A Manual for the Use of Focus Groups

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Preface

The initial publication, in 1984, of the United Nations University’s “Field Guide for the Study of Health-Seeking Behaviour at the Household Level”, developed in collaboration with the World Health Organization (WHO), described the application of anthropological methods to nutrition and other health interventions. These included conversations, guided interviews, direct observation and participant observation. Subsequent field experience led to the addition of the focus group method to the RAP methodology and its use was incorporated into the latest RAP Guidelines, first published in 1987. However, as focus group methods have great value in the fields of medicine and public health, the present manual expands upon the method in considerably more detail than was possible in the previous Guidelines.

The Focus Group Manual was originally developed as a collaborative activity between the Tropical Health Program, Queensland Institute of Medical Research, and the Special Programme for Research and Training in Tropical Diseases (TDR), WHO. It is intended for social science and medical researchers who require information quickly on a particular topic of study. The focus group is an effective way of obtaining such information, and of providing a good estimate of the range of opinion in a community with respect to the topic of interest. It is therefore useful for selecting communities with particular characteristics for an intervention, or for providing baseline information relevant to the development of questionnaires for more quantitative study. However, the focus group technique must also be used properly if it is to have any validity, and this manual provides a step-by-step, easy to read and follow, set of instructions. It will be of considerable use to those already involved in RAP, or to those who would like to become familiar with aspects of RAP methodologies.

TDR is delighted to collaborate with the United Nations University in this publication, as it will facilitate the wider dissemination of this important tool to researchers throughout the world.

Carol Vlassoff, Secretary
Steering Committee for Social and Economic Research
Special Programme for Research and Training in Tropical Diseases
World Health Organization
Introduction

This Manual is designed to help researchers and members of control programmes to use qualitative research methods in order to learn more about important social and cultural issues relating to the transmission, control, prevention and treatment of disease. These methods may be used instead of social survey research methods, or they may supplement other methods. Qualitative research methods, including interviewing, observations and focus groups, are valuable methods for understanding about ideas and beliefs, practices and behaviors. Usually they are used by trained social scientists, especially anthropologists. In many countries, however, including countries where tropical diseases are endemic, there are few anthropologists, and they may already be busy with other projects. This Manual will help you use one of these methods, focus groups, even if you have no formal training.

Focus groups can be used alone or with other qualitative research methods in a number of different kinds of projects. For example, they can be used before an intervention programme to identify various social or cultural factors that need to be taken into account in the design and implementation of the programme. They can be used during the intervention to provide an ongoing assessment of the programme, or after it is completed as an evaluation tool. Focus groups are often used as a Rapid Assessment Procedure too, where a research team or a Ministry of Health needs to quickly find out about the range of social factors that influence the prevalence of a disease or its control. Sometimes, too, focus groups are used as the sole method of a research project (Aubel and Mansour 1989), although we prefer to use a combination of methods.

Focus groups have been used by social scientists since the 1930s, but were developed particularly within market research in industrialised countries from the 1950s. Today, they are used widely by all kinds of social researchers. Focus groups are formally constituted, structured groups of people brought together to address a specific issue within a fixed time frame and in accordance with clearly spelled out rules of procedure. This Manual ex-
plains to you how to organise and conduct these groups, in order to ensure that they run smoothly and that you are able to use them as successfully as possible for your project.

All kinds of methods and techniques can provide information to help you understand social issues related to a given health problem, and you may use several of them in your project to answer different questions. Interviews with individuals are one way of gaining valuable qualitative information, while questionnaires can be administered to households to gather good quantitative data. Observation — watching what is really going on in the field setting — is one way in which you can check reported behaviour. You can also use clinic records, village census data, and other published information.

If you are visiting a village or some other settlement, and stop by a house to chat with the household head, it's quite likely that others will come up to listen in and join the conversation. Often, domestic work and other household work, such as weaving, sewing, or basket making, is done in groups rather than by people on their own. As a consequence, informal focus group discussions are easy to hold: you simply start talking to a group of people, wherever you find them and whilst they continue with their other tasks. These informal group discussions build upon the social networks that operate in a natural setting. In a village, they might include both kin and other neighbours: a woman, her daughter, her daughter-in-law, and her unrelated immediate neighbour for example. These groups of people might also be the ones involved in decision-making in the event of illness: deciding, for example, what kind of illness a child has, whether he or she needs to go to a clinic, or lending money so the mother can take the child for treatment. Such decisions are rarely carried out by one caregiver alone: she draws on those around her. As a result, discussions with such groups can provide fairly accurate data regarding the diagnosis and treatment of illness, choices regarding health services, and so on. However, in contrast to formal focus groups, they do not indicate well the range of attitudes and practices within a particular residential or cultural setting (Khan and Manderson 1992).

Focus groups are a more formal way of getting groups of people to discuss select issues with each other. They are organised in advance, and you will be deciding who you want to speak with, about what subjects, and when you will speak with them. Even though they are formally organised, still their basic structure is not an unfamiliar one. For example, village decisions may be made by groups (such as a village committee or council) rather than individuals, and community participation interventions often also use focus groups for health education, programme design, planning and delivery.

Part 1 of this Manual is addressed to researchers who may wish to use focus groups in their research projects, or to members of control programmes.
or departments of health who are responsible for projects and who may be training others to conduct focus group research. In Part I, we describe the purposes, structure and conduct of focus group discussions, and pay attention to some of the techniques which are useful to keep discussion going in the group.

Part II of the Manual has been written as a series of training sessions for others who will be involved in the project. This manual was developed during a research project on acute respiratory infection in Bohol, The Philippines (Dawson, Gunsalam, Khan and McNee, 1991), and because none of the investigators spoke Boholano, the local language, they developed with Veronica Tallo a method for using focus groups where interpreters are needed. These techniques are described in Part II. Of course, focus groups run best when the people conducting them speak the same language as participants, and most of the training sessions set out in Part II presume native language skills.

We have referred to other work occasionally in the text, and there is a short list of references at the end of the Manual too, in case you want to read further. In describing techniques and explaining aspects of the method, we have used examples that might be relevant to tropical disease research. These examples will give you some idea of the issues which you might explore using focus groups. The Manual does not provide complete question guides for any of the tropical diseases, however, as this is a separate task. You will need to develop your own question lines and focus within your own project, concentrating on the issues that are most important to you.

We hope that the Manual will assist you with your work. If there are parts of it which are not clear, then please write to us and let us know, so that we can revise it for future use.
PART I

Team Leader
Focus Group Training
A Manual for the Use of Focus Groups
SECTION 1

Deciding to Use Focus Group Training

1.1 Introduction

Before you decide to use focus groups to obtain information on which to base your programme decisions, it is necessary to take a close look at the method and what it has to offer. This section describes focus groups and explains the types of information that they are best suited to collect. We will then outline the major advantages and disadvantages which should be considered when planning to use focus groups in a particular project.

1.2 What is a focus group?

A focus group is a group discussion that gathers together people from similar backgrounds or experiences to discuss a specific topic of interest to the researcher. The group of participants are guided by a moderator (or group facilitator), who introduces topics for discussion and helps the group to participate in a lively and natural discussion amongst themselves.

A focus group is not a group interview where a moderator asks the group questions and participants individually provide answers. The focus group relies on group discussion and is especially successful where the participants are able to talk to each other about the topic of interest. This is important as it allows the participants the opportunity to disagree or agree with each other. It can provide insight into how a group thinks about an issue, about the range of opinions and ideas, and the inconsistencies and variation that exist in a particular community in terms of beliefs and their experiences and practices.

The discussion is usually “focused” on a particular area of interest. It does not usually cover a large range of issues, but allows the researcher to explore one or two topics in greater detail.
Focus groups are also “focused” because the participants usually share a common characteristic. This may be age, sex, educational background, religion, or something directly related to the topic. This encourages a group to speak more freely about the subject without fear of being judged by others thought to be superior, more expert or more conservative. For example, young women may not be as forthcoming in their ideas and opinions in the presence of their mothers or mothers-in-law, as they might be if they participated in a group that excluded older women.

1.3 How is a focus group conducted?

There are different ways to conduct focus groups, but this mainly depends on whether you will be working in one common language, or if you need to use interpreters. Focus groups usually involve about eight participants. As already indicated, a person known as a moderator helps the group participate in a natural discussion. The moderator is aided by a pre-prepared question guide that is used to ask very general questions of the group. The question guide is only an outline of the major questions that will be asked of the group. It is flexible enough to allow the group to take the discussion in any way it chooses, while providing enough structure and direction to stop the discussion moving away from the original topic to be studied.

An observer or note-taker records key issues raised in the session, and other factors that may influence the interpretation of information. This involves noting down the responses from the group, and observing and documenting any non-verbal messages that could indicate how a group is feeling about the topic under discussion. The observer may also help the moderator if necessary. She or he may point out questions that are not well explored, questions missed, or suggest areas that could be investigated. The observer should not be especially obvious to the group, but needs to be able to communicate with the moderator if required.

1.4 Language

Sometimes, focus groups may be conducted in a language that is different from that of the researcher, or, that in which information will be analysed and reported. Usually a native speaker would be used to conduct the focus groups, but occasionally the researcher will still want to moderate the sessions, especially in more formal research projects, and so will need translation assistance. This can make the natural flow of discussion between the moderator and participants extremely difficult. Trying to run a focus group with a direct translation of each participant to the moderator reduces the flow of discussion, and often this means that the session becomes simply a group interview. You cannot stop the group after each response to translate, and expect a natural discussion to happen. However, if it is
important that focus groups be conducted to meet project objectives, and translation cannot be avoided, we suggest that you follow the technique set out below, in Part II, Section 4.3.

1.5 What type of information do focus groups produce?

Focus groups are a method developed to explore people's beliefs, attitudes and opinions. They cannot tell you how general these opinions are in the community, although they may give you some indication for further investigation; neither can they be used to build up a detailed picture of specific beliefs. In addition, they do not allow you to document precise practices and behaviours: here, observation is an important and valuable method. However, focus groups indicate the range of a community's beliefs, ideas or opinions, and are especially valuable for gaining baseline information for a project. They are useful in designing question guides for individual interviews and questions for structured interview schedules.

1.6 How can focus groups be used in health programmes?

The method can be used in many different kinds of programmes relating to tropical diseases, primary health care, and other health issues. Focus groups are being used more and more often in new and exciting ways to develop research projects, to complement research information collected using other methods, and to help health planners design and maintain effective programmes. The following list will give you some ideas of ways to use this method in your own health research project or control programme.

**Exploratory studies**

Focus groups are a valuable method to explore a topic about which little is known, or little has been written in the past. For example, to set up health education programmes that will be effective in bringing about behavioural change, and take account of traditional health beliefs and practices, it will be necessary to have a good understanding of people's traditional health beliefs (Basch 1987). Focus groups can begin this process by providing the first in-depth descriptions of how the community sees the cause and treatment of certain illnesses.

If focus groups are conducted early in a research project, then the findings can be used to develop hypotheses that might then be tested using other methods. They are valuable in designing good questionnaires to test how strongly these beliefs, attitudes and opinions are held by the general community, and they can also be used to explain findings from a survey questionnaire. These surveys can describe what behaviours are occurring, but cannot explain why they have occurred. Focus groups can provide this greater depth of understanding.
Focus groups can also be used to discover local terms used for signs and symptoms of illness, types of illness, and other concepts relating to health. These can be of great use to health educators, and are important for both research projects and interventions. For example, focus groups relating to malaria in the Philippines indicated that people used a range of different words to describe “chills”, which relates to their assessment of the severity of an illness episode and the appropriate treatment that was required.

**Testing ideas about new programmes**

In the planning phase of a new programme, it is possible to use focus groups to see what the community feels about the new plan. You can use the method to see what the community identifies to be major problems or difficulties in existing programmes, and build its needs into any changes. Focus groups can give you an understanding of how appropriate the new plan may be in terms of culture or technology.

**Solving specific programme problems**

Sometimes you have programmes that have been running for some time and do not appear to be working as well as expected. There may be services that are not used by the community, or health behaviours that have not changed despite health education or other interventions. The focus group can be used to explore some of these issues, and can be very successful in identifying problems that may be easily solved.

**Evaluating programmes**

You may wish to include focus groups as part of the routine evaluation procedure. They could be used in a simple form to provide extra information about a community’s ideas about a programme’s effectiveness.

**Staffing/management problems**

Focus groups can serve not only the community’s needs, but can be very successful in solving staffing or personnel problems. They can provide a great deal of useful information about your staff and how they see their work. The method can be used to solve a whole range of problems, from poor motivation to assessing training needs.

Focus groups can be used to help a group think of new and creative ideas for a new programme, by getting the group to discuss the problem and its major issues, and then thinking about ways to solve that problem.

1.7 Advantages and limitations of focus groups

As the above discussion indicates, there are various advantages and disadvantages in using focus groups compared with other methods. In summary, these are:
Advantages

- They produce a lot of information far more quickly and at less cost than individual interviews.
- They are excellent for obtaining information from illiterate communities.
- If the focus group is used to explore relatively simple issues, it can be easily managed by people not trained in qualitative research methods.
- Because the questioning is so flexible, it means that you may discover attitudes and opinions that might not be revealed in a survey questionnaire.
- The researcher can be present at the session which allows follow-up of responses if required.
- They are usually well accepted by the community as they make use of the group discussion which is a form of communication found naturally in most communities.
- And, focus groups are good fun!

Limitations

- Results from focus groups cannot usually be used to make statements about the wider community, that is they can indicate a range of views and opinions, but not their distribution.
- Participants often agree with responses from fellow group members (for many different reasons) and so caution is required when interpreting the results.
- The moderator who is not well trained can easily force the participants into answering questions in a certain way.
- Focus groups have limited value in exploring complex beliefs of individuals, and as a result, in-depth interviews are a more appropriate method for this purpose.
- Focus groups can paint a picture of what is socially acceptable in a community rather than what is really occurring or believed, although this problem can be limited by careful participant selection and good moderating skills.

Once you have looked at all the advantages and limitations of focus groups, considered the type of information you require, and decided that focus groups are a suitable method for your project, the next step is to develop the project plan.

Part I: Team Leader Focus Group Training
SECTION 2

Designing the Study

2.1 Setting the project objectives

Introduction

Once the decision to use focus groups in the study has been made, you will need to go back and closely examine the problems you want to solve or the questions you want answered. This will take some time, but careful planning at this point will be very useful later on when you are designing questions and training the staff who will be involved. The entire project will be based on your objectives. These need to be well thought out to make sure the study design, the collection of data, and analysis and report writing, proceed smoothly.

Below, we set out a few questions that you can answer to help you start thinking about the research or programme problem with which you are concerned, and to help you to write good quality objectives to guide your study.

What is the exact problem?

Before you begin to define the problem that you will be working on, find out what information is already available. Others may have done some work, or at least thought about the issues.

Stating the problem will depend on the purpose of the focus groups. Suppose you wish to understand why the community usually chooses to see a traditional healer rather than go to the health service. It is wise to write down as clearly as possible all aspects of the problem that you think need to be investigated. Be specific. In this example, rather than simply state the problem as one of the community not using the health service, it would be better to divide your problem into as many parts as possible. For example: For what types of illnesses does the community choose the traditional healer? What are the consequences of choosing the traditional healer? What are the more common things that people do, like delay in contacting the
health service or not contacting the service at all? You need to meet with others involved in the project to ensure you have examined the problem well. In this example, it would be useful to conduct a couple of in-depth interviews with traditional healers and with local health workers to enable you to define more clearly the research question.

When your list is complete, decide which issues or areas you are most interested in. These will be the basis of your objectives.

If you are preparing an intervention, for example, you need to ensure that you have stated exactly what issues are relevant to this. Suppose you have decided to introduce bed-nets into a community as a means of reducing malaria infection. You would need to check the community’s acceptance of bed-nets, but to do this properly, you need to spell out all the relevant issues: whether people are already familiar with bed-nets; if so, whether they use them year-round or only seasonally; whether all people sleep indoors and in beds; who might be responsible for monitoring net use and re-impregnating them with insecticide; as well as people’s understandings of the cause of malaria and its importance to their health. Focus groups cannot be used to answer a large range of different questions, so you need to decide on the most important information required to help you make good decisions.

Even if you are simply exploring a topic to have a better understanding of a particular issue — for example, people’s beliefs regarding malaria, or how they believe schistosomiasis is transmitted — it is still important to state clearly the project objectives.

**Who can provide the information we require?**

After you have decided on the problem and the information you require, you need to think about which members of the community will best help you in providing that information. This will vary according to the type of research you are doing.

In our example of why a community does not use the health service but prefers the traditional system, you might want to include not only the caretakers of sick adults or children who are making the health care choices, but also the relatives and friends who influence them, the traditional healers, and the health workers in the system that is not being used. When deciding on the people you want to talk to, think as broadly as possible about your topic.

**How will the information be used?**

Is this the only method you will use to gather information, or will it be used with other information collected using other methods? For example, will it be used to supplement information collected from clinic records or survey data? Perhaps the information will be used to provide a good questionnaire for a later survey.
Will you want to explore an entirely new and unfamiliar area (for example traditional health beliefs), or are you aiming to see whether a plan for a new health programme will be accepted by the community (for example, setting up a community participation programme for the distribution, use and maintenance of impregnated bed-nets)?

Who are the results intended for? This will determine many aspects of the project, especially how you present your results. Is it for higher government officials, members of the community, or district level project planners, or is it part of a research project which has no immediate and direct application?

**What is the desired outcome of the exercise?**

Are you trying to solve a small problem in a programme? Will this information be the basis of major decisions? Is this information going to be used in a larger and more formal research project? How will the information be put to best use?

**Looking at your resources**

After you have decided what information you need, and who in the community may be able to provide that information, you need to examine what you have available in terms of money, staff and time to complete the task. Although this may seem obvious, often project planners do not spend enough time on this issue early in the project.

You need to think about the main points of your objectives and the logistics of the project as planned so far, and compare these with available resources. A more thorough and detailed examination of your requirements and resources will follow in later steps during the planning process, but for now, just think in general terms about how reasonable the project is. It may be necessary to change your objectives to meet your resources more appropriately. This could involve limiting the information you collect, the number of people in the study, or simplifying the focus group method to meet the skills of available staff.

**Write your first set of objectives**

This may well be the first of many attempts to set and then refine your objectives. If you have thought about the project carefully, it should minimise the number of times you change your objectives. But it is quite usual to alter them several times before they are satisfactory.

### 2.2 Making the project plan

**Introduction**

Planning the project well is very important, but it is outside the scope of this Manual to provide a detailed discussion on project planning. However, the important aspects of planning a project using focus groups will follow.
We are suggesting just one way of planning a project. If you are already using a good method for project planning, then you can apply this to focus groups.

**Steps in planning the project**

**STEP 1: DECIDE HOW YOU WILL CARRY OUT THE PROJECT**

Using the objectives that you have already set, you now need to decide how to carry out the project. To begin with you will only need to decide the major points. Depending on the size of your project and the amount of staff to be involved, other staff may be involved in the details of the project.

This first task includes answering these questions:

- What information do I need to meet the objectives (more specific than before)?
- How will the study participants be selected and contacted?
- How will the focus group sessions be conducted?
- What role will other staff have in the project?
- How will staff be selected and trained?
- How will the question-line be developed and by whom?
- Where and how will the focus group be pre-tested?
- How will the information be analysed?
- What form will the final report take?

**STEP 2: PREDICT PROBLEM AREAS**

Once you have made a plan on how to carry out your project, it is wise to spend some time trying to see where you may have problems later on. Sometimes problems (logistic or design problems) will only be clear after the pre-test. However, where you think there could be important problems that could affect the project, you should make alternative plans that you can put into action if necessary.

**STEP 3: DECIDE WHAT YOU WILL NEED TO CARRY OUT THE PROJECT**

Every project will be different depending on the size and complexity of the study, but a few suggestions for areas to look at include:

- **Staff.** How many? What skills will they need? Will a staff trainer be required/possible?

- **Office, buildings and space.** Where will the staff work? Where will the staff be trained? Where will the information be stored? Where will the focus groups be held?

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Equipment. What extra office equipment is necessary? How are we storing information? How are we analysing information, and what is required? What equipment is necessary for the focus group discussions, e.g., tape recorders, cameras, etc.?


Incentives. Do we need to repay study participants in some way? If so, how?

STEP 4: MAKE A PROJECT TIMETABLE
After you have completed the above tasks, you will need to draw up a preliminary timetable. As well as demonstrating all the major tasks, you need to show who is responsible for each task and when it is due to be completed. This timetable will not only provide you with a constant check on progress, but will also show you if your original objectives or plans are possible in the time allocated.

STEP 5: DECIDE ON THE DETAILS OF THE PROJECT
The next step involves allocating responsibility to all your staff/team involved in the project. This will depend on the size of the project. Detailed planning can be done by those staff members responsible for a particular area. This does not mean that the team leader is unaware of these plans, but simply encourages the participation of all team members and frees the team leader for other activities. If the focus group discussions are part of a project to be undertaken by a control programme, this project may be a small part of the activities of the staff involved. You need to take account of this in your plans.

STEP 6: REVIEW THE PLAN
Once all the planning is complete, all team members should receive a copy of the detailed plans to read, review, and to check that it is reasonable and can be managed along with their other responsibilities. A team meeting should then be held to discuss any problems, changes or new ideas.
SECTION 3
Selecting and Training Staff

3.1 Introduction
The selection and training of staff is an important area of the project. It is important to make the best of those staff who are available. Part II of this Manual is a detailed training guide for the other members of the team or staff that you select for the project. It is often presumed that you need specialised staff to do this type of work, usually people with post-graduate training in the social sciences. In most cases, however, such people are not available. We are convinced that this is not necessary for conducting these projects, and from experience, we are confident that with a far more basic criteria for staff selection, you can use these methods. This section looks at the decisions that need to be made concerning staff selection and training.

3.2 How much can we afford to spend on staff selection and training?
Depending on the size and purpose of the project, the budget for staff will vary. You will already have given this some thought in the early planning stage, but now you will need to be very clear about how much time and money you have available for the staff. The size of the budget will determine the complexity of staff selection and training.

One point worth stressing here is that by selecting staff carefully, and by offering good quality training, you can improve the quality of your project remarkably, and therefore be able to make more effective decisions about the problem you are trying to solve. Do not try and save time or money in this area as it really is the foundation of a successful project.

3.3 How many staff will we need?
This will depend on the size of the study, but there is a certain minimum requirement for the smallest project. “The smallest project” refers to solving

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a single research or programme problem; for example, "Do our health education messages concerning the prevention of malaria fit in with the community's beliefs about the causes and prevention of malaria or fever?"

The minimum requirement is two or three staff, assuming that they are responsible for other tasks in their usual work activities. It is possible that a single researcher could carry out most tasks associated with focus group research, but even so, she or he would need to have a collaborator to act as an observer/note-taker when the sessions are in progress. So you need at least a team leader/project co-ordinator who may or may not also act as a moderator, and an observer; you may also need someone else to be responsible for transcribing tape-recordings of the focus group discussions.

There are many functions that need to be performed within a focus group project, such as managing the information as it is produced, designing and redesigning the questions for the discussion sessions (see Part I, Section 5), analysing the data, making recommendations and writing the report. Do not be put off by this list as it can be incorporated into staff's normal workload if it is a small project. You may only be conducting a total of four focus groups, for example, in which case there is not too much information that needs to be analysed. You may not even need to analyse the information formally if, for example, health educators are involved in the collection of information and simply propose to discuss their findings with others before they proceed to develop an appropriate intervention. For projects that attempt to answer much larger questions, that try to look across more than one topic of interest, or that aim to use a wide range of methods, you may need to employ staff to work on the project full-time.

3.4 What will the selection criteria be for the staff?

As we have indicated, some projects may employ a number of staff specifically for the project, while others will be selecting staff who are already employed, for example, within a control programme or as local health workers. Regardless of the project size, we assume that staff with social science training are not available. However, we assume that all team members are literate, and if possible have completed high school.

Rather than make a long list of the skills required of each team member, it is recommended that you read the entire Manual before selecting staff. This will help you to have a better understanding of the method as well as what you will need to expect from each team member. Once you have decided how many staff you need, you will then need to write job descriptions for each position. This will help each team member know what his/her responsibilities will be in the project, as well as what the other team members will be doing. In addition, it will serve as a selection criteria for the staff.
3.5 Staff training

This is critical! Your whole project will depend on the commitment and skill of your team. Invest as much as possible in the training of the team. Once you have selected the staff, ensure that they are able to complete the training without distraction. Do not expect that it is reasonable to “fit it in” somewhere during the normal working day. Allow at least two full days for training on very small projects. If you have a larger project, or you intend to use the method regularly, then it is recommended that you allow five full days, not including field practice. The extra three days should be used for practical exercises and a more “hands-on” style of training. Larger projects will most certainly require a higher level of skill.

Part II of this Manual outlines the staff training component, and provides you with the main points necessary to understand and use focus groups. It is not designed to address the learning or training styles that may be necessary in your country.

Where will we conduct staff training?

You need to set aside a quiet area for staff training with quite a bit of room, especially if you want to practice the skills using artificial groups. If possible, try to conduct the training away from the office where staff can easily be distracted by normal work tasks.

Do we need a staff trainer?

This will depend on the size of the project and the resources available to you. For most projects you will not be able to have a special staff trainer, but you may be able to “borrow” a colleague who has experience in training. An experienced trainer is of great benefit, but is not essential. This Manual will provide you with all the information you need to pass on to the project team.
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SECTION 4
Selecting the Study Participants

4.1 Introduction
During the planning phase you thought about which community members would best be able to provide the information you want, or, if you are looking at issues within your organisation or department, which staff members can provide the information. As well as these questions there are many other decisions you will need to make when selecting your participants. This section provides you with a list of issues that you will need to consider before making the final decisions regarding study participants.

4.2 Method of selection (sampling)
There are many methods for selecting your participants, and the type of sampling will depend on how you will use the information. Focus group results cannot usually be used to describe how an entire population would respond to the same questions, so the type of sampling used in studies designed to describe whole populations is not really necessary (for a discussion of these methods, just refer to a simple text on sampling for epidemiological studies, e.g., Smith and Morrow, 1991).

The common (and simplest) method for selecting participants for focus groups is called "purposive" or "convenience" sampling. This means that you select those members of the community who you think will provide you with the best information. It need not be a random selection; indeed, a random sample may be foolish. For example, if you are investigating why leprosy patients do not always present for medication, it would seem more "convenient" and more useful to select those patients, relatives and staff involved in the leprosy programme. A random sample of the whole community may not provide you with a single person with leprosy!
4.3 Who can provide the best information?

Do not forget to think carefully about all aspects of the problem and be creative when deciding who can provide you with the best information. People in positions of power and authority, or with technical skills, are not necessarily the best people to talk to if you are interested in community attitudes and beliefs. Sometimes people who are less obvious can be extremely useful. Try to think of all the members of your community that could have some knowledge or influence on the problem.

If you do not understand the community well enough to know who can be of most use, do not be afraid to ask local health staff, local leaders or simply members of the community that you have access to. Never rely only on your own ideas about a problem, particularly where you are studying people’s attitudes and beliefs. You could be on the wrong track completely by viewing things from your own experiences.

4.4 What will the composition be in each focus group?

As focus groups are discussions among people with similar characteristics, it is important to ensure that participants in any one group have something in common with each other. The reason for this is simple. People talk more openly if they are in a group of people who share the same background or experiences. For example, suppose you are interested in sexual practices in a project concerned with community education to prevent HIV/AIDS. A group that included both young single women and older married women might not be very successful; the young women may feel obliged to discuss “acceptable” practices rather than their true range of experiences and behaviours. Participants with different backgrounds and experience can restrict the openness of discussion within the group. Given this, you need to think about the status of participants in the community, their socio-economic status, educational background, religion, sex, age, and so on, considering which characteristics might most influence a free and natural discussion.

4.5 How many groups are necessary?

In general, once the focus groups cease to provide you with new information, then you do not need to conduct any more sessions. Sometimes this may occur after only two or three sessions with each grouping of participants; sometimes you may need to run six, seven or more before you are satisfied. If this is the first time your team has used focus groups, then you need to allow also for a few practice sessions that may not provide you with the quality of information you require.

You should group “types” of people together. This is probably obvious, but nevertheless worth mentioning. Say, for example, in a study of leprosy,
you have identified as target groups for focus group discussions local health workers, traditional healers, adult patients, caretakers of young people with leprosy, and other members of families with leprosy patients. It would be most appropriate to conduct focus groups separately for each group.

However, do not get too complicated in your selection process. This is a very easy mistake to make! In the above example, you already have identified five separate groups of participants. If you now decided that sex, education and residence might all inhibit discussion, and so decided to interview women and men separately, to interview those with and without formal education, and to interview rural and urban dwellers separately, and you aim to hold three focus groups for each group of participants, you'd end up with 120 focus groups! Use your common sense about the criteria for selection. Ask yourself some basic questions. Will separating leprosy patients according to education, for example, really provide you with more clues to understanding their presentation for therapy?

4.6 How many participants do we want to select?

After deciding who it is you want to include in the project, you need to decide how many people you will want to contact for each session. Focus groups work well with around four to twelve people. Groups with more than eight can be difficult to control, but the decision on how many you want in each group will depend on how your particular community groups together and conducts discussions in natural community settings.

If you have decided on eight participants for each group, it is still advisable to invite ten people, in case some do not arrive at the session. Be careful though not to over-recruit. In many communities it would not be acceptable to turn away participants who had already arrived.

4.7 How do we contact the participants?

This will depend, again, on the community with which you are working. Simply observe the local custom in your area. This usually involves contacting local leaders first, providing an explanation of the study, and gaining permission to work in that village or location. It could also involve meeting with local health workers. Provided you approach such people appropriately, they will usually be happy to help you to locate individuals for the focus groups.

How much notice you give the participants of the focus groups will vary according to the logistics of gaining access to the community. It is ideal to notify the participants the week before and then provide a reminder the day before. In many situations this is not possible, and in some cases participants have been successfully recruited one hour before the session! You need to consider your participants' daily routine and take into account the ease or
difficulty for them to attend the session. They are really making a sacrifice to assist you, and this should always be recognised and allowed for.

When the participants are contacted for the first time, they should be provided with information about the study (without actually discussing the focus group questions or directly stating the aim of the study, as this may reduce the quality of the session), about why they have been selected, and how the results will be used. For example, you might introduce a study on perceptions of disease in an area with a high prevalence of schistosomiasis by explaining that you are interested in the health problems of the study community, that in order to really understand these you need to talk to as many people as possible, that you hope to learn from their own experience of health and illness, and that the information you gather will be used to help formulate plans to try to ensure better health. At this time you will also need to check whether anything will need to be provided to help the participant attend, like child care or transport. Personal contact by the project team is strongly recommended as this can show the participants that their contribution is considered important.
SECTION 5

Developing the Question Line

5.1 Introduction

The question line or question guide is a list of questions you plan to ask the participants during the focus group sessions. It needs to be very carefully thought out, and you need to be ready and willing to change it several times if necessary. The more practice you have at writing questions, the better you will become, and the sooner you will be able to have a question line that does not need many changes. However, it must be remembered that you cannot possibly get to the very centre of people’s beliefs, attitudes and opinions in one or two attempts. If you find that the original questions were exactly correct, be suspicious of yourself! Maybe you are not keeping your mind open enough to what the respondents are really telling you! Be prepared to re-write after each focus group. At the beginning of the study, every focus group will provide you with new information, and so you will want to incorporate things that you learn into the question line in order to raise those issues with the next focus group.

This section will discuss the basic issues of writing questions and developing the guide. You may also find it helpful to consult more detailed texts on focus group research and writing questions for qualitative research (see, for example, Bernard 1988; Krueger 1988; Morgan 1988; Stewart and Shamdasani 1990).

5.2 Get to know the community

Before you begin writing questions from your objectives, you need to have some understanding of the community you will be working with. The amount of time you spend on this will depend on how familiar you are with the people, their culture and beliefs. If you are new to the area, while you are in the planning phase you can use some time to get acquainted with the community.
Depending on the research question, you can talk to people informally about any issues related to your study. It is also wise to learn about the best ways to enter the community, how groups work naturally within the community, and other issues related to conducting focus groups. Try to develop a dictionary of local terms related to your topic; this will help you later on during the focus groups and in analysis. Of course, you can also use focus groups to build up a vocabulary of local terms, e.g., the variety of words that are used for fever, or cough, or diarrhoea.

5.3 Who writes the question line?

This will depend on the size of your project and whether or not you will be working through translators. It is recommended that everyone involved in the project contribute to the question line. The people who will be making the decisions based on the results should see how the questions will be asked, as should the team conducting the focus group sessions. Everyone needs to agree that the questions relate to the objectives.

If you are working in a second language, then the moderator/translators will need to translate the questions from your language into the language of the community. This requires quite a good understanding of the project objectives. If you are not familiar with the community, local staff should also be used to guide you on the acceptability of the questions to the participants.

5.4 General principles to writing questions

The structure of the questions

Questions are asked in focus groups in a very different way from survey questionnaires. Surveys usually ask respondents questions to gain concise and direct information, often with closed questions and fixed choices. In focus groups, responses should be flexible and should encourage people to reply at length. As a result, the sessions are not tightly structured. Your primary aim is to try to understand a new area, or investigate people’s attitudes, opinions and beliefs, and you will not be able to know what the range of answers will be. You need to avoid forcing people into answering questions in particular ways, for you cannot predict how they will want to answer a particular question. Focus groups and other related qualitative research methods such as in-depth interviewing allow respondents to answer in any way they want, and questions do not give away the type of answer required. These types of questions are called “open-ended” questions. For example:

“How do you feel about the leprosy programme?” (to adults receiving multi-drug therapy (MDT) for leprosy).

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This question allows respondents to discuss the things they are happy or dissatisfied with. It does not draw attention to any particular aspect of the programme, and does not indicate to the respondent how the discussion should progress. What they actually choose to talk about first can show you what is the most important issue for them, although this may not be the case for sensitive or embarrassing topics.

Say you were interested in knowing whether people had difficulty getting to a clinic which dispensed the drugs. The general questions may not lead to discussions about access to drugs, and you may still want to explore that question in detail. This will require questions with a little more structure, pointing to an aspect of the problem. For example:

“You are all on regular medication for leprosy. Do you find you are able to get the necessary drugs?”

This question allows the respondents to answer in any way they choose, but it does point to a particular aspect of the programme that relates more closely to the objectives. Suppose instead you had asked, “What problems do you have getting to the clinic?”, it would have indicated to the respondents immediately that getting to a clinic was a problem. It forces people to discuss access to the clinic, when access might only be a minor area of concern. This type of question could give you a very false idea about the importance of access in the minds of the patients. For them, the more important issue might be privacy — they may prefer to present to a different clinic, where access is a greater problem, in order to avoid others knowing that they are being treated for leprosy.

It is important to avoid questions that will give you a “yes”/“no” answer. It may be necessary on occasion to get a quick “yes” or “no” which can then be explored further, but generally, these are not good questions because they do not encourage lively discussion. As in individual interviews, the best questions are those that encourage people to open up. You want them to tell you about a particular issue or experience. For example:

“A number of you have said that it’s too hard to go to the clinic. Could you tell me what things make it so hard?”

**Wording the questions**

Although writing the questions may seem easy once you have decided on information you want, it may not be quite that simple. Sometimes questions can be confusing, or they may be misinterpreted. At other times participants may simply not know what you are talking about: the focus group may be the first time they have ever given any thought to the issue. Do not assume people know what you are talking about, or that they have well developed ideas about the topic.
There are a few simple rules to follow when you are wording the questions:

- Make sure the questions are easily understood by the respondents
  - use simple language,
  - be sure the meaning of the question is clear,
  - keep questions short,
  - do not have several parts to each question.

- Do not word the questions so that people are made to feel guilty or embarrassed.

- Do not indicate any judgement about what is acceptable and what is not.

- If translating questions, always back translate, that is, have the questions translated back into your own language by someone not associated with the project. This allows you to check that the meaning or intent of the question is the same as the original. Sometimes you may need to do this a number of times to ensure that the translation is correct. Do not assume a first translation is accurate, no matter how good your translators are.

- Avoid using too many "why" questions. These questions give people the idea that there should be a sensible, logical answer. Sometimes people cannot provide such answers and may invent a quick response that sounds reasonable. "Why" questions also may sound like an interrogation, which could make them defensive and so answer in what might be a socially acceptable manner.

**Number of questions**

Focus groups usually last from one to two hours. One and a half hours often is the ideal length. Participants tend to get tired after this. It will depend, however, on the success of the discussion, how lively it is, and how interested the group is to continue. It is recommended that you write your question guide with just over one hour in mind, but let your participants know that it may last a bit longer.

Focus groups are supposed to allow an exploration of attitudes and beliefs in a lot of detail. This is not possible if you have a question guide that covers a large range of topics. If you attempt to do this (and it is very tempting!) you will find during the session that you are rushing through the questions and dealing with each superficially. In addition, it will be hard to follow up on leads and clues given by participants as they respond to questions, and the focus group question line will appear rather like an interview schedule for
a survey. We recommend that you limit a single focus group to two or three main ideas, to allow time to really investigate them well. If you feel uncomfortable without a question guide that is rather lengthy and detailed, then experience and pre-testing will show you clearly exactly what is possible and what is not!

**Pre-testing**

In a pre-test, you take the prepared question guide and try it out to see whether it is understood in the way you intended it to be. You cannot know before you test how people will respond to the questions, and pre-testing is an essential part of designing the question guide. Do not look at the pre-test as the final stage of writing questions; it may be just the beginning! Often these have to be re-written and re-tested. This is quite normal and should be allowed for when you are making your timetable for the project.

Pre-testing can also be used to check the effectiveness of staff training of those who are to be involved in conducting the focus groups. It also provides them with much needed field practice, and helps develop confidence.

**On-going question development**

Throughout the project, the results of each focus group will give you more information and therefore a better idea of the issues that are important to the participants. With each new piece of information you may need to change the question guide a little so that it can better address the problem and focus in on the main issues. The number of changes varies quite a lot, but in some projects focus group questions have changed with almost every new focus group session. This process — the flexible collection of data, ongoing analysis, and the feeding-back of information while the research is in progress — is referred to as iterative, and is an important feature of all qualitative research methods.

The following two boxes (1 and 2) give examples of a couple of question lines, to give you some idea of the kinds of questions that are used for focus groups. Note that there are only a few for each. Within each focus group, the moderator will build on responses to these questions, through prompts, probes and various other follow-up questions, to encourage further discussion around each topic (see Part II, Section 10.2).

In the first example (Box 1), you are seeking to gain information on what people do when their children are sick. You are interested, firstly, in symptom complexes and diagnostic categories (that is, what sicknesses they perceive), and then in how they treat them and the range of treatment options available to them, including self-medication and folk therapies, traditional healers, village health workers, traditional and government midwives, rural health units, and hospital services. You will want to know where people go for different symptoms and illnesses, and what influences
Sample question guide on children's illness and treatment strategies

1. What are the most common kinds of illnesses in this village?
2. Do children have different illnesses from adults? What kinds of illnesses are most common among children?
For each illness mentioned, ask:
3. Could you tell me more about the signs and symptoms of ____? Are there any other words used for this illness?
4. What causes this?
5. What do you do when you first think the child has ____?
   (Do you treat it, and if so, how?)
6. Do you get advice from anyone to do this?
7. Suppose the child does not get any better, or even gets worse: then what would you do?
8. And if there was still no change?
Then return to Q3 above for next illness mentioned.

their decisions to go to one service or another. If you are concerned with a particular disease, then you might focus on this disease at some point during the focus group. However, at the beginning, you would ask people very general questions about illnesses and treatments.

The focus group question line is not concerned with biomedical categories of disease, but rather with locally recognised symptom complexes and named illnesses. The moderator will use a range of techniques (probes, prompts, repetition, etc.; see Part II, Section 10), to explore variations of experiences and understandings within the focus group, to build up a vocabulary of locally identified illnesses (e.g., “cough”, “fever”, “spirit illness”, “stomach problems”) and to gain a preliminary understanding of the patterns of resort to treatment, including return visits to individual healers or the concurrent or sequential use of healers from various sectors, i.e., folk and professional. The moderator would not word the questions as formally as they are listed. For example, suppose a mother mentioned “normal diarrhoea” (Abdullah Sani et al. 1990). The moderator would not ask, “What are the signs and symptoms of normal diarrhoea?”, but rather would ask:

“I wonder if you could tell me a bit more about “normal diarrhoea”. For example, could you tell me how you would recognise that your child had this?”
**Box 2**

**Sample question guide on malaria**

1. People in this community have talked to me a bit about malaria. Could you tell me how you know someone has malaria?
2. Are there differences between children’s and adults’ sickness?
3. If someone has malaria, what do you do? (probe for differences according to different sets of symptoms and according to age of person).
4. Are there other words for malaria?
5. Is malaria more common at some times of the year than others — why might this be so?
6. What causes malaria? (probe for a complete list of causes, and understanding of transmission).
7. If mosquitoes are mentioned, ask:
   Do all mosquitoes cause malaria? Where do they breed? Bite? When?
8. Is there anything you can do to avoid getting malaria?

and would then probe to ask;

“This is the only kind of diarrhoea? Could you tell me what other kinds of diarrhoea children get?”

and also;

“You’ve mentioned ______, ______, and ______ as different kinds of diarrhoeal disease which children get. Is this all? Are there other words you can use to describe diarrhoea?”

The general order of questions, however, would be followed.

In this discussion, you may be interested in exploring the significance of social networks and relationships within a community in influencing decision-making in the event of illness, particularly malaria. One way to begin discussion is to simply let people know that you are interested in their health, including malaria, and wonder whether they’d tell you about cases of malaria that they have experienced. Where there has been a recent case, you can use this as a starting point for discussion. Hypothetical questions about illness can also help you to encourage an exchange of ideas about diagnosis and treatment, to explore the variability of knowledge and the concordance of ideas within the group. Where contradictory advice or opinions emerge, these need to be explored as fully as possible. You should note also the nature of the interactions of the group, including points at
which some may defer to others (e.g., daughters to mothers).

The example in Box 2 seeks to gather a wide range of data on malaria, including its cause, diagnosis, treatment, and prevention. Because of its focus on a single disease, the moderator commences questioning on the disease, but each question is very general. This kind of exploratory focus group might help to identify more specific topics for later group discussions or individual interviews.
SECTION 6
Managing the Information You Collect

6.1 Introduction
There are a number of ways to collect and store the information from focus groups. We will look at some of the ways of managing your information, keeping in mind that you may not have access to some of the common technologies used for focus groups, such as computers, cassette recorders or even typewriters. You can still conduct successful focus group projects with a pencil and paper. However, this may limit the size and completeness of your study. It is just a matter of balancing what you want with what you've got!

6.2 Recording the focus group discussions
It is possible to use only one method to record information from focus group discussions, or you can use a combination of methods. The size of the project, and what you are planning to do with the results, may determine the choice you make here.

Taking notes
The most simple method is for the observer of the focus group to take notes of the session, getting as much detail as possible. Without good shorthand skills, it is not possible to get a word-for-word account of the discussion, so the team will need to decide the best method for themselves to get as much information down as possible. This may be just making a summary sentence of each response from each participant, or jotting down key words and then writing down verbatim any striking and important comments. If the note-taker has some shorthand skills, that will help but it is not essential. Practice at note-taking is also important.
Box 3

Notes from focus group on fever

Moderator asks question about fever in small children – what do you do?

Woman 1 says that she “just watches for a while, because children often have fevers”. Woman 2 – if the child “looks weak”, I see the traditional healer. [Other women in the group nod – they agree?] Woman 4 says she’d always take child to rural health centre because fever is “serious”. [Woman 1 frowns slightly – woman 4 answering what she thinks is right answer?]

Immediately after the session, the observer will go back over the notes and add in further detail in order to give a full and clear account of the session. Observers must only write down what they are sure about. They are not supposed to make their own judgements at this time about what the participants meant, only what they said. If it is important to make a judgement or interpretation of a comment, then it can be written in the notes, but the entry should indicate that it is a comment from the observer, and not from the participants themselves. The example (Box 3) indicates the note-taker’s comments in square brackets ([ ]); these include comments regarding non-verbal behaviour and comments regarding interpretation of information. Direct quotes from participants are marked with quotation marks.

As the example indicates, the observer also makes observation notes about body language, how the group works together and anything else of interest that cannot be detected from other methods of recording the information.

Cassette recording

If possible, the use of a cassette recorder is ideal. Although it is certainly not essential, it does allow a more complicated and thorough analysis of the information if necessary. It also allows you to check sessions you did not attend, assess the performance of the moderator, and check translations, and it provides an accurate and permanent record of the session. It provides a true account that can be listened to again if there is confusion over the meaning of a comment made during a focus group session.

The use of the recording is up to you, but it can provide the basis for a full transcription of the focus group discussion. This full transcription is a written or printed account of the entire session. It is made by writing out the session from the tape recording. This is rather a slow process, but it will greatly increase the quality of your information. It also means that you have

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a document that can be far more easily analysed in detail, and reduces the influence the observer has on recording the responses. If the only method for recording the session is the observer making summary notes, then from that moment on you will need to treat your information with more caution as it may be the observer's interpretation of the participants' meaning rather than their actual words.

**Video recording**

This type of recording is sometimes used in first-world industrial contexts. We discuss it only because many texts on focus groups refer to video recordings. Video cameras can be very distracting to participants in focus group sessions, but this will depend on how much exposure the community has had to such technologies. If you have access to a video camera and playback screen, and if you are sure that the camera can be used without distracting the participants from the session, then it can be very helpful. Not only will a video recording provide an account of what the participants said, it also makes a record of how the comments were made. It provides a record of body language (or non-verbal signs) which can be used during the analysis of the information. Body language will be discussed in detail in Part II, Section 11. Video recordings were used in a study to evaluate family planning programmes, and this work indicates they can be useful but not essential in enhancing the quality of data collected (Khan, Anker et al. 1992).

Videos are sometimes used not to record the focus group, but to present information that can be the subject of discussion among focus group participants. For example, in the development of methods for focused ethnographic interviews in ARI (acute respiratory infections), video tapes of infants with fast breathing have been shown to participants of focus groups (e.g., Sison-Castillo 1990).

It is possible to use any combination of these methods. A common approach is to make a cassette recording for later transcription, and for the observer to record aspects that cannot be heard on the recording (e.g., who is speaking, non-verbal communication). The observer also makes summary notes about what the group has said for the immediate debriefing session, and can note key issues raised which will assist in easy reference to the record on tape.

### 6.3 Preparing the information for analysis

After every focus group it is very important to begin to prepare your information for analysis. For sessions that rely only on note-taking, this means that all notes that are made need to be expanded into the fullest possible record as soon as you can. The moderator will be able to help the note-taker fill out the notes. If you conduct another focus group session

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before you write down your notes from the previous session, you can easily
get confused over who said what and in which group they said it! Build this
activity into your detailed plan.

If you are using a cassette recording then the tape will need to be written
down (transcribed) as soon as possible. It can take up to a full day for an
office assistant to write down all the responses from the entire session. As
you will want to read the transcription as soon as possible after the session
to help you in question guide development, you will want to have that
available quickly. If you are working in a second language, then you need to
allow time for translation as well. It is a good idea in this situation to have
the recording written down in the language in which the focus group
discussion was conducted, and then have that document translated. This
allows for better control of the accuracy of translation, as you can check it
at each stage, and you will be able to retain and refer to native language terms
which might be important to the study. It is also far easier for the translator
to work on a written account.

The same applies to the video recording. But instead of making only a
transcript of the spoken word, you can easily add in any observations from
body language directly onto the transcript.

Whatever recording method you use, it is important to prepare material
for analysis within 24 hours of the session. It must be prepared while the
session is still clear in your mind.

6.4 Storing the information

Information should be stored in whatever storage system is already in use
in your office or department. There is no need to develop anything special
for focus group material. You do need to be aware, however, that if you are
making transcripts and analysing the information at the most complex level
described here, you will need quite a bit of space to store the information.
A single 90-minute cassette recording of a focus group may produce a 15-
page transcript. You will also need to allow space for the documents you
produce while analysing the information, and for the basic demographic
data which you collected when you registered each participant.

Even if you are fortunate enough to be using a computer, information will
still need to be stored carefully. Ensure that someone is in charge of
maintaining a good storage system as an untidy and illogical filing system
could quickly produce many unnecessary frustrations. And remember, if
you are using a computer, make backup files: it's easy and common to lose
data unless you do this!
SECTION 7

Analysis of the Results

7.1 Introduction

This section looks at what you do with all the information you collect. The analysis of focus group information can be done at a whole range of levels depending on what you want to do with the information. This Manual will present only the simplest and quickest methods as a complex analysis of information is not usually necessary for health professionals who use this technique simply to solve programme problems or design better programmes. You will need the type of analysis that can easily be performed by you and the project team, while still providing the best way to manage your results as quickly as possible. Those interested in more comprehensive analysis procedures for larger more formal research projects, should refer to other texts (see e.g., Bernard, 1988).

7.2 When do we analyse?

In this type of study, analysis of your information is an on-going process that begins as soon as you enter the field or begin the project, and continues until you write the final report. It is very important to have this idea firmly in your mind before you begin the study. If you leave the analysis to the very end, you could discover large gaps in your results and at that stage it would be too late to correct any problems you have discovered. Early and continuous analysis serves three main purposes:

■ to enable the study to focus quickly on the main issues that are important to the participants, and then explore these issues more closely;

■ to check that the focus group discussions are being conducted in the best possible way (i.e., natural flowing discussion, participants not forced into answering in a particular way, and so on);
to examine the results of the discussions early enough to be able to check that the information you require to meet the project objectives is actually being collected.

7.3 Who does the analysis?
This will depend on the project, but we recommend that all those involved in the collection of information should be included in the process. The amount of involvement will of course depend on the time each team member has been given to work on the project. At worst, one team member can be responsible for analysis, but it must be done in consultation with the field staff who were present at the focus groups. It is not reasonable to expect to be able to analyse by yourself information that you have had no part in collecting.

7.4 How much analysis is necessary?
This must be decided in relation to how much time you have for the project, the skills of the team, and how important the decisions are that will be based on the information. It also depends on whether or not the study is for research that is intended to be used by persons beyond your programme or department. Just use your common sense.

If your project calls for the absolute minimum analysis, then that can simply be a group meeting of those who conducted the focus groups to discuss what they learnt. It may involve using the notes produced by the focus group observer to stimulate a discussion. Small programme decisions can then be made during the same meeting. This will be adequate especially if those involved in the decisions were present at the focus groups. This approach is obviously not enough where larger decisions are being made, where results may be used to inform decisions in other locations, or for formal research.

The method described below is adequate for small to moderate size projects. It can be used for formal research, and is especially useful for projects that need to be completed quickly. It does not require any previous research experience and can be performed by people without a university degree.

7.5 What activities are included in the analysis process?
Again, with this type of research, you do not sit down at the end of the collection of information and enter numbers into a computer that are then used to perform statistical calculations. There are several activities that are part of the analysis process. Some of them you would do without thinking, but it is useful to look at all of these activities and develop some of them so
that they are more formal and can be included in the final result to enable more comprehensive, professional and useful recommendations. It will also help you think more logically and clearly about what you are doing.

Orientation
At the beginning of the project, you will spend time talking to people about the topic in casual conversation. These might include local political leaders, religious leaders, local medical staff, traditional healers, and so on. Although this information should always be written down, it can be just jotted down in note form and may not need to be expanded upon too much. This information helps you to build up a picture of the topic under study. All staff can discuss their findings in the team meetings that are held in the planning phase to design the project. Make special time for this activity in those meetings.

Debrief
At the end of every focus group, time must be set aside to examine the focus group activities and results. Debriefs are discussed more thoroughly in Part II, Section 14, but for now it is important to realise that this lengthy discussion about each focus group is an important part of the analysis process. It feeds back information quickly that you can act on immediately, and builds upon the developing picture.

Analysis of transcripts
This is probably the most difficult of the analysis activities and is certainly the most formal. As we have already mentioned, the analysis of the transcripts or session notes can be as simple or as complicated as you decide. This process should be carried out as the transcripts become available, not when all the focus groups have been conducted. A detailed description of one possible technique for analysing the information from the transcripts to the final analysis stage follows below.

Analysis of all focus group discussions
Once all the focus groups have been conducted, and you have the results from each session, then it is necessary to look at all the focus group discussions together and begin to describe findings that apply to the study as a whole. Do not forget that if you are using other methods for your study (like individual interviews and observation), as most often you will, it is useful to have a final report on the findings from the focus groups separately. At the end of this activity you should have produced a set of results with a detailed description of what you believe the results tell you in relation to your objectives.
Example analysis: From transcript to final results

STEP 1: ANALYSIS OF INDIVIDUAL TRANSCRIPTS

When the transcripts have been completed you need to read them in several different ways. First of all you need to read them as a whole and to note your general impressions. This should be done just naturally without too much structure. Have your objectives fresh in your mind while you read through the transcripts. Look for major opinions and attitudes that are expressed by the groups.

Next, you need to read the transcripts looking for very specific things. Take out your list of objectives, and the document that lists all the information you require. The list should include all the areas that you are interested in finding out about. This is really only a list of what you think is important information to meet your objectives, but as a result of the focus group discussions, you may discover new areas that are also quite important.

Next, you will need to read through each transcript and remove any responses that were forced from participants by poor moderating skills. This often can occur and does not necessarily mean the moderator is not performing well. Many transcripts need to have responses removed before analysis. Part II of this Manual describes in more detail what may cause these responses, and gives you a better idea about how to identify them in a transcript.

At this stage you are also looking for sections that were poorly transcribed and do not make much sense. Remove these from the analysis process. In addition, there will be some statements that seem to be made simply because others have made them. You cannot really be sure how strongly a participant really believes something they have said, but if you strongly suspect a statement not to be truly accurate (for whatever reason), it does no harm to mark the statement as having less importance in the analysis than other responses. So some responses will be taken with more caution than others.

We recommend that you then code the transcripts. This means marking sections of the transcript in a way that indicates what the participants are talking about. For instance, in our example of the programme of multi-drug therapy for leprosy, every time a participant mentions access to the clinic, you mark the section to indicate this. Use code words to make it faster, e.g., CLINACC (i.e., CLINIC ACCESS). So, in the end your transcript will have a list of code words running down the side of the page. This makes it easier to identify sections of interest later on, as all you will then need to do when looking at the issue of access is run your eyes down the transcripts and take all the responses marked CLINACC. If you are running focus groups on folk diagnosis of malaria, and are interested in the ability of participants to distinguish between fevers, then you might code such discussions as
DIFFEVER (i.e., DIFFERENT FEVERS) (see Box 4). For those who have access to computer software packages, the programme The Ethnograph (Siedel, Kjolseth and Seymour 1988) can be used to manage and sort your coded transcript. Note that some responses may refer to more than one issue or idea. These can be given more than one code word so that the response can be included in each relevant area.

You can use the list of information you require to prepare a lot of code words. Try not to break down the information you require into categories or codes that are too small. For example, if you are interested in access to the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Box 4</th>
<th>Coded transcript from focus group on symptoms of malaria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Group discussion, cont.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>W1 said difference between malaria and other fevers clear. All others agreed that there was ordinary fever and “high fever”. W3 said there was “40 degree fever” also, only in malaria.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Malaria occurs with other symptoms. “Malaria sa dugo” (malaria of the blood) is a fever withnanlalamig (cold), giniginaw or ginaw na ginaw (chill: hair stands up on arms) [demonstrated], nangginginig (shivering), nangangatog (chattering), or kinakalikig. Women say all these are different and kanakalikig is the most serious. [Women demonstrate physically by clenching fists and teeth as if with febrile convulsion].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Not clear if these are truly ranked in severity or if are some used as synonyms – offered following prompt “what other symptoms does someone with malaria sa dugo have? – CHECK AND LINK TO DIAGNOSIS AND TREATMENT ACTIONS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other type of malaria is malaria sa utak (of the head or brain). W2 said there was “24-hour” malaria [because of known case of death from cerebral malaria 24 hours after initial fever] and W4 “5+ malaria”, both of which were fatal [5+ from gametocyte reading of 4+++.]. Clear distinction made between malaria and other headaches; with malaria you want to “tear your hair out” [demonstrated], “bang your head against a wall”, “feel as if your head is splitting in two”.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DIFFEVER</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BLOODMAL</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHILTYPE/LANGUAGE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SYMPTMAL</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEREBMAL</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HEADACHE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
clinic, you could either code the responses that refer to access to clinic generally (CLINACC), or you can break them down further into categories. These could be: those who find access difficult due to the cost (ACCESS-COST), those who have no transport (ACCESS-TRANSPORT), those who have no difficulty at all (ACCESS OK) and so on. Avoid this! You will end up with so many code words and categories of information that you will still be analysing transcripts after the programme plan decisions have already been made! Keep it simple!

Not all responses fall into neat categories of the information that you have expected to obtain. In fact, many do not. As you find a response that brings up a new idea or topic that you had not expected, simply code it under a new name and note down that a new idea has been introduced. It is essential to keep a code book. This is simply a list of all the code words you have used and an explanation of what they mean (see Box 5). Sometimes, on larger projects you may have well over 100 codes and it becomes very difficult to remember all the codes and what they mean.

**Box 5**

*Code book for focus groups on symptoms of malaria*

- **SYMPTMAL** Recognition of malaria
- **AGEDIFFS** Differences malaria adults/children
- **BLOODMAL** Malaria “in the blood”
- **CEREBMAL** Cerebral malaria (trad. and clinic categories)
- **DIFEVER** Different kinds of fevers
- **CHILTYPE** Different kinds of chills
- **HEADACHE** Headaches
- **CAUSMAL** Folk etiology
- **VECTOR** KAB mosquito as vector
- **ATTGOVT** Village attitudes to Vector Control Unit
- **ATTRAFF** Village attitudes to Refugee Centre
- **BEDNETS** Ownership and use of bed-nets
- **SELFMED** Home treatment of presumptive malaria
- **HEALERS** Resort to traditional healers
- **CLINIC** Access to and use of clinics
- **HOSPIT** Access to and use of OPD
- **DRUGUSE** Compliance of prescribed medication
- **COSTS** Costs (time, cash) and borrowing

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*44 A Manual for the Use of Focus Groups*
The final step in reading the transcripts involves using your list of required information and checking what information you have actually obtained. This will show you very quickly if the focus group discussion is getting to the point or not, and if you are obtaining the information you set out to gather. If you code information as you go along, you’ll be able to alter your question guide quickly to be more effective in the next focus group.

STEP 2: LOG BOOK
The log book is just a place to keep all your responses together according to the topic of interest. In the example of access to the clinic, let’s say you have decided to have CLINACC as your code to indicate all responses discussing access to the clinic.

In the log book under CLINACC you will enter every response that is coded as such in your transcripts. You should enter each and every response unless it is exactly the same as another. The idea is to retain the full range of responses. If you are using a large notebook for the log, write all your responses down the left side of the book. The right side should be divided into columns, one for each focus group session. As you find responses that are exactly the same, you can begin to tally the amount of times they occur in the columns.

It is important to keep the tally of responses separate for each focus group. Sometimes, one person will make a statement, and everyone else will agree or say the same type of thing. If eight people say something in only one of ten focus group sessions which you held, this may be less significant than if eight individual people say the same thing in eight different focus groups out of ten. You will want to know how many times an issue was discussed across all the focus groups as well as how many times in total a response was given. So, keep the results separate for each focus group (see Box 6).

STEP 3: WRITING THE RESULTS
It is important to keep in mind that you will be writing your results not only from the log book, but also from the notes that you made while reading the transcripts as a whole. This is important because when you take the responses out of the transcript, it is possible to misunderstand the circumstances in which a particular response was made.

Writing up the results is really just a matter of deciding which responses are important enough to include. Suppose, for example, that access to the clinic was only mentioned by two participants. You will need to decide whether to include this in your results or not. If your office was concerned about access as a problem, then it would be wise to include this finding: the focus group discussions indicate that access is not a major factor to explain poor clinic attendance and treatment compliance. You will find that you have a surprising amount of information, and you will not want to include
**Box 6**

*Example of log book from Bohol study (Dawson et al. 1991)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Focus Group Sessions</th>
<th>Total Women</th>
<th>Total FGs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>The Roles of the BHW</td>
<td>F1 F2 F3 F4 F5 F6 F7 F8 F9</td>
<td>3 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 a</td>
<td>Advice – require medicine</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 b</td>
<td>General examination</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 c</td>
<td>Give medicine (pharma.)/ advice appropriate medicine</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 d</td>
<td>Take RR</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 e</td>
<td>Help community</td>
<td>1 1</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 f</td>
<td>General advice</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 g</td>
<td>Health Education</td>
<td>1 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 h</td>
<td>Advice – Immunisation</td>
<td>1 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 i</td>
<td>Health Care – first contact</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 j</td>
<td>Diagnose health problem</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 k</td>
<td>Home visits</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 l</td>
<td>Help malnourished children/ feed malnourished children</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 m</td>
<td>Help in HC</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It all. Go through the log book and the notes, and decide what to keep and what to leave out, which findings to summarise, and which quotes to include verbatim in the text.

Many reported results from focus groups do not indicate how many focus groups or participants discussed a certain issue. You will read results that say “many respondents said…” or “only a few focus group discussions raised the issue of…” It depends on what you plan to do with the results, but it can be useful for others reading your report to know the frequency of particular issues raised. This allows them to decide how important something is, and people who are familiar especially with quantitative research, such as social surveys and epidemiological studies, rather than qualitative research, find it valuable to assess the significance of findings in these terms. If you choose to indicate numbers of focus groups or number of responses, then it is simply a matter of adding up the tallies in the log book. In addition, your report should include a summary of the method, and a profile of participants derived from the initial registration (for example, the ages, marital status, and occupations of participants). In small studies, this information can easily be hand tallied and then described.

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STEP 4: INTERPRETATION
Throughout the study, you should have been thinking about the significance of the information you were collecting, in terms of the problem or question you want to answer. The team should have some well developed ideas about what the respondents are saying. Now is the time to look at the results and discuss them with the rest of the team at length. Do the results really show what our common sense tells us about the community now? What do these results really mean? This careful look at the results will lead you into writing a report and making recommendations.
PART II
Staff Training for Focus Group Discussions
SECTION 1

Introduction

As with any programme, planning is essential to the success of a research programme using focus groups. It is the same with training your staff. Planning is important to make sure the whole thing runs smoothly and everything is included, but for this particular task there is another important reason for careful planning.

As this method may be new to both you, the trainer and the project staff, it can be very easy to give the impression of confusion if you are not well prepared. Confidence of the project team in you, the team’s ability to perform the task, and in the end, the method, depends on how organised you are.

How involved your staff will be in planning the project, collecting the information and analysing the results, will depend on the decisions you make according to what staff you have available. If the staff are highly involved in all aspects of the project, then they should go through the team leader training sessions before this section. Part II of this manual is mainly directed to field staff who will be moderating and observing the focus groups and is concerned with practical aspects of conducting a focus group, along with the skills required to do so.

This section provides all the main points that need to be covered while training your field staff. It is not intended to be used as a series of lecture notes, but simply as a guide to the trainer about the content of the training course. Different communities respond better with different types of learning styles and it will be up to you to select the most appropriate learning method for your staff.

Try to be as imaginative as you can with the training, and include as much practice of the new skills as possible. Exercises can be made that help the staff practice single skills (such as listening) with each other or family and friends. Make sure that you set up some practice focus group sessions for the staff before you pre-test in the field setting. There are many new skills for
them to learn and feel confident about and you should expect that most field staff will feel rather nervous before they have had experience.

Do not send your staff out into the field before they have had time to feel a little more comfortable with the method.

If you are training staff who have had no experience in research, no tertiary education, or have only been involved in clinical aspects of health, then you will need to be rather sensitive to their learning needs. These ideas and approaches to improving programmes may be very new to them and they may feel insecure and unsure of their ability to perform the tasks required. The best way to deal with this very common problem is to keep all training sessions as simple as possible. Never use difficult language, as this is the quickest way to lose the interest of the trainees. Difficult language also makes people feel inferior and less able to carry out the tasks. In addition, regular practice will help to build confidence in their ability. Give staff regular encouragement and always remind them they are not expected to have all the skills perfected immediately.

Sometimes the staff who will be involved in a research project using focus groups will normally have a clinical role in your department, and may need you to spend some extra time with them carefully going through the benefits of doing this type of research. If they are rushed through a training programme for a task they do not believe is of much benefit, they certainly will not try hard to overcome any difficulties they may have. In addition, if health professionals are insecure and feel threatened, they may jeopardise the project by open rejection of the method.

If you have access to anyone with training experience, then either recruit them into the project or consult them for advice on local learning styles.

It is very important to evaluate the training sessions. If there are problems in learning the new skills, you want to discover those before you get into the field setting. It is outside the scope of this manual to discuss evaluation techniques, but even if you have had no experience in evaluation of educational sessions, it is wise to set up checks throughout the training programme. It is not necessary to have great skills in education programmes and their evaluation to be successful with the course. You can use written or spoken tests, practice sessions, or just informal talks with the staff.

Some of the material included below repeats material discussed in Part I, but it is included here to stress the importance of these areas in field staff training.
SECTION 2
Introduction to Focus Groups

2.1 Why are we using Focus Group Discussions?

What are focus groups?

Focus groups are group discussions in which about eight people are gathered together to discuss a topic of interest. The discussion is guided by a group leader (called a moderator) who asks questions and tries to help the group have a natural and free conversation with each other.

Focus groups are aimed at encouraging participants to talk with each other, rather than answer questions directly to the moderator. The group interaction of focus groups is important because it gives us some understanding of how the people are thinking about the topic.

The questions asked of the group are usually “focused”. By this we mean that they focus on one or two main topics, to get a really detailed idea about how the people think about the area of interest. They are also focused because participants of any focus group usually share common characteristics, such as age, sex, educational background, religion, or something directly related to the topic being studied. This encourages the group to speak freely.

Focus groups can find out about people’s feelings, attitudes and opinions about a topic of interest. They examine only one or two topics in great detail, in an effort to really understand why people think or behave the way they do.

How can focus groups be used in health programmes?

Focus groups can be used in many different ways in health programmes. They can explore a new area of interest about which little is known, or they can establish what the community thinks about a new project plan and check whether the plan is appropriate for the community. Focus group discussions can solve project problems. For example, if a health education
project did not appear to be changing the behaviour of the community, then focus groups can explore the reasons why. Focus groups can also be used when you are evaluating a project. They can give you the community's ideas about how useful the project is. They are also used to address staff problems, by providing understanding about programme problems from the point of view of the staff themselves.

**What information will we be collecting?**

**NOTE TO TRAINER**
In this section it is worthwhile to provide a very clear description of the project. You can explain what the problems are that you are trying to solve. You will need to go through in some detail your objectives and the list of information you require. If your objectives have been written in complicated language, then it is advisable either to simplify them, or present them to the staff in a way that will not make them feel that the project is difficult for them to manage. This, of course, will depend on the language skills and educational background of the staff.

**How will we use the data from Focus Group Discussions?**

**NOTE TO TRAINER**
Here you will need to be clear about how you will use focus group results. To make this a little clearer, read the example list below of how you might want to use the information:

- to get ideas about what the community sees as important issues to the topic so that good questionnaires can be written for a larger study in the population;
- to discover local words related to the topic;
- to have additional information about the topic to be used with results from other studies;
- to help the team become more familiar with the area and the communities who live there;
- to assist decision makers with future plans to benefit the community.

**2.2 Conducting the Focus Group Research Project**

**Introduction**
The following section gives you a very brief outline of the whole process of conducting the project. It starts with the planning of the project and goes through all its aspects, including managing the results of the focus group discussions.
Focus group pre-planning

NOTE TO TRAINER
Your sharing of the detail in this section will depend upon what involvement the staff will have in project planning. You may need to provide as much detail as that in Part I of this manual, or alternatively you may just need to describe the main steps that were performed to plan the project.

Conducting the focus groups

BEFORE THE SESSION:
- pre-arrange the focus groups by visiting the site and talking to the local leaders and participants, and selecting the place where the focus groups will be held;
- check all equipment before leaving for the field;
- arrive at the site early to arrange seating and equipment.

DURING THE SESSION:
- receive participants;
- open the meeting;
- conduct the session;
- close the session.

AFTER THE SESSION:
- immediately debrief in the field;
- extend debrief at home office;
- expand field notes and check accuracy.

Management of the Results

NOTE TO TRAINER
It is necessary to provide an explanation of how you will manage the information. This simply means describing to the staff what decisions have been made concerning how you record the sessions, how you will store the information, and how you intend to analyse the information. Again, the detail you provide to the staff will depend on their involvement with these aspects of the project. However, it is important to explain to the staff the entire project, even if they are only involved in one aspect, such as moderating.
SECTION 3
Overview of Skills Training Session

3.1 Introduction
The moderator plays a key role in the focus group discussion. Many of the sessions in the training course apply to the moderator, but other roles are discussed, as well as general issues related to focus groups, that the whole team needs to understand. Although certain sessions are directed to the moderator, and others to the observer or other team members, it is recommended that all team members attend all sessions. For this reason the sessions are not grouped according to which team member is to be involved, but are presented in the same order as they occur during a focus group project.

Although there is much to learn about focus groups, the easiest way to improve skills is to practice, each time trying to include more skills. For the purposes of this training course we will include all of the things you will need to know to be able to conduct a focus group.

It is recommended that you prepare a field guide to take with you into the field. A field guide is a summary of all the main points about focus groups. They can be very useful in refreshing your memory on areas you wish to develop more in each focus group. It also helps you in the beginning when it is not reasonable to expect to be able to remember everything at once.

3.2 Knowledge and skills required of field staff in focus group discussions
The knowledge and skills that you will need to develop will be discussed under different headings:

- Roles of the team (including management of focus groups in a second language).
- General personal characteristics of the moderator.
- Preparation for focus group sessions.
- Activities for reception of participants.
- Communication and co-ordination with the team.
- Beginning the focus group.
- Asking questions.
- Encouraging and controlling the discussion.
- Observing for non-verbal messages.
- Closing the sessions.
- The debrief.
SECTION 4
Roles of the Team

4.1 Introduction

It is important to understand the roles of all members of the team in the field. A clear understanding is essential to the success of focus group sessions. The participants should feel that the team is confident and sure about what it is doing. If you allow confusion to reign over the session, not only will the participants feel uneasy (and perhaps less inclined to take the session seriously), but the quality of the information you collect may be reduced. It is also important to understand the roles and needs of your team members and to be understanding when problems arise.

This session will look at the roles of the team required where the focus group is conducted in the language of the moderator, then will discuss an alternative arrangement where the participants speak a different language from the moderator. A more detailed description of the specific responsibilities of the moderator, the observer and the translator will follow in later sessions.

4.2 Single language focus groups

Moderator

The moderator is the discussion leader. It is a very demanding job, but with practice and a little confidence, it can be performed well. The moderator is in control of the session and is responsible for the direction that the focus group takes. He or she will use all the techniques taught in this course to help the participants feel comfortable and to encourage a lively and natural group discussion.

The moderator will be provided with a question-line (or question guide) that will provide the direction for asking questions to obtain the information of interest to the project. The moderator must be familiar with all the
objectives of the study, as this is essential to explore responses that are given during the focus group and may not be expected by the planning team. To demonstrate this, say a participant gave an answer to a question that was not expected by the team. It may prove to be very important to the main objectives, but if the moderator is not familiar with the purpose of the study he or she may brush over the answer and miss the opportunity to explore something relevant.

Observer

The observer has several functions. The main task is to observe the session and to take notes. How many notes you take will depend on how the session is being recorded. If you are relying only on the observer’s notes, then you will need to get as close to catching every response as you can. On the other hand if the session is being tape recorded, then less detail of the session is required.

In addition to noting responses, the observer is also looking at any non-verbal sign or body language that the group demonstrates. This can tell you a lot about how the group feels about the topic under discussion as well as give some indication of how many people hold the same idea. Sometimes people may nod their head in agreement or shake their head in disagreement without actually saying anything. Observing these signs can add a lot to the written notes of the responses. A more detailed discussion of body language will follow in Section 11 below.

The observer also acts as a “back-up” moderator. He or she can quietly pass notes to the moderator to point out any major question not asked, any area that could be followed up, or anything they think may help.

The observer is also responsible for any equipment that is being used, such as tape recorders or cameras.

Assistants

If staff permits, it can be useful to have focus group assistants. These team members are used to help the moderator and observer run a smooth focus group. They are particularly useful in keeping down crowds during sessions, minding the children of participants, preparing any refreshments, and generally helping to host the session. They can easily be recruited from the community in which you are working for a particular session. They need not have any training or understanding of the project.

4.3 Conducting focus groups in a second language

If the team member or researcher who wants the final control over the discussion does not speak the language of the participants, then translators are required to assist in the session. It should be noted that direct translations of each response to the moderator by interrupting the discussion is not
desirable. For this reason, where translation is required, it is necessary to have a four-member team. For this, it is necessary to have two moderators, an observer and a translator.

**Moderator Translator**

This role is one where a translator is trained to be the session moderator, but is directed to some degree by a controlling moderator. The moderator translator will conduct the session with the help of the prepared question guide. They will pose the questions and encourage the discussion, but should only ask questions previously discussed by the team, or those that are included on the question guide. If the moderator translator thinks that a response should be explored, they will need to check with the controlling moderator first. They will need to be very familiar with the study objectives, and although they are directed by the controlling moderator, they should have the skills to conduct the session alone. The only difference is that the controlling moderator will have the final say about what direction the discussion will take. In more formal research projects, the team member who is responsible for the project may need to have direct control over the focus group session. In other projects, the team leader or co-ordinator may want to moderate the sessions themselves, but may be restricted by language.

**Controlling Moderator**

As described, this member of the team has the final say about what questions are added or dropped from the question guide. They should allow the moderator translator a reasonable amount of freedom in leading the discussion. If the controlling moderator interrupts the discussion too frequently, then it will disrupt the flow of the session. This moderator should simply listen and observe, and interrupt only when a new line of questioning that has not previously been discussed by the team is necessary.

**Translator**

This member of the team has perhaps the most tiring task of all. The translator is expected to keep both the controlling moderator and the observer (see below) informed of the entire sessions. The translator should aim to provide the other team members with a summary translation of each response by each participant. It is not possible to provide a full and direct translation for such a long period. It is also necessary to translate what the assistant moderator is saying in order to aid in the overall understanding of the session.

**Observer**

The role of the observer for translator-assisted sessions is essentially the same as that in the single language sessions. They are there to look, listen and
take notes. In this case, the observer will be noting responses as they are translated by the translator. These notes will be used in the debrief after the focus group discussion is over. The debrief checks on the direction of the focus group and the quality of the information gained. The notes are also important to the development of future question guides for further focus groups. For these reasons it is extremely important that the translation is as accurate as possible.

The diagram (Box 7) illustrates the seating allocations of the Moderator Translator, Controlling Moderator, Translator and Observer, as well as participants. Note that both the moderator translator and controlling moderator are part of the circle with focus group participants, whilst the translator and observer are positioned behind the moderators to avoid disruption.
4.4 Communication and co-ordination with team members

As you can see from our discussion about the roles of each team member, there are clear responsibilities for all members of the team. It should also be apparent that a high level of communication and co-ordination is required to achieve results. There will always be times when some team members will feel that the session is sliding out of control. Hopefully, you will not all experience the problem at the same time. The main point here is to understand the roles and needs of your team members and to be understanding when problems arise.

The other aspect of communication is translation where you are working in a second language. It is really important that the team knows what is going on at all times. If you are losing track of what is going on, it is better to stop the session than for the translator to try to keep pace and to provide the moderator or observer with an inaccurate translation.

Good communication also involves honest and helpful feedback of the session during the debrief. You will be expected to discuss any difficulties you face as soon as they arise, and we hope that you will feel comfortable in doing so.
SECTION 5

Personal Characteristics of the Moderator

5.1 Introduction

Because of the nature of focus groups, and the need for natural discussion by the participants, the atmosphere for the discussion is extremely important. There are many personal characteristics of the moderator that, if developed intentionally, can aid in producing excellent results from focus groups.

The list appears very long, and at first glance may make you feel that it is impossible to be all these things. Do not worry, it is just a matter of being aware of these issues, and as you gain more experience, practice more of them. You are not expected to be able to perform in this way at your first focus group!

5.2 Characteristics

Adequate knowledge

To be able to perform well in a focus group, you will have practice sessions as well as theory lessons. Please try and make yourself as familiar with the materials as possible before the field focus groups begin.

You should also have enough background information about the topic you are working on to help you better understand the responses you get as well as to be able to follow up on critical areas. You will have been provided with a summary of the areas of interest to aid your understanding.

If you have any worries or difficulties, please let the team leader know so that any problems can be rectified. There will also be regular meetings to discuss the focus groups to see if there is anything that can be done to improve them.
Listening skills

Being a good listener is a good skill to develop. For focus groups, it is particularly important. You need to be able to listen to what the participants are telling you so you can summarise comments and repeat them back to the participants to check understanding; in addition, it is only possible to gain information from the group if the moderator is not talking too much!

It is the role of the moderator to encourage the group to speak, rather than talk throughout the discussion. However, it is very easy to do this, especially if you are anxious about the success of the discussion. In addition, the moderator will not be taking many notes and therefore close attention to the discussion is necessary. You will need to be able to remember the comments and then relate them somehow to the next question, and to ask follow-up questions on the basis of what people say. Asking good quality follow-up questions is only possible if you are listening carefully to the participants' comments and really trying to think about what they mean.

The skill of good listening requires practice! You can practice this at home by listening to a group conversation and trying to remember the main points.

Leadership skills

The role of the moderator is also that of a leader. Leadership does not mean taking over the group, but directing the discussion. On the other hand, you do not want the group to lead you. If this occurs, you will not have time to get the information you need to meet the needs of the research project.

Techniques to keep the conversation on the subject will be discussed later.

Relationship with the participants

In order to encourage discussion, participants in focus groups need to be able to communicate with you comfortably. Even if you are local staff, you will probably not be working in your own villages. It is important to try to understand what the participants are saying and what it really means to them. Being sincere in learning about the community should be felt by the group. Good moderators are very sensitive to the needs of the community in which they work, and should be as familiar as possible with important aspects of the local culture.

Your tone of voice could tell the participants many things without you actually saying anything wrong! Where it is necessary to ask further questions so as to gain more information, this must be done in the most gentle and friendly way possible.

It is also extremely important not to be judgemental about any response you hear. People will not talk freely if they think they are being judged, if they feel that you disagree with them, or if they feel that they are giving the “wrong answers”. There are no right or wrong answers in focus groups.
Patience and flexibility

Sometimes focus groups do not go as planned. This can occur by interruptions of many kinds. It helps to try to think of what these interruptions might be, but sometimes (often!) the unexpected happens. Babies need to be fed, more people turn up, the group doesn't work well together. Some groups may not talk much, or, at worst not even arrive! If things happen that you cannot control, then you need to accept whatever happens. Always keep your sense of humour.

Observation skills

As well as listening to the participants' responses it will also be necessary to watch for anything that could indicate boredom, anxiety, tiredness, or impatience. If this occurs, be prepared to fix any problems swiftly.

Clothing

It is always a good idea to find out how the local people would expect you to dress. If you are working in very poor communities you will not be well accepted in very expensive clothes. This could well distance you from the local people. On the other hand, some communities would expect a certain standard of dress, particularly if you represent a district or provincial health office. Find out from local staff the best thing to wear in the field.
SECTION 6
Preparation for Each Focus Group Discussion

6.1 Mental preparation
As the focus group is an activity that requires intense concentration for a one to two hour period, it is important that the moderator is mentally alert and free from anxieties or worries. For the period of the study that includes focus groups, being well rested will assist in your ability to concentrate.

Another factor influencing the success of the focus group is your ability to conduct a smooth and natural conversation, and it will be necessary for you to memorise the questions that will be asked. You will always have a copy of them in front of you, but they should only be glanced at to remind you what the next question should be or what small prompting questions to use to encourage conversation. We will provide examples of this later.

6.2 Focus group discussion checklist
Any activity that requires many activities, equipment and field visits needs to be well planned. Although the majority of plans have been made, it will always be necessary to make sure that you are leaving for the field with everything necessary to conduct the focus group as successfully as possible.

You should prepare a checklist to go through before you leave for the field for every focus group. Any member of the team can be responsible to check that everything is prepared and available. In your list include all the paper work, necessary equipment and lists of participants. When making your equipment list, think about everything you will possibly need including batteries and spare pieces of equipment should any equipment fail. Take extra batteries and tapes with you. Also ensure that one person is responsible for actually testing all the equipment before departure.

Use the checklist before every focus group, even when you feel you know
all that is required from memory. It is a good habit to get into and will save you much anxiety especially in the early days of the project. Checklists also stop everyone thinking that someone else has prepared things!
SECTION 7
Entering the Community and Activities for the Reception of Participants

7.1 Entering the community to contact participants

This may be done a day or even a week before the focus group. However, in some circumstances, participants may be contacted as late as the day of the focus group. Your team will already have made plans concerning when to make first contact with the participants, but there are a few points to make about arranging the session with potential participants.

It is a very good idea for the members of the team who will conduct the focus group to visit the participants in their home to invite them to the session. This will indicate that the team considers the participant important enough to make a personal visit and could encourage them to attend. When you visit participants at their home, you can collect some basic demographic data: their age, occupation and marital status, for example. Registration at the time of the focus group takes up valuable time, and people may not want to register and give away personal details in front of other participants.

When you first arrive in a particular location, it is probably appropriate to contact the local leader, or perhaps the health worker, to obtain permission to enter the community. They will most probably help you locate your participants and can be of great use in arranging a site for the session. It is a courtesy to explain your purpose, but try not to give details of the session as this could influence responses.

Consider the daily activities of the participants and be sensitive to the amount of time they would have available to give up for a two hour session. A focus group scheduled late afternoon might interfere with the preparation of an evening meal for example, and you will find that you’ll have fewer
people willing to participate. By the time participants get to the session, linger for a while talking to friends, then return home, they could easily have lost half a day. Never pressure people into attending. People who are anxious about duties awaiting them at home will not be good participants anyway. You can encourage participation by offering child care at the session. In one study which used focus groups, when women indicated that they would only be free after the evening meal, the researcher arranged to serve them dinner, and so maximised participation and created a warm and friendly atmosphere which encouraged the participants to discuss some sensitive issues relating to their health (Siriporn Chirawatkul, pers.comm.).

7.2 Before the participants arrive

The team should arrive before the appointed time to make sure the place where the focus group discussion is to be held is ready. The checklist you will have prepared should also cover these preparations, so always refer to it before the session.

If you have already arranged the session a day or two ahead, it is worth visiting the participants to remind them if this is at all possible. You may also need to make another courtesy call to the local leader or health worker.

The seating needs to be arranged to encourage a group discussion (in a circle) and the equipment set up and tested once more.

7.3 As the participants arrive

One reason the team will arrive before the appointed time is to let people know that the session will go ahead as planned, and the team is ready to receive them.

The reception time is designed to get to know the participants and to put them at ease. The role of the team is rather like hosting a gathering of friends or neighbours.

Small talk is ideal at this point. It is best to talk about minor issues. You should be aware that issues that will be raised in the focus group should not be discussed before the session begins. Sometimes people will only be prepared to express their views once. Controversial topics should also be avoided! We must maintain the “neutral” appearance at all times so people will be free to express themselves later.

If participants did not register in their homes, then this would be the time to complete that task. In some communities it is a good idea to give participants name tags. It will help the moderator a great deal to be able to remember participants’ names, and it creates a friendly, warm atmosphere. It also helps the observer identify responses of certain participants.

The reception time is also a time to observe the participants to see how they communicate with each other. Talkative or dominating people should
be seated next to the moderator so that he or she can turn away from the
dominator should the situation arise that they are taking over the session.
Shy people can be seated opposite the moderator to enable maximum eye
contact. The observer should greet participants at the door while the
moderator/s are conducting the “small talk”.

Should participants ask questions about the topic to be discussed, it is
important not to give them too much information. If participants have a
detailed idea of what information we require, when the questions are asked
they may not respond in a natural way. For this study, the following points
can be given as a “routine” response to such questions:

NOTE TO TRAINER
Add in to this section the responses that you all agree to give to specific
questions about the session and the topic under discussion.

7.4 Deciding when to start
The ideal number of participants is eight. Should only some of the
participants turn up, be prepared to start with as little as four. This is not
really as productive, but we must respect the fact that those participants who
have come, may have done so at the expense of their normal activities. They
must be made to feel important, and we can do this by demonstrating that
their views are still worth listening to.

Should less than four participants arrive, then it is not a waste of time to
sit casually with them and discuss the same questions. They may be able to
give you some new information that can help with the study. Even talking
like this can provide you with valuable information.

7.5 What to do if too many people arrive for the focus group
Often in villages, the focus group will be seen as an unusual and
entertaining event. It is best for our research purposes if only those invited
actually attend. However, should a crowd of people assemble you need to be
sensitive to local custom.

Discretion in discouraging extra people will be left to the team’s knowl-
edge of the area and local custom. Be aware of the need for flexibility in this
matter. In one study, extra people were asked to leave, but a second focus
group was arranged the following day so that the moderator could talk to
them also (Siriporn Chirawatkul, pers.comm.).
SECTION 8

Beginning the Focus Group Discussion

8.1 Introduction

This part of the session is important as it sets the atmosphere for the whole focus group. It needs to be casual, but people need to be aware that there will be some structure and that we need to follow a semi-planned format. It is important not to appear too casual as people may not take the session too seriously. On the other hand, too much formality may restrict the flow of conversation.

8.2 Points for introducing the session

■ Welcome the participants and thank them for coming. Introduce the team. If you are working in two languages, then the moderator should welcome the group through a direct translation. This gives the strong impression of their involvement in the session.

■ Explain team’s work. Provide a simple explanation of the project without giving away the exact nature of the research questions.

■ Explain the different roles of the team.

■ Explain why the participants were chosen. Include the importance of their contribution to the study and the community.

■ Make sure people understand that the session will be confidential.

■ Explain that you will be using a tape recorder (if appropriate) for the session in order to remember later what was said.
- Explain how the focus group works and “ground rules”:
  - a group discussion that is built around certain questions;
  - session lasts for around an hour and a half;
  - because of the need for translation and tape recording it is essential that only one person talks at a time (if appropriate);
  - at certain times, the observer may need to check a point with the moderator, so please be patient (or if using two moderators, then there may be communication between them).

Try to keep the conversation “in the group” as other conversations going on between a couple of group members may distract the flow of discussion.

Tell participants you would like to hear from ALL of them about their feelings on the subject. Anything they want to say is important. Remember to give all in the group the chance to speak.

Because there is much information to get through in one hour, explain you may need to move onto the next question before the group has really explored one area.

Vague comments cannot provide the group with adequate information. Ask participants to clarify points when necessary. “I agree” comments will usually be followed by requests for explanation. “It is difficult to...” may need to be explained a bit more, such as why is it difficult.

- The group members introduce themselves.

- Ask for any questions.

- Start the session off with a question that will put the participants at ease. This can be a question that demonstrates that they all have something in common and can be comfortable about speaking freely. Or, it could be simply a very general question that is easy to answer and gets the group relaxed. This question may be rather long, certainly longer than in a survey questionnaire. This is because in general this encourages fuller answers in response. For example: “As I’ve explained, I am interested in finding out about the health problems of people in this village. I wonder if you could tell me what you think the main health problems are here?”
SECTION 9
Moderator Skills: Asking Questions

9.1 Introduction
The research team will have carefully prepared questions for the focus groups. If you are working in a second language, the field staff who may also be the translators may need to provide the research team with some guidance in wording the questions as well as translating them.

The question lines have been created to meet specific needs to obtain the right information as quickly as possible. During the pilot sessions it may become obvious that some of these need to be revised, as the participants are not able to understand what is wanted of them.

The most important thing to remember is that the questions need to be asked in exactly the same way as they have been prepared. If you change the order or think that something is wrong, check with the team first.

9.2 Types of questions used
The questions used in focus groups are what we call open-ended. This means that the question could be answered in a variety of ways. This helps the participants to answer what is important to them rather than in a specific way.

We start the session with very open-ended and general questions, but begin to get more specific as we get onto the topic of interest. This allows us to get the information we are really after.

Focus groups avoid yes/no questions. We phrase a question to encourage a discussion. If you ask “do you...” or “is...” questions, then you may simply get a yes/no answer.

Focus groups rarely use “why” questions. This is because it suggests a sensible answer, and the participants may tend to answer in whatever way they think is correct, or what they think you want to hear.
“Accidental” questions may become necessary to ask once the focus group has begun. This happens when we have not anticipated the direction of the discussion, and a topic of great interest emerges during the session. If you think of any such extra or “accidental” questions, and are moderating with a controlling moderator, let them know before you explore the topic further. We usually try and ask these questions at the end of the session in the last five to ten minutes, but it may be necessary to ask them at the time they are suggested.

For example, suppose you were conducting a focus group on schistosomiasis haematobium (urinary schistosomiasis) and someone in the group says that haematuria (blood in the urine) is normal (Bello and Idiong 1982; Nash et al. 1982). This would be an occasion for an accidental or unplanned question, as set out in a hypothetical example in Box 8. “M” is the moderator.

NOTE TO TRAINER
It would be worthwhile to spend some time looking at the question guide that you have prepared, or if you are preparing the question guide with the help of the field staff, then it is better to let the staff complete the training sessions first.

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**Box 8**

**Accidental questions: Haematuria in young boys**

**M:** We’ve been discussing various illnesses which you see in older children. You’ve mentioned malaria, cough, and diarrhoea? Is that all?

**A:** Yes (all participants agree). Older girls and boys are quite healthy around here. Of course, they have the normal things, like menstruation in girls and blood in urine in the boys, but that’s part of growing up.

**M:** Blood in urine is interesting. Could you tell me a bit more: in what ways is this normal?

**A:** Like I said, it’s just like menstruation, it’s the first sign that the boy is becoming a man. All boys have this ...

**M:** They do?...
SECTION 10
Encouraging and Controlling the Discussion

10.1 Introduction
Perhaps the area that requires the most practice is the control of the focus group. You will not be able to remember all of these techniques at first, but with each new focus group try to practice another skill.

Perhaps the most powerful tool for encouraging participation by the group is to explain adequately at the beginning of the session the purpose of the study (in general terms) and how important their contribution is to the study.

The following list is not necessarily complete. Part of your task is to make suggestions about other techniques that could aid in the flow of discussion.

10.2 Encouraging discussion

Atmosphere
Wherever possible maintain a friendly and warm attitude to make the participants feel comfortable. As previously mentioned, being non-judgemental and open can help a lot. Also as mentioned before, aim to be somewhat casual, but not too much so in case the participants do not take the session seriously.

Pauses and prompts
Pausing to allow a participant to think more on the topic being discussed is a very useful technique. It can also allow a new speaker to comment. Some participants who are shy may not compete for time to speak, but these people will often talk if there is a break in the discussion.

This technique is very difficult to do if you are nervous about the success of the focus group. It is natural to want to fill in the gaps in conversation. Try
practising this on family and friends to see how it works. With confidence in the technique, you will be able to use it more effectively.

The pause should not last more than five seconds (which can seem like a lifetime if you are anxious!). The pause used with confidence will also stop you rushing onto the next topic too quickly.

You can also use the pause to make eye contact with someone. This can encourage that person to speak. Just try not to embarrass anyone, particularly the shy ones.

Establishing eye contact can also be a means of prompting someone to continue to talk. Raising your eyebrows, nodding, and other gestures (which vary from culture to culture) may also encourage people to continue to talk. Other prompts are verbal — some have meaning (“I see, that’s interesting, keep on ...”), others are simply reassuring sounds (“mmm”, “uh-huh”) to encouraging a speaker to continue his or her line of response.

The probe
This technique is so important, that we will need to prepare probes for each question we ask should no one respond. Generally, we try to avoid vague comments, and the probe can encourage a speaker to give more information. For example:
“Could you explain further?”
“Would you give me an example of what you mean?”
“I don’t understand...”

The general probe is used often at the beginning of the discussion. This helps the participants know that we want precise answers.

Rephrasing
A question can be rephrased if the group members are finding it difficult to answer. Be very careful not to change the meaning of the original question and do not hint at the answer.

“I was referring to access to the clinic. What I meant to ask you was, are there any factors that either prevent you going to the clinic or make it easy for you?”

Reminder questions
This technique is supposed to keep the conversation lively. It also reminds the group of the question being asked.

“Mrs X, you told us that you cannot always take your child to the clinic because transport is difficult. Mrs Y (who has not yet said anything), does anything stop you from taking your child to the clinic?”

Hypothetical questions
Sometimes it is helpful to give an example of a particular subject (for example, a possible intervention, or a set of symptoms) in order to test the
knowledge and attitudes of the group or to clarify the generalisability of a previous comment. In one study, a research team used clinical vignettes to find out local terminology for different kinds of diarrhoeal disease, and to test the accuracy of those vignettes before incorporating them also into in-depth interviews with mothers and grandmothers (Abdullah Sani et al. 1990).

Suppose, for example, you want to try to determine if treatment differs depending on whether a child has a simple fever, or other symptoms which might indicate malaria. You could ask:

“You’ve suggested that babies who have fever should be treated by the local healer. But suppose that a baby had a bad fever, and was shivering and very cold, and didn’t seem to be getting any better: what would you do then?”

Box 9 gives examples of a number of different styles of questions which you might use within a single focus group.

10.3 Dealing with specific individuals

Not all participants will respond in the ideal way! For this reason we will look at some ways to deal with some of the more common group problems (see also Scrimshaw and Hurtado 1987:15-19; Sittitrai and Brown 1990; Stewart and Shandasani 1990:96-98).

The expert

Often in groups there will be “experts”. This can mean someone who is considered either by themselves or others to have a lot of knowledge on the topic in discussion.

Although “experts” can offer a lot of useful information, they should not be allowed to take over and they may prevent other group members from speaking. Opening statements should emphasise that all participants have knowledge on the subject, and that you want to hear everyone’s opinions.

Sometimes, participants will have a special status in the community that you were not aware of. They might be the wife of an important person, be more affluent than other group members, or have any number of other qualities that prevent or restrict conversation from others. If you identify such a person you should try to limit attention to this fact, although the group members will be aware of it.

Dominant talkers

These are participants who want to answer all the questions for the group. They often answer questions immediately and prevent others from speaking.

Again, the introductory comments should emphasise the need for all
Box 9

**Moderator question styles**

M: I wonder if you could tell me about the different kinds of illnesses your children get? [general question]

M: So there’s a special sort of fever when the child gets very cold and is really shivering, and the child could die? [repetition]

M: Suppose the child had a fever, and was very cold, and then complained of a very bad headache? What do you think might be wrong with it? [clinical vignette]

M: Let’s suppose you took this child to the local store, and you were given some tablets. You gave those to her, but she didn’t get any better. Now what would you do? [hypothetical]

M: You all think that’s true then? Mrs Y, what about you? [prompt]

Mrs Y: Well, not really. You see my brother-in-law helps out...

M: That’s interesting, how? [probe]

Mrs Y: Well, he would lend me the money so that I could take the baby to the clinic.

M: Can he always do that? [check for generalisability of specific person’s experience]

M: What do the rest of you do if you have no money? Do you borrow from someone, or do you do something else? [check for generalisability within the group]

Participants’ comments, and the initial discussion on this aspect should keep the potential problem alive in people’s minds.

Dominant talkers are identified, if possible, during the reception time and are seated next to the moderator. This is done so body language can be used! This means turning slightly away from the dominant talker and looking other group members in the eye.

Should a dominant talker continue, then more drastic measures need to be taken!

- Look slightly bored while avoiding eye contact. *but be tactful and kind.*
- Thank the dominant talker for his or her comment, and ask for other comments from the group.
Shy respondents

There will always be shy people in a group. Again, try to identify these people in the reception time and seat them opposite the moderator to enable maximum eye contact.

If this does not help, try gently to address them by name. Be very careful with this technique as it could embarrass them and prevent them from speaking again!

People who can't stop talking

These people talk on and on about a topic. They cease to provide good information, and will prevent others from speaking. As you only have about one hour for the discussion on several topics, it is essential that you keep these people under control.

Deal with these people by stopping eye contact after 20 to 30 seconds. The observer and other team members, if present, should do the same. Look bored, look at other participants, but do not look at the participant of concern.

As soon as the participant pauses, be ready to fire the next question at another participant, or repeat the same question, if necessary, to other members of the group.
SECTION 11
Moderator and Observer Skills: Observing Non-Verbal Messages

11.1 Introduction
As well as talking, people give many messages through body language. These are very important to understand if the meaning behind what people are saying is to be understood, and observers of focus groups need to take note of these as well as verbal responses to questions.

It is difficult to be expert at this without special training. Try to use common sense, by being aware of this. In the training and debriefing sessions, discuss body language, including common gestures and expressions used in your culture to indicate feeling or emotion.

The observer is the main team member watching body language and tone of voice. Although this will be a major part of his or her role, it is also important for all team members to consider body language during the discussion. The observer will note certain things during the session that he or she will want more information about, so practice observing signs people give that do not involve words and listen to what they are saying at the same time!

11.2 Things to watch for in "non-verbal" messages

Facial expression
The expressions people use whilst talking provide us with a lot of information about how they are feeling about what they are saying. Try writing a list of the types of facial expressions used to give certain impressions, and include the real message they are sending.
Body posture

This is as important as facial expressions. The way people are sitting can give you a lot of information about how they are feeling about the discussion. People use body language differently in different cultural settings. Try to list down some body postures that convey feelings (such as boredom, excitement, interest, impatience, anger or resentment, or lack of understanding), and include facial expressions in this exercise. If listing is difficult, try to demonstrate the body postures and facial expressions yourselves.
SECTION 12

Observer Skills: Recording the Session

12.1 Introduction

There are many ways of recording focus group discussions, but whatever method you choose for your project, it is the responsibility of the observer to record the session. The interpretation of information relies on the quality of the record of the session, and so it is a very important part of the project.

12.2 Note-taking

In many circumstances, you will not have access to tape recorders or video cameras, and must therefore rely on paper and pencil. This is perfectly satisfactory, although it will limit the amount of information you can manage as well as the detail in which you can examine the responses of participants.

If you are only taking notes and have no other method of recording, then the quality of your notes becomes very important. Unless you have skills in shorthand (and most of us do not) then you will find it near impossible to record each response from each participant. One way of getting as much as possible is to try and summarise each participant’s response. You should try and include direct quotes where interesting statements are made, or even to shown a common response.

Also be aware that if you are taking notes only, it is your interpretation of the response that you are recording through the summary. Be very careful to keep the summary true to what the participant intended. Do not record a quote that could take on a different meaning if read away from the discussion in which it was said.

If you are taking notes as well as recording the session, then the way you write your notes will change a little. If you have a tape recording that will be
used to produce a full written or typed transcript of the whole session, then all you need to do is jot down words that can be used during the debrief to remind you of what was said, and by whom. If the taped recording is used to provide a record that will be used only if necessary, then your notes should be as full as possible.

Immediately after the session if possible, and certainly within 24 hours, you need to write up your notes in detail. This is especially important where your analysis will rely on these notes. Always ensure that you have the session written up before the next focus group. As you can't always remember details from one or two sessions ago, it is very easy to get confused. Check with the moderator: she or he may be able to remember some details you have forgotten, or have a different interpretation of various gestures or statements.

Do not forget to include your observations of the non-verbal messages in your notes. These can be of great assistance later for analysis.

12.3 Tape recording

This is a particularly useful method of recording the session. It can be used as a complete and accurate record when there are questions or confusions about responses or their meaning. It can provide a record of the whole session for anyone who was not present at the session, buy would like a detailed knowledge of the results of the focus groups. It can be very helpful for observers to expand their notes if they are unclear about their own summary.

Perhaps the most effective use of the tape recording is the full written transcript. This is only possible where you have the staff to produce the documents. As it takes one full working day to produce a transcript of a 90-minute focus group, not many offices will be able to use this method. However, it is recommended if it is at all possible as it will improve the quality of your results quite significantly.

The observer should set up and test the tape recording equipment in the field even if it was tested in the home office. It is also recommended to have two tape recorders so that each session has a back up recording should one of the recorders fail. Also, if you start one tape recorder about three minutes before the other, then you will not lose any of the session while turning the tapes around. However, good note taking skills can help you fill in the missing information.

You should always ask permission to record the session. It is probably better to use small microphones, as large ones can be a distraction especially if there are children around. Place the microphones in the centre of the group, and try to ensure that the voices of all participants will be heard. Always take at least two sets of spare batteries, and a spare microphone if
possible. You should have extra cassettes too in case the session is very successful and goes on longer than you expected.

12.4 Video recording

This type of recording is rarely used in research in developing countries. Mostly, researchers and health departments do not have access to such equipment, but even if they do, video cameras can be very distracting to the group. This of course depends on how much exposure they have had to such technologies. If you are using video (and it can be very useful) follow the same principles as with tape recordings. Just ensure that people are not aware of the camera too much as this could easily stop a free and natural discussion.
SECTION 13
Closing the Discussion and Meeting

13.1 Introduction
Closing the discussion and having refreshments together can be as important as the discussion itself. This is for two main reasons. People should feel that their contribution has been worthwhile, and that you are really interested in them as people in the community. The participants should leave the meeting feeling satisfied that the time taken from their daily duties was well invested.

13.2 Closing the focus group discussion
The last five to ten minutes of the discussion should be reserved for any extra questions that appeared necessary during the discussion. The observer may want to ask a question or may want to use this time to check that her or his notes are correct.

After the last question has been asked and adequately covered, and there is a pause in the discussion, advise the participants that the discussion is formally closed. Thank them very much for their valuable contribution and invite them to join you for refreshments and informal conversation.

Some participants may want to leave immediately, and should be made to feel comfortable about this. Assure people that they are welcome to join you for refreshments, but they are free to get back to their duties if necessary.

13.3 Refreshment time
This time should be used to answer questions asked by the participants. It is not really possible to predict what types of questions will be asked, but as you progress with the focus groups you can decide how best to answer any common questions concerning the study. Participants will often want to
know whether they have provided the “right” information. Always reassure them that they were extremely helpful. This message should be given in a very sincere fashion, even if the session seemed to be of minimal value! It may turn out to be valuable during analysis later, so you can assure people with confidence.

Another purpose of this time is to listen carefully for any further information that is revealed that was not discussed in the session. Sometimes people may feel more comfortable about discussing things in this very informal time. You cannot write anything down during this time, so try hard to remember anything that seems important.

Some participants may want to stay and continue general conversation with their friends. Usually the focus group team can expect to stay with the participants for about half an hour. You will need to use your own judgement about the most appropriate time to leave.

13.4 Leaving the location

If appropriate and possible, it is a courtesy to find the local leader or health worker before leaving the area to report on the success of the meeting. He or she may also have questions to ask. This should only be a brief courtesy call before setting off.
SECTION 14

The Debrief

14.1 Introduction
A debrief is a meeting that is held after each focus group to discuss all aspects of the session. The debrief is a very useful activity to include in the focus group session. It is very tempting to limit the debrief sessions to a minimum, but it is extremely useful in evaluating the quality of the session, improving the skills of the team, checking the responses, and designing further question guides or changing question lines.

14.2 The field debrief
This is a very short meeting that is held immediately after the focus group while the team is still in the field. It should be conducted away from the site of the focus group. As people will be rather tired after the session, do not expect the team to be able to give more than 15 minutes concentration time to the field debrief. This meeting should only be used for clearing up any confusion that a team member thinks may be forgotten by the time the full debrief session is held.

14.3 The full focus group debrief
You may need two hours for the debriefing of each focus group, especially in the early part of a project. All team members should be present for this meeting. If you are using interpreters, it is especially important that they attend as they can provide a lot of guidance to the research team. They have often noticed things during the session that have not actually been recorded that may be of use. They can also clarify questions about responses that were recorded by the observer.

If tape recordings are to be transcribed, then they will not be available for the debriefing session. For this reason, you will need to rely on the notes taken by the observer. Use these notes to check whether the focus group
discussions are providing you with the information that you require to meet the objectives.

It is quite useful to have a meeting agenda prepared so that you can go through the many aspects of the focus group discussions thoroughly. It is easy to forget all the different parts that need to be discussed, so if you are working with a list of things to cover, the meeting will be more productive. You should design your own agenda, but be sure to include specific points in the following main areas:

- Practical/logistical aspects of the focus group session (including equipment).
- Team skills and performance.
- Wording and comprehension of the questions.
- Information required by objectives being obtained.
- Cultural appropriateness of the session.

In larger projects where distances have to be travelled, a focus group session can take up a half day. In this case, it may be useful to have your focus group sessions in the afternoon and your debrief the following morning. Often if your team members are tired after a session, then holding the major debrief the same afternoon may not be wise. You do not want to rush the debrief as the information that the whole team can provide is very valuable, and may improve the standard of your focus groups quite a lot.
References


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