number of groups does not have a direct impact on the group process; the number of group members, however, does make a difference.

As group size increases, the role of the moderator becomes more critical. There are fewer opportunities for participants to speak in large groups than in small groups. Reticent group members may be likely to hide in the crowd and withhold their participation in the discussion. Moreover, the larger the group, the more individuals will concentrate on information that is shared among the group members.

If the research purpose is to elicit ideas for developing a new product or new policy—for example, to produce creative ideas—smaller groups of heterogeneous individuals are more likely to produce unique or creative ideas

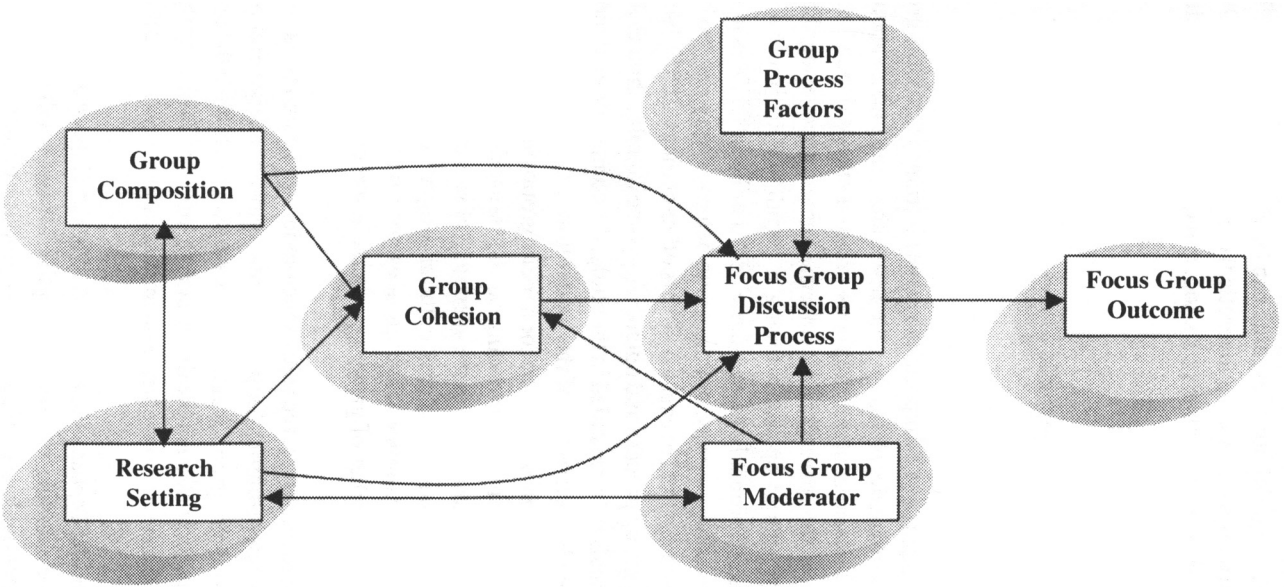

Figure 1.1. The General Focus Group Process Framework

than larger groups. Large groups, particularly if they are heterogeneous, take comfort in sticking to ideas that they have in common. Therefore, heterogeneous small groups may be desirable, but this forces the moderator to establish a cohesive and accommodating atmosphere to elicit the diverse views and unique information from the group's members.

If the research purpose is to verify a theory or develop hypotheses about some aspect of shared behavior, smaller, heterogeneous groups are not likely to provide shared experiences. For this research purpose, larger groups that focus on shared information—even with all their attendant problems for the moderator—may be desirable. These types of methodological issues become decidedly more complex when different research goals are considered. I discuss information sharing in Chapter 5 and discuss a few methodological complexities in dealing with these issues in experiential groups in Chapter 8.

The general conceptual framework for focus group processes, shown in Figure 1.1, is descriptive and is the basis for organizing the rest of the book. It also provides the researcher with some insight into the complex issues surrounding the use of these methods and helps us think systematically about the many choices that make up the research plan.

The framework serves as a road map to guide us through the maze of issues in focus group research. Keep in mind, however, that it is hypothetical. A few of the relationships that it suggests have been tested, but for the most part, the framework has not been tested empirically. Most issues that I discuss in this context have not been resolved. Therefore, an additional benefit of the framework is to focus researchers on issues, if not hypotheses, for future research.

Components of the Conceptual Framework

There are seven components to the conceptual framework—group cohesion, the discussion process, the outcome, group composition, research setting, the moderator, and group process factors. Some are controllable by the researcher and others are not. At the heart of the framework is the discussion process, which affects the nature of the focus group outcome. The other factors—group cohesiveness, group composition, the research setting, the moderator, and group process factors—influence the discussion process and the exchange of information.

Group composition and the focus group setting affect cohesion, both directly and in combination. Group composition refers to the individual charac-

teristics (culture, social status, age, race/ethnicity, gender, and personality) of the participants, which of course depends on who is recruited. The researcher controls recruiting. Therefore, the composition of the group and its effects on cohesion and the focus group discussion should be somewhat controllable. However, this is true only if the researcher understands the mix of individual characteristics represented by group participants and effects of that mix on group cohesion and the discussion process. Cohesion has a direct effect on the group discussion process.

The research setting is not routinely accounted for in the research design, is less easily controlled, and quite often has unintended effects on focus groups. The focus group moderator also affects the discussion process and the exchange of information. To the extent that the moderator is qualified, the effect of the moderator should be controllable. The research setting, including ambient, human, and material factors, affects the focus group process in both predictable and unpredictable ways. Last, group process factors can be controlled, at least partially, if they are understood. I begin with a brief discussion of group cohesion, the focus group discussion process, and the focus group outcome. Then I discuss the factors that affect these three framework components.

Group Cohesion

Group cohesion is critical to the success of some focus group research projects. Cohesion is important because it provides the reason for the focus group participants to contribute to the discussion. The personal characteristics of the participants, the work of the focus group moderator, and the research setting all affect group cohesion.

Group cohesion is the sense of closeness and common purpose among group members (Davis, 1969). It includes all the factors that cause people to remain in the group and participate. It is very similar to a relationship between two individuals. If an individual has no sense of belonging or attraction to the group, it is doubtful that he or she will participate in the discussion. This does not mean that the group must be homogeneous on all or even most individual-difference variables. The moderator should be able to foster cohesion even if the members are somewhat heterogeneous. In what follows, I discuss the individual-difference variables that are most critical and what the moderator can do to foster cohesion.

Cohesion is affected by the composition of the group, which depends in part on the research purpose, the focus group task, the particular population under investigation, and the resources available to the researcher. Thus, the researcher may face a trade-off regarding group composition, the social envi-

ronment, and cohesion. Homogeneous groups may be desirable for theory verification purposes, but limited resources may constrain the amount of homogeneity that can be achieved within groups. When moderators face this constraint, they must work harder to achieve cohesion. If not, the focus group discussion may be adversely affected.

Finally, the research setting of the focus group session can affect cohesion and the discussion process. Factors such as the climate of the room, the number of people present, and the size of the room can affect cohesion and the discussion. The moderator can control some of the effects of these factors but not all.

The Focus Group Discussion Process

The group discussion process can be described from clinical and social psychological perspectives. Foulkes (1964) provides a set of therapeutic factors that will guide the discussion of group process. These factors are ordered from the beginning to the end of the discussion and represent stages in the group discussion.

The first factor, *social integration,* is the opportunity for equal participation of all group members in the focus group discussion. The second, the *mirror reaction,* is individual participants' realization that others share similar ideas, anxieties, or impulses and serves to relieve their anxieties. The third, the *condenser phenomenon,* is an activation of the collective conscious and unconscious that makes it easier to talk about issues raised in the group discussion. The fourth, *exchange,* is the process of sharing information and explanations that makes up the bulk of the group discussion.

The time spent in each stage of the group process depends on the type of group and the research purpose. For idea-generating tasks, less time is needed to deal with diversity and social integration than in groups concerned with uncovering subconscious motives. Furthermore, group dynamics will differ between these two types of group tasks. A knowledgeable moderator should be able to control the amount of time spent in each stage so that member diversity does not destroy the potential group dynamic.

Focus Group Outcome

The focus group outcome refers to the success of achieving the researcher's goals. The outcome has three components (McGrath & Hollingshead, 1994): (a) task performance effectiveness (e.g., quantity, quality, and the cost of information), (b) the user's reaction (e.g., satisfaction with

the process and output), and (c) group member relations (e.g., cohesive, compatible, and lively groups). Outcome is the total effect of the other six components of the framework on the intended consequences of the focus group sessions. Whether the outcome is a success depends on the researcher's qualitative judgment about these three outcome components.

The type, quantity, and quality of information produced in a focus group session (e.g., many shared product use experiences) make up what can be called *output.* Focus groups can produce a number of different types of information, depending on the research purpose or goal (e.g., personal or impersonal and shared or unshared information). For some tasks, a large quantity of information may be desirable, for others quantity may not be as important as the quality of the information.

The focus group output may take on one of several formats depending on the researcher's needs. These formats include moderator notes, audio and video recordings, transcriptions, and surveys. The information can also be presented in qualitative or quantitative formats. Format refers to the way in which the group output is presented. The moderator or analyst interprets this information and reports to the client, whether it is a researcher or a decision maker. I do not address the formal form of the report in this book. Others have done a very good job of dealing with this issue (Krueger, 1988; Morgan & Krueger, 1998; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990).

Effects of Group Composition, Respondent Diversity, and Individual Characteristics on Group Cohesion

Group cohesion is affected by three elements: group composition, the characteristics of the setting, and the focus group moderator. Group composition is a within-group design factor; it depends on the mix of focus group members. Whether groups are homogeneous or heterogeneous in terms of individual difference characteristics will affect the cohesiveness of the group. These characteristics include cultural value orientation, social status, age, gender, race/ethnicity, and personality.

Group Composition. There are six types of individual characteristics and many different levels of each that can describe focus group participants and account for the variability in group composition. Group composition in turn affects the group dynamic and outcome and is not under the researcher's direct control once the discussion begins. However, the impact of these factors is partially controlled by considering them at the planning stage in the re-

search process. For example, the race/ethnicity and the socioeconomic status of focus group participants will affect who willingly participates, the frequency of their participation, and the nature of their contribution to the focus group discussion.

It is widely believed that the effects of these factors on the group process are largely controlled by, and therefore the responsibility of, the moderator. As we will see, this is not always the case. Making each group homogeneous with respect to individual participant characteristics (e.g., value orientation, social status, race/ethnicity, age, gender, and personality) and varying diversity across groups may lighten the moderator's load. Whether diversity and heterogeneity within groups are necessary depends on the research purpose and the focus group approach.

Homogeneity and Heterogeneity of Respondents. Homogeneity of group members restricts the range of issues and positions that focus group participants discuss. Homogeneous respondents are more likely to provide similar responses to the moderator's queries. Also, homogeneous groups should spend more of the allotted time interacting and should be more compatible and cohesive than heterogeneous groups. Conversely, heterogeneous groups increase the diversity and range of positions taken on issues that are discussed. On the downside, too much heterogeneity may have a negative impact on the social environment and may stifle group discussion because of member incompatibility.

For example, if the researcher is interested in evaluating a particular theory about the relationship between sexual practices and HIV infection, it makes sense to use focus groups made up of homogeneous individuals in terms of gender from the relevant population. However, if the researcher is interested in generating lists of all possible characteristics that consumers generally use to evaluate brands of toothpaste, focus groups of heterogeneous members may be desirable.

Individual Characteristics. Group composition and the compatibility of the group members depend on the individual members' cultural value orientations along with their individual genetic and psychological characteristics. I distinguish between two value orientations, individualism and collectivism (Altman, 1975). Briefly, individualists have a "me" orientation. They tend to look out for themselves and are independent compared with collectivists. Collectivists tend to be "we" oriented and look out for the welfare of their primary in-groups and depend on each other more than individualist do. More-

over, to the extent that individuals want to be the same as others in their culture, they become horizontal in their individualist or collectivist orientation. They become vertical individualists or collectivists by differentiating themselves from others in their culture.

Generally, we expect that focus group members who are more similar to each other will be more cohesive than dissimilar members. Groups composed of either individualists or collectivists will be more compatible than those composed of both individualists and collectivists. Nevertheless, within each of these cultural orientations, individuals will differ on many other characteristics.

This variation may be the result of genetic and socialization differences. For example, high-status individuals are usually different from others in a culture on a number of characteristics, such as age, income, and occupation. Thus, they tend to be vertical in their orientation. Including a high-status individual with a group of horizontals might create irreconcilable friction and cause communication problems.

For this reason I examine the potential effects of social status, age, race/ethnicity, cultural orientation, gender, and personality on cohesion in focus groups. For example, in Chapter 2, I discuss the possible relationship between personality and cultural value orientation and demonstrate how the "Big Five" personality dimensions can be related to cultural value orientation and behavior in focus groups. I also examine a few of the complex interactions between these individual characteristics.

The Research Setting

The research setting refers to the space in which the group is conducted and includes the ambient, human, and material aspects of the environment. The focus group setting along with characteristics of the individuals in the group affect privacy regulation. Each setting provides a different ambience, which can affect how participants behave. Settings for focus group encounters may range from formal to informal or artificial to natural, with each setting providing different ambient conditions. The human aspect of the environment refers to the number of people and how they are arranged in the room. Because individuals differ in needs for privacy, some may feel crowded and others may feel quite comfortable if a large group is meeting in a small enclosure. Material aspects of the setting refer to the tangible or physical characteristics of the room (e.g., tables, chairs, mirrors, and recording equipment).

Mirrors and recording equipment may cause some group members to withhold participation in the group discussion.

Individuals require an optimum amount of privacy and personal space (Altman, 1975). When their desired level of privacy is threatened, they tend to compensate by using various verbal, nonverbal, and behavioral means. The effect of threats to privacy on the individual and how they compensate depends on one's value orientation, social status, age, gender, race/ethnicity, and personality. The focus group setting is fixed for 1.5 to 2.5 hours, and quite often the topics of discussion are intimate. Therefore, it is likely that some focus group participants will feel that their optimum privacy is being threatened. People become uncomfortable and even stressed when this occurs, which can result in their withdrawing from the discussion or becoming disruptive through their behavior.

Typically, the researcher chooses the location for the focus group interview. Nevertheless, the decision about whether the interview will take place in a centrally located group facility, a corporate conference room, or a participant's living room is only partially under the control of the researcher. This is so because in many focus group applications, the relevant population under study dictates the range of focus group settings. The setting is confounded with population characteristics. For example, in many rural locations, centrally located high-tech facilities are not available. Even in those situations where the researcher can choose the setting, the effect that the research setting has on participants' privacy regulation mechanisms and on the group discussion is largely unknown and somewhat uncontrollable. I will examine these potential effects in Chapter 3.

The Focus Group Moderator

The focus group moderator also plays an important role in determining the magnitude and types of effects the research setting has on cohesion of group members. The researcher can exert some control over moderator effects by selecting a moderator with specific personality characteristics, particular expertise in the research domain, and particular focus group competencies. However, the researcher has little or no control over the moderator once the interview has begun. Thus, I distinguish between controllable and uncontrollable moderator influences on the group discussion.

Two related questions about the use of moderators must be addressed: (a) Are moderators necessary? (b) Are professional moderators necessary? In some situations, the value of a moderator may not exceed his or her cost in

terms of obtrusiveness. For example, suppose that a researcher wants to assemble focus groups to determine the effects of a prosocial communication on at-risk youth in an urban area (McLaurin, 1995). The research budget is limited, and the available moderators are 45- to 55-year-old white men. In the situation described, is it better to use the available moderators or to use no moderators? Researchers have on occasion allowed groups to work the audio recorder so that they can record their own conversation without intrusion by the researcher or moderator.

If moderators are necessary, do they have to be professionals? There is no doubt about how professional moderators would respond to this question. *Marketing News* routinely expresses moderators' views about the importance of focus group moderators, the characteristics they should exhibit, and the procedures they should use when conducting focus groups. But in many research applications, professional moderators are not a viable or necessary alternative. Many research programs (e.g., most academic research programs) cannot afford professional moderators. In addition, the total cost of using a professional in many geographic areas (e.g., Thailand, Zaire, Tanzania, and Welch, West Virginia) would be unrealistic even if the moderator was willing to travel such distances. Finally, most professional focus group moderators do not have the theoretical knowledge to do focus groups for theory applications. Generally, their education and experience is best suited for effects applications research.

Professional moderators lead focus groups in most applied marketing settings. This is where their experience is most relevant. When they have the responsibility of analyzing the group sessions—for example, uncovering hidden motives or developing theory—they can provide the required insights better than untrained moderators or peer leaders. In these situations, the use of professional moderators or experienced academic moderators makes sense. But for some focus groups, a moderator may not be necessary and may even may be harmful.

The moderator, through his or her intended and unintended behaviors, influences the group dynamic. Factors such as the moderator's personal and social characteristics, interviewing style, and use of aids may affect not only the quantity but also the quality of information obtained.

Group Process Factors

Several group process factors have been suggested as influencing the focus group process. However, recent research has discarded all but a couple of

them as plausible influences on what occurs in focus groups. I discuss two here; others will be discussed in Chapter 5.

It is difficult for people to both think and listen at the same time when discussing issues in groups. While listening to others, they can become distracted. Also, they tend to rehearse what they are going to say, which interferes with listening to others in the group. Third, while they wait to speak, they may forget what they were going to say. All these interruptions can lessen the number of new or creative ideas that group members come up with.

When people are interviewed individually, or when they complete open-ended surveys, they do not face these distractions. Thus, there are fewer chances to lose information. Diehl and Stroebe (1987) showed that when individuals state their ideas as they occur, they can provide about twice as many ideas as when they have to wait for others to finish. These streams of research seem to suggest that better methods exist for brainstorming tasks than focus groups.

A second line of important research is based on information-sampling theory. Stasser and Titus (1985) refer to information possessed by all group members as *shared information* and information that is unique to an individual as *unshared information.* In any group, some information will be shared and some will be unique. The distribution of shared and unique information depends on the degree to which group members share similar backgrounds and experiences. Each group member possesses a slightly different subset of the total available information.

The greater the number of members who know the item of information, the more likely it is that the item will be mentioned and discussed during the group session. Thus, shared information has a greater likelihood of being discussed than unshared information. The evidence supporting the information-sampling model is growing. Unshared information is more likely to be discussed when the percentage of unshared information relative to shared information among group members is large. This condition is most likely when the group members are heterogeneous. Groups with members whose backgrounds are quite different have little in the way of shared experiences to discuss and are more likely to discuss their unique experiences than are members of homogeneous groups.

Applying this research to focus groups, we expect people with individualist cultural orientations to share fewer life experiences than those with more collectivist orientations. Thus, it would seem to make sense to use people with individualist orientations for idea generation and other creative purposes. Moreover, such people probably should be studied individually. Col-

lectivists share life experiences more and will probably be more productive when the group task is collecting common experiences. It is probably not a good idea to combine individualists and collectivists in either idea-generating tasks or experience-sharing tasks.

Summary

A descriptive framework of focus groups has been presented along with some general and speculative causal relationships among its elements. The framework serves several purposes. First, it provides a road map for the rest of the book. Second, it gives researchers a structure for thinking through the many decisions they must make while planning a focus group project. Finally, it allows researchers to speculate about relationships among the various framework components and to design research projects to test the resulting hypotheses. Subsequent chapters of this book treat each component of the framework in more detail.

Chapter 2

Group Composition, Individual Characteristics, and Cohesion

The effect of individual characteristics on the focus group dynamic depends on the types of individuals recruited for the group sessions. Group composition is usually considered in terms of how individual member characteristics will affect group cohesion or compatibility and subsequently how the group interacts. The effect of these characteristics on the focus group dynamic depends on the types of individuals recruited for the group sessions. For example, the amount and quality of personally relevant information disclosed in a group is directly affected by whether the group is composed of all males, all females, or some combination of both genders. The effect of gender on disclosure in focus groups interacts with the degree of acquaintanceship among group members. The following review addresses some main and interactive effects of participant characteristics on focus group dynamics.

Group composition can also have intended and unintended effects on the group dynamic. Because the moderator controls behavior within the group, the composition of individual characteristics within a group can affect the moderator's behavior, which can, in turn, affect the degree and type of individual participation within the group. For example, the moderator may be forced to quiet a dominant respondent, with the unintended effect of causing a shy member to withdraw from the discussion. It is important to understand the intended and unintended effects that can result from inadequate attention to group composition. Therefore, it seems sensible to consider the type of group interaction that is desirable before deciding on the mix of individual characteristics one seeks in choosing group participants.

A number of individual characteristics have received research attention, and the complexity of the voluminous interrelationships among them is great. Practically, the number of individual characteristics that can be controlled or varied in a single focus group project is limited to only a few. This chapter examines those individual differences that most influence group composition and cohesion, and their effects on the focus group process. Please see Figure 2.1.

Cultural Value Orientation

Countries differ in terms of the degree to which they are individualistic or collectivistic. Moreover, within a given country there are multiple cultures, each of which can be characterized by its degree of individualism or collectivism. Adding to the cultural complexity, each culture within a country is differentiated in terms of individuals who are more or less individualistic or collectivistic; that is, in individualistic cultures, there are individuals who think, feel, and behave like collectivists, and within collectivist cultures, there are individuals who think, feel, and behave like individualists. Each country and each culture contains all types—although on average, some cultures are more individualistic and others more collectivistic.

Several factors distinguish different subjective cultures, including language, historical period, and geographic region (Triandis, 1995). "Subjective culture may be defined as shared beliefs, attitudes, norms, roles, and values found among speakers of a particular language who live during the same historical period in a specified geographic region" (Triandis, 1995, p. 6). These elements are transferred from generation to generation and define the culture. Moreover, these elements become organized around a central theme such as individualism. For example, freedom, independence, hard work, creativity, success, and dominance suggest an orientation toward individualism. Cooperation, dependence, keeping the status quo, and strong in-group relationships suggest collectivism. Nevertheless, individuals differ in their acceptance and endorsement of these elements and themes.

Horizontal Versus Vertical Structures of Individualism and Collectivism

Triandis (1995) distinguishes between horizontal and vertical individualism and collectivism. Individuals within a culture can view themselves as

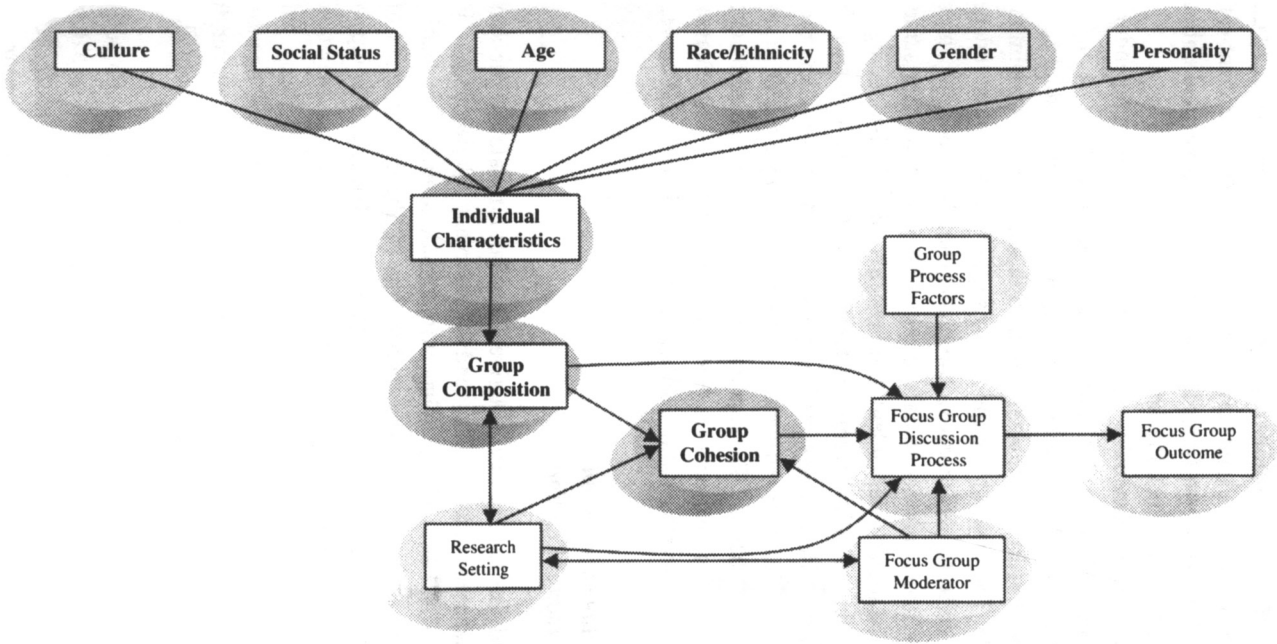

Figure 2.1. Individual Characteristics, Group Composition, and Cohesion

either independent or interdependent and either the same as or different from other people. These dimensions can be combined to form horizontal individualism (independent-same) and vertical individualism (independent-different) or horizontal collectivism (interdependent-same) and vertical collectivism (interdependent-different). Please see Figure 2.2.

The horizontal dimension distinguishes between independence and interdependence. The vertical dimension distinguishes between sameness and being different. Horizontal individualism refers to individuals who value independence but do not like to stick out. High social status is not important to these people. They want to be the same as other people but be independent. Horizontal collectivism refers to those individuals who value interdependence. They have a sense of social cohesion. They want to be the same as others but also be socially dependent. For vertical individualism, being different means that the individual wants to stand out and be distinguished in some sense. Vertical collectivism goes beyond a sense of cohesion and includes a sense of serving the in-group even if it means sacrificing a degree of sameness for the in-group's benefit. These people are the community leaders and representatives of their constituencies. See Triandis (1995) for empirical evidence that seems to support the distinction between the horizontal and the vertical.

Cultural Value Orientation and Interpersonal Relations

Collectivists tend to have relatively few but intimate interpersonal relationships, whereas individualists tend to have many relationships of low intimacy (Triandis, 1995). Collectivists work at maintaining these relationships, but they rely on in-group norms rather than on the development of social skills. On the other hand, individualists interact with many in-groups but have to work at maintaining relationships with them. As a result, they tend to develop social skills for effective superficial interaction with others. Thus, it is possible to mistakenly think that groups of individualists will be more cohesive and interact better in focus groups than collectivists. However, this perception may ignore the superficiality of the interaction and the quality of the information obtained from individualists.

Second, collectivists view themselves as being higher in self-esteem (self-efficacy) when working with an in-group. Individualists see themselves as higher in self-efficacy when working alone (Early, 1993). Early (1993) provides evidence that when collectivists are working with in-groups and individualists are working alone, self-efficacy and performance were higher than

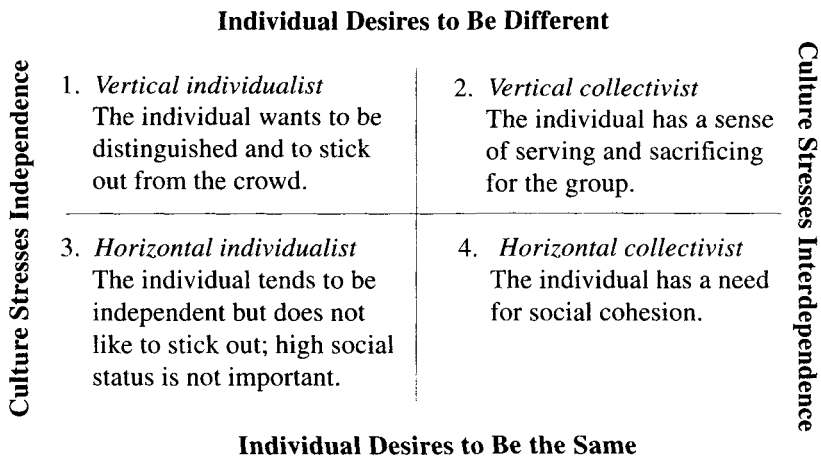

Figure 2.2. The Horizontal and Vertical Nature of Cultural Orientations

when collectivists work alone and individualists work in groups. This has been found in research carried out with managers in China, Israel, and the United States.

Third, collectivists may feel more comfortable speaking in front of a small group than do individualists. Hamilton, Blumenfeld, Akoah, and Miura (1991) found that Japanese teachers (collectivists) spoke to the group 51% of the time and to individuals 47% of the time, whereas American teachers (individualists) spoke to individuals 72% of the time and to the group 22% of the time. Moreover, group membership (e.g., race/ethnicity) may be more important in social perceptions and interpersonal attraction among collectivists than individualists. Individualists may rely on similarities of beliefs and attitudes more when making judgments about interpersonal attraction. According to Triandis (1995), individualists value in-group heterogeneity and collectivists value in-group homogeneity.

For focus groups, the research evidence seems to suggest homogeneous groups if the individuals are collectivists and heterogeneous groups if individualists. This notion is based on the belief that individuals value their own culture and that individualists are more comfortable among heterogeneous groups and collectivists among homogeneous groups. Conformity research, using the Asch-type procedure (Asch, 1952), shows that collectivistic cultures show higher levels of conformity than individualistic cultures (Triandis, 1995).

These findings seem to suggest that for creative and problem-solving tasks, focus groups of peers might be more effective for collectivists. Individualists may perform better if they work alone or in electronic groups rather than in focus groups. For collectivists group-based approaches may work best. Several individual characteristics influence the tendency to accept individualism or collectivism within a society.

Adjusting to Differences in Cultural Value Orientation

Triandis (1995) reports on research dealing with acculturation differences between individualists and collectivists. Generally, the greater the similarity between the individualism or collectivism of the host culture and the culture of an immigrant, the greater the likelihood of a smooth adjustment to the new culture. In the focus group context, the more homogeneous the group members are in terms of cultural value orientation, the more likely it is that group members will adjust to each other and become cohesive. An individualist coming to a focus group of collectivists will have more difficulty adjusting than a collectivist will. The greater the cultural distance between group members, the more difficult it is to adjust and the more likely there will be conflict. This is particularly true when people with vertical individualistic orientations are introduced into a group of horizontal collectivists or vertical collectivists are mixed with horizontal individualists.

Examples of Cultural Value Orientation in Focus Groups

The following examples are based on those provided by Triandis (1995) and illustrate the dilemma facing the focus group researcher. First, assume that the moderator is from a vertical collectivist culture and prefers a certain amount of structure in focus groups, but the group members are from a horizontal individualist culture and do not like to be told what to do. We could complicate things a bit by making half the group members come from the same culture as the moderator, but that is not necessary to make our point. The moderator instructs the group that only one person speaks at a time, each person should be given the opportunity to talk, and the sponsor's agenda must be followed; the moderator adheres to these instructions during the course of the discussion. In this example, the group members might perceive the moderator

to be dogmatic or authoritarian, whereas the moderator may view the group members as being uncooperative if not insubordinate.

Second, if the moderator is a vertical collectivist and the members are vertical individualists, group members may accurately see the moderator's role as being the leader who offers structure. However, conflict may arise because of the collectivistic and individualistic differences. In this case, the moderator may expect group members to focus on their shared beliefs, feelings, and behaviors with respect to a particular product or service that these consumers use. However, group members may want to relate their individual problems and experiences to the discussion topic and present unique ideas about how products or services can be developed to solve their problems. In this situation, it is unlikely that the moderator's goals will be realized.

In a third situation, the moderator represents a horizontal collectivist culture and the group members are horizontal individualists. In this case, the moderator might do away with formal structure and try to fit in so as to be one of the group. This strategy may be used to make members feel relaxed in the presence of the moderator so that they will share their common experiences. However, individualists know that the moderator has an agenda, they do not want to become part of a group, and they try to maintain a certain social distance from the moderator. Again, conflicting goals may adversely affect the group session.

Fourth, imagine a horizontal collectivist moderator and vertical collectivist group members. Again, the moderator wants to uncover shared experiences, does not impose a formal structure, and tries to blend in with the group. However, group members may expect structure and leadership from the moderator. While the moderator is looking for spontaneous contributions, group members may want direction and may spend considerable time trying to figure out what the moderator wants from them.

Different combinations of cultural patterns that represent moderator-versus-group member differences and group member-versus-group member differences present opportunities for different types and magnitudes of group conflict. There will always be some differences in expectations, goals, and productivity because of cultural differences. Being aware of these possibilities may help forestall serious conflicts.

Some of these problems can be minimized by selecting a moderator who is aware of and experienced in working within the cultural value orientation of the focus group members. If this is not practical, training may be necessary to ensure that the moderator is compatible with the cultural value orientations of the group members.

Another way to forestall some of these problems is to consider the cultural value orientation of the group members when recruiting them; it is fairly easy to measure.[1] Not only will members of different cultures respond differently to a moderator of the same or different culture, but they will respond differently to each other. For example, collectivists in focus groups may require some sense of commonality before they feel safe enough to contribute to the group task. Individualists have no need for such socialization, and they are not likely to participate as a collective in any case. Therefore, the warm-up period may be more critical for groups made up of collectivists.

Social Status

Social status refers to the prestige, importance, or value attributed to a group member by others in the group (Shaw, 1976, 1981). Attributions about status are based on perceptions of an individual's characteristics such as age, gender, race, education, occupation, income, and wealth. Higher-status members have more power and influence in the group than do lower-status individuals. Individuals with more power are attributed more status than individuals with less power. Also people with greater communication potential are perceived to be more important than people who have less communication potential (Shaw, 1976, 1981).

High status has several important effects (Shaw, 1976, 1981). High-status individuals are allowed to deviate from group norms more than low-status individuals. Also, higher-status people tend to conform to group norms more than do those of lower social status. Perhaps most important for the conduct of focus groups, high-status people initiate and receive more communications in the group than do people of lower status. Finally, perceived status appears to affect the content of communications. In one study (Worchel, 1957, cited in Shaw, 1976), frustration was tolerated more when the source of the frustrating communication was a high-status individual than when it was a low-status individual.

Wilke (1996) provides a review indicating that high-status individuals accept influence from others in small groups less than do low-status people, presumably because of their perceived greater competence. In addition, they exert more influence than lower-status individuals. This is referred to as a competence differential, which is distinguished from the differential due to antecedent dimensions such as gender, race, and ethnicity. Antecedent differentiation also causes differences in influence. For example, in one study on

influence differentials, it was found that men accept less influence than women do. It appears that status differences occur not only on dimensions relevant to the task at hand—competence, for example—but on antecedent dimensions irrelevant to the task at hand.

Moreover, multiple status dimensions (e.g., speaking ability and education) among group members may be either congruent or incongruent with each other. For example, one person may exhibit high status on one dimension but another person may exceed this high level of status on a different dimension. This would be incongruent and might lead to interpersonal conflict in the group (Exline & Ziller, 1971; Wilke, 1996). According to Exline and Ziller (1971), there is a tendency for different types of status to equalize (or equilibrate) so that they all achieve the same level on the dimension that provides the highest status. If one member of a group equilibrates to the highest level on one dimension that provides satisfaction (e.g., graduate degree) and another individual within the group equilibrates on a different dimension that also provides satisfaction (e.g., income), differences about who has the highest status between the two individuals may arise. In this case, either one or both individuals may try to increase the levels of perceived status on their weakest dimension at the expense of the other (e.g., occupation for the former and ancestry for the latter). Attempts by these individuals to positively influence other group members' perceptions of their relative status may cause conflict within the group (Exline & Ziller 1971). Empirical results tend to support the notion that status incongruency within discussion groups leads to conflict (Exline & Ziller, 1971).

Status appears to be associated with cultural value orientation. High-status individuals are different from most other people on one or more of the dimensions discussed later in this chapter (e.g., age, gender, and race). As a result, they are more likely to be vertical rather than horizontal individualists or collectivists because of their need to stand out. According to Triandis (1995), in both types of cultures, the vertical dimension accepts inequality and rank has its privileges. This dimension reflects the "different self" (p. 44). The horizontal dimension assumes that people should be similar on most important attributes, particularly status. This dimension reflects the "same self," which does not want to stand out (Triandis, 1995, p. 44).

Yamaguchi (1994, cited in Triandis, 1995) measured collectivism in large samples of Japanese students and found that collectivism correlated negatively with the need for uniqueness. Collectivists in the study also tended to want people to be equal in intelligence and indicated that they did not like people who were too competent and presumably of a higher social class. On

the other hand, Japanese who are individualistic pay less attention to social comparison information and the status of others (Gudykunst, Gao, Nishida, Nadamitsu, & Sakai, 1992, cited in Triandis, 1995).

An examination of social status makes it clear that the relationship between status and culture is complex. Achieving high social status is important in individualistic cultures but largely ignored in collectivistic cultures. Within cultural individualism, there are many ways for one to acquire high social status—for example, through natural ability, hard work, education, and inherited wealth. Status can also be achieved through more diffuse antecedent dimensions such as age, race/ethnicity, gender, and personality. The different possible combinations make for many complex ways for individuals to achieve high social status. We now look at some of these diffuse antecedent dimensions.

Age

Age is one factor that seems to account for differences in cultural value orientations within cultures. As people get older, they establish more social relations and tend to become more collectivistic. Also, in many cultures, young people appear to be discarding beliefs, attitudes, values, and the practices of their parents. For example, in the United States since the middle of the 1960s, young blacks, women, gay men, and lesbians have fought for more individual rights, which has resulted in a new sense of independence and "looseness." This new looseness also seems to characterize what has been happening in pop music, literature, and art over the past few decades and seems to suggest an increase in vertical individualism among the young in the United States. An increase in individualism also appears evident in Japan, where many young people tend to be individualistic, whereas their parents tend to remain collectivistic.

Japan is a "tight" culture where people are traditionally socialized to act properly and to conform to age-appropriate norms (Triandis, 1995). The Japanese believe that conformity affords protection against criticism. In pre-World War II Japan, vertical collectivism was the dominant cultural pattern (Triandis, 1995). However, since the war, the culture has been moving toward horizontal collectivism and individualism. Triandis (1995) speculates that this is a result of the postwar occupation by individualistic U.S. military forces. Older Japanese people have been slow to change and remain vertically collectivistic. Younger Japanese people tend to be moving toward horizontal

collectivism and individualism. This is particularly evidenced in the current fashion and music preferences among the Japanese youth.

Although age may be positively related to cultural value orientation, we must be careful about generalizing because age is confounded with other individual characteristics as well. As we will see age, race/ethnicity, gender, and social status may interact so that older people in some of these segments may be collectivists and in others, individualists.

Racial/Ethnic Differences in Cultural Value Orientation

In this section, I focus on race/ethnicity differences between African Americans, Hispanics and Latinos, and Anglos. African Americans tend toward collectivism and Anglos (i.e., European Americans) tend toward individualism (Gaines et al., 1997). First, however, let me define these terms.

I use the term *race/ethnicity* rather than the separate terms *race* and *culture* in the discussion that follows (Gaines et al., 1997). Racial/ethnic identity refers to "the extent to which individuals define themselves in terms of the racial or ethnic groups to which they belong" (p. 1462; see also Helms, in press, and Phinney, 1996, both cited in Gaines et al., 1997). In this section, I abandon the more inclusive term, *culture*, which I used in my discussion of cultural value orientation. In its place I refer to *racial/ethnic identity* to further differentiate individuals within a given culture.

The term *Hispanic* refers to individuals living in the United States who were born in or can trace their background to one of the Spanish-speaking Latin American nations or to Spain (Marín & Marín, 1991). *Latino* reflects the political, geographical, and historical roots of the various Latin American nations and thus is a subset of the Hispanic population. Those who identify themselves as Latinos may not be the same individuals who identify with the term *Hispanic* (Marín & Marín, 1991). I use the more general term *Hispanic* even though I risk mislabeling some individuals. *Asian Americans* refers to individuals born in the United States but whose background is one of the Asian countries.

Gaines et al. (1997) distinguish between the familistic and collectivistic tendencies of African Americans, Hispanics, and Asian Americans, on the one hand, and the individualistic tendencies of Anglos in the United States, on the other. Persons of color are thought to be higher on collectivism and familism and Anglos higher on individualism. Familism is "an orientation to-

ward the welfare of one's immediate and extended family" (Gaines et al., 1997, p. 1461). Individuals may differ in terms of their concern about the welfare of relatives and the welfare of those who are not relatives. Gaines and his colleagues raise the notion of *fictive kin* in African American cultures, which refers to "nonkin platonic relationships whose socioemotional ties are so strong that they resemble the ties that one might expect to find primarily among biological kin" (p. 1461). Similarly, Hispanic relationships include *compadrazgo,* which "is often used to denote the special ties that develop between children's biological parents and godparents" (p. 1461). These types of relationships are not unique to these racial/ethnic groups. They tend to exist among collectivistic cultures and to a lesser extent in individualistic cultures. The point of these distinctions is that among collectivists, relationships with members of the community may be almost as close as relationships with family members. This is not the case with individualists.

Collectivists have a greater sense of racial/ethnic identity than do individualists. Gaines et al. (1997) argue that racial/ethnic identity mediates the relationship between race/ethnicity and cultural values or orientation. Racial/ethnic identity and cultural value orientations have been linked empirically. So have race/ethnicity and racial/ethnic identity. People of color score higher on racial identity than do Anglos. Moreover, African Americans' strength of ethnic awareness and self-identification has been shown to be a predictor of collectivism. Also, gender may moderate the relationship between race/ethnicity and cultural values.

In two studies, Gaines et al. (1997) found that individualism, collectivism, and familism were three distinct cultural value orientations. They also found that the degree to which individuals espoused collectivistic and familistic, but not individualistic, beliefs varied as a function of race/ethnicity. Persons of color tended to score higher on collectivism and familism than did Anglos. Unexpectedly, Anglos did not score significantly higher on individualism than did persons of color.

Moreover, the influence of race/ethnicity on cultural value orientations was mediated by individuals' racial/ethnic identities. Persons of color tended to score higher on racial/ethnic identity than did Anglos, and racial/ethnic identity was positively related to individualism, collectivism, and familism.

Gaines et al. (1997) did not find differences in the individualistic orientation across racial/ethnic groups. They explain that the individualistic orientation may have been imposed on all cultures within the American society. Or it is possible that persons of color in the United States have been acculturated to the norms embraced by European American culture. Finally, when the relationship between ethnicity and the cultural value orientation of collectivism

or individualism is examined separately for women and men, ethnicity is a significant predictor only for men.

Realo, Allik, and Vadi (1997) classify collectivists according to social distance categories: (a) families and significant others (proximal); (b) neighbors, schoolmates, and coworkers (intermediate); and (c) larger social groups and institutions (distant). They argue that different cultures emphasize different types of collectives as the main targets of social relationships (family, peers, and society). This study shows the existence of three clearly distinguishable types of collectivism. *Familial* collectivists are guided by principles such as family security, honoring parents and elders, respect for traditions, and reciprocation of favors. These collectivists are not open to new experiences, are not very creative, and tend to be intolerant of different beliefs and ideas.

Peer-related collectivists have tight relations with neighbors, friends, or coworkers, and they focus on the needs of their in-group (Realo et al., 1997. Peer-related collectives are analogous to Triandis's (1995) horizontal collectives. They tend to be supportive, seek social recognition, and be influential, and they are willing to pardon others. To establish true friendships, they will sacrifice their independence, freedom of action and thought, and creativity.

The *patriotism* collective (society-related) dedicates itself to serving its nation, even surrendering personal comforts for it. People guided by this type of collectivism believe that putting society's interests above personal interests indicates a more mature understanding of life. Patriotism and family-related collectives are consistent with Triandis's (1995) notion of vertical collectives.

Communication in focus groups may differ depending on members' cultural backgrounds. Individualists may feel comfortable with and communicate well using the new focus group technologies such as computer networks, video links, and telephone conferencing. However, these techniques may not be as effective for collectivists as face-to-face groups. Individualism has been shown to facilitate performance of subjunctive tasks (i.e., ones that can be accomplished by a single person), whereas collectivism enhances the performance of conjunctive tasks (i.e., ones that require all members of the group to contribute) (Breer & Locke, 1965, cited in Triandis, 1995).

Gender

A review of the focus group literature suggests that gender is one of the most frequently used variables for controlling homogeneity among respondents.

Even so, relatively little is known about how gender composition affects focus group outcomes. However, the effects of gender on self-disclosure have been studied in psychology (Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993). This literature deals almost exclusively with dyadic interactions. Therefore, caution should be exercised in using this review as a guide for planning focus groups of four or more members.

In the following sections, I discuss how differences in the gender composition of focus groups will affect group interaction and outcomes. First, I look at empirical evidence that points to gender differences in self-disclosure and reciprocity. Then I examine theoretical explanations for these differences and how these differences may affect productivity.

Cultural Value Orientation and Gender in Focus Group Composition

Most reports on how to use focus groups ignore the issue of the moderator's gender. Arguably, the effect of a moderator's gender on most discussion issues is not a major concern. Therefore, most of our attention will address the gender issues surrounding recruiting members and group composition. It is unclear whether all-male, all-female, or mixed-gender groups should be used in focus group projects. The following review explores plausible reasons for gender-based differences in self-disclosure and the implications for focus group composition.

Gender Differences in Self-Disclosure

Early research on self-disclosure found that women generally disclose more personally relevant information than do men (Ellsworth & Ross, 1975; Jourard, 1964; Jourard & Friedman, 1970; Jourard & Lasakow, 1958; Skotko & Langmeyer, 1977). However, the findings are equivocal. Rubin (1978) reports a significant Gender × Topic interaction; women disclose much more on interpersonal topics than men do. Chelune (1976) found that females did not disclose more information than males. Finally, Dindia and Allen (1992) in a meta-analysis on the large volume of self-disclosure research found a significant main effect for discloser's gender, which indicates that women disclosed more than men did.

Gender Differences and Reciprocity

In the context of self-disclosure, the *norm of reciprocity* refers to the tendency of individuals to match their level of intimacy in disclosure to the level established by the other person (Derlega et al., 1993). Because women generally disclose more than men do, if a discussion partner reciprocates at an equally high level of disclosure, the overall level of disclosure for the dyad will be very high (Dindia & Allen, 1992). Therefore, in all-female groups we should expect high levels of self-disclosure. In all-male groups, lower levels of disclosure are reciprocated, leading to low levels of disclosure for the group. Thus, in same-gender male groups, we might expect lower levels of self-disclosure than in all-female groups. In opposite- or mixed-gender groups we might expect moderate levels of disclosure, although there is no empirical evidence to support this expectation.

Factors That Moderate the Effects of Gender on Self-Disclosure

Several factors may affect the relationship between gender and self-disclosure. These include (a) acquaintanceship, (b) the gender of the target of the disclosed information, and (c) the topic about which the disclosure is being made.

Gender Differences and Acquaintanceship. Dindia and Allen (1992) found no significant gender difference between disclosing to parents, friends, and spouses. However, they did find that gender differences in self-disclosing to strangers were significantly less than in disclosing to family and friends. Women disclosed more than men to both strangers and acquaintances, but the difference decreases when disclosing to strangers. These findings are consistent with Triandis's notion (1995) that women are more collectivistic and men more individualistic. Women disclose more to in-groups, particularly to family, than do men, but both men and women are somewhat reluctant to disclose personal information to members of out-groups (i.e., strangers).

Gender of the Target or Receiver of Disclosures. Previous research indicates that female-to-female disclosure is highest, male to male is lowest, and mixed-gender disclosure is intermediate. Same-gender target and female targets resulted in the greatest gender differences in self-disclosure (Dindia &

Allen, 1992). The smallest effect was when males were the targets, and the next smallest effect was for opposite-gender disclosure. Females disclose more than males when both disclose to females (Dindia & Allen, 1992). In same-gender interactions, females disclose more to females than males disclose to males. In opposite-gender interactions, females disclose more to males than males disclose to females.

Gender and the Topic of Self-Disclosure. Research indicates that when talking to friends of the same gender, college age women are twice as likely as men to talk about topics such as feelings and personal problems (Derlega et al., 1993). Moreover, women are more emotionally supportive than men. In another study, by Aries and Johnson (1983), middle-age women talked with same-gender friends about sensitive topics such as doubts, fears, family problems, and intimate relationships more than did men. Finally, a Gender × Target interaction was found. In same-sex interactions, males reported lower levels of intimacy, self-disclosure, and other disclosure compared with females. However, in opposite-sex pairs, males and females did not differ in their disclosure tendencies.

Generalizing to focus groups, the evidence seems to suggest that women may disclose more to female moderators and all-female groups than men will to a male moderator and all-male groups, ceteris paribus. Also, female moderators will receive more self-disclosures than will male moderators if the moderator is perceived as the target, regardless of the group's gender makeup. Mixed groups will disclose more than all male groups.

Men and women also appear to differ in terms of the topics they disclose to others. Moreover, disclosure differences appear to depend on whether the target of the disclosure was of the same or opposite sex. These findings are consistent with the differences between male and female cultural value orientations. It appears that males do not share feelings, problems, or other types of personal disclosures to the extent that women do. I will have more to say on cultural differences later in this chapter.

The Effects of Culture on Gender Differences in Self-Disclosure

There are four cultural-related reasons for gender effects on self-disclosure: (a) value differences, (b) social norms, (c) gender roles, and (d) beliefs about normative behavior. Derlega and colleagues (1993) attribute the gender differences in disclosure to a combination of these explanations, which they see as gender subculture differences. First, men and women value

self-disclosure differently. Second, strict social norms provide clues about what topics are appropriate for men and women to discuss. Third, gender roles are learned through socialization. Fourth, we have different beliefs about what is normal for males and females in terms of disclosure.

Different Values. Several authors provide interesting discussions about the differences in values between males and females (Caldwell & Peplau, 1982; Derlega et al., 1993; Youniss & Smollar, 1985). During their childhood days, females learn to value having intimate conversations, going out with friends, hanging out together, and just talking together (Youniss & Smollar, 1985). Furthermore, female friends tend to talk about more intimate topics than male friends do, such as personal development and family problems (Aries & Johnson, 1983; Youniss & Smollar, 1985). Females are also more likely to disclose feelings of vulnerability and provide emotional support for each other (Derlega et al., 1993). These behaviors are consistent with cultural collectivism.

On the other hand, males tend to value activities such as riding bikes, playing cards, and getting drunk more than females do (Youniss & Smollar, 1985). They are also more likely to discuss nonintimate topics such as school and grades than females are (Youniss & Smollar, 1985). Male discussions are less likely to focus on feelings and emotions, and males are more likely to convey images of composure, which tends to prevent emotional closeness (Derlega et al., 1993). These behaviors are more individualistic in nature than those of females.

These value differences are thought to develop through socialization in our culture. As boys become socialized, they are rewarded for and therefore come to value being independent, self-assured, decisive, rational, and controlled in the face of crises. They are more likely to become vertically individualistic than females. In contrast, girls tend to be rewarded for being sensitive to the needs of others, affectionate, sympathetic, and understanding and therefore come to value these traits (Aries & Johnson, 1983). They become horizontally collectivistic. During traditional gender role training, men become threatened by unsolicited intimate conversation. Because of these perceived threats, they withhold disclosure of their feelings more than women do (Archer & Berg, 1978).

Norms. Another set of factors that may account for some of the disclosure differences between men and women is social norms. Societal norms are thought to designate the types of activities and roles appropriate for males and females. The traditional male role dictates that men should appear to be

strong and self-confident and successful and avoid all activities thought to be feminine. If men express true feelings, they may be perceived as uncertain, weak, or out of control (Derlega et al., 1993). Women tend to agree more with others, and they demonstrate more prosocial behaviors, such as relieving group tension and showing group solidarity when they interact with others (Carli, 1989). In contrast, men tend to disagree more (i.e., show less group solidarity) and demonstrate more task-oriented behaviors (i.e., giving opinions, suggestions, and directions) than prosocial behaviors. These normative differences are also consistent with the previously discussed differences in cultural value orientations.

Gender Roles. The gender role explanation is also based on the notion that males and females are socialized differently. Males are taught to behave in active, dominating, and proactive ways. As a result, men are more task oriented and are more likely to engage in instrumental behaviors (e.g., giving opinions or information). Conversely, females are raised to behave in passive, submissive, and reactive ways and become more expressive and emotional (e.g., agreeing and being friendly) in their behavior (Anderson & Blanchard, 1982; Baird, 1976).

People who adopt a stereotypically "masculine" gender role may have a much different orientation toward social relationships than those who adopt a stereotypically "feminine" gender role (Ickes & Barnes, 1978). This is so because masculinity typically emphasizes achievement, autonomy, and active striving for personal control. Personal control encourages self-discipline, self-monitoring, and the capacity to alter the expression or sever the awareness of one's feelings. All these aspects of the male gender role are consistent with an individualistic cultural value orientation. In contrast, femininity emphasizes communion, commonality, the desire to relate affectively to others, and the awareness and active expression of one's feelings (Ickes & Barnes, 1978). This female role is consistent with the collectivistic orientation.

Beliefs About Normative Behaviors. Gender differences in self-disclosure may be fostered by our belief that norms govern self-disclosure (Carli, 1989; Chaikin & Derlega, 1974; Derlega & Chaikin, 1976). Beliefs may not accurately represent behavioral norms. Nevertheless, people often behave as though they do. If, for example, a person believes that women are more open and intimate in conversation, this belief would cause the person to disclose more intimately to women than to men whether it is true or not (Derlega et al., 1993). Derlega and Chaikin (1976) report that when women reveal personal information about themselves, they are perceived to be better adjusted. How-

ever, men are perceived to be better adjusted when they conceal this same self-information than when they disclose it. These expectancies are internalized and subsequently used as guidelines for one's own self-disclosing behavior. In other words, we expect women to disclose more than men because we believe it is more appropriate for women to disclose more than men do. These kinds of attributions may reinforce the notion that we receive more personal information from women than from men whether it is true or not (Hill & Stull, 1987).

Cultural Value Orientation and Personality Differences

Within cultures are many individual variations in cultural identity. As mentioned earlier, some of these differences are caused by variations in social status, age, race/ethnicity, and gender. Others are due to personality differences. In this section, we examine a few of these personality dimensions.

The five-factor model of personality is a hierarchical organization of personality traits under five orthogonal dimensions: neuroticism, extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness to experience (McCrae & John, 1992). The model includes most, if not all, personality traits under these five factors (Paunonen & Jackson, 1996), which seem to be reasonable approximations of the human personality (McCrae & John, 1992). Moreover, these traits exhibit reasonable reliability, strong stability over time, moderate coherence with behavior, and are moderately influenced by genetics (McCrae & John, 1992). Support for the reliability and at least face validity of the five factor-model of personality (a.k.a. the Big Five) has been shown across several diverse personality measures (Paunonen & Jackson, 1996). The five factors have been replicated cross-culturally as well. Finally, individual differences along these five factors can be inferred with reasonable accuracy by laypersons based on no more than their daily experiences (McCrae & John, 1992). Thus, this model may be useful in the conduct of focus group research.

Keep in mind that traits are only dispositions. They are not complete determinants of thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors. Therefore, we need to account for specific characteristics of the situation (e.g., the type of focus group being run) when making causal attributions based on personality traits (McCrae & Costa, 1990). Other factors, such as an individual's mood, role requirements, acquired habits, and other specifics of the situation, play roles in how personality will manifest itself in focus groups.

The Big Five Factor Definitions

Before proceeding, I define each of the five dimensions (McCrae & John, 1992). *Neuroticism* is reflected in individual difference in tendencies to experience distress, including both the cognitive and behavioral differences that people exhibit under stress. Symptoms of high levels of neuroticism include nervous tension, depression, frustration, guilt, and self-consciousness. People who are low on this dimension tend to be calm, relaxed, even-tempered, and unflappable.

Extraversion is somewhere between dominance and warmth and characteristically involves positive emotions. People who are highly extraverted seem to be cheerful, enthusiastic, optimistic, energetic, dominant, talkative, sociable, and warm. Extraversion connotes a positive emotional state. People at the other end of the extraversion pole appear to be quiet, reserved, retiring, shy, silent, and withdrawn.

Agreeableness appears to vary from friendly compliance at the high end of the continuum to hostile noncompliance at the low end. Altruism, nurturance, caring, and emotional support characterize agreeableness, and hostility, indifference, self-centeredness, spitefulness, and jealousy characterize lack of agreeableness.

Conscientiousness appears to connote constraint and prudence. McCrae and John (1992) characterize conscientiousness as an "inhibitive dimension" that restrains compulsive behavior. Conscientiousness can mean being governed by one's conscience or being diligent and thorough.

McCrae (1987) defines the last dimension, *openness to experience,* as intellectual curiosity, aesthetic sensitivity, and liberal values. Other descriptors include being intelligent, being imaginative, being perceptive, having diverse emotions, and needing variety. However, McCrae and John (1992) point out that openness is not equivalent to measured intelligence because people can be highly open but not have a correspondingly high IQ.

Personality Traits and Cultural Value Orientation

Although the research on personality and cultural value orientation is sparse, Triandis (1995) and others provide some evidence that cultural value orientation appears to be related to personality. For example, Realo et al. (1997) argue that individualists and collectivists differ with respect to openness and agreeableness. People low on openness are traditionalists and tend to be prosaic, conservative, and conventional in their behavior. They are tied to family

and friends and share the beliefs, feelings, and behaviors of these primary in-groups. Highly agreeable people accept collectivistic attitudes, norms, and values (Costa & McCrae, 1992, cited in Realo et al., 1997). Thus, these two personality dimensions seem to describe collectivists.

At the other extreme, people high on the openness and low on the agreeableness dimension are more consistent with notions of individualism. People who are open to experiences tend to be broad-minded and imaginative (Dollinger, Leong, & Ulicni, 1996), which are two characteristics of individualism. Agreeableness is negatively correlated with creative accomplishments (King, Walker, & Broyles, 1996). Last, extraversion is correlated positively with creative ability (King et al., 1996).

The Dominant Personality, the Big Five, and Individualism

Three types of individuals may become dominant in focus groups: extraverted, dominant, and assertive personalities. Because extraversion relates strongly to dominance and assertiveness we treat them as one personality type. Extraversion may appear to be a desirable characteristic of focus group members because extraverts tend to be enthusiastic, talkative, and sociable (Campbell & Rushton, 1978). It is likely that those who come from the individualistic cultural value orientation will be more extraverted than those from collectivistic orientations regardless of racial/ethnic background. We can expect that individualists will tend to dominate group discussion more than collectivists, except perhaps vertical collectivists. Therefore, we can expect them to command a disproportionate amount of the available discussion time in focus groups and exhibit dominant behaviors (Buss & Craik, 1980, 1981, and Jaccard, 1974, cited in Aries, Gold, & Weigel, 1983).

Extraversion also appears to interact with gender in its effect on behavior. Aries et al. (1983) found a significant positive relationship between the dominance personality trait and nine behavioral indicators of verbal dominance in all-male and all-female discussion groups. In mixed-gender groups, however, dominance and dominant behaviors were not related. These studies did not control for cultural value orientation.

Dominance may have differential effects on behavior in discussion groups depending on the gender composition of the group. Aries et al. (1983) argue that in mixed-gender groups, the presence of members of the opposite gender invokes gender role expectations that inhibit the dominant behaviors associated with the participant's disposition to be dominant. If this is

true, we should expect the same inhibition against assertive and extraverted individuals.

These findings seem to have implications for focus groups. If these relationships hold in focus groups, dominance should not be a problem in mixed-gender groups. However, dominance is a potential problem if the group is composed of same-sex individualists or some same-sex individualists mixed with collectivists.

The Dominant Personality, the Big Five, and Collectivism

As mentioned earlier, Yamaguchi (1994, cited in Triandis, 1995) measured collectivism in large samples of Japanese students and found that collectivism correlated positively with affiliation, sensitivity to rejection, public self-conceptions, self-monitoring, and social anxiety and negatively with the need for uniqueness. These findings provide very limited evidence that collectivism may be positively associated with some aspects of neuroticism and negatively associated with some facets of extraversion. Moreover, high collectivism scores were correlated with "false consensus," which is the belief that other individuals share one's beliefs, attitudes, and values whether they actually do or not. The Japanese sample also tended to want other people in a social relationship to be of equal intelligence, and they indicated that they did not like people who were too competent.

Self-Monitoring, the Big Five, and Collectivism

Self-monitoring is related to three of the Big Five personality traits: extraversion, openness, and conscientiousness (Avia, Sánchez-Bernardos, Sanz, Carrillo, & Rojo, 1998); neuroticism and agreeableness are independent of self-monitoring. Self-monitors have a strong concern for appropriate behaviors in social situations. They use cues from others as guidelines for managing their own behavior. Thus, high self-monitors are more inclined to alter their behavior according to particular social situations. They are more attentive to what others are saying, and they reciprocate the emotional, intimate, and descriptive content of the self-disclosures from others (Ickes & Barnes, 1977; Shaffer, Smith, & Tomarelli, 1982). Low self-monitors are not guided by others in social situations and therefore should exhibit more consistent behavior across social situations such as focus groups.

Avia et al. (1998) conclude that two interpersonal dimensions of self-monitoring can be described by characteristics of the five-factor model of personality. First is *acquisitive interpersonal style,* which characterizes people who do not experience negative emotions related to social anxiety. The two most salient characteristics of these people are extraversion and openness. These individuals are assertive, warm, tend to have positive emotions, seek excitement, and tend to be open to fantasy, feelings, new actions, and ideas. The second dimension, *defensive interpersonal style,* characterizes people who are emotionally unstable and are guided by negative emotional states such as depression, social anxiety, and vulnerability. Defensive interpersonal style seems to be closely associated with neuroticism. The Avia et al. findings have been replicated across Spanish, German, and American samples.

Nadamitsu and Sakai, 1992 (cited in Triandis, 1995), argue that in individualistic cultures, self-monitors try to behave in social situations as prototypical others would behave. However, collectivists see prototypical behaviors of others as less important and are therefore low in self-monitoring compared to individualists. Those who are high self-monitors in collectivistic cultures behave appropriate to the particular social situation.

Social Anxiety, the Big Five, and Cultural Value Orientation

Social anxiety is conceptualized in this review as a personality trait also known as shyness. I do not consider anxiety as an affective state in this review (Stiles, Shuster, & Harrigan, 1992). Socially anxious or dysphoric individuals appear to be low on the Big Five personality dimension extraversion. Anxious individuals tend to be retiring, shy, quiet, reserved, and withdrawn (McCrae & John, 1992). In a discussion group, we would expect them to not be very talkative. They also would tend to be inner focused and less assertive than others in the group. Anxious people also tend toward the high end of the neuroticism dimension. This means that they are likely to be anxious, tense, and worrying (McCrae & John, 1992).

Socially anxious individuals have smaller social networks, fewer close friends, and fewer intimate relationships than people who are not socially anxious do (Papsdorf & Alden, 1998). Even when they do enter into social relationships, they experience fewer positive responses from others. Dysphoric people are viewed as less likeable, less sympathetic, and less easy to talk to by

friends and families. This may be due to a similarity attraction principle and the reciprocity effect.

Similarity attraction research indicates that we like individuals whom we perceive to be similar to ourselves (Papsdorf & Alden, 1998) in terms of beliefs, feelings, and actions. Research has shown that anxious and nonanxious participants are more satisfied with and are attracted to others whose levels of anxiety are similar to their own. Also, people tend to reciprocate their discussion partner's level of intimacy of disclosure.

However, Meleshko and Alder (1993) found that anxious people reciprocate at moderate levels of intimacy regardless of their partner's level of intimacy. They were less intimate in response to intimate partners and more intimate in responding to nonintimate partners. Moreover, anxious people did not reciprocate as frequently as nonanxious individuals did. Papsdorf and Alden (1998), however, found no relationship between anxiety and the amount of disclosure.

Socially anxious individuals are perceived to be less similar and less desirable conversational partners and tend to be rejected based on these perceptions (Papsdorf & Alden, 1998). Moreover, overt signs of anxiety and low self-disclosure provide behavioral clues that are used to make similarity judgments. Social anxiety is manifest outwardly in two types of behavioral clues: (a) anxious and awkward physical mannerisms and (b) nonnormative patterns of self-disclosure.

Stiles et al. (1992) suggest that people disclose more personally relevant information when they are distressed (i.e., anxious, depressed, frightened, or angry) than when they are not distressed. Dysphoric individuals should disclose more personally relevant information than the nondysphoric. They argue that stress is cathartic and causes people to focus inwardly on thoughts, feelings, sensations, and meanings rather than outwardly toward worldly events.

Stiles et al. (1992) show that highly anxious people used more disclosure when discussing an anxious event than a happy event. People low on anxiousness did not differ in disclosure between the two topics. Finally, people disclosed less on the second topic, regardless of the topic, than the first topic. This means that their stage fright lessens as the individuals become more familiar with the task setting and they have less need to overcome their anxiety by disclosing personal information.

Although the evidence is equivocal, it appears that social anxiety can be dealt with adequately in focus groups. Anxious individuals reciprocate the self-disclosure of others less often, and they do not appear to reciprocate levels of intimacy in their disclosures. However, their anxiety does not appear to

affect their overall amount of disclosure. Importantly, anxious people appear to become less anxious as they gain experience in the disclosing task.

Complexity and Interactions Between Individual Characteristics

Relationships between individual characteristics tend to be complex, interactive, and not fully understood. For example, self-monitoring may moderate the expression of appropriate gender role behavior (Ickes & Barnes, 1977). Within dyads, males with a higher level of self-monitoring made less use of expressive gestures than did their lower self-monitoring partners. However, higher self-monitoring females gestured more. Ickes and Barnes (1977) interpret this as indicating that expressive behavior is monitored and controlled so that only behavior thought to be appropriate to one's gender role is exhibited in public. Inappropriate behavior is suppressed. For the focus group analyst's perspective, it is important to understand whether the observed behavior is natural or that which is perceived to be appropriate.

Summary

In this chapter, I examined a number of characteristics of individuals that should be considered in recruiting focus group participants. These characteristics not only directly affect cultural value orientation and, subsequently, group cohesion, they interact with each other in their effects. First, we looked at social status. Individuals differ on the dimensions that provide the highest social status. Attempts to increase one's level of status at the expense of other group members can lead to conflict, particularly if the group members are horizontal (the same) in their cultural value orientation. Thus, when recruiting focus group members, homogeneity in terms of cultural value orientation is not enough. The disparity in social status should also be a concern.

I examined age and its relationship to cultural value orientation. Older people tend to be more collectivistic. Some cultures have changed in their orientation over the years due to changes in lifestyles, primarily among the young. I also noted that age is confounded with and interacts with many other individual characteristics. As is the case with social status, large disparities in age within groups should be guarded against, particularly if the group is to be heterogeneous on the other individual characteristics.

As the racial/ethnic mix in the United States changes over the next 50 years, it is likely that cultural value orientations will change as well. Thus, it is important that focus group participants for some tasks be homogeneous in terms of collectivism or individualism. Perhaps individualistic groups are best for ideation tasks, and collectivistic groups are best for sharing life experiences.

I also reviewed literature on gender differences in self-disclosure and concluded that more self-disclosure will occur in all-female and mixed-gender groups than in all-male groups. However, three factors moderate the gender/self-disclosure relationship: (a) acquaintanceship, (b) the gender of the target of the disclosed information, and (c) the topic about which the disclosure is being made. And I examined several cultural differences that may account for the gender differences in self-disclosure.

Finally, I looked at personality differences and culture orientation. I introduced the Big Five model of personality and related it to cultural value orientation and specific traits such as dominance, self-monitoring, and social anxiety. Many other traits can also affect focus group interaction. Using the Big Five model to uncover different personality types and to predict their behavior is groups is fairly straightforward. It is also much easier than one might expect.

Note

1. See the appendix in Triandis (1995) for issues in and methods for measuring individualism and collectivism. Triandis provides a pool of 94 items that measure horizontal individualism and collectivism and vertical individualism and collectivism. Although this list is long, the items are short and easy to understand, so it should not take long to administer or analyze. More promising is a 13-item scale reported by Triandis, Chan, Bhawuk, Iwao, and Sinha (1995). With this scale, the respondents are asked if they are the kind of person who is likely to engage in a number of behaviors such as the following:

    1. Ask your old parents to live with you _____ (collectivism).
    2. Spend money (e.g., send flowers) rather than take the time to visit a sick friend_____ (individualism).

The scores for the individualism and collectivism items are the sums of the item scores that measure each construct.

Chapter 3

The Research Setting

The setting in which focus groups are conducted affects an individual participant's personal space and privacy (see Figure 3.1). People use personal space and various types of territorial behavior in their attempts to seek ideal levels of privacy at a specific point in time (Altman, 1975). Moreover, different people have different needs for privacy and personal space. People also react differently to threats against their personal space and privacy. How people affect and are affected by privacy varies by age, gender, race/ethnicity, and personality.

Focus groups, like other interview methods, involve invasions of privacy and personal space. Focus group research is conducted around the globe, with participants coming from many diverse cultures and racial/ethnic groups. As a result, the research settings and the environments in which focus groups are conducted vary widely. In Chapter 2, I examined group composition and discussed different cultural value orientations and differences among people within a culture. The discussion of individualism and collectivism continues in this chapter but in the context of the focus group setting and individual differences in the need for personal space and privacy.

At the level of culture, individualistic cultures tend to value privacy, but collectivistic cultures may be frightened by too much privacy (Triandis, 1995). The same is true of some individuals within a culture. Personal space is not valued by collectivists as much as it is by individualists. Remember, individualists' beliefs, needs, goals, preferences, and rights govern their behavior; this includes the need for privacy. Collectivists look to the collective for guidance as to proper behavior. Their needs, goals, and rights are subordinate

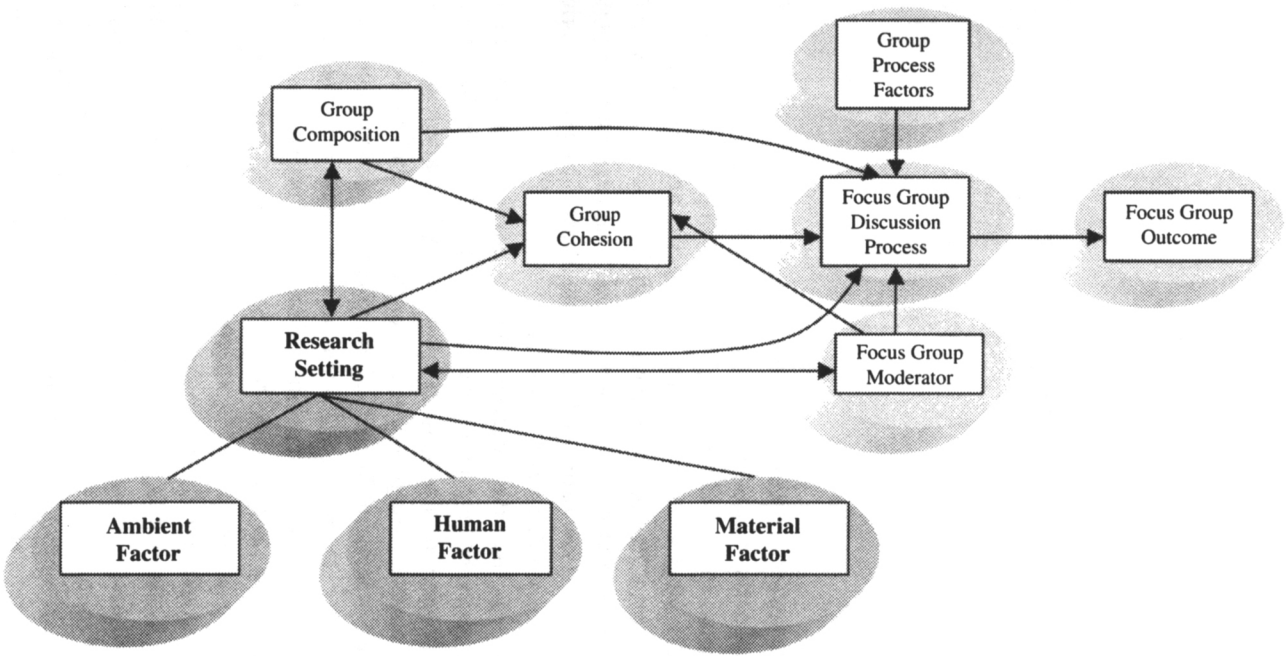

Figure 3.1. The Research Setting

to those of the collective. Therefore, the need for interpersonal distance and privacy is not as great for the collectivist as it is for individualist. For example, if an individual is having lunch at a table that seats several people in a restaurant, a collectivist would not feel uncomfortable about joining the individual without permission (Triandis, 1995). The individualist, however, is likely to think this behavior is rude. More generally, social interaction among collectivists often includes sharing self-revealing information. This is less likely to be the case with individualists. The sections that follow deal with the need for privacy and a host of factors that affect this need, as well as with how people react when their privacy is threatened. The discussion includes personal characteristics that differentiate those who need greater interpersonal distance from those who need less.

Privacy

Altman (1975) defines privacy as the "*selective control of access to the self or to one's group*" (p. 18). Privacy is an interpersonal boundary control process. Sometimes we desire and accept inputs from others. Desired privacy has to do with the amount of contact we want with other people at some particular moment. Achieved privacy is the actual amount of contact we have with others. If the achieved level is more than the desired level of privacy, a person feels isolated or alone. If the achieved level is less than the desired level of privacy, an individual may feel crowded. *Crowded* in this sense means a breakdown in an attempt to regulate one's privacy. When crowding occurs, an individual can react in one of several different ways. The individual can increase personal space, use nonverbal or verbal communication to indicate that the intrusion is not wanted, or establish more concrete territorial boundaries depending on the specific situation.

Privacy includes several important facets. First, privacy is a dynamic process (Altman, 1975). Sometimes a great deal of privacy is wanted. At other times, open contact with others is desirable. By *dynamic,* I mean that one's privacy is frequently opposed by forces that push toward some level of openness or closedness and accessibility or inaccessibility, regardless of what one wants. It is also an optimizing process in which one desires an optimum degree of access to others. This has also been referred to as the equilibrium point of privacy.

One can also think of privacy as an input-output process. People tend to regulate the amount and types of inputs that they make to others and also the

outputs that they receive from others. This process can involve different types of social units, such as individuals, families, and mixed or homogeneous groups.

The Optimization Nature of Privacy

Too much or too little privacy is unsatisfactory. Individuals and groups seek varying levels of optimum privacy. This, according to Altman (1975), is a dialectic process. There is a balancing of opposing forces. The need for social interaction changes over time. When the levels of desired privacy and achieved privacy are equal, there is a satisfactory match. If the level of achieved privacy is higher or lower than the desired level, we become dissatisfied. If the former occurs, we may feel isolated, bored, or lonely. If the latter occurs, we may feel the effects of intrusion, crowding, or the invasion of our privacy.

For a slightly different model see Argyle and Dean's intimacy equilibrium model (cited in Aiello, 1987). They argue that approach forces and avoidance forces are in conflict with each other and work to establish intimacy equilibrium points. If one of the regulatory mechanisms changes and causes more or less intimacy, other mechanisms kick in to restore the privacy equilibrium points. (Theoretically, the optimum level and equilibrium points are not quite the same. In the sections to follow, however, I use the two concepts interchangeably.)

In a transitory group such as a focus group, different individuals may have different optimum levels of privacy or equilibrium points, and these may change over the course of the group session. As a result, discomfort may occur if the optimum level or equilibrium point is not achieved. Some individuals may feel somewhat isolated, whereas others may feel crowded. Attempts by participants to resolve different discomfort levels could result in conflict among the various compensating mechanisms used by individuals in their pursuits of optimum privacy. For example, a female who falls short of achieving an optimum level of intimacy may attempt more intimate disclosures, whereas a male who has exceeded his desired level of intimacy may raise his voice and attempt to change the subject.

Factors Related to Personal Space

Three sets of factors that affect or are affected by personal space include (a) individual factors, (b) interpersonal factors, and (c) setting and environmen-

tal factors. *Individual factors* are biographical characteristics such as age, gender, race/ethnicity, and personality. *Interpersonal factors* refer to the social relationships between people and include attraction, cohesion, compatibility, influence, and group composition, things I talked about in Chapter 2. I revisit a few of these factors here. The *setting and environmental factors* deal with the particular focus group setting and include things such as the ambient environment (e.g., temperature, humidity, and noise), the human environment (e.g., seating and crowding), and the material environment (e.g., room size and shape, table size and shape, etc.).

Individual Factors

This section deals with individual factors that cause variations in people's spatial behavior. Primarily, I will examine the effects of these factors on interpersonal distances. I review research on socioeconomic status, age differences, gender, race/ethnicity, and personality.

Socioeconomic Status. Altman (1975) argues that most research on socioeconomic status and spatial behavior has focused only on differences when it should also consider similarities. He goes on to say that differences among white Americans, Mexican Americans, and African Americans may not be related to race/ethnicity but, rather, may reflect differences in socioeconomic status.

With respect to preferred spatial differences, for example, research on white and black adolescents indicates that blacks stand farther apart than whites in discussion groups (Aiello & Jones, 1971). But the study also showed that often lower-class children stood farther apart while talking than middle-class children. Research by Scherer (1974) showed that lower-class white children stand farther apart than lower-class black children, but that the difference was not significant. Scherer also found that middle-class white children stand farther apart than lower-class white children, although this effect was not found for black children. There were no differences between middle-class white and black children or between lower-class white and black children. So some of the differences between blacks and whites in previous research (Aiello & Jones, 1971) may have been a result of socioeconomic class differences. Thus, it is probably best to compose focus groups so that they are homogeneous in terms of socioeconomic status.

Age Differences in Spatial Behavior. People develop normative patterns of spatial behavior within the context of their specific culture and at a fairly

early age (Aiello, 1987). How we use space and how it effects our behavior develops gradually over time. Early in life, young children develop stable social schemata (Altman, 1975). For example, young children were shown to have more open personal-space boundaries for intimate acquaintances than for strangers or acquaintances who were not considered to be intimate. Moreover, these boundaries appear to be more established among older children (13 to 16 years of age) than among younger children (9 to12 years of age) and more established for girls than for boys.

Generally, as children mature through adolescence, social interaction distances become larger and remain constant through middle age (Aiello, 1987). Norms about spatial behavior are learned by the age of 12 and are continually learned through the teenage years. For example, 7-year-olds tend to stand less than a foot apart while talking, but teenagers typically stand 2 or more feet apart (Aiello, 1987).

From what we have learned, proper social distances appear to be learned early in a child's development. Social interaction distances become stabilized during the teenage years and may become larger or smaller later in life depending on circumstances. Given the meager research in this area, it is risky to make prescriptions. Very young children can be seated quite close to each other—say, 12 inches or so. For teenagers through middle-aged adults, 24 to 27 inches should be allowed for their privacy boundary.

Gender Differences in Spatial Behavior. Differences in spatial behavior are due to the multiple effects of gender, age, the relationships of those interacting, and the context (Aiello, 1987). These factors are combined in their effects on spatial behavior.

The most commonly reported privacy effect is that males require larger personal space zones than do females. Also, other people tend to maintain greater distances from males than from females. It is argued that females feel more comfortable with smaller personal spaces because they are socialized toward more affectionate and intimate relationships (Altman, 1975).

We should also be concerned about the gender of the target of the interaction and the target's relationship. Members of mixed-gender dyads apparently tolerate closer proximity than do members of same-gender dyads (Altman, 1975). Aiello (1987), however, reports that mixed-gender pairs typically use an intermediate amount of space, with all-female pairs using less space and all-male pairs using more space. Acquaintanceship also accounts for differences between females and males. In one study, females allowed shorter distances for close friends than for acquaintances and friends. Distances in these situations did not vary for men.

Finally, situational factors appear to affect how males and females use space (Aiello, 1987). For example, interactions involving a close relationship with high eye contact and smiling cause women to interact at closer distances than men. In a situation that does not involve affiliation (i.e., no smiling or little eye contact) and that is considered threatening, however, women maintain a greater distance than do men.

Aiello (1987) explains that there is some small variation around male and female equilibrium points of physical proximity and that there is overlap in this variation. This is evidenced by the similarities reported between males and females in comfort and preference levels for short interaction distances while seated. Outside this small area of variation, however, is a larger area that is the compensatory range of physical proximity. Remember that the compensatory range is beyond the optimal or equilibrium point, and physical proximity becomes uncomfortable to the point that individuals need to compensate. Therefore, they do and say things that bring them back to their optimal privacy level.

According to Aiello (1987), there is much overlap between male and female compensation ranges. At the extreme ends of the compensation range, compensation does not relieve the individual's discomfort. Because of males' greater interpersonal distance preferences, it is more difficult to compensate for close interpersonal interaction, and males exhibit greater discomfort than females. Females, however, will find it more difficult to compensate for great interpersonal distances and will therefore feel more discomfort as they move farther away from the person or persons with whom they are interacting. Discomfort can become stressful and affect members' contributions to the discussion.

These factors need to be taken into account when arranging, all-male, all-female, and mixed-gender focus groups in the interview facility. If the discussion topic is likely to threaten a participant's sense of privacy, regulating that individual's personal space may help. Once seated, individuals cannot change their interpersonal distances, but they can compensate by not participating. Allowing greater personal space for all-male groups and smaller personal space for all-female groups may help.

Influence of Race/Ethnicity. Research on the effect of race/ethnicity on spatial behavior is grounded in the work of Hall (1966). Hall noticed that people from different cultures used space differently. Southern Europeans, Latin Americans, and Arabs kept closer personal distances when interacting and were more involved in their interactions. They touched more, made more eye contact, and were more direct in their body orientations. North Americans

and Northern Europeans, on the other hand, are from what are considered noncontact cultures and are less involved when interacting with others.

Some studies supported Hall's hypotheses, but others did not. Forston and Larson (1968, cited in Aiello, 1987) found no differences in seating distance between Latin American college students and North American students, but the variability in the seating distances of Latin Americans was greater than that for the North Americans. Graubert and Adler (1977, cited in Aiello, 1987) found that American, Australian, British, and South African young adults did not differ in preferences for interaction distances. Sommer (1968) found that American, British, Scottish, Swedish, and Pakistani individuals rated different seating distances the same for intimacy level. In another study, Japanese preferred greater distances than did Hawaiian Japanese and American Caucasians (Engelbretson, 1972, cited in Aiello, 1987), but the difference between Hawaiian Japanese and American Caucasians was not significant.

Some cultures that are assumed to be similar have been found to have different practices in their use of space. Cook (1970, cited in Aiello, 1987) found that English research participants preferred greater distances than Americans when social interactions involved conversation. Shuter (1976, cited in Aiello, 1987) found differences among Latin Americans where none were expected. Costa Ricans used less space, were more directly oriented, and touched more than Panamanians, who were more involved during social interaction than were Colombians.

Hall (1966) speculated that blacks and Hispanics in the United States use smaller interaction distances and are more highly involved in social interactions than whites. The available evidence, however, suggests otherwise. Aiello and Thompson (1980) argue that Hispanic Americans may be more spatially involved than Anglo Americans, but blacks are not more highly involved than Anglo Americans. According to Aiello (1987), Hispanics, both children and adults, use less space when interacting than do Anglos. When comparing blacks and whites and controlling for age, however, it has been found that young blacks and whites show the reverse spatial behavior pattern of adults. The spatial behavior of young blacks is much closer than young whites. For children aged 12 and older and adults, blacks maintain much greater spatial distances than whites.

One study using participants from the United States, Sweden, Southern Italy, Scotland, and Greece showed that people from Italy and Greece had closer interaction distances, people from the United States maintained intermediate distances, and those from Sweden and Scotland kept larger distances

(Little, 1968). Another study on seating positions used student participants from the United States, England, Sweden, Holland, and Pakistan (Sommer, 1968). They rated seating positions according to their intimacy. All samples agreed that side-by-side seating was the most intimate, followed by corner-to-corner, and opposite seating. These data provide only partial support for Hall's (1966) notions according to Altman (1975).

One study on racial/ethnic differences reported marginal differences between the conversational distances of blacks and whites, but distances for blacks were greater (Willis, cited in Altman, 1975). Another study found that Mexican Americans stood closest to each other, whites stood at an intermediate distance, and blacks stood at the greatest distance (Baxter, cited in Altman, 1975). Baxter also found interactions. For example, members of white and black mixed-sex groups were closest to one another, but with Mexican American groups, female pairs were closest and male pairs were the most distant. Finally, Aiello (1987) reports on 10 studies about interracial interactions. Eight of the 10 studies found larger interracial discussion distances than same-race distances. Moreover, this distance grows larger for individuals from the ages of about 7 to 14. In another quite different study on interracial spatial behavior, Garrett, Baxter, and Rozelle (1981) found that blacks had strong preferences for white police officers who displayed "black" spatial behavior (larger distance) compared with "white" spatial behavior (smaller distance). They also perceived these officers to be more personally, socially, and professionally competent than those who used shorter distances. Similar research by Watson and Graves (1966, cited in Aiello, 1987) shows that Arab students were more positive about English students when they displayed the closer "Arab" social distance than when the showed the greater distance that was more typical of the English.

It is doubtful that focus groups of mixed racial/ethnic members can accommodate the social distance preferences of all. Therefore, when privacy is likely to be an issue, it is probably best to recruit group members who are homogeneous with respect to race/ethnicity.

The Influence of Personality. Interpersonal distance appears to be influenced to some extent by self-confidence and perhaps to a lesser extent by one's sense of social competence (Aiello, 1987). According to Aiello, research seems to show that locus of control, self-esteem, and degree of mental disorder indicate how much space people need.

People who feel self-confident are more likely to approach others closer and to allow others to approach them closer than those with less self-

confidence. Participants who are negatively evaluated and those who score lower on self-esteem or self-concept need more space when approached by others (Aiello, 1987).

Aiello (1987) states that those who feel that they are in control of a situation will allow others to approach them closer and will approach others closer than those with less control. Dominant personalities tend to approach others closely, whereas socially anxious individuals tend to remain more distant. People with an internal locus of control use less space and react more negatively to improper long distances than do persons with an external locus of control.

Introversion and extraversion appear to be related to personal space. Extraverts have been found to maintain closer social distances than introverts (Altman, 1975). Moreover, in discussion groups, extraverts sat closer to others than introverts, and extraverts report that they would interact at closer distances than introverts (Altman, 1975).

Schizophrenics use more personal space and are more variable in its use than normal individuals. Those with neurotic tendencies resemble schizophrenics in their use of personal space. For example, Dejulio and Duffy (1977, cited in Aiello, 1987) found that those students with greater neurotic tendencies chose seats farther from an experimenter than those with fewer such tendencies.

Research efforts to examine personality correlates with spatial use are scarce, and significant relationships are even scarcer. Aiello (1987) concludes that the lack of significance may be because personality characteristics are not salient in many situations. If the interaction between personality and situational factors is jointly considered, we might find more significant results.

Anxiety-prone people place greater distance between themselves and others (Altman, 1975). Close distances are perceived to be more stress producing by anxious individuals than greater distances. Also, under stress-producing conditions, anxious people tend to increase their social distances from others.

Other research results are more equivocal because the research projects appear not to be systematic; also, some results across studies are equivocal (Altman, 1975). Self-directed people are more willing to approach strangers than those more dependent on external reinforcements from others. People with high self-esteem and low authoritarianism approach others more closely than do authoritarian personalities and those with low self-esteem. People

predisposed toward high affiliation sit closer to others than do those more predisposed to low affiliation. The effects of personality will be addressed again in the discussion on influence in social interaction and seating arrangements.

Interpersonal Factors

Several interpersonal factors affect how people arrange themselves in space. Let's briefly look at the relationships between people in the social interaction, the desire for influence, and the status of individuals and positions within the group.

Relationships in the Social Interaction. The degree of personal space should differ across different social relations. Generally, a person should be more available and accessible to other people when interaction with others is desirable and should be less available to others when interaction is not desirable.

Several different research methodologies have produced convergent findings indicating that friends keep closer distances among one another than do mere acquaintances or strangers (Altman, 1975). It is generally acknowledged that the closer the social bond between two people, the closer the interpersonal distance they will tolerate. Also, the more positive the social bonds, the closer the interaction distance. If people are friendly, warm, and popular, others will accept closer social contact with them than if they are unfriendly, cold, and unpopular. A number of studies indicate that people who exhibit positive or favorable personal attributes (e.g., high intelligence) are approached more closely than are those who have unfavorable personal attributes.

People will also tolerate closer interpersonal distances when the social interaction is positive. For example, in one study, approval was manipulated (Rosenfeld, 1965 cited in Altman, 1975). When the participants experienced social approval, they made more eye contact, used more positive gestures, smiled more, and placed their chairs closer to the person giving the approval than did those who received disapproval. When social interaction is stressful, however, people tend to maintain greater interpersonal distances.

It appears that focus groups of friends can be conducted in smaller spaces than groups of strangers. When the research is concerned about shared experiences of neighbors, for example, it might be wise to seat them close together around a rectangular table. For strangers, a round table might be best.

Influence in Social Interaction. Social influence and communication in focus groups is affected by choices of seating positions. Individuals' seating choices can affect focus groups in two ways. First, an individual can have greater influence on the group discussion by becoming an informal leader. Cultural patterns of interaction dictate that some centrally located seating positions are associated with leadership (e.g., the head of the table); the person who occupies the central seating position is likely to control the flow of information and becomes the informal group leader. Second, an informal leader can guide the focus group discussion in ways that may or may not be consistent with the moderator's goals.

In addition, centrally located individuals are able to maintain eye contact with everyone, which increases his or her ability to interact with others in the group; thus, it is no surprise that the emergent leader is more likely to have occupied a central seat at the table. Because seating choices can pose significant control problems for focus group moderators, it is important that they exercise some control over who sits where.

Another seating position with great potential for influencing the group is the one that faces the largest audience. People who exhibit traits of extraversion and dominance and who relish the leadership position are likely to value these seating positions. The person who occupies this seat is likely to emerge as the informal group leader (Howells & Becker, 1962). If three people are seated on one side of a rectangular table and two on the other side, the two-person side should influence more people (i.e., three) than the three-person side (i.e., two) because individuals who are motivated to influence the group (emergent leaders or dominant individuals) are more likely to sit on the two-person side than on the three-person side.

Another factor that controls information in groups is each member's sense of privacy (Altman, 1975). In particular, privacy concerns will affect the disclosure of personally relevant information. People who value privacy may choose to sit in more distant seats. Being on the periphery provides an added sense of privacy and allows them to feel as though they are in greater control of what and how much people learn about them (Kelvin, 1973). They think that the power of others over them during the discussion is limited.

When individuals cannot adjust their seating arrangements to increase their privacy boundary, they are likely to compensate. Individuals may react by doing one of four things if their privacy is threatened. First, they can limit the amount of eye contact they make with others in the group. Second, they can signal others by opening or closing their body posture. The first two strategies for regulating privacy are discussed in the section on nonverbal commu-

nication in Chapter 4 on moderating focus groups. Third, they can select a seating position that is suitable for higher levels of stimulation (e.g., the head of the table) or lower levels of stimulation (e.g., a peripheral seating position). Fourth, they can increase their personal space by choosing how close they want sit to others in the group, unless the seating arrangement is predetermined.

Status in Social Interaction. Seating choices of group participants' often reflect the cultural importance of the various seating locations (Shaw, 1976). People who see themselves as having high social status tend to choose seats that reflect their status self-perception. For example, managers and professional people select the chair at the head of the table significantly more often than do persons from lower social classes (Strodtbeck & Hook, 1961). The more central seating positions are usually associated with high status.

The Setting and Environmental Factors

Three factors account for the setting (Davies, 1994): (a) the ambient factor, (b) the human factor, and (c) the material factor. I discuss these factors and their likely effects on focus groups in the sections that follow.

The Ambient Factor and Social Interaction

The ambience of the room may influence group members and their productivity (Davies, 1994). Conditions such as too much noise and heat and too many visual effects may create stress that in turn makes demands on the attention and information-processing capacities of group members (Davies, 1994). The increased stress can result from distorted perceptions of smaller interpersonal space. As heat and noise levels increase, some individuals may feel more physically constrained and that their privacy is threatened. These threats are stressful, and effort is required to tune out stress. In environmentally stressful conditions, group participants begin thinking about ways to compensate for their perceived lack of personal space. Thus, they become less sensitive to social cues, less motivated to be helpful, unable to recall facts and issues that have been raised, and may become more aggressive and less tolerant of others' views.

The Human Factor and Social Interaction

The human element refers to how people are physically placed in the focus group setting. It includes the number of people, how close they are to each other, and how they are arranged. As more people are added to a given space, there is an incremental decrease in the personal space of each person. It is likely that losing personal space will have a negative effect on an individual's sense of privacy and his or her behavior in focus groups. As with the ambience, too many people and the resulting sense of loss of personal space can result in increased stress.

The Material Factor and Social Interaction

There is relatively little research on the effects of the situation on personal space (Altman, 1975), particularly the material aspects of the environment (e.g., the room, tables and chairs, mirrors, and recording equipment). What little research is available indicates that the physical aspects of the environment do affect interpersonal spacing. In general, as people move from outdoors and more open spaces to inside a structure and more closed spaces, they compensate by trying to increase interpersonal space. Evidence indicates that people also require more personal space when they are in the corner of a room than they do in the center. This also appears to be true when they are in a rectangular (narrow) rather than a square room of equal area and in smaller rooms compared with larger rooms.

Earlier, I talked about stress resulting from the ambient and human aspects of the environment. Reducing the physical space while holding the number of occupants constant is similar to increasing the number of people without increasing the available space. Too little space can constrain personal space and cause stress. It would be nice if we knew how much personal space is optimal for focus group participants, but we don't. Davies (1994) provides a rule of thumb. Until we have better information it seems best to provide personal space of 1.5 to 4 feet for good friends and close acquaintances and social distances of 4 or more feet for casual encounters among strangers. When in doubt and where possible, it makes sense to provide more room rather than less for focus group discussions, particularly if the discussion is expected to be intimate.

In addition, the more formal the research setting, the greater the preferred social distance. According to Altman (1975), "People who find themselves in

formal settings probably act in a restrained and 'proper' way, which might mean having formal relationships, adopting stylized roles and modes of behavior, using barriers such as distance, and thereby not making the self very accessible to others" (p. 84). It appears that the focus group situation and environment can affect the group process, the resulting data, and the inferences drawn from the research.

Formal facilities are not necessary and may be a distraction in focus group research. In fact, if you look back at the early focus group research in marketing, you will see that much of it was done either in participants' living rooms or simulated living rooms with only an audio recorder or handwritten notes for keeping a record of the discussion. The high-tech-driven viewing room and its obtrusiveness has evolved over the past 20 years, probably for competitive commercial purposes, but these facilities are not a necessity.

How familiar the research setting is may also affect preferred social spaces and focus group participation. In one study, some participants were allowed to experience a room for about 30 minutes while others were not. Then both groups were put in the room again. Those people familiar with the room perceived it to be smaller than did those who had not experience it. Moreover, the familiar group used smaller social distances on the return visit than the other people. Apparently, when people are in a place where they have been before, they feel they have more control and have less concern about longer social distances. Less formal neighborhood settings appear to have an advantage in this regard.

In summary, it is important to keep in mind that complex relationships between research design factors, as well as unintended relationships due to factors not included in the research design, affect the output from focus groups. Many of these relationships may confound the results. For example, choosing to do tropical disease research with focus groups confounds the participant population with the research setting (Khan & Manderson, 1992) because the setting options are very limited in the geographic regions where the relevant population lives.

Because of our lack of knowledge about how the focus group environment affects participants, few prescriptions can be made about this relationship. The researcher should think about the special features of the research setting. Attention should focus on the potential interactions, moderating variables, confounds, norms that are operating, distractions that may occur, who has the desired information, and so forth. These factors, not some arbitrary decision based on the available technology, should dictate the design of the

research project. It may be necessary to do exploratory groups before the main research project to determine which factors pose the biggest threats to the quality of the research findings and how best to structure the setting.

Compensation Mechanisms

We all have physical and psychological barriers to guard our privacy. When our privacy is threatened, we compensate by trying to restore privacy. There are many ways to counteract the impending threat. The particular tactic we use depends on many factors, including our cultural value orientation. Therefore, generalization about compensation mechanisms is unwarranted. Nevertheless, before implementing the research project, the focus group researcher and the moderator should investigate how members of the relevant research population compensate for losses of privacy Focus group participants can compensate in several ways, by using (a) verbal behavior mechanisms and the content of the response, (b) nonverbal mechanisms, (c) personal space mechanisms, (d) territory mechanisms, and (e) cultural mechanism (i.e., customs and norms). These behaviors operate as a unified system to achieve optimum privacy when it is threatened; they are compensatory and interacting.

For example, in a focus group situation, territory boundaries may be fixed in regard to the size of the room, the seating arrangement, space between individuals, and method of observation. These boundaries may be acceptable to some group members but not to others. Therefore, some individuals may resort to body language or verbal behaviors to compensate for the loss of their preferred territory boundary. By doing so, they are trying to restore their privacy equilibrium. For others, the boundaries may fall within their privacy acceptance range. If so, they have no need to compensate. Several ways to compensate are described below.

Compensation Through Seating Choice

Typically, focus group participants are allowed to arrange themselves around the room or at a table without direction from the moderator. People tend to choose preferred seating positions. For some individuals, it is important to protect their privacy. For others, controlling the discussion is important. Still others are motivated to maintain status levels. The choice of seats affects interpersonal distances and the amount of privacy that individuals have. If the seating arrangement is not consistent with the focus group partici-

pants' preferred interpersonal distances, they may attempt to compensate by other means.

Compensating Through Verbal and Nonverbal Communication

When individuals' optimum or equilibrium privacy levels are exceeded, they may take evasive actions. Personal space and interpersonal distance can be increased when focus group disclosures become uncomfortably intimate. Compensation can be accomplished by using nonverbal and verbal cues. Examples of nonverbal cues include decreasing the amount of eye contact with others in the group or changing to more closed body postures (e.g., crossing arms and/or legs). Verbal cues can also be used to signal a need for less intimacy. These cues include turning to colder and more distant voice tones and trying to change the discussion to less intimate topics.

Compensation usually occurs only when the discussion is at moderate levels of intimacy (Davies, 1994). Low levels may not require compensation, and high levels may be too high for compensation to have any effect. When the discussion becomes so personal that it appears to be deviant, the offended individual is likely to withdraw from the interaction. Finally, compensation is more likely in encounters with strangers than with friends. With friends, deviance is more likely to be tolerated. We are less likely to feel anxious when a close friend or relative reveals highly intimate information. In addition, we are more likely to reciprocate a friend's intimacy levels. In contrast, high levels of intimacy from strangers are more likely to produce negative feelings and stress. In this case, unwanted, unseemly disclosures can be thwarted by resorting to one of the compensation tactics mentioned earlier.

Compensation Through Cultural Mechanisms

Cultures vary widely in how they deal with intrusions through personal space boundaries. Altman (1975) provides several examples. The Mehinacu tribal group in Brazil lives in small villages built around an open plaza and appears to have no privacy. Members of the community can see and hear each other because of their close proximity to each other and the openness of their dwellings. But there are secret clearings in the forest where people can be alone. There are periods of time that social contact with some family members is limited. Moreover, there are limits about what types of information can be revealed to others outside the family. In short, privacy regulation is

achieved through the use of personal space as well as the use of verbal and nonverbal body behaviors.

In the Tuareg Culture in Northern Africa, both men and women wear robes that reach from shoulder to ankles, along with turbans and veils. The veil is lowered, raised, and adjusted to alter the other-self privacy boundary. Other privacy regulation mechanisms include facial cues, verbal behaviors, and body positions. These mechanisms appear to be used to achieve some level of optimum privacy.

In Java, people live in small bamboo houses. Each house contains one nuclear family. The houses face the street with no walls or fences to keep other people out. The walls are thin, and most do not have doors. Moreover, friends and neighbors and even outsiders wander in and out of any place at any time of day. These people have no privacy that one can see. Their defenses are psychological. Relationships are restrained. People speak softly, hide their feelings, and behave with what appears to be appropriate decorum. Patterns of politeness are highly developed, and emotions are restrained. Because they have no physical barriers to provide privacy, they use psychological ones to establish social barriers.

We all have physical and psychological barriers to guard our privacy. When our privacy is threatened, we compensate. How we compensate depends on many factors, including our cultural value orientation. Therefore, generalization about compensation mechanisms is unwarranted. Nevertheless, the focus group researcher and the moderator should investigate how members of their relevant population compensate for losses of privacy before implementing the focus group research project.

Compensation and Seating Arrangements

Most of the research on seating positions that I encountered is not grounded in theory. Therefore, the following discussion is based on Altman's (1975) notions on interpersonal privacy mechanisms. Many of the theoretical notions are speculative.

Assume that the discussion leader, formal or informal, is strong. The leader takes an active role in the discussion. Discussion group members may interpret the leader's behavior as an invasion of their personal space. If so, they are likely to compensate by withdrawing their attention from the discussion leader. In fact, empirical evidence indicates that with a strong leader, comments are more likely to be directed to neighbors than to those sitting on the opposite side of the table or room. When the group leader is weak or is

nondirective, however, group participants are more likely to direct comments to those facing them than to the people sitting on either side of them (Hearn, 1957).

Central positions exist at rectangular tables but not at round tables. We might expect that using round tables would make it less likely that informal leaders and communication patterns will emerge. However, the distances between all pairs of individuals are longer at round tables except for those sitting side by side. Keep in mind that side-by-side discussants are extremely close (a few inches) and it is likely that their interpersonal boundaries overlap considerably. Thus, participants may compensate by not looking at the person by their side and not addressing comments to him or her. If so, their only alternatives are withholding comments or addressing them to people across from them, at a longer interpersonal distance. The empirical evidence suggests that group members seated at a round table are more likely to communicate with those sitting across the table and facing them than they are with the two adjacent group members next to them. Also, participants who sit across the table from each other (i.e., face-to-face) are more likely to follow each other in the discussion than those sitting side by side (Steinzor, 1950). Thus, even at round tables, communication patterns are likely to develop.

Compensation and Distance Between Participants

Previously, I discussed social distance and how individuals regulate it to maintain their privacy. I also discussed the differences between individualists and collectivists and how these differences might affect their preferred interaction distances. Some focus groups are set up so that there is considerable distance between participants. In living rooms, or facilities designed as living rooms, distance between participants ranges from a few inches to as much as 12 feet depending on the size of the room. Intended or not, spatial distance between focus group participants has an effect on group interaction.

Earlier, I discussed individual characteristics that affect preferred distances for social interaction, such as age, gender, race/ethnicity, and so forth. If these factors are not considered in the research design, some individuals may feel threatened, become anxious, and withdraw from the conversation. Remember that some people prefer rather long interaction distances. Others prefer rather short interaction distances. At the very least, cultural value orientations should be considered when planning the seating arrangements.

In focus group settings where distance is not controlled (e.g., living room types of settings), the amount and perhaps the intimacy of disclosed informa-

tion might vary with seating positions and the characteristics of the individuals occupying the positions. If collectivists have smaller interpersonal boundaries and prefer more intimate seating, the nature of their disclosures could be adversely affected if they are seated around the periphery of the room. Individualists, on the other hand, may thrive in this type of seating arrangement.

Artificial Settings and Environments

In recent years, communication technology has fostered experimentation with many new information collection technologies referred to as focus groups. Some of these technologies might be more accurately termed "hocus groups" because any resemblance to focus groups is an illusion. These new electronic media eliminate the social/cultural environment, the traditional focus group settings, and the face-to-face interaction of focus groups. By not controlling the focus group setting and in some cases not being able to observe the focus group settings of the participants, the researcher diminishes the richness of human interaction and eliminates what is distinctive about the focus group method.

McGrath (1984) discusses the differences between groups that use three different modes of audio communication: audio only, audio plus visual, and face-to-face communication. The research that attempted to separate visual access from physical presence typically involved four experimental conditions: (a) face-to-face, (b) face-to-face but visually screened, (c) audiovisual presentation that is electronically mediated with participants in different rooms, and (d) audio-only presentation that is electronically mediated with participants in separate rooms. When researchers compared these communication modes, they found differences in the style and content of the communication and differences in outcomes.

Rutter and Robinson (1981) attribute these differences to the lack of social cues, what they refer to as "cuelessness," rather than the lack of visual cues. Moreover, they argue that the differences are primarily in communication content, which causes the differences in style and outcomes. As the interaction becomes more restricted (i.e., less like face-to-face interaction), participants become more concerned with the task, and the content of the communication becomes less personal. Because of this, the communication style becomes less spontaneous, and the outcomes become more task oriented and less interpersonal. In negotiations, for example, the audio-only mode frequently results in deadlocks rather than in the usual outcome in face-to-face negotiations, which is compromise. The authors attribute this to the lack of

communication about social factors, such as beliefs, attitudes, moods and so forth, and too much focus on task issues.

McGrath (1984) seems to agree with Rutter and Robinson (1981) and suggests that these differences across modalities occur because the interpersonal information exchanged is less rich, even though participants in these decision-making and negotiation tasks normally prefer the more socially rich face-to-face interactions. Participants also like each other more in face-to-face interactions. The justification for using these restricted interactions is that they tend to be more efficient. Because there is less role differentiation and leadership exhibited in the restricted interactions, however, the correlation between influence and the amount of communication is lower. In fact, it appears that all participants tend to communicate equally and that no patterns of interpersonal relations develop in restricted groups as they would in face-to-face groups.

Furthermore, richer modalities tend to emphasize the affective content or positive and negative interpersonal communications. According to McGrath (1984), "It is as if the richness of social cues in a situation—including physical and social-psychological distance, and availability of interpersonal cues via visual and other nonverbal modalities—operates as an enhancer of the potency of the other person(s) in the situation" (p. 181). The reduction in the richness of social cues in electronic media "mutes the impact of others as persons, [makes] them more non-persons, more machine-component like, more object like, and so on" (p. 181). When you consider all the other nonverbal factors (e.g., group size, group composition, seating arrangement, and types of moderators), the richness of the social cues in electronic media should be muted. Consequently, the group outcome should be more sterile and sanitized. These outcomes may be desirable for some research purposes but probably not for most focus group uses.

McGrath (1984) speculates that every communication act deals in both task and interpersonal relation patterns and that these two patterns influence each other and the participants. Restricting the communication modalities eliminates the interpersonal aspects of the group and allows the task aspect to become more prominent. This does not occur in face-to-face groups. Thus, the task-related outcomes reflect the effects of the task aspects of the interaction. At the same time, the group structure becomes less articulated. Therefore, the group fails to develop a communication pattern, which has a negative effect on role differentiation, leadership, satisfaction, and attraction for the group.

If the purpose of the group is to investigate phenomena likely to occur as a result of interpersonal relations, the less rich electronic communication mo-

dalities (e.g., telephone conference calls) are inappropriate. It is better to use face-to-face groups. For most focus group purposes, these findings suggest that "real" focus groups are better than electronic groups.

Computer-Aided Groups Compared With Focus Groups

Synchronous computer conferences are currently receiving some research attention, particularly by academicians. These groups use interacting computer hookups, which allows communication among group members in real time but only in typed form. This type of group presents the problems with electronic media previously discussed and more. All information that is not in the form of text, including oral and nonverbal communication, is eliminated. Because 60% or more of all human communication is nonverbal (Barnum & Wolniansky, 1989), computer-mediated focus groups provide relatively little information compared with face-to-face groups.

Oral and nonverbal cues serve three functions in group communication. First, they help regulate the flow of communication and make the transition between speakers smooth. Second, they help us express more intense emotions. Finally, they also help us convey meaning and nuances that are too subtle to be expressed in short printed messages. Both oral and nonverbal cues help participants know when a speaker has talked long enough, who talks next, and when it is time to change speakers. With typed messages only, communications among members are likely to be more disjointed and turbulent. Also, there is an emotional void left by eliminating oral and nonverbal communication.

McGrath (1984) outlines differences between face-to-face groups and computer-aided groups. First, of those people who can type, most can talk faster than they can type. But most people do not have access to computers, and many that do cannot type. Even among those who type there is great variation in typing speed. Therefore, most people can produce more thoughts orally than they can by typing them.

Second, a computer message can be checked for errors in logic, spelling, and grammar before it is sent. This reduces people's risk of looking silly. In face-to-face groups, the editing and speaking occur almost simultaneously, so there is relatively little time to correct errors. To the extent that spelling and grammar checks can be used to influence the respondents' and the moderator's perceptions of each other (e.g., social status, personality, and social skills), computer messages may provide false information. In face-to-face

groups, nonverbal cues provide bases for suggesting and detecting deception. When deception is suspected—say, as a result of oral information that is inconsistent with appearance—the apparent deceiver can be confronted. In computer groups, the deception is likely to go undetected.

Third, people read and hear at different rates of speed. Moreover, they have control over the rate at which they read a message and the number of times they read it. The rate of listening to another depends on the speed of the speaker, the nature of the material being discussed, and the number of distractions. In addition, it is cumbersome if not embarrassing to ask people to repeat what they have just said. Therefore, in computer groups more attention can be devoted to comprehending a message, developing a strategy for responding, and rehearsing the response. Messages become less spontaneous.

Finally, in computer conferences, more than one person composes and sends messages at the same time. In focus groups, participants are explicitly asked to speak one at a time. Thus, in face-to-face focus groups, there is less competition for speaking time, and there are fewer distractions. In addition, participants can concentrate on one message at a time. In computer conferences, there may be many messages waiting for each participant's attention, and the order in which they are answered may be arbitrary. In face-to-face groups, however, it is more likely that we know the order of responses and which ones result from something that was said previously.

Because of all the preceding factors, whether computer-aided focus groups are more productive than face-to-face focus groups is problematic. As McGrath (1984) points out, because more people can transmit messages at the same time, relatively small increases in group size can rapidly increase the reading load of each individual. As a result, it is likely that increasing group size will at some point cause face-to-face groups to become more productive than computer-aided groups.

Summary

Focus group interviews involve some invasion of the privacy of the participants. Different people have different cultural value orientations that include differences in how much of the self they will reveal to others in social interactions. Moreover, depending on their cultural value orientation and other factors, people differ in how the social interaction setting will affect how much they reveal about themselves.

I defined privacy as an interpersonal boundary control process that is dialectical in nature. Sometimes we desire a great deal of privacy, and at other

times we want contact with others. There is some optimal level of privacy where the desired level of privacy equals the actual level. To maintain the optimum level, we employ a compensatory process to regulate our personal space and privacy.

Three sets of factors affect and are affected by personal space: (a) individual factors (e.g., age, gender, race/ethnicity, and personality), (b) interpersonal factors (e.g., influence, status, and cohesion), and (c) environmental factors (e.g., ambient, human, and material). I discussed each factor and suggested how they might affect focus groups.

Four mechanisms for dealing with invasions of privacy were discussed: verbal behavior, personal space, territory, and culture. I noted the compensatory and interacting nature of these mechanisms.

Chapter 4

The Focus Group Moderator

The focus group moderator is a facilitator or discussion leader, not a discussion participant, except perhaps in experiential tasks. In this chapter, I discuss many of the background factors that the moderator brings to the focus group. These factors are fixed. The only variable part is how the moderator employs his or her background in any particular group.

The preponderance of the literature on focus group moderators deals with three sets of factors necessary to become successful: (a) desirable personal characteristics, (b) professional qualifications, and (c) training needs. These personal characteristics of the moderator are specific personality characteristics thought necessary for someone to be an effective moderator. Professional qualifications include things such as type of academic degree, business experience, and product/service category experience. Training is a topic that has received limited attention, although a few authors bemoan the lack of focus group training provided by colleges and universities. Most of these articles deal with professional moderators exclusively. Relatively few deal with situations when professional moderators are not available—an oversight that will be addressed in this chapter.

In a departure from tradition, the discussion that follows is not limited to professional moderators. Several focus group studies that I reviewed did not use professional moderators. There are several reasons why this is so. No single set of moderator characteristics is adequate for all focus groups; different research purposes require different moderators. I try to match moderator credentials with specific research purposes and focus group tasks. Please see Figure 4.1.

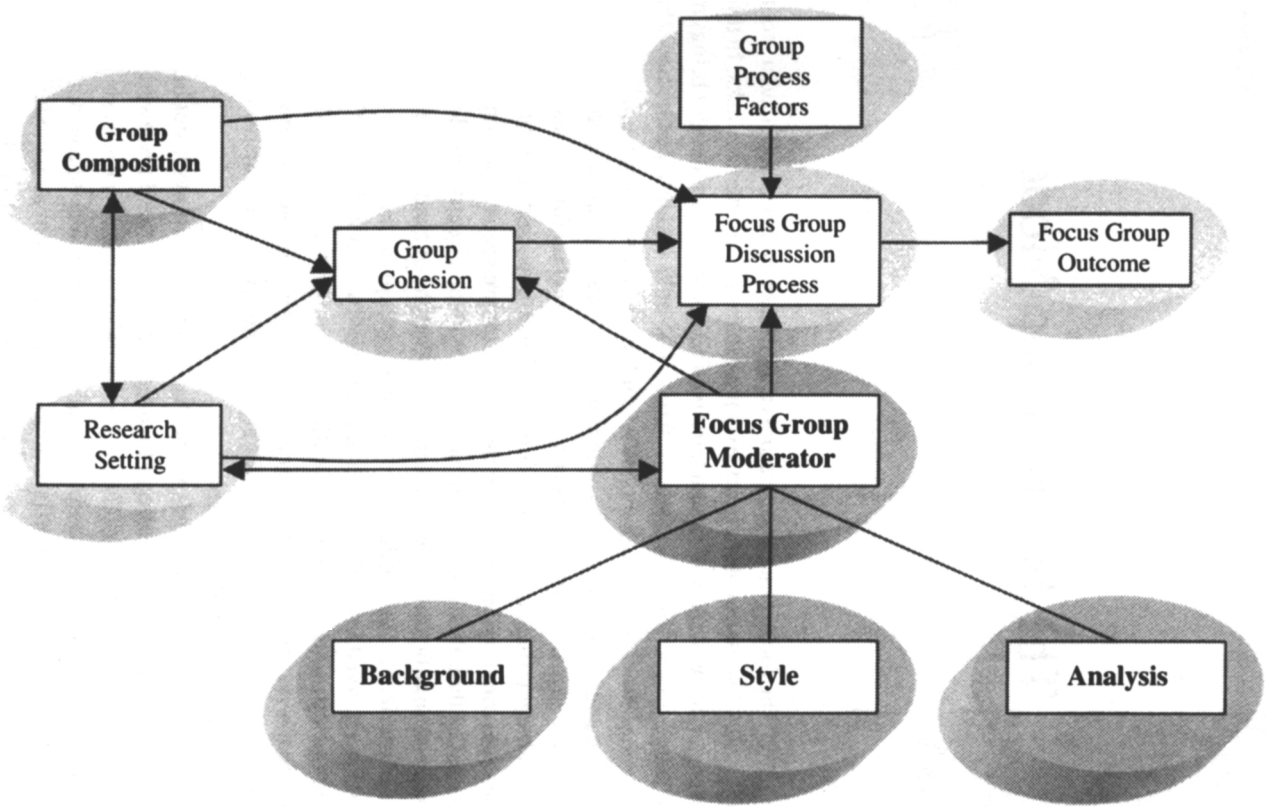

Figure 4.1. The Focus Group Moderator

A moderator's background, moderating style, and analytical skills affect the behavior of the moderator during the focus group discussion. Analytical skills affect not only the moderator's actions during the discussion (e.g., note taking) but the analysis and findings as well. The primary concern here is with the effects of background and style on the discussion process and information exchange. The first section deals with the moderator's background. Moderating style is the second major section of this chapter. This section deals with what moderators do and goes beyond the issues that "style" connotes to talk about different approaches for different uses depending on the research purpose. The discussion is more theoretical than applied. I provide very little guidance in the way of suggestions for specific behaviors in specific situations. Following this discussion, I talk about issues in analyzing the focus group session.

Desirable Background Characteristics of Moderators

The important moderator characteristics, according to a focus group of professional moderators, are personality, sensitivity, insight, ability, empathy, warmth, listening skills, and analytical skills (Caruso, 1976). Education should include psychology, sociology, marketing, or some combination of these. Moderator training is also desirable although it may be difficult to achieve outside professional research agencies. Moderator characteristics, according to Axelrod (1979b), include being a good listener, having an interest in people, having a dynamic personality, being warm, being involved in one's work, and believing in one's work. The moderator should also blend in with the respondents and should always be in control. Finally, the moderator should be someone the group can accept and relate to.

A point made by Krueger (1988) is particularly relevant to this discussion regarding experiential groups. He says that the moderator should be similar to respondents (i.e., blend in), should be acceptable, and should be able to relate to the group. "It is important that the moderator appear like the participants in dress and appearance" (p. 73). Arguably, the best way to accommodate Krueger's suggestion is to ensure that the moderator comes from the same population as the focus group respondents even if it means trading off some professional skills.

Moderator Characteristics for Specific Research Purposes

The previous discussion presumes that one set of moderator characteristics is suitable for all research purposes and types of focus groups. I question this assumption and offer an alternative model. On the basis of characteristics promoted by professional moderators and McDonald's (1993) empirical results, I hypothesize that different focus group tasks require moderators with different personalities and learned skills.

McDonald (1993) analyzed tapes of focus group interviews that represent the work of 66 different moderators. Topics of the interviews include new product ideas, advertising strategies, questionnaire preparation, and marketing programs. He distinguishes between "everyday" moderators and "scientific" moderators. The former are characterized as participant observers who use a conversational approach to moderating, whereas the latter use motivational theories and other social science concepts in moderating focus groups.

McDonald (1993) reports no statistically significant difference in the assignment of everyday and scientific moderators to Calder's (1977) focus group trilogy by research agencies. He notes, however, that more everyday moderators are assigned to phenomenological groups than scientific moderators (52% versus 33%). Also, more scientific moderators are assigned to clinical groups than everyday moderators (38% versus 29%).

From a slightly different perspective, I offer an alternative hypothetical factor structure to McDonald's (see Table 4.1). From this highly speculative structure, I develop three different moderator profiles, one for each of the three types of focus group tasks. This factor structure is representative of what can be done in terms of developing different moderator criteria for different focus group tasks.

Earlier, I reviewed desirable moderator characteristics and organized them according to the focus group task for which they seem to be appropriate. The outline in Table 4.1 does not account for differences in effect and theory applications. The obvious difference in theory applications is that the moderator should know something about theory. In addition, analytical skills are much more important for theory development and uncovering motives. The personality of the moderator is less important for theory applications. Similarity between moderator and respondent is arguably the most important characteristic for theory evaluation and experiential tasks.

TABLE 4.1 Moderator Characteristic for Each Type of Focus Group Task

Characteristic	*Exploratory*	*Experiential*	*Clinical*
Personality			
Expressive			
Sensitive	✓	✓	✓
Warm		✓	✓
Humor			
Empathetic		✓	✓
Spontaneous		✓	
Involved		✓	
Insightful			✓
Creative	✓		
Confident	✓	✓	✓
Communication skills			
Expression	✓	✓	✓
Listening	✓	✓	✓
Questioning	✓	✓	✓
Management skills			
Establish rapport	✓	✓	
Controlling	✓		✓
Directive	✓		
Nondirective		✓	✓
Flexible	✓		✓
Detached			
Receptive	✓	✓	✓
Analytical skills			
Logical	✓		✓
Analytical	✓		✓

The Moderator's Education and Experience

No specific set of background characteristics is necessary for all research purposes. Some specific skills are helpful though. Moderators should have

some background in research. This implies that they should have a graduate degree in one of the social sciences. Individuals with graduate degrees are probably more flexible in terms of the types of groups they can conduct than those without advanced degrees. Group experience, however, may balance the lack of academic background. Certainly, academic experience or other work-related experience in the area of the research problem is beneficial.

Conducting focus groups is a learned skill. There are a number of sources available for developing basic moderating skills (Goldman & McDonald, 1987; Krueger, 1988; Morgan & Krueger, 1998; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990; Templeton, 1994; Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996). Having read one or more of these books, the incipient moderator should practice the newly learned skills. Practice sessions should be video recorded so that the moderator can go back over them and learn from past mistakes.

Moderator Backgrounds for Racial/Ethnic Focus Groups

Focus group moderators with the same ethnic and racial background as the respondents are preferable in most cases (Vasquez & Han, 1995). Members of all-minority focus groups may challenge white moderators for philosophical, political, and personal reasons and because of a moderator's lack of knowledge about the ethnic culture. Whites and ethnic minority group members may also challenge minority moderators if they perceive the moderator's position to be inconsistent with his or her "ascribed lower status" in society (Vasquez & Han, 1995). By being from the same racial or ethnic group, the moderator is able to establish greater rapport, increase each respondent's willingness to participate, and most important, contribute to increased reliability and validity of the information collected.

Deciding Whether to Use Focus Group Moderators

In several applications of group research, the moderator may not be critical to the process. As mentioned earlier, moderators may not be necessary for some idea-generating tasks. A little creativity, however, is required to develop written instructions that guide the group discussion. In my experience, groups can follow instructions, cover a list of topics similar to a moderator's guide, and provide leadership on their own.

Morgan and Spanish (1984) introduced a new moderating style. They told groups to try to work things out on their own; moderators were available if needed. They suggest that sometimes groups get sidetracked, and when that happens the moderator or researcher should refocus them on the topic. They report that this tactic was almost totally effective and that the moderator's involvement in the group discussions was minimal.

Professional or Amateur Moderators

Several reasons for not using professional focus group moderators have been proposed (Morgan & Krueger, 1993). Qualified moderators are critical for most applied research. The first reason for not using professionals is the lack of supply. In many fields of inquiry, there is a lack of professionally trained moderators with both the experience and background necessary to understand the phenomena being studied (e.g., resisting family planning among Mayans). This is particularly problematic when the research purpose requires revising one's theoretical notions as the project progresses (Morgan & Krueger, 1993). The best moderator may be the researcher in these situations.

Second, most academic researchers cannot afford up to $5,000 for a single focus group, much less afford professionally led groups that might be required for a given research project. Together, the lack of theoretical knowledge on the part of many professional moderators and serious financial constraints should provide ample motivation for academic researchers to train nonprofessionals in the use of this method. The downside risk is that using moderators who are inexperienced or, worse yet, inept may also work counter to the research goal.

Third, much field research, both theoretical and applied, requires respondents from ethnic and cultural groups that are radically different from those with which professional moderators routinely work. A lack of sensitivity to a particular culture's social values could interfere with the research project's goals as well. Thus, amateurs from the same cultural background may be preferred over professionals who lack experience with the relevant population. For example, McLaurin (1995) required moderators who could relate to inner-city, African American youths. Other researchers have conducted focus groups in Japan, Africa, and South America. If it is necessary to interview these populations in natural settings, less experienced moderators may be the researcher's only choice.

These considerations are several legitimate reasons for not using professional moderators. Even so, there is no viable alternative to professional moderators for most applied research. The technology, skills, and experience that make these moderators professionals evolved from the combined experiences in focus group research over the past 30 years. The commercial research infrastructure within the United States and across the world allows professionally moderated focus groups to be scheduled for small local projects as well as for large projects. Moreover, focus groups can be scheduled countrywide and even worldwide with relatively little advanced planning, compared with mail surveys. Furthermore, research funding should not be a major problem because most commercial projects will realize a return on the cost of the focus group research. The return comes in the form of increased profits or decreased losses. For applied research, the risk of missing that single potentially profitable idea may be well worth the costs of professional recruiters and moderators. In applied contexts, the decision maker should carefully calculate the potential value of the research outcome and weigh it against the cost of doing the research.

Moderating Style

In the preceding section, I said that there is no viable alternative to professional moderators in applied research. In the following discussion, I address two issues that the focus group literature neglects—listening skills and nonverbal communications skills. I then address specific issues that should be important to the incipient focus group moderator.

Listening Skills

Much of the extant focus group literature deals with questioning skills; relatively little deals with listening skills. In this section, I briefly discuss two types of listening—nonreflective and reflective. Because of space constraints, I cannot provide enough information to teach you how to become an effective listener. Atwater (1981), however, provides concise (127 pages) informative reading, along with exercises, that will help the interested reader develop good listening skills. Most of what is presented next comes from Atwater's book. The two listening skills I discuss here (nonreflective and reflective) are also referred to as passive and active. Because both types of listening are active, I use the former terms. There are six groups of skills: attention, nonreflective listening, reflective listening, essential attitudes, nonverbal

communication, and memory skills (Atwater, 1981). Focus group moderators use them all. Nevertheless, I cover just two groups of skills from the six. I begin with nonreflective listening, which is the simplest listening form.

Nonreflective Listening

Nonreflective listening is a physical and psychological process that requires minimal responses (e.g., "mm-hmm" and nodding the head). Minimal responses are not coercive or threatening, but they invite respondents to talk, and respondents tend to talk for a longer time in response to this kind of listening (Matarazzo, Wiens, & Saslow, 1965). Nonreflective listening is helpful when the speaker needs to ventilate. Its use depends, however, on the situation, the speaker, and the purpose of the discussion.

Nonreflective listening may be particularly helpful in a number of focus group situations, particularly the globality and differentiation stages of the discussion process (see Chapter 5). Globality refers to actual racial/ethnic diversity among group members, and differentiation has to do with the perception that other group members are different in terms of status, occupation, personality, and so forth. Nonreflective listening sets the tone for an unstructured and empathetic style of moderating. Thus, a moderator using nonreflective listening encourages respondents to participate in the discussion but does not influence the nature of the participation. Shy and reticent minority group members may feel less threatened and participate more freely. At the other extreme, dominant or disruptive participants may be less problematic if they sense that the moderator is really listening to them. Both shy and dominant respondents benefit because it shows that the moderator is interested in what they have to say.

Nonreflective listening is also appropriate for uncovering wide-ranging responses as might be the goal in applied exploratory research. Because of the nonjudgmental nature of this approach, groups may explore a broader range of issues. This type of listening is also widely used by therapists in clinical applications. It is used successfully in Carl Rogers's approach to psychotherapy (Rogers, 1973). The major negative is that this approach encourages nonstop talkers as well.

Reflective Listening

Reflective listening is also nonjudgmental. It is different from nonreflective listening because it seeks to clarify the accuracy of what is being said. The use of this approach is pervasive throughout psychotherapy as a means of

helping patients understand their feelings and problems. Atwater (1981) warns that these skills are not easily acquired, it takes considerable practice.

Reflective listening gets at the heart of communication problems—misunderstanding. The message sent may not be what was intended, and even when the intended message is accurately sent, it may be misperceived.

Four types of reflective responses are used to increase communication accuracy: clarifying, paraphrasing, reflecting feelings, and summarizing. *Clarifying* responses ask the speaker to clarify what was said (e.g., "I don't understand."). These responses point out that we do not understand what the speaker means. *Paraphrasing* is restating what was said. This response is a means of making sure you understand what the speaker intended to communicate. In doing so, the moderator restates just the essence of the speaker's message. When *reflecting* feelings, the moderator mirrors the feelings that he or she thinks were expressed (e.g., "You appear to feel . . ."). The content of the statements is of secondary importance; the feelings behind the content are primary. This type of response should fit the intensity of the feelings being expressed. *Summarizing* responses are summary statements about the main points, feelings, or both that the individuals express. Not all people communicate logically or in grammatically correct statements. Summarizing is particularly effective for playing back the important points that the speaker was attempting to make (e.g., "Your main points, as I see them are . . .").

Reflective listening is particularly helpful in applied experiential focus group tasks where the group is evaluating concepts, strategies, communications, and policies. Moderators may find this type of listening extremely important when it comes time to write up the final report. It should increase the moderator's confidence that he or she captured the respondents' comments accurately, and it should increase the validity of the inferences that go into the final report. This listening approach is also important for theory triangulation and evaluation purposes.

Nonverbal Communication Skills

Nonverbal cues are important for the conduct of focus groups as well as for interpreting the output. Because both responsibilities fall to the moderator, I include a review of nonverbal communication.

Different authors categorize nonverbal behaviors differently. For our purposes here, I use four categories. The following review is based on the works of Burgoon (1994), Hare and Davies (1994), and McGrath (1984). McGrath (1984) categorizes nonverbal behaviors into nine different groups.

There is some overlap between the typologies used by McGrath, Hare and Davies, and Burgoon. I chose the common categories.

Some patterns of nonverbal behavior are constant throughout the focus group discussion (e.g., distance, body orientation, physical contact, and thermal and olfactory modalities). We discussed some of these behaviors in the chapter on the focus group setting (Chapter 3). Other behaviors tend to vary with the flow of the discussion (e.g., visual orientation, facial expression, and bodily posture and movement). I limit the following discussion to the behaviors that change during the discussion because they appear to have some diagnostic value. The discussion deals with (a) visual orientation (eye contact and looking), (b) facial expression (particularly smiling), (c) body movement and gestures, and (d) vocalizations (McGrath, 1984).

Visual Orientation

There is much research on gaze and eye contact. Gazing or looking is not the same thing as eye contact or mutual looking (McGrath, 1984). Gaze is controlled and modified to fit the situation and an individual's role in it. On the other hand, eye contact can result from chance occurrences. First, gaze rate differs between males and females. Females look more and longer at their partners than men do and are more observant of gaze than men are. People look more at people they like and talk longer to people they look at. Apparently looking, liking, and speaking are related to each other. Focus groups of people who like each other (e.g., family and friends) should provide more discussion than groups of strangers.

Second, listeners gaze more than speakers do. Gazing on the part of the listener may indicate attention and openness to influence. It should be an important source of information to the speaker. Conversely, speakers gaze less than listeners do. McGrath (1984) provides an interesting narrative. As the speakers reflect on what they are going to say, they tend to look away and gaze only intermittently. From this behavior, moderators should be able to predict who is getting ready to speak. As the speaker prepares to finish, however, he or she will gaze at the person presumed to be the next speaker. The moderator can use this behavior to judge the reliability of their prior predictions. At the same time, the presumptive next speaker will have been looking at the speaker as he or she prepares to take over the conversation—another reliability check. As the next speaker takes over, he or she averts the current speaker's gaze. In the focus group context, moderators should be able to use these types of predictable behaviors to help regulate the flow of the group discussion.

Facial Expression

Facial expressions serve several expressive functions. Hare and Davies (1994) list six emotions that can be readily identified from posed facial expressions: happiness, surprise, fear, anger, sadness, and disgust. Smiling also tends to reinforce other persons' actions, including talking. Moreover, smiling indicates friendliness and may be used to appease or ingratiate another person. Smiling is also frequently accompanied with acknowledgments such as "yeah," "uh-huh," and head nods.

Smiling expresses friendliness, but it does not accurately indicate happiness (McGrath, 1984). Nevertheless, Hare and Davies (1994) state that happiness is the most accurately identified emotion. Smiling serves as a social greeting at the beginning of an encounter and helps define the level of intimacy for the interaction. Later in the discussion, the moderator may smile to provide positive reinforcement to the speaker. Reinforcement is important because it helps regulate the flow of the interaction and provides encouragement to participate in the discussion.

Body Movement and Gestures

Body movements serve expressive functions also. For example, posture can be used to judge relaxation and tension. It also indicates receptiveness or openness and, conversely, coldness and lack of receptivity to others. Gestures can illustrate what is being said, substitute for what is being said (e.g., a thumbs up sign), and emphasize points that are being made (Hare & Davies, 1994). Gestures are also used by listeners to signal agreement (e.g., nodding) and disagreement (e.g., shaking the head), and to regulate the discussion flow (e.g., turning the head away before replying or raising the hand to claim the floor).

Vocalizations

Linguistic form can tell us a lot about the speaker. For example, "verbal staring," which is focusing on another individual while talking, is interpreted generally as being negative. It can indicate that a person's personal space and privacy is being threatened. Thus, this behavior is discomforting, causes stress, and elicits defensive responses from the receiver. Positive feelings are conveyed through language style as well.

Hare and Davies (1994) suggest that dominant individuals may try to keep the floor by filling pauses with "er," "um," or other sounds. Pauses do not

necessarily indicate breaks in speech. Rather, pauses may indicate that the speaker is confident, vital, and has a sense of well-being or high self-esteem. Pauses are used for other purposes as well. They may be used to take stock, to recover from mental fatigue, to temporarily withdraw, and to wait.

The tone of voice may indicate anger, sadness, happiness, or surprise (Hare & Davies, 1994). Low speech tones may indicate dominance or aggression and high tones may indicate the opposite—lack of aggression and dominance.

I have presented a glimpse of the types of behaviors that are studied and their common interpretations. Much research has accumulated in this important communication area. Focus group moderators might consider the potential advantages of knowing more about nonverbal communication and how it can be used to better understand the meanings associated with the verbal part of communication.

How Directive Should Moderators Be?

Professional moderators vary in the control they exercise in focus groups. Control ranges from nondirective to directive (aka active and passive). Nondirective moderators ask few questions and probe on a limited basis; they do not actively participate in the questioning process. Directive moderators are very involved and direct the interview as an active empathetic participant. They exercise considerable control by using structured questions (Frey & Fontana, 1991). A third type of moderator is generally passive but becomes active when necessary. See Goldman and McDonald (1987) and Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) for more information about moderator styles.

There is no single best moderating style. The effectiveness of a particular moderating style depends on the research purpose. For exploratory work in a theoretical area, the moderator is more likely to benefit from being nondirective. By participating only minimally, the moderator allows the group members to take the research in directions that they think are important. For theory triangulation or evaluations purposes, a more structured and directive approach is necessary. For applied research in which the researcher is interested in uncovering shared experiences and knowledge about a particular phenomenon, more direction may be appropriate to keep the group on track toward providing the necessary information. I discuss different approaches for different uses in Chapters 7, 8, and 9 on the exploratory, experiential, and clinical tasks.

Handling Shy and Dominant Respondents

Solicitude, according to Wolf (1973), helps prevent withdrawal from the discussion and thwarts attempts to maintain disconnection from the group. Moderators can engage and continue to reengage those who become detached from the discussion. Wolf (1973) describes a therapist who is good at bringing members back into the conversation. He says, "She was an artist at discovering and suggesting ways to group members to promote and restore communication among them when they were on the verge of dispersing in unforgiving anger" (p. 3). The moderator's personality characteristics (e.g., empathy, sensitivity, and involvement) may help resolve the shy person's resistance and enhance interaction.

Wolf (1973) says that you can "gently" frustrate the inappropriate claims of monopolists without rejecting them. Goldman and McDonald (1987, p. 74) provide several means for dissuading this type of disruptive respondent. Moderator honesty can be used to help shy participants open up, and candor and directness can be used to close down dominant respondents, thereby increasing the quality of mutual exchange. A less direct approach is to find people in the group who can provide others with mutual warmth and understanding. Through them, you can get the shy members to overcome their resistance and defensiveness and to become more involved in the discussion (Wolf, 1973).

It makes little difference which tactic you use to restrain the dominant respondent or to encourage the shy person so long as you are sensitive to people's feelings. These interventions help group members see each other more realistically and cause them to become friendlier, closer, and more productive (Wolf, 1973).

Handling the Disruptive Respondent

Acting out is not unique to therapy groups. It can occur in focus groups as well. This behavior is recognizable because there is a greater tendency toward motor activity than verbal expression (Spotnitz, 1973). For example, displeasure may be expressed through physical gestures and other dramatic acts rather than verbal reports. Acting out is more likely in clinical tasks than exploratory or experiential ones. In clinical applications of focus groups, it can be dramatic in nature (e.g., expressing anger or contempt or expressing feelings toward other group members), resulting in disruption and withdrawal from the discussion.

Spotnitz (1973) suggests several methods for minimizing disruptive effects. First, the moderator can condition members at the beginning of the session to verbally express and describe their emotions. This may prevent the sudden or intense demonstration of feelings that is best expressed verbally. Second, the moderator can stress that verbalizing feelings, thoughts, and experiences is a cooperative group behavior and acting on them without discussion is uncooperative behavior. Third, it makes sense to alert group members to the potential for aggressive or angry impulses. The moderator can help individuals release their pent-up feelings and emotions verbally rather than through their behavior. Fourth, some participants have few opportunities to express themselves in their daily lives and can be disruptive. Firm management by the moderator is required to make communication tolerable. Finally, as Wolf (1973) suggests for shy members, the group can help those who may be disposed toward disruptive acts to communicate verbally.

Moderating Groups of Racial/Ethnic Minorities

As previously reported, the racial and ethnic makeup in many areas of the world may be drastically different over the next few decades than it is today. Therefore, we begin to consider what moderators need to know about conducting groups with minority members. Anyone who is contemplating doing mixed-ethnic groups might want to consult Vasquez and Han (1995). Their insights are most appropriate for clinical groups, but they may be useful for exploratory and experiential groups as well.

Ethnicity is both a salient personal and interpersonal factor. The ethnicity of focus group participants affects how groups interact. Consequently, the ethnic composition of focus groups should suggest ways that focus group moderators facilitate the group sessions. By understanding the relationship between race/ethnicity and group interaction, the moderator should be able to establish a climate of trust and safety for minority group members. If these participants feel comfortable sharing personal experiences in focus groups, more information that is relevant to the research task may be obtained. From both ethical and group process perspectives, moderators should empower racial and ethnic minority group members to participate in the group discussion without prejudice.

Conducting focus groups with members of minority groups presents a formidable task for the white focus group moderator. The messages that many minority group members internalize are that their needs, experiences, and

perceptions are not important or valid. If these feelings are not countered, minorities may become reticent to participate or withdraw from participating in the group.

Self-Empathy and Mutuality

Self-empathy and mutuality are two factors that should be considered when focus groups are heterogeneous in terms of race/ethnic backgrounds (Vasquez & Han, 1995). Self-empathy is the ability to have compassion for one's self and to accept that which is human in ourselves. Self-empathy is similar to self-esteem. Mutuality is "the ability to tune into the subjective, inner experience of another person at a cognitive and affective level" (Vasquez & Han, p. 113). Mutuality involves the ability to understand, appreciate, and convey respect for another person's thoughts, feelings, experiences, and uniqueness. Mutuality is similar to having empathetic understanding of others. By creating mutual empathy among minority and white group members, the moderator facilitates trust and safety; both of which are necessary for group participation. Thus, both the researcher and the moderator should be concerned about developing a nonjudgmental atmosphere in which participants can develop self-empathy and compassion for each other (Vasquez & Han, 1995).

The Need for Establishing Trust

Of particular significance is the treatment of minority group members during the social integration stage of the discussion process. Diversity will be noted during the globality and differentiation stages. For social integration to occur, minority members must trust the moderator and other group members. Distrust may lead to members dropping out of the discussion or failing to achieve the level of desired depth during the interview. Minority group members may be particularly skeptical about the sponsoring agency, other group members, and the group moderator. Therefore, it is essential that the moderator promote an atmosphere of trust and safety. Otherwise, distrust may lead to an increase in differentiation rather than social integration.

The Benefits of Establishing Trust

There are several benefits from establishing trust during the integration stage. Group members may be better able to handle dominance by some mem-

bers, struggles for speaking time, and the conflicts that may evolve. For example, conflicts about power and dominance among some white group members may become noticeable through discord and various expressions of irritation (both verbal and nonverbal). Minorities in particular may find it disconcerting to deal with these events, even in ethnic homogeneous groups. An activist Latino or African American participant, for example, may become upset if he or she perceives that conservative members of their minority group are denying their own "true identity" (Vasquez & Han, 1995). When trust is established, minority members are less likely to withdraw from the discussion.

Preparing for Focus Groups With Racial/Ethnic Group Members

Three factors need to be considered before conducting focus groups with racial/ethnic groups: (a) the language(s) to be spoken, (b) the ethnicity of the moderator, and (c) the group discussion format. I've already discussed the ethnicity of the moderator. The moderator needs to be aware of the respondents' language preferences before the groups meet. In fact, the researcher who plans the project should consider and plan for all these research design factors.

Language Preferences. Marín and Marín (1991) found that 70% of the Hispanics that they contacted in San Francisco preferred to answer questions in Spanish rather than English regardless of their level of acculturation. The others apparently preferred English. Keep in mind, however, that what potential respondents tell you during the recruitment process may not be diagnostic. Yelland and Gifford (1995) encountered language problems in their research on SIDS (sudden infant death syndrome) in Australia. Several of their respondents reported that they spoke English with their friends, and these people had no apparent problems in one-to-one conversations with recruiters. In the subsequent group discussions, however, lack of confidence in their ability to speak English caused them to withhold participation in the group discussion. Apparently the ability to speak a foreign language in one-to-one discussions is not directly applicable to group discussions. This point should not be forgotten when recruiting minorities for focus groups.

Discussion Format. Moderators from a different culture than that of the respondents may have difficulties understanding the realities of the minority

culture. Marín and Marín (1991) suggest that researchers with the same minority background as the respondents be used to provide input into (a) the research design, (b) the measuring instruments, and (c) the interpretation and use of the data.

Before conducting studies with racial and ethnic minorities, the discussion format and the moderator's guide need to be thoroughly researched (Marín & Marín, 1991). At the very least, exploratory groups should be conducted with a sample from the target population. This effort should provide a better understanding about heterogeneity within the population. Exploratory research should focus on how language use, social status perceptions, sensitive issues, and gender affect group interaction. Alternatively, researchers might immerse themselves in the culture being studied so that they can better understand the cultural realities of group participants (Marín & Marín, 1991). The latter suggestion should not be taken lightly because of the tremendous increase in time and money that this involves before data collection even begins.

Building Trust and Safety for Minority Group Members

Moderators can do several things when faced with potentially distrustful members (Brown & Mistry, 1994; Vasquez & Han, 1995). First, getting other members to become active in the discussion helps enhance trust and safety. It helps to get members to respond to each other rather than the moderator. This can be done both verbally and nonverbally. Focusing the group on the positive aspects of their experiences rather than the negative ones may also help them become more positive toward the focus group experience.

Second, moderators can communicate nonverbally with individual group members (Vasquez & Han, 1995). Eye contact can be used to suggest recognition, awareness, and feeling for the individual who appears to be stressed. See the previous discussion on nonverbal communication.

Third, the moderator can empower group members to trust their own observations, memories, and feelings (Vasquez & Han, 1995). He or she can call on individuals to develop awareness of themselves and their feelings and to rely on their experiences rather than relying on the feelings and experiences of others. Moderators can help these people by listening and acknowledging their feelings, thoughts, experiences, and perceptions. By being a good nonreflective listener and attending to what is said, the moderator will validate what minority group members are saying (Brown & Mistry, 1994). It

may even be necessary for the moderator to demonstrate or model how to hear, receive, and deal with others' feelings.

Fourth, sometimes it is difficult for ethnic minority participants to talk about feelings that they perceive to be negative. If some members find it unacceptable to discuss personal feelings, the moderator can acknowledge that it is unacceptable in other cultural contexts and then find a more acceptable way to deal with the topic or issue (Vasquez & Han, 1995).

Fifth, the moderator can relax and try to feel comfortable when talking about issues that may induce stress (e.g., race, gender, racism, sexism, and other sources of oppression). Finally, moderators can relate to the other group members in a mutually respectful way and be prepared to challenge oppressive attitudes.

For many moderators, these tasks will be formidable and will require preparation and practice before the project begins. It is doubtful that moderators with little experience or knowledge about the specific minority group under study will be able generate much usable information. If experienced moderators are not available and scarce resources prevent prolonged training for novices, it might be better to turn the recorder over to the groups and let them stumble through the sessions without a moderator.

The preceding techniques are also worth trying when attempting to overcome counterproductive status differences in focus groups. Moderators can work with those who lack self-confidence due to status perceptions by accepting and encouraging others to use a "we orientation" instead of the "me orientation." Reducing self-focused attention may make it less stressful and easier for some people to participate. Another tactic is to reassure the less confident individuals that you understand them and you think they have something to contribute. With an increased sense of competence, their participation levels may increase also. If it can be honestly and tactfully done, the moderator may be able to augment or reduce the status of some individuals during the globality or introduction stage of the discussion process. Keep in mind that the more heterogeneous the group, the more time is needed for integrating them socially for the exchange of information.

Moderating Styles for Different Research Purposes

Unlike exploratory or experiential groups, the moderator of clinical groups becomes very involved with the group and its members. Greater depth of communication, including "painful secrets" and "real" reasons for their

behavior, should evolve (Vasquez & Han, 1995). Apparently, a frequent practice in therapy groups is to provide little or no concrete help or advice for group members. In a focus group, however, a supportive moderator may intervene to provide advocacy for individual participants or to psychologically empower them. Psychological empowerment is "the motivation, freedom, and capacity to act purposefully, with mobilization of the energy, resources, strengths, or power of each person through a mutual relational process" (Surrey, 1987, cited in Vasquez & Han, 1995, p. 116). With the moderator's support, as the group matures, its members should develop a sense of direction, become relatively comfortable with each other, and engage in a genuine and focused discussion of the issues.

Moderator as Analyst

Focus group moderators are responsible for developing the discussion guide, which sets the agenda for the focus group sessions. The moderator is also in charge of the discussion, both as a facilitator and as an analyst. Not only does the moderator lead the discussion, but he or she has a direct and important impact on what raw data are analyzed. Usually but not always, it is the moderator who analyzes the raw output and writes the report on which decision makers rely. In some applications, multiple moderators are used and analysts other than the moderator are used (Goldman & McDonald, 1987).

Qualitative Analysis of Focus Group Data

Most frequently, focus group output undergoes some form of qualitative analysis. Several books provide details about how to analyze qualitative data (Antaki, 1988; Krueger, 1988; Miles & Huberman, 1984; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). Goldman and McDonald (1987) discuss taking notes, things in the discussion that the analyst should pay attention to, and report writing; they do not discuss details. Among the things that Goldman and McDonald consider important in analyzing qualitative data are (a) the order in which issues are discussed, (b) the intensity or strength of feelings, (c) the reasons behind feelings, (d) deception, and (e) generalizability. They provide little guidance about how these factors affect the qualitative analysis.

Qualitative analysis can range from summarizing the discussion, to identifying themes, to elaborate coding schemes. The type of analysis depends on how the resulting information is to be used. Discussion summaries run from the descriptive to the analytical (Goldman & McDonald, 1987). The latter

"synthesizes, structures and interprets data which, if reported as a string of observations, would leave the task of analysis almost entirely to the reader" (p. 172). It appears that an analytical summary is the moderator's qualitative interpretation of what occurred in the group discussion.

Some researchers go beyond qualitative analysis and organize the data more formally into themes (e.g., Conover, Crewe, & Searing, 1991; Parasuraman, Berry, & Zeithaml, 1991; Powell, Single, & Lloyd, 1996; Proctor, 1991; Swenson, Griswold, & Kleiber, 1992). Other researchers use coding schemes to organize the qualitative data into first- and second-order constructs (e.g., Conover et al. 1991; Hughes & DuMont 1993). For exploratory purposes, coding and thematic analyses are necessary.

Quantitative Summaries of Qualitative Sessions

In Chapter 6, I provide examples of beliefs about whether focus group results can or should be quantified. These beliefs persist despite the empirical evidence to the contrary (e.g., Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1993; Fern, 1982a; Griffin & Hauser, 1993; Höijer, 1990; Nelson & Frontczak, 1988). It is time to challenge conventional wisdom regarding the quantification of focus group findings.

I agree with Axelrod (1979a) that qualitative research does not need to "add up" to be useful. On one important point, we disagree. If you can add up focus group findings, they are quantifiable and analyzable. However, I want to be absolutely clear on this point: Quantitative analysis of focus group findings is by no means necessary. In fact, quantitative findings can often be quite misleading. Television news reports during national elections that cite votes from focus group members exemplify this point. For many research purposes, however, quantitative analyses may be informative (e.g., tabulating the frequency of beliefs, feelings, and behaviors).

Almost without exception, focus group written reports provide typical or representative examples from the group discussion (e.g., quotes from respondents). It seems only natural to ask, "How typical are these responses?" There are several ways to answer this question. One could say, for example, "It is my impression that they are typical." Alternatively, one could say, "These feelings are very typical." Finally, one could say "Approximately 80% of the people we interviewed felt this way, give or take 10 percentage points." Of course, the last response requires quantitative analysis.

I provide two examples of quantitative analysis of focus group data, although I could provide more. First, Höijer (1990) summarized the frequency

of different types of themes across focus group transcripts because the research interest was in the differences in individuals' levels of comprehension of television programs. By calculating the average number of individuals who expressed a particular theme, the significance of audience profile differences was tested using *t* tests.

In the second example, Delli Carpini and Keeter (1993) developed and tested survey-based measures of political factual knowledge. They tested the predictive validity of the resulting scale using focus groups. They conducted four groups (21 people in all), transcribed the tapes, and coded them for differences in the respondents' use of information. The scale predicted the use of facts in the 2-hour focus group discussions fairly well (*R*-squared = .51).

Quantitative analysis (e.g., counting frequencies) might be done for any of the following reasons: (a) to see what we have in a large body of data, (b) to verify a hunch or hypothesis, and (c) to keep oneself analytically honest, protecting against bias (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Quantitative analysis can account for either a single aspect of a focus group discussion or for several aspects. However, the same precautions taken in survey and experimental research are necessary.

Sources of Moderator Bias

Personal bias is the extent to which personal and professional experience, beliefs, prejudices, and needs cause the moderator to prejudge the focus group outcome. Kennedy (1976) and Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) discuss these types of bias.

Personal bias affects focus group findings if the moderator accepts responses consistent with his or her own positions on the issue and rejects others. This is a cardinal sin for moderators, and it is more likely to occur with inexperienced moderators than it is with professional moderators. Personal bias is unacceptable in both theory and effect applications, regardless of the group task.

How do we minimize the chances of receiving biased focus group findings? For applied research, the client should know the research agency and the moderator. Experience is arguably the best teacher. With unknown moderators, it may be best to get a second opinion. I discuss this in the following section on reliability. For theory evaluation purposes, it is best to involve two moderators. Each can then evaluate the other's sessions for sources of potential bias. If found, they need to be reported. Moreover, it makes sense to use an analyst other than the moderator. This reduces the temptation to shade the re-

sults in the direction of the moderator's expectations. Some types of research require the evaluation of the research finding's reliability and validity.

Reliability

For experiential tasks, the data must be reliable and should show evidence of face validity. Reliability requires conducting a systematic analysis of the transcripts or tapes to check for the consistency, stability, and equivalence of moderating procedures across groups. The coding scheme is critical.

Face Validity

Validity, at least face validity, can be assessed in focus group research (Höijer, 1990). Remember we are talking about the validity of the inferences drawn from focus group findings, not the validity of the focus group method per se. Thus, our concern is about whether the method fits the research purpose and whether the research plan was implemented adequately. The researcher must check each of the following: (a) group composition, (b) group size and the number of interviews, (c) the appropriateness of the interview location, (d) group process, (e) moderator characteristics and style, and (f) data coding and analysis. Even so, validity is a judgment call. Ultimately, this judgment depends on the researcher's ability to justify how the method suits the research purpose.

Summary

Different moderator backgrounds are necessary for different research purposes and different types of focus groups. For some applications, moderators are not necessary, and for other applications, amateurs are adequate. For most applications, trained moderators are preferred. Listening, observing, and interpreting nonverbal communications is neglected in the focus group literature. I discussed both topics and demonstrated their importance to both the conduct and analysis of group discussions. Handling dominant, shy, disruptive, and deceptive respondents was discussed briefly. Considerable space was devoted to planning focus group projects with racial/ethnic minority groups. The chapter ended with a discussion of the appropriateness of qualitative and quantitative analysis of the group output. Quantitative analysis is justified for some purposes so long as reliability and face validity are assessed.

Chapter 5

Factors That Affect the Focus Group Discussion Process

There is much speculation about factors that affect the group dynamic in focus group research. Various authors talk about the effects of social comparisons, peer group pressure, and group influence on individual group members' responses in the context of focus groups. But there are relatively few formal treatments of these theoretical processes in the focus group literature. See Fern (1982b), Bristol and Fern (1993), and McQuarrie and McIntyre (1988, 1990) for exceptions. To better explain the dynamics at work within each type of focus group, I first examine group processes more generally. Then, I review current thinking about factors that affect behavior within small informal groups. Subsequently, I examine the potential differential effects of these factors on particular focus group tasks.

During the course of the following review, I suggest a discussion process that underlies all focus group sessions to some extent. The causal factors, displayed in Figure 5.1, are known as production blocking, social influence, free riding, and information influence. These causal factors are taken from research on group processes in the psychology literature and appear to be theoretically generalizable (Turner, 1981). The primary output of interest is the individual member's self-disclosure of personally relevant information.

The Focus Group Discussion Process

In this section, I review research on group discussion processes and how these processes may affect an individual's self-disclosure in focus groups. But first,

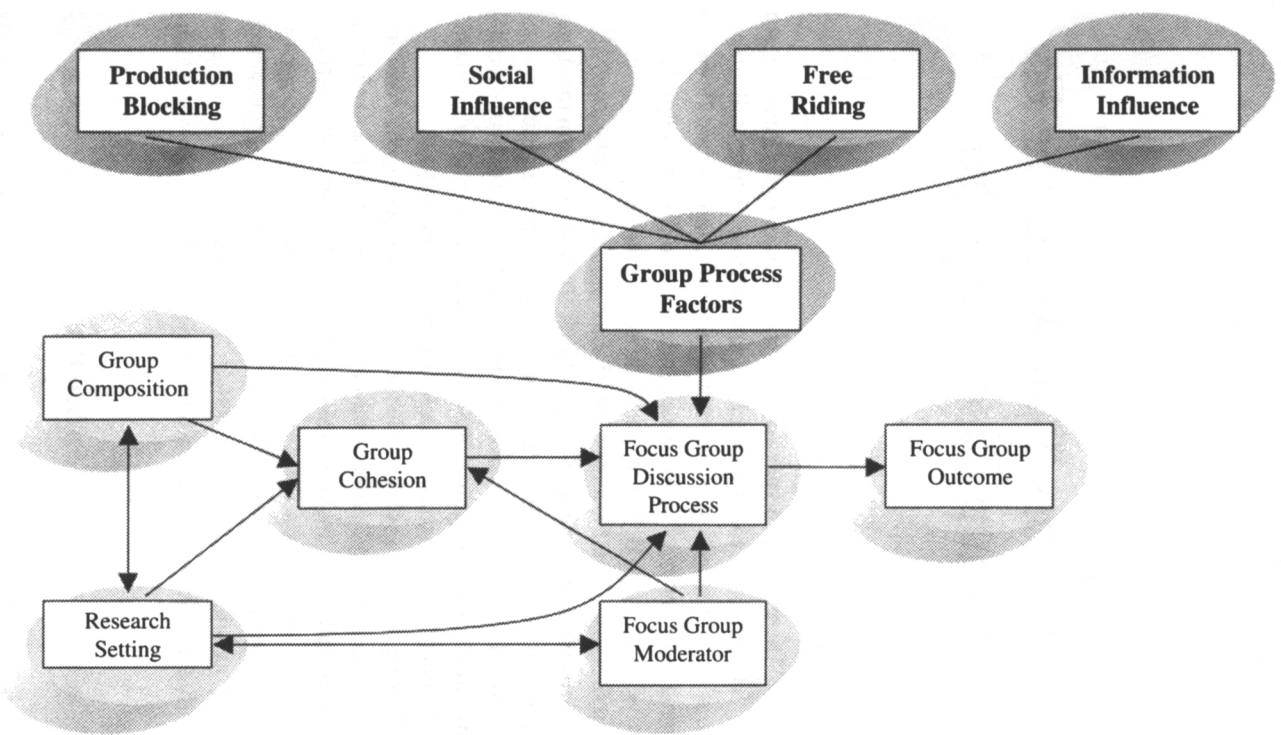

Figure 5.1. Factors That Affect the Focus Group Process

I define focus group discussion process and self-disclosure. The discussion process consists of six sequential stages borrowed from Foulkes (1964). This process is outlined in Table 5.1. When first meeting each other, group members are confronted with the diversity of strangers who have been recruited to participate in the group discussion. Over time, diversity gives way to social integration and, ultimately, the exchange of information. The time spent in each stage of the process depends on factors such as the research purpose, the type of focus group task, group composition, and the moderator. In later chapters, I examine the differences between the types of focus group tasks and how these differences may affect the discussion process. For now, however, I examine the differences in the time spent in each stage of the discussion process across research tasks. Later, I explain that some tasks, for example, will necessarily require more time than other tasks in the globality and social integration stages.

The first stage of the process, *globality,* has to do with the degree and the nature of the diversity among group members. Globality depends on the researchers' goals (e.g., uncovering shared or unique experiences), whether homogeneous or heterogeneous responses are desired, and who is recruited for the group sessions. For some research purposes, globality may be minimal; for others, it may be great. Individual group members recognize globality as soon as they become aware of each other.

Two activities mark the *differentiation* stage of the process—serving refreshments and warming up the participants by having them introduce themselves in round-robin fashion. During these early encounters, as members pick up on verbal and visual cues, they begin to differentiate other group members in terms of status, occupation, personality, and so forth. This is the second stage of the process. Greater differentiation is expected in heterogeneous groups than homogeneous ones. Depending on the degree of heterogeneity, the moderator may attempt to socially integrate the group.

Social integration is necessary because it is important for group members to realize that each member is on equal terms in this contrived social situation. The amount of time spent during this phase of the group discussion depends on the type of group and the degree of differentiation among group members. For groups of acquaintances, less time will be spent on social integration than for groups of strangers. For clinical tasks, considerable time may be devoted to integrating group members, whereas relatively little time may be spent on this activity for exploratory tasks. The moderator may or may not have to take an active role in this stage depending on whether there is a need to point out

TABLE 5.1 Focus Group Discussion Process

Stages		*Description*
1.	Globality	Participants recognize that they are different.
	↓	
2.	Differentiation	During warm-up session, they learn the extent of their differences.
	↓	
3.	Social integration	During the warm-up and the general discussion, they learn how to interact as a group.
	↓	
4.	Mirror reaction	As the discussion continues, participants learn what they have in common.
	↓	
5.	Condensing	At some point in the discussion, they develop a collective consciousness.
	↓	
6.	Information exchange	Finally, the group begins to exchange information and explanations on focal topic.

and interpret events that tend to prevent the social integration of the group members.

As the group becomes socially integrated, the members begin to relax and realize that others share similar thoughts, feelings, and experiences. This all occurs during the *mirror reaction* stage. Mirror reaction means that the individuals see parts of themselves in the others who are present. Knowing that one shares things in common with other members of the group relieves anxiety. As the group begins to develop a collective consciousness, the *condensing* stage begins. At this point, coalitions may form. Goldman and McDonald (1987) refer to the next stage as *hierarchic integration.* Differentiation, social integration, and mirror reaction may result in individuals of the same mind

who become allies within the group. McQuarrie and McIntyre (1988, 1990) discuss this phenomenon in terms of coalition formation and market segments. Again, the extent to which this stage emerges depends on who is recruited for the group sessions. It is more likely to occur when group members have different backgrounds.

Having passed through these five stages, the group enters the *information exchange* stage during which information and explanations are freely exchanged. Arriving at this end stage may take only a few minutes for some research purposes (e.g., thought-collecting tasks) and up to 30 minutes or more for others (e.g., uncovering motives for behaviors). Exchange is the heart of the focus group session. The exchange of information involves self-disclosure.

Self-Disclosure

Self-disclosure involves making oneself known to others by verbally disclosing personal information (Chelune, 1978). For present purposes, *self-disclosure* refers to oral/verbal disclosure. Nonverbal disclosure is treated elsewhere. By personal information, I mean any information (e.g., thoughts, feelings, and experiences) about the self that is generally not known to others (Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993).

Two types of self-disclosures are discussed by Derlega et al. (1993): descriptive self-disclosures and evaluative self-disclosures. Descriptive self-disclosures are facts about oneself and information that might be more or less personal, ranging from occupation and family size to drinking and sexual habits. Less personal descriptive self-disclosures are more likely to be made during the differentiation or warm-up stages of the group interview. As the group moves toward and accepts social integration, more personal descriptive disclosures and evaluative self-disclosures should be forthcoming. Evaluative self-disclosures are expressions of personal feelings, opinions, and judgments (Derlega et al., 1993).

Five dimensions of self-disclosure have been identified in the literature: (a) the amount or breadth of disclosure, (b) the intimacy of disclosure, (c) the duration of disclosure, (d) the affective manner of presentation, and (e) the flexibility of disclosure pattern. See Chelune (1975) for a review of these dimensions. The amount of disclosure seems to imply duration. The greater the number of personally relevant statements made, the longer it takes, holding speaking rate constant. So by itself, duration is less informative than amount.

Affective manner of presentation refers to the emotional level of the disclosure. Some disclosures are more laden with emotion than others. Flexibility of disclosure pattern refers to the ability to adapt one's self-disclosures to changes in the situational context (Chelune, 1975).

The intimacy of self-disclosure is important for many focus group purposes. It is commonly believed that focus groups will provide more candor and more intimate information than individual interviews (Caruso, 1976; Dupont, 1976; Goldman & McDonald, 1987; Wells, 1979). Others describe the focus group experience using phrases such as "greater spontaneity and candor," "release of inhibitions," "greater anonymity," and "feelings of openness" (Bristol & Fern, 1996; Fern, 1982a). The reasoning behind the notion that more personal and candid responses are obtained in focus groups is that the group supports its members in expressing anxiety-provoking and socially unpopular ideas (Goldman, 1962). Bristol and Fern (1996) report findings from an empirical study that compared respondent perceptions of the research atmosphere across focus groups, the nominal group technique, and self-administered open-ended surveys. They found that focus group participants felt less anonymous, less confident, more personal, and less relaxed than the individual survey participants. Nevertheless, to date, there is no empirical evidence to suggest that these feelings cause focus group respondents to disclose more personal information than survey respondents

In the literature I reviewed, verbal self-disclosure has been studied almost exclusively at the level of the dyad. Research on verbal self-disclosure in a group context is virtually nonexistent. This represents a wide gap in our knowledge about this phenomenon because self-disclosure is heavily influenced by the social context (Derlega et al., 1993). Because of this void in the extant research, I extrapolate theoretical explanations for self-disclosure behavior from verbal disclosure in dyads to disclosure in focus groups.

Disclosure Reciprocity and Liking

Forty years ago Jourard and colleagues began a stream of research on the relationship between self-disclosure and what they termed *cathexis,* or liking. They found that the more personal information one individual obtains from another, the more that person was liked (Jourard & Lasakow, 1958). They also discovered that the more personal information one received from another, the more one reciprocated the disclosure of personal information. Other researchers have added to these findings. High disclosers are more attracted to

other people than low disclosers (Query, 1964). And more personal information is disclosed to those from whom more intimate information was received (Ehrlich & Graeven, 1971; Worthy, Gary, & Kahn, 1969). Self-disclosure, however, is not related to liking when strangers first meet (Ehrlich & Graeven, 1971).

There are several explanations for reciprocity in self-disclosure. One explanation is that a reciprocity norm is operating in these situations. People feel obligated to disclose themselves when they receive disclosure from others. The individual who fails to reciprocate is in an inequitable relationship (Chaikin & Derlega, 1974). By not reciprocating, the recipient of disclosure can use the disclosed information to hurt the discloser. Inequity creates tension that in turn motivates behavior designed to eliminate it—reciprocating similar levels of personal information.

A focus group moderator may be able to increase levels of self-disclosure by disclosing some personal information about himself or herself. Care must be taken, however, to not disclose at a high level of intimacy. Cozby (1972) found a curvilinear relationship between intimacy and liking; reciprocity is less likely at higher levels of intimacy. Apparently, disclosing at high levels of intimacy is interpreted as a reflection of questionable mental health. Derlega, Harris, and Chaikin (1973) found that the disclosure of deviant intimate information was liked less than the disclosure of nondeviant intimate information. They interpret this finding in terms of a similarity-attraction relationship; people are attracted to those who are similar, but they reject deviants.

Four sets of factors may affect focus group processes and self-disclosure: production blocking, social influence, free riding, and information influence. I begin this group process discussion with production blocking.

Production Blocking

Participants in focus group discussions are required to attend to what is being said and at the same time prepare their contribution to the group discussion. These two processes may conflict with each other, resulting in distractions that hinder accurate listening and accurate transmission of contributions to the discussion and that cause one to forget what has been said. These conflicts adversely affect group processes and are referred to as *production blocking.*

Fern (1982a) demonstrated diminishing returns in a thought-collecting task as the size of focus groups increased, which is consistent with a social-loafing explanation. More current research has uncovered other more tenable

explanations for this phenomenon (Diehl & Stroebe, 1987, 1991). Steiner (1972) argues convincingly that idea production is necessarily blocked in any group discussion and that the blockage is caused by the loss of coordination among group members. Diehl and Stroebe (1991) extend Steiner's thinking to brainstorming groups. Lamm and Trommsdorff (1973) had previously argued that idea production by groups is inferior to that of individuals working alone because the limited speaking time must be shared among all group members. Diehl and Stroebe (1987) disagree that the lack of speaking time is the cause of decrements in idea production in groups. In most previous research, they argue, group members ran out of ideas before reaching the time limit. Therefore, lack of time cannot be the problem. Rather, they argue that production blocking occurs when brainstorming group participants become distracted or when they suppress their thoughts while other group members are speaking. Individuals brainstorming alone have no such distractions.

Presumably, it is difficult for people involved in group discussions to both think and listen at the same time. While others are talking, at least three things can occur, any one of which may block idea production. First, a listener may become distracted and unable to think of new ideas. Second, the person waiting to talk may rehearse what he or she is going to say next and not listen to what is being said or not think about creative ideas. Third, people waiting to speak may forget what they were going to say.

It is also possible that different cognitive structures or processes are activated, depending on whether a person is receiving or transmitting information. Zajonc (1960) refers to this phenomenon as *cognitive tuning*. If a person is listening while other group members are talking, cognitive structures capable of receiving the new information are activated. For example, the individual may be contemplating his or her attitudes about the issues under discussion and whether or not they are similar to the speaker's attitudes. In this mode, the person is either not thinking about new ideas or is momentarily distracted while trying to think of new ideas. Subsequently, when a person is expecting to speak to other group members and is getting ready to transmit information, a different set of cognitive structures may be activated. For example, the individual may be trying to recall sources of information to bolster his or her argument on a particular issue. During the attempt to recall information, the individual is less likely to attend to what is being said. Because these cognitive structures that are in place for speaking are different from those for listening, little or no information is received while individuals are in the speaking mode.

During the course of a group's discussion, members switch transmission modes many times. Each switch in cognitive tuning mode results in a loss of information. When no one else is present, which is the case in individual interviews and open-ended surveys, individuals maintain the speaking or transmission mode throughout most of the task. Thus, little information is lost because of switches in tuning. This process may account for Fern's results (1982a) showing that focus groups disclose fewer ideas than individual interviews.

Group members are more likely to forget or suppress their ideas during the delay between the point at which the idea occurred to them and the point at which they were able to speak. For many individuals, having to listen to others is distracting and interferes with one's own thinking. Diehl and Stroebe (1987) demonstrate that when individuals are allowed to verbalize their ideas as they occur, they generate almost twice as many ideas as when they have to wait their turn.

Several mechanisms mediate the impact of production blocking: (a) the total length of time for brainstorming, (b) the period available for the expression of ideas, and (c) procedural strategies (e.g., turn taking and note taking) (Diehl & Stroebe, 1991). Diehl and Stroebe (1991) found that an equivalent number of individuals working alone produced more ideas than "real" groups and they produced more ideas in 20 minutes than they did in 10 minutes. When real groups were given four times the time allotted to individuals, they finally outperformed them. However, there was no significant Group Type × Time interaction. This means that the idea production gap between individuals and groups does not narrow when time is extended for groups. Thus, the lack-of-speaking-time explanation does not seem to hold up under scrutiny.

If the additional time that was given real groups allows more speaking time, then time would be the explanation of the nominal group superiority over real groups. If the additional time results in more thinking time, however, then time does not explain the differences. Diehl and Stroebe (1991) showed that when participants reported their ideas as they occurred speaking time was unimportant. They concluded that productivity loss was due to members' inability to use waiting time to think productively. This inability to think productively may have been because they were distracted, inattentive, or simply forgot their ideas. By increasing each participant's control over how they used their waiting periods, Diehl and Stroebe thought that group members' productivity might increase. Participants in this study, however, were unable to use their waiting time for additional idea production. Note taking did not help much. Participants did, however, produce significantly more ideas when they

could not hear other group members and produced marginally more ideas when they took notes than when they couldn't hear others or did not take notes. Note taking, apparently, was more effective without the distraction of hearing others.

Social Influence

Another factor that is thought to impede focus group discussions is *social influence.* Social influence, however, is widely misunderstood. It includes effects due to social facilitation (Fern, 1982b), evaluation apprehension (Collaros & Anderson, 1969; Taylor, Altman, & Sorrentino, 1969), self-awareness (Duval & Wicklund, 1972), group dynamics (Lewin, 1958), conformity to social pressure (Asch, 1952), and normative influence (Goethals & Zanna, 1979). In the sections to follow, I discuss three types of social influence that appear to be relevant to focus groups: evaluation apprehension, self-awareness, and normative influence.

Evaluation Apprehension

Inhibition due to embarrassment or apprehension may have adverse effects on members of focus groups. The fear of social disapproval may work against the disclosure of personally relevant information in focus group discussions. Taylor et al. (1969) provide evidence that people disclose less when they are being evaluated negatively. Even the potential for negative evaluation by others in the group may cause some members to withhold their thoughts (Collaros & Anderson, 1969). There is little agreement, however, about the source of negative evaluation. Other group members, the moderator, the one-way mirror, and the video cameras are all potential causes of evaluation apprehension. Most reports by professional moderators suggest that focus group respondents soon forget about the recorder and that it is not a source of evaluation apprehension.

In a study by Diehl and Stroebe (1987), evaluation by peers or judges affected the number of ideas generated by individuals only when they were evaluated individually. It made no difference whether they brainstormed alone or in a group. When individuals thought that their individual performance was being assessed, they produced fewer ideas than those who were not being assessed. Szymanski and Harkins (1987), on the other hand, demonstrated that the mere potential for evaluation by the experimenter caused

participants to increase their idea production in a brainstorming task. Maginn and Harris (1980) provide contradictory evidence. In their study, evaluation apprehension had no effect on the brainstorming task.

Apparently, evaluation apprehension is a factor to contend with, but it should have relatively minor adverse effects on participation in creative tasks. The manipulation of peer evaluation in the studies that I reviewed was rather strong. For example, in two of the studies (Diehl & Stroebe, 1987; Maginn & Harris, 1980), participants were facing a one-way mirror, and they were told that judges who sat behind the mirror would rate their ideas for quality and originality. In another manipulation, these same researchers told participants that they were being videotaped and that the tapes would be used in the classroom for demonstration purposes (Diehl & Stroebe, 1987; Maginn & Harris, 1980). In a third experiment, these two conditions were combined so that participants thought they were being evaluated by judges who sat behind the mirror and that the tapes would be used later in the classroom (Diehl & Stroebe, 1987). Even so, the effects of evaluation apprehension are not great.

The main effect of evaluation apprehension on idea production explains 8% of the total variance in the number of ideas produced (Diehl & Stroebe, 1987). Compare this with 84% for type of brainstorming session, group versus individual (Diehl & Stroebe, 1987), and 86% for the size of the group—one, four, and eight members (Fern, 1982a). Diehl and Stroebe (1987) also report that there is significantly less idea production when judges behind one-way mirrors personally assess individuals, in both individual and group brainstorming conditions. Apparently, when the group rather than the individual is the targeted for evaluation, evaluation apprehension has no effect. It appears that evaluation apprehension may have an adverse effect on individual performance in thought-elicitation tasks, but contrary to popular belief, it is not a major cause of this effect. Whether an effect is obtained at all depends on whether the individual or the group is targeted for evaluation.

The negative impact from evaluation apprehension manipulations in brainstorming studies may not generalize to focus groups for several reasons. First, the evaluation manipulations in these studies were extreme, as noted earlier. Focus group moderators can warn group members about evaluation. When group members are instructed, "We want as many ideas as possible, and don't prejudge your ideas," group members should focus less on the self and self-evaluation. Thus, it is unlikely that individuals are very apprehensive about what they say in focus groups.

Second, the brainstorming tasks did not involve disclosing personal information, as is the case in many focus group applications. In focus groups, it

is expected that evaluation apprehension will come from other people present during the group discussion (e.g., group members, the moderator, note takers, and decision makers). Focus group participants are less likely to fear being watched from behind one-way mirrors or being evaluated by peers at some later time. It is more likely that looking foolish or silly in front of other group members causes people to be apprehensive in focus groups. If focus group members are more apprehensive than individuals expressing their thoughts alone, less intimate information will be shared in groups than in individual interviews.

Self-Awareness

Enhanced self-awareness, which is uncomfortable, may result from the presence of other people, one-way mirrors, tape or video recorders, unfamiliar or unstructured surroundings, and minority status (Derlega et al., 1993; Duval & Wicklund, 1972; Wicklund & Frey, 1980). Mirrors, cameras, and tape recorders are commonly used in focus group research and at least have the potential for causing self-focused attention.

In one study (Duval, Wicklund, & Fine, reported in Duval & Wicklund, 1972), half the women participants were told they were in the upper 10th percentile on a cleverness test, which should not be discrepant information. The other half was told that they were in the lower 10th percentile, information that should be discrepant. The participants were then told to expect someone to show up within 5 minutes, but if the person didn't show, the participants could leave the room. When the room was equipped with a mirror and camera, participants given the discrepant information (i.e., told they were in the lower 10th percentile) waited 6.4 minutes. When there was no mirror and camera, participants in the discrepant condition waited 8.1 minutes, and the difference was significant. Apparently, when faced with discrepant information, individuals find facing a mirror and a camera uncomfortable.

In another study (Archer, Hormuth, & Berg, 1979, participants were asked to disclose information about themselves to another person. Some were asked to disclose mildly intimate information, and others, superficial information; some disclosed before a mirror. Those who were asked to disclose intimate information in front of the mirror hesitated twice as long as those not facing a mirror (17.1 versus 9.8 seconds).

Individuals may also express more extreme attitudes because of a state of heightened self-awareness. Under such conditions, the self-aware individual undergoes a process of evaluation in search of the correspondence, or lack of correspondence, between some standard of behavior and his or her actual be-

havior. If the discrepancy is negative, the evaluation is negative, which is uncomfortable (Wicklund & Frey, 1980). To reduce the discomfort, individuals can either try to eliminate the discrepancy by changing their behavior or remove themselves from the source of the self-focusing stimuli or ignore it. If the discrepancy is positive, there is no discomfort. Thus, when individuals are in a state of self-focus and reflect on their attitudes, they may look for reasons to support their attitudes and feelings (Duval & Wicklund, 1972). Comparing their attitudinal position with what they believe to be a normative standard among their peers or even reflecting on their prior behavior regarding the attitude object may cause a discrepancy and lead them to adopt more extreme attitudes (Ickes, Wicklund, & Ferris, 1973; Scheier & Carver, 1977).

Self-awareness may have positive effects as well. For example, self-focused attention may cause people to behave more consistently with their stated personalities. In the first of two studies that examine this relationship, Carver (1975) found that when students who stated a preference for using punishment to teach were given the opportunity to do so in front of a mirror, their behavior reflected this propensity. Those who were not teaching in front of the mirror did not reflect their previously reported punitive attitudes in teaching style. In the second study, female students rated themselves in a test of "sex guilt" (Gibbons, 1978). Later, when they were asked to read pornographic material and rate their enjoyment of it, those in the self-awareness condition expressed their distaste for pornography in a way that was consistent with their earlier sex guilt ratings. Those not induced to become self-aware did not exhibit consistency in their distaste for pornography.

Values (punitive attitude and sex guilt) were measured before the self-awareness experiments were conducted in these studies. Weeks later, the self-awareness induction caused the individuals to behave in ways that were consistent with their stated values. This was not so for those who did not undergo the self-awareness experience. If these sparse findings generalize to focus groups, we may find that mirrors and recorders cause individuals to become self-aware and more likely to reflect positions on issues that are consistent with their personalities. In the context of focus groups, however, we know little about the effects of mirrors, recorders, and observers on the self-awareness and subsequent behavior of group members.

Normative Influence

Individuals often compare themselves to the social standards (norms) of others (Harkins & Szymanski, 1987). Such comparisons may lead them to adopt attitudinal positions that are more extreme (i.e., polarized) than the *nor-*

mative standard apparent within a group (Goethals & Zanna, 1979). Three conditions are necessary for social comparisons to cause attitude polarization: (a) Individuals must desire to be evaluated favorably by group members; (b) the setting must provide a standard of comparison; and (c) the setting must allow for the evaluations of others. All three of these conditions are possible in focus groups. In settings in which others provide a standard of comparison, a desire to be evaluated favorably may motivate individuals to adopt and express more extreme attitudes than they held previously (Allison & Messick, 1987; Harkins & Szymanski, 1987). Sanders and Baron (1977) argue that in group discussions about opinions, beliefs, and attitudes, individuals often understate their valued positions because they do not want to appear deviant in the eyes of other group members. In either case, individuals express attitudes in groups that are more or less extreme than those they held previously. When others express more extreme attitudes in the group's discussion, the more moderate members feel either released to express their valued positions or a need to compete in expressing more extreme attitudes. It is likely that these processes occur in focus groups as well.

Free Riding

Free riding is expected to occur when individuals think that their thoughts will be pooled along with those of others in the group. As a result, their individual productivity will not stand out and they tend to ride free on the work of others. This phenomenon is also known as motivation loss, diffusion of responsibility, and social loafing. Latané and his colleagues have examined this phenomenon using a number of physical tasks to support the free riding explanation (Harkins, Latané, & Williams, 1980; Latané, Williams, & Harkins, 1979; Williams, Harkins, & Latané, 1981). In a brainstorming task, Williams and Karau (1991) show that co-acting groups (individuals working alone) generated more uses for an object than groups brainstorming collectively. Finally, research on social loafing and collectivism indicates that social loafing is less likely among collectivists than among individualists (Early, 1989) and that individualists are more likely to free ride than collectivists (Wagner, 1992, cited in Triandis, 1995). Individualists tended to avoid their responsibilities, let others do a greater share of the work, and allow others to pay for them more than collectivists do. Individualists are more prone to free ride when the interest is in group goals, but not so with collectivists; group goals work best with these people.

There is evidence against the free riding explanation, however. Diehl and Stroebe (1987) compared groups with individuals while manipulating performance assessment. Half of those in the individual and group conditions were told they would be individually assessed after brainstorming, and the other half were told that the group they were in would be assessed after brainstorming. Free riding should cause fewer ideas to be generated in the group-assessment condition (i.e., because they feel individually unaccountable) than in the individual-assessment condition (i.e., they are individually accountable). Moreover, this effect should be greater in real groups than in nominal groups (i.e., groups randomly selected from individuals working alone, with their output aggregated into a group product) because individuals are less likely to free ride if they are being individually evaluated. Diehl and Stroebe's results showed that nominal groups produced significantly more ideas than real groups. Moreover, type of assessment did not interact with type of group, and the main effect for type of assessment, as reported earlier, was small as well. Thus, they concluded that it was unlikely that free riding accounted for the results.

In summary, evaluation apprehension does not cause individuals to outperform focus groups in ideation tasks. Typically, focus group moderators tell members that individuals are not being evaluated and that the research interest is in aggregate results, not those of individuals. This practice is probably enough to prevent the debilitating effects from evaluation apprehension. Free riding is not likely to be an explanation for this phenomenon either, but it cannot be completely ruled out. Again, the moderator's instruction that "we want to hear from everybody" coupled with calling on reticent speakers may minimize free riding.

Waiting time, and how participants use it, is the most likely explanation for the productivity decrement in thought-collecting groups. While group members are waiting to speak, they may become distracted or they may rehearse their thoughts and forget what they were going to say. The number of changes in transmission modes that each participant experiences is another factor that may attenuate the number of thoughts elicited in groups.

Both the length of the waiting time and the number of times participants have to wait tend to be compensatory in their effects on idea production. To decrease the number of tuning mode changes, the moderator might encourage participants to speak longer while they have the floor, which decreases the number of tuning changes but increases the waiting time and the likely distractions that result from waiting. Decreasing the waiting time increases the number of mode changes as well as the distractions they cause. This poses

a dilemma for the moderator. I address these issues further in the discussion of exploratory tasks in Chapter 7.

The Influence of Information

Earlier I discussed the role of normative influence on group discussion and attitude polarization. Information can also affect group discussion. Information influences group discussion in two ways. The first type of influence deals with the persuasiveness of unique information that is used during group discussion to support a particular position. The second type of information influence depends on how the needed information is distributed across group members. Common information or that which is distributed almost equally across the group's members affects the group discussion differently than does information that is uniquely held by each member of the group. McQuarrie and McIntyre (1988) talk about shared information in their writings on focus groups. Here, I discuss the influence of shared information more formally and return to the topic when I consider experiential groups in Chapter 8.

Persuasive Arguments and Attitude Polarization

In marketing research, we use focus groups to gain insights into a wide range of topics, including media attitudes, brand attitudes, attitudes toward packaging aesthetics, attitudes toward financial services, and attitudes toward electric utilities, to mention a few. Academic researchers frequently use focus groups to develop and explore consumer behavior theories and theoretical constructs related to attitudes. Academics and practitioners use focus groups to explore the various components of attitudes, such as beliefs about product attributes. Of the academic studies cited by Wilkie and Pessemier (1973) in their discussion on the use of multi-attribute attitude models, 75% reported the use of groups to initially specify the attributes used in the models. Finally, in fields other than marketing, focus groups have been used to explore beliefs, opinions, and attitudes toward contraceptives, family planning, traffic safety, the arts, alcohol effects on sexual behavior, HIV infection and AIDS, smoking, diarrhea, and many more attitude objects or people. Despite Calder's (1977) warning, many researchers rely on focus groups for studying the vari-

ous components of attitudes. Thus, I feel that this topic is important, and I offer the following insights into how attitudes can be affected by the focus group process.

One danger in using focus groups for studying attitudes is that the strength or intensity and the polarity (i.e., positive or negative) of the elicited attitudes may reflect the process used to collect the information. For example, the presence of, or interaction with, other individuals can lead to shifts or changes in one's own tendencies, including attitudes (Millar & Millar, 1990; Turner, 1991; Zuber, Crott, & Werner, 1992). Moreover, the "true attitude" cannot be sorted from the confounded effects due to method. There are several ways that group discussion can affect attitudes, and these are discussed next.

Attitude shift is any change in magnitude or direction of attitudes. Attitude *polarization* refers to the increase in intensity of one's previously held attitude—that is, a change in degree but not direction. Attitudes expressed in groups may be stated more strongly than the individual's true feelings might warrant. For example, a student who thinks diet sodas taste bad might say that they taste extremely bad in a focus group. In fact, a student in one or our studies said that diet sodas tasted so bad that he would not drink one in the middle of the desert even if there was nothing else to drink. This expression of affect is considerably stronger than "extremely bad," which was the polar extreme on the survey scale that we used. Attitude *depolarization* is also known as attitude change and is a reversal in attitude direction, a decrease in intensity, or a move in the opposite direction. For example, someone who thought diet sodas tasted somewhat good before group discussion might think they tasted somewhat bad after group discussion. Evidence for both polarization and depolarization as a result of group discussion has been reported (Vinokur & Burnstein, 1978).

Attitudes may shift during the course of group discussion because of the persuasive arguments presented (Kaplan, 1987; Vinokur & Burnstein, 1974). The exchange of information in groups may lead members to consider facts not considered previously when their initial attitudes were formed (Allison & Messick, 1987). In group polarization research, informational influence refers to the exchange of arguments, for or against a position, that induces shifts in opinions, beliefs, and attitudes (Turner, 1991). Several factors can influence the persuasiveness of an argument, including the relevance, validity (the truth or logic of an argument), and novelty or uniqueness of the argument (Isenberg, 1986). For example, valid and novel information that is relevant to

the discussion topic can lead some group members to shift their attitudes so that they become polarized or depolarized.

I have read reports of focus group research projects dealing with attitudes that declare that focus groups provide more information than surveys. The information is thought to be richer because the expression of attitudes is more vivid or feelings are expressed more intensely. Caution should be used when interpreting these expressions; they may reflect situational demands on the individual who is responding. Unless we take other measures, we cannot be certain about whether these are the individual's "natural" attitudes, whether they simply reflect the transitory situation, or whether they represent lasting change.

Information Sharing

Stasser and Titus (1985) refer to information possessed by all group members as *shared information* and information that is unique to an individual as *unshared information.* I use their terminology throughout the discussion that follows. Stasser and Titus (1985) developed an information-sampling model that predicts the predominance of shared information during group discussion. The following section discusses their information-sampling model.

Assume that for any focus group purpose, there is a domain of relevant information distributed across group members. This domain is the sum of all the information held by individual group members. Group members share part of this information, and the other part is not shared. The shared information is common or everyday knowledge that results from the similar backgrounds and life experiences of the individuals making up the group. The unshared part of the information is that which one individual knows but others do not. This information is unique because no two individuals have exactly the same life experiences. As a result, the domain of information available to the group and its moderator is unequally distributed across group members, depending on the degree to which members share similar backgrounds and experiences. Each group member possesses a different subset of the total available information.

From this perspective, group discussion is a disjunctive process, which means that only one member needs to recall and mention an item from the domain of information for it to be considered by the group (Stasser & Titus, 1987). The greater the number of members who know the item of information, the more likely the item will be mentioned and discussed during the

group session. By definition, shared information is known by all group members and therefore is more likely to be mentioned and discussed by the group than unshared information. The reader who is interested in calculating these probabilities should read the articles by Stasser and Titus (1987) and Stasser, Taylor, and Hanna (1989).

The evidence supporting the information-sampling model is growing. In a task involving the selection of a political candidate, Stasser and Titus (1985) found that group discussion focused primarily on the information that each member shared with others in the group. Even when the unshared information clearly favored one of the political candidates, participants tended to omit this information from the group discussion. As a result, the group choice is often biased in favor of the candidate who was supported by the shared information. A second study (Stasser & Titus, 1987) reports results similar to the study for the selection of political candidates of equal attractiveness. In addition, they report that the discussion of unshared information occurred only when the percentage of shared information, relative to unshared information, was low.

The results from this research also show that as the percentage of shared information decreases relative to the unshared, the probability of discussing unshared information increases. The relative percentage of unshared information is determined by the similarity of backgrounds of the group members, the number of people in the group, and the specific time in the group discussion. Groups with members whose backgrounds are heterogeneous may have little shared information to discuss and are more likely to discuss their unique information than homogeneous groups.

Factors That Affect the Likelihood of Group Members' Discussing Unshared Information

Several factors affect the likelihood that group members will discuss unshared information. These factors include the size of the group, importance of the information, importance of the task, group structure, and member training.

Size of the Group. If the group is large—say, 12 or more members—it is more likely that group members will focus on the information they have in common rather than on the unique aspects of their backgrounds and experiences. Group size affects the amount of information shared and also the amount that is not shared (Stasser et al., 1989). As the number of people in the group increases, it is more likely that an item of shared information will be

mentioned so long as the ability to recall information does not change. The probability of discussing a piece of information also depends on the likelihood of recalling it from memory. There is no change, however, in the probability of discussing unshared information as a result of increasing group size; it remains the same.

Note that under some special circumstances, unshared information may be discussed more and have a substantial impact on the discussion. Generally, shared information will have a greater impact, particularly if it is equally distributed across group members. When two or more members share the same relatively unique information and the majority shares none, however, the minority position on the issue may prevail, causing disagreement between the minority and majority. As McQuarrie and McIntyre (1988) note, subgroups within a focus group may form, thus allowing the researcher to observe characteristics of market segments. Keep in mind that there is a risk that the persuasiveness of the unique information may lead to attitude polarization between minority and majority positions on the issues and may cause within group conflict.

Importance of Information. The previous discussion implicitly assumes that the individual pieces of shared or unshared information are equally important. In an actual focus group situation, however, it is likely that some items of information will be perceived to be more important than other items. Importance judgments become problematic because they can be biased and lead to biased preferences. Information perceived to be more important should have more influence on the group's discussion, leading to biased attitudes and preferences. This is so because the importance of information is not objectively determined. Importance tends to be determined by the order in which the information is presented and the number of people who share the information. Information presented earlier in the discussion and supported by a substantial number people is more likely to be considered important than information brought up later by a single person.

Moreover, the information presented first may be considered more important because it tends to anchor individual judgments. Information brought up later is used to adjust these judgments. When adjustment fails, which is highly likely, the group choice is biased by the arguments that were presented first (Gigone & Hastie, 1993). Therefore, shared information is likely to be perceived as more important, and the resulting group choice or preference is likely to be biased in favor of the members' initial preferences.

The number of people who share an item of information prior to the group meeting affects the perceived importance of information as well. If only one

person in the group possesses a particular item of information and two or more individuals share another item of information, the group should perceive the latter to be more important than the former. Because more group members possess shared information, it is more likely to be considered common knowledge and perceived to be more important than information that is not shared. This "common knowledge effect" suggests that the importance placed on a piece of information will increase as the number of group members who share the information before group discussion increases (Gigone & Hastie, 1993).

For some tasks, the common knowledge effect poses a challenge for focus group moderators. For exploratory tasks for which unique information is desired, moderators must keep the group moving so that potentially important unshared information is brought to the surface. For experiential tasks, shared everyday experiences may be desirable, with unshared information being less important. In either case, the group discussion should not become consciously involved in judging the importance of the issues that are raised. Moderators should also resist the urge to attribute undue importance to positions raised early in the discussion as well as those that receive unanimous support when they analyze the tapes or transcripts.

Importance of the Task. Another factor that affects whether an item of information is discussed is the individual group member's motivation to participate in the discussion (Larson, Foster-Fishman, & Keys, 1994). Important unshared information may be lost to the group if the member who possesses the information is reluctant to share it. Therefore, improving participation in the group discussion should increase the amount of otherwise unshared information that is shared with the group and improve the overall quality of information obtained. People are more likely to find the discussion meaningful and are more likely to be motivated to participate in the group discussion when the topic is one that may have a substantial impact on their lives. When a shy individual possesses important information, it may remain unshared unless the moderator facilitates this person's participation in the discussion. The moderator's role becomes even more crucial when the topic of discussion is mundane or uninteresting.

Group Structure and Training. If groups can be taught to use a strategy for uncovering relevant information—for example, rules about what types of information to include in the discussion—the quantity of information elicited may increase (Larson et al., 1994). Some moderators admonish group members not to prejudge thoughts. Another strategy involves instructing the

groups to use a two-stage process. The first stage might be devoted to eliciting all the relevant information (common and unique) without comment and the second used to discuss the information. Different stages allow the group to discuss information without mentioning preferences in the first stage but discussing and supporting their preferences during the second stage. This is similar to the nominal group technique that will be discussed later. Stasser et al. (1989) provide empirical evidence to suggest that structuring the group discussion increases the amount of information discussed.

Another strategy for developing information vigilance skills (Larson et al., 1994) is formal training before the group discusses the topic of interest. If group members are made aware of how they can uncover and deal with unshared information, the quantity and quality of information might increase. Larson and colleagues found that vigilance training and group structure cause an increase in the discussion of both shared and unshared information. Moreover, the focus of the conversation in the untrained groups went from shared to unshared information, whereas no change in focus occurred in the trained groups. Vigilance training is discussed in more detail in the chapter on experiential groups (Chapter 8).

Summary

I discussed the events that occur during the first 15 to 30 minutes of a focus group session. I described six stages of the discussion process and noted factors that may affect this process. I also explored the dimensions of self-disclosure and concluded that the type of self-disclosure sought depends on the research purpose and the type of group being conducted. In addition, self-disclosure tends to be reciprocal in nature because people like those who disclose moderately personal information and the recipients feel an obligation to return the favor. Also, the focus group moderator may facilitate this process by disclosing personal information so long as the information is not highly intimate.

Next, I looked at a number of factors that may adversely affect the discussion process. The group process is not conducive to brainstorming tasks, primarily because the group discussion process interferes with the ideation process. These problems are diminished, however, if the ideas are expressed individually before they are discussed in depth. Also, evaluation apprehension is not a major concern for focus group moderators. Neither is social loafing or free riding a concern.

I also looked at two different effects that information might have on this process. First, I discussed some ways in which attitudes of group members might change because of the group discussion. As a result of normative pressures or persuasive arguments by other group members that may be present in any group context, I considered the problem of determining whether attitudes expressed in groups are "natural" or the result of the group situation. In the chapters to come, I discuss some of these same issues in the context of specific types of focus group research.

Second, information that is available to a group through its members is unequally distributed. Some information is shared by all the members, and some is known by no more than one member. Because the probability of mentioning an item of information depends on the number of people who know it, common or shared information is more likely to be brought up in the group discussion than unique or unshared information. Knowing something about group composition, we can recruit group members to ensure either homogeneous members with much information in common or heterogeneous groups with relatively little information in common. Depending on the research purpose, we can then recruit individuals to uncover either shared information and experiences or unique information and experiences.

If the research goal is to uncover common or everyday experiences from the relevant population, larger groups with relatively homogeneous members are desirable. If the researcher is interested in unique information or ideas, a number of smaller groups of heterogeneous individuals may be better. Whatever the research purpose, care must be taken when attributing importance to some specific items of information but not to others. Common information uncovered early in the discussion will be given more importance by group members than the unique information uncovered later in the discussion. The analyst should be aware of this occurrence.

I also offered some exercises that moderators might find helpful in eliciting relevant information. One strategy involves a two-stage process that can be used for thought-collecting tasks. I also discussed using part of the allotted time for providing group members with training in information vigilance. Vigilance training may be helpful in getting group members to discuss more of the unshared information than might otherwise be discussed.

Chapter 6

Methodological Issues in Focus Group Research

Representativeness, Independence, Degrees of Freedom, and Theory Confirmation

Several potential problems with focus group uses have been noted. Most are summarized in Wells's (1979) concerns that focus group research violates the "accepted cannons" of survey research. First, focus group research is criticized because the sample sizes are small and samples are not selected using probability methods. Therefore, the samples are not representative and the focus group results are not generalizable. Second, questions are not asked the same way each time. Apparently, this is so even though moderators have guidelines to help in this regard. Third, responses are not independent; some respondents inflict their opinions on others, and some respondents do not participate. In the extreme, the lack of independence means that the focus group is the unit of analysis (i.e., a focus group of eight members constitutes an n of 1). Fourth, results are difficult if not impossible to quantify. This notion is based on the qualitative nature of focus group research and the belief that qualitative information should not or cannot be quantified. Fifth, conclusions depend on the analyst's interpretation, and the analyst/investigator can easily influence the results—"Bad analyst: bad report" (Wells, 1979, p. 12). Focus group critics ignore the fact that this criticism applies to survey and experimental research as well. Sixth, Wells warns that considering the above problems, users of focus groups should weigh the risks of using focus groups for more rigorous investigation than hypothesis generation. Finally, Calder (1977) questions the scientific status of focus group research compared with quantitative research, presumably

experiments and surveys. Nevertheless, when focus group projects use unrepresentative samples, incompetent or biased moderators, unstructured moderator guides, and a single untested interpretation, users of the resulting focus group findings should be concerned because the risks they face are considerable.

Although there is much that can be done to minimize these problems, because of these and other concerns, focus groups are generally thought to be limited in terms of legitimate uses, the types of data they can generate, and the types of analyses that can be performed on focus group data. In the sections that follow, I explore each of these concerns. During the course of the exploration, the reader will see that some of these concerns are not at all problematic, others can be dealt with, and the quality of focus group data depends on the choices made by the researcher. As with experimental and survey research, focus group research poses dilemmas that require the researcher to make informed choices (Blalock, 1984; McGrath, Martin, & Kulka, 1982). After examining each of the six concerns expressed by Wells and others, I conclude that none of these concerns are inherent in the focus group method. Through informed and judicious choices by the researcher, focus groups may find uses beyond those traditionally acknowledged in the marketing literature. One choice the researcher faces affects the representativeness of the sample.

Representative Samples

The argument that focus groups are not representative appears to be based on two common practices: (a) relatively few groups are run in a given study, and (b) the selection of respondents is not a random process. Although this concern is appropriate for some types of research purposes, it is unduly restrictive. Choices about the number of groups and the sampling process are judgment calls on the part of the researcher (Blalock, 1984; McGrath et al., 1982). The belief that focus groups lack representativeness may be due to the small sample sizes and recruiting procedures used in many marketing research applications (e.g., uncovering consumers' thoughts and experiences, learning their language, and developing hypotheses).

In applied focus group research (e.g., advertising research), unrepresentative samples often result from budget and time constraints. Frequently, decision makers facing short turnaround times and limited resources prefer running a few focus groups to no research at all, although the research is not

representative (Wells, 1979). Marketing applications typically use relatively few focus groups and routinely employ convenience or judgment samples (e.g., mall intercepts). Just how many depends on whom you ask. However, most authors on the topic argue that most focus group research requires somewhere between four and six groups. For these purposes, it is unlikely that the samples are representative, and the warning against generalizing to a larger or different population is warranted.

However, for many applications, researchers appear to use judgmental and stratified samples out of concern for their representativeness (e.g., Conover, Crewe, & Searing, 1991; Glik, Gordon, Ward, Kouame, & Guessan, 1988; Hoppe, Wells, Wilsdon, Gillmore, & Morrison, 1994; Kitzinger, 1995; Zimmerman et al., 1990). Two examples follow. Conover et al. (1991) stratified focus groups by urban-rural residence and acquaintanceship. They conducted four focus groups in the Chapel Hill, North Carolina, area of the United States and four in the Peterborough area of Great Britain. Glik and her colleagues (1988) used focus groups on a health education planning project for child survival in Côte d'Ivoire, Africa, a West African setting. Their sampling goal was to minimize within-group differences (homogeneity) while increasing differences across groups (heterogeneity). Because most of the African community volunteers knew each other, local status hierarchies could cause self-selection into groups among higher-status individuals (wealthy, opinion leaders, and so forth). Therefore, the researchers specified three sampling strata: (a) linguistic/ethnic groups, (b) geographical regions (forest, mountain, and savanna areas) and (b) gender. They conducted 24 groups representing six language-ethnic groups and other mixes within these groups. They wound up with three to four groups within each stratum from which individuals can be randomly drawn. These are probability samples and are representative of the populations from which they are drawn.

It is an exaggeration to say that, in general, focus groups are not representative; it is also inaccurate. This limitation is self-imposed by some researchers who, for whatever reason, choose to not use representative probability samples. To eliminate concerns about representativeness, a researcher can simply stratify the population and draw random samples from within each stratum.

Even so, most behavioral research whether theoretical or applied is based to some extent on nonrepresentative (i.e., nonprobability) samples—for example, convenience or judgmental samples. For many marketing research applications, surveys and interviews are used to collect information in shop-

ping malls and test-market areas based on a researcher's judgment about representativeness. To hold focus group researchers to a higher standard is hypocritical.

The Generalizability of Focus Group Findings

A frequently expressed concern about focus groups is that the results are not generalizable. Typically the lack of generalizability refers to the respondent population, but it also applies to moderators, research issues (e.g., products, services, and policies), time periods, and contexts. In the words of Axelrod (1979a), we may have learned something different

> if the job had been done differently; if a different kind of approach had been used in the questioning; if the "tone" of the interviewing had been different; if the moderator had established a different kind of rapport with the respondents; or if the analyst had a broader range of insights, sensitivity, and familiarity in the category upon which to draw. (p. 52)

Presumably, because the research method is not replicated exactly, the results are not generalizable.

Generalizability is commonly taken to mean external validity in experimental research. However, there are those in marketing who think that validity is not a legitimate concern in focus group research. Focus group validity refers to the validity of the inferences drawn from the study, not the validity of the particular method being used. See Pedhazur and Schmelkin (1991) for clarification on this issue. The external validity view of generalizability is arguably the most widely accepted in the marketing discipline and has received the most critical attention (Calder, Phillips, & Tybout, 1982, 1983; Lynch, 1982, 1983; McGrath & Brinberg, 1983). I consider generalizability from this perspective.

External validity refers to generalizability, representativeness, and even the applicability of the experimental effect to other settings (Campbell, 1957). The representativeness of any effect is thought to depend on a study's internal validity. Presumably, internal validity establishes the ground rules for the detection of empirically generalizable effects. Because internal validity requirements for a controlled study are in some sense artificial, the effects from any single study are not externally valid. But an empirical finding that

has been observed across several different studies of similar design is believed to be general.

In a departure from the traditional notions about generalizability, McQuarrie and McIntyre (1988) differentiate between *existence* generalization and *incidence* generalization in applied research. They argue that the existence of some set of responses (e.g., beliefs, attitudes, opinions, etc.) uncovered by focus groups is generalizable to some larger population. Three conditions are required for this to be so.

First, the sample of respondents recruited for the focus group project must be representative of the relevant population of respondents. Second, the number of characteristic responses expected should be relatively small (i.e., less than 12). For example, when comparing the researcher's perceptions of a new product concept with those of the actual consumer, McQuarrie and McIntyre (1987) suggest that no more than 12 strengths and weakness are generalizable. This requirement is based on the Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) notion that the most salient attributes (5 to 9) will be elicited first. Thus, salient responses from the domain of responses in the population of interest are more likely to be identified in the group discussion. By limiting the number of responses in focus groups that can be generalized, the authors implicitly assume that these responses are salient to the relevant population and that their second condition for generalizability is satisfied.

Third, the respondents must be recruited independently of one another. Independent recruiting is required to find participants who more closely mirror the relevant population; also, presumably, it increases the chances of having heterogeneity within each focus group. If these three conditions are met, then the responses uncovered in focus groups are generalizable; they exist in some larger population. These conditions seem to refer to methodological characteristics of the focus group study.

This type of generalization is similar to what Turner (1981) calls empirical generalizability. This type of generalizability is based on the assumption that the degree to which some effect is to be observed in the future depends on the degree to which it has been observed in the past. However, Turner (1981) disagrees with this representation of generalizability. According to his position on the issue, empirical generalizability is not external validity. This association is logically flawed. Turner states emphatically that it is untrue that the more populations, settings, and variables in which an effect has been observed in the past, the more we can extrapolate the effect in the future. He refers to this logic as the fallacy of induction: "The fallacy can be demonstrated by rephrasing the statement as, for example: all the swans that I have ever seen

are white and therefore all the swans that I will ever see or that exist are white" (p. 11). Therefore, induction cannot be a basis for generalization because it involves extrapolating into realms not included in the original sample.

When we try to generalize empirical effects to new but similar circumstances, the new situations always differ from those settings we sampled in the past. Some novel but causally relevant factor in the new setting may inhibit or modify the original empirical finding. This would seem to suggest that the theory is inadequate because these novel factors have not been included in the hypothesized network of relations. However, to the extent that the new setting can approximate the original setting through representative sampling, any obtained effect is more descriptive than predictive. Thus, for theoretical research this type of generalizability is not very informative.

Turner (1981) concludes that generalizability needs a theoretical basis. It may also require a methodological or empirical basis as well. Arguably, a theoretical basis alone is inadequate because the way we evaluate theories is through empirical testing. Thus, without empirical testing, there is no reasonable claim to having a theoretical basis. I conclude that theory is a necessary but insufficient basis on which to assess generalizability, as is empirical testing. Researchers often believe their theory will hold across variations in substantive and methodological contexts, but they are in no better position to make this claim than a researcher who argues about the generalizability of an empirical finding across variations in the people studied. Knowledge accrual is both probabilistic and contingent, as is generalizability. It may help to think of generalizability as the level of confidence that researchers have in their belief that empirical findings are robust across variations in theory, method, and substance. Of course, this approach is inductive, but it argues in favor of establishing credibility of arguments in support of generalizability rather than proof.

Two sets of factors that pose threats to generalizability can be distinguished. First are the factors that compose methodological threats—those factors that interact with the study variables to cause unintended effects (e.g., moderator style, individual participant characteristics, and group composition). Thus, external methodological validity is the extent to which an empirical effect can be generalized, under theoretically appropriate conditions, to noncontrolled settings. This type of generalizability is not likely from any focus group report.

Second, there are theoretical threats—the dangers of incorrectly interpreting the conceptual and theoretical meaning of an empirical effect. Exter-

nal conceptual validity is defined (inclusive of its methodological counterpart) as "the extent to which the conceptual and theoretical meaning of an experimental effect is known so that it can be generalized systematically to theoretically identified conditions" (Turner, 1981, p. 12). The latter is considered the fundamental form of generalizability of a research effect.

In discussing theoretical issues, Turner (1981) states that "experimental effects generalize directly to real-world conditions which approximate experimental settings in theoretical relevant ways" (p. 15). It is assumed that by "approximate" he means that experimental conditions have been selected in a way to make them representative of conditions in the population. Generalization occurs from data to the real world through theory. It is not the specific study conditions or the specific variable operations that allow generalization. Generalization does not come from the representativeness, the number of responses solicited, and the method of sampling respondents. These aspects of the research design are often novel and are determined by the specific goals of the researcher. From Turner's perspective, a powerful theory transcends the results observed in the laboratory and allows predictions that transcend the methodological realities on which it is tested. However, the relation between theory and observations may be much more interactive and complex than implied by Turner's position. It can be argued that theory cannot transcend the results observed in the laboratory because inferences drawn from the theory are completely constrained by the empirical evidence.

Turner (1981) appears to be correct in this belief. Focus group critics, and journal reviewers as well, believe that social psychological group process theories transcend their empirical bases and apply to focus groups (e.g., social comparisons, reference group influence, and evaluation apprehension). This perception that theory transcends the empirical base may be because theorists are willing to argue that variations in the methodological and substantive domains will not influence their theoretical interpretation. For example, groups researchers would argue that focus groups are simply a group (with no unique features) and that research on small-group behavior would apply to focus groups. Of course, focus groups do differ from other groups on multiple dimensions (e.g., ad hoc, paid respondents, information-related task), but the theorist would argue that these differences are not relevant, even though relatively little empirical research has shown that these processes apply to focus groups. In fact, if a researcher contemplates a project to test whether these theories apply to focus groups, he or she runs the risk of being told, "We already know these effects; they are not new." This implies that if a theory has

been supported across different studies, it is robust, and therefore, it is generalizable.

Thus, the extent to which focus group results can be generalized may depend on the robustness of the theories they generate, not on the empirical effects. In applied focus group research, the decision maker is at considerable risk when attempting to generalize focus group empirical results beyond the research context in which they were obtained. Nevertheless, for many applications, this does not constitute a serious risk factor. When the sample of focus group respondents is representative of the relevant population and when common responses are sought, the downside risk depends on how much is at stake. Usually the magnitude of the risk depends on the costs associated with making a wrong decision (e.g., introducing a flawed new product or service, implementing poor public policy, or using a misunderstood advertisement).

Theoretical Generalizability: The Positive Effect of Focus Group Influence

Consistent with Turner's (1981) notion of theoretical generalizability, McQuarrie and McIntyre (1990) argue from a social psychological perspective that group influence can have a positive effect on focus group research. Their argument seems to suggest that to the degree that a researcher is interested in theoretical notions about group processes, focus groups results are generalizable. The McQuarrie and McIntyre position on generalizability in this case appears to be consistent with Turner's notions and will be summarized briefly. McQuarrie and McIntyre (1990) argue that the focus group process has a positive effect on the group's output. From their perspective, focus groups may cause distortions in individual responses to moderators' queries. Individuals may either exaggerate or diminish the truth of their thoughts and experiences in focus groups. However, these distortions are not necessarily bad. Presumably, social comparison processes cause individuals in focus groups to focus more on common responses (e.g., thoughts, feelings, and experiences). Therefore, focus groups can benefit from the group interaction and the resultant social pressures from other group members any time the phenomenon under study is "collective" in nature. For example, consumption phenomena driven by reference group pressure may be more accurately captured in group interviews than in self-reports (e.g., individual interviews and surveys). This is a promising theoretical idea, although there are no empirical data to support it.

This perspective is consistent with the position taken later on the unit of analysis in focus group research. However, the notion that the consumption experience must be collective reflects the belief that the group necessarily is the unit of analysis. If the researcher is interested in the effects of reference groups on individual behavior, the unit of analysis should be the individual rather than the group. The individual is the target of reference group pressure. Focus groups are appropriate for studying this type of phenomenon, and it is not collective behavior. In the marketing literature, see Childers and Rao (1992), Bearden and Etzel (1982), Park and Lessig (1977), Burnkrant and Cousineau (1975), and Bourne (1957) for examples of reference group influence research. These studies claim to have assessed the effects of reference group influence on purchase decisions using self-reports. However, without reference group members present, it is not at all certain what these researchers measured. See Reingen, Foster, Brown, and Seidman (1984) for a critique of this research stream and their conclusion that this research is more accurately labeled "perceived influence studies." Simply put, self-reports cannot determine the extent of reference group influence on individual behavior. However, focus groups can.

Asking Questions and the Moderator's Guide

Another point made by Wells (1979) is that moderators do not question people the same way across groups. Again, this practice involves a choice made by the researcher based on the demands of the research project. When the researcher is concerned about increasing measurement precision, questions can be standardized at a cost in terms of variation in response and generalizability.

A fundamental dilemma of empirical research is that as we increase the precision of our variables, we necessarily decrease the variability within them (Runkel & McGrath, 1972). When we attempt to increase reliability (i.e., replicability), for example, by controlling some variable, we necessarily decrease variation in observations across our sample, thereby reducing generalizability. Conversely, when we randomly sample across variable levels, geographical regions, people, or some combination of these, we may maintain generalizability, but we also may mask the relationships we are trying to uncover. If the researcher is interested in variation within a population of responses and is interested in generalizability as well, variation in the wording of questions may increase the variety of responses and their generalizability

at a cost of precision. If the researcher is interested in precise measurement, then some level of generalizability must be sacrificed.

No solution to this dilemma exists. However, the concerned researcher can alleviate some of these negative effects. If the researcher desires both precision and generalizability, he or she could specify levels of question wording, making question format an independent variable. Then individuals could be randomly assigned to focus groups within each wording format. Precision is achieved by reducing error due to differing formats within groups, and generalizability is achieved through variation in question format across groups. Of course, this solution increases sampling costs.

Alternatively, the number of groups in each stratum or variable level can be increased. Assume that question standardization is not possible because of diversity of respondent vocabularies across the sample. Moreover, assume that this diversity is randomly distributed across groups. As you increase the number of observations (i.e., number of groups within variable levels), random errors due to imprecise question wording are averaged out within levels of the independent variable and systematic differences between levels increase (Runkel & McGrath, 1972). It is assumed that question wording is not systematically biased in any way. But again, increasing the sample size increases the cost of the research. Nevertheless, the researcher makes the choice. Lack of question standardization is not inherent in the focus group methodology; it is a matter of choice.

For some research tasks, such as uncovering common or shared thoughts for theory applications, uniformity in the way questions are asked might be desirable. Certainly, if the researcher is interested in verifying some set of theoretical notions, uniformity in the way questions are asked would be a necessity. For theory applications, the researcher may find it helpful to train moderators to follow the focus group discussion guide meticulously. Moreover, in these cases, the discussion guide might be more structured than would be necessary otherwise. Of course, valuable unique information may be lost. Nevertheless, this trade-off is one that the researcher should make knowingly.

Having said all of the above, critics may claim that strict adherence to the moderator's guide is antithetical to focus groups. They are right regarding the traditional practice of focus group interviewing in marketing research. However, there is little to gain by stubbornly adhering to research practices of the past. With the newly evolving technologies being used under the general designation *focus groups,* this term no longer covers the various hybrid forms of group research. Consistent with these changes, many of them being highly creative and useful, it seems necessary to adapt the available focus group technology to the potential purpose of the research. Ensuring that questions

are asked in the same way across groups is but one step in these new research directions. Finally, it is not only possible to add structure to focus group research, but for some research purposes, it may be desirable.

Independence, Degrees of Freedom, and the Unit of Analysis

Many authors of focus group articles accept unquestioningly the belief that participant responses in focus groups lack independence. This belief frequently appears as the $n = 1$ or degrees-of-freedom argument. Regardless of form, the argument is that responses in focus groups are dependent or at least interrelated. Therefore, it is best to treat each group session as a single observation. The degrees-of-freedom belief may unduly limit the types of inferences we make from focus group results. This section provides an alternative perspective on this issue.

Wells (1979) states his position on this issue by saying, "In a four-interview study with 32 respondents, the degrees of freedom are 3, not 31—one less than the number of independent observations" (p. 12) However, this is only true if the responses are interdependent. In this case, the group becomes the unit of measurement.

But the lack of independence assumption (i.e., the $n = 1$ argument) does not hold in all focus group applications. For example, these assumptions are not true if the researcher is interested in the effect that the group has on some individual response. For example, if focus groups are used to study the effects of reference group influence on individuals' attitudes, each 8-person group could contribute 8 degrees of freedom. Contrary to Wells's assertion, the degrees of freedom for four 8-member focus groups is 31 ($df = 32 - 1$) rather than 3.

For most focus group applications, independence is not a relevant issue. If qualitative knowing is the researcher's only concern, then the generalizability and independence of the findings are not relevant. Independence becomes a relevant factor if the researcher contemplates doing statistical analyses of individual responses from focus group participants. Past research demonstrates empirically that individual responses in groups may not violate the assumption of independence, although group member behaviors are interdependent. Nevertheless, lack of independence need not be a serious constraint to the statistical analysis of focus group data.

In this section, each of these issues is addressed. First, I distinguish between independence and interdependence. Second, empirical evidence suggests that even if individuals' actions within the group are interdependent,

their responses may be independent. Third, independence and the implications for treating the group or the individual as the unit of analysis is discussed. Fourth, I discuss two types of independence and how they are manifest in group interviews, individual interviews, and survey research. Last, I talk about the moderator's role in obtaining independent responses.

The Difference Between Independence and Interdependence

Independence is the degree of freedom with which an individual may function as a member of a group (Shaw, 1976). Individuals' responses in focus groups are independent to the extent that they are free from the influence of others in the group. Independence means that group members are free to express their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Dependence means relying on others for aid or support; it involves needing others, having confidence in them, and trusting them. It is one-way in its effect. Interdependence involves mutual dependence or being dependent on each other; it is two-way in its effect. It is doubtful that the one-way effect of dependence is manifest in focus groups, except in clinical groups in which a respondent may become dependent on the moderator. However, interdependence may affect behavior in focus groups, and therefore, it will be discussed next.

Independence differs from interdependence. Focus group discussions may promote interdependence among group members. In fact, this is the strength of the focus group method. Individuals respond to comments made by others in the group, including the moderator. Group members share thoughts, feelings, and experiences. However, this does not mean that individual responses to queries from others lack independence. It is possible for the behavior of focus group members to be interdependent and still provide independent responses to the moderator's questions.

Empirical Evidence in Support of Independent Responses From Interdependent Group Members

There is empirical evidence to support the notion that group members' responses can be independent although group members' behaviors are interdependent. Early game studies (e.g., Prisoner's Dilemma) distinguish between two types of interdependence—promotive interdependence and contrient interdependence (Steiner, 1972). *Promotive* interdependence re-

fers to potential payoffs that prompt individuals to cooperate in a group problem-solving task (Steiner, 1972). Individual members receive a greater individual payoff when their behavior is beneficial to other group members and lesser rewards when their behavior is not beneficial to other group members (Steiner, 1972). Thus, it is in each person's best interest to promote the group's goals.

Contrient interdependence refers to those situations in which achieving an individual's goals necessarily works to the disadvantage of other group members. Group members' payoffs correlate negatively, and there is no way that one individual can achieve his or her goals without depriving others of the attainment of their goals (Steiner, 1972). This type of interdependence tends to inhibit cooperation among group members.

A few researchers have compared promotive interdependent groups with contrient interdependent groups. I will examine this research, but my main interest is in promotive interdependent groups. Steiner (1972) shows that promotive groups are more heterogeneous in the type and quantity of contributions to the group discussion than are contrient groups; they apparently have nothing to gain by duplicating or repeating the contributions of other group members. Promotive group members are judged to be more attentive to the contributions of others, are more friendly to each other, and experienc fewer communication problems. There appears to be more of a "we" feeling among members of these groups (Steiner, 1972). When payoffs are promotive rather than contrient, group members have greater feelings of responsibility to colleagues, greater willingness to help others, and are more productive (Thomas, 1957). Members of promotive groups also exhibit greater coordination, more effective communication, and greater attentiveness to what is going on (Hammond & Goldman, 1961). Last, promotive groups experience more harmonious interpersonal relations, are warmer, happier, and are more active than contrient groups (Julian & Perry, 1967).

In a follow-up to a study by Deutsch (1949, cited in Steiner, 1972), Hammond and Goldman (1961) included an independence condition. In this condition, participants were told that their reward was based on previously established criteria and any member could receive high payoffs by performing well. Thus, the payoffs for the independent groups were not dependent on other group members. Because there is no group goal, there is no reason for them to compete with each other during the group discussion. Thus, members of these groups feel that they can work independently of each other.

Hammond and Goldman (1961) found that independent groups are as task oriented as promotive groups and that the rank orders on the process vari-

ables were very similar for these two groups. Thus, there is virtually no difference between independent groups and promotive interdependent groups on either task orientation or process. As Steiner (1972) acknowledges,

> Internal independence appears to have been fully as effective as promotive interdependence in motivating members to make task contributions. . . . If a person's payoff depends entirely upon his [or her] personally meeting an established standard of task performance, he [or she] is likely to be strongly motivated to do what is required to meet it. (p. 148)

The results from this research stream are not entirely conclusive. However, it appears that at least in some situations promotive interdependence creates a favorable climate for group members. Most important for focus group researchers, groups with a promotive interdependence orientation perform as well as groups in which member independence is stressed. Moreover, these two types of groups perform equally well on process factors, and both do better on these factors than contrient groups. The tentative conclusion is that it is possible to create independence among focus group members, even if only promotive interdependence (i.e., cooperation among group members). This still gains more heterogeneous and independent responses than if the groups are competitive.

Interdependence and the Unit of Analysis

The lack of independence argument also implies that each focus group is the unit of analysis—that there is a "group mind." Davis (1969) rejects this position rather strongly. According to Davis, "We shall not concern ourselves further with the group mind debate, except to point out that there is neither psychological nor physiological evidence that such a collective consciousness is in fact a palpable entity" (p. 2). I agree with Davis and accept his position on the issue that a group is "composed, first, of a set of persons, and second, of a collection of interdependent persons" (p. 4).

This is not to say that the group is not an appropriate unit of analysis. Indeed, when interest is in a group product, such as a family decision, you can treat the group as the unit of analysis. In this case, each group contributes an n of 1, and the degrees of freedom for a study is the number of groups less 1.

However, calculating degrees of freedom becomes more complex when coalitions form in focus groups—for example, when five members adopt and defend a particular position on an issue and the remaining three argue against

that position. Even so, coalition formation does not seem to imply that the group is the unit of observation. To the contrary, it implies independence of responses across coalitions, and therefore, the coalition is the unit of measurement. McQuarrie and McIntyre (1990) see coalition formation as an opportunity to identify consumer or market segments (i.e., coalitions of members with different perspectives) and study how they differ. Therefore, the degrees of freedom would seem to be the total number of cooperative coalitions minus 1. To be sure, this requires a judgment call on the part of the researcher and becomes an issue only if the researcher is interested in statistical tests of hypotheses about coalition formation. If a researcher is interested only in qualitative representations of what occurs in focus groups, there is no logical reason for being concerned about degrees of freedom.

Independence of Response Across Focus Groups, Personal Interviews, and Surveys

Independence of responses in focus groups typically refers to the effect that one respondent has on a statement or statements made by other respondents. To the extent that conditions leading to the first statement are unique (e.g., not replicable under different conditions), the subsequent statement is neither reliable nor valid. However, independence of responses is never absolute; independence is relative. No single research method provides perfectly independent responses. Whether responses from focus group participants are independent or not depends on some reference point. Many factors affect response independence, and these causal factors vary depending on the researcher, the research purpose, the theoretical model, the method used to collect data, and so forth. So to say that focus groups results are not reliable because responses are not independent overly simplifies complex issues.

In focus groups, independence might be threatened as a result of the effect that a single participant or the group moderator has on respondents. However, independence might also be violated because of the effect that an individual's prior thoughts or responses have on subsequent ones. Remember the caveat that respondents should not rethink or rehearse their responses? It is curious that authors who warn us about the misuse of focus groups choose to focus almost exclusively on the independence of responses across focus group participants. Other threats to independence should be considered also.

Moreover, it is risky to believe that one method provides responses that are more independent in an absolute sense than another one. For example, in correlation or survey research, a frequently expressed concern is whether the

TABLE 6.1 The Independence of Responses Across Data Collection Methods

	Independent of Researcher/Interviewer	Interdependent With Researcher/Interviewer
Independent of Other Resp.	• Computer-mediated focus groups • Laboratory experiments	• Mail surveys • Interviews (face-to-face and telephone) • Nominal group technique (NGT) groups • Focus groups for exploratory effect applications
Interdependent With Other Resp.	• Focus groups for experiential theory applications	• Focus groups for exploratory theory applications • Focus groups for clinical effect applications

responses are independent or influenced by the survey instrument, which is referred to as correlated measurement errors or mono-operation bias. In fact, this is the primary reason for using multiple operations within a single study. The goal is to eliminate the possibility that the data collection process itself influenced an individual's responses. This type of independence is under the control of the researcher. I refer to this as researcher-interviewer independence. The interviewer is included because in many situations, such as telephone and personal interviews, an interviewer administers the survey.

The second type of independence refers to the degree to which responses are free from the influence of other respondents. This is respondent independence. Research methods are differentiated in terms of researcher-interviewer and respondent independence in Table 6.1, which illustrates how these methods can be categorized as independent or interdependent. However, as noted above, each independence dimension is more likely to be continuous.

For comparison purposes, examine the independence of responses across a variety of research methods. Given this two-dimensional depiction, computer-mediated focus groups are independent of the researcher-interviewer and other respondents. Individual responses to mail surveys are independent of other respondents but interdependent with regard to the researcher-interviewer. Face-to-face focus groups for creative theory applications and for cognitive tasks may be interdependent on both dimensions. Other methods tend to fall somewhere in between these two extremes. Individuals interviewed using the nominal group technique (NGT) and similarly structured fo-

cus groups provide relatively independent observations. They are "relatively" independent because these participants are interviewed as a group but they respond without discussion or evaluation. Thus, there is virtually no opportunity for group interaction or peer group pressure to influence individual responses. However, interdependence between the interviewer or facilitator and the respondents cannot be ruled out. Clinical focus group tasks also lie somewhere between the two extremes. The success of focus groups for cognitive tasks depends on the interdependence of the individual respondents. However, the degree of researcher-interviewer independence depends on the moderator's style. Some clinical approaches to therapy use a hands-off style (e.g., humanists), others take a more active part in the group discussion (e.g., gestalt therapists), and others are very involved (e.g., cognitive behaviorists). For clinical applications to focus groups, the degree of independence between moderator and respondent depends on the moderator's personal style.

Interaction, Independence, Group Influence, and the Moderator

Another complexity is the relationships between group interaction, independence, and group influence and their effects on responses in focus groups. Certainly, some if not most focus group applications encourage individuals to interact and thereby provide the opportunity for "group influence" to affect individual responses. The moderator determines the degree of interaction between himself or herself and the respondents. Whether, and the degree to which, group influence affects individual responses depends on the type of focus group being conducted and the controls the moderator puts in place. In some focus group applications (e.g., clinical tasks), group influence is encouraged because it is beneficial. In these situations, quantification of the group output is usually not a concern; therefore, the unit of analysis and degrees of freedom are not meaningful issues.

However, in a structured group interview, turn taking may be encouraged. The moderator may take necessary precautions to ensure that each member participates. In these groups, reticent participants are encouraged to participate, and domination by a single individual is discouraged. To the extent that the moderator maintains control and that the group climate is supportive, individual responses may be relatively independent. If the researcher demonstrates that the responses are independent, ceteris paribus, statistical analysis of responses is justified.

Several reports are available on how the moderator controls group discussion (e.g., Greenbaum, 1998; Morgan & Krueger, 1998; Templeton, 1994). Moreover, reports in trade publications from professional focus group moderators lead us to believe that it is their job to preserve independence of responses. These reports typically suggest that all respondents participate, only one person speaks at a time, and there are no "right answers." Moreover, they control dominant respondents, encourage reticent respondents, and do not take votes. Finally, the output from focus group interviews is usually a collation of individual responses. If moderators are successful in these attempts to control the group, we can assume that responses are somewhat independent. To argue that individual responses are totally context dependent suggests that moderators fail in their efforts to maintain independence.

I conclude that independent responses, in some types of focus groups, are possible. If so, statistical analytical methods are appropriate, other things being equal. However, it is up to the researcher to convince us that the responses are not interdependent. When in doubt, there are methods for dealing with the problem (Fern, 1982a; Gollob, 1991; McGuire, Keisler, & Seigel, 1987). The next issue to be addressed is whether quantitative data can be obtained from focus groups.

Quantitative Data From Focus Groups

Professionals who do applied focus group research think it inappropriate to quantify focus group results. In a focus group on focus groups (Caruso, 1976), one professional moderator implied that, too often, final reports represent something more than they actually are. Justification for this belief is that some focus group reports use words and phrases such as "all the respondents," "most," "many," "half," and other quantitative terms. Others suggested that is OK to say "feelings were almost unanimous" or "the prevalent feeling was . . ." One person reported seeing tabulations of responses at the end of the report as though this were a breach of professional conduct. The Caruso focus group hypothesizes that words and phrases such as "all," "detailed findings," and "conclusions" and using percentages and reporting head counts and votes should be avoided (p. 12). Rather, softer words and phrases should be used, such as "impressions," "observations," and "hypotheses for further testing." According to Axelrod (1979a), "Numbers do not belong in a qualitative study at any time . . . remember . . . the 'quality' of the response . . . is important. . . .

Its purpose . . . is to start you thinking" (p. 54). However, this constraint may be too restrictive.

First, Campbell (1988) argues that common sense or qualitative knowing underlies all quantitative data. This is so because recording and coding of responses necessarily involves judgmental qualitative processes. He points out that this fact is often ignored because commonsense knowledge is ubiquitous and so dependable that we fail to notice it. He also alludes to qualitative researchers' refusal to become involved in quantitative analyses:

> At the present time we have an unhealthy division of labor in this regard: on the one hand, we have quantitative social scientists who use census data, monetary records and crime rates, forgetting their qualitative judgmental base. On the other hand, we have qualitative sociologists who do critiques on how the numbers get recorded, for example, analyzing the social dynamics of a census interview, the incommensurable understandings of the participants, the fears and pressures lying behind the answers and because of the skepticism thus generated, refuse to participate in quantitative analysis. (p. 367)

From this rarely acknowledged perspective, it becomes readily apparent that quantitative knowing underlies qualitative research as well. Most focus group moderators employ quantitative interpretations of their own direct focus group experiences when they summarize their findings, whether they realize it or not. Deriving higher-order constructs from everyday knowledge necessarily involves some form of tabulation even though it is not explicit. For example, focus group projects have uncovered multiple dimensions of attitude based on differences in respondents' expressions of affect. Likewise, many times, moderators make determinations about the presence or absence of some idea, thought, or characteristic in a focus group transcript. This process of culling sets of relevant thoughts, feelings, or behaviors from the transcript is analogous to assigning a 1 to an acceptable characteristic and a 0 to an unacceptable characteristic. If we explicitly acknowledge this implicit process, it becomes obvious that some sort of tabulation is going on. By simply counting the 1s, the frequency of the characteristic in each focus group can be tabulated. If groups differ on some characteristic—say, gender—then it is a simple process to do a *t* test on the frequency of response to determine whether the groups differ significantly on the characteristic of interest. Whether the significance test has any meaning depends on factors other than the qualitative nature of the findings (e.g., representativeness, sample size, control, independence, etc.). More will be said about the quantification of focus group findings later. Next, differ-

ent interpretations of the same focus group output by different moderators will be discussed.

Interpretation of Focus Group Output

Focus group moderators acknowledge that different moderators may interpret what goes on in focus groups differently. These authors seem to be saying that the nature of the information that a decision maker uses to make choices depends on which moderator-analyst is providing the information. The implication is that the reported findings are not necessarily reliable (i.e., not stable across moderators). However, this is not an insurmountable problem. The simple solution and one widely used in quantitative research is to check the reliability and internal consistency of the results. In his discussion on this effect among ethnographers, Campbell (1988) suggests using two different ethnographers for this purpose. His suggestion applies equally well to focus group moderators. The researcher can use two different moderators with different backgrounds (e.g., a male and a female moderator) to conduct groups that differ on some relevant characteristic (e.g., gender). Following the group discussion, each moderator interprets his or her groups as well as those of the other moderator. This process results in what is commonly known as intercoder reliability. If both moderators provide the same results or negotiate a single interpretation of the results, one would have greater confidence in the validity of the implications from the study (Campbell, 1988).

The Scientific Status of Focus Groups

Previously, I argued that focus group results can be representative, theoretically generalizable, quantifiable, reliably interpreted, and provide independent observations. These arguments along with the following discussion challenge the lack of scientific status of each of Calder's (1977) three focus group methods—exploratory, experiential, and clinical. Calder assigns scientific status to those quantitative approaches to research that use numerical measurement to test scientific constructs and causal hypotheses. Although distinguishing between quantitative and qualitative research is problematic and I am uncomfortable with it, for the sake of simplicity I use this distinction in the following discussion. *Quantitative* in this context means the use of scientific methods in common use, such as experiments, some types of cross-sectional and panel surveys, and time-series analysis (Calder, 1977, p. 355).

Qualitative "in the following discussion means research that provides in-depth, if necessarily subjective, understanding of the consumer" (Calder, 1977, p. 353). This definition refers almost exclusively to focus groups. The treatment of focus groups presented here does not relegate all focus groups to the quasi-scientific or everyday status, nor does it hold observational research (e.g., survey and experimental research) to be more scientific than qualitative research. Under certain conditions, focus group research has the same scientific status as quantitative research (i.e., surveys and experiments).

A careful reading of Calder's (1977) article suggests the potential for this new scientific status. What is easy to overlook in Calder's article is his acceptance of the notion that scientific knowledge should be compared with everyday knowledge. This appears to mean that it is acceptable to compare quantitative findings with those from focus groups. In Calder's words, "It is useful to think of this relationship as cross-validating scientific explanations against everyday ones" (p. 356). He argues that if the qualitative knowledge is inconsistent with the scientific explanation, the researcher is forced to make a choice between the observations and the theory, and "consumers' explanations will sometimes be favored over theoretical hypotheses" (p. 356). This same notion is express by Campbell (1988). Finally, Calder (1977) states, "Contrary to current practice, it is just as appropriate to conduct focus groups *after* a quantitative project as before it. Scientific explanations should be treated as provisional also" (p. 356).

It appears that Calder (1977) is suggesting that it is OK to use focus groups for triangulation purposes if not for theory evaluation purposes. Arguably, an inconsistency is inherent in this argument. If qualitative research is not as scientific as quantitative research, then why would a researcher faced with conflicting evidence accept a qualitative explanation over the more scientific one? The answer appears to be straightforward; the researcher has more confidence in the qualitative evidence. To put this another way, the researcher accepts the qualitative explanation because it appears to provide more valid inferences than the quantitative one. In fact, several authors have compared quantitative research findings with those from focus groups and arrived at the same conclusion.

Comparing Focus Group, Personal Interview, and Survey Results

Several researchers compare the findings from focus groups and surveys and report that these two divergent methods provide similar results. These comparisons are briefly reviewed, but the interested reader should read the

original reports for details. Generally, these reports are qualitative in nature, and in some, the findings are secondary to the original purpose of the research project. Others used focus groups for triangulation purposes.

Bertrand and colleagues (cited in Ward, Bertrand, & Brown, 1991) compared surveys and focus groups in three studies. The first was conducted in Guatemala where they studied the follow-up of acceptors of tubal ligation using 8 focus groups and 785 surveys. The second, in Honduras, examined the knowledge and attitudes toward vasectomy with 11 focus groups and 959 surveys. The final study was done in Zaire where they studied the follow-up of acceptors of tubal ligation with 6 focus groups and 453 surveys. The focus groups provide an analysis of general trends without specifying numbers, and the surveys report results in a quantitative format. Their comparisons were qualitative assessments of the similarities between focus group and survey results. They found that overall, 28% of the results were similar; 42% were similar, but focus groups provide more information; 17% were similar, but surveys provided more information; and 12% of the results were dissimilar. Overall, focus groups provided more information.

Irwin et al. (1991) compared the frequency of response in focus groups with the frequency of response to survey items about the knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs about HIV/AIDS in Zaire. They categorized focus group responses as very common, common, and rare. Of the 16 areas of inquiry, there appears to be consistency in responses for 13 of the 16 items and disagreement on 3 (Irwin et al., 1991, Table 3).

Harari and Beaty (1990) used focus groups to explain findings from survey research that suggested a consensus of opinion between managers and workers on a number of work-related issues. The focus groups suggested a trend that was obscured by the questionnaire phase of the research. Moreover, the researchers were surprised at the extraordinary passion and emotion of black workers' feelings as they discussed each of the job factors. These findings are not available in surveys. The authors say, "Without the focus group data, the rank-order data would have provided at best superficial data, at worst misleading if not erroneous data—despite the fact that the initial survey procedure was methodologically rigorous" (p. 277). For a comprehensive analysis of these findings see Beaty and Harari (1987) and Harari and Beaty (1989).

Several studies used focus groups to compliment findings from survey research, including a contraceptive social marketing campaign (Folch-Lyon & Trost, 1981), community-based distribution in Nigeria (Lapido, Delano, Weiss, & NcNamara, 1987), and attitudes toward vasectomy in Kenya (Lan-

dry, Fischbacher, Bundi, & Haws, 1988). All these studies are cited in Ward et al. (1991).

Grunig (1990) reports another focus group project that was relied on to plan a 3-year program for reducing the stigma associated with mental illness. The goal, to overcome barriers to integrating the mentally ill back into the community, was realized by assessing concerned residents' attitudes toward the chronically mentally ill. The focus group project was followed up by a countywide telephone survey. Grunig reports that the telephone survey provided new information (e.g., proportions of residents on positions on the issues), but that it was negligible compared with the "richness" of the focus group information.

Reynolds and Johnson (1978) found that focus groups produced results that were similar to those from surveys on all but one consumption behavior variable (97% confirmation rate), and actual sales data corroborated the focus group findings. Stycos (1981) found that focus groups and surveys provided similar results about male attitudes toward contraception on a number of variables but mildly discrepant or contradictory findings on only a few.

Delli Carpini and Keeter (1993) report on the development and testing of survey-based measures of political factual knowledge. The predictive validity of the resulting scale was tested using focus groups. Focus group participants were recruited from those who responded to a local telephone survey, which included the scale. The scale predicted the use of facts in the 2-hour focus group discussions fairly well (R-squared = .51).

Finally, in an infrequently cited critique of focus groups, Leonhard (1975) reports the results from survey research that was done to verify the results from his "group dynamics research." This characterization is similar to depth group interviews (aka clinical groups). His firm conducted one survey, and the client firm did the other. In the first instance, Leonhard stated in the group dynamics research report that "the findings are typical and representative of about 75% of consumers" (p. 7). In a mail survey of 500 respondents, he found the survey proportion, about 80%, to be within the 99% confidence interval obtained from the group research. In the other study, he found that a new product idea had been rejected by about half the executives who participated in the group interview. The client's survey results indicated that of the 100 executives they interviewed, about 60% rejected the idea, which almost falls within a 95% confidence interval. These results are impressive. However, Leonhard was not arguing in favor of quantifying focus group results. Just the opposite, he used these examples to support the reliability of group

dynamics sessions and to argue against the reliance "on statistical significance when engaged in question-and-answer games" (p. 7). Leonhard's point is that under proper conditions, people are truthful and "will tell us more about a topic and do so in greater depth if they are encouraged to act spontaneously instead of reacting to questions" (p. 7).

In summary, several research reports suggest that those findings from focus group projects and surveys are comparable and perhaps equally reliable. These reports vary from qualitative comparisons to quantitative ones. Next, the most comprehensive study of the similarities between survey responses and focus group responses will be presented in more detail than the previous comparisons.

Continuous Attitudinal Responses in Focus Groups

Javidi, Long, Vasu, and Ivy (1991) developed a unique research program to enhance the generalizability of focus group research and to address validity problems. They combined continuous attitudinal response technology with survey research for this purpose. The method couples microcomputers with video technology, allowing them to present video stimuli to group members, collect their feedback, and feed back information to groups almost simultaneously. Respondents can react continuously to video stimuli by turning a dial on a handheld keypad. Output can be played back to groups in the form of various types of data summary tabulations (e.g., bar graphs of polled responses).

First, the researchers conducted a national public opinion poll that measured attitudes toward insurance industry concepts and consumer-voter attitudes toward insurance policy issues in California. The results from the survey were used to develop a conceptual model. The researchers then used focus groups to test hypotheses derived from the national survey model. This was done by isolating the dependent variables that were prominent in the debate over Prop 103 in California and then submitting them for feedback to demographically selected focus groups. The focus groups were shown six segments of televised stimuli followed by overlays (on the same monitor) that summarized the groups' responses in the form of curves, averages, and standard deviations. Groups were asked to retrospectively explain their responses. The segments were run twice, followed by respondents' rating them as "favorable/unfavorable" and "believable/unbelievable." Order was reversed for each group to control for response set bias. Then, focus group responses were compared with the national poll.

According to the researchers, this technology provided a confirmatory tool particularly well suited for model building. The advantages of the two methods in combination were (a) greater breadth from large-scale telephone surveys and (b) greater depth provided by focus groups. They found that many of the elements in their conceptual framework were confirmed by the focus groups. It also allowed them to test questions that were to be used in a follow-up national poll.

Some Everyday Thoughts About Surveys and Focus Groups

The above empirical evidence points to similarities between focus group findings and survey findings. However, this point is equivocal for several reasons. First, most of these studies were not designed to test the equivalence of findings. Thus, the results can be attributed to differences between question formats. Surveys typically ask for structured responses (closed such as dichotomous or multichotomous response formats) to structured questions, whereas in focus groups, the questions tend to be unstructured and open-ended (Ward et al., 1991). Second, some of projects that looked for similarities raised issues that were either highly sensitive or new to the respondent (Ward et al., 1991). Some focus group participants are reluctant to reveal highly sensitive information (e.g., coital frequency) in public. Third, some focus group participants are unwilling to provide information about an issue when they do not have established attitudes about the issue. Survey respondents are not so reluctant.

For example, Zaller and Feldman (1992) question whether surveys capture opinions. They think it is implausible that people possess opinions at the level of specificity of survey items. Public opinion research assumes that people have reasonably well-formed attitudes and opinions on political issues, and surveys are passive measures of these attitudes and opinions. According to these two researchers, people are likely to have conflicted opinions or only partially consistent ideas about political issues. However, most people respond to political surveys based on notions on the top of their minds at the moment of answering the survey questions. The questions in the survey call to mind an arbitrary sample of ideas made salient by the questionnaire item and recent events and use these ideas to choose from among the alternative answers. Additionally, survey respondents often create opinions on the spot, drawing on whatever beliefs and information that they happen to pull from memory at the moment of the interview or survey (Zaller, 1990). Finally, sur-

vey responses may appear to be reliable and valid because answers to previous questions may affect responses to later ones (Feldman & Lynch, 1988).

However, focus groups may be ideal for uncovering the fluid and dialogic aspects of opinion formation (Delli Carpini & Williams, 1994). Unlike survey research, focus groups allow the examination of social interaction in opinion formation and expression. Groups may even help guard against researcher bias and shortsightedness by allowing open-ended responses and unanticipated and inconsistent views to emerge (Delli Carpini & Williams, 1994). Unanticipated and inconsistent views can be explored to determine whether they reflect the respondent's lack of information or simply the "inherent contestability of most important public issues" (Delli Carpini & Williams, 1994, p. 800). Specifically, the analyst can examine particular views within the context of the full set of statements in which they were made.

Finally, unreliable or invalid responses to some types of queries may be less likely in focus groups because respondents are unsure about whether they will have to explain or defend their views. Except for people who have a high need for self-monitoring, we might expect more honest responses to some types of questions in focus groups than in surveys. However, there is no empirical evidence to support this contention. For some substantive domains, more information is likely to be obtained in survey research, but the information obtained may be less reliable than that which is obtained in focus groups. Focus group research may be appropriate as a stand-alone method for some research purposes—for example, program development and opinion formation (Ward et al., 1991) and exploration of consumption motives—but not for other purposes (e.g., opinion polling). Based on the review of current focus group research practice, when the researcher is uncertain about which method to use, it makes sense to use both focus groups and surveys for comparison purposes.

For the concerned researcher, the questions raised above may suggest interesting future research projects. To date, there is no definitive empirical research that satisfactorily answers the questions about the similarity between responses in focus groups and in surveys. Nor is there evidence to suggest when either method should be preferred. The lack of empirically based criteria for determining when focus groups can be properly used as a stand-alone method or should be used in conjunction with other methods suggests an opportunity for a controlled study. Most authors on focus group issues echo the Campbell (1988) and Calder (1977) positions that qualitative methods are justified for triangulation purposes.

The Choice Dilemma Facing the Researcher

We have explored the major areas of contention about the use of focus groups as stand-alone methods. Common knowledge suggests that focus group research methods are of questionable reliability and validity and that the findings from these methods are not generalizable beyond the samples used in the research. Most of the warnings about the shortcomings of focus group methods use survey research and controlled experiments as benchmarks for scientific inquiry. As a result of these comparisons, focus groups have been cast as having dubious scientific value. Yet many researchers find that group research is the most viable and in some cases the only alternative in their scientific pursuits.

Many researchers and practitioners may perceive a dilemma: Should they use a "scientific" research method (survey research) that is unsuitable for collecting the desired group information, or should they use an "unscientific" research method (focus groups) that can provide the desired information? Actually, this is not a dilemma. The scientific basis of knowledge does not necessarily lie in the research method; rather, it lies in how we design the research and implement it. The choice among research methods is a judgment call. McGrath (1982) makes a powerful statement regarding these types of choices when he says "*all* research strategies are 'bad' (in the sense of having serious methodological limitations); none of them are 'good' (in the sense of being even relatively unflawed)" (p. 80). His solution is to combine strategies, not necessarily within a given research study but across the program of study. Thus, the method is evaluated in the context of its contribution to the program of study rather than its contribution to the findings from a single study.

Summary

In this chapter, I have treated focus groups as a generic research method and have laid the groundwork for what is to follow. Focus groups are suitable as a stand-alone method for some purposes but not for others. A problem to be resolved is which type of focus group should be used for which research purposes. (In the chapters that follow, I abandon the generic notion of focus group and explore in greater detail different types of focus groups and the appropriateness of each type for different research purposes.) Here, I attempted

to separate applications research from theory-based research to establish ground rules for the use of specific focus group methods for each purpose. The hazards that face each type of research task were discussed along with the purported hazards that do not pose a serious concern.

Chapter 7

Exploratory Tasks

Researchers use focus groups for a variety of exploratory tasks. There is considerable overlap between exploratory tasks and Calder's notion of exploratory focus groups (1977). Exploratory and clinical tasks are similar to each other but different from experiential tasks in that the information they generate tends to be unique. The focus group participants' creative efforts or the unique experiences and creativity of the researcher are usually requisites for exploratory tasks. In Chapter 1, I reviewed these tasks and organized them according to whether they are applied or theoretical.

As discussed earlier, the nature of the research purpose should provide guidance in making many of the decisions about the design of the exploratory research project. Focus group methods for effects applications should differ from those used in theory applications. I discuss some of these differences in this chapter, beginning with the types of information that come from exploratory groups.

I discuss group composition for both applied research and theoretical research first. The discussion considers recruiting problems and the homogeneity and heterogeneity of group members. I provide guidelines for recruiting people with shared perspectives and those with unique perspectives. The recruiting section ends with a discussion of specific suggestions about group composition for exploratory tasks.

Other issues to be covered include group size and the number of groups, characteristics of the group setting, computer-mediated groups, and the focus group moderator, including personal characteristics, background, and moderating style. The unintended effects of group process factors should be con-

sidered along with how their adverse consequences might be minimized and their intended positive effects maximized. All the while I keep in mind the major differences between theory and effects applications. The chapter ends with a discussion of the generalizability of exploratory task results.

Types of Information From Focus Groups

I begin by discussing the types of information that might be of interest to focus group researchers. First, I differentiate between information disclosed about the self and information only peripherally related to the self. Self-disclosure is the information that people reveal about themselves to others; it includes one's thoughts, feelings, and experiences (Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993). This information is personal or intimate in nature. Other disclosures involve information only indirectly related to the self and considered impersonal in nature. All disclosure reflects something about the self, but some disclosures are more intimate or personal than others. For example, simply repeating something that appeared in a magazine article reflects the reading habits of the individual and may be self-disclosing, but it is not very personal. Thus, each self-disclosure is considered in terms of how personal or intimate it is. Personal information about oneself is highly intimate, and impersonal information is not at all intimate. This distinction is denoted by the vertical axis in Table 7.1.

I also distinguish between information that is shared by others and information that is not. The latter is considered unique information (Stasser & Titus, 1985). Shared information refers to thoughts, feelings, and experiences that most, if not all, group members have or know before the group meeting. This information is knowledge of the everyday variety. For example, most people are assumed to know the fundamental customs of their culture. Unshared information refers to the unique thoughts, feelings, and experiences that each group member has or knows before the group meeting. If only one member of the group knows a piece of information, it is unshared. If one or more members know this information, it is shared. This information is distinguished by the horizontal axis in Table 7.1.

Combining the intimacy of self-disclosure (personal or impersonal) with how commonly the information is distributed across group members (shared or unshared) provides four types of information (see Table 7.1). The first, *shared personal information,* is information an individual may have in common with other group members. For example, group members from the same

TABLE 7.1 Types of Information Disclosed in Focus Groups

	Shared Information	*Unshared Information*
Personal Information	1. *Shared personal information.* This is self-relevant information that other group members may have in common. Reciprocity causes the verbal disclosure of this information, but it can be inferred from verbal and nonverbal cues.	2. *Unshared personal information.* This is unique self-relevant information; others do not share it. Reciprocity is not likely if disclosing this information is considered deviant behavior, but it can be inferred from verbal cues.
Impersonal Information	3. *Shared impersonal information.* This information is not self-relevant, and other group members may share it. Reciprocity is not likely to elicit this type of information because it is common. It can be inferred from verbal and nonverbal cues.	4. *Unshared impersonal information.* This is unique information that is not self-relevant and is not shared by other group members. Reciprocity is not likely to elicit this type of information because it is not self-relevant. It can be inferred from verbal and nonverbal cues.

neighborhood may share some of the same personal thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Of course, before the group meets, they may or may not be aware of these similarities in their backgrounds. Because this information is personal and common among neighbors, we expect them to reciprocate the disclosure of information at similar levels of intimacy.

The second type, *unshared personal information*, is self-relevant and not shared by other individuals in the group because of the unique factors in members' backgrounds and experiences. For example, not all individuals in a neighborhood will share the same knowledge, attitudes, preferences, and life experiences, which may vary greatly among individuals. Because this type of information is unique to the individual, it cannot be reciprocated in kind. Also, reciprocity is not likely if the disclosed information is considered too personal or deviant. The disclosure of this type of information is appropriate for focus groups, but the moderator's task is likely to be more difficult in this case.

The third type of information, *shared impersonal information*, is impersonal in nature but is shared by group members. This information does not directly reflect the self-concept, although it is possible to make personal infer-

ences from the content of the information. For example, the discussion may be centered on factual information, observations, and narratives about what others have done or said. Because this information is not at all intimate, its disclosure is not likely be reciprocated. Nevertheless, because it is commonly held, it is more likely than unshared information to be the focus of the group discussion (Stasser & Titus, 1985).

The fourth type of information is *impersonal unshared information* and is not shared by other group members. Because this information is not intimate (e.g., factual information) and is uniquely held by a few members of the group, reciprocity is not likely. Moreover, because members of the group do not share this information, there is little common ground on which to build a conversation. Thus, for exploratory tasks, the group discussion may require more structure and direction than is necessary to elicit the other types of information. Eliciting this type of information should be the most problematic task for the moderator.

Focus Groups for Exploratory Effects Applications

Focus groups generate knowledge that is either shared or unshared by other people in the group and either personal or impersonal. Moreover, focus groups have been widely used in effect applications for making decisions about strategy and policy. For these purposes, scientific knowledge has little relevance so long as the information is utilitarian. There are five types of applied exploratory tasks: (a) creating new ideas; (b) collecting unique thoughts; (c) identifying needs, expectations, or issues; (d) discovering uses for products, and (e) explaining survey results (see Table 1.1).

Focus groups are used in much the same way as brainstorming groups in some of these applications. Participants are told not to evaluate or prejudge their thoughts. This task focuses on the unique or creative thoughts of the assembled individuals and does not require any sense of shared knowledge or experience. For example, a researcher may be interested in a broad range of beliefs about a particular public policy issue. Many qualitative studies by both academics and practitioners simply compile characteristics of objects, issues, or people that are used to make choices.

Focus groups are also used for collecting unique thoughts. In thought-collecting tasks, the researcher is not primarily concerned with theory. For many of these research purposes, everyday knowledge is the sole concern. Applied research is often interested in collecting lists of characteristics that

consumers use in making purchase decisions or for discovering unintended uses of existing products in a category.

Identification refers to recognizing the needs, expectations, and issues relevant to a particular population of people. For these purposes, focus groups can identify consumers' unfulfilled needs in a product or service category. They can also discover consumers' expectations about the performance of products or services. Groups have also been used to uncover issues of importance to various public service constituencies, such as public health agencies, educational administration groups, and political campaigns. These tasks involve little more than compiling lists of responses.

In many of these applications, the only criterion important to the researcher is whether the list of things being sought is exhaustive of the population, although in some cases the researcher is interested only in the few important or dominant needs, expectations, or issues. This list may later be used in a quantitative survey to determine the frequency with which each item of interest occurs in the general population; the relative importance of each item of interest; how these objects, issues, or people score on each characteristic; or some combination of these. Also, factor analysis during the subsequent quantitative stage might be used to develop second-order constructs. The major goal for the qualitative component is to generate an exhaustive list of items.

The fourth exploratory task is discovery. Discovery refers to the insights and knowledge we gain about new uses and applications of extant products, services, and policies. It also includes the discovery of new products, services, and policies for existing problems. Discovery is a creative process.

The fifth task is to provide explanations for occurrences that we do not understand. Wells (1979) was the first to suggest using focus groups to help explain survey results. Although this use comes after the quantitative study, it is still exploratory in nature. Another exploratory use of focus groups is to explain why consumers for whom innovations are developed do not accept them (e.g., media messages, products or services, and policies).

Focus Groups for Exploratory Theory Applications

Focus groups can be used in theory development in several ways. First, they can be used to generate theoretical constructs and hypotheses. Theoretical constructs can be created (i.e., identified and defined) from the discussion transcripts. Through a process of aggregation, what respondents say can be creatively structured into higher-order theoretical constructs. The everyday

statements that people make in focus groups are treated as first-degree constructs. Then second-degree constructs can be created through the researcher's own imaginative generalizations. Similar first-degree constructs or themes are grouped and labeled as second-order constructs. This process is subjective but analogous to factor analysis. See Miles and Huberman (1984) for a detailed discussion of patterned coding for one way of accomplishing this task. A number of researchers have aggregated common themes into constructs using some form of pattern coding (Conover, Crewe, & Searing, 1991; Hughes & DuMont, 1993; McLaurin, 1995; Parasuraman, Berry, & Zeithaml, 1991).

As constructs evolve, the researcher can track the relationships between these constructs. This is the process of generating hypotheses. For example, Yelland and Gifford (1995) used focus groups to explore familial, environmental, and sociocultural factors from which they generated hypotheses about cultural practices that might protect babies from sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS). Yelland and Gifford (1995) conducted 23 groups ranging from two to eight members and lasting about 1 hour each. The groups were homogeneous on ethnic background (Australian-born, Italian, Southeast Asian, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Malay-Chinese, and Malay-Malay) and the birthplace of their children (hospitals vs. at home). This inductive process of hypothesis generation can be used to develop theoretical explanations for phenomena of interest.

The second theoretical application is to develop theory. Hughes and DuMont (1993) used focus groups to help formulate a research model and to pretest survey items for their appropriateness for the population under study. They wanted to understand how being African American shaped individuals' experiences as workers and parents. Keep in mind, however, that the observations from these groups still provide everyday knowledge. Nothing inherent in the group discussion is scientific or theoretical. It is the researcher's job to generate theory from these observations. This is the process of induction. But these hypothesized relationships cannot be evaluated within the context of the focus groups from which they were derived. In quantitative research, it is generally accepted that you not test a model on data that were used to develop the model. The same thing applies to qualitative research. Therefore, evaluation must await additional quantitative or qualitative research.

Implied in the preceding discussion is that different types of focus groups are more or less useful for generating different types of information for different types of problems. There is no empirical information to offer guidance about what types of groups are most appropriate for what types of informa-

tion. Therefore, I borrow from research on the reciprocity of intimate information and information sharing to offer the following guidelines on information that is most appropriate for exploratory focus groups. Although this discussion is speculative, it offers opportunities for future research.

Group Composition

Group composition is important because it affects compatibility, cohesiveness, and the group process. Cohesiveness and compatibility affect the group process though their effects on the amount of interaction, member motivation, and social influence. Ultimately, group productivity is affected.

Group Composition for Applied Research Tasks

The more that individual members identify with the group and the more they are attracted to other group members, the more cohesive the group should be. Previously, I said that cohesive groups are more susceptible to social influence because of interpersonal attraction or social identity processes. I also said that cohesiveness was two-sided in its effect on productivity. On the one hand, cohesiveness increases motivation and can increase group productivity. On the other hand, increased motivation can be misdirected toward maintaining relationships rather than toward achieving the goals of the moderator and the sponsoring agent.

A third effect due to cohesion is that it increases conformity among group members (McGrath, 1984). When group members face questions about which there is no physical reality, they rely on social consensus to define reality. For example, conformity to beliefs, attitudes, or positions on issues makes individual behaviors more predictable and group members more comfortable with each other. As a result, members of cohesive groups try to influence other members' beliefs and attitudes. Those who deviate from the norms of the group receive much more attention and more persuasive attempts from other group members (McGrath, 1984). Therefore, caution should be exercised when groups are used for uncovering unique or even different beliefs, thoughts, and evaluations. Cohesiveness may increase the likelihood that individuals will try to conform and get others to conform to the perceived normative group position. Thus, cohesiveness can have two adverse effects on focus group research. Conformity could be a particularly perplexing problem for theory applications when agreement among respondents may lead the

researcher to hypothesize that a particular effect is more general than it really is. Also, conformity can cause individual responses in focus groups to be interdependent rather than independent. Therefore, statistical-significance testing on individual responses within and across groups becomes problematic. When independent responses are critical, the researcher can do one of two things. First, one can assume that the responses are not independent and use statistical procedures to correct for interdependence (Gollob, 1991). Second, one might measure cohesion among group members to see if anything need be done. Then, if interdependence is still suspected, the group can be treated as the unit of analysis (Fern, 1982a). Alternatively, a subset of respondents can be randomly drawn from each group for between-group comparisons with the remaining individuals being used as a replication sample.

If the researcher is interested in divergent perspectives in terms of needs, expectations, issues, and thoughts, cohesiveness may work at cross-purposes to the research goal. Social influence may cause individuals to regress their positions toward the perceived group norm. On the other hand, if the researcher is interested in the shared or common perspectives of a particular population, cohesive groups may be better suited for this purpose. This is the point that McQuarrie and McIntyre (1990) make.

When one recruits respondents, it is difficult if not impossible to screen potential recruits to achieve compatibility and cohesiveness. Probably the best one can do is recruit individuals who are relatively homogeneous, or alternatively, heterogeneous, on some set of characteristics. For shared perspectives, the groups should be homogeneous, and for unshared or unique perspectives, the groups should be heterogeneous.

Group Composition for Theoretical Research Tasks

For theory applications, generalizability is a desired outcome of the focus group process. Therefore, precision in determining the guidelines for respondent recruitment and the number of groups is critical. For most theory purposes, within-group heterogeneity is undesirable. Heterogeneity can be achieved through between-group differences.

If the research purpose is to uncover theoretical notions about how a population of individuals generally thinks, feels, and behaves toward some object, issue, or person, compatibility may be more desirable than cohesiveness. This is particularly so if the researcher does not intend for reference or peer group pressure to account for the results. Cohesiveness may encourage individuals to conform to reference group pressure and alter the reports of their

individual behaviors to meet the expectations of others in the group. For this purpose, recruiting acquaintances should probably be avoided. All group members, however, should share similar backgrounds and life experiences. Depending on the discussion topic, respondents should come from the same ethnic group and, probably, be of the same gender.

For uncovering the effects of peers on personal cognitive processes, compatibility may not be enough. For this task, cohesiveness among pairs of individuals or among all members of the group may be desirable. This can be achieved by recruiting pairs of acquaintances or all acquaintances. If pairs of friends are recruited, then compatibility between the pairs will facilitate group discussion and the sharing of information—at least, the sharing of common information. For example, focus groups provide the opportunity to observe the effects of social interaction on opinion formation, expression, and change (Delli Carpini & Williams, 1994). If the researcher is interested in developing hypotheses about things such as personal belief, attitude, and opinion change, cohesion groups provide an opportunity for observing these processes.

For theory applications, group cohesiveness through member homogeneity may be desirable. This is not easily achieved, however,. I return to the Yelland and Gifford (1995) study because it provides insights into what can go wrong when trying to recruit homogeneous groups. I report details from their study because it is one of the few reports that provides enough information about the group process to be informative.

Problems in Recruiting Homogeneous Groups

Many of the problems that Yelland and Gifford (1995) encountered were because professional recruiters were not available or the potential respondents did not trust the available recruiters. First came the language problems. Many of the women who were recruited reported that they spoke English with friends. They also had no problems in one-to-one conversations with recruiters. Their lack of confidence in speaking English, however, negatively affected their contribution to the group discussion. Apparently, the difference between the use of language in one-to-one discussions with recruiters and in group discussions is considerable.

Familiarity was also a contributing factor to problems in the group discussions that Yelland and Gifford faced. For example, as might be expected of horizontal collectivists, Vietnamese women were reluctant to meet with women they did not know. To get this group to participate, they were recruited

as friends. This was not planned but was a judgment call made as implementation of the research design ran into unexpected problems. This decision resulted in some groups being friends and other groups being strangers, depending on the individuals' ethnic backgrounds. Moreover, friends were more inclined to gravitate toward issues of interest to them rather than the ones on the moderator's list. This finding is consistent with the information-sharing expectations that we previously discussed. Groups of strangers discussed the moderator's topics with relative ease. Group size is also confounded with ethnic backgrounds. Because of recruiting difficulties, some groups were systematically smaller than other groups (e.g., Vietnamese and Cambodian), which should provide more speaking time, fewer cognitive-tuning changes, and less productivity loss. By contrast, ethnic groups that are easier to recruit (e.g., Anglo-Celtic women) tend to be larger, which decreases speaking time, increases the number of cognitive switches, and makes it more difficult to get participation from all group members.

This research also encountered problems with focus group moderators because the research purpose was to interview cross-cultural groups. Bilingual facilitators were employed to moderate the Vietnamese and Cambodian groups. Although these moderators received training, they were not professionals, and in some groups, they were forced to assume the role of a health professional. Accordingly, they provided more information and spent more time answering questions in these groups than they did in other groups. Thus, group productivity was differentially affected by the moderator's role as perceived by the members of the group.

Yelland and Gifford (1995) found different types and levels of participation across groups. Most groups ran as expected and were characterized as providing a relaxed atmosphere, with animated conversation and interaction among participants. Generally, the women openly shared experiences, opinions, and ideas about infant care. As might be expected, however, differences were found across ethnic groups. In the Vietnamese and Cambodian groups, members tended to agree more with the moderator and express fewer personal beliefs, values, and practices. In fact two thirds of the content of the Asian transcripts was devoted to giving information and answering questions. The researchers reported that Southeastern Asians reflected courtesy bias and were less likely to express views that they thought were not acceptable to others in the group. This is typical of collectivistic cultures.

Anglo-Celtic group transcripts were quite different and in ways that are consistent with individualistic values. Only one eighth of content was devoted to giving information and answering questions; they were more prone

to discuss details about their individual beliefs and practices. Also, one or two people who held strong opinions and were able to articulate their views clearly, tended to dominate some groups. This inclination caused other people to withdraw from the conversation. Notwithstanding these problems, the researchers found the information that they uncovered to be useful.

Guidelines for Achieving Homogeneous or Heterogeneous Groups

There are many different ways that individuals can be combined to form homogeneous or heterogeneous groups. The composition task becomes more manageable, however, if the researcher first considers the types of information he or she wants. I begin with shared perspectives for both personal and impersonal information.

Recruiting Guidelines for Shared Perspectives. When the research purpose is to uncover shared perspectives, which is the case in experiential research, we need focus groups composed of people who have something to share. It is natural for group discussions to focus on what individuals have in common and ignore things that they do not share. Homogeneous groups increase the likelihood of uncovering shared information.

For shared perspectives, it is desirable to have homogeneous groups with members from the same race, ethnic background, and gender. Thus, if researchers are interested in identifying shared needs, expectations, issues, and thoughts, it makes sense to include only those of the same race and ethnicity in the group. If the information is highly personal, gender should be used as a control variable. Differences in worldviews are due to age, economic status, social status, and personality types. Therefore, it is unlikely that groups that are heterogeneous on these factors will be compatible or share similar perspectives. To achieve the research goal, steps should be taken to make sure that the groups are fairly homogeneous in terms of age and social and/or economic status. It is easy to screen people in terms of age. Occupation and education can be used as surrogates for economic and/or social status.

As is currently the practice among professional research organizations, user status should also be used at a break characteristic. Users and nonusers of the product, service, or program do not share the same perspectives. Therefore, they do not necessarily share the same needs, expectations, issues, and thoughts. For some research purposes (e.g., theory applications), both per-

spectives are desirable. In these cases, homogeneity within user groups and heterogeneity between user groups is a possibility.

Personality is a bit more difficult to deal with. Machavellians in particular and, to a lesser extent, high self-monitors may be disruptive while otherwise compatible individuals are attempting to share their perspectives. Individuals can be screened using versions of the Machavellianism and self-monitor scales, although this presents ethical dilemmas. Once the group has begun, it is awkward if not unethical to expel these individuals from the session. Moreover, their expulsion may very well have a negative impact on the other group members. Keep in mind, however, that disruption is probably less of a problem when attempting to identify needs and collect thoughts than when evaluating programs, communications, or concepts.

Recruiting Guidelines for Unique Perspectives. Heterogeneity among group members is desirable when trying to uncover unique perspectives in exploratory research. This can be achieved by recruiting people from different occupations, neighborhoods, lifestyles, age groups, and user status within relatively homogeneous populations. Groups should probably be homogeneous, however, with respect to race/ethnicity and gender. Unlike when searching for shared experiences, groups of users and nonusers are appropriate when the research purpose is to uncover different perspectives. The goal is to reduce the likelihood of focusing on the common ground and encourage discussion of the unique perspectives. For creative ideation, mixing perspectives is particularly important.

Remember that for eliciting unshared personal information, reciprocity is not likely to help, and the natural inclination to discuss common information works against providing this type of information. As a result, heterogeneous groups might keep returning the discussion to what they share regardless of how trivial it is. Thus, the moderator's role and the instructions and encouragement that the moderator offers the respondents become important.

Group Composition for Exploratory Tasks

For exploratory tasks, it is not critical that focus group members are cohesive as long as they are compatible. The goal is to create unique ideas. For face-to-face focus groups, members should be compatible for exploratory tasks but not necessarily cohesive. For electronic groups and research using the nominal group technique, the social climate is less important. In some ap-

plications of electronic media to the focus group process, compatibility is not required because the technique does not use social interaction. Therefore, heterogeneous groups are not problematic and compatibility is not a major concern. The medium, rather than the social relationships among group members, tends to drive the process.

Individualists are probably best for exploratory tasks unless differences across cultural value orientations are important to the research purpose. Collectivists will focus the discussion on ideas that group members share, and they will ignore unique thoughts. Sharing tasks are primarily experiential and are dealt with in Chapter 8. Thus, for exploratory tasks, it makes sense to bring together individuals who value curiosity, creativity, broadmindedness, and the love of life. All these characteristics tend to be associated with individualists.

Group Size and the Number of Groups

It is generally acknowledged that focus groups should be composed of 8 people, give or take 2. There is evidence, however, that throughout the focus group industry, group size is diminishing to as few as 2 group members. It is not obvious why this is occurring, but this trend may affect the nature of the information being collected. Therefore, I examine group size from the perspectives of the researcher's goals in terms of the type of information desired. To simplify matters, I assume that the intimacy of the information is at a moderate level. The desired information is not too personal or too impersonal. The commonness of the information is split between common and unique.

Based on the information-sharing research, increasing group size, say, from 8 to 12 members should increase the likelihood that shared information will be discussed. Thus, if a researcher is interested in common performance expectations for a service or product, larger groups seem to make sense. For example, assume that the researcher is interested in the most common unmet needs in a financial service area. Groups of 8 to 12 homogeneous individuals may focus on the common if not important unmet needs in this area. Applied and theoretical focus groups should be treated similarly in terms of group size.

On the other hand, if the interest is in the unique expectations of specific segments, smaller groups of 4 or 5 make more sense. Rather than one group of 12 heterogeneous individuals, three groups of more homogeneous individuals can be run without sacrificing the heterogeneity of the 12 individuals.

Because the groups are homogeneous, they will share common expectations, but they are more likely to do this in a shorter time period and move on to their more unique expectations. Heterogeneity across groups will provide diversity in the unique perspectives. Consequently, at the group level, more unique information should be found, and across groups, more diversity.

If 8 to 12 relatively heterogeneous individuals are recruited for a single group, it can be expected that the discussion will focus on the basic things they have in common. Groups of heterogeneous individuals are likely to look for some common ground. In doing so, they will probably focus on their common perspectives. Unfortunately, the things they have in common may not be on the moderator's guide; that is the risk associated with using large groups of heterogeneous individuals.

You can also go to the extreme with small groups (e.g., 4 members) and maximize heterogeneity, within the constraints dictated for compatibility. In this case, there is little or no common information to share, leaving only unique information for the discussion. In addition, for the same recruiting cost of a 12-person group, three heterogeneous 4-person groups can be conducted with less chance of groups focusing on trivial or useless information. With smaller groups, however, the moderator may have to work harder to get at the desired information.

How Many Interviews Are Necessary for Exploratory Tasks?

Suggestions about the optimal number of focus group sessions range from two to eight. The number of groups seems to depend on the research complexity and the researcher's interest in difference variables (Goldman & McDonald, 1987; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). Two groups per characteristic used to create homogeneous groups may be enough (Knodel, 1993).

For most focus group research, fewer than five groups is probably adequate (Krueger, 1988; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990; Wells, 1979). Occasionally, four to six focus groups or more might be needed (Crabtree, Yanoshik, Miller, & O'Connor, 1993; Goldman & McDonald, 1987; Wells, 1979). All these sources seem to agree with Churchill (1992) that there comes a point when diminishing returns set in. At the point of diminishing returns, the cost of an additional group will not be covered by its incremental benefit. Wells (1979) elaborates this notion:

> From the first interview on an unfamiliar topic, the analyst invariably learns a great deal. The second interview produces much more, but not all of it is

> new. Usually by the third session, and certainly by the fourth, most of what is said has been said several times, and it is obvious that little is to be gained from continuing. (p. 6)

For many applied thought-elicitation purposes, as few as four focus groups may be enough. Griffin and Hauser (1993) uncovered 80% of office equipment needs by the end of the fourth group interview. On the basis of qualitative researchers' experiences and the empirical research, I conclude that by the end of the fourth group most shared or common attributes (70 to 80%) should be captured.

It is likely, however, that the unique or creative thoughts come later in the group discussion, as suggested in the discussion of the information-sampling model. Therefore, increasing the number of groups will not necessarily increase the chances of uncovering unique information, but increasing the length of the focus group session may help. Once the common information is discussed, it is more likely that the unique information will be mentioned. As the unshared information is mentioned, the moderator can focus the group on these unique perspectives for explanation and elaboration.

If the researcher is interested in a total population of thoughts rather than common or unique ones, more groups may be necessary. For this task, smaller heterogeneous groups can be used to force discussion of unique thoughts. To compensate for fewer respondents, more groups can be run to make sure that the sample of people is representative of the population.

For exploratory tasks, there is not much difference between the number of groups recommended for effects and theory applications. The number of groups depends on the rate of progress toward answering the research questions. Rapid progress requires fewer groups than slower. It should also be kept in mind that the number of groups might not be predetermined in some research projects. This is likely to be the case when the researcher begins the project with foggy notions about the research problem. It will take more groups to sharpen these notions into constructs and their hypothesized relationships than if the research problem was more clearly defined. For example, exploratory findings from one focus group might cause the researcher to follow three or four different lines of inquiry. Additional groups may be required to explore additional constructs or even second-level constructs as first-order theoretical notions evolve from earlier groups. For example, Manderson (cited in Khan & Manderson, 1992) used large mixed-gender groups to discuss general issues, then split these into smaller groups to discuss specific cultural and social issues.

Keep in mind that most of these suggestions are for marketing applications. It becomes obvious from reading the literature, however, that the number of groups is a judgment call. This decision depends on whether the research purpose is to uncover common or unique perspectives, whether the research is for effects or theory applications, and the heterogeneity of the relevant people population. I am certain that one group is rarely sufficient for any research purpose. Nevertheless, I do not pretend that there are magical numbers of groups to fulfill all researchers' expectations.

The Focus Group Setting for Exploratory Tasks

My review of literature on small-group-tasks environments suggests that the environment should be consistent with the research purpose. Here I discuss several aspects of the ambient, human, and material environments for exploratory tasks and note that the focus group setting is confounded with population characteristics of the focus group respondents and with the research purpose. Focus group respondents are selected because they represent some population that is specified in the research purpose. The physical location for exploratory research is dictated by its accessibility and acceptability to the respondents. Therefore, to what extent the setting or the respondents cause the focus group outcome is unknown. The focus group researcher should think through these potential confounds and their unintended effects. Many potential confounds can be eliminated during the research planning stage; the uncontrollable ones should be noted in the research report.

For example, assume that the research purpose is to study shared thoughts about tropical disease prevention. At least three other choices are somewhat constrained if not predetermined by this purpose: the location of the study, the relevant human population, and the type of focus group facility. The study is constrained to regions where tropical diseases are a threat to humans and where it is unlikely that centrally located high-tech focus group facilities will be available to the researcher. Fortunately, for the purpose of collecting shared personal thoughts, these constraints are not formidable. Informal group discussions among neighbors in someone's living room are natural and may provide the best environment for sharing the desired information. Moreover, reference group influence is likely to keep respondents focused on common wisdom and away from unique thoughts. In this case, the potential confounds may not pose insurmountable process obstacles or have a

negative effect on the research outcomes. Homogeneous groups of acquaintances are consistent with our theoretical notions about factors that are conducive to sharing common information. This example assumes that the group members are homogeneous in terms of culture, social and economic status, and everyday experiences. This assumption must be explored, however, because often times the appearance of homogeneity may be misleading.

The preceding scenario is not so promising for uncovering diverse unique personal information, however. For example, assume that researchers were interested in highly creative and unusual home remedies for tropical diseases. For this type of information, groups of strangers from different populations and most likely different geographic locations might be desirable. This type of recruitment, however, may be extremely difficult to achieve, and the researcher may have to think of other more creative solutions to the problem. It may be necessary to use a different population to uncover the hypotheses—for example, experts on home remedies from widely different tropical areas. For this sample of respondents, the focus group facility will no doubt be different and the types of responses will be different from those that were intended. Another possible solution might be to conduct longer and smaller groups within a neighborhood. Extending the time for unique perspectives and increasing diversity by doing groups across heterogeneous neighbors may help in this specific case.

Computer-Mediated Groups for Exploratory Tasks

With the rapid increase in computer technology comes a new set of "focus groups" referred to as electronic groups or computer-mediated groups. This new technology has promise for exploratory tasks. Research by Gallupe and others seems to indicate that these electronic groups generate significantly more unique (i.e., nonredundant) ideas and higher-quality ideas than face-to-face groups (Gallupe, Bastianutti, & Cooper, 1991; Gallupe et al., 1992). As discussed earlier, the face-to-face group discussion process is not conducive to brainstorming tasks because the discussion process interferes with efficient turn taking. These problems are diminished, however, if the ideas are expressed individually before the group discusses them. In computer-mediated groups, individuals express their thoughts somewhat independently of the group process. Thus, factors such as evaluation apprehen-

sion, social loafing, free riding, and cognitive tuning are not likely to be detrimental to the group outcomes.

I pointed out previously that information available to a group through its members is unequally distributed. Some of this information is shared; some is not. Moreover, the probability of mentioning an item of information depends on the number of people who know it. Common or shared information is more likely than unique or unshared information to be brought up in the face-to-face group discussion, particularly when the groups are relatively large. A couple of things can be done to increase the probability of uncovering unshared or unique information in computer-mediated focus groups. First, individualists rather than collectivists can be recruited, which should increase the chances that individual group members will not feel compelled to focus on that which the group values. Second, to increase within-group heterogeneity and the diversity of ideas, individuals can be recruited across social class, race, and ethnic groups. Finally, by keeping the groups relatively small, communication problems and the probability of discussing shared ideas are minimized.

One outcome of these developments, however, appears to be the removal of social interaction that characterizes face-to-face groups. Because of these changes, more emphasis is placed on task accomplishment, resulting in less rich communication and less rich information being generated. For example, virtually all nonverbal communication is lost. For exploratory tasks, however, this is less likely to be problematic than for many clinical and most experiential tasks, for which this loss will be problematic.

McGrath and Hollingshead (1994) suggest other problems with electronic groups. Because group members are not visible to each other, transitions from speaker to speaker can become disrupted and disjointed. This is most noticeable in telephone conferencing. Moreover, each respondent's ability to type, typing speed, and reading load can effect message transmission negatively. For some tasks, face-to-face groups have the potential of being more productive.

The Group Moderator for Exploratory Tasks

For exploratory research, the moderator should be professionally competent. The notions about moderating focus groups in this section are based on the theoretical notions discussed earlier.

Desirable Characteristics of Exploratory Group Moderators

Exploratory group moderators, who are charged with discovering unique information, should be sensitive, creative, and confident in their ability. They should have good communication skills and be able to manage the group. For this type of group, the moderator should establish rapport but control the group so that all points of view are expressed. When necessary, he or she needs to direct the group into new areas and be flexible and receptive to exploring new and unexpected ideas. For exploring shared information, the moderator should reflect characteristics similar to those of phenomenological moderators.

The Moderator's Background

The moderator's educational background is not so critical for exploratory effect applications, particularly when the researcher is interested in shared perspectives. An undergraduate degree with some course work in the social sciences is helpful (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). Presumably, knowledge about small groups is an asset in managing focus groups. A degree in marketing provides the required marketing research knowledge for business applications. A master's of science degree is a plus because it is a research degree. For theory applications, the master's of science degree is a minimal requirement. Ph.D.-level work in the theoretical area is also helpful. In most cases, the people developing the theories or their associates will conduct the groups. Minimal training in the focus group method is also required.

The relaxed background requirements for focus groups does not mean that just anybody can conduct focus groups successfully. In marketing research, where competition among firms that do qualitative research is intense, standards for moderator qualifications are high. The literature on moderator qualifications attests to the concern for quality. The cost of group research is also high. Therefore, client firms want, and have a right to expect, highly competent focus group moderators. The nature and the amount of previous focus group experience are legitimate concerns. For other uses, however, these requirements are less critical. Educational background, focus group training, and experience are important. A minimum requirement is that the potential moderators should conduct several groups after the initial training period. Viewing videotapes of the sessions will alert the researchers to any problems that need correction before the project begins.

Moderating Style

Moderating style is not particularly important for the success of exploratory groups. It is the outcome that counts. Focus group moderators who are seeking unique ideas can be more detached and become more involved in one-to-one interaction with group members. For uncovering shared ideas, they should be more like the participants and blend into the group. Detachment is not desirable for these applications, particularly for theory development purposes. In these cases, perceptions that the moderator is like the respondents, another member of the group, are important. Nevertheless, the moderator needs to maintain control.

Group Process Factors and Brainstorming Tasks

Collecting unique or creative impersonal thoughts and ideas poses an almost insurmountable obstacle for focus groups. Most people cannot talk and think creatively at the same time. I discussed this in Chapter 5. Several studies have shown that groups are not efficient for generating creative ideas (Diehl & Stroebe, 1987; Fern, 1982a). Individuals working alone can generate up to twice as many thoughts as the same number working in groups.

Limited research suggests that groups do not generate better thoughts than individuals (Fern, 1982a). A study by Sussman, Burton, Dent, Stacy, and Flay (1991) found no evidence of creative synergy in focus groups. They compared smoking-cessation strategies generated individually before the group discussion with those generated after group discussion. If the group fostered creativity, they expected more variety in smoking-cessation strategies to be elicited from individuals after group discussion than before. This effect was not found. The group discussions did not integrate any of the individuals' ideas into new strategies; there was no synergy due to group ideation. Moreover, only 15% of the participants provided strategies during the post-group survey that they had not reported on the pregroup survey.

This does not necessarily mean that focus groups should not be used for brainstorming. In talking with colleagues, I found several reasons for using focus groups for this purpose. They are fun to do. For the inexperienced interviewer, focus groups can run on their own without much direction from the moderator. Also, and this may be the most important reason, people tend to believe what they see in focus groups. Focus groups appear, correctly or not, to provide some consistency or reliability among individual responses.

Peers challenge or back up what their cohorts say. This provides an intuitive but naïve check on realty for observers of the focus group session.

An Alternative Method for Brainstorming Tasks

An alternative group technique—the nominal group technique (NGT) (Claxton, Ritchie, & Zaichkowsky, 1980; Delbecq, Van de Ven, & Gustafson, 1975)—avoids the cognitive-tuning problems I uncovered in focus groups. There are several advantages to using the NGT. First, moderators can lead these groups with virtually no training or practice. Second, there is almost no opportunity for group dynamics (e.g., peer pressure) to affect individual thought production. Third, more respondents can be included in the groups with no adverse consequences. Finally, the group process is simple.

The moderator asks the respondents to write down their thoughts about any topic. This procedure prevents changes in cognitive-tuning modes, and the group does not influence the individual's thoughts. Then each person reads one idea from his or her list; the moderator writes it on a flip chart until all group members have contributed an idea. Then the process begins again and continues until all ideas by all individuals are expressed and written on the flip charts (Claxton et al., 1980). The moderator hangs the charts around the room, and the group eliminates all redundant thoughts. The result is a list of unique thoughts without group influence.

An additional benefit of NGT is that after all thoughts are generated, the moderator can ask each individual to rank order the three or more thoughts that they think are most important, most creative, most useful, and so forth. Because the group does not discuss the thoughts, the individual responses are statistically independent and can be subjected to quantitative analysis. Finally, once the nominal group task is finished, the moderator can extend the time and transition into a focus group discussion about the reasons behind the thoughts. At this point, the list has been generated, and there is no need to be concerned about any adverse effects due to group interaction.

Generalizability

Are the results from exploratory focus group research generalizable? It seems that under some conditions, both effects and theory applications can be generalized. The specific domains that are generalized may differ, but both types of research are concerned about generalizability. For example, an effects

researcher may be concerned about whether an effect will hold across variations in respondents. On the other hand, the theoretical researcher may be concerned about whether an effect will generalize across different behaviors.

If a quantitative survey is anticipated, generalizability of the exploratory research findings can be easily assessed. If quantitative follow-up research is not planned, additional groups can be run to discover whether the exploratory results are reliable. The researcher and decision maker should be convinced that the results are reliably replicated across different groups from the relevant population. This becomes an economic issue. Whether or not the project should commit to additional groups depends on how risk averse the decision maker is and what is at stake if a wrong decision is made on the basis of the research.

Summary

Focus groups are used for research tasks such as creating new ideas, thought collecting, identifying consumers needs, discovering product ideas, explaining puzzling empirical results, and uncovering theoretical explanations and hypotheses. Within each of these tasks, four types of information are generated. The information may be shared or unshared and personal or impersonal. Exploratory research is primarily interested in unshared information. These tasks are further differentiated in terms of effects and theory applications.

I discussed the effect of group composition on both effects and theory applications. Cohesion among group members is desirable for some research purposes because cohesive groups work together and cohesion fosters productivity. Too much cohesion, however, may cause group members to conform to normative behaviors or positions on issues and may decrease diversity in the group discussion. This cohesive effect may not pay off for exploratory tasks. Conformity is not desirable for research that is interested in unique information. Thus, when one is interested in eliciting a range of thoughts, it may be best to recruit individuals who are compatible in terms of demographic characteristics but who are not necessarily cohesive. I also discussed recruiting practices to achieve homogeneous or heterogeneous groups and presented specific recruiting guidelines for gaining shared as well as unshared perspectives from focus group participants.

The size of exploratory groups should be smaller than for other research purposes, depending on the researcher's understanding of the research problem. This is so because large groups tend to focus on shared rather than unique

information. Groups of four heterogeneous individuals may make sense for creative and exploratory purposes. The number of groups to use is a judgment call, depending on the research purpose, whether the task is applied or theoretical, and whether shared or unshared information is desired.

Because exploratory group research is not concerned about theory testing, control of the setting is less critical. In particular, the researcher should resist the temptation to compare the group output across groups when the settings differ. Beyond this caveat, be aware of the potential negative effects that the setting can have on group productivity. This warning is particularly true when contemplating the new electronic media.

Next, I explored some artificial and nontraditional focus group environments resulting from recent developments in communication technology. I critically evaluated these technologies and compared these innovations with traditional focus groups.

I also discussed the moderator. The background characteristics of the focus group moderator in exploratory tasks are less critical than for moderators employed for clinical and experiential tasks, for which moderators should be trained in leading focus groups and have a similar cultural background to that of the respondents. I also discussed strategies a moderator can use to increase sharing of information.

Most of the group process and motivation losses seem to adversely affect productivity in focus groups, although the negative effects may be relatively minor. The biggest negative effect is due to cognitive tuning; people cannot think and talk at the same time. This phenomenon seems to be responsible for the largest decrement in group productivity loss. There are a few ways to avoid these problems, however. All of them minimize group interaction. The researcher can opt for one-to-one interviews, NGT, or computer-mediated focus groups for ideation purposes.

The chapter ends with a discussion of generalizability. Generalizability is probably of little concern beyond the particular effect application and the relevant populations that interest the focus group user. The generalizability of concepts or relationships is a greater concern for theory applications.

Chapter 8

Experiential Tasks

Focus groups are used for a number of experiential tasks. Several factors distinguish experiential tasks from clinical and exploratory tasks, although there is some overlap. Many of the experiential tasks are those that might be undertaken by phenomenological focus groups (Calder, 1977). The consciousness and commonness of the experience differentiate experiential tasks from clinical tasks.

Experiential tasks also differ from exploratory tasks. As discussed in the last chapter, exploratory tasks are often interested in creative or unique solutions to problems. Uniqueness is foreign to intersubjectivity but is characteristic of intrasubjectivity. By intrasubjectivity, I mean all the aspects of one's knowledge and experience that make the individual unique. Intersubjectivity is at the heart of experiential tasks. This is not to say that creativity or uniqueness will not surface in experiential tasks, but the unique perspectives of group members are not necessary for the success of experiential tasks. The only use for unique perspectives might be to delineate the boundaries of the shared experiences. Unique perspectives may tell us something about how individuals deviate from the intersubjectivity of their primary group affiliations. As a whole, the sum of these unique experiences may help delineate the core of everyday knowledge.

The power of the experiential use of focus groups lies in knowing that each focus group respondent not only speaks for himself or herself but also for the primary groups with which he or she shares everyday knowledge. This shared everyday knowledge is of interest to both decision makers and academic researchers.

In this chapter, I begin with a discussion of the types of information that can be obtained through experiential tasks. Then, the differences between experiential effects applications and theory applications are discussed. Considerable discussion is devoted to two theoretical applications: triangulation and theory confirmation. Group composition is then examined in the context of applied and theoretical research, with specific emphasis on how to achieve groups of homogeneous respondents. I discuss group size next and the number of groups to be recruited for particular purposes. The focus group setting is particularly important for experiential research tasks and is considered along with characteristics of the moderator that may be desirable. The chapter ends with a discussion of group process factors that may adversely affect the outcome of experiential research.

Types of Experiential Information

Experiential refers to the thoughts, feelings, and behavior shared by members of a culture, race/ethnic group, community, or familial group. These are the natural attitudes and intersubjectivity discussed in Chapter 1. Experiential tasks deal only with information that is known to the individual respondents. Others in the group may know some of this information as well. An additional constraint in experiential tasks is that the information be representative of or common to some larger group of people. On the other hand, clinical tasks are interested in either suppressed or unknown information. The goal for clinical tasks is to make the unknown known (i.e., to make it public). For clinical purposes, it makes no difference whether the information is shared or unshared. This distinction is not meaningful for clinical tasks.

Focus Groups for Experiential Effect Applications

In the discussion on exploratory tasks, I outlined several types of everyday information sought by focus groups. Experiential tasks differ from the other types of focus group tasks in that, typically, only the shared personal information is sought. Depth of disclosure (i.e., the individual's unique motives) is not relevant to understanding the intersubjectivity of a primary group. The nature of disclosure targeted in this approach can range from highly personal to impersonal so long as the self-disclosures are normative for the primary group being investigated. Deviant information (unshared personal information), by definition, falls outside the group's norms and should be avoided in

experiential focus group research. The reason is that the discussion could become uncomfortable and embarrassing or even come to a standstill when the deviant disclosures are not reciprocated.

There are several applications of focus groups for experiential tasks in the literature. Of the studies reviewed, I found research projects interested in uncovering shared perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors. One study used focus groups to understand attitudes, opinions, and lifestyles of youth in India (Agarwal, Muthukumaran, & Sharma, 1990). Other applications include understanding the language of the targeted population (Hughes & DuMont, 1993), the knowledge the members of that population have (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1993; Irwin et al., 1991), and their shared experiences (Agar & MacDonald, 1995). Finally, several studies try to understand media habits and behaviors (Delli Carpini & Williams, 1994; Höijer, 1990). These applications are presented in Table 1.1.

Four broad categories of applied experiential tasks are sharing, eliciting, understanding, and evaluating. The first task is *sharing* the life experiences of the participants. Frequently, researchers are interested in profiling the lifestyles of population segments. Once the profiles are established, interest turns to the relative size of the groups profiled. In marketing, this is referred to as *psychographic* or lifestyle research. Lifestyle is just one component of the broader category of psychographics; the other two components are psychological and product benefits (Kinnear & Taylor, 1995). Lifestyles refer to the activities (e.g., work, hobbies, and entertainment), interests (e.g., family, recreation, and media), and opinions (e.g., social issues, politics, and business) of the profiled segments. Focus groups are used to uncover the relevant activities, interests, and opinions of the particular group under study, usually for follow-up survey research.

A second task, *eliciting*, refers to extracting or evoking the respondents' shared attitudes or feelings, preferences, and behaviors or intentions. It goes beyond what is orally communicated and includes uncovering nonverbal cues through seeing and feeling. This means that the analyst may resort to observing facial cues (e.g., smiling or frowning) and interpreting the emotional content (e.g., passion or indifference) of the verbal communication of attitudes and behaviors.

A third task is developing an *understanding* about how people talk, how knowledgeable they are, and how they experience things. This refers to capturing the nature, character, and the nuance of the phenomenon of interest. In simple terms, this means experiencing the participants in the interview. A major difference between this task and the others is the relaxation of group struc-

ture and the participant nature of the moderator's role. The moderator becomes part of the group without directly influencing the direction or the content of the discussion. The moderator learns through passive participation as a group member.

Finally, focus groups are used to *evaluate* the reliability, validity, and generalizability of findings in effect applications. I discuss this use in more detail under theory applications. At a minimum, process evaluations should be used for cross-validation purposes (Campbell, 1988). In the context of experiential tasks, process evaluations are used to make sure that the findings are reliable if not valid. If, as is done in experimental research, the particular focus group process is recorded (i.e., a written record), the record can be evaluated by others before and after the project is completed. In addition, these records will allow others to replicate the research if needed.

Focus Groups for Experiential Theory Applications

Two experiential tasks for theory development purposes are triangulation and confirmation. Actually, the goals of triangulation and evaluation are very similar. The major difference is that for triangulation purposes, focus groups are used to verify findings from another research method. For evaluation purposes, focus groups are used as a stand-alone method to confirm theoretical notions directly.

Focus Groups for Triangulation Tasks

Triangulation derives from work on the multitrait-multimethod matrix by Campbell and Fiske (1959) and is widely accepted among social scientists. Apparently, focus groups have become quite popular for triangulation purposes. The logic for this use appears to be that if maximally diverse methods lead to the same research findings, our confidence in the findings increases. Focus group findings have been compared with the findings of surveys, individual interviews, and telephone interviews.

Triangulation is based on the optimistic if not idyllic and perhaps naive belief that results from two different methods will converge and that we will be better off because of this extra precaution. This optimism may not be warranted, however. Using focus groups for triangulation purposes may leave us worse off than we were before. The findings may not converge. Brinberg

(1995) suggests that triangulation be used (he uses the term *multiples*) only when "they [multiples] provide information beyond what we currently know and the cost of including them is less than their potential (and likely) benefits" (n.p.). See Brinberg (1995) for a discussion of the conditions under which using multiples may be beneficial. My goal is to alert researchers that using focus groups for triangulation purposes should be done only after careful thought about what they are expecting to achieve by doing so.

Assume for the moment that focus group and survey findings do not converge. What inferences can be drawn from these divergent findings? In discussions on qualitative methods, both Campbell (1988) and Calder (1977) state that they would likely accept the qualitative findings in cases of such divergence. Although, it is comforting to know that they have more confidence in a qualitative method than the more "scientific" methods when findings are not congruent, this confidence may be misplaced.

There are many causes for the inconsistency between findings from different methods. For example, the survey items may differ from the questions used in the group research. Ward, Bertrand, and Brown (1991) report that focus groups provide greater depth of response than surveys. Surveys, however, provide more information than focus groups because many survey questions require yes or no responses to a series of items. The dissimilar responses may occur because the potential number of responses to some questions in focus groups is limited. In addition, some questions about issues may be highly sensitive or new to the focus group respondent. Thus, focus group respondents may be reluctant to reveal highly sensitive information and attitudes or opinions that are not well established. Finally, survey questions may ask for more direct structured responses, whereas focus groups may ask for the same information indirectly and in open-ended questions. Focus groups, therefore, may provide more information than surveys. After the data are collected, speculation about areas of poor convergence is problematic. If the researcher is interested in triangulation, these types of inconsistencies can be ironed out before conducting the research.

There are a number of other potential methodological reasons for the divergence (e.g., sample selection, interviewer characteristics, and response format) across multiple methods. It is not necessary to discuss all of them. The point is that a divergent finding across multiple methods poses a serious dilemma for the researcher. This is so because there are many ways in which methods differ.

Group process factors affect focus group but not survey responses. Four types of process factors are discussed in Chapter 5, including production

blocking, social influence, free riding, and information influence. Not only do these group processes affect focus groups differently from surveys, but they also affect different types of focus groups differently.

Triangulation necessarily introduces different sources of error (both systematic and random) into the research design, including populations, research settings, and times, not to mention numerous differences because of the particular research methods chosen. See Brinberg (1995) for an analogous discussion of the methodological issues involved. A priori, it is unlikely that different methods will provide convergent findings. The logic of the last statement is the same as that used to argue that the null hypothesis in theory-testing research is never totally true (e.g., the difference between two means is never exactly zero). Two different methods will never produce exactly the same findings. Consequently, the convergence between focus group and survey findings is a matter of judgment. When convergence is not found, the researcher is faced with explaining why the focus group results exceeded the expectations for the other method or, conversely, failed to live up to the researcher's expectations.

Convergence, on the other hand, poses a deceptively simple solution—accept the finding. This solution is deceptive because of the inherent bias in seeing what we want to see as well as the potential for unintentionally guiding the group discussions toward convergence with the survey research. The interested researcher might think about what methodological factors need to be controlled before confidence in the triangulation of survey and focus group is positively or negatively affected.

Nevertheless, triangulation has been unquestionably used to justify the use of focus groups to explore a large number of applied and some theoretical issues. If the researcher is convinced that triangulation is necessary, the reasons should be explicated before the data are collected. Moreover, the theory should account for both the positive and the negative findings that may result from the attempt to find convergence. For example, assume that individual interviews (either face-to-face or by telephone) and focus groups are being used to examine attitudes or opinions about some issue. It might be reasonable to expect convergence of results about existing attitudes in the absence of reference group influence. If group members influence attitude formation or change (i.e., polarization or depolarization), however, we might expect attitudes expressed in focus groups to be different (e.g., more extreme) from those expressed in individual interviews. In this oversimplified example, convergence might be taken to mean that existing attitudes were not affected by reference group pressure. Conversely, more extreme attitudes in focus groups might mean the existence of reference group influence. Thus, if focus groups

are to be used for triangulation purposes, the extent of the expected convergence of findings should be included in the theoretical and measurement models (Brinberg, 1995). Specifically, the possibility of the lack of convergence should be addressed during the hypothesis formulation stage of the research.

Focus Groups for Theory Confirmation

A second set of theoretical tasks includes confirming theories, models, or hypotheses. I found relatively few focus group uses that could be classified as theory evaluation purposes (Agar & MacDonald, 1995; Delli Carpini & Williams, 1994; Pramualratana, Havanon, & Knodel, 1985). Therefore, I will devote considerable space to justifying the notion that focus groups can be used to confirm or test hypotheses and theories.

Several concerns are expressed when authors discuss, or allude to, the scientific status of focus groups. I discussed each of these concerns in Chapter 6. Now we look at how we can handle these concerns when focus groups are used for theory evaluation purposes.

Representative samples are drawn from the relevant population in experiential research using the same methods used in survey or experimental research. Sampling techniques ranging from judgmental samples to stratified samples can be used. Simple random sampling will hardly ever be used in this type of research because usually the researcher is interested in a specific population. The groups should be homogeneous with respect to individual characteristics that cause the shared perspectives. Of course, these choices require sufficient knowledge of the phenomena under investigation to be able to make informed decisions about these causal factors. I assume that this knowledge was gained during the exploratory stage of the research project.

Another issue raised is whether the same or different focus group moderators ask the same questions in different groups. This is the uniformity issue. Because the research is not exploratory or clinical, there is little reason to vary question format across groups. For theory applications, questions can be standardized along with the follow-up probing questions.

Independence is no more or less important in focus groups for experiential tasks than in survey research. Laboratory experimental research is one area in which independence is tightly controlled. It refers to whether individuals in focus groups can report aspects of the self, independent of other reports in the group. For this to occur, group members must feel free to express themselves independent of dominant respondents and the like. The moderator can help by providing a climate that affords the opportunity for open and can-

did responses. If statistical control becomes necessary, the researcher can use the group rather than the individual as the unit of analysis. Alternatively, the researcher can nest individuals within groups and analyze the nested design using analysis of variance.

If it can be observed, it can be quantified. In my own research (Fern, 1982a), I have used quantified focus group data and used analysis of variance (ANOVA) and orthogonal comparisons for my analysis. Others have done the same. Clinical psychologists have a research tradition of investigating the effects of different psychotherapy methods on therapeutic outcomes. Moreover, meta-analyses and other statistical analyses have been reported in reviews of the literature. For example, Lieberman, Yalom, and Miles (1973) report the results of factor analysis done on survey responses from encounter group members. It is a myth that focus group discussions are not quantifiable. One of the most perplexing notions advanced against focus group research is that different analysts will interpret the same focus group discussion differently. Yet this anomaly appears to be acceptable to those advocates of focus group research. This belief, if it remains untested, should cause buyers of applied focus group research to pull their hair. The simple solution to the problem is to have more than one moderator use the same protocol, then have them interpret each other's findings and check their reliabilities.

When focus groups are used for experiential tasks, they can achieve the same scientific status as survey and experimental research. It is up to the researcher. Keep in mind, however, that in exerting more control over the design of the research and making each group session subscribe to some predetermined protocol, focus groups become something quite different from the traditional notion of focus groups.

Group Composition

Unlike exploratory group research where compatibility is enough, for experiential research, there must also be group cohesion. Experiential group research should benefit from group cohesiveness. Cohesive groups foster social influence through interpersonal attraction and social identity. Although these processes work against uncovering unique experiences, they work for sharing common experiences. The group exerts pressure on its members to conform to normative behavior. The normative behavior in focus groups for experiential tasks is sharing everyday experiences.

Group Composition for Applied and Theoretical Research Tasks

For effects and theory evaluation applications of experiential research, focus groups should be homogeneous. I assume that someone using either of these applications is interested in shared perspectives. Homogeneity is achieved by recruiting members with similar life experiences for each group. Shared perspectives are more likely when group members are of the same race, ethnic background, and gender. If researchers want group members to disclose shared attitudes, preferences, and behaviors, race and ethnicity are minimal control variables. For highly intimate personal information, gender is an important break characteristic. For more information about achieving homogeneity with ethnic minorities, see the discussion in Chapter 7 on focus group composition and cohesion.

Differences due to age, economic status, social status, and personality types also affect life experiences. Individuals who are heterogeneous on these factors may be compatible if they are from the same race or ethnic group, but they are unlikely to be cohesive enough to disclose shared information. Therefore, it is desirable to make sure that the groups are homogeneous in terms of age and social status, economic status, or both. It is easy to screen people in terms of age—say, youths, middle-aged people, and senior citizens. Occupation and education are surrogates for economic and social status. In many cases, members from the same or similar neighborhoods will fulfill this requirement adequately.

Groups should be homogeneous with respect to product or service user status. I noted in the discussion of exploratory groups (Chapter 7) that users and nonusers of the product, service, or program do not share the same perspectives. Therefore, they do not necessarily share the same attitudes, behaviors, and so forth. For theory applications, both users' perspectives and nonusers' perspectives may be desirable, and within-group homogeneity and between-group heterogeneity on user status will provide this information.

Recruiting Homogeneous Groups

A major goal of experiential tasks is to share common ideas and experiences. Therefore, groups should be cohesive. This condition is most likely if group members have a collectivist cultural value orientation. Consistent with this orientation, group members should have the desire to uncover normative beliefs, behaviors, and experiences. In this case, individuals within groups

should be homogeneous with respect to cultural value orientation. Individuals should value social relationships, respect for tradition, family security, and personalized relationships. Because life experiences differ depending on social class, age, gender, and race/ethnicity, these factors should be used to capture diversity across groups while maintaining homogeneity within groups.

Guidelines for Achieving Homogenous Groups. When the researcher is interested in using focus groups for triangulation purposes, for example when comparing focus group results with those from surveys, the samples used in both methods should be representative of the same population. The focus group sample depends on the sample used in the survey research. If the samples are not drawn from the same population using the same sampling procedure, it is questionable whether the results will converge.

Even when focus group respondents are sampled from the same population as survey respondents, the researcher must decide whether the groups should be homogeneous or heterogeneous. Moreover, this choice depends on whether shared or unshared information is desirable. This means that the research goal of the survey dictates the composition of groups for experiential tasks. Therefore, the focus group researcher should know the following about the survey research: sample characteristics, type of information sought, and relevant segments of the population being studied. With this information, the researcher can create homogeneous groups that represent segments of the population to obtain shared information. In addition, heterogeneous groups can be created in the same way to gather unshared information. Finally, both homogeneous and heterogeneous groups can be used to collect a more complete set of information, both shared and unshared.

Group Composition for Experiential Tasks

Group Size and Number of Groups

The size of groups should be consistent with the research purpose. For experiential tasks, the purpose is accessing the shared perspectives of the group members. As group size increases, so does the probability that only shared information will be brought up for discussion. Accordingly, groups for these purposes should be larger than those for exploratory purposes (e.g., 10 to 12 group members). These issues become decidedly more complex when one considers the number of issues to be explored.

How Many Interviews Are Necessary for Experiential Tasks?

Because cohesive groups promote conformity, the range of responses that can be expected from cohesive groups should be narrower than if the groups were more heterogeneous. Therefore, if there are many issues on the discussion guide, more groups will be needed. This may be a necessary trade-off. The rule of thumb that groups should be run until no more shared information is forthcoming seems to be appropriate. If so, four to six groups per break characteristic should be enough.

More groups are necessary for theory applications than for effect applications. As the complexity of the theory increases, the number of variables, the number of break characteristics, and the number of different homogeneous groups increase.

The Research Setting for Experiential Tasks

As I have stated repeatedly, focus groups are useful for investigating perspectives that a population of individuals has in common. The ambient, human, and material aspects of the research setting should be consistent with this purpose. As I argued in the chapter on exploratory tasks, however, the environment is confounded with the characteristics of the respondent population. I raise two concerns here: One is methodological and the other is behavioral.

The group setting is fixed for many effect applications because modern, centrally located viewing rooms are used. A positive aspect of this practice is that all respondents face the same research setting. Variation in responses is not attributable to variation in settings. If there is a distinguishing characteristic of the room that affects behavior (e.g., type of table, mirror, or camera), however, the effect is systematic across groups. Therefore, we do not know for sure to what extent the characteristic caused the group's behavior; this is systematic error. When conducting groups in field research (i.e., different households or different focus group facilities), whether systematic error is introduced or not depends on the similarity and nature of the facilities. Error is introduced nevertheless; only if the locations are randomly selected is the error random.

For effect applications, researchers can randomly select facilities or control them by ensuring that they are physically comparable. This is a particular concern if the researcher is interested in comparing responses across groups.

For example, assume that the researcher is interested in comparing shared experiences between two populations (e.g., urban and rural). In addition, the urban population interviews are in focus group facilities, and the rural groups interviews are in local motels. Furthermore, assume that the shared experiences of the rural people are different from those of their urban counterparts. Systematic differences due to the research settings cannot be ruled out when comparing findings for these two groups. The ambient, human, and material environments differ for these two groups of respondents. Thus, the researchers must be able demonstrate or argue that the differences in findings were indeed due to respondent differences and not to the environment. These concerns should be particularly troubling for researchers who are interested in verifying hypotheses or theories.

The behavioral issue deals with the effect of the environment on information sharing. It is important that the research setting not be stressful. A more unstructured or casual environment is preferred to ones that are more formal. What is casual, however, may depend on the characteristics of the relevant population. Casual for business executives may be quite different from what factory workers consider casual. Some research firms use viewing facilities that reflect characteristics of households, such as living rooms and kitchens. Actual living rooms, family rooms, or even barrooms may be best for information sharing and many other tasks.

The human aspects of the setting may have different effects on respondents, depending on the culture from which the respondents are sampled. Preferred interpersonal distances are culture bound. (See the discussion in Chapter 3 for more detailed information about these preferences.) The setting and how people are positioned within the setting determine interpersonal distances. Therefore, seating arrangements should be determined when planning research for groups of mixed ethnicity.

The material factor is also determined once the locations for the groups are decided. Careful thought should be given to how respondents react to many of the sterile high-tech viewing rooms currently in vogue among professional research firms. Is it possible for focus group participants to feel relaxed in these settings?

Cultural Value Orientation and Privacy and Personal Space

Too little personal space is not as critical when designing focus groups for individuals with a collectivist cultural value orientation as it might be for

individualists. Collectivists normally operate at much closer social distances than individualists, so too much space may be problematic for collectivists. In collectivists' daily routines, social interaction often includes sharing information that is more self-revealing than that which individualists are likely to share. This suggests that focus groups of collectivists will reveal more intimate information than will groups of individualists or mixed groups.

Group Process Influences on Experiential Tasks

Because experiential tasks are concerned primarily with shared experiences, evaluation apprehension should not have aversive consequences for these focus group uses. It is important that the moderator reassure respondents that the researcher is not interested in individual responses. For example, tell them that only group findings are of interest and that the report does not identify individuals or anything they say. This is a common practice among professional moderators.

There is little reason to think that free riding, social loafing, and production blocking should adversely affect the use of focus groups for these tasks. The number of disclosures is not important so long as they are common to the population from which the sample of individuals was drawn. It is important, however, that shy as well as dominant respondents have time to talk. Striving for equal participation is the responsibility of the moderator.

Information can influence group members in two ways. First, information presented during group discussion can cause some group members to change their attitudes, preferences, and behaviors. One highly persuasive group member can use information to influence the attitudes of other members. Thus, it is difficult to determine whether the attitudes being expressed are the individuals' "true attitudes" or a reflection of the persuasive power of an argument presented by another group member. For example, focus group reports note that attitudes are expressed more richly in groups than is possible in surveys. This is true, but is the richness a reaction to the persuasive attempts of others, or does it reflect the respondents' natural attitudes?

Normative influence may also affect attitudes during the group discussion. Norms are more likely to be operative if the moderator allows group members to indulge in social comparison processes. If individuals become concerned about being evaluated by others in the group and standards for evaluation emerge, a passive moderator may unwittingly allow members to

evaluate others' attitudinal positions. If this goes unchecked, attitude change and polarization are likely. Subsequent interpretation of respondents' attitudes becomes problematic.

Information working in concert with normative influence can also influence group discussion. Discussing things we have in common is comforting when talking with strangers. Thus, group members are more likely to discuss shared information than unique or unshared information. Sharing common information is a goal in experiential research, and in this case, group influence works toward achieving this goal.

Heightened self-awareness can have unpredictable effects on some focus group respondents. The effects may be manifest in the form of changed or extreme attitudes, reluctance to disclose personal information, and disclosures that are more consistent with their personalities. It is not possible to eliminate the effects of self-awareness in focus groups. Professional moderators claim that people forget about the mirrors and recorders after a while and behave as though they are not there. This may be true of some people if not most. For others, being observed is a constant threat and is likely to affect their participation adversely.

Steps can be taken, however, to reduce the possibility that some group members are more or less affected by external sources of self-awareness than others (e.g., mirrors, recorders, and people). Different seating positions should not cause differences in self-awareness. Thus, if mirrors and recorders are used, they should be equally observable in all seating positions, or else hidden. At rectangular tables, some seating positions provide a greater audience to the speaker than others. Sitting at the end of a long table provides a larger audience than sitting in the middle or at the end of one side. Sitting at the end position may cause shy individuals to withdraw and cause dominant respondents to dominate, depending on how they react to heightened self-awareness. If the moderator has a sense of the group's personalities before the discussion, he or she can arrange people in the room to minimize unwanted self-awareness effects.

The Group Moderator in Experiential Research

The experiential task for focus group moderators is quite different from either exploratory or clinical tasks. Individual moderator characteristics that are desirable for this focus group application, along with background factors and strategies for eliciting unique information, are discussed next.

Desirable Characteristics for Experiential Research Moderators

Moderators who are chosen for experiential research should share similar life experiences with their respondents, be similar in appearance, and blend into the group (Krueger, 1988). Because shared information is the purview of this group method, the moderator should be sensitive, warm, empathetic, spontaneous, involved, and confident. Good listening and questioning skills are also requisite, but their mode of expression should match that of the respondents. Group management is less of a concern, but this type of moderator needs to establish rapport. Being more of a participant than a leader, the moderator should be nondirective but very receptive to the viewpoints of other group members. Analytical skills are not required of the moderator for uncovering shared perspectives, particularly if the researchers and not the moderator analyze the data.

The Moderator's Background

For effect applications in experiential research, whether the moderator has scientific training is not an issue. Instead, the moderator must have good interpersonal and moderating skills. Moreover, the moderator must blend in with these groups, or at least not stand out in them. Moderator characteristics such as gender, race, and ethnic background should be the same as the respondents. This is not always possible, however. Alternatively, the researchers may try letting the group run itself. A few researchers have reported this approach to be successful (Fern, 1982a; Morgan & Spanish, 1984).

Moderator Strategies for Getting Group Members to Share Unique Information

Focus groups are used for understanding attitudes, lifestyles, and other experiences that people share to some extent. If two or more members know a piece of information, it is shared information. Sharing can involve anywhere from two individuals to the whole group. Unique information is unshared and is relevant only if it helps to understand the limits of sharing. For some research purposes, the researcher may be interested the degree of sharing. Therefore, ways to increase the amount of information sharing may be important.

Several methods are proposed to encourage the disclosure of little-shared and unique information. These might be helpful to the researcher interested in

how individuals deviate from the intersubjectivity of their primary group affiliations (e.g., subculture or market segment differences). Identifying both what people share and what they don't share may help in understanding their natural attitudes better. Uncovering unshared or little-shared viewpoints may be difficult, however, particularly when focus group members come from collectivist orientations.

There are two ways the moderator can help groups do a better job of discussing little-shared information. First, they can help the group develop a strategy for sharing information (Larson, Foster-Fishman, & Keys, 1994). Setting a few minutes aside during the initial part of the exchange stage of the discussion process to allow group members to decide on a discussion strategy, or talking about discussion strategy, might be useful for moving the group toward the exchange stage. In either case, involving the participants in planning the discussion strategy may improve their productivity. For example, they might consider and discuss how to get the more reticent members of the group involved in the discussion or how to encourage different perspectives. It is important that the group develops the strategy, not the moderator.

A second alternative is to help the group members develop what Larson et al. (1994) call "information vigilance skills." Both the prior strategy suggestion and this one are adapted from those used by decision-making groups. Both strategies need to be tailored to fit the specific focus group task, whether it is exploratory or experiential. Information vigilance prevents, or at least decreases, the group's tendency to overlook information that relatively few members share. To overcome this tendency, tell the group something like this:

> It is natural for groups to focus on information that they all know. It is rather common for some individuals to withhold thoughts and experiences because they think no one else has had them. By discussing only common information and withholding other information, we may miss something. It will help us if you try to bring out all points of views even if you think they are unimportant.

By helping group members to become more vigilant for unique information, the amount and the quality of information that the group provides may improve.

Finally, care should be exercised in analyzing the transcripts, notes, or tapes. Whoever analyzes the transcripts or tapes should be aware of the common knowledge effect (Gigone & Hastie, 1993). The information generated in experiential groups may be shared among group members, but that does not necessarily mean it is important. Therefore, tabulating the incidences of a

particular response has no value in terms of determining the relative importance of a response. Response frequencies across respondents may indicate how common a particular feeling or experience is but not how important it is. Moreover, importance of the discussion topic (i.e., its relevance to group members) may affect how much information is shared among group members. Therefore, it is critical that the moderator not clue the group in to the importance of the topic, either verbally or nonverbally.

Generalizability

The representativeness or the generalizability of focus group findings is almost nonexistent if you believe the disclaimers in most focus group reports. But such disclaimers are based on the same faulty logic from which they seek to protect us. The faulty logic is assuming that a few vivid instances are more prevalent in the population than they are (Kahneman & Tversky, 1972). From the few vivid reports on focus groups in the 1970s, we generalize that all focus group research lacks generalizability. Thirty years ago, this notion was certainly true of most small, applied focus group research projects in marketing (i.e., one to four focus groups). Current focus group research projects are not necessarily small. Allbutt, Amos, and Cunningham-Burley (1995) conducted 28 groups; Basch, DeCicco, and Malfetti (1989), 40 groups; Glik, Gordon, Ward, Kouame, and Guessan (1988), 24 groups; Hoppe, Wells, Wilsdon, Gillmore, and Morrison (1994), 27 groups; Kitzinger (1994), 52 and 76 groups; McLaurin (1995), 27 groups; Plaut, Landis, and Trevor (1991), 41 groups; Plax and Cecchi (1989), 35 groups; Riportella Muller, Cook, and Linder (1990), 48 groups; and York and Tundidor (1995), 45 groups. Even if some of these projects are not generalizable, it is not because of the number of groups. Nonrepresentative findings are so because of multiple factors considered when making this judgment (e.g., the respondents, the moderators, the facility, the topic, etc.). Representativeness does not lie in the method but in decisions made in applying the method to the research problem.

Summary

Focus groups are used for disclosing, describing, and understanding life experiences shared by some relevant population. I distinguished between effect applications and theory applications. Applied researchers have different goals and financial incentives and face different risks than theoretical re-

searchers. Because of the differences in research purposes, focus groups for effects applications are different from theory applications. These differences were discussed at length. In particular, triangulation and theory confirmation were discussed in relation to theory applications. Triangulation poses a dilemma for focus group researchers. Care should be taken when deciding whether to use focus groups for this purpose.

Focus groups are appropriate for theory evaluation purposes under certain very specific conditions. Sample representativeness, response independence, and the routine use of a standard question format should receive special attention in the research design. The researcher must be cognizant of unintended effects associated with other research design facets as well.

Group composition was discussed in the contexts of both effects and theory applications. Composition affects group cohesion and compatibility. Cohesion among group members is desirable for experiential research purposes. Cohesion causes conformity to normative behaviors, and this should be desirable if the researcher is interested in shared everyday experiences of a particular culture. For this type of research, the recruiting goal should be homogeneity of individual characteristics from the population of interest. Heterogeneity is achieved across groups.

I also discussed group size and the number of groups required for experiential research purposes. Larger groups are better for sharing information. Larger groups cover fewer research issues, however. Therefore, it is likely that more groups will be necessary for experiential tasks, particularly for complex applied issues and most theory applications.

The choice of research setting has methodological and behavioral implications for focus group research. Different facilities introduce different types of error into the research findings. The researcher can control sources of error or randomize them. Because the research setting affects behavior in groups to some extent, it makes sense to think through the possible aversive consequences of the environment before choosing the site.

Attention was given to moderator characteristics, background, and strategies for enhancing discussion of unshared information. In these types of research, group moderators should blend in with the group members. In some situations, peer led or leaderless groups may be appropriate. In addition, to increase the production of unshared information, strategies were presented to help group members plan the session.

Group process factors should be considered when planning experiential research. Both informational and normative influences affect attitudes in groups. Group influence has a positive effect if the researcher is interested in

shared perspectives and experiences. Self-awareness can affect behavior as well, particularly that of dominant and shy respondents. There is no empirical evidence to suggest that mirrors, recording devices, and seating position might affect behavior in focus groups.

Finally, generalizability is an important concern for some focus group tasks, for experiential tasks more than for exploratory or clinical ones. Arguably, generalizability of a finding is less of a concern for many effect applications and more of a concern for some theory applications. These differences, however, are much smaller than is the case for exploratory tasks. Generalizability of experiential effects is likely to be of greater concern than exploratory effects regardless of the application. For experiential research, all those factors that affect representativeness and generalizability are important.

Chapter 9

Clinical Tasks

Two premises underlie clinical approaches to focus group interviewing (Calder, 1977). First, everyday thoughts are often misleading as explanations of our behavior. The causes of behavior are often subconscious and therefore undetectable in self-reports of individual behaviors (e.g., surveys, individual interviews, and group interviews). As individuals report their behaviors, they subject them to various perceptual defense mechanisms such as rationalization. Furthermore, most people are involved, to some extent, in monitoring and managing the impressions they create. Therefore, the tools that most interviewers and moderators use in exploratory and experiential research are inadequate for detecting the underlying causes of behavior.

The second premise is that the causes of behavior are detected through "the sensitivity and 'clinical judgment' of a specially trained analyst" (Calder, 1977, p. 357). Presumably, moderators who are trained in clinical methods are more likely to uncover the "real" causes of behavior. This assertion makes the questionable assumption that clinicians are effective at uncovering causes of behavior in a single focus group session. Calder (1977) refers to the clinical approach to focus groups as "quasi-scientific" because it relies on the clinician's judgment, which is supposedly based in scientifically valid theory. The following treatment of clinical focus group tasks diverges from these two premises.

Rather than argue whether causes of behavior are subconscious and whether clinical tools are necessary to uncover them, I take a different approach. First, I identify the types of information that researchers may seek

when the research task is clinical. Second, I provide suggestions for how these different types of information may be obtained using different methods. Third, I discuss research issues that need to be considered when planning for clinical tasks: group composition, the research setting, and the influence of group process factors.

The Clinical Process

Four types of information about focus group participants can be uncovered during clinical tasks (Fenster, 1993, 1996; Luft, 1970; MacKenzie, 1990). Each of us is aware of much self-information, and we are able to disclose it when queried about it. Nevertheless, we are reluctant to report much of what we know about ourselves—specifically, information that is highly personal. Moreover, we cannot report information about ourselves that we do not know. Also, others know some information about us through their observations that we do not know about ourselves. By combining these notions about what we know about ourselves and what others may know, we can distinguish four types of information that differ along these two dimensions (observed/unobserved and conscious/subconscious): public, private, suppressed, and unknown. The underlying dimensions and the four types of information are depicted in Table 9.1. In the sections to follow, I discuss types of clinical information, the character of disclosure in clinical tasks, and ways to encourage feedback, insight, and self-disclosure.

Types of Clinical Information

First, some knowledge about the self is communicated to others intentionally and some is not. *Observed* information refers to information that is sensed or inferred by others as well as that which we intentionally communicate through our verbal and nonverbal behaviors. This information refers to all those things that others in the group know about us whether we know them or not. *Unobserved* information is all that information about us that others do not know and are not able to infer. For the purposes of clinical tasks, we are not concerned about the accuracy of self-knowledge or the information that others know about us.

Second, some of our personal information is consciously available to us and some is not. The conscious information includes those things that we know about ourselves—for example beliefs, opinions, likes, and dislikes. The

TABLE 9.1 Types of Information from Clinical Tasks

Types of Information	*Observed Information (Things others know about us)*	*Unobserved Information (Things others do not know about us)*
Conscious Information (Things we know about ourselves)	1. *Public information* Public information results from self-disclosure, insight, and feedback.	2. *Private information* If we disclose our new insights in the group, public knowledge increases. (Self-disclosure)
Subconscious Information (Things we do not know about ourselves)	3. *Suppressed information* Self-disclosure of conscious information leads to feedback from others, which can cause new insights about our suppressed information and more self-disclosures. (Feedback)	4. *Unknown information* As the subconscious becomes conscious through discussion and feedback, the individual gains insight. (Insight)

SOURCE: This diagram is informed by the works of Luft (1970), MacKenzie (1990), and Fenster (1996).

personal information that is not available to us may exist at the subconscious level of our minds. The subconscious information includes all of the personal things that we do not know about ourselves, such as motives that underlie beliefs, feelings, and behaviors.

The first cell in Table 9.1 depicts "public information," which is personal information we know about ourselves and do not mind sharing with others. Others in the group are able to observe the verbal and nonverbal disclosure of this information. Cell 2 depicts the personal information that we know about ourselves but try to keep hidden from others during the group discussion. I refer to this information as "private information." There is also information that others may know about us that we don't know ourselves. We may not be aware of this information because it results from behaviors that are driven by subconscious feelings and motives. Others may see the manifestations of the subconscious in our verbal and nonverbal behaviors but not the underlying causes. This information is the "suppressed information" depicted in Cell 3.

Last, some subconscious pieces of information, such as our motives, predispositions, and behaviors, are known neither to us nor to others in the group; they are unobservable and unknown (Cell 4).

The Unique Character of Disclosure in Clinical Tasks

The use of focus groups for clinical tasks is somewhat unique. The information sought in clinical tasks is different from that sought in other tasks. Focus groups for exploratory and experiential tasks seek information that we know about ourselves. For many of these focus group tasks, this information is made public by simply disclosing one's thoughts, feelings, and experiences. For clinical research tasks, however, much of the desired information is either private, withheld, or not known by the respondent. Whether this information is shared or not is irrelevant for these tasks. Some of this information is not observable but may be inferred from behavioral cues, whereas some is not observable and cannot be inferred from behaviors. In either case, the individual holding the information is not aware of it and cannot disclose it. Therefore, it is up to the focus group moderator to use the group to bring the suppressed and unknown information to the surface. This can be accomplished through a process that uses feedback and insight to bring about the self-disclosure of the subconscious information (Luft, 1970). Feedback from the moderator and other group members can help the individual gain new insights into information that is held subconsciously. Once the subconscious becomes conscious, the individual can then make the decision to disclose the private information, thus making it public. See the arrows in Table 9.1.

Encouraging Feedback, Insight, and Self-Disclosure

When a focus group of strangers convenes, group members know little information about each other. Thus, the amount of information in Cell 1 is relatively small. Much information is private or unknown, so the amount of information in Cells 2 and 4 should be quite large. In initial meetings with strangers, we tend to be guarded and try to hide or deny things that we know or feel (Luft, 1970). Moreover, some of our behaviors and the motives behind them are unknown to us and to others. This information, depicted in Cell 4, is probably the most difficult to access, and its magnitude is probably greatly underestimated. Also, there are various psychological reasons for suppressing or hiding some information about the self from others (see Cell 3). The

goal of the moderator is to uncover information in Cells 2 through 4 so that it becomes public information, at least within the group.

As the group discussion warms up—that is, passes through the globality, differentiation, social integration, and mirror reaction stages—mutual trust should evolve as the group develops a collective consciousness, and members should feel less need to hide their thoughts and feelings (Luft, 1970). Thus, the private self should become less prominent, and the amount of public information should increase. The warm-up is probably not sufficient for unleashing the suppressed and unknown information. People usually have strong reasons for blinding themselves to aspects of their behavior (Luft, 1970), so making suppressed and unknown information public is a formidable task.

For tasks that require probing for suppressed and unknown information, it may help to prime focus group members early on by telling them what to expect. By communicating the goals of the session and an overview of the types of information (public, private, suppressed, and unknown) that the group will be providing, the moderator establishes a sense of mutual trust. It can be explained that one of the goals is to use feedback, insight, and disclosure to bring some of this information into the public arena. As more information becomes public, the less private, suppressed, and unknown information there is; a change in one type of information changes the others. It can be explained that one reason for revealing suppressed and unknown information is that it takes energy to keep these types of information hidden. The only way we can uncover this information, however, is through a climate of trust; trust increases our awareness of all types of information. Forced awareness, however, is unproductive. Increases in disclosure and public information indicate that interpersonal learning has occurred in the group and that communication is good. The smaller the pool of public information, the poorer the level of communication. It may also help to tell participants that curiosity about the unknown is held in check by custom, socialization, and various fears, but sensitivity can help overcome these threats to self-disclosure. Thus, we should be aware of the importance of keeping some information private and respect others' desires to keep some things private.

Learning about group processes may also help overcome members' fear of public disclosure. The moderator can point to group processes as they occur, which may increase awareness about why people withhold information and help to break down some of the barriers to self-disclosure. Finally, establishing a system of values for the group members as they proceed toward dealing with the unknown information in their lives may help increase the amount of public information generated in the group.

In focus groups of friends or acquaintances, the amount of private information that individuals hold may be relatively small compared with that held by groups of strangers. Conversely, the amount of public information in groups of friends may be relatively large. There should be little difference, however, in the amount of suppressed or unknown information. Thus, the increase in the amount of public information resulting from the warm-up should be minimal for acquaintances and relatively large for strangers.

Focus Groups for Clinical Effect Applications

Focus groups for clinical tasks generate different types of knowledge than those used for exploratory and experiential tasks. This knowledge comes not only from what respondents say but from what they do and the moderator-analyst's interpretation of their actions. I provided examples of clinical group tasks in Table 1.1. All of these tasks have one thing in common; they attempt to uncover underlying causes of behavior by probing for private, suppressed, or unknown information that individuals bring to the focus group session.

For some behaviors, the causes are conscious and private but can be reported when a person is asked to do so. For example, some people do not like diet colas because they taste bad. Other people do not like the taste of coffee, so they do not drink it. Still others are concerned about negative effects of diet soda and coffee on their good health. Many types of behaviors such as these can be researched using surveys, interviews, and focus groups with little concern about subconscious motives. For some behaviors, however, the motives behind them are subconscious.

Much past research in marketing dealt with uncovering purchase motives. This refers to removing or peeling away the conscious reasons for purchasing a product or service to get at the inner cause of the purchase. For example, some taste tests indicate that consumers cannot differentiate across brands in some beverage categories, although they have strong brand preferences. In these cases, researchers try to uncover motives, which are thought to be subconscious, for strong brand preferences when they apparently cannot distinguish differences on what is thought to be the most important product attribute—taste.

Another clinical task is to unveil resistance to persuasive communications. We selectively attend to and process persuasive communications. Although persuasive messages may successfully pass advertising testing procedures, once they are in print or on television, they may fall short of the

decision maker's expectations. Focus groups can be used for this clinical task by revealing subconscious reasons for failure that are not uncovered during the copy-testing stage of research. Similarly, clinical focus group uses include exposing biases and prejudices that underlie choices (e.g., choosing one of two candidates for political office). Finally, this approach to focus group interviewing is a viable alternative for discovering reasons that underlie aberrant behavior (e.g., drug use, smoking, and alcohol abuse).

The use of focus groups for clinical purposes is much more specialized than previous authors on the topic have indicated. This is why it is thought that moderators of clinical groups should have clinical training. Clinical background, however, is not necessary for moderators of exploratory and experiential groups and may not be necessary for all clinical tasks. Exploratory and experiential tasks are by definition conscious. Therefore, the moderator does not have to worry about probing below the level of consciousness. Respondents should be able to relate thoughts, attitudes, and experiences without delving into their subconscious.

Focus Groups for Clinical Theory Applications

The applications of focus groups to clinical theory tasks may be particularly useful for bringing respondents to the point of disclosing information that was previously private, suppressed, or unknown. For clinical tasks that are theory applications, focus groups can be used to help explain the "why" of beliefs, feelings, and behaviors. Another theory application is to get consumers to reveal the underlying reasons for their product and brand preferences. Last, focus groups can be used to confirm models, hypotheses, and theories of behavior, as long as the issues raised in Chapter 6 are addressed.

Group Composition

Cohesion among members of focus groups for some clinical tasks—for example, uncovering suppressed or unknown information—need not be an important recruiting concern. For these tasks, it is likely that the moderator will have clinical psychology experience. This is so because the roots of the depth interview, which is used for such purposes, are in psychotherapy and the clinician is instrumental in developing cohesion (Kaul & Bednar, 1986). The homogeneity/heterogeneity of group members is not likely to be controlled in

these clinical settings. The therapist is more concerned about creating cohesion between himself or herself and the group members than among group members. Consistent with clinical practice, cohesiveness between the moderator and the group members is important in this application. This is not the same as cohesiveness among members as discussed in the chapters on exploratory and experiential tasks. Clinical groups presumably can be heterogeneous so long as the moderator can develop cohesion with group members.

For clinical tasks in which self-disclosure of public and private information such as attitudes is a concern and the moderator has no clinical training, however, the groups should be at least compatible. Mixed groups may have dynamically different social distance preferences. This diversity can cause some individuals to increase their level of self-disclosure because their optimum social distance is less than that which exists in the group. Others may decrease their self-disclosure because their optimum social distance is greater than that which is available to them. Privacy regulation in heterogeneous groups can adversely affect self-disclosure and the amount of public information that is generated. The magnitude of the adverse effect depends on whether the diversity is due to social status, age, gender, personality, race/ethnicity, or interactions among the individual characteristics of the group members.

Achieving Moderator/Member Homogeneity for Clinical Tasks

Some researchers use the within-group homogeneity and between-group heterogeneity rule of thumb for making group composition decisions, regardless of the research task or the moderator's background. Others believe that heterogeneity within groups increases diversity of thought and increases interaction among members. The belief behind the latter approach is that much can be learned about the strength of convictions of group members (Goldman & McDonald, 1987). As mentioned earlier, heterogeneity of group membership for some clinical tasks should be manageable for some moderators but problematic for others. Whether heterogeneity becomes problematic depends on the source of the heterogeneity, the nature of the clinical task, and the training of the moderator.

The relevance of moderator-group cohesiveness, however, may depend on whether the moderator's orientation is psychotherapy groups, encounter groups, self-help groups, or some other clinical persuasion. In psychotherapy and encounter groups, the therapist tries to mirror the respondents' actual social environments but on a smaller scale. Therefore, we might expect these

groups to represent the degree of member heterogeneity that the respondents encounter in their day-to-day lives. If so, the degree of cohesiveness in the focus group should represent the degree of cohesiveness in the relevant population. Moderators with psychotherapy and encounter group backgrounds should be able to deal with both heterogeneous and homogeneous groups.

In addition, a particular moderating style (e.g., Gestalt) may rely on confrontation to uncover respondents' suppressed or unknown feelings. Thus, for a moderator with Gestalt training, heterogeneity among group members may be desirable. For example, assume that focus groups are being conducted to better understand motives that underlie public feelings about some policy issue that affects one segment of the population more than others. The focal topic is somewhat ambiguous, and feelings may run deep, which suggests that clinical focus groups may be appropriate. The dynamics and tensions operating in the external environment may be captured best in ethnically or racially mixed groups (Vasquez & Han, 1995). These stresses, however, may not emerge during the group discussion if groups are homogeneous with respect to race/ethnicity. Because of the research purpose, mixed groups led by a Gestalt therapist may uncover more variation in deep-seated feelings in mixed groups than, say, a moderator who has worked only with encounter groups or self-help groups or one without clinical training. For the latter two types of moderators, homogeneous respondents may be more desirable. Moderators with backgrounds in Gestalt therapy may be better prepared than the other two types of moderators to handle deep-seated feelings within groups of diverse individuals.

Alternatively, assume that the researcher is interested in the affects of this same public policy on a particular ethnic or minority group's feelings. In this situation, it is best to provide a group atmosphere of trust and safety. Homogeneous groups allow members of each ethnic or minority group to focus on their unique feelings without threats or intimidation. The researcher rules out confrontation and the Gestalt approach. In this situation, a Gestalt therapist might be inappropriate. Instead, moderators from the same ethnic or minority group who have self-help group experience might lead the groups effectively. Alternatively, the researcher might choose to do groups using peers as the leaders. In either case, these kinds of groups may allow the respondents to voice feelings that might otherwise remain suppressed.

With clinical tasks, homogeneity of the focus group respondents is not critical; rather, the role of the moderator is the critical issue because he or she is the one who creates group cohesion. Add to this complexity the fact that different clinical styles affect groups differently. Moderators with psycho-

therapy backgrounds may develop cohesion out of diverse individuals, whereas moderators with self-help group backgrounds may not. The latter moderators may do very well with homogeneous groups and therefore be able to successfully explore issues across diverse groups that are homogeneous within, depending on the research purpose.

Group Moderator and Member Compatibility

Depending on the specific research purpose, the group moderator should be consulted about the degree of compatibility with which he or she is comfortable. For clinical tasks, cohesion between the moderator and group members is more important than cohesion among group members. The moderator is the force behind the process by which the suppressed and unknown information becomes public.

For some moderators, it might make sense to use cultural value orientation as a cutting variable and make some groups homogeneous in terms of individualism and some homogeneous in terms of collectivism. If the task is to uncover suppressed or unknown motives for behaviors, it is likely that individualists and collectivists are motivated by dramatically different factors. Remember, to collectivists the social relationship is important, and they will adjust their behavior to the needs of others and expect others to do the same. Individualists reflect on their own needs and are likely to resist attempts to get them to yield to others' needs. These differences can result in friction among group members. Collectivists are likely to yield under these conditions, and individualists are likely to stand firm. These episodes can pose a formidable task for the focus group moderator. Thus, focus group moderators who are comfortable in dealing with diversity and confrontation may accept groups that are culturally heterogeneous. For moderators who have collectivistic orientations, culturally homogeneous groups may be preferable.

It is necessary for moderators to understand the dynamics of mixed-culture groups. In particular, it is necessary to address any perceived imbalance of power between minority and majority subgroups within the focus group. Minority group members may feel a need to subscribe to majority group norms during the course of the group discussion. The information obtained under such conditions will more than likely be useless. Moderators must also be aware of their own stereotypes and biases toward some minority groups. Burke (1984, cited in Fenster, 1996) reports on therapy situations in which white group members did not trust a male black leader unless he "com-

promised" himself. The black leader was perceived to be overpowering by the white group members. A white leader was seen as wanting to blend in with the group rather than take a leadership position. Moderators must be careful in how they present themselves to multicultural groups. Knowing the norms and lifestyles of minority group members is necessary for moderators who are conducting multicultural focus groups. They need to be very careful about relying on stereotypes associated with particular cultures and remember that within cultures individuals do have varying life experiences.

Virgin Respondents and Repeat Visits

Virgin respondents are thought to be highly desirable for most focus group applications (Goldman & McDonald 1987). *Virgin respondent* refers to an individual who has not participated in a focus group session within some previous period of time (e.g., 6 to 12 months). For some focus group tasks, for which prethinking or rehearsing responses is counterproductive, this restriction makes sense. Another concern is that admitting people with focus group experience will foster the evolution of a class of professional respondents who participate only for the money or the social interaction. Both concerns are about people who repeatedly participate in focus groups across different focus group tasks, and they are legitimate concerns. This problem is no doubt exacerbated by overrecruiting from a single population located near a fixed focus group facility. This should not be a problem when group sessions are scattered geographically or conducted in local neighborhoods.

Contrary to focus group practice, clinical psychotherapists see their clients anywhere from weekly to monthly and over periods of 6 months to several years. Yet when focus groups are used to probe for subconscious motives, a clinical application, the sessions usually last little more than a couple of hours, and groups rarely meet more than once. In Chapter 5, I presented the discussion process. It may take up to 30 minutes to get from the globality stage to exchange stage, depending on the heterogeneity of the group members. This leaves relatively little of the remaining time to uncover subconscious causes for behavior (approximately 1.5 hours). Limiting focus groups to 2 hours seems unnecessarily restrictive for these purposes. There are two reasonable choices to overcome this problem, increase the length of time for the interview or meet more than once for clinical tasks. Longer meetings have aversive consequences for focus group respondents, such as fatigue, boredom, and irritation. All three conditions negatively affect the likelihood of de-

veloping meaningful feedback, insight, and self-disclosure in clinical tasks. Moreover, sessions cannot be extended long enough to accomplish many of these tasks. Thus, multiple sessions with the same respondents seem to make sense.

The use of multiple focus group sessions with the same respondents has received relatively little consideration in the focus group literature even though it is ubiquitous in clinical practice, which is the model that underlies most of this research. This idea, however, is inconsistent with the desire for virgin respondents in most marketing applications of focus groups. Hayward and Rose (1990) provide survey evidence in support of multiple sessions. I found no theoretical or empirical support for the virgin respondent notion. Hayward and Rose surveyed focus group participants (virgins, beginners, novices, and experienced) before and after the group discussion. They found that previous experience had little effect on how participants felt before the group session. As might be expected, the virgins and beginners were less relaxed and at ease, less confident and optimistic, and more anxious and nervous than the more experienced participants. The postgroup survey showed that the more experienced participants were more relaxed and at ease, more confident, and less anxious and nervous than the inexperienced participants.

Moderators and observers correctly identified the experienced group of participants and the virgin and mixed groups (two from each type of participant). The experienced group was more cohesive, relaxed, and participative but relatively less focused on the research issues. The virgins were less relaxed, participated less, and were no different from experienced participants in focusing on the research issues.

Examination of the videotapes suggested that differences in process had little effect on the differences among the groups' outputs; they were quite comparable. The researchers ran additional groups to check on their previous findings. Experienced moderators and the administrative staff observed these new groups. Contrary to the first session, experienced moderators were unable to identify accurately those with and without previous group experience.

Although the empirical evidence is limited, it seems to suggest that support for virgin respondents is weak. Intuitively, it makes sense that for some tasks, experienced focus group participants are not desirable. All theory applications should require virgin respondents, at least in the sense that they appear in the same theory application only once. The same restriction makes sense for effect applications in which a series of focus groups is being run for

a single project. This restriction, however, seems to be overly cautious for many effect applications.

Group Size and the Number of Groups

The size of focus groups for clinical tasks can range from four to eight members. Depending on the skills and background of the moderator, larger groups may produce the desired results. The number of groups is subject to judgment. It depends on factors such as the size of the relevant population, the degree of member homogeneity, and the amount of suppressed and unknown information made public during the initial group sessions. As the population increases in size, so does its diversity (e.g., age, gender, and minorities) as well as the number of subgroups or segments that should be studied.

As more variables are included in the design, more groups are necessary. With these factors in mind, the diminishing returns mentioned in Chapter 7 become important. The layperson, however, is unlikely to distinguish subconscious motives from conscious reasons for the participants' behaviors or to understand the point of diminishing returns. Thus, the client user of the focus group results must rely on the analyst to determine when enough groups have been conducted.

The Research Setting for Clinical Tasks

The type of setting for clinical tasks depends on the moderator's preferences. Today, it appears that most depth interviews are conducted in centrally located focus group facilities, although they can be done in less formal settings. For most marketing applications of focus groups, the respondents travel to centrally located viewing facilities or they are intercepted in shopping malls. It is commonly accepted among focus group moderators that the focus group viewing room has little effect on the behaviors of group members. I previously discussed the ambient characteristics of this type of facility (see Chapter 3). For heterogeneous groups, centrally located viewing rooms make sense, economically and theoretically. Ambience is controlled in focus group facilities and is not likely to be problematic so long as the researcher's purpose does not involve ethnically/racially sensitive issues. If the issues are sensitive or homogeneous groups from the same neighborhood are desirable or collectivists are recruited, neighborhood settings may be appropriate. Con-

ducting focus groups in the respondents' neighborhood eliminates the need to travel into strange and unknown regions. Living rooms, family rooms, or perhaps other familiar places that are more public can serve as focus group settings, such as private rooms in bars, restaurants, hotels, or government buildings. Ambience can be controlled somewhat in these situations and can reduce problems associated with travel. Facilities need not be comparable across groups except for some theory applications in which control is important.

The choice of the interview location also determines the material aspects of the setting. For highly sensitive issues, less obtrusiveness is probably better. The more technology used to capture and observe what is being said, the more threatening the material environment. Private information may be more forthcoming among ethnic minorities if their responses are written down or recorded with audio equipment. Bright lights, video recorders, observers, mirrors, and note passing may be disconcerting to those group members who feel threatened.

The Group Moderator for Clinical Tasks

Professional moderators, by tradition, lead focus groups that deal with the subconscious. I have not uncovered a single case that suggests otherwise. Nevertheless, different professionals have different personalities, backgrounds, and moderating styles.

Desirable Characteristics for Clinical Moderators

Moderators for clinical tasks require more professional training than do moderators for exploratory and experiential tasks. This is because they are dealing with the respondent's subconscious. Personality is less important in this case than their professional qualifications. Sensitivity, warmth, and empathy may be desirable. They need, however, to be insightful, logical, and analytical because of the dual role they play during the group discussion—moderating and analyzing. They also need to be in control without being directive. They should also be flexible and receptive in following the directions taken by the group without allowing uncontrolled wandering. Good communication skills are also required, particularly good listening skills. See Table 4.1 for characteristics that seem to be consistent with the role of the moderator for clinical tasks.

The Moderator's Background

A review of psychotherapy group research provides several implications for deciding on the backgrounds of moderators for clinical tasks. The current focus group literature does not recognize the distinctions that are made next. McDonald (1994) is the only one I am aware of who talks about the scientific method of moderating focus groups. Arguably, the lack of concern about the clinical psychology qualifications of clinical focus group moderators is an important oversight. This is so for two reasons. The upward spiral in focus group costs continues. The clinical background required for moderators in many of these projects makes clinical research more costly than exploratory and experiential group research. For many applications, the cost of clinically trained moderators is unaffordable. The second reason is that alternative therapeutic models seem reasonable: self-administered training tapes, lay therapists, and peer-led groups (Fern, 1982a). These alternatives have not received much attention in the focus group literature. Researchers with limited resources might find some of these counterintuitive methods well worth investigating.

A few examples follow. Uncovering subconscious motives for patronizing the arts may be a relatively ambiguous task for clinical group research. The underlying reasons for patronizing the arts is likely rooted in the social and economic conditions of patrons (Cooper & Tower, 1992). What's more, people who support the arts may attribute their behavior to their own philanthropy, whereas those who do not support the arts may attribute their lack of support to economic conditions. These attributions are consistent with those that clinicians deal with in therapy. Thus, it makes sense to use one of the psychotherapy models and moderator approaches to uncover motives in this case. Moderators with a group psychotherapy background are experienced in dealing with ambiguous problems, social confrontations, and respondents' divergent attributions.

Now assume that the problem deals with underlying reasons for at-risk behaviors and AIDS prevention among middle-class whites. The problem is not as ambiguous to the respondents as the first one might be. Arguably, the problem does not result directly from economic and social conditions. Therefore, it is unlikely that attributions about the causes will focus on these conditions. It is not necessary in this situation to confront the respondents with interpersonal issues that lurk in society. For this scenario, peer leaders or lay leaders with similar backgrounds to the respondents may be adequate. This last point is arguable. It makes intuitive sense that trained therapists may be

more effective in uncovering at-risk behaviors that lead to the HIV infection. Empirical evidence to support this notion is not overwhelming, however.

Using encounter group methods may be best for ethnic and minority group issues. The point is that even within clinical therapies, there are distinctions among approaches, and it is best if the approach fits the research purpose. Less costly and more effective groups may be possible if we begin to think in terms of fitting the moderator style to the research purpose. Aponte, Rivers, and Wohl (1995) have compiled a set of interesting articles that deal specifically with psychotherapy methods and minority groups.

Moderator Strategies for Clinical Tasks

The dual role as group leader and analyst differentiates the clinical moderator from other moderators. It is a complex role and difficult to portray. Foulkes (1964, 1975) provides a vivid description of the clinician's role in a way that is understandable. The purpose is to show the interrelationships between the leadership role and the analytic role.

Foulkes (1964, 1975) views the therapy group process as a free-floating discussion with no particular agenda. From this perspective, the clinical group moderator provides a minimum of instruction and is not an active leader as is the case in exploratory groups. The moderator must observe the group and each individual within the group. The group serves as the background against which the performance of each individual member is observed. The role of the moderator is complex. He or she must balance between the role of analyst, which can be disturbing to the group, and the leadership or supporting role.

The moderator's task involves two types of actions—analytic and supportive. The analytic activities continue from the beginning of the group session through to the end when he or she writes and presents the final report. The supportive activities are the facilitative things that go on during the group session; these are the main concerns of books on moderating focus groups. The moderator's task is complex because both sets of activities affect the individual respondents and the group as a whole. The moderator communicates, verbally and nonverbally, with the group and each individual member. Any member can communicate with the group or any other individual member. Moreover, the group can communicate with the moderator or individual members. To accomplish the supportive and analytical tasks, the moderator must remain detached; he or she cannot become involved in the group process. A moderator who insists on maintaining control and directing the group's discussion is sure to miss some things that may be critical to the

analysis. This is why Foulkes (1964, 1975) says that an attitude of dynamic neutrality is an essential part of the clinical approach.

Let's consider these two activities in more detail. As the leader of the group, the moderator must attend to what is being discussed; this, as I previously noted, is the manifest level. As the analyst, however, the moderator must also be concerned about the subconscious or primary level of the discussion. To add to the complexity, each level has an independent effect, and these combine to have an interactive effect on what the moderator can attend and listen too.

Foulkes (1964, 1975) uses a clever analogy to illustrate this complexity. If we are listening to an orchestra play a symphony, we can listen to parts of the strings (the manifest level) with only faint attention to the woodwinds (the latent level). Alternatively, we can listen to the woodwinds (the latent level) with faint attention to the strings (manifest level). Finally, we can listen to the both sections simultaneously and hear the interactive effect (i.e., the interaction between the manifest and latent levels).

The moderator's role in this type of group is part violinist and part conductor. At the manifest level, the moderator is like a violinist. He or she cannot afford to take an active leadership or conducting role. As a person, he or she stays in the background, plays the violin, listens reflectively, and follows the lead of the group. As the analyst, he or she is like a conductor in calling on the group to speak, inspiring agreements, diminishing disagreements, and so forth. As the conductor, he or she brings out the latent content and helps in analyzing the repressed thoughts and the relationships among individuals in the group. He or she sets the pattern of desirable behavior such as reason, tolerance, understanding, independence, and frankness. Unlike orchestra conductors, however, clinical moderators must be part of the group but at the same time must remain outside the group and observe its dynamics.

How do these two dimensions interact? The manifest level affects the primary level in two ways; one is because the moderator is the leader and the other is because the moderator is part of the group. By not taking an active role as leader at the manifest level, the leader remains neutral at the primary level. Failure of the moderator to remain neutral at the manifest level means that the group has to interpret his or her role at the primary level, which could result in their confusing these two roles. This is critical because of the moderator's roles as both analyst and leader. In clinical groups, the perception of moderator bias by group members also affects them at the subconscious level. Subsequently, the analysis will reflect this bias whether the analysis is unbiased or not. As the group grows in maturity at the manifest level, which should be the goal of the therapist, however, it also becomes less dependent on the leader as

an authority figure at the latent level. If the moderator becomes active in the discussion, the group cannot decrease its dependence on the manifest leader and cannot relinquish its latent image of the therapist as an authority figure.

The primary level is latent, but without it as a background, much of what is manifest would lose its meaning. Unless the moderator has the authority given to the primary leader figure, the prestige that is commanded will be lost along with the justification for his or her behavior. A result could be that the moderator becomes reluctant, which might be interpreted as weakness or incompetence. If so, the group could begin looking for another leader, who might be the most verbal or most dominant member of the group. There is no guarantee that this leader would best serve the interests of the group or the interests of the moderator.

If so, the informal leader would have no reason to sanction the free flow of discussion, would not provide the analysis that is needed, and would not break new ground or test participants' values or accepted codes of behavior. Moreover, the moderator's own contributions (e.g., explanations, interpretations, questions, and judgments) would not carry sufficient weight to elicit the necessary information from the respondents. Thus, without the moderator's protection and impartiality in leading them, frank disclosures are less likely.

It is necessary for the clinical moderator to observe both the manifest and latent components of the clinical group task. This is indeed a complex and difficult task. The manifest occupation is casual conversation about the topic of interest. The latent component of the task is what motivates the discourse during the discussion. The analyst role of the clinical moderator is to peel away the manifest layer of the conversation to get the fruit, the latent occupation. The other types of focus groups are interested only in the manifest occupation of the group.

Group Process Influences on Clinical Tasks

In my coverage of exploratory and experiential groups, I considered unintended effects due to free riding, social loafing, and production blocking. None of these processes appears to pose a threat to clinical research goals. Neither the quantity nor diversity of thought is important to the success of clinical groups. In addition, therapists, either singly or in concert with other group members, should be able to provide feedback to group members so that members can gain new insights into their behaviors and allow the self-disclosure of previously suppressed or unknown information. Through group discussion and feedback, more group members should become involved in

the conversation. It should make little difference whether the respondents are dominant or shy.

Information influence in the form of persuasive arguments should not be problematic in clinical tasks either. Because the research interest is in the private thoughts of the individuals or the subconscious, the moderator-analyst is only peripherally interested in persuasive arguments and their influence on cognitive processes (e.g., attitude change and polarization). Likewise, the moderator is not interested in shared beliefs, thoughts, preferences, or other manifest levels of group discussion, so biased information sampling should not be a problem.

Heightened self-awareness is a concern, however. From our understanding of the literature on therapeutic cure, therapists try to avoid self-focused attention. The main exception might be the approach referred to as "attack therapy" (Lieberman, 1975). Clinical moderators might consider the effects that the viewing room technology has on achieving depth in these interviews. To the extent that bright lights, recorders, and mirrors are visible, individuals may become self-focused. Self-awareness could interfere with the development of insights about one's behavior and the subsequent self-disclosure of its subconscious causes.

Normative Influence on Clinical Tasks

Normative influence may be detrimental to some research purposes, but it is a plus in clinical tasks. Norms establish the rules for behavior in clinical groups. Behavior that violates notions of the "right way" to behave is considered deviant and is subject to sanction by the group (Lieberman, 1975). In Lieberman's words norms "are, in effect, an unwritten social contract which can be invoked when troublesome behavior arises" (p. 463). It is also in the moderator's interest to help or allow the group to develop norms. This requires, however, understanding what norms are likely to govern what groups. Discerning the right norms becomes complicated in mixed groups, particularly in mixed-ethnic groups.

Lieberman (1975) suggests three ways to determine which norms are governing the group. First, the moderator needs to look carefully at behaviors that occur regularly and notice which ones do not occur. Lieberman likens this approach to that of an anthropologist. In addition, the moderator should note which individuals receive the attention of the group over time and which do not. The group will attempt to control the dominant or disruptive individual. If the group is not successful in this attempt, "The group begins to 'withdraw' its attention from this member to the point where he [or she] almost becomes a

nonperson in the group—ignored, isolated, as if he [or she] were not there" (p. 464). This may take more time than is available in the typical focus group. The third approach is to ask about group norms through a survey. Lieberman, Yalom, and Miles (1973) they report a factor analysis of responses to such a norm survey instrument. This last approach is the easiest and simplest, and it is doable within the time allotted for focus groups.

Relying on group norms to help control group behavior assumes that norms can operate in ad hoc groups that meet for no more than 2 hours. Therapy groups employ group norms to change behavior, but the process occurs over a relatively long period of time. It is also assumes that the moderator understands what norms are operating in each group. Using group norms to uncover subconscious processes is intuitively appealing but not demonstrated empirically in focus groups.

Summary

This chapter began with the unique nature of the clinical process. I identified four types of information that clinical focus group tasks deal with: public, private, suppressed, and unknown. Then I discussed the unique character of disclosure in clinical tasks, followed by some thoughts about how moderators can encourage feedback, insight, and self-disclosure in clinical tasks.

An outline of a process by which moderators can facilitate the self-disclosure of private information was proposed. This process involves getting group members to provide feedback to each other about information that the group is aware of but that each individual is not aware of. From this feedback, individuals should develop new insights about their own behaviors, which then become conscious but private. If discussion causes the self-disclosure of this new private information, it becomes public, and the pool of usable information is increased.

I then discussed effect and theory applications of focus groups to clinical tasks. I outlined a number of tasks for each application and made a distinction between tasks that sought conscious information and those that sought subconscious information, both suppressed and unknown. I further argued that some clinical tasks do not require moderators with clinical training; only those tasks that seek information that is either suppressed or unknown do.

I also discussed group composition and reasoned that cohesion among group members is less important than cohesion between the moderator and the group. For clinically trained moderators, homogeneity is not a recruiting

concern. The focus group should reflect the cohesiveness in the respondents' daily lives. For example, if the research is interested in an individualist cultural orientation, the focus group makeup will be quite diverse. If the interest is in collectivists, however, the group makeup will be quite homogeneous. For those without clinical background, it is probably better if the groups are homogeneous on those individual characteristics; diversity may cause the group to become dysfunctional. Moderators should also be cognizant of perceived imbalances of power within groups that contain majority and minority segments.

Another topic was virgin respondents and when they might be required. The argument for virgin respondents is weak and should become an important concern in a few limited effect applications tasks and all theory applications.

Group size depends on the preferences of the moderator in clinical tasks. The number of groups depends on the moderator's judgment about whether the underlying explanations for behaviors have been uncovered and whether the project has reached the point of diminishing returns.

The research setting was also discussed. In centrally located focus group facilities, the ambient, human, and material environments are dictated by the design of the viewing room. The viewing room also may have a detrimental effect on some individuals because the material environment with its mirrors and recorders may cause them to become self-aware. The negative impact should be most noticeable when the task is to uncover suppressed or unknown information, such as a deeply held bias or prejudice. On the other hand, normative influence on group members could be facilitating for clinical tasks. Other group process factors should not have a major impact on clinical tasks.

The moderator was also discussed in this chapter. I concluded that clinical training might be helpful for some tasks, but it is not required for all clinical tasks. In addition, I discussed fitting the moderator's background to the particular clinical task. Finally, I outlined in some detail the role of the moderator and in particular the duality of being the discussion facilitator and the content analyst.

The final topic was the influence of group processes on clinical tasks. Contrary to the potential detrimental effects of group influence in other group tasks, for some clinical tasks normative pressures may be helpful. If the moderator understands what norms are operating, he or she may use the norms to control group members as well as to increase the amount of self-disclosure in the group.

Chapter 10

Planning and Reporting Future Focus Group Research

In the first chapter, I listed several goals for this book. The first goal is to motivate researchers to test the hypothesized relationships presented in conjunction with the conceptual framework. In addition, I presented several criteria for evaluating both theoretical and applied focus group research projects. Other criteria also make sense. The number and types of criteria may depend on the research purpose and the publication to which the authors intend to submit the manuscript reporting the results of their study. For theory confirmation in experiential tasks, for example, researchers might have to meet more stringent requirements than in exploratory tasks for effects applications.

Second, because the focus group method is so widely used, I have attempted to share focus group experiences across disciplines. Because of space limitations, I was not able to share more than a few examples of the many focus group uses; hundreds could have been provided. The edited table of uses—which had to be omitted from the book—was over six pages long. Consequently, an annotated bibliography of focus group uses and experiences might be useful. See McGrath and Hollingshead (1994) for an example of this type of bibliography.

Third, I wanted to help researchers move beyond the traditional, generic focus group method. By delineating the types of research tasks for which focus groups are used, other researchers may become more actively involved in extending the boundaries of this popular research method. As a first step in this direction, I distinguished theory from effects applications and differentiated three distinct research tasks: exploratory, experiential, and clinical. In

addition, I provided a framework for making informed decisions about how to design focus group projects.

Fourth, I critically reviewed technological issues and discussed the effects of technology on the focus group process and output. Readers are also cautioned that some technologies not only eliminate some problems with focus groups but also eliminate what makes focus groups unique—the group dynamic or interaction.

A Conceptual Framework for Planning Research on Focus Groups

In keeping with the first goal of this book, a conceptual framework for planning research on focus groups was provided. The framework draws almost exclusively from the literature reviewed in Chapter 6. As research on group processes evolves, however, two central components of the framework, group process variables and outcomes, will change as well. Because of these expected changes, the framework is a work in progress.

Much of the research that is relevant to focus groups was reviewed. Arguably, the input characteristics from the group process literature least applicable to focus groups are due to the nature of the group task. Much small-group research deals with groups that make decisions, which is almost never the purpose or task of focus groups. Except for perhaps jury panels, focus groups do not have to arrive at consensus or agree on any choice alternative. Nevertheless, focus groups can perform various clinical and experiential tasks to investigate group members' beliefs, feelings, and experiences. In addition, one clinical task of focus groups parallels that associated with psychotherapy groups—uncovering suppressed or unknown causes of behavior.

McGrath and Hollingshead (1994) note that many potentially relevant factors can be studied in group research: "far too many to incorporate in any given study as design variables, or as factors to control statistically or experimentally" (p. 94). This state poses dilemmas for those who are interested in research on focus groups—too many variables to choose from and little guidance about where to begin. Following the example laid out by McGrath and Hollingshead (1994), I present a conceptual framework to help guide future researchers' choices among the voluminous variables that singly and multiply affect focus group processes (see Table 10.1).

The purpose of the framework is to provide a guide for planning research. The intention is for researchers to use it to develop theoretical hypotheses

TABLE 10.1 Conceptual Framework for Focus Group Process

Input	Organizing Concepts	Process Variables	Outcomes
Research Purpose	Group Cohesion	Exchange of Information	Type of Information
		Cognitive Tuning	
Individual Characteristics	Discussion Process	Evaluation Apprehension	Quantity and Quality of Information
Group Composition	Process Losses	Self-focused Attention	
Focus Group Setting	Social Influence	Normative Influence	Group Member Feelings
Focus Group Moderator	Motivation Losses	Free Riding	
Group Process Factors	Information Distribution	Information Sampling	Moderator's Analysis
Group Task		Information Influence	

about many of the issues raised and discussed in the previous chapters. I also envision its use in designing empirical research projects to test these hypotheses. Finally, it may provide some sense of unity of research purpose across disciplines. Different researchers subscribing to the same conceptual framework are more likely to concentrate their research efforts on a more focused and perhaps more relevant program of study.

The framework provides four groups of variables that normally make up a focus group research project: inputs, organizing concepts, process variables, and focus group outcomes. The first column lists seven sets of input factors that lay out the course the focus group research project will take.

These seven factors are the independent variables in hypothesized relationships. The second column notes organizing concepts that have the potential for affecting the focus group outcomes. These concepts indicate the composite effects of the input factors on group process variables, both main effects and interactions. Column 3 denotes specific group process effects that may result from the input factors. These effects may be either dependent or independent variables, depending on the research purpose. The last column is a partial list of sets of potential group outcomes. In most research, these variables are the dependent variables.

There are three notable and obvious problems with this conceptual framework. First, I do not depict the potential interactions among the input factors. The space to do so is not available, and it would make the framework unnecessarily complex and cumbersome. Some of these interactions are discussed in previous chapters. Second, I have not included all of the group process factors that have been studied empirically. The literature review was selective in that it is generally limited to experimental research and the phenomena studied by social psychologists. Third, the framework does not provide an exhaustive list of process effects or outcomes that the inputs cause.

Input Factors That Affect Focus Group Outcomes

A review of the research on group processes has provided seven factors that may ultimately affect group outcomes: the research purpose, individual characteristics, group composition, the research setting, the focus group moderator, group process factors, and the group task. I discuss the research purpose and explain how it frames the research project in Chapter 1. The research purpose constrains the many methodological choices available to the researchers. Choices about the various populations that I include in the study (e.g., people, location, and issues) depend on the research purpose.

I discuss focus group participant characteristics and group composition in Chapter 2. Cultural value orientation will affect group compatibility and cohesion. Therefore, it makes sense to assess the importance of cohesion to the research purpose before deciding on the cultural makeup of the focus groups. For exploratory research, cohesion is not very important, so groups can be composed of individualists. For experiential tasks, sharing of common experiences may be easier when the group members are collectivists.

Within cultures, the researcher should consider individual differences in social status, age, gender, personality, and race/ethnicity and how these characteristics will affect cohesion and compatibility. I provide theoretical rea-

sons for some main as well as interactive effects of personal characteristics on self-disclosure. For example, group members' personalities affect the compatibility of group members and the discussion process. Some personality mixes make focus groups more compatible than others. Focus groups made up of both dominant and shy personalities should be more compatible and cohesive than groups of all dominant or all shy individuals. I did not, however, look at how dominance or shyness of individuals interacts with the size of the group to affect information or normative influence and the nature of the information obtained from the focus group session.

I explored the effects of the focus group setting in Chapter 3. People differ in terms of how they react to their environment and the perceived invasions of their privacy. Individuals compensate for threats to their privacy by regulating their verbal and nonverbal behaviors, increasing their personal space, managing their territory within the focus group confines, and relying on various cultural mechanisms. Depending on the specific setting and characteristics of the individual participants, compensation can lead to withholding information, breaking down cohesion within the group, and causing conflict throughout the discussion process.

In Chapter 4, I discussed the focus group moderator. Much of this discussion dealt with characteristics of the moderator and skills that may increase the moderator's effectiveness. The moderator's ability to handle shy, dominant, disruptive, and minority group members will affect what kind of information is disclosed, how cohesive the group is, and whether there is conflict throughout the discussion process. In Chapter 4, I provided specific examples of what might happen if the moderator and group members come from different cultural value orientations.

In Chapter 5, I presented the group process factors most likely to affect focus group discussions. Production blocking and, in particular, problems with cognitive tuning appear to account for the decrements in brainstorming by groups compared with brainstorming by individuals. In addition, heterogeneous groups of individualists may facilitate the collection of unique thoughts, and heterogeneity in experiential tasks may cause conflict and inhibit information sharing. Furthermore, group cohesion may interact with group process factors to affect the group discussion process in ways that we still do not understand.

Chapters 7, 8, and 9 deal with exploratory, experiential, and clinical tasks, respectively. Each type of task was examined in terms of group composition, group size, number of groups, research setting, group process influences, and the moderator. The type of research task, along with group compo-

sition, the setting, and the moderator, has interactive effects on group cohesion, the discussion process, and the type of information that will be disclosed.

In addition, there are many potentially interesting three-way interactions. I previously suggested that small groups may be good for eliciting unique information in exploratory tasks, whereas large groups may be better for uncovering shared experiences in experiential tasks. To test this notion, you would have to vary the distribution of information across different-sized focus groups in both exploratory and experiential tasks. A significant three-way interaction would suggest that this notion is correct.

Organizing Concepts

There are six organizing concepts in the framework: group cohesion, discussion process, process losses, social influence, motivation losses, and information distribution. Group cohesion depends on the individual characteristics of the focus group members and whether the group composition is homogeneous or heterogeneous. The amount of time spent in each stage of the focus group discussion process depends on the composition of the group and the extent to which the group members are heterogeneous in terms of individual-difference characteristics.

Process losses should be a bigger concern when doing exploratory tasks than when doing other types of tasks. Cognitive-tuning problems pose the greatest threat to focus groups for ideation tasks. Social influence processes can negatively affect member contributions of unique thoughts and experiences in exploratory tasks through evaluation apprehension, self-focused attention, and normative influence. Social influence, however, may positively affect contributions in experiential tasks. Social influence causes acquaintances to be more candid with each other and is responsible for reciprocating the disclosure of intimate information.

Motivation losses result from the research purpose, type of group task, and group size. These productivity losses may be manifested as diffusion of responsibility, social loafing, and free riding.

Information distribution refers to how shared and unshared information are distributed across individuals within a group and the potential influence of the information on the exchange of information in the group. Information distribution depends on how cohesive the backgrounds of the group members are. The amount of shared information discussed in the group should increase as group cohesion increases and the amount of unshared information should

decrease. All the process variables have the potential for adversely affecting both the quantity and quality of information generated in groups.

Process Variables

Eight types of group processes seem to account for much of the group interaction effects reported in focus groups: information exchange, cognitive tuning, evaluation apprehension, self-focused attention, normative influence, free riding, information sampling, and information influence. These group process factors are manifested as the group process variables in Column 3 of Table 10.1.

Group cohesion is likely to have a positive effect on the exchange of shared information and attenuate the exchange of unshared information. Unique information is most likely to be disclosed by heterogeneous groups of individualists, and shared information is most likely to be discussed among homogeneous groups of collectivists.

Production blocking and cognitive tuning are likely to limit disclosure in all types of groups except perhaps nominal groups. This effect is most pronounced in ideation tasks. It remains to be seen whether procedural rules can be instituted to minimize process losses due to cognitive tuning problems. Productivity losses occur as a result of the group discussion process, which involves the coordination of simultaneously listening, thinking, and speaking. It has not received much research scrutiny outside its effects on brainstorming. For example, we do not know what effects process losses have on discussing shared information in experiential tasks.

Self-focus refers to the self-centered attention that results from being in the presence of other individuals, mirrors, and recording devices. For some individuals this attention may be positive and cause them to speak up more. For example, some individuals seem to be motivated to speak up when faced with an audience. For other individuals, these factors are personally threatening and may inhibit their participation in group discussions. Although focus group moderators may disagree about the importance of self-focused attention in focus groups, there is no empirical evidence to support either side on this issue.

Normative influence in these surroundings may inhibit the free expression of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in some tasks and have a positive effect in others. In attitude research, normative pressures within the group may cause individuals' attitudes to be more extreme than they would be if others were not present. Normative influence also is likely to have a positive effect

on collectivists' sharing common experiences, but it is not likely to have an effect on individualists.

Past research on the effects of free riding in group discussions has been done primarily in the context of brainstorming tasks. Little is known about how the seven input factors affect motivation to participate in the discussion or whether decrements in motivation adversely affect outcomes in any of the other focus group applications.

The distribution of information determines the kind of information group members bring up and discuss. Groups with members from similar backgrounds (e.g., acquaintances) will have relatively little unique information or experiences to talk about compared with the amount of information they share. Those with widely different backgrounds may have relatively few shared thoughts and experiences to discuss relative to those that are unique. A second use of information, information influence, is through persuasion. Group members may introduce information as persuasive arguments to influence other members' positions on issues.

Outcomes: Criteria for Determining Focus Group Effectiveness

There are three sets of criteria for assessing the effectiveness of focus groups. They are task performance effectiveness (e.g., type, quantity, and quality of information), member relations (e.g., attraction and feelings of impersonality), and user reactions that depend on the moderator and the analysis (e.g., satisfaction with process and outcomes) (McGrath & Hollingshead, 1994). In research on focus groups, these outcomes translate into five sets of potential dependent variables: the type of information, quantity of information, quality of information, member feelings, and quality of the moderator's analysis. The choice of dependent variable depends on the type of focus that is the subject of the research and the theory underlying the research. For example, in my research on idea generation (Fern, 1982a), task performance effectiveness was determined in part by comparing the number and quality of unique ideas generated in focus groups with those generated in individual interviews. In a study of focus groups in the experiential context, the number of redundant experiences rather than unique ones might determine task performance effectiveness.

There are several ways to categorize the types of information that can be obtained from groups. I oversimplified the types of information in Chapter 7.

By using just two dimensions, the intimacy and uniqueness of disclosure, four different types of information are derived. There are several other dimensions of disclosure. For example, complexity can be increased by adding two more dimensions from Chapter 9 (i.e., conscious/subconscious and observed/unobserved) to further distinguish the types of information that clinical focus groups can generate. A more reasoned and thorough typology of responses in focus groups might be useful to those doing research in this area.

Group member reactions to and satisfaction with process and outcomes seem to be relevant only insofar as they affect performance effectiveness. Focus groups are ad hoc groups, and poor interaction and performance are not enduring. Thus, group member reactions are important only if they tell us something about group interaction, group processes, and performance effectiveness during their particular group discussion. Therefore, it makes sense to use static measures of group member feelings, across groups of mixed ethnic, race, or gender makeup. Dynamic measures of group process do not make much sense for focus group research.

It might be wise to debrief focus group participants routinely. Doing so would help assess the face validity of the inferences being made from their responses. For example, respondents could be debriefed to uncover reasons for process failures, to emphasize the importance of group composition, and to explain otherwise unexplained effects resulting from unintended input factors.

Research Agenda for Focus Groups

There are many ways to design empirical research on the focus group phenomena. I present only a few from the many possibilities. In marketing research, field research conducted by professional research firms should provide a rich source of data for gathering knowledge about this research method. I found only one situation in which substantial knowledge about focus groups resulted from the use of proprietary research information (McDonald, 1994). Cooperation between commercial market research firms and academic researchers could produce considerable new knowledge about the focus group processes and output.

Other research approaches may be used as well—for example controlled laboratory experiments (Fern, 1982a) or social network analysis (Reingen, Foster, Brown, & Seidman, 1984; Ward & Reingen, 1990). Regardless of the

research method, some unanswered questions appear to be more important than others. Therefore, I offer the following research agenda suggestions.

First, researchers need multiple indicators of group and individual performance, group interaction processes, and group member reactions to process, including the moderator. These indicators can range from surveys administered before and after the group interviews to elaborate coding of the behavioral process. Many studies have transcribed the discussion content and developed higher-order constructs from the transcriptions. The incremental cost and effort to do these additional analyses is minimal once the discussions are transcribed.

Second, researchers need to study what combinations of member attributes are desirable for creating cohesive or compatible groups for each research purpose. They also need to identify and understand how to handle manipulative respondents without adversely affecting the more compliant ones.

Third, I have speculated about some possible differences between the approaches to focus group research, but other than what can be learned from McDonald's (1994) study, we know little about how focus group methods differ. More research is needed on the methodological differences between focus groups for exploratory, experiential, and clinical tasks. In addition, we need to explore the differences in the effects of research purpose, group composition, research setting, and moderating style across methods.

Fourth, it would help to know the group processes that drive each focus group application. Production blocking attenuates idea generation in exploratory tasks, but not much is known about how to overcome these problems. And we know little about how other group processes affect exploratory tasks or what processes affect clinical and experiential tasks. For example, many focus group professionals would agree that experience in clinical psychology is helpful if not necessary to moderate groups for clinical research tasks; it appears to be less necessary for the other two tasks. In my review of this vast literature, however, I found little to indicate why or how psychotherapy experience translates into focus group practice. Perhaps it is time to move beyond the intuitive and highly persuasive appeals for the necessity of clinical experience for moderators and explain what clinicians bring to the process method that others do not.

Fifth, I am not sure what the new information-processing technologies have to offer focus groups. From the review of this research by McGrath and Hollingshead (1994), computer-mediated groups offer hope for exploratory tasks but do not provide acceptable solutions to many of the problems attrib-

uted to other focus group applications. Before plunging into these new media, users should be sure that they understand the implications of these new technologies in terms of group process and outcome.

Reporting Focus Group Research Results

Additional research on focus groups will do little to increase our knowledge about this research method unless there is a concurrent change in reporting the results. It is impossible to provide even descriptive information about the many creative uses of focus group research methods across many diverse disciplines because much of the important information is not available in the published research reports. Relatively few articles on focus groups report the minimum information necessary to replicate findings or to evaluate the quality of the research. Because of this deficiency, it is impossible to synthesize knowledge from the extant research.

Moreover, few articles provide enough detailed information to determine critical aspects of the research design used in the study. By paying a little more attention to what information is reported about our focus group projects, perhaps we can overcome the almost complete void in "scientific knowledge" about this increasingly popular research method. I provide suggestions for reporting the minimal aspects of focus group research in the following section.

Research Purpose

A major theme throughout the book is that the type of group research anticipated depends on the research purpose. No single focus group method is amenable to all types of research questions. Therefore, the researcher must think creatively about the purpose of the research and the type of group task that will best serve that purpose. Exploring potential reasons for some population being at risk of contracting the HIV virus is quite different from developing an understanding of shared practices that lead to the HIV virus. Whether the research is exploratory or confirmatory affects the group size, number of groups, group composition, and so forth. Authors should clearly state the purpose(s) of the research and explain why the particular focus group method is used.

Type of Group Research Task

Different purposes require different types of focus group research. It is not sufficient to simply adopt the traditional generic focus group approach because the researcher has not clearly thought through the research purpose. It is too easy to wander into the realm of theory confirmation or clinical analysis when it is inappropriate. For example, most thought-eliciting tasks are conscious cognitive activities. It makes little sense to use projective techniques for top-of-the-mind thought elicitation. They are most appropriate for uncovering motives in clinical research tasks. Yet in practice, focus group moderators use a barrage of unnecessary clinical techniques for thought collecting and many other tasks. Most of the clinical techniques are intended to elicit subconscious motives for behavior. They are not necessary for most conscious thoughts. Likewise, if the project is exploratory, it makes little sense to talk about shared experiences or the frequency of shared experiences. It makes no sense at all to develop theoretical concepts and then count their occurrence in the same groups. This is analogous to testing a regression model with the same data that the researcher uses to develop it. For most theory evaluation purposes, much more attention to design issues (e.g., group composition, research setting, moderator characteristics, and so forth) is required than for exploratory purposes. Failure to recognize this can result in treating untested everyday knowledge as scientific knowledge and incurring all of the attendant dangers in doing so.

Number of Groups

It is also important to report the number of groups. The number should differ across research purposes. For example, in some thought-elicitation tasks, one group may be sufficient. For theory-confirmation purposes, however, a single group will almost never suffice. Thus, it is incumbent on the researcher to report and justify the number of groups conducted in a project.

Duration of Group

The length of the group session may be less important than these other characteristics, but for the sake of completeness, length of meeting time should be included in the focus group report. Moreover, any outliers (e.g., groups that met for less than 1 hour and groups that met for more than 2 hours) should be explained. Sometimes group members are not compatible regard-

less of the care taken in recruiting them. At other times, a single member can intimidate other members to the point that the moderator will end the discussion prematurely. These instances should be reported and explained.

Group Composition

Group composition should also be reported. It is informative to read that groups were homogeneous on some individual characteristics and that heterogeneity was captured across groups. In many cases, nothing is sacrificed by conducting groups that are heterogeneous across a number of characteristics. Groups for clinical tasks might benefit from heterogeneous group members. Conversely, experiential groups might suffer if groups are composed of individuals who share very little in the way of everyday knowledge. Information about group homogeneity/heterogeneity and the individual characteristics on which these decisions are based should be reported routinely.

Geographic Location

Most studies that were reviewed reported the country and some reported specific cities or villages. Reporting the geographic locations for the focus groups has important implications for the generalizability of the results. Simply stating that the groups were conducted in several major cities throughout the United States tells us very little about the generalizability of the results, if anything.

Group Setting

It makes a difference whether the groups were conducted in a central location (e.g., focus group facility or hotel conference room) or in a group member's living room. First, groups conducted at a central location are likely to be more heterogeneous than those conducted in a living room. This is so because meeting in someone's living room usually means that the respondents come from the same general backgrounds even if they are not friends. Second, the location has an effect on the group composition in terms of culture, gender, personality, socioeconomic class, and attitudes. It may also affect participation in the group discussion. For example, anxious individuals may participate more if the group is conducted in a more relaxed atmosphere than is available in a central location. Third, people who are similar tend to reciprocate more and share more information (e.g., everyday knowledge) than peo-

ple who are dissimilar. Thus, people from the same neighborhood should share more information than those recruited from different neighborhoods. Strangers are more likely to be recruited for central locations than neighbors are.

Information Collected

Quotations from transcripts continue to be the information most frequently reported in group research reports. Still, I found many fine reports about the first- and second-order constructs derived from focus groups. It would be helpful if researchers routinely reported some measures of the quantity and quality of information that resulted from the project.

Quantity and Quality of Information Collected

Hard-core focus group advocates will probably be appalled by the notion of reporting quantitative results from focus groups; after all, it is a qualitative method. Presumably, you cannot derive quantitative information from qualitative methods. As previously argued, quantitative assumptions underlie the qualitative information derived from focus group research. If we report the most frequently discussed themes, why not simply report the incidence of these themes. Most of us who read focus group reports are knowledgeable enough to be able to handle quantitative information without being led down the path of improper inferences from viewing such information. Moreover, if higher-level constructs are developed, the researcher should provide us the information about the criteria used to develop these constructs.

Reliability Check

Knodel (1993) advocates developing an overview grid for analytical purposes. This grid is simply a matrix with the rows representing focus group sessions and the columns representing essential issues or themes that were discussed across groups. The issues come from the moderator's discussion guide. Within each cell, the analyst notes the content of the discussion as it relates to the particular issue. This matrix may be as detailed as the researcher cares to make it. For example, in my own research, I have identified participant contributions for each seating position at the table (e.g., the specific product attributes, number of thoughts, individual's attitudes, and intimacy of self-disclosure). By doing so, I am able to note the position taken by each indi-

vidual from each group on each issue. This process becomes decidedly more complex as more detail is added to the matrix.

Once the overview grid is complete, the researcher can verify that the same issues were addressed by each group and that the positions taken on these issues are the same across similar groups. More important, perhaps, different researchers can construct grids from the same tapes or transcripts. This procedure allows comparisons among researchers to assess the reliability of the information collected. It also allows comparisons within similar groups to check the reliability of the phenomenon studied.

Validity Check

Validity is relevant for theory confirmation purposes and some effects applications. I previously discussed research design factors that can be used to verify face validity. Process factors might be assessed as well. As pointed out before, however, this is a judgment call.

Albrecht, Johnson, and Walther (1993) describe three potential threats to the validity of data from focus groups: (a) compliance, (b) identification, and (c) internalization. *Compliance* occurs when the respondent responds in ways that he or she thinks the questioners expect. *Identification* is when a respondent provides responses similar to those of a person to which he or she is personally attracted. Albrecht et al. (1993) frame both of these threats in terms of the respondents' perceptions of the moderator. *Internalization* refers to the deeply ingrained opinions that are personal and less susceptible to group influence. Due to respondents' desires to conform (Asch, 1952), however, it may be difficult to draw out individual's internalized opinions.

In sum, Albrecht et al. (1993) appear to be saying that opinion formation and change occur naturally through group discussion. In focus groups, however, the moderator can disrupt this natural process because of the respondent's desire to comply with the moderator's expectations. Moreover, individuals may identify with others in the group and simply adopt the positions taken by highly attractive individuals. Either compliance or identification has negative consequences on opinion formation. The moderator should be able to control for the effects of compliance, at least as much as individual interviewers or survey researchers do. Also, identification occurs naturally in group discussion and is not a big problem. The moderator can address the identification issue during the group discussion, or the researcher can detect it when analyzing the transcripts or tapes.

Finally, internalized or deeply held opinions are the most difficult to change. It is unlikely that they will be susceptible to conformity pressures in the way suggested by Albrecht et al. (1993). Nevertheless, it is the moderator's job to note these attempts and to provide a group climate that allows individuals to express and defend strongly held beliefs and opinions. Also, attempts to change ingrained beliefs and opinions provide much of the rich material that goes into the final analysis. If the researcher is interested in opinion change, the research project can be designed to measure change.

Method of Analysis, Including Reliability Checks

For theory-based group research, the researcher should provide information about the method of analysis and any checks on reliability and validity that were attempted. This is particularly important for triangulation and theory evaluation research. For some exploratory and most experiential effects applications, reliability and at least face validity should be checked.

All the preceding information is rather easy to provide and at the least will ensure that the researcher has attended to the basic details in planning focus groups. It will also cause researchers to report the minimum information necessary to evaluate the quality of the research. In addition, it will provide valuable information for those interested in comparing focus group studies across researchers, research projects, and disciplines. Finally, it will allow the systematic study of how differences in these factors (i.e., the independent variables) affect the outcomes (i.e., the dependent variables).

Conclusion

The use of focus groups is increasing at a faster rate than our knowledge about these qualitative research methods. Nevertheless, we still cling to many of the prescriptions about focus group interviewing that predate the Calder (1977) trilogy of focus group methods. This would be understandable in a static research environment. Every indication, however, is that this environment is dynamically changing and will continue to do so over the next 50 years.

To help keep up with those changes more research on focus group methods is needed. Consistent with this need, the first goal of this book is to motivate researchers to test the veracity of the many hypothesized relationships discussed in the preceding chapters. The second goal is to provide a review of the diverse conceptual and empirical focus group research for the benefit of

those who desire more than basic knowledge about conducting focus groups. A third goal is to move researchers beyond the traditional generic focus group approach toward developing focus group research designs for specific research purposes and tasks. The fourth goal is to offer some new perspectives about focus group research and motivate others to use this research method creatively in the 21st century. To aid in achieving these goals, a descriptive conceptual framework of the focus group research process was developed. This framework specifies relationships between factors that affect the focus group process and outcomes. It also provides criteria for evaluating both focus group research proposals and reports on the finished research.

This advanced look at focus groups tries to pave the way for new uses of these qualitative methods in new environments. This effort is problematic and perhaps controversial. I have gone beyond the parochial use of focus groups in marketing research to develop new approaches for new purposes and tasks. During the course of this effort, several important issues were uncovered and addressed. Considerable space was devoted to exploring individual characteristics that affect group composition, group cohesiveness, the focus group discussion process, and ultimately, group productivity.

I also explored the settings in which focus groups can be conducted. Among the concerns I raised is whether some aspects of the focus group setting interact to have unintended causes on the group process and output. I noted that caution should be exercised in comparing groups across settings when the settings vary in terms of the ambient, human, and material aspects of the environments.

Perhaps the most controversial notions were aired in Chapter 6, where I questioned some underlying assumptions about focus group research. They have seriously constrained the use of focus groups over the past 25 years. Focus groups can be used for theory evaluation purposes, and the output from such groups can be quantified for statistical significance tests. The independence, representativeness, and degrees-of-freedom arguments are constraints that can be overcome with careful research planning.

I hope that the door is now open to new and creative uses of focus groups for solving many human as well as organizational problems. There is a risk, of course, that those who prefer to do a few groups rather than a larger survey project will misuse this new theory-testing view of focus groups. Thus, it becomes incumbent on users of these methods to evaluate the quality of the research proposals and the contents of the final research reports.

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