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Methods for Social Research in Tropical Diseases No. 1

Social and Economic Research (SER)

THE FOCUS GROUP MANUAL

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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 behaviours. Usually they are used by trained social scientists, especially anthropologists. In many countries, however, including in 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 explains 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

PART I

TEAM LEADER FOCUS GROUP TRAINING

1 DECIDING TO USE FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

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.

1.6 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 compliment 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 what people's traditional health beliefs are. 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 their 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

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.

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?

- 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?
- 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, eg. tape recorders, cameras etc.?
- Transport. Is transport required? What type of vehicles? Drivers? Extra fuel?
- Incentives. Do we need to repay study participants in some way? If so, how?

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 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.

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. Most projects 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.

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?

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, don't 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.

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 Shandasani 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 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, eg, 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.

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 don't 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. Don't 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. Don't assume a first translation is accurate no matter how good your translators are.

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 Section 10.2, Part II).

Box 1. 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 for next illness mentioned.

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

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.

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 mosquitos cause malaria? Where do they breed? Bite? When?

8. Is there anything you can do to avoid getting malaria?

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?]

As the above boxed example indicated, 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 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 <u>how</u> 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

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 back-up files: it's easy and common to loose data unless you do this!

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 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.

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 multidrug 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, eg: CLINACC (ie. CLINIC ACCESS). So, in the end your transcript will have a list of codewords 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 (ie. 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 codewords. 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 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!

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)
DIFFEVER	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
ATTREFS	Village attitudes to Refugee Centre
BEDNETS	Ownership and use of bednets
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

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

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 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.

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.

If you are training staff who have had no experience in research, no tertiary education, or have only ever 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 they may need some extra time spent to carefully go through the benefits of doing this type of research. If they are rushed through a training programme for a task they don't believe is of much benefit then 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.

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 your objectives and the list of information you require in some detail. 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.

3 OVERVIEW OF SKILLS TRAINING SESSIONS

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 need 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 de-brief

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.

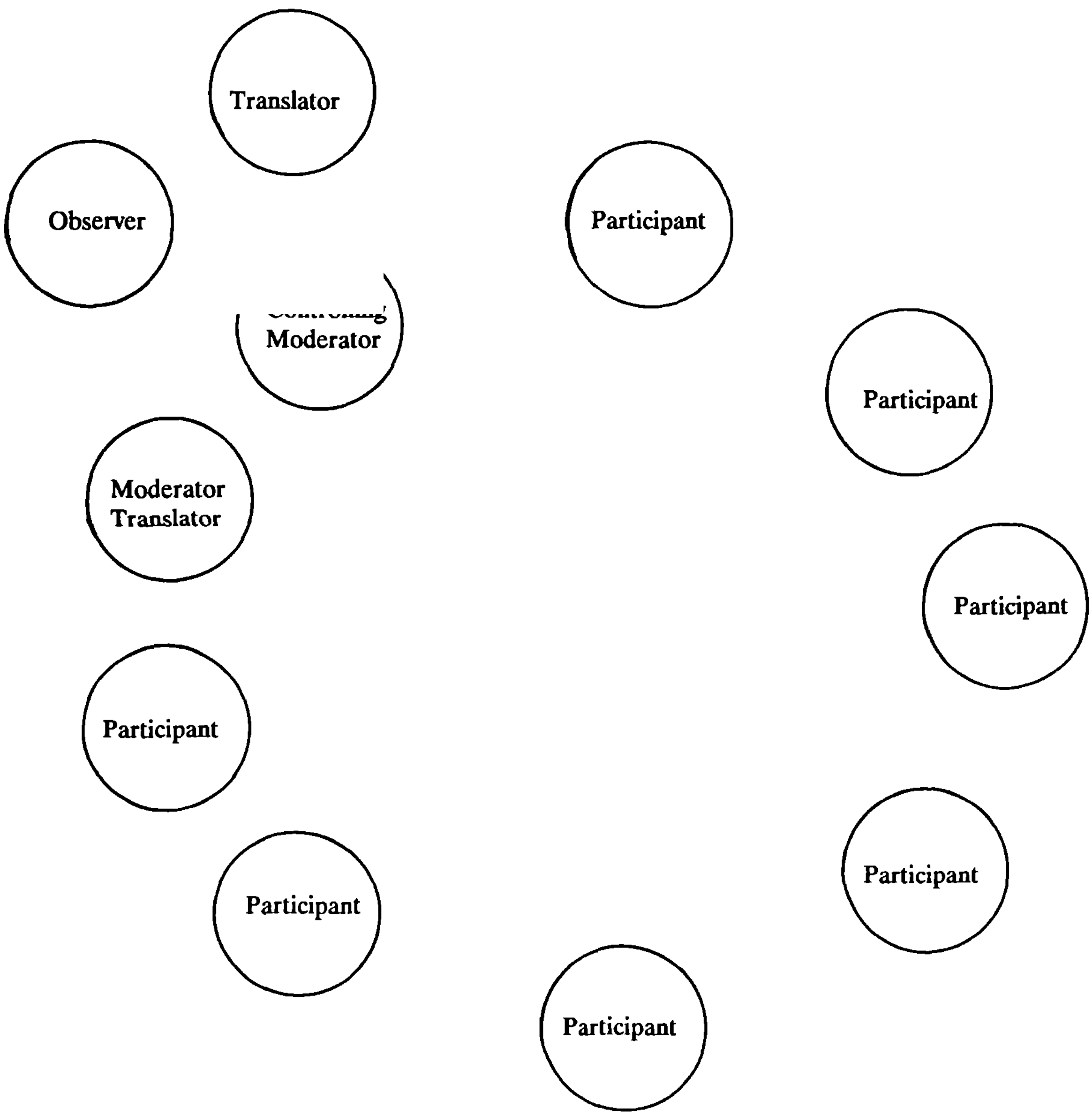
Assistant Moderator

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 assistant moderator 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 that are included on the question guide. If the assistant moderator 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.

Box 7. Seating arrangements for translator-assisted focus groups (Dawson et al. 1991).

FGD SEATING ARRANGEMENT

for sessions in two languages



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. Don't 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

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, 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.

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 same 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 2 hour session. A focus group scheduled late afternoon might interfere with the preparation of an evening meal for example, and you'll 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.).

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 knowledge 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.).

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

We would like to hear from ALL of you about your feelings on the subject. Anything you want to say is important to us. Remember to give all the group the chance to speak.

Because we have much information to get through in one hour, we may need to move onto the next question before we have really explored one area.

Vague comments cannot provide us with adequate information. We may ask you to clarify a point for us. "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 are 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 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?"

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, and 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?

....

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.

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 their 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.

eg: "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 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 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).

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 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.

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 observe certain things during the session that they 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 feeling (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.

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, who would like a detailed knowledge of the results of the focus groups. It can be very helpful for the observer 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.

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.

- 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 de-brief the following morning. Often if your team members are tired after a session, then holding the major de-brief the same afternoon may not be wise. You don't want to rush the de-brief as the information that the whole team can provide is very valuable, and may improve the standard of your focus groups quite a lot.

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