

Chapter 5

Introduction to Qualitative Research

Introduction

In this chapter you will learn about:

- Qualitative research techniques and in particular focus groups, depth interviews and observation
- How to use qualitative tools for exploring and evaluating concepts and ideas.
- The advantages and disadvantages of the different qualitative research tools.
- The role of the moderator in qualitative research and the techniques they use to get people to open up.

The qualitative research techniques

Qualitative research is used to find out about people's attitudes and feelings. It explores how people feel about themselves and about the products and services they use. Finding out about people's thoughts and feelings through qualitative research is often important in the exploratory stages of a new research project. These research findings can provide a starting point when little or no previous research has been done on a subject.

Qualitative research can also provide background, for example interviewing experts in an industry or business area, to get insight into a problem. If some conclusive findings are also needed, it

would be necessary to then carry out a second phase of research to collect quantitative data.

Qualitative research is only widely used where small segments of the population (or groups of people who have a common characteristic) are of specific interest to a researcher. Below is a list of some of the main reasons for carrying out qualitative research:

- To evaluate a market, product or consumer where no information exists
- To identify and explore concepts
- To take researchers rapidly up the learning curve when they know very little about a group of consumers
- To identify behaviour patterns, beliefs, attitudes, opinions and motives
- To establish priorities amongst categories of behaviour, beliefs, opinions and attitudes
- To identify problems in depth and develop models for further research
- To put flesh on the bones of points arising from a pilot or major survey
- To provide verbatim comments and anecdotes from participants – so that the research findings can be brought alive for the client
- To test how a questionnaire works by going through question by question asking about routing, signposting, understanding and ambiguity
- Where direct questioning will not give us personal or hidden details about respondents.

Market research executives are wholly involved in the process of qualitative research. They carry out the data collection and they do the analysis and interpretation. They have a feel for the subject that others cannot have because they have got the information first hand. The main techniques that are used in qualitative research are:

- Focus groups
- Depth discussions
- Observation

Focus groups

A focus group is made up of a small number of carefully selected people who are recruited to discuss a subject based on the commonality of their experience.

Focus groups have four key characteristics:

- They actively involve people
- The people attending the group have an experience or interest in common
- They provide in-depth qualitative data
- Discussion is focused to help us understand what is going on

The people:

Focus groups typically are made up of 6 to 10 people. The group needs to be small enough to allow everyone the opportunity to share insights, and yet large enough to provide group interaction and diversity of experience. Larger groups inhibit discussion as some respondents shy from venturing opinions while smaller groups may be limited in their pool of ideas.

Commonality of experience and interest:

Focus group participants have a degree of homogeneity, and this is important to the researcher. This similarity is the basis for recruitment, and indeed, specific requirements are usually necessary for attendance at the group.

It is common for researchers and clients to jointly identify the key criteria that identify the individuals for focus group discussions. For example, a focus group examining people's attitudes to web sites would almost certainly require them to have access to the internet and to use it fairly regularly.

Depth of information:

Focus groups deliver qualitative data that is rich in words and descriptions rather than numbers. The group provides the forum for discussion and the group moderator, the researcher guiding the group, uses their skills to get the discussion going so flushing out ideas, attitudes, and experiences. The focus group is more than a group interview. The key is the interaction between the group members.

The topic for discussion:

The questions in a focus group are carefully designed to elicit the

views of the respondents. A discussion guide is prepared prior to the group and the group moderator uses this as their aide memoir of what must be covered. Careful design of the guide ensures a logical flow of conversation around the topic area and a clear focus for the discussion.

Key point

Focus groups are ideal for getting ideas, testing concepts or exploring a problem where the researcher is not sure exactly what issues are at stake.

The topic guide is reflective of how groups operate. Groups always start with an introduction from the moderator explaining the purpose of the meeting and what can be expected to happen. Then each participant is asked to introduce themselves and perhaps say a few words about their experience with the subject in hand. This serves to get people talking and feeling comfortable enough to develop their opinions and experiences as the discussion progresses. Questions are thrown to the group and people are encouraged to

comment, debate, and adjust their views so that the subject gets covered from all angles and points of dispute become as reconciled so far as is possible.

Depth interviewing

Depth interviews offer an alternative to focus groups for digging deep so that the researcher has a greater understanding of consumers' motivations. It uses a discussion guide similar to that for the focus group. The interview is relatively unstructured, allowing the interviewer the opportunity to be flexible and follow up points of interest. Depth interviews are particularly useful where it is advantageous to keep respondents apart so that there is no contamination from hearing the response of others, as happens in focus groups.

Extended depth interviews are common in business to business audiences where the subject is big and sometimes complicated. Time is required to unravel the story. They are used in consumer research where the subject could be delicate (and complicated) and it is necessary to pace the "conversation" to ensure that all is revealed. As might be expected, a strong rapport between the interviewer and the respondent is vital in this type of interview. They are generally held at the home or the offices (in the case of business to business) of the respondent and need to be booked in advance.

A variation is the *paired* or *triangular* depth interview. When it is thought that decisions are taken in pairs or small groups, it makes sense to get those people together for the interview. So, for example, teenage girls who shop together and hang around together, sharing their ideas, would be obvious targets for a paired interview. The triangular interview is an extension of this concept and could involve three teenagers or a family unit of Mum, Dad and the kids. These combinations can be useful when discussing family decisions such as buying cars, choosing cereals, deciding where to go on holiday and so on.

Key point

Depth interviews are used to obtain a deep understanding of the thoughts, behaviour and motivations of selected individuals.

Sometimes it is helpful for the interviewer to accompany the respondent during a shopping expedition to explore the whole process. A front end interview may set the scene and then the respondent gives a stream of consciousness (talking aloud as thoughts come into their mind) during the shopping experience. A final interview may close the process.

As might be expected, depth interviews are extremely time consuming and must be carried out by skilled and experienced researchers. As with all qualitative research, the findings are heavy in words, usually transcripts of the taped interviews. There is a limit to how many of these can be carried out and analysed by a small team of just one or two researchers and 20 to 30 such interviews would be considered a maximum.

Observation

Observation can be a quantitative method as well as qualitative. Some years ago I ran the Paris marathon. As I shuffled with the pack over the start line I noticed two cameras on either side, pointing at our feet. At first I thought the cameras had slipped but then it dawned on me that they were for observational purposes, recording the brands of shoes of the runners when the video footage was played back frame by frame.

In the same way that the camera provided the eyes for observing the running shoes, so too it could be positioned discreetly in the corner of the supermarket ceiling, not to stop pilfering but to observe the shopping party and their roles. It can watch our procrastinations as we buy our beans. It can observe behavioural patterns that may be autonomic and which would not be recalled in a conventional

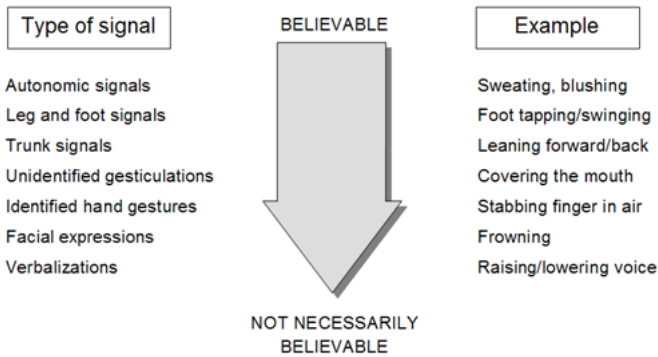
interview. For example, do we deliberate over our purchase of a can of beans? Do we read the label? What influence and pressure comes from the accompanying kids? Do we pick up other brands and examine them or do we just fly down the aisles throwing cans in the trolley without even checking prices?

Observation is still used in the traditional manner. A telecoms company wanted to consider the opportunity for offering information alerts to different industries and chose commercial road transport as a potentially attractive sector. It was decided to commission a qualitative survey amongst transport managers to find out what type of information they needed in their daily round. Since it was believed that some of the information that was needed and used may be taken for granted, such sources and requirements may not be mentioned in conventional interviews. A sample of companies employing transport managers was persuaded to allow observers to spend two days in their offices finding out what was requested and how it was used. The observers watched drivers pop their heads around doors and share stories about traffic conditions, best routes, and the weather. They heard phone calls being made to ferry companies to collect timetables. They observed juggling acts as the transport management team sought to optimize return loads and routes. In this way, the complex sources of information that are used as part of the natural cognitive process were noted and recorded and they would not have been found by orthodox interviewing techniques.

Observation is used for poster checks to see that they are in good condition.

Observation is also used as a complement to the interviewing process and skilled interviewers know how to interpret the body language of respondents. We learn to control our upper torso because this is the part of the body on which we focus when we are speaking to people. This control means that we manage our face – smiling, frowning, and generating a mask to indicate the mood of our engagement. This means that these facial expressions do not give us any deeper clues and insights into the respondent's answers as it could be all an act. Of course, if the respondent were to blush or visibly sweat as a result of the questioning, this autonomic reaction, would tell a big story. This is not something that can be done to order. So too, leg swinging and foot tapping and the body language of the lower torso could indicate some anxiety. The believability of the clues of body language is summarised in Figure 5.1.

Figure 5.1 **Body Language Clues In Depth Interviews**



Think about

The next time you talk to someone in business, pay attention to their body language. What does it tell you? What other clues surrounding the person tell you about them such as the books on their shelves, the watch they are wearing, their clothes, and the way they organise themselves? How much more can you learn about this person and their attitudes from paying attention to non verbal leakage?

Matching qualitative research to the research objectives

Qualitative research can be used as an *exploratory* tool. Where there is uncertainty about a subject, and the researcher does not know what detailed questions to ask, a few depth interviews or groups may be sufficient to provide an understanding and explanations which answer the problem. Imagine that you are a manager of a hospital, eager to improve the standard of patient care. Your 'clients' include the young, the mentally ill, the old and the very poorly. What they think of your service is decisive in guiding how you develop in the future – but how do you find out what they think? The very young, the very old and the mentally ill may be unable to tell you. And when do you interview them? If you do so while they are in the hospital, it could bias the result as their treatment may not yet be over and, in any case, they may find it hard to be critical during the period of medical care. It may be better to interview soon after they return home, even though this is the more expensive option.

Designing a quantitative study for checking on standards of patient care is likely to be complicated and costly. Instead of focusing on the patients themselves, an understanding of the issues could be obtained from people who can speak on their behalf. Group discussions with general practitioners in the hospital's territory could provide a distilled view of the strengths and weaknesses of the hospital and individual departments. Group discussions with GPs could be quickly convened and the results available within a couple of weeks. A couple of focus groups is not a sizeable study but they could provide a signpost as to where the real problems lie and give focus to any subsequent quantitative research.

In the same vein, researchers may be faced with a marketing problem which needs investigation. Problem solving requires an understanding of the cause and effects and these could be flushed out by discussion in groups or depths. When used in this capacity, qualitative research is a *diagnostic* tool. Typical subjects for analysis could be a downturn in sales, a loss of market share or an increase in complaints. A major UK manufacturer of domestic heating boilers looked at the latest trade association figures and saw that it had suffered a loss of share. This had not been apparent from the company's sales figures which were holding up quite well in a market which was buoyant. Four group discussions with plumbers who install boilers were sufficient to show that a major competitor was heavily discounting and using direct mail to promote its boilers – a method of promotion which was concealed from the competing suppliers.

Very often, qualitative research is used for *creative* inspiration and guidance. For example, if an advertising agency wants ideas for a new campaign it may get these from the interaction of thoughts arising in focus groups. The creative power of qualitative research need not be confined to teasing out ideas for advertising; it can be used to guide all types of innovative work such as new product development and branding. A manufacturer of crisps was concerned that the health food trend would eventually affect his market and wanted to know in which way he could respond. Qualitative research was commissioned to find out if, with some modification, crisps could be positioned as a health food.

Qualitative research can also be used to *evaluate* ideas. Focus groups or depth interviews can be used to find out what people think of a different presentation of an advert or pack design. Of course, there will be no large numbers to substantiate the evaluation but the views of the small number of respondents may be sufficiently convincing. A cable manufacturer wanted to steal a march in the competitive

field of house wiring and designed a pack which looked very different to the conventional reels which electricians had used for years. The pack dispensed the cable from the centre of the reel and so offered a number of advantages. However, electricians are very much driven by habit and group discussions showed if there would be any resistance to the new product and how to overcome it.

Think about

How could you use focus groups inside your own company? For example, how could you use them to brainstorm new ideas? How could you use them to evaluate new ideas? How could you use them to find out how to make product or service improvements?

The advantages and disadvantages of the qualitative research methods

Focus groups

Focus groups are the mainstay of qualitative research. There are three times as many people recruited to focus groups as there are interviewed in depth interviews. The focus group provides clients and researchers with a powerful tool that yields a considerable understanding of a subject in just a couple of hours. Of course, the findings from one focus group would be dangerous as they could be biased by some rogue factor such as an outspoken respondent or an unusual mix of recruits. More than one focus group is required and typically four would give assurance of a commonality in the findings. This said, the first focus group provides a very solid base of understanding and subsequent groups may be used to dig deeper on certain subjects or take different angles of questioning. Focus groups offer clients the easiest and most convenient way of joining in the research process. They can participate by observing the group take place in the viewing centre and learn directly from hearing respondents' views at first hand.

There are some drawbacks and limitations to groups. First, to mention is the most obvious – groups are a qualitative and not a quantitative research technique. If we need to ask 'how many' type questions we should almost certainly be using another technique.

In a project we may need both qualitative and quantitative research. Focus groups were carried out with members of the general public to find out how they decorated their houses when holding parties.

The groups identified a strong demand for balloons which were a simple and inexpensive means of decoration. Helium balloons offered at an attractive price in a DIY kit would have great appeal. However, what does great appeal mean? What proportion of the population would buy this type of balloon, and with what frequency? Follow-on quantitative research was required to calculate the market size.

The reason why groups are not capable of yielding quantitative information is twofold. The samples are inevitably small. For example, four groups covers only 30 or so respondents. Second, the actual form of a group does not lend itself to precise quantification of data – there is a general discussion, perhaps even vigorous argument, and this is difficult to translate into measurable responses.

Another feature of groups is the high element of subjectivity in handling them and in their interpretation. The outcome depends very much on the group leader and how he or she:

- structures the discussion
- conducts the meeting
- analyses and interprets the results.

There is some element of subjectivity in all research but it is particularly strong in group discussion work. If the same brief is given to two experienced group researchers there is a chance that the outcome will differ to some extent. This is obviously far from the scientific approach to quantitative research where the interviewer's personality is expected to have no effect on the result. A client commissioning group discussions should recognise that the outcome will reflect the views of the respondents *and the researcher* in some uncertain mixture. Therefore, there has to be every confidence in the ability and skill of the researcher. It is not only important that clients recognise this point, but that the researcher does so as well.

The small sample, coupled with this subjectivity, makes the group discussions very suspect to some more quantitative-minded researchers. However, the 'number jocks' too must recognise the limitations of their own techniques, particularly the impossibility of answering the many 'how' and 'why' questions which are vital in marketing.

A summary of the advantages and disadvantages of focus groups is given in figure 5.2.

Figure 5.2 Advantages And Disadvantages Of Focus groups

Advantages

- The brain storm effect generates ideas as one person's view sparks off ideas in others
- They clarify questions that are to be incorporated in a subsequent quantitative survey
- Respondents feel safety in numbers and so relax and talk
- They are good for resolving differences of opinion between respondents
- Spontaneous comments are encouraged
- They generate a quick understanding of the issues so that in just 1 to 2 hours everyone has moved far up the learning curve
- It is easy for clients to participate in. Up to half a dozen people can watch and become part of the research process
- It is an excellent medium for showing things like products or adverts
- Almost always groups give a real understanding of the issues even if there are no measurements of how many think what

Disadvantages

- When the subject is highly sensitive, respondents may be inhibited in exchanging beliefs
- The minority view can be lost
- Insignificant subjects are "hot-housed" by focusing on them to the extent they are separated from reality
- Costly – one group seldom isn't enough and four groups cost £10-15,000, depending on the difficulty of recruitment
- The success of the groups depends very much on the moderator skills and these can be variable
- It is not possible to organize groups if respondents are thin on the ground
- They are subject to bias from dominating respondents
- In a similar way to the above point, they are subject to the herd instinct (everyone agreeing)
- It is difficult to know to what extent there has been contamination of views from the debate
- They can be difficult to control and sometimes the group doesn't gel or have any "dynamic"

Depth interviews

In second place in popularity as a qualitative research technique, behind group discussions, are depth interviews. The term 'depth' or 'in-depth' is bandied around by market researchers without a precise meaning but implies somehow that the interview is longer rather than shorter, unstructured rather than structured and face-to-face rather than over the telephone. Because the subject is covered in depth, there is a suggestion that the respondent digs deeper for answers, talks more freely and so the true facts, perceptions and

motivations are discovered. Usually the interview is tape recorded rather than written down on a questionnaire.

Depth interviews are used where it is important that there is no 'contamination' of respondents' views one with the others, as happens in group discussions. Also, depths may be preferable to groups when the subject is highly sensitive because it is about sexual practices, personal hygiene or financial planning.

In a depth interview, each respondent has the opportunity of speaking for most of the duration which is often between half an hour to an hour. In a group discussion, all other things being equal, the discussion time is shared between the respondents and the moderator and each person only has the chance to speak for around 8-10 minutes. This means that the output from 8 depth interviews is (say) eight hours of taped discussion – much more the 1½ hours arising from the same number of people in a group. Depth interviews do not benefit from the interaction and 'dynamic' which is so important in groups but they do work hard.

In business-to-business markets depth interviews may be the only option because it is simply not possible to recruit people to groups if they are too thinly scattered. In order to convene a group it is necessary to have a pool of around 50 respondents within a tight geographical area (say where time to travel to the venue is within an hour) to successfully achieve 8 or 9 recruits at the appointed hour. Pulling people from a wider area would need a subject of riveting interest or a very attractive incentive.

Respondents targeted in depth interviewing have to be carefully chosen. Just as in group discussion recruitment, they are likely to be chosen on the basis of their age, sex, social class or because they are buyers (or not buyers) of a product or service.

Fundamental to depth interviewing is listening. To listen carefully to a respondent is to show interest and this is an encouragement to say more. Furthermore, only through listening will an understanding be built up from which there could be a deeper line of questioning – the very substance of depth interviewing.

A summary of the pros and cons of depth interviews is given in figure 5.3.

Figure 5.3 Advantages & Disadvantages Of Depth interviews

Advantages

- Considerable input from each respondent (10 depth interviews generates 10 hours of transcripts)
- An independent view is obtained on a situation
- Respondents are able to discuss intimate and confidential issues without fear
- There is no peer group pressure that creates bias
- Good for following complex issues specific to a respondent
- Allows rapport to build between respondent and interviewer
- Can accommodate widely scattered respondents
- Better for heterogeneous respondents who may not gel in a group
- Good for product tests because more controllable
- Allows the interviewer to see the surrounding home or office of the respondent

Disadvantages

- No brainstorming and therefore less creativity in responses
- More expensive than focus groups because very time consuming to carry out all the interviews
- Expensive analysis (lots of tape transcripts to type up and analyse)
- Responses may be over rationalized and not mirror the true emotions and motivations
- Leads to the temptation at the analysis stage of counting how many said one thing and how many the other (strays into quantitative territory)
- Research sponsors cannot watch as easily as at groups (though sometimes depths are held in viewing centres)
- Takes longer to set up and organize than focus groups
- Logistically more difficult for transporting products (easier to ship them to a focus group venue)
- Possible interruptions or eavesdropping by the respondent's family (if in their home)

Observation

The third of the qualitative research tools is observation. Observation plays many roles in market research from evaluating poster sites, to watching people make their purchases in a shop and to mystery shopping. Observation is valued for the premise that actions speak louder than words. What people do, in other words their actions, may give us more understanding of a subject than simply asking them.

Mystery shopping could be either a qualitative or a quantitative technique depending on the numbers of shopping experiences that are carried out. However, there is always a subjective element in the interpretation of the experience and to that extent it is covered in this section under qualitative methods. The researcher acts like a typ-

ical customer, buying goods or asking for help. The researcher has a questionnaire to complete at the end of the shopping experience. This could include the length of time taken to deal with a call, the number of staff members required to deal with a problem or the way in which a problem was addressed by staff members. The questionnaire is not paraded during the shopping intervention as clearly this would be a give away to the store and create a biased reaction. Much, therefore, must be committed to memory and the mystery shopper could fail to recall precisely what happened (though they would try to complete their questionnaire very quickly after the event to make sure that things were as clear as possible). A camera is sometimes used as the means of capturing what is happening but the playback has still to be looked at and interpreted by somebody. This means that although observation offers us a useful tool for objectively finding out what is going on, it could be subject to misinterpretation if there is a lot to remember and the subject is complicated.

A further type of qualitative observation technique to mention is accompanied shopping. Here the subject is accompanied by an interviewer who observes the subject's behaviour, and also asks them questions from an interview guide. This type of data collection is useful because the interviewer can record behaviour and then ask questions about attitudes and opinions. This can help the researcher to match opinions to behaviours.

A summary of the pros and cons of observation techniques is given in figure 5.4.

Figure 5.4 Advantages & Disadvantages Of Observation

Advantages

- Can provide an objective picture as there is no bias from the use of respondent words or interviewer intervention
- Can be relatively inexpensive if cameras are used to carry out the observation
- Helps understand things that people forget or cannot articulate (for example how they examine products when they buy them)
- Strong complement to other research techniques such as watching the body language in interviewing

Disadvantages

- Can only be used when people do things and access to this is often restricted
- Difficult to analyse (watching hours of video tape)
- Not good at answering the why question
- Logistically difficult to organize as many actions are in private and over a long period

The role of the moderator and the discussion guide

The moderator

The role of the moderator is crucial to the success of the focus group. A skilled moderator uses considerable social skills to make people quickly settle down and open up. In most consumer groups the moderator dresses “smart casual” to create a feeling of professional informality. However, if the focus group comprised accountants or members of the legal profession it may be more appropriate to wear a suit. The match between the moderator and the group participants has been the subject of much research i.e.

- How is the credibility of the moderator seen by the group participants?
- How much does this affect the group dynamic?

The key point is that the moderator needs to be accepted by the respondents and can create a “safe” environment where respondents feel comfortable and confident to freely express their own views.

The age, gender and experience of the moderator may be critical in some topics. In general, the moderator’s standpoint will be one of a researcher, not an industry expert, and usually their detachment from the topic area is an advantage. However, in some sensitive topics, it may be necessary to match the moderator to the group respondents – a female moderator for a female group discussing feminine issues, a male moderator for a male group of heavy beer drinkers, someone who is familiar with medical jargon running a focus group with doctors.

Groups are led by a researcher whose role differs considerably from that of an interviewer. The group moderator’s role is:

- To steer the discussion through a range of topics which are relevant to the problem. There is usually an order to the “unfolding” of these topics but there is sure to be some influence created by the spontaneity of the group itself.
- To act as a catalyst to provoke responses or introduce ideas. Sometimes the researcher should play devil’s advocate or feign ignorance.
- To draw a response from those who are quiet and curb those who attempt to monopolise.

The way questions are asked in a focus group is quite different to in a conventional interview. Empathy must be created with the members, relaxing them and generating a lively discussion. A brief introduction explains the proceedings including the fact that the proceeds are being taped and people are watching behind the two way mirror. It is then necessary to break the ice by asking each member to introduce themselves and their experience with the subject.

Working from a topic guide, the researcher moves the discussion from the broad to the particular. All the time the group is encouraged to express their own views and challenge the views of other group members. In this way all the issues unfold, supported by a discussion which gives a deeper understanding of the subject being researched.

Key point

Good moderators make their work look easy. This is because they are professionals who know how to create trust with a group so that respondents speak openly and freely.

Managing the group dynamic can be made difficult by a dominant personality who may seek a platform for their views and colour those of the other members. Equally there may be slow thinkers, introverts, wits, compulsive talkers and the indifferent. Bringing out the best from each, without insulting or embarrassing anyone, requires a mixture of authority and tact.

Groups generally take between 60 and 90 minutes to administer, depending on the complexity of the subject and interruptions from films or product presentations.

Tools of the group moderator

The questions in a focus group are carefully designed to elicit the views of the respondents. A discussion guide is prepared prior to the group and the group moderator uses this as their aide memoir of what must be covered. Careful design of the guide ensures a logical flow of conversation around the topic area and a clear focus for the discussion.

The topic guide is reflective of how groups operate. Groups always start with an introduction from the moderator explaining the purpose of the meeting and what can be expected to happen. Encouragement will be given to join in the conversation but to speak in turn so the tape can pick up the words of wisdom. Each

participant is asked to introduce themselves and comment on their experience with the subject in hand. The nature of questioning is conversational to break the ice and get people talking.

Then questions are tossed into the arena and the group is encouraged to comment, debate, and adjust their views so that the subject gets covered from all angles and points of difference are reconciled so far as is possible.

The group moderator will have considered in advance how he or she can stimulate the discussion if necessary. The “*Why?*” question is particularly important for encouraging free responses but for some respondents this may be difficult because the subject hasn’t been thought through fully. By probing *how*, *when*, *what*, it may be possible to get behind the question and infer the answer *why?*. As with any depth interviewing approach, questioning tends to be free and open to keep the conversation going and to flush out the fuller answer.

Other stimulus material could include:

- Visual stimulus materials e.g. video, story boards, photographs, advertisements, web sites
- Auditory stimulus materials e.g. tapes, video
- Product trials and demonstrations

In addition to stimulus materials, there are a number of specific techniques which can be used in focus groups. Some of these, such as *projective techniques*, are borrowed from psychology and work by tapping into different ways of thinking. Examples of *projective techniques* are:

Brainstorming: a storm of ideas is encouraged, anything goes, and the more the merrier. The researcher is looking for just one idea that could be developed and built upon. An important principle of brainstorming is saying what comes to mind without too much forethought. It is also closely linked to *word associations* where respondents are asked which words they associate with a product or brand.

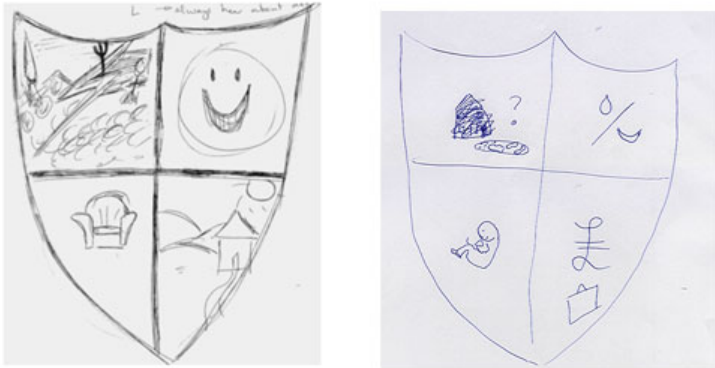
Sentence completion: this is a development of word association where the moderator presents the group with an incomplete sentence which they are asked to finish. The sentence completion can be carried out individually and introduced into the group for discussion, or the group can engage in discussion to complete the sentence.

Word sorting: this is a technique where the group is presented with a number of words or sentences and asked to sort them into groups according to the attributes of a product, or brand, or need. It is commonly used in advertising research for identifying associations with brands.

Developing a campaign: this is a group activity in which everyone works together to come up with a campaign around an issue, for example to get people like themselves to buy a product.

Picture drawing: some issues are difficult to express in words. In a focus group with undergraduates, respondents were each asked to draw a heraldic shield and divide it into four quadrants, each with a simple drawing to describe their life before coming to university, something that characterises their disposition, what it feels like at university and where they see themselves in the future. The foetus and the armchair in the drawings by two of the students were strong expressions of their feelings of safety and security at the university.

Figure 5.5 Picture Drawings Expressing Attitudes To A University



Think about

What type of focus group moderator would you make? What skills would you need to improve to be a good moderator? How good a listener are you? What are your social skills like? How creative are you?

SCARY STORY

A nightmare for moderators is the “professional groupie” – someone who regularly attends focus groups, enjoying the night out, the conversation, and pocketing the envelope with the incentive.

Groupies are in league with the recruiters who make life easy for themselves by working through a list of friends or friends of friends who are happy to attend focus groups. In order that they fit the quota for recruitment, the recruiter may ask the groupie to play a role, for example, to say that they buy certain products or that they have a certain job.

Clearly the lies that these groupies could tell are misleading and dangerous. However, even if they don't lie their regular attendance of groups will make them biased respondents. They know the lines of questioning moderators take and they have a stock of ready answers to please them.

Some years ago I ran a focus group in which it soon became clear that everyone knew each other. Not only was I facing a collection of groupies, I was never going to get answers to my questions on financial services because each would not want the others to have insights into their banking policies. The group was a waste of time.

Standards of recruiting have been tightened in recent years and respondents who are recruited to a focus group are eliminated if they have attended a group in the last six months.