2

Joint and Group Interviews

This chapter reviews these topics:

- Joint interviews
- Group formats for interviews, including *nominal group technique, Delphi* groups, *informal* and *formal* groups, and *focus groups*
- Designing studies using focus groups, preparing for group interviews, discussing sensitive issues, formulating questions and encouraging participation, and analyzing data

What issues do qualitative researchers attend to when generating data with couples or groups of people? In this chapter, I talk about joint interviews and approaches to group interviews before examining the focus group in more detail. I review issues to consider when interviewing couples or groups of people, ideas for planning interview guides, and suggestions for how focus group moderators encourage group members to participate.

One might assume that skills used in asking questions in individual interviews apply equally to interviews with couples or groups. Unless they are using a specific group technique designed to minimize or eliminate group interaction, researchers will likely call on different skills to effectively manage interviewing more than one person at a time. Multiparty talk complicates turn-taking since speakers take different roles and participants orient to what others have said. Even though multiparty talk is complex, interviewers are unlikely to notice how turn-taking is accomplished unless problems in interactions arise. For example, individual speakers can monopolize talk, interrupt others, initiate irrelevant topics, engage in side conversations, or remain silent. These actions are not confined to group interviews—they can also occur in individual interviews involving two speakers. How interviewers work out what to do next when interactional problems occur is a task complicated by what co-present parties do.

Joint Interviews

Sometimes, it is both practical and preferable to interview two people together. Louisa Polak and Judith Green (2016) commented that the literature uses a range of terms to refer to interviews involving two people: joint interviews, couple interviews, conjoint interviews, and dyadic interviews. One complication of the way these terms are used is that some research involving "couple interview research" uses individual rather than joint interviews. For example, Ruth Mellor et al. (2013) discussed challenges in interviewing couples individually, including recruitment, informed consent, and maintaining confidentiality. Here, I use the term "joint interviews" to refer to interviews in which one or more interviewers asks questions of two participants, while recognizing that other researchers use the term "dyadic interviews" (Morgan et al., 2013) for interviews conducted with two people paired by the researcher.

Researchers in health and family research have made increasing use of joint interviews with couples. Margunn Bjørnholt and Gunhild Farstad (2014) examined data from several studies in which couples were interviewed together. They asserted that joint interviews provide a space for "family display" (p. 16) and proposed that joint interviews (1) "solve the problems of anonymity and consent among interviewees"; (2) provide a space for reflection and disagreement; (3) provide observable data; and (4) present practical advantages (e.g., more men take part, and time and costs entailed in interviewing are reduced; pp. 16–17). Brian Heaphy and Anna Einarsdottir (2012) interviewed same-sex couples individually and together. They analyzed how the couples' relationship stories were shaped by the context in which they were interviewed, generating three different narratives—one couple's and two individual narratives. Heaphy and Einarsdottire (2012) found that the individual narratives contextualized and complicated the stories narrated by couples (p. 64) and recommend an interactionist approach that uses both individual and dyadic interviews to examine relational narratives.

Louisa Polak and Judith Green (2016) discussed the benefits and constraints of joint interviewing. They contended that joint interviews are suited to studies examining interactive practices such as decision-making since the interview context is analyzable as a "space in which co-production of a public narrative is directly performed, and practices such as assessing knowledge sources, resolving conflicting advice, or developing a coherent rationale for action" (p. 1646) are made visible. Joint interviews can involve challenges, however. For example, Dana Zarhin (2018) analyzed data from joint interviews conducted with couples concerning the topic of sleep disorders. Zarhin found that joint interviews provided contexts in which a partner can dominate talk, silence the other, or enact "symbolic violence" (p. 850), all of which can generate tension during interviews.

What this review shows is that involving two individuals in a joint or dyadic interview complicates the conduct of interviews in ways that cannot be anticipated. This is especially relevant when individuals interviewed are couples. For researchers examining topics relating to relationships, data generated in joint interviews are analyzable for how relationships are performed within interview contexts. With reference to dyadic interviews in which participants may not necessarily have a preexisting relationship, David Morgan et al. (2013) suggested that these are useful when researchers are seeking "both social interaction and depth, when narrative is valued, and when interaction in larger groups might be problematic because research participants are geographically distant" (p. 1283). Let's now look at approaches that researchers use when working with more than two people.

Formats for Working With Groups

Researchers use a variety of formats to elicit information from groups of people. These include the nominal group technique, the Delphi technique, informal and formal group interviews (Frey & Fontana, 1993), and focus groups. James Frey and Andrea Fontana (1993) proposed that group interviews can be compared on four dimensions: (1) interviewer role (directive–nondirective); (2) question format (structured–unstructured); (3) purpose (exploratory, pretest, phenomenological); and (4) setting (formal–natural; p. 30). Each of the techniques reviewed in the following paragraphs differs according to these dimensions in the ways in which data are generated.

Researchers use group formats to learn about group dynamics and the ways in which particular groups talk about topics among themselves (Stewart et al., 2007). Some researchers have suggested that group talk and others' presence provide an environment in which people are willing to self-disclose (e.g., Krueger & Casey, 2000). Some techniques are organized to eliminate the impact of group participation on the data generated, while in others, group interaction is key. When considering the use of a group interview technique, it is helpful to clarify the purpose of the project, as well as consider if group interaction is desirable and what it will contribute to examining research questions. Researchers can then structure group interaction in ways that will effectively fulfill the requirements of the project.

Nominal groups are those in which the researcher minimizes or eliminates interaction among group members with the purpose of developing group consensus. This technique avoids the problem posed by group members who dominate talk and provides researchers with a method of obtaining information in a way that minimizes participants influencing what others say. Ann MacPhail (2001) described her use of the nominal group technique (NGT) to elicit young people's views about physical education. Students completed individual written responses to a series of statements. These were collated and presented back to students, who then selected and ranked them in a second round of data generation. In health research, Nichole Harvey and Colin Holmes (2012) used NGT to generate data for discussion prompts to be used in a participatory action research group exploring triage and management of pregnant women in emergency care. In this approach, the researcher takes a directive role, asking questions of participants in a structured format. In Harvey and Holmes's study, this involved assembling groups of participants in a face-to-face setting. After introductions and explanations related to the purpose of the meeting, participants were invited to write responses to a series of questions in silence (e.g., "In your experience, what are the commonest reasons for pregnant women to present to the emergency department? Just write them down"; p. 191). Participants then shared their ideas in a round-robin, and these were recorded by the researcher. Group discussion then ensued, with the researcher emphasizing the need for "value neutral" receipt of ideas (p. 192). Each group then participated in voting and ranking statements, with findings presented to the action research group that aimed to improve patient care for pregnant women presenting at the emergency department of a regional hospital.

The Delphi method was developed in 1953 by the RAND Corporation (Dalkey & Hemer, 1963) and entails convening groups in which a panel of experts respond to the researcher's questions via successive rounds of structured questionnaires. The participants, who are unlikely to meet face-to-face, receive the results from each round of data generation. The researcher aims to come to consensus concerning the topic discussed in successive rounds of questioning. Michael Bloor et al. (2015) offered suggestions for conducting Delphi groups. These include ensuring that the group includes individuals with a range of viewpoints, expertise, and interests with respect to the topic examined; recruiting more participants than needed to allow for nonresponse; taking care to accurately represent participants' responses when developing reports; letting panelists know that their participation is not open-ended; ensuring that the final iteration of materials requires assent from participants; and ensuring that final reports let readers know that findings do "not equate to either public participation or member validation" (p. 67). Like the NGT, the Delphi technique is highly structured, with researchers taking directive roles and eliciting specific information about topics by asking structured questions of participants who remain anonymous to one another.

Adrianna Kezar and Daniel Maxey (2016) innovated on the traditional approach to the Delphi technique to propose a "change-oriented" Delphi method for use in participatory research. Kezar and Maxey claimed that to use the Delphi method in a genuinely participatory form entails engaging community members in dialogue to "develop solutions to problems over time" (p. 147). In their study, the change-oriented Delphi method exhibited strategies used in participatory research, including (1) pursuing change, (2) working with diverse stakeholders and valuing community knowledge, (3) incorporating stakeholder input in design and implementation, (4) developing resources for stakeholders, (5) engaging stakeholders in developing collective commitment and support for implementation of change, and (6) undertaking the process over a lengthy period of time (pp. 148–149).

Frey and Fontana (1993) listed ***natural*** and ***formal field interviews*** as another group interview technique. In ongoing fieldwork, researchers conduct spontaneous and unstructured interviews with naturally occurring groups rather than researcher-selected groups. Researchers might also conduct formal interviews with groups on planned occasions (pp. 30–31). While natural interviews are likely to be unstructured and conducted at an early phase in the study for exploratory purposes, formal field interviews are likely to occur later in a study, with the interviewer taking a more directive role in search of specific information.

In ***focus groups***, a group of people is brought together by an interviewer, or "moderator," to discuss their views and opinions about a selected topic with one another. Focus groups differ from the previously described formats in that the moderator deliberately fosters interaction among group members. In the next section, I review the origin of focus groups, discuss variations and innovations, and outline steps involved in designing research studies.

Focus Groups

Numerous scholars discuss theoretical and methodological issues involved in using focus groups, along with the practicalities of designing and conducting studies using this method (see, for example, Barbour, 2018; Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999; Hall, 2020; Kamberelis et al., 2018; Morgan & Hoffman, 2018b; Stewart et al., 2007; Wilkinson, 2004). As noted earlier, focus groups bring a group of people together to discuss topics introduced by the moderator. Jenny Kitzinger and Rosaline Barbour noted that participants are "focused" on a particular activity and make "explicit use of group interaction to generate data" (1999, p. 4). They continued: "Instead of asking questions of each person in turn, focus group researchers encourage participants to talk to one another; asking questions, exchanging anecdotes, and commenting on each others' experiences and points of view" (p. 4).

The development of focus groups is commonly traced to the work of Robert K. Merton et al. (1956/1990), described in the text *The Focused Interview: A Manual of Problems and Procedures*. Merton did not distinguish between the use of focused interviews with groups or individuals, and he preferred the term "focused interviews." As Merton reported, the focused interview was originally used to generate information concerning participants' responses to particular experiences and situations (such as watching a film or listening to a radio program; p. xxi). The criteria for measuring quality related to whether participants' descriptions were sufficiently detailed with respect to the dimensions of range, specificity, depth, and personal context. Merton et al.'s (1956/1990) manual provides sequences of interaction drawn from focused interviews to show how effective interviewers generated data according to these criteria, typical problems and situations that interviewers encountered, and guidelines for interviewers for how to generate data more effectively.

One of the challenges in learning how to use focus groups for the purposes of social research is discerning what advice is methodologically appropriate for a particular study. This is because there is great diversity in the purposes for which focus groups are used. Let's look at some of the variations in how researchers use focus groups, along with innovations.

Variations and Innovations in the Use of Focus Groups

The use of focus groups in a variety of fields has led to a multitude of procedural advice relevant to differing theoretical and practical issues (e.g., Belzile & Öberg, 2012; Kamberelis et al., 2018). Focus groups have been used for the purposes of informing military intelligence, doing marketing and consumer research, conducting evaluation studies, and enhancing public/nonprofit work. Evaluators and qualitative researchers have used focus groups to pursue participatory agendas, enact feminist pedagogy, and employ culturally responsive and Indigenous methodologies (Hall, 2020; Kamberelis et al., 2018). Applications of focus groups can look quite different, depending on how their use is framed theoretically, the purpose for which they are conducted (e.g., marketing, opinion polling, research, or evaluation), and the modality by which they are facilitated (e.g., face-to-face, synchronous online, or asynchronous online). Let's look at how focus groups are used.

Marketing Focus Groups

The field of marketing has made use of focus groups for decades. In marketing, moderators frequently conduct focus groups with product samples or artifacts such as images for advertising campaigns, asking participants to respond to objects in the moment. The topics of talk frequently orient to opinions and perceptions of external objects (e.g., mock-ups of a website, product samples, advertising slogans, etc.). Participants are paid for their participation at the conclusion of the focus group. In marketing contexts, focus groups are typically conducted with people who are unknown to one another. As a result, participants are likely to have less concern for how others view what they have said. The talk is typically video recorded and undertaken in a setting in which the client group (i.e., representatives of the company seeking information) may view the interactions from a viewing booth. Moderators might not transcribe the interaction. Instead, client groups are given videos of interaction and a written report of the moderators' impressions of participants' responses. The appeal of focus groups for market researchers lies in the potential of group interaction to generate data that demonstrates participants' responses and opinions about products, services, or other phenomena of interest (Stewart et al., 2007).

Focus Groups in Opinion Polling

Opinion polling has a long history in political campaigning and uses both surveys and focus groups. Participants' opinions and attitudes are elicited by moderators' questions in focus groups—some of which are televised during election seasons. When groups are very large, turn-taking is highly structured, with the moderator calling upon particular people to respond in prespecified orders. In instances where the focus group simulates a fireside chat with a moderator, the editing of talk for the public venue of television is hidden from viewers. How talk is generated in these instances differs in important ways to how social science researchers commonly moderate focus groups. Overall, talk generated in these groups is taken to index attitudes, preferences, opinions, and intentions from which future actions might be predicted.

Critical Focus Groups

Groups have also been used by social activists for pedagogical and political purposes. George Kamberelis et al. (2018) identified the enacting of skepticism and praxis as a key feature of a critical approach to focus groups. The primary focus is the instigation of critical dialogue and helping people to imagine and ultimately transform the social world. Social science researchers pursuing emancipatory agendas have used focus groups. For example, Rosie Walters (2020) discussed the ways in which activities can be used in focus groups to contribute to the lessening of hierarchical relationships in feminist research. Social science researchers have also incorporated Indigenous perspectives in the conduct of focus groups, in addition to making use of new technologies. Let's look at these next.

Culturally Responsive Focus Groups

Scholars using culturally responsive approaches to research work to pursue social justice. Katrina Rodriguez et al. (2011) outlined a number of attributes of culturally responsive researchers: They are socially conscious, operate from an asset-based framework, see themselves as change agents, are aware of and acknowledge participants' social identities, practice reflexivity, and use participants' stories in ways that expand opportunities for them to co-construct knowledge (p. 404). To these attributes, Jori Hall (2020) added, among others, the need for employing specific methodological approaches that are responsive to participants' cultural contexts (e.g., sharing circles in Indigenous contexts) and accounting for the culture and context when analyzing and interpreting data. Hall (2020) provided examples of how culturally responsive approaches to focus groups can be incorporated in evaluation studies of programs developed for marginalized, vulnerable, and older populations, as well as in research conducted in non-Western contexts.

Online Focus Groups

With expanding technological facilities in global contexts, researchers have embraced the use of asynchronous (Williams et al., 2012) and synchronous tools using video or text (Woodyatt et al., 2016) to facilitate focus groups. David Stewart and Prem Shamdasani (2017) discussed three forms of online focus groups: synchronous, asynchronous, and "virtual world" focus groups.

Although the conduct of focus groups has moved into online contexts and is lauded for expanding the potential participant pool while lowering the costs involved in facilitating focus groups, it is not without problems. For example, researchers may encounter technical challenges in facilitating interaction, and it may be necessary to screen participants for their abilities to use and access the technologies required. Nicola Boydell et al. (2014) reported on the challenges involved in recruitment for online focus groups that they experienced in two projects, while Roberta Thompson (2018) discussed the messiness involved in conducting online focus groups with teenage girls.

Clearly, focus groups are used for a range of purposes, including social sciences research, and in a variety of ways with diverse populations. To generate interaction for a particular outcome, researchers must reflect on the various decision points entailed in planning for and conducting focus groups effectively (e.g., theoretical framing, purpose, modality, structure, etc.). Kamberelis et al. (2018, pp. 713–714) posed questions that will help in planning to use focus groups, including these:

- How shall I frame my research project? (i.e., ontological and epistemological assumptions)
- How is theory going to shape my work?
- Who will my participants be?
- What about my facilitation strategies?
- When do I end my focus group study?
- What transformation strategies might I use?

Although many of the steps to design a study using individual interviews apply to focus groups, working with groups entails several issues not relevant to individual interviewing. In the next section, I discuss designing the study, scheduling interviews, and organizing groups.

Designing a Study Using Focus Groups

Prior to beginning a study, researchers need to consider the following questions:

- Will focus group data be sufficient to adequately address the research questions?
- If not, what other methods of data generation in addition to focus groups might be employed (e.g., individual interviews, naturally occurring interaction, documents and texts, field notes of observations)?

Focus groups are well-suited to examining the ways that people talk about and make sense of topics and the issues that they see as relevant. They can be used as an adjunct to other methods, as a single source of data, and as a way of facilitating dialogic interaction. In the following section, I discuss these in more detail.

Focus Groups Used to Generate Data in Conjunction With Other Methods

Focus groups can generate a range of opinions and ideas in a short period of time and are frequently used in mixed-methods research. This method is useful when researchers want to generate ideas to develop interventions or large-scale surveys and test instruments, or to determine what topics are relevant to people with whom they are working (Brody et al., 2003). When used in this way, focus group data can inform the design of instruments to be used in a larger study or how a program is developed and implemented. Focus groups can also be used to recruit and engage participants during the development of a project (Bagnoli & Clark, 2010). When used to generate ideas, focus groups are used in the preliminary phase of a study's design. Focus groups can also be mixed with other methods to provide greater depth in the information elicited. For example, Sylvie Lambert and Carmen Loiselle (2008) used a combination of individual interviews and focus groups to examine the information-seeking behaviors of people diagnosed with cancer.

Focus groups are also used in the latter phases of a study to explore a study's findings. Researchers can convene focus groups to examine findings that emerged from analysis of other data sets—such as qualitative interviews, observational data, or surveys that have been analyzed quantitatively. For example, Alexandra Duarte et al. (2015) used focus groups to explore information gained from document analysis, interviews, and surveys in their study of the impact of the renovation of learning spaces on pedagogical practices in Portugal.

Focus Groups as Single Source of Data

Some researchers use focus groups as a single source of data to examine topics. For example, Rae Zimmerman et al. (2010) used focus groups to explore professionals' perspectives of risk communication in catastrophic events using scenarios describing chemical and biological attacks. Methodologists provide different views on the use of focus groups as a single source of data for a project. Whether a researcher does this will depend on their theoretical assumptions about knowledge production. For example, some research has shown that people can provide different kinds of information in focus groups than if individually interviewed (Agar & McDonald, 1995; Maynard-Tucker, 2000). This does not mean that individuals are necessarily providing untruthful information. Rather, this is a product of group interaction in which people provide comments that orient to what others have said and tailor their accounts in particular ways to other group members as overhearing audiences. In a group, people provide particular self-representations that may differ from those provided in a one-on-one setting. Deciding on whether to use focus groups as a single source of data or as one method among others is intimately connected to a study's purpose and what assumptions about knowledge production researchers bring to a study.

Focus Groups as Dialogic Interaction

For researchers wanting to examine dialogue among people, focus groups are ideal. For example, Sabine Caillaud and Nikos Kampalikis (2013) commented that focus groups are well suited to examining tensions and debates concerning social issues—for example, their study of people's meaning-making related to ecological practices (p. 298). Focus groups present a method for initiating dialogue, consciousness-raising, and deliberate discussion of topics. Researchers working from critical and feminist perspectives and those pursuing transformative, participatory, and inclusive agendas have made use of focus groups. A key assumption is that the very nature of focus groups—with participants outnumbering the moderator—provides opportunities to deliberately upset the asymmetrical relationships usually assumed by researchers with participants of individual interviews. Group interviews accomplish this through providing opportunities for participants, rather than the moderator, to set the agenda and pose questions, and to respond to one another's utterances in free-ranging ways. Another assumption is that all participants, including moderators, can transform their understandings of topics by engaging in dialogue with others.

As one example, Melanie Nind and Hilra Vinha (2016) used repeated focus groups in their work with people with learning disabilities, incorporating a range of innovations, including the use of metaphor as a stimulus and use of I-poems from the Listening Guide (Edwards & Weller, 2012). In this application of focus groups, the authors stressed the importance of developing a stable group over time in order to facilitate dialogue among group members for the purpose of conducting inclusive research (Nind & Vinha, 2016, p. 13).

Recruiting Participants and Organizing Groups

Researchers recruit participants for focus groups using similar methods as for individual interviews. Strategies include sending invitations to selected populations, advertising for participants, or using established networks or groups as a basis for group participation. In cases in which participants are recruited from a single setting, participants may already be known to one another. Participants who already know one another bring preestablished relationships to the interaction and also take away impressions of and information concerning others that have been generated within the group. This poses a number of issues for researchers.

First, participants are likely to orient to others within the group according to existing relationships. People who know one another prior to the group will talk in ways that reflect their roles and relationships outside the group.

Conversation analysts refer to this ubiquitous feature of all talk as *recipient design* (see Appendix 2). This can be both beneficial and detrimental for the generation of data for research purposes. For example, if working with groups who are well-known to one another, the moderator may have little work to do in order to establish a comfortable environment in which group members are willing to freely discuss topics of interest. When focus groups are conducted in naturally occurring settings such as families, the interactional order of talk is also analyzable (e.g., Brown, 2015). In focus groups, participants are likely to position their perspectives in particular ways for other members of the group, especially those who are already known to them. For researchers interested in how interview interaction is accomplished, this is a topic of analysis. If researchers are aiming to elicit individuals' opinions and views about particular topics, this can create challenges. This is because group members orient their talk not only to the moderator, but to overhearing members of the group. How people present themselves to others is an unavoidable part of any interaction (Goffman, 1959). In focus groups, this aspect of how people present themselves in everyday life may hinder conversation. Take, for example, the following excerpt from a focus group conducted for a study in which all participants were known to one another and worked together (see Appendix 1 for transcription conventions used).

Excerpt 2.1

P1: Participant 1

M: Moderator

1.	P1	I'm just saying from what ev- from we've all said from [those
2.	M	[uh huh
3.	P1	who have spoken I would say that we've all said you know [we were
4.	M	[I see
5.	P1	positive and I think that's how we feel so I can't speak for the ones who
6.		haven't spoken=
7.	M	=sure

In this interaction, we see a focus group participant providing a positive evaluation concerning the topic discussed. P1 explicitly recognizes that not all members of the group had provided views on the topic (Lines 3, 5–6). Analysis of this focus group's interaction indicated that several members of the group were comfortable in expressing their views, while other members contributed little to the talk. If the purpose of the study is to elicit responses from all members of a particular group in which there are divergent views, it is possible that some people may be uncomfortable in presenting their views publicly. The problem posed for group members in presenting divergent or unpopular views within the format of the group is heightened when the topics discussed are sensitive or when group members have strongly held views concerning controversial topics. In the evaluation study from which Excerpt 2.1 was drawn (Choi & Roulston, 2015), because there were several instances in which focus group interaction showed that some members dominated the talk while others were reticent to discuss their views, I revised the research design to include individual interviews in additional rounds of data generation. By using individual interviews, I was able to gain more information concerning how the views and opinions of participants involved in this group diverged.

A second issue relevant for focus groups, especially those in which members are already known to one another, is that of confidentiality. Although researchers assure participants of research studies that they will treat data generated in focus groups confidentially and may request that participants keep information shared within the group private, researchers cannot ensure that this will occur. For topics that seek to elicit personal experiences concerning sensitive topics from group members who are known to one another, researchers might consider using individual rather than focus groups.

Finally, researchers need to consider the group's composition: Will groups be homogenous or heterogonous? What constitutes "homogeneity" or "heterogeneity" in a group may be difficult to gauge prior to generating and analyzing interaction. While researchers frequently make use of established sociological categories such as gender, age, socioeconomic status, or race and ethnicity in order to group people, participants themselves may not view themselves in the way that researchers do. To provide a simple example, the group "international students in a U.S. setting" might be comprised of students from many countries, include people from Western and non-Western countries, with diverse native languages, including English. To organize a group on the basis of one category (e.g., that of occupying an identity as an "international student") may overlook other relevant social locations that may be of relevance to both participants and the topic studied (e.g., native language or country of origin). This issue highlights one of the key differences in how Robert Merton has described the use of focused interviews in examinations of people's responses to media messages in the 1940s to how social sciences researchers currently use focus groups.

Whereas Merton and his colleagues asked questions that focused on an *experience* that participants all shared (e.g., listening to a radio broadcast prior to the focus group), in many cases social science researchers want to learn about the views concerning a phenomenon expressed by members of a particular group whom they have identified by a demographic category (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity, age, marital status, income, etc.). Although researchers may assume that people who occupy a specific social location share experiences, this may not be so. Therefore, organizing groups of people to participate in focus groups involves more than scheduling a time and place. Researchers need to think about how participants self-identify and from what social category the researcher is expecting individuals to speak.

Researchers wanting to use focus groups can consider the following questions in relation to recruitment of participants:

- Are group members known to one another?
- If so, what is known about these people's relationships?
- What are the implications of prior relationships for the production of talk (e.g., supervisor/ employee; family members)?
- What are the implications for group interaction of discussing the topic selected (e.g., ethical issues to do with confidentiality of topics discussed; sensitive issues)?
- What are the social categories assumed of participants that are relevant for the study (e.g., whether participants self-identify in the ways anticipated or if there is evidence in talk that participants speak from other social locations)?

Researchers may not always know the answers to these questions prior to conducting a focus group. Conducting a pilot study to try out focus groups questions and activities is useful. If appropriate to the research question, researchers might generate other forms of data to complement focus groups (e.g., individual interviews, document review, or participant observations). Even then, focus groups may not always generate the kinds of data that are needed to examine research questions. By examining data while it is being collected, researchers can adjust the research design to ensure that data are purposefully generated.

How Many Participants? How Many Focus Groups?

Methodologists provide a range of advice on the appropriate number of participants for focus groups. One recommendation is to recruit 8 to 12 members for groups, with the proviso that smaller groups of four to six may work better for some topics (e.g., Krueger & Casey, 2000, pp. 73–74). Monique Hennink et al. (2019) worked to ascertain the number of focus groups needed to achieve saturation, which they defined as "the point in data collection when issues begin to be repeated and further data collection becomes redundant" (p. 1). Hennink et al. found that while conducting four focus groups was sufficient to identify a range of new issues, a greater number of focus groups was needed to gain deep understanding of these issues.

On a related note, when facilitating focus groups or group interviews, it is useful to involve two facilitators. This allows for one facilitator to take notes of speaker order along with observations of group interactions, while the other facilitator poses initial questions and steers the topic of talk. If it is not possible to arrange for two facilitators, it is useful to video the focus group so that information concerning speaker order and other facets of group members' interaction can be analyzed (e.g., Gilbert & Matoesian, 2021).

Scheduling Interviews

Scheduling a common time for multiple people to meet is challenging. When scheduling meetings for groups that do not meet regularly, it is wise to recruit more members than required in order to ensure that enough people will attend. Researchers need to be prepared that not all people who agree to participate will. In institutional or workplace settings, it may be possible to schedule focus groups during regular meeting times. Because of the complexity of arranging meetings with multiple people, assistance with scheduling might be gained from a member of the organization in which the study is being conducted. If focus groups are scheduled during breaks, researchers might consider providing drinks, snacks, or meals for participants. Researchers need to consider relevant circumstances that may lessen participation. This might necessitate providing child care for parents who attend or transportation for participants to and from the venue.

Groups Involving People With Disabilities

Researchers have incorporated focus groups as one means of being more inclusive in the ways in which research is conducted with people with disabilities. Melanie Nind (2014) defined inclusive research as changing the "dynamic between researchers and the people usually researched" so that studies involve participants in various aspects of the design, conduct, and dissemination of findings (p. 3). For example, as mentioned earlier, Nind and Vinha (2016) used a range of elicitation strategies within focus groups to initiate dialogue among people with learning disabilities. Thilo Kroll et al. (2007) outlined issues that researchers need to consider in using focus groups with communities with disabilities. When "proxy respondents" are included in groups to assist participants with communication difficulties, care must be taken that participants' views are distinguished from those of support staff (p. 694). Valerie Williams and her colleagues used focus groups in which facilitators were members of groups with whom research was conducted (V. Williams, 2019). In this sort of research, team meetings of a research group are also analyzable (V. Williams et al., 2020). When participatory forms of research employ focus groups, the lines between researcher and researched blur, and clear distinctions between focus groups and research talk within a participatory project involving researchers and participants fades.

Sensitive Topics

Authors have argued that focus groups can be used effectively to facilitate spaces in which participants are comfortable discussing sensitive topics (e.g., Farquhar & Das, 1999; Guest et al., 2017; Hoppe et al., 1995; Zeller, 1993). Others have found participants to be more forthcoming about sensitive topics in individual interviews (Kruger et al., 2019). Moderators using focus groups in research on sensitive topics must be able to effectively facilitate talk in a way that group members feel comfortable in expressing opinions that diverge from those of others. Richard Zeller (1993) provided examples of interaction in which the moderator used the introduction to the focus group to make remarks or narrate stories that represented self-disclosure about sensitive topics—in this case, sexual decision-making—that set the tone for self-disclosure on the part of participants. This technique draws on a feature of ordinary conversation, in that when one person tells a story, frequently a listener will provide a "second story" (Sacks, 1992), which closely aligns with the first.

Zeller's (1993) three recommendations for eliciting interaction concerning topics that participants may be reluctant to talk about involved (1) the use of a screening questionnaire to stimulate thinking prior to the focus group, (2) self-disclosure by the moderator, and (3) responding to participants' comments in ways that legitimate contributions from all group members. Whether participants self-disclose in response to moderators' acts of self-disclosure is very much dependent on how participants perceive the moderator. Although working mainly with individual interview data, Jackie Abell and her colleagues (2006) found that in some instances, interviewers' self-disclosure was perceived as a display of difference by participants, and these researchers propose that the identity of the researcher is as "much a focus of study as that of the interviewee" (p. 241). Thus, researchers who want to use focus groups to discuss sensitive topics need to consider the ethical implications involved in having participants share information perceived to be sensitive with others, in addition to how they will moderate the discussion in ways that will facilitate talk. Cory Woodyatt et al. (2016) compared the use of synchronous online focus groups in which gay and bisexual men responded to questions on a sensitive topic (intimate partner violence) in text formats with face-to-face focus groups. They found that although the talk generated differed in terms of format, the content of talk was similar.

Developing Questions and Topic Guides

As in individual interviews, there are numerous ways to formulate and ask questions of participants. The following recommendations concerning how to structure topic guides and formulate questions should be viewed as guidelines rather than prescriptions, since the relevance of questions will depend on the purpose and topic of study, the theoretical perspectives taken by the researcher, and the research questions to be examined. Morgan wrote that, in an ideal group, "the moderator would have to ask only the first and last questions" (2002, p. 148), suggesting that the most effective focus group is one in which talk is unstructured, and participants become so engaged in discussing the topic that they need little assistance from the moderator. In that sense, the less the moderator intercedes, the better. While this is a model to work toward, as a starting point, I draw on Richard Krueger and Mary Anne Casey (2000) to suggest four sets of questions or statements that researchers might use to structure the interview guide: opening questions and introducing topics, focus questions, clarification and transition questions, and summarizing statements and closing questions.

Opening Groups and Introducing Discussion Topics

Methodologists agree that the opening moments of focus groups are important for setting the agenda for interaction to come. To ensure participation of all group members, moderators are advised to foster a genial social environment. Authors suggest that moderators set an informal and relaxed tone by providing snacks and drinks for participants and telling jokes. Others emphasize the importance of explaining the ground rules for talk to participants at the outset of the session and including introductory activities to orient participants to the group's task.

Openings might begin with participants' self-introductions. This assumes that participants are unknown to one another, which while a common feature of focus groups in marketing and opinion polling, may not be the case in studies in which researchers make use of preexisting networks and groups. In cases where group members are already known to one another, it makes little sense for them to introduce themselves to one another. In this context, moderators might use name tags to identify different participants or, alternatively, ask participants to introduce something about themselves that is unknown to other participants. Researchers must tailor introductions to the composition of specific groups. For example, if there are status differentials among group members who are unknown to one another that would be highlighted through providing personal introductions, researchers might include an orienting activity in which equal participation from all members is favored.

Michael Bloor et al. (2001) recommended that initial questions should focus people's attention on the topic of subsequent interaction and suggested orienting activities that entail participants responding to various items provided by the moderator (e.g., a list of items, an opening vignette, a news bulletin exercise, or a set of photographs; p. 45). All sorts of activities have been used in focus groups to solicit group members' engagement, including games (Robinson, 1999), object and visual elicitations, graphic elicitation, word associations, and stimulation of discussion using vignettes, newspaper articles, videos, surveys, food, and odors (Caillaud et al., 2022). Given the immensity of the World Wide Web, researchers have many sources from which to draw for visual images, audio and/or video clips, and other items that might be used in activities with groups.

After the opening sequence in which participants introduce themselves or in which the moderator has provided some orienting activity, researchers introduce the topic of talk for the focus group by asking a question. Exemplar questions provided by various authors indicate that these are usually open-ended questions that provide a wide range of possibilities for participants to respond. For example, Krueger and Casey (2000) offered the following as a starter for an opening question: "What is the first thing that comes to mind when you hear _____" (p. 45). One alternative to answering questions aloud is to have participants write down their responses. After participants read these aloud, the moderator can follow up on the ideas generated among the group. How moderators introduce a topic is significant for how participants will orient to forthcoming questions, and many writers agree that the opening moments of a focus group will impact the quality of data generated (Krueger & Casey, 2000; Morgan, 1997).

Focus Questions

Focus questions are those that seek information to inform the primary research questions that the researcher aims to examine. Krueger and Casey (2000) used the term "key questions" and proposed that 10 to 20 minutes be allowed for discussion of each one (p. 45). These authors suggested that a typical focus group of 60 to 90 minutes will need from two to five questions to discuss the central topics of interest. Texts on focus groups recommend that interview guides lead from general to more specific questions. Stewart et al. (2007) proposed that questions should be ordered by level of importance, with more important questions earlier on the topic guide to allow appropriate time for discussion (p. 61).

Clarification Questions and Transition Statements

Clarification questions include both open and closed questions in which the moderator checks their understanding of prior talk and elicits further information from participants to expand on what has been said. Examples include these:

- You've told me that_____. Is that accurate?
- You talked about_____. Does this mean that_____?
- When you say_____, do you mean_____?
- You mentioned_____. Tell me a bit more about what you mean by that term.
- You talked about_____. Does anyone have an example of that?
- Does anyone have any other stories about _____ that you would like to share?

Similarly to the follow-up questions discussed in Chapter 1, these questions use the participants' words to clarify the moderator's understanding of what has been said or to prompt further elaboration.

Transition statements are used to move discussion from one topic to the next. When posed as questions, they provide an opportunity for others to contribute their ideas before moving to the next topic for discussion. For example,

- We've heard_____. What are other views about that?
- Before we move on, would anyone else like to add to what has been said about_____?
- You've told me about_____. Now, I'd like to learn about your views on_____.

Summarizing Statements and Closing Questions

Summarizing statements signal that the focus group is moving toward closure as the moderator invites participants to add final comments. For example,

- Now, just to sum up what you've said. What I've heard is_____. Is there anything you'd like to add to that?
- Are there any relevant topics that you'd like to discuss that I've missed?
- Are there any questions that I haven't asked that we should have talked about?

The questions that are described in this section may not work for all applications of focus groups. For example, for researchers aiming to stimulate dialogic interaction among speakers, other methods might be more appropriate (e.g., Freeman, 2006). For novice researchers who would like to experiment with focus groups, this section may be used as a framework to generate initial questions that can be used in a pilot study to test what happens.

Managing Focus Group Interaction

Claudia Puchta and Jonathan Potter (2004) have examined excerpts from focus groups conducted for marketing purposes to illuminate how moderators manage group interaction effectively. They have outlined strategies that moderators use to manage group interaction and encourage participation. Although these recommendations are based on analysis of data from marketing focus groups, it is useful to consider how these ideas might be applied in social sciences research. Puchta and Potter (2004) described the conversational resources and techniques used by effective moderators to (1) produce informality, (2) produce participation, and (3) produce opinions that are both useful and varied. These suggestions are outlined in the following paragraphs and include excerpts from focus groups conducted by novice moderators in the social sciences to show what these strategies might look like in practice.

Producing Informality

First, Puchta and Potter (2004) suggested that informality is produced through the use of idiomatic and slang terms and laughter (p. 46). They advised against the use of scripts since they contribute to a sense of formality. Moderators can cultivate spontaneity by referring to notes or a checklist (p. 46). Excerpt 2.2 from an interview conducted by a novice moderator concerning teachers' professional development shows how a moderator might contribute to interaction and participation of her interviewees through informal talk.[1]

[1] Excerpts 2.2 and 2.3 are drawn from a study on how researchers learn to interview (Roulston et al., 2003). Moderators and participants gave their consent for publication of data.

The sequence is taken from the opening section of a focus group in which the moderator had asked her participants to describe their teaching history as an introduction to the topic of talk. As already discussed, the strategy of seeking some introductory comments about one's personal background is one way to introduce a group and establish a comfortable environment in which to introduce the focus questions.

Excerpt 2.2

P: Participant

M: Moderator

1.	P16	OK (.) I taught high school remedial English and Math for
2.		two years taught English as a Foreign Language for a year
3.		in [Eastern Europe] (.) I taught high school LDPD for a year (.) that
4.		was all I could take (.)=
5.	P8	=heh heh heh heh
6.	P16	hhh. ↑then I taught fifth grade for three years (.) all subjects and
7.		I've been teaching college education methods courses now (1.0) for
8.		(1.0)
9.	P16	↑five years
10.		(2.0)
11.	P16	so I've been teaching for 12 years
12.		(1.0)
13.	M9	°mm wow° wow
14.	ALL	heh heh heh heh
15.	M9	and you look so ↑young ((reaches out to touch P16's arm))
16.	P16	heh heh heh heh heh I started teaching at eighteen
17.	P8	I love it
18.	M9	and ↑how about -I-you ((turns to P8 and touches the desk in front))
19.	P8	oh Lord have mercy (.) uhm I taught for five years so (.) uhm
20.	P16	I feel like a ↑grandma
21.	P15	heh heh heh

Throughout this interaction, we see laughter (Lines 5, 14, 16, 21) from multiple participants, including the moderator. The moderator showed her appreciation for the contribution of P16 (Line 13) and joked about P16's length of experience (Line 15). P16 responded to this by joking about her age (Line 16) before the moderator assigned the turn to a new speaker (P8, Line 18). The informal and spontaneous nature of this excerpt was characteristic of the interview as a whole. Turns were rarely allocated, but rather were taken by members in no specific order. Participants' accounts were interspersed with comments, assessments, laughter, and appreciation tokens from both the moderator and group members (see Lines 5, 13, 14, 16, 17, 21). Throughout the focus group, this moderator, as visible on Line 18, focused the topic of talk by allocating turns that oriented participants to their task. In this excerpt, we see how a moderator can contribute to the interaction in a spontaneous way that works to produce an informal atmosphere in the opening moments of a focus group, thereby setting a casual tone for members' interaction.

Producing Participation

In contrast to the advice from many other writers to ask short, open questions, Puchta and Potter (2004) suggested that moderators make use of "elaborate questions" (see also, Puchta & Potter, 1999). These authors found by looking at examples of data from actual focus groups that moderators tended to ask complex questions that provided multiple response options, prior to asking simple follow-up questions. Puchta and Potter (2004) argued that elaborate questions are an effective means of managing interaction in that they "display informality, guide participants without forcing them, secure participation, and manage asymmetry between moderator and participant" (p. 52). As mentioned, the examples that these authors provided are drawn from marketing focus groups, so it is difficult to ascertain whether the same holds true for the use of elaborate questions for the purposes of social research. Given an example discussed in Chapter 8 (see Excerpt 8.4), it is quite possible that, if used purposefully, elaborate questions could be effectively used in focus groups in the way that Puchta and Potter described. In reference to elaborate questions, Puchta and Potter made the following suggestion to moderators:

> At the start of new topics and themes, ask elaborate questions in a way that shows uncertainty both about the answer and the type of answer. Unpack it as it goes along. Include a range of candidate answers. Make the participants experts by focusing on views, opinions or feelings. (2004, p. 46)

Another suggestion for securing participation is one that is echoed throughout interviewing literature: "Pay attention to the participants" (Puchta & Potter, 2004, p. 65). Excerpt 2.3 shows an example of how a moderator can demonstrate attention by distributing turns to speakers who have participated minimally. When speakers in a group have preexisting relationships and friendships, they may dominate the talk. In Excerpt 2.3 from a focus group moderated by a beginning researcher, two of the participants (P2 and P9) repeatedly took lengthy turns, at times freely conversed with one another, and even posed questions probing for further details of one another's accounts. Another participant in this group of four, P7, took turns less frequently, and on two occasions in this focus group was nominated by the moderator. Excerpt 2.3 is an example of how the moderator, by attending to the ongoing interaction, nominated P7 for a turn in the context of interaction dominated by other speakers.

Excerpt 2.3

M6	so you mentioned a few things u::m (.) problems with colleagues ↑or
	administrators↑(.) and uh (I also noticed) you had a bit of
	a problem with a colleague too=
P9	=yeah it was a problem with a colleague and that's what (that's what
	happened)
M6	yeah (.) do you have a similar experience Lauren? [with a colleague or an
P7	[with a colleague?
M6	administrator?
P7	yeah with admin- with administrators mostly maybe it's because I'm
	coming from a different school background

In Lines 9 and 10, P7 responded to the moderator by taking a turn that oriented to one of the two options provided by the moderator (Line 8, "administrator"). She then proceeded to give an account of her experience (not included here). It is impossible to know whether P7 would have produced this account had she not been allocated the turn by the moderator. It is safe to assume that if moderators do not assign turns that encourage participants who are silent to contribute, they will be less likely to participate. Allocating turns to reticent speakers is just one way that moderators show that they are attending to participants. Using continuers such as "mm hm" and "uh huh," asking follow-up questions related to what speakers have said, and orienting to what participants say through body posture and gaze all express interest in what participants say.

Producing Opinions

In marketing research, moderators seek to elicit people's "perceptions, opinions, beliefs and attitudes" (POBAs; Henderson, 1991, cited by Puchta & Potter, 2004, p. 66). Puchta and Potter (2004) advised moderators to "monitor carefully breakdowns where participants start to make knowledge and truth claims, and become concerned with evidence and the moderator's own knowledge. Reiterate the focus on POBAs as needed" (p. 88). These scholars recommended that moderators ask questions that seek evaluations to prompt interaction (e.g., how satisfied are you with X? how would you rate the way Y was implemented?), and if talk becomes too "lively," "ask for descriptions" (p. 88). Again, these are useful strategies for generating information for client groups about consumers' perspectives of products, services, and programs, or evaluation studies. Not all social science research examines these questions, however. Researchers must ask themselves what kinds of data they seek to elicit, how they intend to use it, and formulate questions with that purpose in mind.

Analyzing Focus Group Interaction

Researchers using focus groups have become increasingly aware of the need to attend to the interaction occurring in focus groups in addition to the substantive topics of talk. This has led to a range of analytic approaches. Bente Halkier (2010) demonstrated how the work of Erving Goffman, conversation analysis, discursive psychology, and positioning theory can be used to examine social interactions in a study of Danish women's cooking; Sabine Caillaud and Nikos Kalampalikis (2013) showed how thematic analysis can be combined with dialogic content analysis in their study of ecological practices; and David Morgan and Kim Hoffman (2018a) outlined procedures for coding interaction in dyadic interviews and focus groups.

There is a growing body of research that takes the interaction in focus groups as a topic in its own right. This work illuminates not only the complexities of focus group dynamics (Farnsworth & Boon, 2010; Jung, 2019) but also how speakers incorporate gesture and embodied action (Gilbert & Matoesian, 2021). Miriam Catterall and Pauline Maclaran (1997, para. 4.6) suggested a range of topics that analysts of focus group interaction might examine:

- How language is shared among speakers, including what is taken for granted, and when clarification questions are asked
- How beliefs and myths are shared, taken for granted, or challenged
- Arguments that speakers use to justify their views to others
- Sources of information that speakers use to support their arguments and justify opinions
- Moments when speakers demonstrate that they have changed their opinions, or reinterpreted experiences
- Tone of voice, body language, and the degree of emotional engagement among speakers

Chapter 8 explores an approach to examining how interaction is produced that can be used to explore focus group talk.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I reviewed a range of formats for working with groups, including joint interviews, nominal groups, Delphi groups, and informal and formal group interviews as ways to elicit data. I provided further detail concerning issues to consider in the use of focus groups and suggestions for how one might secure participation from group members. A well-conducted focus group looks deceptively easy. With careful and thoughtful planning for how the group is structured and what kinds of questions will generate the data required to inform research questions, researchers can use focus groups to generate useful data for analysis.

Nevertheless, managing multiparty talk in a way that will generate data that will serve the researcher's purposes may not always go smoothly. Given the complexity of group interaction, researchers might also consider analyzing the talk for interactional difficulties that occurred, how group members interacted with one another and managed disagreements, or the kinds of evidence that speakers used to support their opinions.

I have not discussed the recording and transcription of focus group talk in this chapter since many of the same issues apply to individual interviews. These topics will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 6. In the next chapter, I review different conceptions of interviewing in relation to the kinds of research questions that might be posed, as well as implications for analytic and representational strategies.

Further Reading

Joint Interviews

Mavhandu-Mudzusi, A. H. (2018). The couple interview as a method of collecting data in interpretative phenomenological analysis studies. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 17*(1). https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1609406917750994

Nominal Group Technique

Rankin, N., McGregor, D., Butow, P. N., White, K., Phillips, J. L., Young, J. M., Pearson, S., York, S., & Shaw, T. (2016). Adapting the nominal group technique for priority setting of evidence-practice gaps in implementation science. *BMC Medical Research Methodology, 16*(1), 1–9. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12874-016-0210-7

Søndergaard, E., Ertmann, R. K., Reventlow, S., & Lykke, K. (2018). Using a modified nominal group technique to develop general practice. *BMC Family Practice, 19*(1), 1–9. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12875-018-0811-9

Delphi Groups

Brady, S. R. (2015). Utilizing and adapting the Delphi method for use in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 14*(5). https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1609406915621381

Fletcher, A. J., & Marchildon, G. P. (2014). Using the Delphi method for qualitative, participatory action research in health leadership. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 13*(1), 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F160940691401300101

Focus Groups

Hall, J. N. (2020). *Focus groups: Culturally responsive approaches for qualitative inquiry and program evaluation*. Myers Education Press.

Hennink, M. M. (2008). Emergent issues in international focus group discussions. In S. N. Hesse-Biber & P. Leavy (Eds.), *Handbook of emergent issues* (pp. 207–220). Guilford Press.

Salmon, A. (2007). Walking the talk: How participatory methods can democratize research. *Qualitative Health Research, 17*(7), 982–993.

Special Issue: *Qualitative Health Research*, 2016, *26*(6).

Practice

Activity 2.1 Formulating Questions for Focus Groups

Generate a topic for a focus group. Brainstorm for each kind of question listed here:

- Orienting questions or activities
- An opening question
- Focal questions
- Transition questions
- Closing/summarizing questions

Select questions you would use and include a statement with each question that provides a rationale for why you would use the question and the kinds of data you hope to generate.

Activity 2.2 Orienting Activities

Select a topic about which you would like to know more. Locate a picture, text from a newspaper or magazine, or video clip relevant to the topic that could be used to focus the participants' attention at the beginning of a focus group. Formulate a question or series of questions that could be used as an orienting activity.

Activity 2.3 Moderating a Focus Group

Moderate and videotape a 45- to 60-minute focus group on a topic of your choice. After viewing the video of the focus group interaction, write a summary of the content of the focus group interaction and a self-critique of your skills as a moderator. Respond to the following questions:

- What kind of interactions were generated? For example, did participants express their opinions? Were exchanges conversational?
- What challenges did you face? For example, did you have individuals who were dominant speakers or who participated minimally?
- What did you do well?
- Would you change anything if you moderated another focus group? If so, what?