3 Preparing for the Focus Groups

This chapter, alongside Chapters 4 and 5, ventures into the practical terrain of carrying out focus groups. We will discuss, consecutively, the preparations that need to be done prior to the focus groups (Chapter 3); the steps involved with actually undertaking focus groups (Chapter 4); and the work associated with analyzing the data generated therein (Chapter 5). The following pages are therefore intended to provide the information that you need to be a successful focus group practitioner.

Toward that end, these chapters are comprehensive. They are also necessarily incomplete. No text will fully prepare you to address every potential challenge that can surface in the actual practice of data collection. As Barbour reminds us, "[t]here are . . . no hard-and-fast rules regarding the practicalities involved in planning and running focus groups" (2007, 90). Unexpected setbacks will occur. Unanticipated opportunities may arise. I do not, therefore, presume to provide an exhaustive rendering of focus group-based work. Instead, I hope to tackle the major issues and concerns that must be considered before, during, and after the focus groups have been undertaken, while providing you with the tools needed to carefully consider the implications of the (unexpected) decisions that you will likely need to make along the way.

This first, preparatory chapter is organized as follows. In the next section, I address the most important preparatory steps that you must take before heading into the space where your focus groups will be held. As I consider the nuts and bolts of focus group organization, I rely, where I can, upon a running example to help elucidate the decision-making process (Gamson 1992). Next, I pay close attention to two aspects of focus group work that are, arguably, vital to the data collection method's success. The first is the definition of the moderator and his/her preparation. This person is responsible for eliciting the responses that will comprise your data. The second is the making of the question protocol itself – the vessel, if you will, through which your data are generated. Choosing the moderator and developing a question protocol are essential steps in ensuring that your focus groups are as productive as possible. Because of this, they merit special treatment in the pages that follow.

Finally, I underscore some of the additional measures that should be considered when carrying out focus groups in non-native settings and on topics that may be considered sensitive or difficult to address. In these situations, the

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researcher and her moderator should take extra care to be cognizant of cultural norms and sensitivities, power differentials, especially between the moderator and the participants, and other preparatory details that may not be necessary in settings that are familiar to the researcher and over topics that are not expected to be controversial. Focus groups are especially well suited for these kinds of situations, but they do require additional care in their preparation.

The Nuts and Bolts of Undertaking Focus Groups

The point of departure of any successful data collection endeavor is the research question driving the project. This point cannot be overstated. When a researcher decides to carry out focus groups, it is presumed that the research question has been clearly defined, the relevant population has been identified, and existing information on the topic has been obtained and absorbed (Stewart et al. 2007, 53–54). Chapters 1 and 2 offered a set of guidelines for determining the kinds of questions that focus groups are well suited to address. My assumption moving forward, therefore, is that you – as the future focus group practitioner – have already decided that focus groups make sense for your particular research question.

With that decision behind you, you now face a set of logistical quandaries. With whom will you carry out focus groups? How many focus groups should you organize? Where should they take place? What kinds of questions should you ask? Who should ask the questions? Where, in other words, do you begin?

Before initiating any of the logistical footwork, it makes sense to first answer a set of questions regarding certain practicalities of focus group organization (see Table 3.1). These answers will help you establish a "wish list," or a logistical plan that represents how you would carry out focus groups in the most ideal of circumstances. In practice, you will likely find that many of your

Table 3.1 Practical Questions about Focus Groups

1. How many focus groups should I carry out?	6. Where will the focus groups occur?
2. What is my sampling frame?	7. What materials should I prepare?
3. What should the composition of each focus group be?	8. How will I record the conversation?
4. How should I recruit participants?	9. What costs should I expect?
5. Will I work with a research consultancy?	10. Do I need consent?
	11. Who will be my moderator?
	12. What questions will I ask?

ideals are difficult to meet. Nevertheless, by specifying a preferred starting point, you will be better equipped to make and later explain certain decisions that were less than optimal.

Focus Group Composition and Recruitment (Questions 1 to 6)

The first questions you must ask are fairly broad: How many focus groups should I carry out? Additionally, who should speak on the questions I have? What is the appropriate group (or groups) to speak on the subject? What, in other words, is my population of interest (sometimes called a *sampling frame*) for this research question?

How Many Focus Groups Should I Carry Out? (Question 1)

Regarding the number of focus groups, this will vary according to the research question and the desired composition of the focus groups. Generally speaking, with four to six focus groups a researcher will arrive at data saturation, that is, the point after which the introduction of new, relevant data is increasingly rare. As a general rule of thumb, then, a maximum of six focus groups should be the goal (Morgan 1996). Still, a researcher may wish to access multiple perspectives from different stakeholders on a particular topic of interest. For example, when addressing the effectiveness of a particular addiction treatment program, a researcher may wish to speak to addicts and also to the counselors responsible for administering the treatment. In this case, the researcher may aim to carry out, for example, four focus groups with each group (i.e., addicts and counselors).[1]

What Is My Sampling Frame? (Question 2)

The **sampling frame** represents the list of people, households, organizations, or groups that the researcher believes is a good approximation of the research population of interest (Stewart et al. 2007, 45). Before beginning data collection, a researcher must first define the sampling frame to which her research question applies. Once defined, she then can develop a strategy for recruitment that entails capturing as representative a sample of that population as possible.

Certainly, researchers must take great care in identifying the appropriate population(s) from which to recruit focus group participants. Here, the research question is key. It helps determine, first, with whom a researcher

[1] When planning focus groups, costs are an important consideration. I address this point in greater detail below.

would like to speak and, second, whether or not she would like to speak to more than one group or population. Let us return to the example of the addiction treatment program above. A research question might be: How effective is treatment X perceived to be in comparison with previous addiction treatments? On this point, addicts and counselors will likely offer different (but equally consequential) reactions on treatment effectiveness. Therefore, the researcher may wish to identify two sampling frames (addicts *and* counselors) and plan for recruitment accordingly. Given the comparative nature of the research question, the researcher will want to locate, where possible, addicts and counselors that have had experience with *both* treatment X and at least one previous treatment.

How, then, does one identify these individuals? And what is the best way to recruit individuals once they have been identified? Let's tackle this question by examining, first, how one research team actually identified and recruited a set of focus group participants. We can, then, develop a set of conclusions based on their experience. Box 3.1 introduces a project undertaken by William A. Gamson. The project included multiple focus groups and was published in the 1992 book, *Talking Politics*.

As Box 3.1 shows, Gamson was successful in carrying out multiple focus groups. Importantly, tradeoffs were made when it came to the sampling and recruitment process. For one, Gamson ultimately decided to truncate his sampling frame to the Boston area. Truncation inherently limits the generalizability of his results. This means the conclusions are less likely to apply to groups outside the Boston area. Geographical delimitation also, however, gave Gamson more control over the recruitment process, as he could use his own knowledge as a resident of Boston to achieve considerable diversity within the city limits.

Second, Gamson sought to compose each focus group with a diverse group of individuals. Yet, his recruitment strategy – his team recruited one individual who would then enlist the remaining participants in a particular group – meant that the focus groups tended to stratify into all white or all black groups. Overall, then, the focus groups were racially homogenous, if also heterogeneous in terms of sex and age.

What Should the Composition of Each Focus Group Be? (Question 3)

Certainly, composition matters for focus groups. The goals of your project can help you define the ideal make up of each group. A research question, for example, might seek to understand whether gender affects notions of equality. Here, the researcher will likely organize all male and all female focus groups. Generally speaking, the researcher should carefully consider the scope and

Box 3.1 A Running Example: *Talking Politics*

In his book, *Talking Politics* (1992), William A. Gamson examines how people construct meaning about politics. He is specifically interested in understanding how individuals discuss particular, hot-button issues when left to their own devices. He asks, what frames do citizens use to make sense of complicated topics? He is particularly interested in understanding how exposure to the mass media might affect the frames citizens use. He therefore further asks, how does mass media consumption affect how citizens understand complicated issues?

To help answer this question, Gamson organized several focus groups, through which he could speak with citizens directly. He ended up organizing thirty-seven focus groups comprised of a total of 188 participants (an average of about five individuals per focus group). He chose to exclude college students or graduates from his population, as he was interested in how working people in particular – individuals who "do not own the means of production, who sell their labor power to others" (Gamson 1992, 14) – processed the news and understood politics.

Data collection was undertaken in the Boston area, a choice that made sense logistically even though it limited the extent to which the results could be generalized (Gamson 1992, 15). The groups varied in terms of race, gender, religion, and age, though of the thirty-seven focus groups, only three were interracial. Seventeen were all white, and seventeen were all black. Recruitment occurred in multiple sites. The author chose to focus on "public sites," where a recruitment table would not be overly conspicuous, including during the festivals, picnics, fairs, and markets that occurred in different communities (Gamson 1992, 16). His intention was to recruit one person who would then recruit friends or colleagues to complete the group.

conditions of the research question under investigation. Given its content, with whom would you ideally speak? Which groups, organizations, or individuals would be best poised to answer the question? Are there distinctions that are vital? If so, then these should be prioritized when it comes to recruitment. Secondary goals – for example, Gamson's desire to achieve as much heterogeneity as possible – may be sought as well, but a research question can still be answered if those goals are not fully met. Overall, it is best to keep in mind that group composition affects the answers that you will get.

Researchers must make additional considerations when it comes to focus group composition. Should, for example, they be comprised of strangers or acquaintances? Gamson deliberately chose to work with peer groups. When focus groups include acquaintances, conversations may unfold more easily, such that underlying patterns of meaning are more easily uncovered (Flick 2009, 197). Nonetheless, the researcher should be cognizant of how sensitive the topic might be. Friendly neighbors may not be as willing to address complicated and potentially polarizing topics, such as teen pregnancy, drug use, or religious beliefs. Tensions may emerge that may make future interactions less comfortable. With strangers, the longer-term effects of the tensions that conversations might reveal will be less consequential. Alternatively, it may be more difficult to get the conversational "ball" rolling – although in my experience, if the questions are topical enough, citizens will want to talk.

Additionally, as with Gamson's project, a researcher will have to decide how homogenous a group should be, as well as in what way. For certain questions (e.g., the differential effect of a new drug addiction treatment), homogeneity will be preferred. Participants, such as drug addicts or counselors, will have a lot in common – a sense of solidarity and shared experience – that can make sharing easier. This sense of solidarity is especially ideal when studying sensitive topics, such as drug addiction, sexual assault, or racial discrimination (Finch et al. 2014, 231; Liamputtong 2011). With homogenous groups, it will also be easier to compare data collected *across* multiple focus groups. Alternatively, when groups are homogenous, it may be difficult to tease out difference or disagreement among participants.

With more heterogeneous groups, a researcher may wish to exploit differences in opinion or reaction within a single group setting. One should be careful, however, to avoid bringing together individuals with socio-demographic differences that may be particularly pronounced, for example, mixing class or age groups that are obviously very different. Here, diversity can make people uncomfortable and impede, rather than fuel, conversations (Finch et al. 2014, 231). For example, in focus groups about pregnancy termination, a researcher can attempt to achieve diversity in terms of age and relationship status, but she may wish to only include women who have had abortions.

Note the use of the term, "attempt," in the previous sentence. It is important to keep in mind that our expectations regarding group composition – as with all things regarding focus group preparations – should be realistic. Some group distinctions (or similarities) will be necessary for the focus groups we organize. Others, however, might be ideal but ultimately secondary for the research question at hand. When it comes to group composition, therefore, researchers should identify those differences or similarities that must be leveraged. Beyond that, however, the researcher may have to cede some control over the actual groups that form.[2]

[2] The researcher must, ultimately, take group composition into account when analyzing the data collected. On this point, asking participants to fill out a demographic questionnaire will be helpful. More on this below.

Recruiting your Participants; Working with Professionals; and Identifying a Space for Undertaking Focus Groups (Questions 4, 5, and 6)

Understanding your priorities for focus group composition is vital for a successful recruitment process. It is also a very difficult undertaking. This is especially the case if you do not have the resources to hire a consultancy group to do the recruitment for you. For some authors, recruitment represents "the single most common source of failure" in undertaking focus groups (Morgan 1995, 517). There are many reasons for this. For one, achieving the desired focus group composition can be very difficult. Additionally, restrictions imposed by your Institutional Review Board (IRB, see below) may limit where and how you recruit potential participants. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, though you may feel quite confident that you have successfully recruited enough participants, you can never know *for sure* that individuals will actually show up to the designated place at the designated time.

Recruitment is, therefore, both vital to a successful data collection process and also extremely difficult to control (Morgan 1995; see also Krueger and Casey 2015). The best one can do is develop a recruitment strategy that you feel will maximize the likelihood of success. First and foremost, you must think carefully about "where and how potential group members spend their time, what barriers may exist that make participation difficult, and what incentives are valued by the group" (Stewart et al. 2007, 59). The answers to these questions should help you identify *where* recruitment should happen; *how* recruitment can best take place; and even *when* and *where* the actual focus groups should take place.

Recruitment should happen, quite simply, in those places where your ideal group members spend their time. Might they belong to the same church or civil society organization? Is there a public space (e.g., a park or a plaza) that they typically frequent? Gamson sought to recruit a wide diversity of people from multiple different communities (see Box 3.1). He therefore zeroed in on public events in those targeted communities. Note that he explicitly chose *not* to recruit at public events that were political in nature. He did not want to bias his sample toward individuals who could be politically inclined (Gamson 1992, 16).

Once you identify where recruitment will happen, you must decide how actually to recruit. Will you set up a recruitment table, as Gamson (1992) did? Will you enlist the help of church or civil society organization volunteers? Engaging the peers of your potential participants can be extremely useful for successful recruitment. When utilizing the help of others, however, you must consider the following. First, your IRB must approve of whatever approach you devise. Second, you must properly train your enlisted volunteers on what they must (not) say when recruiting participants. For example, they may need to ask screening questions to gauge whether an individual meets your specified requirements. You may want them to briefly describe the kinds of conversations that will take place in the focus group. Perhaps they can mention, as Gamson did, that compensation will be provided. Once these decisions have been made, keep in mind that you should then *over*-recruit by at least 20 to 25 percent. Better to have too many rather than too few participants show up (on this problem, see Chapter 4).

Some researchers may have access to a consultancy group with whom they can work to recruit participants and even, in some cases, carry out the focus groups. The clear advantage to this is that a researcher will ostensibly be working with a person or team with a demonstrated record in undertaking focus groups. They will likely have a recruitment process to which they can tailor your research needs. They may also have a place where the focus groups can take place. If this type of assistance is within your reach, then I recommend grasping it with both hands! The problem, of course, is that this kind of professional help tends to be expensive. If you have the money, then you should do your due diligence. Speak with more than one consultancy group near your research site. Request estimates for the work to be undertaken. Negotiate. Re-negotiate. Then, make the best decision given your project.

Finally, the decision regarding where and how to recruit may impact your choices on when and where to host the focus group conversations. Is there a space available in the civil society organization or church in question? Is there a quiet café or restaurant near the public space where recruitment occurred? You will want to identify a location and a time that is convenient to your population of interest. This means establishing a time out of regular work hours and choosing a space that they can easily access.

In addition to convenience, you want to identify a space that is large enough to comfortably fit the six to ten individuals you have recruited plus a moderator, yourself, a table and chairs, and the equipment you will use to record the conversations. You also want to identify a *quiet* space where interruptions will, ideally, be minimized. Data collection will be much more difficult if participants cannot hear each other and your recording equipment cannot hear the participants. Some creativity may be required when it comes to identifying an appropriate space. You should rely on your knowledge of the research site, and the knowledge of others when possible, to make this step as painless as possible.

The Material Needs of Focus Groups (Questions 7 and 8)

To be sure, identifying a *space* for hosting the focus groups is but one of several material demands that focus groups require. Focus groups are quite material intensive. When you show up on the day of the focus group(s), you should keep in mind that you typically must arrive with the following items:

1. **Recording equipment**. Most principally, you will need to tape the focus group conversations. This is indispensable for the transcription process. You may choose to audio- or videotape the focus groups. There are trade-offs to videotaping the focus group. On the one hand, you can more easily keep track of who is speaking and also capture the non-verbal responses that can be so central to content analysis. On the other, the presence of a video camera may make your participants uncomfortable. It will also have greater implications for the kind of consent that your IRB may require, since anonymity will be harder to protect when visual data are created alongside the audio data. In my experience, audiotaping works just fine, especially if you, as the researcher, can keep track of particularly important non-verbal inflections and participant order in your own, written notes. Regardless of the recording mode, be sure to bring the device's charger or an extra battery, in the event that an outlet is not immediately accessible. If your focus groups take place outside of your home country, keep in mind the voltage and outlet requirements of the research site and plan to bring any converting devices that may be necessary. (In fact, you should make note of these technological requirements in an on-site visit *before* the day of the focus groups, to prevent any potential technological issues.)
2. **Pens, paper, name-tags, envelopes**. Many focus groups ask participants to write down certain answers or thoughts before sharing them. For this, writing implements and paper will be necessary. It is also typically nice to provide name-tags, so that you, the moderator, and other participants can easily refer to everyone's first name as the conversation unfolds. Depending on your IRB's consenting procedures, you may need to enclose consent forms and demographic questionnaires in sealed envelopes, so be sure to bring these along as well.
3. **Consent forms, demographic questionnaires**. Often, participants fill out a demographic questionnaire before (or after) a focus group takes place. You may also need to obtain the written consent of your participants before the focus group can take place. Bring these forms with you! Of course, this seems obvious, but often it is the obvious things that we take for granted – and, consequently, leave behind or forget – in the final days leading up to the focus groups.
4. **Compensation**. Researchers often compensate focus group participants for their time (more on this below). It is best to have the compensation, however defined, divvied up, ready to disseminate, and stored with the consent forms and demographic questionnaires prior to the focus group(s).

5. **Refreshments**. It is customary to provide your participants with some light refreshments (e.g., a beverage or two, cookies or crackers) to enjoy before, during, and after the focus group. In addition to the drinks and food, remember to bring enough cups, plates, and napkins for your expected participants.
6. **Table, chairs**. Ideally, your defined space for the focus groups will come equipped with the furniture where focus group participants, the moderator, and you will sit. In the absence of this infrastructure, you will need to provide it yourself. Keep in mind that, in addition to the space needed for different individuals, you will need room for the refreshments and also for your recording equipment.

The Costs Associated with Focus Groups (Question 9)

Focus groups are not cost-free. Still, the financial commitment required can vary depending on how resourceful you are during focus group preparations. For example, the researcher may directly purchase many of the material needs listed above. She can rent a space; buy the paper goods; pay for photocopies; and purchase the refreshments at a local market. She may also, however, utilize a donated or borrowed space and/or acquire the paper goods from, and make the photocopies with, a local institutional host. Focus groups, in other words, need not exert *excessive* costs if the researcher is willing to do the footwork necessary to reduce certain expenditures.

Still, certain costs will likely be unavoidable. For one, it is customary to pay your moderator for his/her time and experience. The rate should be negotiated and adjusted both for the level of the moderator's previous experience and typical moderator rates in the area. The participants also often receive monetary compensation (although this is not always the case, see Box 3.2). Even if the cost per person is relatively low (say, $5 to $10 per person), the overall expense can nevertheless become quite high, especially if you organize six focus groups with ten people each (a grand total of $300 to $600).

Finally, researchers should keep in mind the costs involved with transcribing the focus group conversations. Certainly, there are financial costs to this step. These can be curtailed somewhat, however, if you can "outsource" transcription to a third party. For example, an undergraduate research assistant may charge less per hour than a graduate assistant or professional. Additionally, it may be wise, both financially and analytically, to have a native transcribe your data if your focus groups took place in another country. Hourly rates may be lower. Moreover, that person may be better equipped to decipher colloquialisms and other local linguistic idiosyncrasies.

Box 3.2 What/How Much Compensation should Participants Receive?

It is customary to provide focus group participants with compensation of some kind in exchange for the time and energy they contribute to the focus group (Bloor et al. 2001). Quite often, researchers provide a monetary award. In this case, one must decide how much money is appropriate. Often, researchers take into consideration the travel costs incurred in arriving at the data collection site and time potentially missed in a job or additional commitment (Hennink 2007, 31–32).

Researchers must be careful, however, to balance a desire to compensate for time with what may be perceived as a monetary inducement to participate at all.

Additionally, in some cases (e.g., as with upper class participants), a relatively small monetary prize may not be appropriate. Instead, a researcher might donate the total of the group's "earned" money to a charity or an organization of choice.

Indeed, where monetary compensation is not preferred, researchers may think creatively to offer alternative forms of compensation. For example, all participants may be entered into a lottery, in which one or two prizes (e.g., a tablet or a gift certificate) are included. This may be preferable from a price stand point, as one or two non-monetary gifts may be less expensive than a universal cash handout.

Ultimately, any decision regarding compensation must be approved by your institution's IRB. That said, there is some flexibility (and creativity!) involved in devising the compensation structure that works for your project.

In addition to the financial costs, the researcher must also keep in mind the labor and time involved in transcription. This is not an easy (or particularly fun) process! Finding a trusted third party can alleviate the burdens of this intensive and extremely important step in the data collection process. On this last point, a researcher who has the funds may wish to hire a local consultancy firm to carry out the entire data collection process from start (i.e., recruitment) to finish (i.e., transcription). This will likely be the most costly budgetary item to consider, and so it is not typically available to most social science researchers.

Overall, resource-strapped researchers may wish to think carefully about where they will invest the limited funds they have when it comes to doing focus groups. Personally, I find that the most difficult, time-consuming, and labor-intensive aspect of the focus group process is transcribing the data collected onto paper. I therefore prioritize, above all else, allaying these costs. Then, I decide how to distribute my remaining funds. Ultimately, it is important to keep in mind that the money you have at your disposal, together with your resourcefulness and contacts on the ground, will determine how many focus groups you can feasibly carry out. Consequently, this is not a step in your focus group preparations that should be taken lightly.

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) Process (Question 10)

The IRB represents a group of individuals at an academic institution that has been designated to review and monitor all research involving human subjects. Its primary purpose is to ensure that the rights and welfare of the humans involved in any research project are protected. The IRB is charged with reviewing the protocols and related materials associated with a given research project, such that human rights and welfare are preserved.[3]

Most researchers are subject to some form of IRB oversight and/or approval prior to carrying out focus group-based research. This oversight can present certain limits regarding how and where participant recruitment occurs, including what can(not) be said, as well as whether, and what kind of, consent is needed. Generally speaking, the IRB will review all documents associated with a data collection project, including recruitment scripts, question protocols, questionnaires, and/or sign-up sheets. The path to IRB approval can be fairly circuitous. Importantly, the requirements and restrictions vary from institution to institution (Stark 2011). Therefore, I recommend that you present your preferred focus group project to the IRB and adjust it according to their response.

Choosing and Training the Moderator (Question 11)

Thus far we have addressed, with some brevity, some important considerations involved in focus group preparation. In the next two sections of this chapter, we will spend more time addressing two final aspects of the focus group that must be carefully considered prior to undertaking focus groups: choosing a moderator and developing the question protocol. These two concerns deserve more attention, because they are truly crucial for the overall success of the focus groups. For one, the questions help determine the kinds of topics covered throughout the conversation. The moderator, in turn, is largely responsible for eliciting responses and, consequently, nurturing and guiding the conversations taking place. Taken together, the set of questions and the

[3] See www.fda.gov/RegulatoryInformation/Guidances/ucm126420.htm (last accessed July 24, 2018), for more information. Information on human research standards in other countries is available at: www.hhs.gov/ohrp/international/compilation-human-research-standards/index.html (last accessed August 9, 2018)

moderator condition, in great part, the nature and the quality of the data generated.

Let us first examine the role of the moderator. This person conducts the focus group from start to finish, introducing the topics of interest, regulating the tenor and flow of the discussions that take place, and ensuring that all participants are both at ease and engaged. Depending on the question protocol, a moderator may also have to present stimulus material (e.g., a newspaper article, a video, an audio clip) and/or engage participants in a specific activity, such as a team-building or brainstorming exercise (Onwuegbuzie et al. 2009, 4).

The moderator should also keep track of points raised that may need to be revisited, while simultaneously regulating the dynamic of the group itself. She may have to draw out shy or quiet participants or discourage dominant or disruptive ones – tasks that require a certain level of empathy and tactical flexibility (Morrison-Beedy et al. 2001, 50). Finally, moderators must be sensitive to the nature of their own participation in the focus group. On this point, a “delicate balance” is required (Sim 1998, 347). The moderator must be engaged to stimulate participation while also sufficiently removed from the conversation so as not to stymie its flow. In short, moderating is no small task!

In a focus group comprised of professional focus group moderators, participants identified the ideal set of skills one should have to thrive in their line of work: personality, sensitivity, insight, ability, empathy, warmth, and listening and analytical skills (Caruso 1976, as taken from Fern 2001, 75).

Given the rather hefty role that a moderator must fulfill, it behooves the researcher to spend some time electing the appropriate person to oversee her focus groups. Indeed, the literature tells us that, in choosing a moderator, certain traits are desirable. A moderator should be empathetic, genuinely interested in what others say, animated and spontaneous, flexible, eloquent, and have a sense of humor (Stewart et al. 2007, 79). Good interpersonal skills, in general, are important, since the moderator has a powerful influence on the conversations that take place (Sim 1998, 347).

In addition to these desired personality traits, a moderator’s gender or race can be important. For example, a researcher might wish to have a woman moderate a set of focus groups comprised of women who have experienced sexual assault. When carrying out focus groups in another country, a researcher might consider working with a native speaker – someone familiar with local speech patterns. In his focus groups, Gamson (1992) matched the race of the moderator with that of his focus group participants. Given the topic of the focus groups, these demographic considerations may be minor. Keep in mind, however, that the chosen moderator should be someone with whom focus group participants can relate and/or feel comfortable (Fern 2001, 75).

Finally, when possible, researchers should choose an individual with previous moderating experience. While inexperience is not necessarily an impediment to successful moderation, a first-time moderator may be unwilling to allow a conversation to deviate too much from the question protocol – a tendency that can inhibit spontaneous conversation (Kidd and Parshall 2000, 294). Less experienced moderators may also, consciously or not, wish to please the researcher, inadvertently seeking to confirm hypotheses and steering participants away from alternative positions (Stewart et al. 2007, 85).

Of course, one's moderator "wish list" may not be fully realized. Where this occurs, take heart! If one's choice of moderator is suboptimal, the researcher may nevertheless find solace in the fact that focus groups are remarkably "robust" to any potential moderator weaknesses (Morgan 1995, 521). Indeed, the researcher will spend considerable time and energy training the moderator prior to overseeing any focus group. Therefore, she can exercise a certain amount of control over how the moderator functions in practice. Let us, then, conclude this section by discussing moderator preparation.

When preparing your moderator, it is important to keep in mind both the nature of the research question at hand, as well as the group dynamics that might arise given group composition and the questions to be discussed (Stewart et al. 2007, 81). How, then, does one train a person to moderate? I recommend meeting at least once (if not more) with your chosen moderator. Explain the motivations for organizing the focus groups. Introduce the primary research question(s). On this point, be careful not to reveal your expectations or hypotheses, since this can bias the moderator toward drawing out certain responses.

Next, consider the question protocol in its entirety and develop a strategy for addressing each question. To do this, make sure, first, that the moderator understands each question. (This is especially important in non-native contexts, where phrasing or content may not "travel" as well as the researcher might think.) Then, explain the goal behind each question. Note that this is different from explaining the desired or hypothesized response that you suspect a question will elicit. For example, it might be useful for you to explain that you want a question to elicit an emotional response (e.g., "With this question, I want to understand how *x* makes them feel."). You may also instruct the moderator *not* to use certain cues or words unless first addressed by the participants themselves. Here, your goal is to ensure that the moderator adopts the appropriate tone and guides the discussion in an appropriate way, without inadvertently leading participants toward a particular response or outcome. In the past, I have found it useful to make certain instructions explicit on the question protocol that I give to the moderator. I then encourage the moderator to study these instructions, essentially memorizing them before overseeing the first focus group (see Appendix 1 for an example).

Finally, you may wish to provide specific instructions regarding the moderator's overall approach to the conversations. You may, for example, encourage reflective listening, wherein the moderator clarifies, summarizes, and paraphrases certain points along the way so as to prevent miscommunication or misunderstanding (Fern 2001, 81–82). You should also remind the moderator to avoid making any kind of verbal or non-verbal judgments. Focus group participants should feel free to speak openly and honestly. Finally, a moderator may be instructed to gently engage with shy or reticent participants. She should also know to – again, gently – frustrate the attempts of participants who are particularly dominant or disruptive. I spell out some strategies on how to deal with challenging participants in the next chapter.

One last point to keep in mind. It will be useful to address your expectations regarding how much control the moderator exerts over the focus group conversation. You may ask the moderator to prevent participants from straying too far from the topic at hand. This might be ideal for comparative purposes. Greater imposition will allow for better standardization across focus groups (Morgan 1996). However, where the research is more exploratory in nature, it may be useful to instruct the moderator to intervene only minimally in conversations.

In his project, Gamson (1992) instructed his moderators to exert more control. He instructed them to break off contact as soon as (politely) possible with any one participant and to encourage others to join the conversation. They were told to avoid reacting, to the extent possible, to comments participants made. Moderators were instructed to keep participants on track in terms of the topic at hand, although what counted as "off track" was defined quite narrowly, so as to encourage participants to bring in their own experiences (Gamson 1992, 17–18).

Training the moderator is, therefore, of utmost importance when it comes to focus group preparations. Indeed, the care you take in preparing your moderator will likely be reflected in the quality of the focus groups that ultimately take place. As a final recommendation, I suggest that you take the time to write down the logic behind your choice of moderator. You should make note of her preferred demographic profile. You should also write down the specific instructions that you gave prior to the focus groups. There are two reasons for this. First, you should be prepared to make your moderating choices public, in the interests of methodological transparency. Second, you might need to carry out more focus groups in the future – sometimes, well into the future.

In my case, thanks to funding and other resource constraints, three years passed between two rounds of fieldwork for a single project (Cyr 2017b). If I had not carefully made note of my instruction protocol and moderator choices, I would have had reason to be concerned about the comparability across each set of focus groups.

Defining the Question Protocol (Question 12)

Developing a set of questions, sometimes called a question protocol or a questioning route, may seem easier than it actually is. In fact, a lot of careful consideration is required. For one, a researcher must strategize over the best use of the focus group's fairly limited length. In one and a half to two hours – the standard time of any single focus group – you will be hard-pressed to ask more than eight to twelve questions (Krueger 1998a). Ask more than that, and you will sacrifice the substantive depth that makes focus groups so unique as a method.

Questions, then, should be carefully thought out, with an emphasis on making the most of a limited time frame. They must also be pointed, that is, directed toward the research at hand. Finally, they should be engaging for the participants and even fun. In all, writing a question protocol is no easy task! Therefore, this section is oriented toward helping you create a useful set of focus group questions.

Above all else, when developing your focus group questions, you must keep your research goals in mind. What are you hoping to learn from the participants? What topics do you want them to address? The questions should evoke conversation, but they should also be one-dimensional. That is, each question should address one issue or topic. It is better to ask two questions, addressing two different dimensions of an issue (How was the program useful to you? How was it practical?), rather than fold both into one (How was the program useful and practical?). Overall, the questions should be concise and easy to understand. Ideally, they will adopt the language and idioms of the participants themselves (Krueger and Casey 2015, Chapter 3).

When developing a question protocol, most obviously, the questions should be open-ended in nature. If questions can be answered with a simple, "yes" or "no," then they are unlikely to generate much conversation. In Gamson's study, for example, the moderator asked participants to think about issues that were prominent in the news cycle at that time. She asked, "When you think about this issue of . . ., what comes to mind?" (Gamson 1992, 194–195). Phrased as such, citizens are invited to give their reaction, whatever it might be, to the topic.