On a more practical side, locations conducive to group interviews may not exist, natural groupings may not develop, and if they do form, the researcher may not be permitted access to the group, particularly if that group has established a history of getting together. It may be very difficult, for example, for a researcher to be accepted into a regular poker-playing group or a group that meets at coffee break. In addition, group responses can be affected by the size of the group, by the group members' view of the purpose of the interview, and by the differences in background of the members. In fact, group interviews, particularly the natural and focus groups, may experience the pressure to conformity (Izenberg, 1986); individuals may be stifled rather than stimulated by the group; there may be a higher ratio of interpersonal conflict in interacting groups, and this could drain the response energy of the group; the production of irrelevant data may be high; posturing by members of the group could create a level of false information or awareness of the research problem; and the outcome of the interview could very possibly be biased by the interviewer's role in the group.

If the group interview is employed, some of the flexibility in the observer role is compromised. The covert role is virtually impossible to implement, and the peripheral member role may be all that is possible since the role of interviewer requires some coordinating and directing (Adler & Adler, 1987). Thus the field researcher who implements group interviews will need to employ a more active membership role if intense phenomenological interviewing is required, but the less active role facilitates organizing informal spontaneous group interviews.

Conclusion

The group interview is a tool that social researchers should consider utilizing, particularly as a strategy to obtain phenomenological data in natural settings. The sole purpose of this technique is not limited to exploratory inquiry or to the development of procedures and questionnaire items for subsequent quantitative studies. It is a technique that can stand alone as a procedure for obtaining data on any social context that is being studied in an ethnographic manner. Finally, we do not propose that the group interview be a substitute for the traditional one-on-one interview. Rather, the group interview should be considered for use along with other techniques of interviewing and observation.

3

The Design and Analysis of Focus Group Studies

A Practical Approach

JOHN KNODEL

Practitioners of modern social science research are increasingly recognizing the value of focus group methodology to collect qualitative data either for its own right or to be used in conjunction with quantitative data. There is already a substantial literature on how to conduct focus groups, based largely on marketing research experience (e.g., Greenbaum, 1987). Far less has been written about how to design focus group studies and analyze their results, especially within the framework of social science research (but see Morgan, 1988; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). This chapter provides a practical approach to design and analysis.

Designing a Focus Group Study

As with other approaches to studying social phenomena, designing a focus group study requires careful thought and reflection. Given that focus groups can be used for a variety of purposes within social science research, the design of a focus group study will depend on its purpose. At one extreme, maximum flexibility may be desired; the number of groups to be held and even the precise characteristics of the populations to be targeted are decided in a stepwise fashion as the fieldwork
progresses. Such a flexible approach allows the fieldwork to stop once
few new insights appear to emerge from additional sessions. This very
flexible approach is probably most suitable when the research is of a
very exploratory nature and when it is useful to digest the content of
each successive focus group session before deciding if another is
needed with any particular target group. This may be the case with pilot
studies of a particular topic. Likewise, if focus groups are being used
to help formulate questions and response categories for a structured
questionnaire, only a few sessions may be necessary; decisions on
precisely how many and with whom are contingent on the utility of the
sessions as they are held.

At the other extreme, when qualitative information is needed on
issues about which the researchers have substantial background knowledge
and a reasonable grasp of the issues they wish to examine and
extensive analysis of the data is anticipated, a detailed design, set in
advance, is likely to be more appropriate. Much of the discussion that
follows relates to this latter type of design and assumes that the project
will involve several subsets of the population, although many of the
points are relevant even if the study concerns a single population
segment. The discussion is illustrated with examples taken primarily
from research on aging but could just as well have used examples from
any other area of social science interest.

Setting Objectives and Formulating
Discussion Guidelines

The first step in designing a focus group study should be to define
and clarify the concepts that are to be investigated. In general, it is
advisable to keep the number of broad concepts examined in a focus
group moderate so that each can be examined in detail. The general
concepts to be explored need to be formulated as a set of discussion
guidelines that can be used by the moderator during the focus group
sessions. The basic idea of the guidelines is to lay out a set of issues for
the group to discuss. It is important to bear in mind that the moderator
will mostly be improvising comments and questions within the framework set by the guidelines. By keeping the questions open-ended, the
moderator can stimulate useful trains of thought in the participants that
were not anticipated.

Guidelines should be kept relatively brief. Remember that the objective of a focus group is an in-depth examination of the concepts being
covered. If there are particular aspects of a topic that you want to ensure
are probed, this can be noted in the guidelines without formulating
separate questions. This way the moderator can bring them up in a more
natural manner. Presumably many of these points will come up sponta-
necessarily in the course of the discussion. If there are too many concepts
and associated questions, there will be insufficient time to cover them
before the participants become fatigued.

An example of a set of guidelines intended to guide a discussion of
the position and support systems of elderly in a developing country is
provided in Table 3.1. Note that the guidelines tend to be general in
nature, be open-ended, and seek to find what is going on without
specifically asking directly about the situation of the individual partic-
ipants. However, participants are likely to share their personal experience voluntarily to support their opinions. Such personal information
can also be useful, as it helps ground the discussion in reality and can
serve as a concrete referent when asking about what is typical or
common. Note also that guidelines need not be as detailed as shown in
Table 3.1. If a less structured discussion is desired, a simple list of topics
might even suffice, provided the moderator is well versed in the nature of
the issues and thus will know when and what to probe. However, if
comparisons are to be made across differently defined subgroups, rela-
tively detailed guidelines such as those shown can help ensure that
similar points are discussed across groups.

If the focus groups are part of a project involving other data collection
(e.g., a survey or cases studies) consideration must be given to how the
focus group data fit into the overall research plan. This is crucial
because they may affect which population subgroups you wish to target
for the discussions, what the differences between them are, and how
many focus group sessions need to be organized.

Targeting the Participants

Given a clear idea of the concepts that are to be investigated, the next
critical step in designing a focus group study is to decide on the
characteristics of the individuals who are to be targeted for sessions.
When there is interest in comparing views of people with differing
Table 3.1  Example of Focus Group Guidelines for a Study of Support and Exchange Systems Involving the Elderly

**TOPIC 1. Support of Elderly**

1.1 Where do elderly prefer to live in relation to their children?  
   [Probe: coresident, in own house but nearby children]

1.2 What assistance do elderly expect to receive from children?  
   [Probe: daily activities, work, help when sick, remittances]

1.3 In reality, can the elderly depend on children for assistance and care or do they need to depend on themselves? Why?

1.4 How can the elderly help ensure that they will get support and care from children?  
   [Probe: withholding inheritance, providing higher education]

1.5 Does the assistance and care received by elderly from children differ according to the characteristics of the elderly person?  
   [Probe: wealth, work status, health]

1.6 Does the assistance and care received by elderly from children differ according to the characteristics of the child?  
   [Probe: sex, marital status, residence, occupation, education]

1.7 What help do elderly generally receive from sources other than children?  
   [Probe: How about elderly with no children?]

**TOPIC 2. Economic Role of the Elderly**

2.1 Do most elderly work in this community?  
   [Probe: type of work]

2.2 Do elderly work because they want to or because they have to?  
   [Probe: relation to economic status]

**TOPIC 3. Role of Elderly in the Family**

3.1 How do elderly who live with children contribute to the household?  
   [Probe: household chores, child care, expenses]

3.2 How do the elderly help children who live away?

**TOPIC 4. Respect**

4.1 How do people show respect for the elderly?  
   [Probe: in general, from adult children]

4.2 Does the respect shown the elderly at the present time differ from the past? How? Why?  
   [Probe: role of educational gap between generations]

Backgrounds or attitudes toward the topic of discussion, the usual approach is to hold discussions with separate groups, each homogeneous within itself but differing in terms of particular characteristics specified as the selection criteria. These separate focus group sessions will deal with the same topics and have a similar or identical set of discussion guidelines. A comparison between attitudes in the different sets of groups can then be done during the analysis phase. Note that consideration of participant characteristics is done for several purposes and that it is necessary when designing a focus group study to specify characteristics according to the purpose served. Two broad types of group definition characteristics can be distinguished: those that differentiate groups from each other (break characteristics) and those that are common to all groups (control characteristics).

**Break Characteristics.** In focus group studies within the social sciences, designs will often incorporate different subsets with potentially contrasting views or experiences concerning the issues under investigation. Break characteristics define how these subsets are differentiated. For example, a study of support systems of the elderly might want to compare views of elderly parents and those of adult children in both rural and urban areas. In this case there are two break variables: Generation (elderly versus adult children) and type of area (rural versus urban). Together the two break variables define four different population subsets for which separate focus group sessions would be held: rural elderly, urban elderly, rural adult children, urban adult children. Note that incorporating break characteristics into a design is useful not only for contrasting views between subgroups but also for establishing which views are common. Indeed, as discussed below, the analyst is often able to be more confident in drawing conclusions about the latter than the former.

**Control Characteristics.** Even when focus group sessions are held with different subsets of the population, it is often important to ensure that the groups all share some common characteristics. Control characteristics may be uniform characteristics or may specify a common composition for each group. For example, all groups might be limited to a particular region in the country, to people within the midrange of socioeconomic levels, and to individuals affiliated with the predominant religion. In this example, all groups share some set of uniform control characteristics. In addition, one or more common composition control characteristics may be specified for each group. For example,
you may wish to have the views of both men and women represented in each group, and thus gender would be a characteristic explicitly taken into consideration when forming groups. However, rather than using gender to differentiate the groups, both men and women would be recruited for each group.

Note that what may be a control characteristic in one study may be a break characteristic in another. Note also that some focus group studies may involve only one population subset. For example, a study might focus only on the elderly in a particular city and all groups would be composed of this particular population subset (with or without some specified composition within each group). In this case, there are no break characteristics specified. Instead, the group definition characteristics are the same for all groups and can thus all be considered as uniform control characteristics.

Holding separate sessions with homogeneous but contrasting groups is believed to produce information in greater depth than would be the case with heterogeneous groups, because it will be easier for participants sharing similar key characteristics to identify with each other’s experiences. Although there is little systematic methodological research to test this assumption, it is at least the intuitive rationale behind the conventional practice of maintaining some degree of intragroup homogeneity. Thus, in addition to permitting comparisons among different types of groups, defining separate groups in terms of break characteristics helps avoid mixing persons who may have sharp differences in opinion or behavior associated with the topics under study. For example, adult children may speak more frankly about the difficulties of caring for elderly parents if no elderly are present. Likewise, the elderly may be more open about their perceptions of lack of respect shown by younger individuals if no members of the younger generation are present.

In addition to break characteristics that have direct substantive relevance for the particular topic, groups are often separated by social status, even if social status is not expected to be related to the phenomenon under study. The reason for this is the assumption that if participants within a group differ sharply in social status, those who perceive themselves as inferior may be deferential toward the others and feel inhibited to speak their minds. Thus socioeconomic status is commonly incorporated into the design as a break variable. An alternative is to limit the study to persons with similar status (i.e., define some level of socioeconomic status as a uniform control characteristic). Likewise, in some cultures or with respect to some topics, mixing men and women in the same group may inhibit frank discussion, and thus it may be necessary to introduce gender as a break variable.

In sum, the choice of break or control characteristics incorporated in any particular study should be based on both substantive considerations specific to the topic under investigation and on considerations concerning the facilitation of frank group discussion. Thus for reasons related to the substantive nature of the issues being investigated, a study of adolescent sexuality would use a set of characteristics different from that used for a study of support systems of the elderly, regardless of the cultural context. However, whether groups in either or both studies would best be separated according to gender or socioeconomic status would depend on the particular cultural context of the population in which the study is being conducted.

Determining the Number of Sessions

A variety of considerations, both practical and substantive, must be taken into account when deciding on the number of focus group sessions to be held. On the practical side, obviously budget and time constraints are critical. In estimating the costs, consideration needs to be given to all phases, including transcription (and translation if conducted in a language foreign to the analyst) as well as the cost of the time used for analysis. Consideration also needs to be given to the time frame of the study. Transcription (and translation) take considerable time if done carefully. Time needed for analysis can also be substantial and is more or less proportional to the number of pages of transcript generated (and to the detail and care of the analysis).

Practical constraints on the number of groups that can be held limit the number of break characteristics that can be incorporated in any particular study design to differentiate groups. Based on theoretical considerations, differentiation should be made along the lines of only the most important break characteristics. Other important characteristics can be dealt with by using uniform control characteristics to focus the study on a particular subset of the population, thus eliminating variation with respect to these characteristics and facilitating discussion and interpretation of results. Generally, the incorporation of break characteristics should be kept to as low a level as is consistent with examining the major differences between subgroups in the population. Otherwise the cost in both money and time increase substantially.
In terms of substantially related considerations, the number of sessions depends on the complexity of the design as defined by the number of break characteristics incorporated in the study. Typically, at least one group needs to be conducted for each combination of break variables used to define a group, although for some studies interest may be in only selected combinations. Moreover, at least several groups are needed for each different combination of break characteristics that the researcher wishes to use as the basis of comparisons when analyzing the data. If only one session is held for a particular type of group, it is not possible to determine if unique patterns emerging from that group are related to the defining characteristics or are simply flukes related to the particular session. Note, however, that during the analysis phase, it is unrealistic to make comparisons between every unique combination of break variables. This point is discussed below.

Table 3.2 indicates how a set of characteristics might be incorporated into a focus group study design of support and exchange systems affecting the elderly in Thailand. Because there are four break characteristics, each with two dimensions, the design shown in Table 3.2 leads to 16 different combinations. For the 16 sessions, all participants would be Thai-speaking Buddhists with no more than a secondary school education. In addition each session would include a mix of men and women as well as a mix of martial status for elderly participants. If one focus group were held for each combination there would be a total of 16 sessions, producing 8 sessions each for comparison on any one of the four break variables and 4 sessions each for comparison on any two of the four break variables taken in combination. Although it is unlikely that any researcher would want to make comparisons on the basis of three or more break variables taken in combination, there would still be 2 sessions each for comparisons of any combination of three of the four break variables.

Table 3.2 Use of Characteristics in Selecting Groups for a Study—Exchange Systems Between Elderly and Adult Children in Thailand

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Break</th>
<th>Uniform Control</th>
<th>Composition Control</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Life Stage</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elderly Versus Adult Child</td>
<td>XX</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northeast Versus Central</td>
<td>XX</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural Versus Urban</td>
<td>XX</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socioeconomic Status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor Versus Better Off</td>
<td>XX</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddhist</td>
<td></td>
<td>XX</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thai Dialect</td>
<td>XX</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Higher Than Secondary</td>
<td>XX</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male Versus Female</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>XX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital Status (of Elderly)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married Versus Widowed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>XX</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

that it is the best or only way to go about the task. Undoubtedly, a number of strategies can be usefully followed.

General Considerations

Given the qualitative nature of the data gathered by focus group methodology, a considerable amount of subjective judgment is necessarily involved in their interpretation and analysis. Not all statements can be taken at face value. Interpretation is facilitated by the fact that statements can be examined within the context of the broader discussion and in light of information available from other sources based on different methodologies such as surveys, case studies, or in-depth interviews. Thus, with proper scrutiny and interpretation, the information, perceptions,
opinions, and attitudes expressed by focus group participants can yield valuable insights not available from other sources.

The extent and nature of analysis to which focus group discussions are subjected can vary considerably and will ultimately depend on the goal of the study as well as to the skills and time commitment of the investigators. In the case of marketing research, for which the goal may be to arrive at some practical recommendations without carefully documenting their basis, analysis is often done within a very short time span and may be based simply on impressions gained and notes taken while listening to the actual session or to the tapes. In the following discussion it is assumed that a thorough analysis based on repeated examination of a full set of transcripts is to be undertaken with the goal of explicating and understanding the phenomenon under investigation from a social scientific perspective. Although a number of shortcuts may be tempting, they will likely compromise the quality of the analysis.

The topics for analysis are generally dictated by those included in the focus group guidelines. Sometimes other topics not explicitly incorporated in the guidelines will arise regularly enough that sufficient information was generated to include them in the analysis. On the other hand, some topics in the guidelines may have generated so little discussion or have required so much moderator intervention that they are little more than brief direct answers to specific questions and are better left out of the analysis. If a large number of full-length focus group discussions have been undertaken and a number of different topics or subtopics were covered, it may be best not to tackle all topics at once when proceeding with the analysis but instead to break up the analysis into more manageable subsets of topics.

Focus groups generate textual data for analysis in the form of transcripts. A typical 2-hour session yields an average of 40 to 50 transcript pages. Thus if 20 sessions are conducted, there will be close to 1000 pages of transcripts. Dealing with large amounts of textual data is common for social scientists who employ qualitative research approaches. Ethnographers typically have extensive field notes; qualitative sociologists often have long transcripts from in-depth interviews. Fortunately, the advent of personal computers together with word processing and special programs to help manage textual data have greatly facilitated the task of analysis.

In essence, there are two basic parts to the analysis of focus group data: a mechanical one and an interpretive one (Seidel & Clark, 1984). The mechanical part involves physically organizing and subdividing the data into meaningful segments. The interpretive part involves determining criteria for organizing the textual data into analytically useful subdivisions (in essence coding the data) and the subsequent search for patterns within and between these subdivisions to draw substantively meaningful conclusions. A major aspect of the mechanics of qualitative data analysis is equivalent in essence to cutting and pasting: cutting the material apart and pasting the pieces into categorical and conceptual collections. This unwieldy and time-consuming aspect of the mechanical part of the analysis is greatly facilitated by the use of computers programs: Word processing programs are used to put the texts into the computer, and other programs are used to organize and retrieve the textual data. An example of such a software package is The Ethnographe, which is quite suitable for use with focus group transcripts (Seidel, Kjolseth, & Seymour, 1988). The Ethnographe enables the analyst to code interactively textual data files into analytic categories. Segments of the text associated with a particular code or combination of codes can then be readily sorted and retrieved. In this way all statements relating to a particular topic covered by the focus group sessions or all of the views of a specific nature concerning that topic can be easily assembled for the analyst to study, once the transcripts are entered into the computer and coded.

Word processing and The Ethnographe are, of course, only tools to aid the analysts in exploring the data for developing and testing analytical ideas and questions. Interpreting the transcripts is the real challenge to the researchers. Several specific procedures can be followed, which should contribute to the quality and reliability of the analysis.

**Code Mapping Transcripts**

Central to an analysis of qualitative data such as focus group transcripts is the process of coding the material into analytically distinct segments that can then be examined together when drawing conclusions concerning one or more of the topics and related concepts under investigation. In addition, coding can identify segments for some practical purpose, such as use as quotations in the report or to alert the analyst of some special feature of the segment (e.g., responses elicited by a leading question posed by the moderator or comments said in jest).

The term code mapping is used here to describe the process of coding, because in effect the analyst goes through the manuscript marking in the margins where segments corresponding to different codes start and
end. The term is borrowed from the manual of *The Ethnograph*, which is well suited for entering these codes onto a computerized focus group transcript (Seidel et al., 1988). Even if a computerized transcript is not being used, the basic process of marking codes on the transcript would still facilitate analysis considerably. It is generally useful to read through a sample of the manuscripts before coding is started. However, because material can be easily recoded and the coding can be expanded at any point in the analysis, it is recommended that coding begin quite soon in the analysis stage. When developing codes, the code words chosen should be short and summarize the contents.

It is unrealistic to think about coding a transcript in full detail the first time through, largely because many concepts and subjects that will be useful to code will only become apparent as the transcripts are read and as the actual writing up of the results takes place. The following steps are one way that the code mapping process might take place. They are suggested with the idea that the researcher will be using *The Ethnograph* or similar program eventually to enter the codes in a computerized version of the transcript.

*Develop an Initial Set of Codes Corresponding to Each Item in the Focus Group Discussion Guidelines.* Note that the guidelines will typically have both major topics and subtopics (or specific questions below them). In addition, the subtopics (or specific questions) may have probes below them. A separate code should be assigned to each item at every level. Thus some codes will be fairly inclusive and cover general topics under which the more specific codes are organized. The codes covering major topic headings will normally include very long segments of text. For example, if the guidelines are organized under three major topics, the code for one may cover a third or more of the entire transcript.

Note also that comments concerning any subtopic will usually be nested within longer segments covered by the major topic codes, as they will normally occur at the point in the discussion when the moderator has reached the subtopic in the guidelines. However, when comments concerning a subtopic arise spontaneously and are not within the text of the “correct” major topic, the segment of text given the subtopics’s code should also be given the appropriate major topic’s code, even though the specific segment appears within the text of a different major topic. In other words, any segment assigned a code of a subtopic should always be associated with the code of the major topic under which the subtopic falls in the guidelines. Likewise, any segment assigned a code associated with a probe under a subtopic should also be associated with the codes of the subtopic and the major topic under which the probe falls in the guidelines.

*Create Additional Codes for Topics That Arise and Are of Special Interest.* As you go through the transcript mapping codes according to the scheme developed in correspondence to the guidelines, invent additional codes for topics that arise and are of interest to you but that are not specifically mentioned in the guidelines. Different researchers may be struck by or interested in different topics so they will not necessarily choose codes for the same additional topics.

*Develop Nonsubstantive Codes That Will Be of Particular Help in the Analysis and Write-Up Phases.* In addition to codes relating to substantive topics, you may also want to use some nonsubstantive codes, which will facilitate interpretation and write up. Some examples of such codes are one that flags potential statements that could serve as illustrative quotations in the text of the report, a code that flags discussion in response to comments or questions by the moderator that appear to be leading and hence biasing the participants in their subsequent discussion, and a code that indicates a statement is made as a joke or that the participant is laughing while making the comment (perhaps based on comments by the note taker included in the transcript).

*Develop Subsequent Detailed Codes to Use for Analyses of Specific Topics.* After the initial code mapping is completed and the researcher is analyzing specific topics covered by the transcripts, it may be useful to develop a considerably more detailed set of codes for the topics on which the analysis is concentrating. The relevant details to be coded will generally become apparent as the analysis proceeds and will usually refer to considerably shorter text segments than those identified in the course of the previous code mappings.

### Constructing an Overview Grid

An effective way to proceed with the interpretive part of the analysis of focus group transcripts is to construct a large chart or table that can be referred to as an *overview grid* and that provides a descriptive summary of the content of the focus group discussions. Such a grid would typically have topic headings as one axis and focus group session identifiers as the other. The cells would contain brief summaries of the content of the discussion for each group concerning each topic, indicating, for example, the extent of consensus regarding the topic and the
direction of this consensus. Other brief relevant aspects about the discussion can also be noted within the cell, including your impression of the quality of the information. In reaching conclusions on quality, consider such factors as moderator influence, the number of people actually giving that opinion, and so on. The topic headings are largely determined by the issues addressed in the discussion guidelines. However, topics that persistently arise even though not explicit in the guidelines would also be added.

Although it is not imperative to have code mapped the transcript before constructing an overview grid, having done so can facilitate the task. This is especially so if the code mapping has been computerized through a software package such as The Ethnograph. Computerized coding of the transcripts makes organizing their contents by topic and session quite convenient. Construction of the overview grid serves as an effective way to familiarize the analyst with the content of the transcripts. Often the process leads to insights and suggests hypotheses that contribute to the later stages of the interpretive analysis.

Relationships between some of the variables of interest can be assessed directly during the stage at which the overview grid is being constructed, especially if direct questions addressing such relationships were included in the discussion guidelines. Table 3.2 contains examples of questions that directly address relationships, including the probe about whether the life cycle stage or sex of the adult child relates to various expectations for actual behavior affecting the elderly, the probe about whether place of residence affects the support that adult children provide parents, and the probe about whether the amount of property that an elderly couple retains affects the care they receive. Other analysis, however, may examine patterns existing between the analytical subdivisions used in forming the overview grid and require returning to the transcripts to develop appropriate interpretation. A program like The Ethnograph can be very useful at this stage, because it provides an efficient means to retrieve statements relating to any combination of analytical categories that the analyst specifies.

Clearly a considerable amount of subjective judgment is involved at this stage in detecting patterns as well as in the earlier stage when determining what views appear to be more pervasive among the many opinions expressed. Not all statements can be taken at face value but rather require interpretation based on the context in which they are made and sometimes in the light of information available to the researchers from external sources. It is advisable that several people read through all the transcripts and collaborate on the analysis to reduce the chances that the subjective portion of the analysis process leads to unwarranted emphasis or invalid conclusions.

Making Intergroup Comparisons

If the study design involved a set of break characteristics used to differentiate subsets of the target population, an important part of the analysis will be a discussion of the similarities and differences between the groups involving these various subsets. Note comparisons are not necessarily made between every unique combination of break variables but instead between clusters of combinations. For example, in a study that incorporates region (central versus northeast), rural-urban residence, socioeconomic status (high versus low) and religion (Buddhist versus Muslim) as break characteristics, there are 16 unique combinations of the characteristics. Nevertheless, interest is unlikely to focus on comparisons between all 16 detailed combinations. Rather comparisons are more likely to be made on the basis of only one or two characteristics at a time (e.g., Buddhist versus Muslim or possibly rural Buddhist versus rural Muslim versus urban Buddhist versus urban Muslim). It is unrealistic to think of exercising controls in the analysis of focus group data in the more rigorous sense of a quantitative multivariate analysis.

Incorporating break characteristics believed to be of substantive importance into a study design enables contrasts to be made between focus groups held with the differently defined subsets of participants. However, comparisons among groups differentiated by break characteristics may be even more useful for giving the analyst confidence that the views common across the groups are relatively general than in enabling the analyst confidently to contrast differences in views associated with the break characteristics. This is particularly true if only a small number of groups are available for each subset. The reason for this is that the analyst may have difficulty in distinguishing differences between any two groups that stem from more substantively based considerations from those differences that are a function of the circumstances under which the group took place (e.g., the particular way the moderator conducted the session or the particular group dynamics related to the personalities of the particular participants). However, when similar opinions are expressed by different subsets, despite the many differences that characterize the conduct of any two sessions, it is likely that views or experiences are being tapped that are common to a shared underlying culture within the broader population.
Assessing Reliability

Using a team approach involving several researchers when analyzing focus group data substantially facilitates reliability in the interpretation because various steps in the analysis can be done independently by each team member and later compared. Disagreements can then be discussed and generally resolved by reviewing the transcripts together and tracking down the source of the disagreement. By having each team member independently construct an overview grid, it is possible to establish considerable reliability early in the interpretive process. If both original language transcripts and translations are being used, a team approach is essential with at least one member being able to analyze the original language version.

Because the focus group approach inherently involves conducting a number of sessions, it is possible to assess the reliability of the data (in contrast to the analysis) by comparing statements within and, more important, across sessions. This advantage in assessing reliability is an important difference between the focus group approach and other qualitative research strategies. Assessing the internal reliability of the focus group is greatly facilitated by the construction of overview grids. Although some variation in views is to be expected from session to session, an important goal of a focus group study is often the determination of cultural expectations (e.g., about the role of the elderly and the support and exchange systems in which they are involved). The extent to which consensus is found within and between groups about their expectations, allowing for possible systematic differences by ethnicity or other cultural groupings of the sessions, can indicate the reliability of the information collected. The fact that a design often imposes some variation in key characteristics such as rural and urban residence and socioeconomic status permits confidence that views that are consistently found across groups represent cultural consensus.

The accuracy of the interpretive analysis is also enhanced if the analysts are intimately involved with the actual data collection (i.e., present at the focus group sessions and possibly even serving as moderators). This eliminates considerably the distance between the analyst and subject being studied so often marks qualitative social science research in which only interviewers and not the eventual analysts have contact with respondents.