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CONDUCTING FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH ACROSS CULTURES: CONSISTENCY AND COMPARABILITY

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WeD is a multidisciplinary research group funded by the ESRC, dedicated to the study of poverty, inequality and the quality of life in poor countries. The research group is based at the University of Bath and draws on the knowledge and expertise from three different departments (Economics and International Development, Social and Policy Sciences and Psychology) as well as an extensive network of overseas contacts and specific partnerships with institutes in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Peru and Thailand. The purpose of the research programme is to develop conceptual and methodological tools for investigating and understanding the social and cultural construction of well-being in specific countries.

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SUMMARY

Conducting professional and science-based focus groups across several cultures presents unique challenges that must be addressed from the point of conceptualisation and research design forward. This paper presents several principles for ensuring consistency of research strategies and comparability of data when focus groups are conducted in several countries for the same project. Examples of focus groups that have been carried out in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Peru, and Thailand—the four WeD research bases—are included, as well as suggestions from those who have conducted multi-country focus groups for similar projects. Topics include issues surrounding research design, sample selection and participant recruitment, development of the moderator's guide, moderation skills and interpretation, data analysis, and report preparation. This working paper is based in part on Billson 2004, 2005, 2006.

KEYWORDS

Focus group, qualitative research, cross-cultural, development, wellbeing

RELATED READINGS:

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper offers guidelines, suggestions and examples that will assist the ESRC Research Group on Wellbeing in Developing Countries (WeD) meet the challenges presented by conducting in-depth interviews in several countries on the same research question. Science-based focus groups across cultures requires intensive planning and negotiation at all stages of research to solve problems in meaning of terms, applicability of the method, consistency of strategies, and comparability of data. This working paper is based in part on Billson 2004, 2005, 2006.

Focus groups, as a type of in-depth interviewing, can provide invaluable insights into the complexities of development and wellbeing. They harness our collective understanding of the complexities of human interaction and help uncover layers and types of information that are not easily accessed through other methods. Used properly, this maturing social science technique can produce reliable, solid data. This flexible and versatile approach can be applied to many different questions or settings. Group interviews were developed in the last century (Merton et al, 1956) and have grown in both popularity and misuse. The challenge of this century is to bring more discipline to the method, use it responsibly, and present findings creatively.

This paper defines focus groups as a research approach and explores the unique challenges of the method in conducting cross-cultural research. Nine critical strategies for maintaining data consistency and comparability are delineated. These include crafting a common research design/group blueprint; setting aside ample time for preparing focus groups; thorough training of recruiters and recruitment without bias; developing a uniform moderator's guide; thorough training of moderators and interpreters; organising close and onsite supervision of the entire research process; creating and following a common structure for data analysis; creating and agreeing upon a common structure for report presentation; and following basic strategies for conducting ethical research.

1.1 What is a focus group?

Focus groups are structured, guided discussions that have as their sole purpose the gathering of data for scientific purposes (Merton et al, 1956). A specially trained moderator facilitates the discussion through a process of "guided interaction" within a controlled environment. The moderator or other participants can pursue ideas generated by the group. The moderator can draw out motivations, feelings, and values behind verbalizations through skilful probing and restating responses. Participants stimulate each other in an exchange of ideas that may not emerge in individual interviews or surveys. The moderator can link ideas for further exploration. Group interaction generates insights that might not occur without the cross-fertilization of ideas that occurs in a well-moderated focus group. Focus groups afford depth and insight into the research question and help contextualise

quantitative data (Krueger and Casey, 2000; Puchta and Potter 2004; Billson 2004; Billson 2006).

Human interaction revolves around group discussions in families, workplaces, peer groups, and communities, but not all of those discussions are structured. A focus group is more than the conversation that occurs when a group of community members and leaders get together to discuss a project, the search for funding, or randomly emerging topics. In fact, most conversations are *not* structured, as they do not have an agenda, a fixed timeframe, and a designated leader. In contrast, focus groups have all of these characteristics. Nor do people use a typical discussion as a *formal* research method, which is the hallmark of a focus group.

Like any other method, focus groups have advantages and disadvantages, especially when researchers and/or moderators lack training and experience in the approach. Focus groups should not be confused with community meetings, group discussions with leaders or government officials, or informal brainstorming with "natural" groups (Billson 2004, 2006). Poorly designed, loosely structured, and badly moderated "discussion groups" yield disappointing results. Focus groups that follow a moderator's guide full of leading questions, double-barrelled questions, or forced- choice questions, may yield interesting information, but not reliable data.

Unless research design, recruitment of group members ("respondents" or "participants"), moderation, data analysis, and report preparation follow the canons of good social science, the method will generate misleading information and unreliable data. As with any other research approach, focus group research should be grounded in the following general principles of scientific analysis and group dynamics:

- Basic research design principles determine sample selection and size.
- Standard rules for social science interviewing shape the moderator's guide.
- Identifiable principles of group dynamics govern the moderation.

1.2 Dovetailing focus groups with other research methods

The most appropriate uses of focus groups occur when researchers desire group interaction around a topic, seek complexity of responses, and value triangulation of methods (supplementing or complementing other methods that are looking at the topic through a different lens). Focus groups can be used on their own as a freestanding research methodology, as can surveys or individual interviews. Through *triangulation*, focus groups can amplify other methods when they are used in combination to reinforce the advantages and strengths of each method while minimizing their disadvantages and weaknesses.

- First, participant observation and key informant interviews could grasp how people frame the concept of wellbeing in their community.
- Second, focus groups could generate debate and collaborative interpretation of the meaning of wellbeing within selected segments of the community.
- Third, a face-to-face survey of a larger sample of community members could broaden the base of understanding.
- Fourth, the findings could be discussed in focus groups to contextualise data.

1.3 Conducting Focus Groups on a Variety of Topics

Research groups, universities, international agencies, and NGOs in many countries have conducted focus groups on a wide variety of topics, including many that might be considered "sensitive," e.g., sexual behaviour, contraception, abortion, HIV/AIDS, child-rearing, or corruption and political transparency. For example:

Integrating Sexual and Reproductive Health Education into Service Delivery: A Program for Rural Communities- Bangladesh[1]
Initial qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted with a representative sample of residents from 14 villages, including 20 married men, 20 married women, 13 never-married boys, and 12 never-married girls. Eight single-sex focus groups were conducted with a total of 50 married adults and 20 never-married adolescents. Interviews focused on participants' sexual and reproductive health experiences: how they learn about sex, whether they engage in nonmarital sex, how they express sexual feelings, whether they have experienced family violence, and how much they know about STDs, HIV, and reproductive health.

Centro Internacional de Agricultura-Tropical-International Development Research Centre Internship with the Participatory Research for Improved Agroecosystem Management (PRIAM) Project -Ethiopia[2]
Focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews were held to elicit information on the background of on-farm experimentation processes; the impact of new technologies on the farming system, household livelihood, and household and community relations; and the social networks and institutions in which farmers participate (diffusion).

Final Report: Sustainability of Postabortion Care - Peru[3]
Ipas, Peru, introduced a postabortion care (PAC) intervention in a Lima hospital. The subsequent focus group research explored the extent to which postabortion services were institutionalised. Ipas analysed the cost-effectiveness of the services; described the

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[1] The Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee and The International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research (ICDDR-B), Dr. Abbas Bhuiya (ICDDR-B) and Dr. A. Mushtaque Chowdhury, Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC). Final Report: Nasreen, H.E., M. Chowdhury, A. Bhuiya, S. Chowdhury, and S.M. Ahmed, Dhaka: BRAC and ICDDR-B, 1998.

[2] Don Peden (Canada); Centro de Investigaciones en Agricultura Tropical (CIAT). PRIAM sites at Boffa and Wolencheti., 2003.

[3] An Ipas/Population Council study in 1996-98.

organizational and environmental contexts that have influenced changes in postabortion outcomes such as family planning acceptance, length of hospital stay and provision of medical information; and conducted a rapid assessment of other hospitals to recommend scaling up the PAC model.

Combating Corruption at the Grassroots-Thailand[4]
The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) carried out an election monitoring and anti-corruption campaign in several provinces in Thailand. After the multi-faceted project, NDI conducted a rigorous evaluation process, including pre- and post-activity tests, surveys, focus groups and self-evaluation exercises. The results of this evaluation helped NDI assess the program and shaped future programming decision-making.

1.4 The Flow of Focus Group Research

Regardless of the specific research question or setting, all focus group research should flow through several key processes, as shown in Figure 1, the "Focus Group Research Model" (Billson 2004).

The flow of focus group research includes:

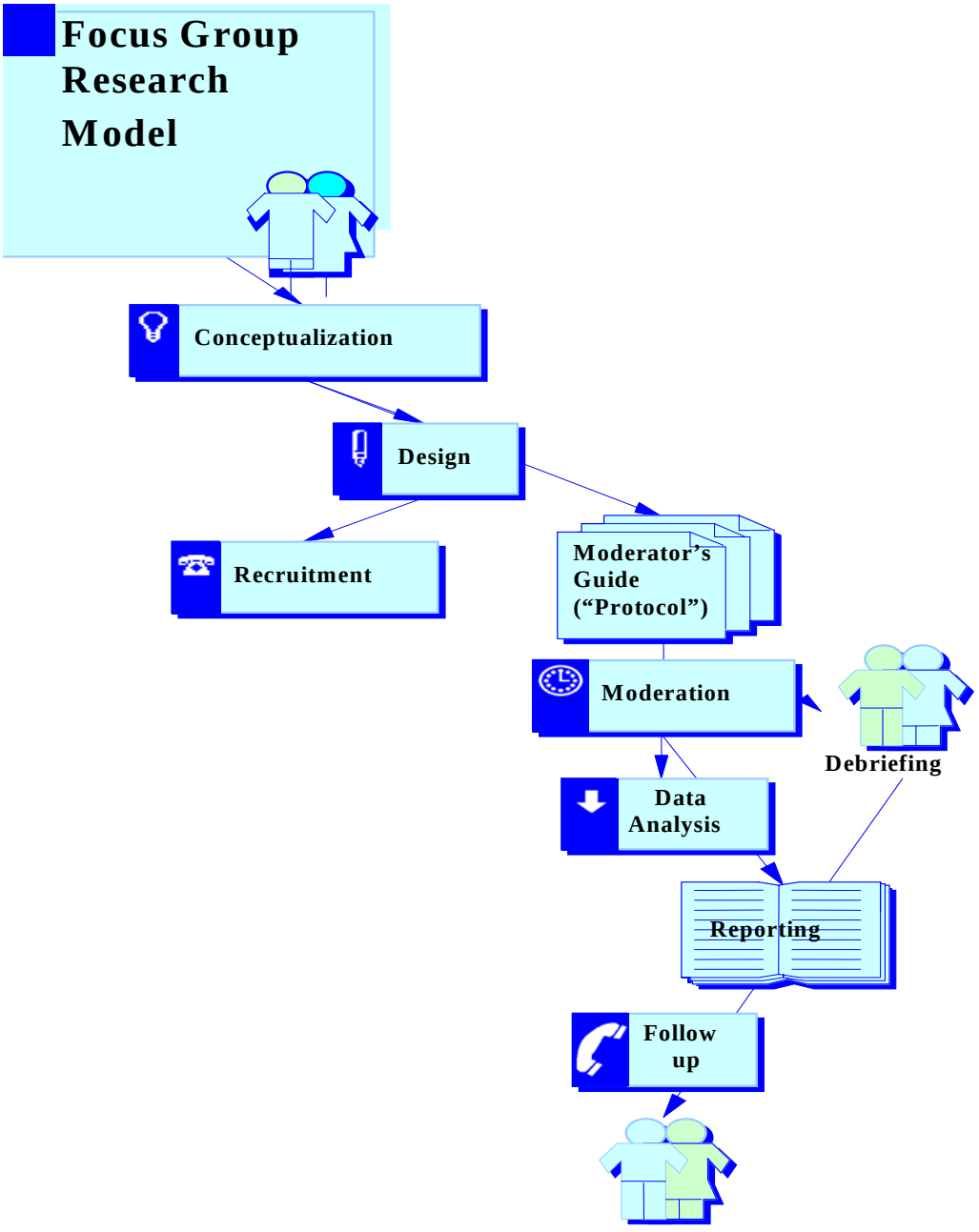
1) *Conceptualisation of the key research question:* This comes first, and involves clarifying the key research question the focus groups are supposed to answer, why the study is important, and how the data will be used.
2) *Design of the research approach:* If researchers work hard to articulate the key question, but fail to create a design that does not have the power to answer that question, the project will fail to produce the desired results.
3) *Development of the moderator's guide:* If a strong design fits the key question well, but the moderator's guide is weak, the project will flounder.
4) *Recruitment of participants:* If the key question, research design, and guide are strong, but the team cannot recruit proper respondents, data will be suspect.
5) *Group moderation.* If all the building blocks are in place for a quality focus group project, but the moderator has poor skills and biases responses, study will not generate rich, appropriate data. If the moderator allows three or four people to dominate the conversation, then data are lost from 60 or 70 per cent of the carefully recruited respondents. That negates the research design.
6) *Debriefing with observers/researchers:* Insights generated during the debriefing with the research team and collaborators, held immediately after each focus group when the data are fresh, may enhance data analysis. Omitting this process represents a lost opportunity to identify "top of mind" themes and patterns.
7) *Data analysis:* If the focus group process has worked well, it will produce "mountains of words"—qualitative data that requires special analytical techniques. If the data analysis is weak, the project suffers.
8) *Presentation of findings in oral, written, video, or combined formats:* The researchers must report findings in a way that is meaningful and useful to

[4] The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI), 1999.

others. Reports that are too long, too detailed, or badly written can obscure the findings from even the most well-conceived and implemented focus groups.

9) *Follow-up:* To improve future focus group findings, it helps to follow up with parties involved to explore how to conduct such a project more effectively in the future and the impacts (if any) the project findings have had on the community.

Figure 1: The focus group research model



Source: Billson 2004: 17

Keeping the entire flow of focus group in mind during planning will help to avoid serious misjudgments in timing, staffing, and allocation of resources. However, the flow may not be as linear as this model suggests. For example, the act of developing a moderator's guide may help sharpen conceptualization of the research question, or debriefing may result in adding, dropping, or rewording moderator's guide questions. Similarly, the final report's conclusions and recommendations may lead to more focus groups on the topic, thus extending the research design. On the other hand, if serious discussions about conceptualization of the research question do not precede development of the guide, it will not produce relevant data.

2. UNIQUE CHALLENGES OF FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH

2.1 Challenges stemming from cultural differences

Several unique challenges arise when conducting professional focus groups across cultures (Billson 1991; Knodel 1995; Billson 1996/2006; Billson and Mancini 2007). Acceptance of the project "on the ground" is a plus in larger communities and a requirement in smaller ones in order to ensure effective recruitment and to avoid politicisation of or resistance to the project.Most cultures support a small group discussion format, which helps overcome gaps in understanding. Extra planning and careful preliminary work with communities helps minimize misinterpretation and maximize participation. Remaining challenges include:

- Moderators must take extra care to create a safe environment in which genuine disagreement can be expressed. For example, in Thailand, the concern for harmony strongly affects group discussions.
- In some cultures, making direct eye contact can be problematic, which presents special moderation challenges. Explaining to participants before the group begins that this cultural difference exists and stressing the need for you to make eye contact as part of moderation will help avoid perceptions of rudeness.
- Language barriers and interpretation difficulties must be addressed with care whenever researchers work outside their own linguistic/cultural communities, or meaning is lost. Technical support with interpretation and translation avoids many complications.
- Recruitment may be especially problematic in small, rural populations, villages, and tightly-knit communities. Hiring local residents and training them in neutral recruitment techniques is usually preferable to hiring "outsiders." Politicization of recruitment is always a danger when researchers are not familiar with local customs, hierarchies, tribal loyalties, and family structures. Close supervision is required to help recruiters stay above the pressure from local networks.

2.2 Strategies for conducting focus groups in a comparative mode

When focus groups are being conducted in several different cultures (or communities) for the same project, questions of comparability of data arise. Nine critical strategies in designing and implementing a cross-cultural focus group project

determine whether or not data consistency and comparability will be achieved. These are detailed in the box overleaf.

Nine critical strategies for comparative cross-cultural research

- Craft a common, required research design and "group blueprint" (Section 3.1)
- Set aside ample time for careful preparation for the focus groups (Section 3.2)
- Thoroughly train recruiters and recruit without biasing samples (Section 3.3)
- Develop a uniform moderator's guide (Section 3.4)
- Thoroughly train moderators and interpreters (Section 3.5)
- Organise close, on-site supervision of the entire research process (Section 3.6)
- Create and follow common structure for data analysis (Section 3.7)
- Create and agree upon a common structure for report presentation (Section 3.8)
- Follow basic strategies for conducting ethical research (Section 3.9)

For instance, a study of female urban micro-enterprise owners in Thailand, Bangladesh, Peru, and Ethiopia should yield a clear picture of these women in each country, but also afford comparative analysis across countries. The research team must take time to negotiate the details of each strategy, with an eye to achieving two related goals:

1. Develop sound, integral "case studies" of each focus group category in each country.
2. Systematically gather data across all project countries to allow comparisons.

The strategies outlined in the box above are explored in detail in the remainder of this paper.

3. NINE CRITICAL STRATEGIES FOR COMPARATIVE CROSS CULTURAL RESEARCH

3.1 RESEARCH DESIGN: craft a common research design/group blueprint

Conceptualisation of the Research Question

A well-designed project depends on a clear research question that makes sense in all countries involved in the project. Negotiating details carefully up front avoids future misunderstandings. Country collaborators need to be closely involved with developing the research question, design, and process at every step along the way.

Many projects falter because the research question has not been thoroughly discussed, defined, and agreed upon.

The research question should not be too broad (e.g., “How do people feel about a World Bank-funded project to enhance girls’ education?”). Narrow the question down to a manageable and realistic level (e.g., “How do educators, parents, and students *directly involved in the project* evaluate the teaching/learning process, project organization, and identifiable impacts?”). Each question could be broken down even further. For example: “How do educators, parents, and students evaluate the teaching/learning process in elementary classes compared to secondary classes?” The more targeted the key research question, the more likely the data will be useful to those who are evaluating the current project, and the more likely the data will generate best practices, lessons learned, and elements that can shape similar projects in the future.

The research question drives project design, but a review of the pertinent literature, reliance on relevant theory, and lessons derived from past research experience also shape the key question and the ensuing design..

Number of focus groups

The nature and number of focus groups should be worked out early in the research process. Most studies range between 8 and 16 groups, but smaller and higher numbers may be conducted, depending on the purpose, circumstances, resources, and research timeframe. The number of focus groups should always adequately represent all types of potential participants. If the project is designed to evaluate a one-time event in which only 100 people participated (such as a workshop), two focus groups might be sufficient. If it is designed to assess parent attitudes toward a large national program, 20 or 30 focus groups might be indicated (spread around the various regions of the country and controlling for multiple variables). Although some researchers suggest interviewing a percentage of the relevant population, the common sense principal is to select a number that *does not bias the responses* in any way. The number of groups is determined by the group blueprint.

Key variables

Once the central research question has been well defined, the next step is to determine how categories of prospective participants might differ from each other. As with survey research, it makes sense to think in terms of *universe* (e.g., all mothers in Thailand), *population* (e.g., all mothers who received prenatal care in a program funded by WHO in 2005), *sample* (e.g., every Nth mother in that population).

The best way to determine the number of groups is to determine the major variables that are *most* likely to influence respondent data. Most projects select only two to four key variables in order to maintain reasonable control over the research

process. In this case, key variables might be women who were first-time mothers versus mothers with at least one previous pregnancy, and mothers who are low-income versus mothers who are middle income. Thus, number of pregnancies and income level are assumed to be important factors for this particular research question. Prior research should help you decide which key variables can be expected to provide the most rigorous explanatory power. Once the key variables have been determined, it is important to designate other "secondary variables" that may affect the results. In this case, secondary variables might be urban versus rural residence, marital status, employment status, or education level. Key variables and secondary variables always relate directly to the key research question.

Example: A WeD study might define age, gender, ethnicity, and income level as key variables that would likely affect how Bangladeshis, Ethiopians, Peruvians, and Thais think about the importance of girls' education. Sometimes, hard choices must be made among the key variables because of funding or time limitations. Variables often include race or ethnic group, age, gender, socio-economic status, and marital status. More specific variables depend on the research question

"Breaking" the variables

For certain projects, all of these variables will help define the logical structure of a focus group project. In others, two demographic variables (say, income and residence) will combine with more specific variables (say, participation in a program) to create the design. Selecting variables is a critical part of the research process and depends on a careful review of previous research on the topic. The reason for this is simple: If the variables you select are not relevant to the question, you will lose important analytical power when it comes to interpretation of findings.

The next step is to "break" each variable. For example, "income" might be broken into "high," "medium," and "low" or "above the poverty line" and "below the poverty line"—or specific income categories could be used, depending on the project.

Reasonable homogeneity within categories is useful, but mixed groups can be very productive as long as participants have direct experience with the topic, are *homogeneous* on key variables for the particular project, and can engage in meaningful conversation with each other around the topic. For some projects, a more complicated set of variables may evolve. Once the most logical variables and breaks are determined, recruitment can proceed.

The group blueprint

If you place the key variables on a grid, they will create a "group blueprint" that helps you visualize the ways in which major variables interact with each other (Billson, 2004, 2005). Group blueprints not only help determine the number of groups, but also help shape the direction of the research. Especially when it is

necessary to curtail the number of focus groups, a blueprint will help you decide rationally rather than randomly which groups to eliminate.

Example: Francisco Sagasti of Agenda: PERÚ created a research design for focus groups that were used to prepare questionnaires for a nationwide survey with a representative sample of all Peruvians (Table 1). Sagasti and his colleague, Max Hernández, hired a professional market research firm to do the focus groups. The design could be represented as a "group blueprint," as follows:

Table 1: Group Blueprint for Perú—Two Key Variables

INCOME / GENDER	Low-Income	Low-to-Medium Income
Male	Group 1	Group 3
Female	Group 2	Group 4

The researchers in this case stratified the focus groups by socioeconomic status However, they did not use all possible income breaks for their design, as Sagasti describes:

> We did not conduct the focus groups for middle or high income, for these strata of the population were overrepresented in all of our other regular activities (seminars, workshops, town hall meetings, conferences, mass media presentations, and so on). Also, within each stratum we had to do separate focus groups for *men and women*, for women don't usually speak freely in the presence of men they do not know. We focused only on *voting age* persons but excluded the very old who are not representative of what the majority of poor people think and feel in Perú. Finally, the sampling technique used by our pollsters was quite sophisticated and based on *place of residence*, so as to ensure that we would get the participants that really represented a particular socioeconomic segment. This allowed us to avoid many of the pitfalls that bedevil other studies of this type. [5]

Many researchers prefer to use two groups in each box or category (which would have yielded eight instead of four groups in Table 1). If a third variable with two breaks (such as age) had been added, the [hypothetical] group blueprint would have produced eight to 16 groups (depending on the number of groups conducted for each population segment), as shown in Table 2.

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[5] Francisco Sagasti, Agenda: PERÚ, personal communication, February 2004: Lima, Perú; www.agendaperu.org.pe.

Table 2: Group Blueprint for Perú—Three Key Variables

INCOME / GENDER	Low-Income		Low-to-Medium Income	
	AGE			
	18-36	*36-54*	*18-36*	*36-54*
Male	Group 1	Group 3	Group 5	Group 7
Female	Group 2	Group 4	Group 6	Group 8

Limited funding, time constraints, and the burden of managing enormous amounts of qualitative data discourage a high number of groups. Furthermore, most projects do not require such “fine tuning” in order to generate highly satisfactory data. As a result, most projects either cut the number of variables or simply conduct one group per category. Another solution is to maintain the most critical variables for the research agenda and ensure that each group is mixed or heterogeneous along less critical variables, as the Agenda: PERÚ project decided about age—they mixed each group to contain a range of voting age participants rather than separating respondents into younger and older age groups.

The research design is critical to ensuring that the appropriate respondents reflect the wider population from which the groups are selected, the fundamental purpose of the research project, and the intent of the research question. A weak design inevitably results in poor research and possibly unusable results, whereas a strong design supports the generation of valid, reliable, and useful data.

3.2. PREPARATION: Set aside ample time for preparation

The typical focus group project requires several weeks lead-time. Set aside ample time for defining the research question, developing the research design, constructing the group blueprint, preparing and revising the moderator’s guide, developing a screener and recruiting participants, arranging logistics, and conducting the focus groups. Ideally, the research design phase of the project should take at least two to three weeks in order to allow time for reflection, percolation of ideas, re-negotiation of strategies, and clear communication. While this may not always be possible, most researchers find rashly-conceived projects nerve-wracking. Worse yet, they may compromise quality of data and deteriorate relations with the community.

Effective groups can be organized and conducted in a few weeks if all parties commit themselves to putting the design and preparation first on their list of priorities. Organizing focus groups in distant locations or across cultures introduces complications that may take much longer to address unless local staff are well versed in the methodology, cognizant of the research agenda, and free to devote ample time to recruitment and logistics.

3.3. RECRUITMENT: Thoroughly train recruiters and recruit without bias

Recruiting participants for focus groups can be time-consuming and difficult. The approach to selecting participants must not bias the research results in any predictable way. No category of potential participants should be overlooked if their responses can be expected to alter the results significantly.

Researchers must use creative methods for making participation both attractive and safe. For community needs assessments or impact evaluations, a series of two-hour focus groups targeted to different topics may be more productive than long, arduous sessions in which the moderator tries to cover all areas of interest. Ensuring participants' voices will be heard, holding the groups in a central, known place, and creating a safe environment will help in the recruitment process. Offering appropriate incentives can assist greatly in recruitment. Training for recruiters must be thorough to *ensure consistency* of procedures, incentives, and sampling.

The link between design and recruitment

A critical part of focus group research is recruitment of participants, who are chosen because they share characteristics of special interest to the researcher. Most researchers use a "screener" that ensures that prospective respondents fit one particular cell of the group blueprint. In order to preserve the design, recruitment must follow the breaks without exception (see section 3.1). If a study calls for eight groups of rural married women under 40 with children living at home, women who do not meet these criteria should not participate. That means that village heads, husbands, and elder women cannot attend, regardless of the political pressure to allow them to participate in the focus groups. Failures in recruitment can easily damage the research design and, therefore, the study's consistency and scientific nature.

Recruitment strategies

Generally speaking, commercial facilities require a minimum of two weeks to recruit a set of focus groups. Even if the sessions will be held inside a government or non-profit organization (which will be responsible for recruitment), two to four weeks represent a practical minimum for recruiting. In small communities, recruitment might be done in one week by NGOs or the research team, once the group blueprint has been determined. Hasty recruitment can result in numerous violations of the screening guidelines.

Commercial vs. non-commercial facilities

Some researchers hire commercial focus group facilities with trained moderators and skilled interpreters. In contrast, much academic and public sector research is carried out by the researchers themselves in less elaborate settings (meeting rooms

in local churches, NGO offices, agricultural extension offices, conference centers, and so forth). The research team, in collaboration with community members, directly oversees and conducts recruitment. This more informal approach costs less than contracting with commercial facilities but carries higher risks of logistical problems and skewing groups toward certain types of participants.

Commercial facilities are more formal than community-based facilities; most have an anteroom (so researchers can observe through a one-way mirror), built-in audio- and videotaping equipment, refreshments, and support staff who are specially trained in recruitment techniques. The staff can access a bank of telephones and lists of potential participants, and have the (paid) time to follow-up on tentative participants. These factors all contribute to a relatively high "show rate" that might be more difficult to achieve under other conditions.

Commercial facilities are not usually located outside of urban areas (and are not found at all in some countries), so they cannot be used exclusively for most projects. They may also attract a certain type of respondent (e.g., those with telephones) and discourage or exclude others (for example, those who would not feel comfortable talking to a stranger or coming to a central office outside their community). Commercial facilities may be useful for conducting one or two exploratory or pilot groups even if the researchers intend to do the focus groups in the community.

Screeners

Whether recruitment is accomplished by a commercial facility or by researchers for their own project, researchers are responsible for developing a "screener" that enables staff to identify key characteristics of potential participants. The screener is a brief questionnaire that takes potential participants through a logical progression of questions to filter out those who do not fit the criteria. It is administered orally in person or over the telephone, as appropriate. Screeners help sort respondents into specific groups (e.g., low-income, married women under age 50, etc.). Participants should be screened in advance and *re*-screened before the focus group session to ensure their fit with the group blueprint.

Example: A university evaluation team wants to study attitudes toward a new government-subsidized housing program planned for an Ethiopian town. The study requires a screener to sort out any of the following:

1) Employees of the government housing agency and their families.
2) Contractors and others involved in planning, designing, constructing, marketing the housing, and their families.
3) People who are not eligible for this type of housing (for any reason).
4) People who do not plan to change their residence in the next two years.
5) People who do not make or participate in the decision to secure housing for their family.

6) People who have taken part in a focus group during the past year (or six months), especially on a topic related to the research question.
7) If a potential respondent passes the first screening questions, then the researchers asks questions regarding the key variables (e.g., income, marital status, gender, age, number of children, occupation, area of residence, etc.).

Incentives

Participants often receive a small incentive for coming to the session (money, a meal, or both). When research is being conducted in the community, participants may agree to attend the focus group because of intangible incentives, such as wanting to help their community (or social pressure). Respondents should still be respected as the "experts" on their own lives and views; therefore, a tangible incentive is appropriate (whenever possible). Light refreshments promote the comfort of participants and also act as an incentive. Providing transportation to and from the focus group session and on-site childcare may also facilitate participation. Cash or other tangible incentives should be distributed immediately following the focus group session.

Recruitment pitfalls

Recruitment bias can be caused by the following factors:

1) *Lack of lead-time for research design*: A tight timeframe leads to flawed design, which impacts recruitment. The typical focus group project requires several weeks of lead-time, or even months if multiple countries are involved.
2) *Lack of preparation for recruitment:* Recruitment is often the most time-consuming phase of a focus group project. Researchers tend to underestimate the time, resources, and energies that must be devoted to good recruitment. Preparation for recruitment may take much longer than the allotted recruitment period. Matching groups, selecting statistical or logical samples, and planning how best to achieve satisfactory group membership take time, discussion, and negotiation among researchers. These can be avoided by developing a screener and engaging in thorough training of recruiters.
3) *Lack of time for recruitment*: Once the recruitment preparation and strategy have been determined, the actual recruitment process may be rushed, resulting in serious violations of the screening guidelines, the "wrong people" showing up in the groups, under-subscribed groups, biased groups, unresponsive groups, confused participants, frustrated moderators, and poor or even useless data.
4) *Lack of resistance to political and organizational pressure*: When recruitment occurs in the field with the assistance of the community, the temptation to succumb to political or organizational pressure runs high. For example, in a small community, political leaders such as council members or a mayor might urge researchers to include them in a focus group evaluation of a new irrigation system. Because such political leaders probably played a key role in initiating the project and securing funding for it, they have a stake in making sure that

any evaluation shows the project in a favorable light. In addition, average citizens might find the presence of political leaders in the focus groups very intimidating, thereby altering their own participation. Mixing levels of respondents could lead to resentment toward the researchers for failing to screen out inappropriate participants and "politically correct" but skewed data.

Selectivity

Re-screening should take place just before each focus group. If the research design calls for single women with children under five, and a 70-year-old woman walks into the room with her husband, the moderator must say, "I'm sorry, this group is for single women who have children under five years old." Sometimes that is very difficult, especially if the person happens to be an influential community leader who helped gain access to respondents, but it is essential to preserving integrity of the research design.

3.4. THE MODERATOR'S GUIDE: Develop a uniform moderator's guide

Designing focus group questions requires as much art as science. Questions that seem relevant and well-formed may fall flat in a focus group setting. Questions that seem unique but tend to generate the same responses as an earlier question will confuse respondents. For this reason, the moderator's guide should always be piloted with a group of respondents who are similar in essential respects to the study respondents.

Expect several discussions on the moderator's guide, especially regarding how to translate English concepts into other languages. Grappling with the most productive questions is probably the best way to engage all parties in fine-tuning the general research question. Anticipate multiple drafts of the guide to ensure that your project starts on the right footing. Faxing or e-mailing subsequent versions back and forth could take the place of arduous meetings over complicated changes, but working closely helps eliminate misunderstandings. Developing a uniform moderator's guide *(*with attention to language, cultural differences, and translation/interpretation issues) will provide *project integrity*. Ensuring that the guide is identical across countries will provide *data consistency*.

Core vs. tailor-made questions

The moderator's guide for a cross-cultural study should contain the same core questions for all groups and all countries, but tailor-made questions for each culture can be placed in add-on modules.

- *Core questions* can include "identical" (no wording differences) and "parallel" questions (that get at the same material but with slightly different terminology).

Example: In Bangladesh, women might refer to contraception as "birth control" and in Thailand they might use the term "contraceptives." As long as the wording is identical except for these interchangeable terms that have to do with local usage, it is still a parallel question.

- *Tailor-made questions* address specific issues and should not constitute more than about 10 to 15% of the entire guide, if the project goal is to make meaningful comparisons across cultures.
  Example: A tailor-made question might address unique programs or events: "The Ministry of Health conducted an education campaign in your district regarding contraception. How did women react to that?"

Priming the participants

A strong moderator's guide does not stand alone in the research process. Rather, it relies on making sure participants have been "primed" for the discussion with:

- Clear recruitment messages (so they know why they are coming to the group).
- A good preamble that is read by the moderator at the beginning of the group. It may also be useful to have a written copy at each place around the table, so participants can read it themselves before the group begins).
- A way to introduce themselves that participants can relate to and enjoy.
- Targeted "warm up" questions that help participants start to focus on the topic.

Characteristics of good focus group questions

Good questions elicit rich responses from participants. Poor questions elicit silence. The focus group guide should be relatively short, lean, and contain only open-ended questions that stimulate both individual contributions and group interaction. Asking a question in an unexpected way yields spontaneous and lively answers. Most importantly, a focus group interview guide should not look like a survey! Forced choice questions, long questions, or too many questions will throw off the group's rhythm and result in long silences or "dead spaces" in the group. The purpose of the guide is to elicit data in a way that does not feed participants answers or bias responses. Questions should elicit discussion, debate, and dialogue—not "yes/no" answers.

Structure of the moderator's guide

Thinking about how a group discussion should progress will help you structure your moderator's guide and design good questions. The discussion should flow through four major phases that serve to establish a safe, comfortable climate in which respondents can debate, discuss, agree, and disagree with each other, brainstorm creatively, and struggle with complicated issues. Participants do not need to come to consensus—in fact, the moderator should stress the importance of airing different views and the questions should stimulate participants to think on many levels. The guide should include:

1) *The preamble:* This sets the stage for how a focus group works and how it differs from other group discussions respondents might have participated in before (such as community meetings).
2) *Ice breaking:* A group that does not go through a sufficient ice-breaking or warm-up period will most likely falter or express resistance when serious questions are placed on the table. First, rapport must be established that can include:
    - A good three-point introduction question (e.g., "Please share with us your first name, where you live, and how long you have lived in this village."
    - A "trigger" question that begins to focus people on the topic in a non-controversial way (e.g., "What do you like most about living here?").
3) *Main discussion:* This represents the true hard work of the group, but depends on the preamble and warm-up to operate efficiently. The key research questions should be addressed in this section.
4) *Closure:* The ending stage allows time for the group to reflect on its intellectual products and reach some new, higher-level syntheses. If appropriate, it also gives researchers an opportunity to return to a question that they feel was left unfinished, to clarify certain responses, or to ask a new question stimulated by listening to the focus group (e.g., "What else would you like us to understand about wellbeing in your community?" "Is there anything else we should have asked you?" "What do you think we learned today?" Closure questions invite participants to reflect, raise new material, and gain a sense of task completion.

Principles of interviewing

Focus group interviewing follows standard interviewing principles but it becomes complicated by the fact that several people are interacting around the same set of stimuli (both the moderator's questions and participants' responses). Also, small groups afford an exponentially greater number of discrete interactions than does a dyad (a group of two, as in one interviewer and one respondent). Therefore, crafting an effective moderator's guide is critical for structuring the listening process. Five key rules apply to guide development (and moderation):

1) *Stay Focused*: Keep questions short, clear, and on target. Some respondents will become confused if they hear more than one question at a time or if questions are too long-winded. The group easily loses its focus, and the transcriber will have greater difficulty in keeping responses straight. If the guide is clear, the group will be responsive.
2) *Stay Organized:* Keep together all questions relating to sub-topics of the key research question.
3) *Ask One Question at a Time:* For example, "How do you feel about the views that have been expressed so far about material wellbeing?" rather than, "How do you feel about the views that have been expressed so far about wellbeing, and what could improve wellbeing?"

4) *Move toward Depth:* Keep questions moving from abstract to concrete:
    - Move from the least threatening to the most sensitive questions.
    - Move from the simplest to the most complex questions.
    - Move from the most neutral to the most emotionally laden questions.
    - Move from the least controversial to the most controversial questions.
5) *Stay Neutral:* Avoid biasing and confusing participants:
    - Avoid questions that impose assumptions that are inaccurate, leading, or misleading: "Given the amount of crime, how safe is it to walk at night?" assumes that much crime exists; that the person is aware of the crime rate; and that the person walks at night.
    - Avoid questions that introduce bias in the items or in the responses: For example, "Some people in your community have very negative attitudes toward the government—how do you feel about that?"
    - Avoid supplying response alternatives. For example, "What is more important to you, money from working, harmony with your family, or a good roof over your head?" (It is acceptable to ask, "Which of these is *most* important to you?" if all are listed on a flip chart.)
6) *Finalize the Guide:* Pre-test the guide and refine it before using it for the time in each country. Refine it again after the first groups (one per country), but then work with the same guide from that point forward. The guide, once agreed upon, becomes a critical factor in ensuring comparable data: Once it has been adopted, any changes to the guide must be approved by the Research Director and all Country Coordinators because of the language and cultural implications for all four teams (see next section).

Framing the questions across cultures

Because certain concepts might not easily be translatable into some languages, and because cultures have different perspectives on questions surrounding wellbeing, the language differences present a specific challenge for focus group research in cross cultural contexts. Difficulties in finding comparable terms (within each country and across the four WeD countries) need to be worked out in the process of developing the moderator's guide—not after the focus groups have been launched.

The best questions are simple, provocative, and capable of stimulating conversation—but they must always be tested in pilot groups in *all* project countries to make sure that they work in various focus group settings.

Example: "Voices of the Poor"

The World Bank Group's "Voices of the Poor" project (2000/2001) conducted focus group discussions with thousands of people in 20 countries. Their researchers recommend specific strategies for determining how best to word focus group questions on wellbeing, starting with initial exploration of the topic by asking one or more pilot groups, "*How do people define wellbeing or a good quality of life and ill-being or a bad quality of life?"* They suggest:

- Start by asking local people to explore their own terminology and definitions that explain quality of life, wellbeing, and illbeing.
- Since different groups within the same community could be using different terms or phrases, record all of them without superimposing your own ideas.
- Allow the community to come up with its own categories into which most people fall (no fixed number, but probably three to six).
- Ask the community to estimate the proportion of households/individuals in each category.
- Develop a list of criteria on which households can be differentiated, then use that and the category proportions for recruiting participants.

3.5. MODERATION: Ensure neutral moderation and interpretation

From a sociological point of view, two or more people in focused interaction constitute a group. Turning this definition on its head, Robert Bales (1950) pointed out that in a group, "every action is treated as an interaction." Furthermore, both verbal and non-verbal behaviours constitute "interaction" that carries some meaning for every group member. A *small group* engages in face-to-face interaction around an agenda and functions with formal or informal leadership (or both). The focus group is an instance of a small group and is consequently subject to all the principles governing small group process.

The need for moderator and interpreter training

A group interview affords access to a wider variety of experiences and opinions than does an individual interview. This is at once the focus group's advantage and its unique challenge in terms of research design and moderation. Because the moderator is the "instrument of research," it is easy for the moderator's experiences, opinions, and biases to creep into the process. Therefore, it is critical that all moderators in each of the project countries be trained on the core questions that will be used across cultures. They need consistent training on how to probe each question, how to restate the questions without changing them, and how to avoid biasing respondents by their reactions to participant responses.

Very few people are truly bilingual and have a full command of two languages. Most bilingual persons speak, write, and understand one of the languages much better than the other one. Because interpreters can bias responses, they should be apprised of the project's purpose and the need for neutral interpretation. Ensuring

accurate interpretation means hearing, understanding, and interpreting *within* cultural contexts. An appropriate interpreter means: Being more than bilingual—having full command of both languages; being able to interpret simultaneously or quickly—the "one second rule"; and being able to concentrate and stay in role.

- NOTE: The moderator should NOT also be the interpreter, because the moderator needs to pay close attention to process as well as content! However, the moderator must acquaint the interpreter with the project's purpose, the nature of the participants, and logistics—and review the moderator's guide with the interpreter in detail (this takes about two hours in advance of the first group).

Principles of group interaction

Because a focus group is a small group, it cannot escape the typical dynamics that characterize small group interaction. General principles that underlie successful moderation include the following (Billson 2004).

1) *Opportunity for informal, nonpurposive conversation reduces fear of interaction in formal or contract settings:* A few minutes of casual conversation prior to the moderator's entry into the focus group room will help participants relax and will allay anxieties about the session. Sometimes this "chit chat" occurs over a light meal or refreshments.
2) *All groups need a period of icebreaking before focusing on task activities*.
3) *People who participate early in the group interaction are likely to continue to participate; those who are not brought into the group early will find it harder to enter later:*
   - "Popcorn" introductions by letting each member introduce him/herself when ready, rather than going around the room in a circle—this helps reduce communication anxiety and sets a norm of a free communication pattern.
   - Give each person a chance to say a few words of introduction early in the process; this improves chances of later participation.
4) *The leader of any group serves as a model for that group:*
   - The moderator should begin the icebreaking at the beginning of a focus group by introducing him/herself in an appropriate way (no personal information) and using the optimal length of time (e.g., one minute).
   - Exhibiting openness and enthusiasm for the focus group will help establish the same attitude among participants.
5) *Every participant in a group is responsible for the outcome of the group interaction:* Although the moderator is ultimately responsible for the outcome of every focus group, good moderation empowers each and every group member to contribute fully and constructively.
6) *Group interaction rests on communication and feedback. The effectiveness of a group depends upon the quality of feedback contained in the interaction.*

- Good moderation maintains open and even communication flows and uses *neutral, non-judgmental feedback* (on occasion) to create dynamic interaction.
- The most important form of moderator communication is *listening well.*

7) *Group solutions and insights profit from heterogeneity of input:* Good moderation ensures that all members contribute their important ideas.
8) *When people feel psychologically "safe" in a group, their participation level will increase.*
    - Safety is ensured when the moderator enables participants to express controversial or contrary opinions without ridicule or negative reactions.
    - The moderator must establish norms of openness, tolerance, and inclusiveness from the outset of the session.
    - Trust and participation will increase in a group as people come to feel they are "all in the same boat"—at least some of the time and on some issues.
    - It is as important to recognize consensus or similarity of responses, as it is to legitimise differences in opinion, even though focus groups are not facilitated toward consensus.
    - Each person's eagerness to submit opinions as conclusions must be discouraged without undermining further participation. Opinions, ideas, and reactions should be treated by the moderator as contributions to the discussion, not as final statements that terminate further debate or elaboration.
    - Moderate neutrally—without agreeing with or disagreeing with contributions; simply acknowledge them.

Dual functions of group leaders: process vs. content

Focus group moderators are trained to pay attention to two levels of group interaction at all times: Content and Process.

- Content: Listen to lines of argument and specific responses to questions; probe for deeper meaning; clarify meaning of words and phrases; explore ideas.
- Process: Observe, understand, and manipulate the process—non-verbal cues among group members, conflicts, coalition building, scapegoating, participation levels, and much more. Be mindful of group process concerns such as cohesion, morale, and keeping on task.

A skilful moderator does not sacrifice understanding of content to complexities of the process, but balancing content and process is a difficult goal for even the most experienced moderator to achieve. For this reason, some researchers prefer to work with a co-moderator or assistant moderator who can point out to the moderator (by subtle signal or notes) those who have not participated in some time.

Dual functions of moderators: task vs. socio-emotional areas

At the same time, any analysis of small group interaction must take into account communication around the *socio-emotional arena* and the *task arena*. All group leaders or facilitators must attend to these two dichotomous roles if they are to be effective in maintaining group productivity and cohesion. In their groundbreaking work over 50 years ago, Bales and Slater (1955) distinguished between "expressive" or socio-emotional action (oriented toward past or present feeling) and "instrumental" or task action (oriented toward future consequences).

Leaders must know at any given moment whether expressive or instrumental roles are most appropriate in order to facilitate a productive group. These areas apply to leadership of any group, including focus group moderation.

The Socio-Emotional Arena: This refers to the degree to which a leader:

- Responds to group members in a warm and friendly fashion.
- Attends to socio-emotional expressions in the group.
- Involves mutual trust, openness, and willingness to explain positions, specifically:
  -Listens to group members.
  -Is easy to understand.
  -Is friendly and approachable.
  -Treats group members as equals.
  -Is willing to make changes in the format, setting, or sequencing of questions if appropriate to the research agenda.

The moderator who does not use participants' names, who ignores their feelings, opinions, or problems dealing with the group experience, or who ignores signs of low morale or lack of responsiveness, is performing inadequately in the socio-emotional area.

The Task Arena: This refers to the degree to which a leader:

- Organizes, directs, and defines the group's structure and goals.
- Regulates group behaviour.
- Monitors communication.
- Reduces ambiguity of purpose, specifically:
  -Keeps group on task.
  -Helps group follow agenda.
  -Keeps group on time schedule.
  -Ensures that all participate ("gatekeeping").
  -Is willing to be flexible within structure.

The moderator who fails to negotiate clear expectations, is disorganized, or does not move the group toward achieving its stated goals, is performing inadequately in the task role. Although task and socio-emotional functions can be separated

conceptually, they are intertwined. A moderator who performs well in the task areas will be contributing greatly as well to morale, positive climate, and satisfaction. Conversely, if a moderator is overly concerned with task roles to the neglect of socio-emotional roles, the group will have difficulty in achieving its purpose of exploring the research question in depth because of low morale.

> *The effective moderator combines gatekeeping (socio-emotional) roles with timekeeping (task) roles. Moderation cannot stand on one role alone.*

In the ideal focus group, task roles (other than time-keeping) should recede into the background once the moderator establishes the groundrules and purpose for meeting. A dynamic group discussion occurs when leadership interventions early in the group help establish norms of listening, participating, and being open. By the second half of the group (if not sooner), the moderator should be able to move into "low gear" on both task and socio-emotional dimensions. This happens when group members begin to gatekeep for each other, ask each other for clarification, and try hard to understand what others mean. The moderator may find, then, that a group that moves toward high dialoging and high gatekeeping will even anticipate the next question on the moderator's guide! With only two hours or less to reach this level of productive, mature participation, this indeed would be the sign of a skillful moderator and a well-designed guide.

Why Have An Assistant or Co-Moderator?

An assistant moderator—who is <u>not</u> a note-taker—can help:

- Prepare the room, food, seating arrangements, table arrangement, etc.
- Set up the tape-recording equipment and microphones.
- Manage the tape recording, including labelling and changing tapes.
- Greet participants and make sure they fit the group blueprint.
- Offer refreshments and make sure they have a name tent (a piece of paper folded into three sections and placed on the table in front of each participant; participants are invited to write their first name on both sides in large letters).
- Pass a note to the moderator with names of low participators.
- Handle any difficulties that arise during the group (e.g., change room temperature, manage refreshments, help a participant who feels ill,
  eject disruptive participants or people who try to join the group late).
- Distribute incentives at the end of the group. '
- Debrief with the moderator at the end of each group, commenting on key lessons learned from the group, on the task and socio-emotional nature of the interaction, and on the balance between content and process.

Balancing participation

As suggested above, small groups function best when participation of members is relatively well balanced. Nowhere is this clearer than in the moderation of focus groups. Each person in the group represents valuable data If a group is taken over by dominants who squeeze out more timid participants, the pool of information

shrinks and the data become suspect or even useless. In most small groups, two or three people tend to dominate and the rest listen to those three people discuss and debate. That is not a focus group, but a mini-interview with three people who happen to have an audience. If 100 surveys were distributed in a small town and only 30 people replied, researchers would be extremely concerned about missing data from 70 per cent of potential respondents and might consider that an unacceptable response rate. The same principle holds when moderating focus groups. In fact, the goal for focus groups is even higher than for surveys—a 100% response rate.

The crucial role of strong, trained moderators becomes clearer from classic communication theory regarding what happens when two or more humans interact in a small group. As the number of people in a group increases, the number of *possible* interactions increases exponentially, as shown in Table 3. This complicates the challenge of achieving balanced participation.

Table 3: Size of Group and Number of Interactions

Number in Group	Possible # of Interactions
2	2
3	9
4	28
5	75
6	186
7	441
8	**1056**

Source: Billson 2004: 68.

In a group of ten—the common size for focus groups—the number of possible interactions increases to over 3000! This means that the flow of communication among group members becomes the primary moderation task.

Direction and pattern of communication are critical to uncovering good and reliable data. If the moderator is weak in controlling flow and patterns of interaction, reliability of findings drops considerably because the widest possible range of ideas is not introduced into the discussion.

Restating versus re-asking questions

One of the most difficult challenges in focus group moderation lies in knowing how to restate a direct (original) question if the group does not respond immediately. *The golden rule of focus group interviewing is: Re-ask questions as they originally appear on the moderator's guide.* Almost always, simply repeating the question verbatim and pausing will give participants a chance to gather their thoughts. The

best way to handle this situation is to re-ask the question slowly and deliberately, perhaps pausing between phrases.

WeD has spent considerable time crafting questions that strike to the heart of its research agenda, so it is crucial that they be asked and re-asked in ways that ensure consistency of data collection (not consistency of responses). Restating questions runs a very high risk that they will be improperly worded, which can sabotage a research project that involves more than one group.

> ***Example:*** In evaluating a program for new parents, the moderator's guide asked, "In what ways has this prenatal program helped you cope with your newborn child?" An inexperienced moderator restated the original question as, "Has this prenatal program helped you cope with your newborn child?" This "on the run" version of the question took it back to a survey-style "yes/no" response, which should be avoided in focus groups. In another group, the same moderator restated the question as, "How do you feel about your ability to cope with your newborn child?"—which led the respondents away from the program's impact toward feelings about competence and confidence in coping with a newborn. Worse yet, in a third group, the moderator restated the question as "In what ways has this prenatal program helped you cope with your newborn child?" (pause...silence) "Do you feel that it has made you more confident?" On this last occasion, the moderator fed an answer to the respondents—a definite mistake in individual or group interviewing.

If, after the first group in each country, a question truly seems to elicit very little response, then the research team can reword it in an appropriate way. If the question is asked several different ways in subsequent groups, the data will not be amenable to systematic comparison.

Probing

Probing does not refer to restating the original question in different ways. On the contrary, it should be an intentional process through which a moderator follows up on all areas of key importance to the research question. Probing gives the moderator a chance to make sure that meaning has been checked and clarified. The moderator should be prepared to use three different types of probing questions:

- Substantive probes: Follow-up questions ensure that key points are covered under original questions; they should be anticipated in advance of the focus group and are usually included in the moderator's guide.
  Example: "You mentioned the organization of this brochure for Thai educators who are engaged in distance education…what about the colour? The type size?" "Level of the language?" "What about the cover?"

- Gate-keeping probes: Moderator interjections ensure that *all* participants who wish to respond to a direct question have the "air time" to do so.

Example: "Any other ideas?" "How about a different view?" "What else?" "How about that end of the table?" "Is there another way to look at this?"

- Depth or meaning probes: These ensure that a participant's meaning is "checked out" rather than assumed by the moderator or other researchers. ***Example:*** **"**Can you tell me more about what distance education would mean to your community?" "How might it affect secondary students?" "What do you mean when you say it could have a 'revolutionary impact'?" "Let's hear more about the meaning of 'effective distance education'."

Skillful probing helps participants clarify what they mean and helps the moderator better understand their responses. Probes must be kept to a strategic minimum in order to ensure that each question on the moderator's guide is given ample time. Again, probes must avoid biasing responses in any way.

3.6. DATA COLLECTION PROCESSES: Provide close on-site supervision

Coordinating logistics inside and among the countries

When working across cultures, an opportunity for true comparative research emerges—or can be sabotaged—in the data-collection process. If focus groups are held with women in very informal, free-wheeling settings in one country, with husbands and children wandering in and out of the room, but in a very formal setting in another country, without interference, the results may be quite different. Similarly, if community leaders are allowed to observe the focus groups because the local logistics person does not have the strength to prevent them from entering the focus group setting, the data may look very different from data gathered in a more neutral setting in another country. Close, on-site supervision of the process by one central coordinator will strengthen consistency of processes and procedures across countries. The coordinator can troubleshoot and serve as a sounding board for solving problems unique to each country.

If logistics and data collection processes are kept as uniform (and controlled) as possible—as per previously-agreed upon conventions, then comparative analysis is protected. Consequently, there is a particular need in cross-cultural focus group research for:

- Training of all logistics and support staff.
- The assignment of one person in each country who is responsible for and present for all focus groups in that country; preferably, the person coordinates logistics and observes at least one focus group per moderator to ensure consistency of style and approach.
- The presence of at least one representative from the project's central headquarters (or a consultant who oversees all country research activities); if this is not possible, then a videotape of at least one focus group from each set should be reviewed for consistency, along with a review of logistics.

- Pre-, mid-point, and post-reports on logistics and the progress of the focus group research (e-mail suffices).

Being a presence

Even when researchers do not moderate the focus groups themselves, they can be intimately involved in the research process. As Sagasti writes about the Agenda Perú project, "We frequently stood behind a two-way mirror to observe the progress of the focus groups and spent a considerable time reading the detailed transcripts of each session" (Sagasti, 2004). This helps to ensure that the entire data-gathering process is carried out in a professional, consistent, and systematic manner. It also gives the researchers ample opportunity to suggest probes and follow-up questions, as needed.

Tape recording vs. taking notes in focus groups

Data analysis relies on accurate data collection. Regardless of the method used to record a session, it must be accurate and thorough. Most social and policy-related research requires written or taped documentation of the sessions. If note-taking will be the primary means of recording a session—in order to avoid the necessity of formal transcription—then tape record the session *also*, whenever possible, and have the note-taker check the notes against the tapes for accuracy. Ideally, however, tape-recording with formal transcripts provides the most accurate data and may be essential in doing cross-cultural work because of translation issues.

Data-collection checklist

The following checklist will make sure you do not lose data. If you follow these procedures faithfully, your data will be secure and usable for efficient data analysis:

- Record every session in order to preserve authenticity of the data.
- Use tabletop tape recorders rather than hand-held Dictaphones or pocket tape recorders, which will not effectively pick up group conversations.
- Use an omni-directional microphone for each tape recorder and use masking or electrical tape to keep the on/off switch in the *on* position; place the microphones in the centre of the group.
- Always use *two* tape recorders, each set up with its own omni-directional microphone, in case of machine, mike, or tape failure.
- Set the tape recorders to different tonality (one slightly more bass and one slightly more treble); this will ease transcription of difficult passages, especially when working with different accents and/or languages.
- Always use 60- or 90-minute tapes (not 120 minutes, which is thinner tape and more prone to breaking during transcription). Ordinary voice (not music) tape works well.
- Have all tapes transcribed to provide a working electronic version of the data and to facilitate checking questionable passages.

- Have an assistant take notes during sessions (you and the group members will be distracted if *you* try to take notes); add your notes to the transcripts.
- Debrief each group with co-researchers; tape the debriefing; add to the transcripts.
- Tape your own “general impression” notes after each debriefing (this can be done in private, using a mini-recorder); add to the transcripts.
- If you mail tapes to a transcriber, always make a copy first and send the original via traceable mail.
- Keep the tape copies until after the final report has been accepted, and then destroy them to preserve participant anonymity.
- Keep a secure log of participant names, addresses, phone numbers, and e-mail addresses in case you wish to revisit the same people in years to come (for example, to give feedback on a revised report to consumers or an upgraded program).

3.7. MANAGING DATA ANALYSIS: Create and follow a common structure

Managing the data produced by focus groups may be the most challenging part of this type of qualitative research. Good data and excellent research design may lie fallow if not analysed correctly and communicated effectively. Conversely, a strong research design and clear group blueprint can guide data analysis.

All country teams must use a common process for data analysis, but specific content and coding categories will emerge. Outlying or unusual data are included to avoid selectivity bias. Themes and patterns are extracted to go beyond anecdotal data. The key factor is to develop a consistent approach and technique across groups and across cultures.

The link between the group blueprint and data analysis

Data analysis can proceed in several directions, following the rows and columns of the group blueprint. For example, in the Agenda: PERÚ case (3.1), in which the key variables were income, gender, and age, the data could first be analyzed discretely for each group. Second, researchers could compare all low-income respondents to all medium-income respondents (regardless of age or gender). A third level of analysis could compare data for all females (regardless of income or age) to all male data. Fourth, all data for younger respondents could be compared to all data for older respondents. Finally, all data could be reviewed to discern overarching patterns.

The structured transcript

If you are working from transcripts, supply the transcriber with a copy of the guide and ask that responses to questions be slotted in where appropriate (regardless where they come up in the conversation). In this way, the data will be where you want it when you begin data analysis. (If you want to know where the response

appeared, the transcriber can make a notation in the actual flow of conversation, but place the full response under the appropriate question.) This type of “structured transcript” saves time, but depends on excellent transcription services (Billson, 2004, 2005, 2006). It is useful to supply the transcriber with a glossary of technical terms, names of people, places, and organizations, and acronyms that might come up in the focus groups for each project. This will enhance transcript accuracy and speed up the transcription process.

Blocking and coding interview data

Once you have access to an electronic version of the transcripts (via diskette or e-mail), you can begin to block and code the data. Two main avenues exist for analyzing data. The first can be carried out by following the outline of the moderator’s guide, analysing the data question-by-question and developing concepts, summary statements, and hypotheses as you go. Retain some direct quotes to illustrate key points under each question. Turn the questions into headings (e.g., “What are the main issues facing this community today?” becomes “Main Issues Facing the Community”). Presumably, the guide was an effective device for gathering the data—it can now become an effective device for analysing the data. The structured transcript is invaluable in this case. Word processing programs such as WORD or WordPerfect can help code—simply use the “find/search,” “block cut,” and “block paste” functions to locate key words and move blocks of data under appropriate headings and subheadings.

The second avenue is through using a text analysis computer program such as N6 or NVivo (www.qsr-software.com) or The Ethnograph (www.qualisresearch.com) to code responses, then to gather them under certain categories that relate back to the key research question. For example, for a focus group on teenage pregnancy, each response that includes any comment on contraception can be coded as “contraception use”; all entries with that label can be placed in one sub-file and then re-coded into more discrete categories (e.g., “open to contraception use,” “resistant to contraception use,” or “uncertain or uninformed about contraception use”). These subcategories then form the basis for a narrative discussion of the various attitudes toward contraception and how they relate to teenage pregnancy for each focus group. Another software program, Decision Explorer, can import from or export to NVivo to develop concepts further (www.banxia.com/demain.html).

Either of these approaches works well. Both require the researcher to label categories and sub-categories, although computerized searches for keywords can assist with that process. Either approach also requires developing schemata for categorizing interrelated topics and links among them.

Maintaining control

Data analysis can seem like an endless and overwhelming task. The following work habits make it manageable:

1) Develop a system for analysing the data and stick with it for each project (it may vary, depending on the team's expectations, time frame, and report length).
2) Make copies of the original transcripts and work from the copies. Keep the originals on diskette or a zip drive and in a separate directory to avoid loss. If possible, keep copies on a different computer.
3) Save your work every few minutes on the computer and set the automatic back-up feature to two minutes—changes or conceptualisations once made are often quickly forgotten and lost data may take time to retrieve from the original transcripts.
4) Analyse the data from one group at a time, and then begin to make comparisons across groups. This helps you see how various respondent categories view the topic.

Focusing the analysis

You cannot report every detail, nor would that be more useful to the reader than simply reading transcripts or watching session videotapes. Data analysis entails making summaries and drawing themes from the raw data. To focus analysis, include the following steps:

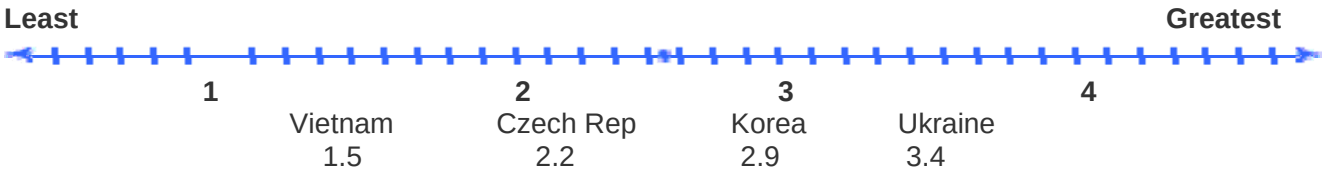
1) Revisit the key research question and purpose before you analyse the data.
2) Break the analysis into discrete topics and sub-topics, using the guide to outline the data analysis and the final report or (as discussed above under "Blocking and Coding Interview Data"), use emergent themes to organize your analysis.
3) Develop your analysis with themes, patterns, broad strokes, conceptualisations, extreme cases, illustrative cases and quotes that reflect typical responses.
4) Place data on a conceptual continuum:
   High_____ (variable 1) _____Low
   High_____ (variable 2) _____Low
5) Create typologies (by combining two or more continua).

Example: A project at the University of Glasgow (Miller, Duckett, & Hermanns, 2003) studied grassroots attitudes towards globalisation in East Asia and Eastern Europe by conducting focus groups in four countries: the Czech Republic, Ukraine, South Korea, and Vietnam. The researchers ranked replies as positive or negative for each country, and then created scales that show different patterns across countries on items such as economic despair; who benefits from economic change ("winners and losers"); perceptions of crime, corruption, and inequality; and threats to national language, culture and tradition. The research group's continuum for economic despair appears in Figure 2:

Figure 2: Economic Despair in Four Countries

After constructing the five scales, the researchers then combined them into an "overall scale of discontent" (Figure 3), based on average rankings for each country on all scales:

Figure 3: An Overall Scale of Discontent



As the researchers noted, the sixth scale is a "very crude summary measure" but it is instructive in that it "places Vietnam fairly close to the generally most contented end (at 1.5), and Ukraine fairly close to the generally most discontented end (at 3.4)....The Czechs and the Koreans are clearly somewhere in the middle" (Miller, Duckett, & Hermanns, 2003).

Example: A typology might combine two scales, economic despair and trust in government (Figure 4). Each continuum would be divided into high end and low end responses:

Figure 4: Typology—Perceptions of Crime vs. Economic Despair

Perceptions of Crime/ Corruption/Inequality	***Economic Despair***	
	High	*Low*
Most Concerned	Country W	Country X
Least Concerned	Country Y	Country Z

Subjectivity

As with quantitative data, qualitative data has its limitations, especially if you analyze the data improperly. Qualitative data involves two types of subjectivity: The subjectivity of the respondent's contributions and the subjectivity of those who are trying to make sense of those contributions. "Subjective" literally means "from the

point of view of the subject" (i.e., the respondent). Presumably, you are asking people questions because you want their points of view. If you systematically code and neutrally analyze this type of data, it becomes scientifically objective. By overlooking certain comments because they do not fit into preconceived notions about what you would find, one risks biasing the results.

Another risk occurs in working with focus groups. Researchers tend to draw conclusions after the first couple of groups. These early impressions can be very misleading because the most recently heard comments have more cognitive and emotional impact than comments made in previous groups. For example, if you are taking a "quick picture" in the middle of a project and you do not systematically analyze the data, you risk amplifying the subjective aspects of focus group data. When you carefully code and analyze the final data, your insights and conclusions might shift dramatically away from the mid-stream impressions.

You can reduce the risks of working with qualitative data. For example, two researchers instead of one can attend a focus group; one moderates while the other takes notes and begins to develop an overview. Focus groups produce very interesting quotes that help keep your analysis from getting too subjective—when you talk with colleagues about the data, the notes keep the conversation honest: "Yes, most group members were unhappy about the agricultural program but there were two people who kept saying how happy they were." The notes help you *not* forget the exceptions. If you record the sessions, you can verify trends by listening to the tapes.

If the research addresses a highly significant question (such as whether or not to re-fund a major program or change a policy that impacts many people), following the best research practices will help reduce the subjectivity inherent in qualitative data.

Therefore, it is important to conduct many focus groups with carefully chosen participants, the same guide, and superb moderation; systematically analyse the data and have more than one person contribute to the data analysis.

3.8. REPORT PREPARATION: Create and follow a common structure

As with data analysis, you have the choice of following the structure of the moderator's guide, whose flow and design made initial sense to you, or of creating a new structure based on dominant themes and major findings. Whichever choice you make (or somewhere in between), the same format should be adopted by all teams in all project countries. Standards for formatting, font, and language make it easier to compile contributions into joint reports and papers.

Good writing, clear organization, and inclusion of selected direct quotes will make the report more readable. The most welcome reports are those that help readers make sense of the data, communicate to others, make policy or program decisions, or forward recommendations. This involves highlighting the most significant findings, condensing copious verbiage into succinct statements, and teasing out

themes and patterns for others to absorb. These steps assist the project to write meta-analyses of subsequent data-collections.

3.9. ETHICS: Follow basic strategies for conducting ethical research

A focus group researcher must be committed to the highest professional standards, which include the following precautions to protect participants:

1) Verbal and/or written explanations of the research purpose, methods, and setting. Full disclosure as to the broader context of the research should be made to all participants.
2) Informed consent forms, when necessary. Participation in the groups should be entirely voluntary (even if participants receive a financial incentive).
3) Assurances of anonymity, when possible. Participants must be informed that the discussions will be tape-recorded (for purposes of accurate data analysis by the researcher only) and/or videotaped, and that their responses will not be identified with them personally. Identify note-takers in the room, if present.
4) Assurances of confidentiality of the report, when possible and necessary. In the event that audio or video recordings might be used in preparing advertising, films, documentaries, and so forth, participants should give their informed consent *prior* to the focus group.

Even though focus groups usually pose minimal risks, the rights of participants must be safeguarded during every step of the research process.

Informed consent agreements

These agreements, which can be relatively formal or informal, set the stage for participant protection. When appropriate, interviews should be conducted in strict compliance with each country's federal guidelines for the use of human subjects in research. This involves:

- Identifying risk levels and establishing that the project poses no particular risks to participants.
- Ensuring that the topics and questions are not intrusive.
- Ensuring that the groups will not be facilitated purposely to elicit emotional responses.
- Informing participants prior to the focus group that they can pass on any question and that there are no right or wrong answers. The moderator does not press individuals to respond to particular questions; rather, he/she creates a safe climate in which anyone who wishes to contribute can do so with ease.
- Stating that a live person is recording the session in attendance, a tape recorder, and/or a video recorder (as appropriate).
- Explaining how the recorded material will be used after the session.

The preamble: protecting participant anonymity

Most researchers want to protect the identities of respondents. Note that focus group respondents are guaranteed *anonymity* (if possible and appropriate), but never *confidentiality*—because the very fact that more than one person is being interviewed means that the researcher cannot control whether and what other participants will report outside the focus group.

The preamble helps set the tone for a focus group, but it can also clarify ethical issues and anonymity concerns among special populations:

- Ask participants to introduce themselves with first names only.
- State that you will omit reference to any names or identifying characteristics in the report. Phrases such as “one woman” or “some group members” or “several men” will be used instead.
- Note that you have excluded anyone from the focus groups as participants or observers if they have any type of reward power over participants.

Introductions: Reinforcing the concept of anonymity

Similarly, the introductions can be handled so that identities remain unclear. This reinforces the statements regarding anonymity in the Informed Consent Agreement and the Preamble. If anyone chooses to give their last name during introductions, the moderator can simply remind the group to use first names only (especially on sensitive topics) and can instruct the transcriber to omit last names. For example, introductions could be structured in this way:

> *First, could you tell us a little about yourself? Your first name, which village you live in, and what kind of farming you do. Remember, we will not associate identifying characteristics in our report with any particular quote.*

4. CONCLUSIONS

Any kind of research requires a certain amount of intuition as well as standard methodology, art as well as convention, luck as well as cautious planning. Focus groups can provide invaluable insights into virtually any question brought by academics, policy analysts, or program managers. Used properly, this maturing social science methodology can produce reliable and solid data.

Focus groups constitute a universal methodology, but they must be reshaped for each cultural context without losing the depth of data accessible according to local, regional, and national sensitivities; their scientific nature; or the capacity for cross cultural comparison.

If researchers adhere to the guidelines and practices outlined above, and maintain careful control over tapes and transcripts, participant protection and quality, reliable data will be assured.

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