

## 4 Undertaking Focus Groups

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The focus group emerged in a rather impromptu way, when Paul Lazarsfeld asked Robert Merton to join him as he monitored individual responses to different radio morale programs. Participants pressed different red or green buttons to reflect their negative or positive responses to different aspects of the programs. Lazarsfeld's assistant then asked a series of follow-up questions. Here is where the story gets interesting. To Merton's dismay, the assistant's questions were not focused enough on specifically expressed reactions. To add to his frustration, Merton felt that the assistant was inadvertently guiding participants to respond in particular ways (Merton 1987, 552–553). In each case, the potential of the focus group for eliciting useful information remained unmet.

Merton's focus then (and, as it happens, my focus now) on these two weaknesses in the follow-up group interview were consequential. Merton's experience with the flawed "focussed [*sic*] interview" provoked him to think more seriously about what a group interview could and should entail. They helped him clarify how focus groups could be undertaken properly. These lessons are useful for us as we think about undertaking focus groups in this chapter.

On the one hand, focus groups should seek to elicit broad but also specific insight into the issues and processes under investigation. These dual objectives – seeking both precise and wide-ranging responses – might seem contradictory at first. In reality, the social nature of the focus group facilitates the fulfillment of both goals. The simultaneous participation of multiple participants enables an extended discussion of a potentially broad range of issues – something that might overly tire a single participant in an individual interview. Nonetheless, the moderator can ask individuals to elaborate on particular responses. By probing in this way, it is possible to achieve a level of specificity on certain points that is similar to that of one-on-one interviews.

To achieve this balance of wide-ranging but nonetheless precise responses requires fairly skillful moderation. This leads to my second point – one that was addressed initially in Chapter 3. The moderator is key to undertaking a successful focus group! In what follows, then, we visit some of the logistical details of undertaking focus groups. Then, we consider the general format and sequencing of a typical focus group and discuss some of the challenges that

may arise therein. Finally, we will concentrate on certain moderating tasks that can help facilitate an informative and productive group conversation.

One last point on undertaking focus groups. The content of this chapter is designed to walk you through a typical focus group experience. It provides a template, if you will, of what focus groups tend to look like. That said, you have considerable flexibility in tailoring the 90 to 120 minutes to your needs. Moreover, you may notice that this chapter is, relative to Chapter 3 at least, quite short. This is because the actual implementation of a focus group is fairly straightforward once the steps leading up to it, as identified in Chapter 3, have been fully addressed. Put differently: when the focus group is underway, much of the hard work is behind you. And while you should be attentive to small modifications you may wish to implement in future iterations, you should also listen to and engage with the conversations as they unfold. In other words, enjoy the focus groups!

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### Setting up the Space

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Before your participants arrive, you should set up the space in a way that both assures participant comfort and maximizes the data collection process. Ideally, you can set up the table(s) and chairs so that the participants and the moderator are seated in a circle. At the very least, you should minimize the hierarchical position of the moderator vis-à-vis everyone else in the conversation. It is not ideal, for example, to place the moderator at one end of the table, although this may be unavoidable. By integrating, as best you can, the moderator into the seating arrangement, you convey to the participants that everyone's voice matters equally. The researcher, by contrast, should be seated separately from the main set-up. Again, this distance reflects the passive, observant role the researcher will play as the conversation unfolds.

Refreshments – which often include a beverage or two and a light snack, such as cookies or chips – should be located such that participants can access them at any time during the conversation. Certainly, the shape of the room may mean that these are not immediately within participants' reach. This should not be too much of a disruption, however, especially if the moderator encourages participants to serve themselves early on. At any rate, participants should know that they are welcome to more food and drink as the conversation unfolds. The moderator may simply ask them to be as quiet as possible should they need to move to get them.

Perhaps the most important consideration, in terms of maximizing the data collection process, is the placement of the (audio or video) recording device in the room (Bloor et al. 2001). Quite obviously, the data produced

in a focus group will be of little consequence if the researcher cannot access the conversation after the fact. Therefore, the recording device should be placed such that it captures everyone's intervention, regardless of where they sit in the room. The researcher should work with the moderator on this point. They should test sound quality throughout the room before participants arrive.

A lot of the logistics of the focus group itself, including the snacks served and the arrangement of the furniture, should be sensitive to the cultural norms and practices of the research site in question. These sensitivities are key to enabling participant comfort. They also imply additional knowledge on the part of the researcher. They remind us, again, that undertaking focus groups in international contexts often involves some extra research and care.

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## The Focus Group, from Start to Finish

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As we move forward with an overview of a typical focus group sequence, it may be helpful to view actual focus groups as a reference. One good option to explore is Peter Hart's Voices of the Voters project, which is sponsored by the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania. The examples are numerous, and the topics are very interesting.

The Annenberg Public Policy Center has hosted focus groups with voters from around the United States since 2004. Peter Hart, veteran pollster and expert on public opinion, moderates the focus groups. These conversations are intended to draw insight about presidential candidates, campaigns, and campaign issues from voters from a broad political spectrum. An archive of video recordings is publicly available. These videos are very useful for understanding what a focus group looks like in practice. See [www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/events/peter-harts-voices-of-the-voters/](http://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/events/peter-harts-voices-of-the-voters/) (last accessed July 24, 2018).

We can typically reduce the focus group to a set of five stages: (1) the introduction; (2) the initial question(s); (3) the heart of the focus group, where the most important questions are asked; (4) the wrapping-up stage; and (5) the final stage, where participants are debriefed. Let us briefly address each stage in turn.

### Stage 1: The Focus Group Introduction

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A lot happens in the introductory stage of the focus groups, although, in practice, this stage passes quite quickly. Here, the moderator must undertake three tasks. Each is fundamental for the conversation that follows.

First, the moderator must *set the right tone* for the conversation that follows. The moderator will welcome the group and invite them to partake in refreshments. While the individuals are settling in, friendliness and openness on the part of both the moderator and the researcher is important. First impressions matter! These initial, friendly interactions demonstrate to individuals that, while they have come to a data collection session, there is an atmosphere of congeniality and informality. I find it useful for the moderator to introduce herself and also the researcher, so that the participants know the moderator is running the show.

Once everyone has been seated, the moderator should provide an overview of the overall research project. Keep in mind that she should convey only very general information about the project. Too much specificity can bias individuals toward answering in a particular way. For example, I recently undertook a set of focus groups in Lima, Peru. My project sought to understand why certain Peruvians strongly oppose a particular political movement in the country, called *fujimorismo* (Cyr and Meléndez 2017). Rather than convey the particular goals of the project, however, my moderator told the participants that I sought to understand how Peruvian activists viewed politics in their country today. The introduction was fairly vague in terms of the project's goals. It was also, however, an accurate, if general, reflection of those goals. The moderator therefore allowed participants the chance to assess whether they would like to participate in the project, without giving away what my specific research goals would be.

Once the tone has been set, the next task for the moderator is to *set the ground rules* for the focus group that will follow. This is where participants learn about what their participation, exactly, entails. For example, the moderator can read the consent form out loud at this point. The consenting process often involves emphasizing several things (although the exact nature of consent is IRB-dependent). Participants may learn that their participation is entirely voluntary (and often anonymous); that there are no right answers; and that their answers will be taped (Finch et al. 2014, 218–219). Participants must knowingly consent to these things, so the moderator should be firm on these points.

To be sure, the moderator should also convey these ground rules in a friendly way, in the hopes of reducing the “evaluation apprehension” of the participants (Fern 2001). When ensuring confidentiality, for example, the moderator can assure participants that their words will only appear anonymously in publications. She can emphasize that all data generated will be stored in a password- or lock-protected space. The moderator may offer to take questions at this point, further allaying any potential participant concern. Once participants feel fully informed, the moderator will ask them to sign

the consent form. This is also a good time to ask participants to fill out a socio-demographic questionnaire, if the researcher has provided one. Recall that this questionnaire helps a researcher assess the diversity of the focus group and any potential sampling biases that might exist (Bloor et al. 2001, 40).<sup>1</sup>

Finally, the moderator must work to *set the participants at ease*. Participants must feel comfortable in the focus group setting before the questions begin. This is especially important if the focus group will broach some sensitive or difficult topics. The moderator may, therefore, acknowledge the potentially difficult nature of the conversation that will unfold. In so doing, she can suggest that the sensitive nature of the topic is precisely why we need focus groups. They provide key insight on hard-to-address themes (Stewart et al. 2007, Chapter 5).

This is also a moment in which the moderator can disclose some information about herself. Let us take, for example, a focus group in which participants will be asked to share their opinions about a recent election. The moderator may reveal, for example, that she enjoys discussing politics with others and therefore is especially looking forward to their conversation. This helps place the moderator on a more equal footing with the participants. It also helps establish rapport (Fern 2001). In all, the introductory stage is a key moment in which the moderator can create “an atmosphere of trust and openness” with participants (Stewart et al. 2007, 94).

## Stage 2: The Initial Question(s)

Once the rules have been established and participants have signed the consent form, it is time to begin. The first question is largely introductory in nature. Each participant should be asked to give their first name and to answer a simple question that is related to the topic at hand. For example, if the overall focus group is about religion and politics, the moderator may ask each participant to talk briefly about the regularity of their religious practice.

The principle goals at this point are twofold. First, the moderator and the researcher will want to take note of each person’s name, so that they can track the order of the conversation as it unfolds. Second, this initial question is meant to break the ice. It represents each participant’s first intervention in the focus group. It should be simple and fairly straightforward, so as to ease

<sup>1</sup> Depending on the design of the focus groups, a researcher may wish to present the questionnaire at the *end* of the conversation. This can be useful, for example, in certain experimental settings. I find, however, that if the questionnaire only provides socio-demographic information, it is best to have participants fill it out first. This prevents fatigue from setting in, potentially affecting the accuracy of the form. It also ensures that all participants respond to the form. Sometimes individuals are up and out the door before they can be fully debriefed!

each individual into the conversation and warm them up for the remaining questions.

An alternative to the icebreaker question is to present the participants with a focusing exercise (Bloor et al. 2001, 42–47). Focusing exercises are intended to help participants concentrate on the general topic of the focus group – they help “focus” the conversation, as the name suggests. It can involve ranking a set of topics. In this case, the moderator provides a set of statements to the group and asks them to agree on a ranking in order of importance. The moderator may also present a hypothetical case or scenario to the group that is suggestive of some real life situation related to the research topics of interest. Participants, in this “vignette” focusing exercise, are then asked to comment on a course of action to follow. The moderator may also present the group with a photo or image and ask them to describe what they think is going on. Returning to the *Talking Politics* example from Chapter 3 (Gamson 1992), Gamson presented focus group participants with editorial cartoons related to the news topics that they were discussing and asked them for interpretations of and reactions to them (see Gamson 1992, 202–212).

Note that focusing exercises are tasks rather than questions. Unlike a straightforward question, they can, in some cases, encourage participants to work together toward a joint goal from the very beginning of the focus group. While this can be very useful, it may nonetheless be difficult to devise an ice-breaking exercise that is appropriate for the topic at hand. Also, participants may be reluctant to jump right into a group task, especially if they do not know each other. On this point, keep in mind that focusing exercises can also be useful later on in the focus group, as a way to break up the monotony of conventional questions. It can also be a useful tool for asking a particularly important question in a different way, allowing it to serve as a check on validity.

Finally, the moderator should encourage everyone to speak during this first stage of the focus group. It will be increasingly difficult for timid participants to contribute as the conversation deepens. By involving each participant early on, there is a greater chance that they will stay involved throughout the conversation (Finch et al. 2014, 220).

### Stage 3: The Heart of the Focus Group

After the introductory question, the moderator should present a set of questions that brings participants into the heart of the research goals at hand. On this point, sequencing is important, as we already emphasized in Chapter 3. For one, each question should, where possible, lead into the next, so that the flow of the conversation is maintained. Where this is not possible, the

researcher and moderator should work together to devise an appropriate transition between two unrelated topics.

Moreover, it is often the case that one or two questions are really central to the overall objectives of the focus group. The placement of these should be considered carefully. The researcher will want to maximize group rapport. She will also, however, want these questions addressed before participant fatigue sets in. It may be best, therefore, to place these questions fourth, fifth, or sixth in order (out of, say, seven or eight questions).

The moderator is responsible for moving the group from question to question and for probing particular responses as needed (more on this below). She should do so, however, without overly structuring the conversation (Hennink 2007, 172–176). Ultimately the moderator cannot force participants to address any question directly. Indeed, *how* participants answer a particular question is informative in and of itself. Do they understand what is being asked? Does the question have resonance? In fact, in a set of multiple focus groups, researchers can use the first one or two to adjust or adapt questions in accordance to the quality of the response.

Finally, it may at times be necessary for the moderator to explore diverging views. Sometimes participants appear to come to agreement about a question relatively quickly. To probe this apparent consensus further, the moderator may ask, “Does anyone have a different perspective on this point?” Where conversations are disjointed, the moderator can ask if anyone would like to build off of a point made by somebody else (Hennink 2007, 183). The moderator must therefore strike a balance between allowing the conversation to unfold organically and probing for additional or more precise responses. I return to this point in greater detail at the end of the chapter.

#### Stage 4: Wrapping Up

The focus group should come to a close with a final question. Often, this entails allowing participants the opportunity to raise an additional point or two that they feel still needs to be addressed. The moderator should signal that this is the final question (Finch et al. 2014, 221). Indeed, she may also indicate that the focus group is near coming to an end in the *penultimate* question (see, e.g., Appendix 1 for an example). It is often helpful to provide these guideposts to participants along the way.

#### Stage 5: The Debrief

Finally, before participants leave, the moderator should thank each of them for their time. She can also remind them that the researcher is available for

additional questions or comments. The researcher, for her part, should be prepared to provide her contact information or her business card. She may also need to field specific inquiries by the participants as they prepare to leave (Bloor et al. 2001).

During this final, debriefing stage, it is often helpful to mention the future direction of the project. This can include the project's next steps, the kinds of outputs that the project will produce, and when these might be available. This is also the time to pass out compensation to each participant. If the benefit of participation is not immediate, the researcher should use this time to inform the participants about how their time will be rewarded.

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### **The Role of the Researcher**

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The moderator is tasked with much of the work during the focus group. This does not mean, however, that the researcher can sit back on her laurels! Instead, the researcher is often a present, if passive, observer of the conversation. She has one primary role before and after the focus group, and a different role as the discussion unfolds.

First and foremost, the researcher's presence lends credibility to the focus group. She is the project's primary representative. As such, she should be prepared to answer any questions the participants have, both before and after the focus group takes place. I recommend that the researcher arrive with business cards or, at the very least, be ready to provide participants with an email address. Participants often wish to follow up the conversation or follow the project itself as it unfolds.

During the focus group, the researcher should be actively taking notes. This means tracking what the participants say. It is particularly helpful to follow the sequence of interventions. That way, the researcher can avoid the misidentification of participants during the transcription process later on. When I observe focus groups, therefore, I pay close attention to who is speaking to carefully capture the order. I will also, often, directly quote something that each participant says during a particular intervention, so that the transcriber can be sure that the overall intervention is properly attributed.

Beyond this attention to the order of participant interventions, I often try to capture what I think are important insights that each person says during the focus group. This can be quite tiring and, when taken to the extreme, can involve writing down – to the extent possible – as much as possible of what each person says. While this kind of intensive note-taking is not necessary, it will also help with the transcription process. The researcher can also review these notes immediately following the focus group (and before, for example,



the written transcript is ready) as a way to draw some initial conclusions about the data collected.

### Confronting Certain Challenges as the Focus Group Unfolds

The emic, organic nature of focus groups means that certain human dynamics may affect how the conversation evolves. The moderator and the researcher should be prepared to address these challenges, should they manifest. It is often necessary to discuss them in the pre-focus group encounter between the moderator and the researcher. Especially when the moderator is less experienced, it will be useful for her to have some guidelines regarding how to deal with each (see Table 4.1).

Perhaps one of the most widely discussed challenges that can manifest in a focus group is the phenomenon of **group think**.<sup>2</sup> Group think occurs when a focus group conversation yields consensus, whether or not one truly exists (Copsey 2008). In this case, the social dynamics of the group induce pressures for dissenting participants to muffle their disagreement. Therefore, the data

**Table 4.1** Addressing Problematic Social Dynamics in the Focus Group Setting

Dynamic	Why Problematic	Potential Solution
Group think	May reflect false consensus	Ask for written before spoken responses; probe for dissenting ideas
Passivity	Less data collected	Indirect: Eye contact Direct: Invite the participant to intervene
Dominance	Over-representation of one perspective	Indirect: Turn toward someone else; avoid eye contact Direct: Invite others to speak
Hostility	Creates stressful environment	Indirect: Turn toward someone else; avoid eye contact Direct: Invite the participant to take a break or leave
Group silence	Foments discomfort, loss of data	Ask additional, more specific questions; provide examples of potential responses; employ a focusing exercise
Losing focus	Can denote misuse of time	Revisit the original question; turn to the next question

<sup>2</sup> We also briefly addressed this challenge in Chapter 2.

collected by the researcher is inaccurate, since it does not reflect the true sentiments of the group.

Group think can be a problem for focus groups, certainly. Some researchers suggest, however, that, since group think is a dynamic that occurs in our day-to-day social interactions, it actually adds a layer of validity to the focus group process (Hollander 2004, 607). After all, people regularly feel pressure to conform in group settings (Krueger 1994, 10–11). Setting aside the reality of group think, it is nonetheless possible to check for its presence in the focus group setting. Participants can be asked, for example, to write down their responses before voicing them to the group at large (Albrecht et al. 1993, 56–57). This way, the researcher can verify whether what individuals say in the social setting of the focus group conforms with what they initially write. These social forces might also be attenuated by bringing together participants from similar backgrounds.

In addition to group think, a focus group may include an incredibly timid or quiet participant. Here, **passivity** is a concern. When certain participants are overly reticent, then the researcher can lose access to potentially very useful data. After all, passive participants talk less. This means less information is gathered, which is not ideal. Passive participants can sometimes be engaged indirectly. A moderator can invite someone to speak by simply making eye contact. Where this does not work, she can be attentive to potential non-verbal reactions from the participant. If that person nods or shakes her head in response to something, then that can be an invitation for the moderator to intervene and ask her to speak up. Keep in mind, however, that consented participation in the focus group is often predicated on the premise that no one has to speak if they do not wish to. Therefore, the moderator can only do so much with a quiet participant.

**Dominant** participants, by contrast, are more problematic. They can make it more difficult for others to speak, truncating the data collected in a different way than with passive participants. As a louder and more frequent voice, a dominant person can hijack the conversation and impose her perspective, leaving little room for others to interject. A researcher will want to address (and mitigate) this challenge when it occurs. The moderator has indirect and direct tools for dealing with dominance. Sometimes, a moderator can avoid making contact and even turn physically to face someone else, as if to non-verbally communicate that it is someone else's turn to talk. Where this does not work, it may be necessary for the moderator to invite someone else to speak (Finch et al. 2014, 225). Where even this does not work, the moderator may need to take extreme measures and (gently) cut the person off (Stewart et al. 2007, Chapter 5).

Very rarely, one may encounter an openly hostile participant in a focus group. Perhaps a participant has had an usually bad day. Perhaps she is hostile

in her general temperament. **Hostility** occurs when a person is openly confrontational in her actions. Quite obviously, this situation will be extremely disruptive for the group dynamic and will cause a stressful, unenjoyable environment for everyone involved. Sometimes, the moderator can successfully turn the conversation away from the hostile participant by avoiding contact or turning to someone else. If, however, the hostility becomes untenable, then the moderator may have to (gently) pull the person aside and ask her to take a minute to calm down or simply to leave (Stewart et al. 2007, Chapter 5).

There are two, group-level dynamics that may also have to be addressed to preserve the integrity of the focus group. The first occurs when a group, as a whole, does not speak as openly or as freely as one would hope. Sometimes a group may not respond to a particular question. **Group silence** (Hollander 2004; Bloor et al. 2001) can signal that a question is not particularly relevant or properly understood. In the latter case, the moderator may wish to re-phrase the question – often in a way that has been discussed with the researcher when going over the protocol together. Silence, however, when a question has been appropriately interpreted is, by contrast, potentially quite informative. It can signal that the group has little to say on the subject. For example, I undertook focus groups to learn about the stereotypes that citizens associated with different political parties in Peru, Bolivia, and Venezuela (Cyr 2017b). In some cases, the participants had little to say about a party. This silence was quite informative. It suggested that the party had little resonance in society, since citizens could not meaningfully talk about it.

Much more problematic, however, for the focus group are generalized silences. It is every researcher's fear that individuals will simply choose not to speak (Bloor et al. 2001). I have *never* encountered this problem; however, one can imagine that something about a group dynamic might make individuals reluctant to speak. In this case, empathy can go a long way. The moderator can offer up her own answer to the question, as a way to build a rapport with the group and encourage others to speak. (Care must be taken, however, not to *lead* the group by biasing them toward one response.) She can also employ a focusing exercise (see Stage 2 above), which can encourage the group to work together before asking individuals to share their own feelings on a particular topic (Bloor et al. 2001, 52).

Finally, sometimes a group can get caught up in a tangent, pulling the conversation away from the topic of interest and into drastically different thematic terrain (Hennink 2007, 189). These kinds of divergences can be informative. After all, there is a reason that the conversation diverged as it did. When a group **loses focus** and cannot seem to return to the original topic at hand, however, the moderator should be instructed to interject and set the

conversation back on course. She can do so by revisiting the question,<sup>3</sup> or, alternatively, by turning to the next question on the list.

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### The Importance of the Moderator, Revisited

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Throughout this chapter, we have seen how the moderator plays a crucial role in: setting the ground rules, establishing an environment of ease, addressing problematic participants, and keeping the conversation on track. We must, therefore, return to a theme from Chapter 3: The role of the moderator is key! Here, I consider the moderator's overall approach to the focus group and, specifically, the careful balancing act that moderating can imply.

When facilitating a focus group, moderators must work to walk the fine line between different attitudinal and behavioral extremes. For example, the moderator will want to project a certain air of authority, so that she can credibly interject into the focus group as needed. Yet, too much scriptedness or formality can make participants suspicious or ill at ease (Puchta and Potter 2004). Similarly, the moderator should not be a predominant figure in the conversations that unfold. Yet, she may have to interject at times, either to elicit a more complete response or to address a particularly challenging participant (see Table 4.1). It is therefore necessary to maintain a careful balance between involvement and passivity. As Bloor et al. (2001) remind us, the moderator is a “background . . . , not a foreground figure” (Bloor et al. 2001, 49), and yet she clearly must also facilitate the conversation to keep it flowing.

On this point, a bit of guidance from the researcher can help. She can (and should!) consider every question on the protocol with the moderator, so that the latter is fully aware of the purpose of each. A question may, for example, have the goal of encouraging a group to consider the different (and potentially conflicting) priorities that might drive vote choices. The moderator can work to draw out these priorities and the tensions between them if the participants do not immediately address the point. Knowing when to probe, in other words, can help a moderator attain the proper balance between intervening and standing off. Probes are ultimately very useful under certain circumstances: (1) to ascertain the specific meaning behind an overly general intervention; (2) to obtain a more complete response; (3) to encourage others to participate (e.g., “Does anyone else have the same reaction as Linda on this point?”); and (4) to seek out dissent (e.g., “Does anyone have a different perspective from

<sup>3</sup> If the group ventures once again down the tangential path, even after the moderator re-emphasizes the original question, then the researcher may conclude that the apparent divergence is not, actually a divergence. Instead, it is a reflection of something meaningful to the topic at hand.

that of Linda?”) (Stewart et al. 2007, Chapter 5). The researcher can work with the moderator so that the latter understands the extent to which each probing goal is a priority and for which questions, in particular, probing might be necessary. Appendix 1 provides an example of a focus group protocol that includes moderator instructions that address some of these concerns.

Finally, the moderator is tasked with ensuring that all of the questions are addressed. This will be especially important when the researcher intends to compare across multiple focus groups (Morgan 1996, 142). This may require achieving a balance between probing individuals (or the group) on certain questions that are of utmost importance to the researcher. It will also require, however, the equally important skill of time management. The moderator must regularly check a clock to ensure that the time allotted to certain questions – especially those that engender healthy debate or enthusiasm – does not leave the group rushing to finish at the end. Focus groups should not last more than one-and-a-half or two hours. The researcher can work with the moderator to establish a rough estimate of the time that should be devoted to each question. Knowledge about the relative importance of different questions will be helpful here. Beyond this, however, the moderator should have a sense of when the conversation around a certain topic has been exhausted so that she can move on to the next question. Keep in mind, too, that time management is hardest early on (Stewart et al. 2007, Chapter 5), when the questions tend to be more general and the responses of individuals more tentative, slow to emerge, and, in some cases, even long-winded.

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## Conclusion

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This chapter has addressed the different stages that typically constitute a focus group, from the early introductory phase to the final, debriefing stage. It has identified certain challenges that the focus group setting can provoke, especially with respect to individual and group responses to the questions that are asked. While the researcher has an important role to play in both observing the focus group and taking notes as it unfolds, the chapter has also suggested, in line with Chapter 3, that the moderator is a key player in producing a successful conversation.

To be sure, there is very little that the researcher can do once the focus group is underway. Preparation (e.g., of the moderator, of the question protocol, of the space) is fundamentally important precisely because the researcher's control over what happens in the focus group itself is minimal. As a final note, then, I would encourage the researcher to be constantly attentive to how participants respond to certain questions and the general reactions to the

protocol overall. Does the focus group appear to be eliciting the desired information? If so, then excellent! If not, then changes may need to be made before the second, third, or fourth focus group takes place. In the meantime, have fun! Listen to what the participants have to say, and enjoy the fruits of your (preparatory) labor. Hard work – in the form of data analysis (see the next chapter) – is soon to come, and so the researcher should sit back and appreciate the focus group as it unfolds.

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### Exercises

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- 4.1.** Devise two focusing exercises that might be appropriate for an exploratory focus group that wishes to explore strategies for reducing racial prejudice in the workplace.
- 4.2.** Imagine you are undertaking a set of focus groups in a university classroom. The study examines the difficulties of attaining work-study balance among working, first-year college students. How, exactly, would you set up the classroom space to accommodate eight participants, the moderator, and the researcher? What details would you need to keep in mind?
- 4.3.** Access one of the focus group question protocols that is of most interest to you at the Qualitative Data Repository (QDR, <https://qdr.syr.edu/> [last accessed July 24, 2018]). Examine the protocol and read the brief project description that accompanies it. Once you understand what the goals of the project are, consider how you would train a moderator to carry out this protocol with a set of focus groups. What specific instructions, if any, would you give to a moderator regarding each question? Which questions would you suggest are the most important? Finally, how would you advise them to address problematic participants? Using the protocol as your guide, write up a set of instructions for your moderator.