CONDUCTING GROUP INTERVIEWS IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

A.I.D. PROGRAM DESIGN AND EVALUATION METHODOLOGY REPORT NO. 8
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by

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FOREWORD

There has been a growing belief among A.I.D. managers that many widely used data collection methods, particularly censuses, sample surveys, and detailed ethnographic descriptions, are often not appropriate for generating information for decision-making. They require considerable investment of resources, take a long time to complete, and often produce data that are too elaborate for their intended purpose. Researchers, therefore, have begun to use alternative methods that can provide timely information in a cost-effective manner. The group interview is one of them.

Group interviews can be used for obtaining a wide range of information for different purposes. They can provide background information for designing projects and programs, generate ideas and hypotheses for intervention models, provide feedback from beneficiaries, and help in assessing responses to recommended innovations. They are also useful for obtaining data for monitoring and evaluation purposes and for interpreting data that are already available within A.I.D.

Despite their immense potential, the literature on group interviews is extremely limited. The little material that exists deals with group interviews within the environment of

industrialized nations. Therefore, the Center For Development
Information and Evaluation of The Bureau for Program and Policy
Coordination has produced this guide, which describes the nature,
uses, advantages, and limitations of group interviews with
reference to the conditions of developing countries. It also
explains the steps involved in conducting two types of group
interviews -- focus group interviews and community interviews.

The guide has been written in jargon-free language for use
by A.I.D. managers, contractors, and host country officials. I
am sure that they will find it useful.

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SUMMARY

The Group interview is one of the rapid, cost-effective
data collection methods. It involves the use of direct probing
techniques to gather information from several individuals in a
group situation. Although superficially the difference between
the individual and group interviews is the number of
participants, this difference contributes to major variations
between the two with regard to planning, nature of interview
guides, probing techniques, and analysis of information.

Group interviews can serve a wide range of information
collection purposes. They can provide background information and
help to generate ideas and hypothesis for project and program
design, provide feedback from beneficiaries, and help in
assessing responses to recommended innovations. They are also
useful for obtaining data for monitoring and evaluation purposes
and for interpreting available quantitative data.

There are two main types of group interviews -- focus group
interviews and community interviews -- that have wide potential in
developing countries. Both types should be carefully planned.
The investigator should conduct a systematic review of the

relevant documents, records, or studies and consult with a few key informants before venturing into the field. The main concepts should be clearly defined in order to avoid possible misunderstanding between the respondents and the interviewers.

Focus Group Interviews

The focus group interview represents a group situation in which the participants talk with one another under the guidance of a moderator for the purpose of generating relevant ideas and information. The main interaction is among the participants, who stimulate each other. Such interviews are conducted on the basis of a flexible interview guide.

The interview guide lists the main subtopics and issues to be covered. The number of items in the guide should not exceed six or seven, in order to leave enough time for in-depth discussions. The optimal number of participants ranges between six and ten. A group of this size is neither too large nor too small and can be easily managed. The composition of the group should be homogeneous, with members sharing similar background and experience. Although probability sampling cannot be used for selecting the participants, every effort should be made to ensure that they are representative of the population in which the investigator is interested.

Seating arrangements should facilitate maximum interaction among participants. The best arrangement is to have the participants sit around a table facing each other. The duration of a session can range from 1 to 2 hours. However, if the discussions are interesting, the group can continue beyond the scheduled time.

After a brief introduction, the moderator should explain the purpose of the inquiry. The moderator should stress that it is an informal group and that participants should express their views candidly. Probing should be subtle, and the moderator should adopt a posture of "sophisticated naivete" to encourage the participants. For eliciting details, questions should be asked casually. The queries of what, when, where, which, how, and why are quite helpful. Visual aids such as slides, films, and pictures can be shown to stimulate discussions on a specific subtopic.

To prevent a few individuals from dominating the discussions, the moderator can follow one of three strategies: (1) give nonverbal cues to the respondent to stop, such as looking in another direction, showing a lack of interest, and stopping note taking; (2) politely intervene, saying that he has somehow missed the point and would like to summarize what the respondent was saying -- then refocus the discussions; (3) take advantage of a pause and say that the issues raised are of vital significance and should be discussed in a separate session.

To minimize group pressure, which inhibits dissenting participants from expressing their views, the moderator can ask

for other ideas, explanations or recommendations than those already discussed, suggest new ideas for discussion. The moderator can also look at the participants who appear to be skeptical of the views of the group and encourage them to speak.

Focus group interviews should be carefully recorded. The notes should include (1) records of the discussions, (2) moderator's observations of the nonverbal behavior of the participants, and (3) the moderator's own ideas, hunches, or thoughts generated during the interview.

Community Interviews

Unlike the focus group in which participants discuss a subject among themselves, in community interviews the primary interaction is between the interviewer and the participants. Community interviews take the form of community/village meetings open to all adults in the area. Communities for conducting interviews are carefully selected to minimize sampling biases.

A structured interview guide listing precise questions for the interview should be prepared for community interviews. Its language should be simple. Both leading questions and questions that combine two or more queries should be avoided. Questions on controversial topics that can generate strong emotions among the participants should also be avoided.

The interviewer has little control over the the size of a community meeting, which depends on factors such as the population of the community, time and location of the meeting, and interest of the target population. Past experience has shown, however, that if they are well publicized and the time is convenient, many people turn up. If the number of participants exceeds 30, the investigator should consider dividing the group into two or more subgroups for more open discussions.

As far as possible, community interviews should be conducted by a team of two because it is extremely taxing for a single interviewer to preside over a large meeting, ask questions, probe respondents, and take extensive notes.

Restraining the leaders from monopolizing the interviews requires great acumen and interpersonal skills on the part of the interviewer. One strategy that has proved effective in the past is to discuss the main subtopics with important community leaders before the meeting. This strategy has two merits. First, the leaders might not want to repeat themselves in large meetings once they have articulated their views and shared their information. Second, the interviewers can say at the outset of the meeting that they have already discussed the subject with a few leaders and have come to hear from the others.

Community meetings can be also used for generating some quantitative data. Often, useful community-level statistics can be gathered from them. Experience has shown that such data are relatively accurate. An interviewer can also take polls during

community meetings for obtaining quantitative information about the behavior, experience, opinions, and assessments of the respondents. Extreme caution is required for making generalizations on the basis of such data.

Post-meeting conversations with interested individuals are an integral part of the interview process. They enable the interviewer to get the views of those participants who for some reason preferred not to express themselves in the meeting.

Interviewers' Biases

There are four kinds of interviewer biases in group interviews that can undermine the validity and reliability of the findings. The "hypothesis-confirmation bias" arises from selectively focusing on information and ideas that confirm the preconceived hypotheses and beliefs of the interviewers. The "elite bias" results from an interviewer's tendency to give more weight to the views of elites than those of others. Vivid descriptions and statistical data about a few cases can give the impression that they represent general situations, thereby producing "concreteness bias." Finally "consistency bias" can be generated by a premature search for coherence in the disparate, often irreconcilable remarks of the participants in order to draw meaningful conclusions. A.I.D. managers should be mindful of such biases in the studies contracted by them.

1. INTRODUCTION

This monograph describes the nature and mode of conducting group interviews in developing countries.{1} It attempts to explain in nontechnical language their nature, types, uses, and limitations. More important, it details the steps involved in conducting two types of group interviews with great potential for application in developing countries: focus group interviews and community interviews.

The following subsections of Section 1 describe group interviews and their primary uses and advantages. Section 2 presents the general steps involved in planning studies based on group interviews. Section 3 highlights focus group interviews and discusses the techniques for conducting them, and Section 4 outlines the procedures for conducting community interviews. Section 5 describes biases of interviewers and moderators and their adverse affects on the interview process. Section 6 presents a brief discussion of suggested reading.

{1}There is almost no literature on group interview techniques, especially on conducting them in developing countries. This brief monograph attempts to provide some guidelines for researchers who want to use group interview techniques in developing countries but have no sources to draw on for guidance.

1.1 Description of Group Interviews

Broadly speaking, group interviews involve the use of direct probing techniques to gather information from several individuals in a group setting. Such interviews can be conducted by one or more interviewers, with or without an interview guide, and with groups of varying sizes and composition. Superficially, the difference between individual and group interviews is the number of respondents; however, this difference leads to major variations between them with regard to planning, nature of interview guides used, probing techniques, and analysis of information.

The two types of group interviews that will be discussed are focus group interviews and community interviews.

Focus group interviews focus on a specific topic and are conducted in small group sessions. A distinguishing feature is that participants discuss ideas, issues, insights, and experiences among themselves. Each member is free to comment, criticize, or elaborate on the views expressed by previous speakers. The moderator guides the discussions toward the issues identified in the interview guide and uses various probing techniques to elicit further information. Focus group interviews can last 1 to 2 hours, depending on the interest of the participants and the subject under investigation. The groups generally have 6 to l0 participants, selected on the basis of a set of criteria dictated by the objective of the inquiry.

Community interviews are also based on an interview guide and take the form of public meetings that are open to all members of a community or village. Usually, the large number of participants (more than 15) does not permit free discussions among all those present. Each participant is not expected to answer all the questions raised in a session. Generally, a few leaders tend to dominate the discussions. Use of an interdisciplinary team rather than a single interviewer is more effective in conducting community interviews.

This monograph is written primarily to meet the needs of practitioners who are involved in the design, monitoring, and evaluation of development projects. Often they require data and information of reasonable accuracy within a limited time span. What they need is timely information to guide their activities. For them, group interviews could be very useful in gathering relevant information.

1.2 The Use of Group Interviews by Project and Program Managers

The managers of A.I.D. projects and programs and host country officials can use group interviews for generating a variety of information on development interventions. Specifically, they can use them for the following purposes.

1. Securing background information for project and program planning. Group interviews can provide much needed background information about communities and villages, social and economic systems, farming systems, target groups, and local organizations and institutions. For example, if A.I.D. is designing an agricultural extension project, a series of group interviews with the intended beneficiaries, concerned officials, and other experts can provide relevant information about farmers, agricultural land, farm practices, crops, marketing facilities, and the outreach capacity of existing extension services.

2. Generating ideas and hypotheses for project and program design. Group interviews are ideal for exploratory investigations. For example, at the project or program design stage, they can be conducted for generating ideas and hypotheses concerning the needs and requirements of target groups, the appropriateness of the intervention models, and the suitability of delivery systems. Obviously, these hypotheses will have to be tested on the basis of additional data gathered from other sources.

3. Getting feedback from project/program beneficiaries. The majority of development projects build or improve delivery systems for providing necessary goods and services to the target populations. Hence the managers need constant feedback from their beneficiaries about the efficiency and effectiveness of such systems. For example, the managers of an agricultural extension project should know whether extension workers are disseminating the message in a language farmers understand, whether they hold agricultural demonstrations at convenient locations and times, and whether the message imparted is relevant and timely. Such information can be rapidly obtained through community interviews or focus group discussions with the targeted farmers in select locations.

4. Assessing responses to recommended innovations. Nearly all development interventions introduce innovations, and the ultimate success of the intervention depends on the acceptance of the innovations by the targeted group -- farmers, small businessmen, or government officials. Group interviews can be helpful for assessing the reactions of the intended clients to the innovations. For example, focus group interviews can inform the project staff in a family planning intervention about the reactions, concerns, and reservations of women about the use of contraceptives. Focus group interviews can often reveal more in-depth information than can formal sample surveys.

5. Interpreting available quantitative data. Donor agencies, host governments, and project staff gather data from various sources. Group interviews can be helpful in interpreting them; they can add a qualitative dimension, which the data lack.

6. Investigating implementation problems. Many implementation problems faced by development projects require in-depth probing of the motives, attitudes, and understanding of the actions involved. It is important to know, for example, why

the majority of farmers in a project enthusiastically adopt a new variety of wheat but revert to their previous variety in succeeding seasons, or why demand for contraceptives soars in some regions but remains stagnant in another, or why farmers are not repaying their short-term loans to the agricultural credit societies. In all these examples, we need to understand the perspective of the individuals -- why they are behaving as they are. Group interviews, particularly focus group interviews, can be very useful for this purpose.

7. Project onitoring. Group interviews can also be helpful for generating information needed to monitor project performance, achievements, and limitations. They can also generate practical recommendations and suggestions for improving project performance.

8. Evaluation. Finally group interviews could be a major source of data for mid-term, terminal, and impact evaluations.

1.3 Advantages and Limitations of Group Interviews

As a mode of data collection, group interviews have several advantages. First, they enable the investigator to gather information rapidly. A group interview with 6 to l0 people can be conducted within an hour or two, which is much less time than it would take to interview them individually. While it will not provide the same depth of information that might be gained in individual interviews, a skilled interviewer can still obtain considerable information and understanding from group interviews. When impending deadlines impose severe time constraints, group interviews may be the only viable alternatives.

Second, group interviews are economical compared with in-depth interviews or structured surveys because they do not require a large staff of enumerators. A trained interviewer can conduct two or three group interviews in a day, each covering multiple respondents. Thus costs are considerably less for studies based on group interviews.

Third, group participation can sometimes reduce individual inhibitions, thereby providing information that might not be otherwise shared. In some cases, people in groups are willing to share feelings, emotions, and concerns that they would be reluctant to express in more private settings. The obvious reason is that they find a sense of security in the group, which is undoubtedly an important consideration in rural conditions, where respondents are uncomfortable in the presence of outsiders. The knowledge that other farmers have the same reservations about the recommended technical package can lead a cautious farmer to express his own doubts on the subject in the presence of senior officials. Of course, the reverse is also true; some may be reluctant to express their intimate feelings and opinions in public.

Fourth, respondents are able to raise issues and concerns that the investigator might not have considered. Group members generate new ideas and approaches because they stimulate each other. A group dynamics emerges that encourages the participants to respond to each other's ideas and comments, thereby opening up fresh lines of inquiry. For example, farmers may remark casually that since the establishment of a procurement center by the government, they have had to transport their produce to the center themselves, instead of using private traders who used to pick it up at the farmgate. This comment may have a "snow-balling" effect in starting an interesting discussion of several issues that might not have occurred to the investigator during the design of the investigation. In addition, group interviews can reveal divergent perspectives and innovative ideas, which are usually not identified in a structured survey.

Fifth, one of the major advantages of group interviews is that they permit a direct interaction between respondents and the investigator. In this respect, they are better than formal survey interviews conducted by enumerators who are not involved in data analysis and interpretation. Group interviews provide investigators with a broad view of the situation; they are able to listen to respondents and also watch their expressions.

Sixth, information gathered in group interviews can sometimes be more accurate than that obtained in individual interviews because respondents are generally reluctant to give inaccurate answers for fear of being exposed by other participants; when they do, others tend to correct them. In the oft-cited example of group interviews conducted by Ladejinsky in Bihar, India, a large landowner who said that he owned only 30 acres of land (the maximum permitted under law) grudgingly conceded that he owned 300 acres when the other participants humorously questioned the validity of his answers (Ladejinsky 1969).

Finally, group interviews provide considerable flexibility to the interviewers, who are not unnecessarily constrained by their research instruments and are thus able to pursue the leads provided by respondents.

The advantages of group interviews should not, however, obscure their major limitations.

First, group interviews cannot generate reliable quantitative data from which generalizations can be derived concerning the whole population. They give a relatively accurate picture of the prevalence of a phenomenon, attitude, perception, or behavior pattern, but not of its extent or pervasiveness. For example, an investigator may learn from group interviews that small farmers are not availing themselves of the short-term agricultural credit offered by the project institutions because of the cumbersome delay in processing loan applications. But the investigator could never know what percentage of farmers in the project area are being deterred by this factor. Hence, when precise quantitative data are required, group interviews cannot serve the

purpose. Even when some limited quantitative information is generated in community interviews, the interviewers should resist the temptation to generalize from the findings.

Second, group interviews are highly susceptible to interviewer biases, which can undermine the validity and reliability of their findings. Probably the most common bias is "hypothesis confirmation bias." Unless interviewers are well trained and possess a healthy skepticism about their own hypotheses and hunches, they may misinterpret the group discussions as confirming their own position. Experience has shown that interviewers can consciously or unconsciously give greater weight to the views expressed by elites than those of other members of a group, thereby projecting a distorted picture. (Four types of interviewer biases are discussed in Section 5.)

Finally, particpants do not divulge sensitive information in group situations.

1.4 Time, Staff Requirements, and Costs

A field study based on 10 to 15 group interview sessions should be completed within 6 weeks under normal conditions. Usually it takes about 1 or 2 weeks to review literature and to develop the interview guide, 2 to 3 weeks in the field to conduct the interviews, and another 2 weeks to prepare the report and recommendations. This estimate assumes that the investigation team will be able to complete at least one group session every day while in the field. Thus, if the geographical area to be covered is large, and there are problems in moving from one site to another, additional time will be required.

The requirements for the research staff are different for focus group interviews and community interviews. Focus group interviews are conducted by a single moderator, whereas community interviews require a team of two. When the principal investigator is not fluent in the local language, he or she must be assisted by a local collaborator.

Investigators should ideally meet three requirements. First, they should have appropriate training in conductiong group interviews. A continual difficulty faced by A.I.D. managers is that many people claiming to be experts have little experience and expertise. Second, the investigator must have substantive knowledge of the subject under investigation in order to understand and correctly interpret the discussions and responses of the participants. For example, only a person acquainted with extension services should interview farmers on this subject. Finally, the interviewer should be sensitive to the cultural norms of the community.

The major costs of group interviews are the remunerations, per diem, and traveling expenses of the investigator(s). These expenses can be quite low for local experts from the host

countries. For focus group interviews, additional costs might be incurred for renting rooms for the discussions and for modest honoraria for the participants (honoraria should be paid only when absolutely necessary). In addition, secretarial services should be considered when estimating costs.

2. PLANNING STUDIES USING GROUP INTERVIEWS

This section briefly describes how to plan studies based on group interviews. The steps involved are similar to those for other investigations requiring empirical data collection: (1) delineating the scope and objective of the inquiry, (2) reviewing the available information, (3) defining the key concepts to be used, and (4) selecting the appropriate group interview technique. The interviewer should follow these steps before venturing into the field.

2.1 Delineating the Scope and Objective

One simple rule in survey research is that the investigators should look backward; they should focus on the ultimate, desired outcomes and then examine how these will be achieved, if at all, by a survey. In other words, the focus should be on the questions that the survey is intended to answer. This rule is as valid for group interviews as it is for formal surveys. Thus the first step is to prepare a set of questions, which the A.I.D. manager would like to be answered by the study.

This can be illustrated with a simple example. Consider a project that has been supplying a set of inputs to farmers for growing an improved variety of maize. Despite the best efforts of the management, the targeted farmers have shown little interest in the recommended technical package. As a result, the USAID Mission has decided to initiate an exploratory study to gain an understanding of the farmers' perspective through group interviews. In this case, the investigator should begin by writing down research questions such as the following:

1. Do farmers regard the improved variety of maize as profitable, given the additional investment of time and resources?

2. Are interested farmers able to procure the required inputs such as seeds, fertilizers, insecticides, and pesticides in time?

3. Do they face problems in securing short-term credit from the project to purchase the required inputs?

4. Is there a shortage of labor during the peak agricultural seasons that constrains interested farmers from cultivating the improved variety of maize?

5. Is there a gender issue? Which farmers, male or female, are expected to do extra work?

6. Is the taste of the improved variety palatable to the local populace?

7. Do farmers believe that they are likely to get timely technical advice about the package from the agricultural extension service when needed?

8. What are the socioeconomic characteristics of farmers who are using the improved variety of maize?

9. What proportion of farmers abandoned the new variety after initial trial?

10. What proportion of targeted farmers is actually using the new variety?

Once the list has been prepared, the investigator should examine whether these questions can be explored through group interviews. Some study questions cannot be explored in group interviews, and in such cases, the plan for group interviews will have to be abandoned. For instance, group interviews cannot answer questions 7, 8, and 9 because they require statistical data that can be collected only through formal surveys. The remaining questions, however, can be adequately dealt with on the basis of group interviews.

It is prudent to discuss the study questions in detail with the concerned A.I.D. or host government staff. This is necessary because unlike the questionnaires prepared for formal surveys or censuses, interview guides used in group interviews do not provide a clear idea of the nature and contents of the interviews. As a result, there is potential for genuine misunderstanding; the expectations of the sponsors might be different from those of the researcher.

2.2 Reviewing Available Information

The next step is to review the information available on the subject. This is necessary for clarifying the essential ideas and for avoiding duplication. Launching into group interviews without sufficient knowledge of the local conditions and the problem to be investigated is a waste of time. While the interviewers need not conduct a comprehensive library search as in an academic research effort, they should familiarize themselves with the literature and discuss the subject with a few key informants.

The following are some important sources of information that can be rapidly tapped for this purpose:

-- Project/program records and documents. These are easily
   available and can provide a wealth of information.
   For the above-cited example of the failure of the target
   population to adopt the new technical package, the
   reports and records of extension services, of the
   project management, or of agencies providing the inputs
   can be extremely useful. The reports prepared by
   extension workers can tell the investigator about the
   initial enthusiasm, reservations, or problems of
   farmers, while the records of the agencies supplying
   inputs can shed light on the nature of the demand for
   the various inputs and their timely availability. The
   progress reports of the supervisory staff can give
   additional insights about the overall management of the
   project.

-- Published or unpublished studies undertaken on the
   subject by different donor agencies, governments,
   and educational institutions. These can include
   feasibility studies, evaluations, doctoral theses, and
   formal and informal surveys. Often the existence of such
   studies is not known except to the sponsoring agencies
   and the researchers who participated in them. They can
   be located only through personal visits to the offices
   of concerned organizations and institutions.

-- Secondary data available from government and research
   institutions. One is often surprised by the wealth of
   data routinely collected by the governments in
   developing countries that can be obtained with little
   effort. Such data are usually available from statistical
   offices, census bureaus, ministries of agriculture,
   health departments, and planning divisions. In
   addition, many private and public research firms also
   gather statistical data on a limited range of topics.

In addition to these sources, the investigators can meet and
discuss the subject with a few knowledgeable individuals. For
instance, they can talk with extension staff to get information
about farming systems, with public health workers to learn about
family planning practices, and with officials of agencies
supplying inputs to learn about the sales of fertilizers, seeds,
or insecticides.

2.3 Defining the Key Concepts

The conventional wisdom in qualitative research is that the
relevant concepts should not be defined in advance but should
evolve from the field experience. This advice, although sound
for academic research, is not appropriate for studies based on
group interviews unless their purpose is to refine or develop new
concepts. The obvious reason is the short time in the field:
group interviews are conducted within days rather than weeks.
Moreover, the concepts used are not new and have generally been

used in previous investigations.

The investigator should carefully define the key concepts during the planning stage. Conceptual clarification avoids confusion and helps to sharpen the focus of inquiry. Moreover, if the investigator does not clearly define the concepts, the investigator and the respondents might be talking about different things; while the investigator is referring to small-holders, respondents might have large commercial farmers in mind. As for as possible, the definitions should be simple and congruent with the common usage of the terms; otherwise the participants in group interviews might not comprehend their precise meaning. Box 1 describes the case of a group interview in Thailand, where the use of the word "marriage" created some problems during the interview.

Only a few major concepts need to be defined for the purpose of the study. For example, in an investigation of farmers' responses to the new varieties of maize seed, one need only define what is meant by the "farmer" in this context, which improved varieties are involved, and what the technical package promoted by the project contains. One advantage of the group interview is that inappropriate definitions can be modified during the course of the study if misinterpretation becomes apparent.

2.4 Selecting the Appropriate Technique

Finally, an appropriate group interview technique should be identified. The two group interview techniques most relevant in the context of developing countries are focus group interviews and community interviews.

The most important consideration in selecting the specific group interview technique is the nature of the information required. When in-depth knowledge about peoples' perceptions, feelings, or values is sought, focus group interviews tend to be more useful. They permit an intensive probing of a subject and bring to the surface the subjective feelings, opinions, and

Box 1. The Importance of Defining Key Concepts:
             Marriage in Thai Society

In Thailand, couples may choose any one of several forms of conjugal union, from simply moving in together to having an elaborate ceremony. As a result, it is extremely important to state explicitly which meaning of the term is intended. This was highlighted in a group interview situation, as the following excerpts indicate:

In Thai, the usual, more formal word for marriage in general also has a more specific and literal connotation of a marriage ceremony. While we

anticipated that the use of this word in our focus
group sessions would prove no problem and be
interpreted in its more general sense, a number of
participants who had not apparently had a marriage
ceremony obviously interpreted the term more
literally than expected. The following quotes
underscore the need for researchers to be aware of the
variety of ways conjugal unions can be initiated in
Thailand and the different terms used.

"I didn't get married. Back then we just turned out
the lamp and did it." (older woman, North)

" I did not get married, I ran away [eloped]."
(younger woman, construction site, Bangkok)

"For those who are laborers, they will not get
married but will run away together [elope]." (older
woman, construction site, Bangkok)

"Back then, you did not get married, not like
nowadays." (older woman, North)

 Source: Pramuslratana, Havanon, and Knodel (l983, l4-15).

judgments of participants. Thus they are very useful when the
views of a specific target group or market segment are sought.
Community interviews are most useful for understanding local
needs, expectations, and behavior patterns. Suppose we want to
know if communities will be willing to share the cost for
constructing a school building or a health center; community
interviews can give us a reasonable idea. They can also provide
relatively accurate information about community-level indicators
such as access to roads, availability of medical facilities,
major crops grown, or marketing facilities. There are no hard
and fast rules about the selection of the group interview
technique; each investigator will have to exercise individual
judgment in the matter.

3. CONDUCTING FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS

    Focus group interviews offer a means of getting in-depth
information on a specific topic through a discussion group. The
underlying premise is that people who share common experiences,
problems, or concerns are willing to reveal them in a group
atmosphere. Focus group interviews are not simply individual
interviews conducted in a group setting; the moderator does not
ask the same question of all respondents. Rather, focus group
interviews represent a group situation in which the participants
talk with each other under the guidance of a moderator. Each
participant is stimulated by the comments of others and in turn
stimulates them. Strictly speaking, when participants direct

their questions to the moderator rather than to each other, it is not a focus group interview. The primary role of the moderator is to promote group discussions.

Interest in focus group interviews has been growing since the 1960s. They have been used extensively in marketing studies for understanding the psychological and behavioral underpinnings of consumer behavior and for identifying the ways and means to affect it. The breadth of topics on which focus group interviews have been conducted has been unusually large -- from testing a concept to gauging ultimate satisfaction with the product. Educators have also used focus group interviews for evaluating curricula and the performance of instructors -- reflecting an awareness of how focus group interviews can complement the information gathered through the formal questionnaires normally administered for this purpose. Public health professionals have used them for assessing the needs and perspectives of clients in health delivery systems. Finally, investigators working on family planning, especially the social marketing of contraceptives, have used focus group interviews to gather useful knowledge for their own purposes and have also demonstrated the effectiveness of focus group interviews in different social and cultural contexts.

The following subsections outline the steps involved in conducting focus group interviews. (Planning group interviews was discussed in Section 1.)

3.1 Preparing the Interview Guide

Once the focus and scope of an inquiry have been determined, the major concepts defined, and the target populations identified, an interview guide is prepared. The guide, similar to that used in in-depth qualitative interviews with individual respondents, lists the subtopics to be covered. The guide does not give detailed instructions to the moderator; rather, it is an aide memoire to refresh the memory during the interview.

The number of items included in the guide should be limited. The moderator should focus on only six or seven subtopics, but should explore them in considerable detail. Having fewer items leaves more time to pursue leads before moving to another item. When an attempt is made to cover many subtopics in a single session, participants do not feel free to raise issues, questions, or ideas that are uppermost in their minds because they feel constrained by time.

The nature of an interview guide can be illustrated with a concrete example. Suppose an investigator is conducting focus group interviews to uncover attitudes toward family planning and the use of contraceptives among the target population. The purpose is to gain a general understanding of the subject so that a comprehensive sample survey can be launched at a later stage. In this case, subtopics such as the following can be included in the

interview guide:

    -- Preferred size of the family

    -- Preferences concerning the sex of children

    -- Changing attitudes and behavior patterns related to age
       at marriage

    -- Economic aspects of having children (e.g., effect of
       family size on standards of living, importance of
       children in old age)

    -- Attitude towards childless couples; reasons?

    -- Attitude toward family planning

    -- Awareness of different contraceptive methods

Many more subtopics than those identified in the interview guide are likely to be discussed in a session. This happens because, as participants express their ideas, experiences, and explanations on a subtopic, their comments are then supported, criticized, or elaborated on by others. Thus the few initial items often generate a fruitful chain of discussions not anticipated by the investigator. In a focus group interview on the use of contraceptives, for example, a woman may mention that although unmarried young women would prefer to use contraceptives, they do not want to purchase them at grocery stores because of social and religious taboos against premarital sex. This casual remark can lead to an interesting discussion of the mechanisms for distributing contraceptives. Participants are also likely to propose different ideas and suggestions that can be further examined by the group. The essential point is that the discussions in a focus group do not remain confined to the items in the interview guide. Thus, reliance on an elaborate interview guide can be self-defeating to the extent that it inhibits the free flow of ideas and insights.

3.2 Size and Composition of the Group

The size of a focus group should not be so small that the advantages of group dynamics are lost. In small groups (3 or 4 participants), individuals feel exposed, and they feel a constant pressure to comment, whether they have something to say or not. Moreover, discussions in very small groups are more vulnerable to the effects of the personalities and opinions of influential participants. Conversely, a large group (more than 12 people) leaves little time for meaningful discussions. Individuals have to wait to make a comment, and by the time their turns come, they may have lost interest or forgotten the points they intended to make. As a result, spontaneity is undermined. Moreover, large groups tend to fragment into smaller subgroups, whose members address their remarks primarily to each other. The moderator may

be helpless in such situations.

The optimal number of participants in a focus group interview is between 6 and 10 people. A group of this size is neither too large nor too small to permit the smooth flow of conversation. It is also easily manageable.

To the extent possible, the focus group should be homogeneous in composition, with members sharing similar backgrounds and experience. For example, a focus group interview on the use of contraceptives should comprise people of generally the same age, gender, and socioeconomic background. This will require separate groups for men and women, old and young, and rich and poor.

In the stratified societies of the developing world, participants drawn from different social and economic strata are unable to interact on an equal basis. Differences in status impinge on interpersonal communication. One generally finds that people of lower socioeconomic status are reluctant to talk in the presence of their perceived superiors. The presence of older women, for example, can deter unmarried girls from talking about their sexual behavior because they dare not disclose non-traditional behavior patterns in the presence of elders. In other instances, participants enjoying higher status might consciously or unconsciously dominate discussions. Only the valiant efforts of the moderator can save the situation.

Efforts should be made to select people who do not know each other. Anonymity among participants also minimizes the inhibiting effect of differences in status and prevents the formation of small cliques, in which a few members talk primarily with one another and not with the whole group. Nonetheless, this requirement for anonymity cannot usually be met in rural areas where people have frequent contact with each other. If they do not personally know each other, they are still likely to know about each other. This is also the case when participants are drawn from an organization (e.g., extension service or family planning agency), because it is likely that they are familiar with the status and roles of the other members.

The moderator should also try to exclude people who have previously participated in a focus group on the same subject. Repeat participants are not spontaneous in their responses and display a tendency to show off their past experience. Hence, what is much-prized previous experience in other circumstances is a disqualification for a focus group interview. Fortunately, the investigator can always find people who have not participated in focus group interviews because such interviews are uncommon in project or program areas.

3.3 Sampling

Probability sampling to generate an unbiased sample

representative of the total population is not used to select participants for focus group interviews. This is neither possible nor desirable because of time and space constraints. The common accepted practice is to rely on convenience sampling, in which participants are selected on the basis of their easy availability, provided they meet some other predetermined criteria. However, efforts should still be made to see that participants are as representative of the target populations as possible. One can attain an acceptable degree of representativeness (1) by classifying the target populations on the basis of carefully selected criteria variables relevant to the study objective and (2) by including participants from each category in different groups.

This can be explained with a simple illustration. Consider the owners of the tractors in an area development project. They can be classified on the basis of variables such as age (young or old), gender, size of holdings (smallholder or largeholders), and literacy (literate or illiterate). They can also be categorized according to use of the tractors (those who use tractors for their own farms, and those who rent them to others), source of financing (those who got loans from the project, and those who raised money by themselves), or the mechanical skills of the owners.

The choice of a classification system will be dictated by the purpose of the inquiry. An investigator interested in discovering the cost-effectiveness of tractors for the owners might use categories based on size of landholding, source of financing, and the mechanical skills of the owners -- all factors that affect the cost-effectiveness of tractor operations. By contrast, if the purpose of the focus group interviews is to identify gender-based differences in the use of tractors by farmers, such elaborate categories are unnecessary -- a simple classification based on gender will be sufficient.

Once appropriate categories have been identified, the focus groups can be formed in such a way that participants from all relevant categories are represented. For example, in focus group interviews for determining the cost-effectiveness of tractor operations, one can include (1) smallholders, (2) large landowners, (3) owners who cultivate their own farms, (4) those who rent, (5) owners who borrowed money to purchase tractors, (6) those who financed their purchase themselves, (7) those who possess some mechanical skills, and (8) those who do not. Efforts should be made to hold separate group sessions for each category or to include a mix of tractor owners from the various categories in each group session.

To identify participants in developing countries, the best approach is to consult key informants who are knowledgeable about local conditions. The investigator can ask them to identify individuals who might be readily available for a focus group interview. It is always prudent to consult several informants to minimize the biases of individual preferences (see Section 4.2). Once the list is prepared, the investigator can select the

required number of participants.

Should participants be paid? In marketing research, it is customary to pay participants to induce them to attend focus group interviews. This practice is not recommended for development projects and programs. The obvious reason is that once key informants know that participants will be paid, they tend to suggest friends and acquaintances, a practice that biases the findings. Moreover, the practice might encourage some individuals to try to attend many focus group interviews. However, there are situations when some payment might be necessary to induce participants to attend focus group interviews. In such cases, payment should be modest.

Box 2 cites the example of a focus group study in Indonesia that used 10 categories of participants.

3.4 Location and Seating Arrangements

Focus group interviews can be conducted anywhere that 6 to l0 people can be seated and assured of some privacy. If women participants are involved, the location should be such where they can easily go. The most readily available sites in rural areas are primary school buildings, health centers, community centers, and churches. Rarely can the investigator find a house in a village that will accommodate a focus group.

Investigators must guard against unwarranted intrusions by outsiders, who can pose serious problems. A focus group interview can be an interesting social event in a remote village--one that can arouse the curiosity of the community. Sometimes village officials will insist on participating (see Box 3). Hence focus group interviews should not be held in open spaces.

Seating arrangements should facilitate maximum interaction among participants. The best arrangement is to have the participants sit around a table facing each other. The other alternative is to arrange chairs in a semicircle. If group members prefer to sit on the floor, they can do so. The important thing is that all participants feel physically and psychologically comfortable.

3.5 Timing and Duration

The time of the meeting should be convenient to all the participants -- male and female. Focus group interviews can last from 1 to 2 hours. If the discussions are interesting, the group can continue beyond the scheduled time. When only some participants want to continue, the moderator can terminate the session but continue the discussion informally. The experience of focus group interviews shows that often new and fresh ideas

are brought to the attention of the moderator in these informal

Box 2. Formation of Focused Group Interviews for a
          Family Planning Study in Indonesia

In a study on family planning, investigators identified
"10 categories of people whose views would be important for
an understanding of family planning behavior and attitudes."
These were as follows:

l. Married women with children

    -- Current users of contraceptives
    -- Those who no longer use contraceptives
    -- Those who never used contraceptives

2. Married women without children

3. Unmarried women

4. Women engaged or about to be married

5. Older women

6. Three groups of men

    -- Current users of contraceptives
    -- Those who no longer use contraceptives
    -- Those who never used contraceptives

There were theoretical and empirical grounds for these
classifications.

Each of these groups brought a different
perspective to the questions.... It is likely
that the level of education attained by potential
acceptors is a key determinant of the use or non-use
of family planning. Thus, in order to reflect
differences in knowledge, attitudes, or behavior
as a result of different educational levels, focus
group sessions were conducted at two educational
levels for each of the 10 categories of
respondents; those who had 6 years or less of
education... and those who had been educated
beyond elementary school.

Source: Sunyono et al. (1981, 434).

Box 3. Uninvited Participants in Group Discussions

The problem of uninvited respondents is illustrated by the experience of a study team in Ivory Coast that was examining the impact of television on viewers. This team intended to assemble discussion groups composed of six regular adult viewers (four men -- two young to middle-aged and two elderly viewers--and two women -- one young to middle-aged and one elderly viewer) and two infrequent adult spectators (one young to middle-aged and one elderly woman). However, the proposed sample was not respected.

"In spite of our attempts, women rarely participated. Secondly, larger numbers of participants than were requested grouped around the interviewer." To the dismay of the team, uninvited individuals insisted on participating in the discussions.

Source: Grant and Pierre (1975, 11-12).

sessions. Participants who are reluctant to present an innovative idea or a dissenting view in a large group often tend to share their views during informal conversations.

The moderator should make provisions for late starts because it is rare when all the participants arrive on time. The moderator can converse with the earlier arrivals on topics of mutual interest. Informal conversations before the sessions can often establish rapport between the moderator and group members. However, the problem of late arrivals can be partly solved if arrangements are made for picking up participants from their homes or farms.

3.6 Opening the Interview

After a brief introduction, the moderator should explain the purpose and scope of the inquiry. The explanation should be brief because lengthy explanations confuse participants, who usually are not able to understand the complexities involved. For instance, if focus group interviews are being conducted to identify reasons for the nonrepayment of loans by farmers, the moderator can simply say that the cooperative societies have succeeded in distributing credit, but that people do not seem to be repaying their loans. If this situation continues, the cooperative societies will have to be closed. The moderator should explain that the group has been assembled to discover the reasons for this problem and that participants should express their views, opinions, and suggestions.

Often the individuals recruited for focus group interviews do not know what is expected of them. It is therefore important that the moderator stress the following characteristics of focus group interviews. First, the group interview is not a question and answer session. Rather, it is an informal

discussion; if one individual is making a point, another can comment on it. Second, the group is convened to hear the views and experiences of all the participants. Third, the moderator is interested in the full range of ideas and explanations. Anyone with a divergent view on an item should express it freely; the whole purpose of the group interviews will be defeated if the moderator returns with incomplete information. Finally, because time is limited, participants should be asked to speak as briefly as possible. Box 4 gives an example of an appropriate introduction to a group interview.

Before venturing into a discussion of the subject, there is usually a short warm up period during which the moderator tries to establish rapport with participants by talking about general, noncontroversial subjects of mutual interest. The moderator can request every member to say something about his or her family, or the moderator can talk about an impending social or cultural event, such as a fair. If interviewing farmers, the moderator can exchange a few words about crop prospects for the current agricultural season. In any case, the initial question or comment should be very general and should not lead to detailed discussion. The purpose is simply to break the ice and thus help the group settle down to a comfortable, relaxed beginning.

This opening discussion will also enable the moderator to identify the participants who are reticent as well as those who love to talk. The moderator should take note of these differences and by asking more questions of the less talkative, encourage them to express themselves.

3.7 Probing Techniques

Probing involves encouraging participants to share their feelings, insights, and ideas with the group. Probing must be subtle; the moderator should not seem to be cross-examining the group or its members. Instead, the moderator should convey the desire to learn from the participants. Even if the moderator is a renowned expert, this expertise should not be displayed in a way that could intimidate the participants.

Box 4. An Illustration of Introductory Remarks
           for a Group Interview

My colleague and I are grateful that you were kind enough to come to help us in the project. Let me mention the purpose of our meeting here. As you probably know, this project in your area is being funded by A.I.D. to try to popularize an improved variety of maize, which should significantly increase yields. The project is also providing interested farmers with seeds, fertilizers, insecticides, and pesticides, which are necessary for the cultivation of the improved variety. However, most of the

farmers are not using it. Why? We have some ideas and explanations for this, but we are not sure about them, and so we want to hear your views.

I stress that we want to know your real views; the best help you can give us is to be candid. Why are more farmers not using the new maize variety? Is the improved variety profitable to the farmers? Do the farmers experience difficulty procuring the needed inputs? Do they need credit? What are the general impressions about the improved variety? Do the people like the taste of the new variety of maize?

I have a few requests. Because all of us must participate in the discussions, we must be brief and to the point. Please remember that this is not a question and answer session. Each of us can make comments or raise questions about what others say. This is an informal discussion among friends. So do not hold back any ideas or information. Even if you disagree with the rest, please state your views.

We will be taking notes so that we can remember your comments. (We would also like to have your permission to record the discussions on a tape recorder.)

In group sessions, the moderator should adopt a posture of "sophisticated naivete." Participants should be told that the moderator understands the subject but does not know the details as they do. Such an approach usually works because people are generally willing to help in such a context. Thus the moderator can ask specific details, saying, for example, "You know that I am not a farmer, so you will have to explain it to me in greater detail," or "I wish I knew local customs and traditions. Will you kindly tell me more about them so that I can follow your discussions?" Such probing induces participants to think more deeply on the subject and to verbalize their feelings and thoughts.

For eliciting details, questions should be asked casually. The queries of what, when, where, which, and how can be as helpful in focus group interviews as they are in other conversations. The purpose is to seek as many specifics as possible, to elicit not only impressions but also information about particular events, activities, or programs. Examples of questions designed for more specific responses are provided in Box 5.

Box 5. Sample Questions for Eliciting Specific Responses

-- "You said that you visited an extension meeting last year. What impressed you most about it?"

-- "What did the extension worker say when you asked

about the use of fertilizers?"

-- "You said that many people were there. Can you
   give us a rough estimate of how many?"

-- "You said that people were enthusiastic about the
   improved variety of maize in the last extension
   meeting. What is the basis for this conclusion?"

-- "You said that women farmers also attended the
   extension meeting. How many women were there?"

-- "Do you recall whether any woman farmers asked
   questions in the last meeting? What has been the
   experience of other group members?"

Often if the moderator asks such questions, others will
follow that example. Participants will begin to ask specific
questions, or their remarks will be more detailed, which will
make the moderator's task a little easier.

The moderator can also ask members to assume a specific
role. Role playing makes abstract questions more concrete and
easier to comprehend. Suppose the moderator asks, "What should
be the duties of a family planning worker?" The question should
generate an interesting discussion that may provide useful
insights and suggestions. In some cases, however, the moderator
might get better results by rephrasing the question: "Let us
suppose that you were appointed a family planning worker in your
village. What would you like to do?" Such rephrasing makes the
question more vivid and concrete and thus stimulates better
discussions. Of course, the situation differs from session to
session, depending on the background of the participants.
Moreover, participants can be asked to assume only those roles
with which they are familiar.

Visual aids such as slides, films, and pictures can be shown
to stimulate discussions on a specific subtopic. For example, in
the case of an agricultural project, the investigator can show a
documentary about a farmer planting a new variety of maize.
Following the film, the moderator can ask the group members to
give their views on the operations involved and the advantages
and limitations of using the new variety.

Another effective probing technique is the use of gestures.
However, it is important for the moderator to be aware that
gestures can discourage as well as encourage participants. For
example, an eager look of interest from the moderator can
encourage a hesitant participant to continue with a comment.
Conversely, a look of boredom or a sense of restiveness can imply
that the moderator is uninterested in the comment or believes
nothing useful is coming from the session. This would obviously
discourage participants from continuing their discussion.

3.8 Pacing the Discussion

    To cover several subtopics within a stipulated time is
obviously not an easy task given the vagaries of group
discussions. Some items may be more interesting than others but
less relevant to the objective of the inquiry. For example, in a
focus group interview on the adoption of contraceptives in a
family planning project, the young participants might like to
dwell on the resistance to their use of contraceptives that they
encounter from their elders, but the moderator would also like
to know more about whether contraceptives are available at
convenient locations, whether they are used by the participants,
and what suggestions the participants may have for promoting
contraceptives. It is therefore important that the moderator
budget time for each issue.

3.9 Controlling Discussions

    A common problem faced in focus group interviews is that a
few articulate individuals tend to dominate discussions. They
have opinions on every subject, and some go to unusual lengths to
make a superficial and often irrelevant point. The moderator
must be careful in dealing with them. Overt attempts to
interrupt their long-winded remarks might be misconstrued and might
create unnecessary tensions.

    What should be done when such situations arise? Obviously,
there are no hard and fast rules. The moderator will have to
exercise discretion, taking into consideration the specific
situation. However, a few simple suggestions may be helpful.

    First, the moderator could give nonverbal cues to the
participant to stop the discussion, such as looking in another
direction, showing lack of interest, or no longer taking notes.
People are sensitive to such cues, and the participant is likely
to get the message and shorten the observations.

    Second, the moderator could politely intervene, saying, "I
have somehow missed the point and would like to summarize what
the respondent has been saying to ensure that I am not misunder-
standing or misinterpreting what has been said." The moderator
can thus refocus the discussion. For instance, in a focus group
interview on the use of contraceptives for family planning,
a participant might give a long discourse on how the decline of
family values has eroded the whole social fabric. The moderator
can simply say: "If I understand you correctly, you are
suggesting that changing social values are affecting family planning
practices. However, I would also like to know what difficulties
women face in getting contraceptives in the local community?"
Such interruptions, if polite, can help redirect the discussions
without offending the participant.

    Third, the moderator can take advantage of a pause during

the speaker's comments and say something like the following: "Thank you very much. Certainly, this is an interesting idea. I think that we should discuss this subject in detail in a separate session. Perhaps we can meet after this session or at some other time. Meanwhile, with your consent, I would like to cover the remaining items on the list." This leaves the respondent with no option but to stop.

3.l0 Controlling Group Pressure

    In focus group interviews the moderator should be able to minimize group pressure that inhibits dissenting participants from expressing their views or forces them to agree to positions to which they do not subscribe.

    The underlying reasons for group pressure are complex and varied. In some cases, the idea or explanation proposed is new, and most of the participants are momentarily captivated by it. In other cases, the majority has little to add to what has been said, and they extricate themselves from this uncomfortable situation by fully endorsing the position of a participant. In still other cases, the idea or suggestion comes from those who are influential and articulate, and the other participants do not want to challenge them. This is an important factor in cultures that emphasize consensus in social relationships. Whatever the reason, group pressure can undermine the validity of the findings and conclusions; the investigator might come to regard the position favored by the few as that of the whole group.

    The moderator should seek to minimize group pressure by encouraging participants to express diverse views and perspectives. Seeing that an idea is being generally adopted without sufficient examination of alternative positions, the moderator should try to probe for alternative views using one of the following strategies.

    First, the investigator can ask for other ideas, explanations, or recommendations. For instance, if during a focus group interview for assessing farmers' views on the different modes of delivering fertilizers, the moderator finds that the majority is taken by the notion that village cooperatives should be the only mechanism for distributing fertilizers, the moderator can say something like the following: "We had an interesting discussion, but let us also explore other alternatives." This will force the group to examine other approaches.

    Second, the moderator can mention another idea or issue for discussion. For example, the moderator can say: "What about the village grocer? Do you think that he can also distribute fertilizers?" This strategy, however, may give the participants the impression that the moderator is interested in using village grocers as conduits for fertilizer distribution. Participants may reverse their positions to please the investigator despite their own beliefs and better judgment. Therefore, the moderator

must stress that the idea is mentioned only to generate discussion on the subject, not to suggest approval.

Finally, participants who appear skeptical of the group's position may be encouraged to express their views. When conducting a discussion, a moderator may have an intuitive feeling that some members are not convinced of a particular position and yet are remaining silent. Often what they need is the moderator's encouragement. In such situations, the moderator can look toward one of the reluctant participants and say: "What about you? You might have a different view." Such a remark might open the way for this participant or others to present their views on the subject.

3.11 Recording Discussions

The ultimate value of a focus group interview depends on the nature and quality of its recording. The information and insights generated by the group interview may be lost if they are not instantly recorded. Unless gifted with an exceptional memory, no moderator is able to recall all the major points or conclusions of a session.

In the affluent settings of marketing research in the United States, video recorders are being used increasingly for taping focus group interviews. However, in rural areas of developing countries, the use of video recorders is generally out of the question. They are usually not easily available. More importantly, there are logistic problems involved in using video recorders. Above all, participants who have rarely if ever seen a video recorder become self-conscious when facing it. Their manner becomes artificial, and their attention shifts from the subject under discussion to the operation of the camera.

A tape recorder poses similar problems -- unless it can be hidden. However, this poses an ethical problem. For example, if the moderator tells the participants that their discussions are being taped, the participants may become self-conscious. But if the moderator conceals the recorder from them, this violates their privacy by recording the discussions without their explicit consent. Probably the best course is to candidly alert the group about the tape recorder and then put it in an inconspicuous place. Once the participants are involved in discussions, they may forget about it.

Even when discussions are taped, moderators should take extensive notes for several reasons. First, tapes cannot record the nonverbal behavior of participants -- facial expressions, movements of hands and legs, or other observable behaviors. Second, in the event of mechanical problems, the moderator's written notes can serve as a fallback record. Finally, moderators can cross-check the transcribed records with their own notes. Notes can also identify the person speaking, which will help to categorize the views of the participants (e.g., the views of women,

landowners, or government officials) on a certain topic (see Section 4.6).

Written notes should be as extensive as possible because the significance of many statements might not become apparent until several focus group interviews have been conducted. This is especially true when focus group interviews reveal new facts or explanations. Consider a focus group interview on the effectiveness of an extension service in providing technical assistance to farmers. Suppose that in the first session, the issue of the location of extension meetings was raised by a participant, but that it did not generate much discussion. The moderator even overlooked it. However, if the same issue is later mentioned in other sessions, the investigator might reevaluate its importance. Thus a seemingly trivial issue in the early stages might turn out to be important later on. Unless extensive notes or a recording of the discussions is available, the investigator will not be able to recapture all the points made on that issue in previous sessions.

Basically, notes should cover three categories of information. First, the substantive contents of the discussions should be noted. What did the various respondents say? In what context? This is probably the easiest part to record.

Second, moderators should record the nonverbal behavior of participants -- what did their nonverbal behaviors convey? Although it is difficult to observe all participants, moderators should nevertheless try to do so to the extent possible.

Finally, moderators should record their own impressions, thoughts, or ideas generated during the group sessions. While participants are discussing a topic, the moderator may think of new ideas and insights not mentioned in the session. For example, it is possible that by watching the participants, the moderator can infer that the farmers who appear well off are those who are most satisfied with the extension service, while others are critical of the service. The moderator should note such observations, for it may be that the extension service, despite its official mandate, caters to the needs of large land owners and neglects smallholders. Careful records of the observations during focus group interviews can enable a moderator to pursue such leads in other sessions.

It is generally advisable to have a rapporteur for recording discussions. This eases the burden on moderators, enabling them to focus more fully on the group discussion.

4. CONDUCTING COMMUNITY INTERVIEWS

Community meetings remain the most widely used form of group interview in development projects and programs. Community meetings are usually organized at short notice and are open to all adult members of a village or locality. Unlike focus group

interviews, in which participants discuss a subject among themselves, in community interviews investigators ask questions, raise issues, and seek responses from those who care to attend. The main interaction is between the interviewers and the respondents.

It is surprising that project papers, evaluations, and other studies rarely mention the information gained from community interviews. The reason probably lies in the way these meetings are conducted. Most of the meetings are not carefully planned, and interview guides are not followed for generating comparable data. Interviewers{2} generally fail to involve the majority of participants in the interview process and do not follow appropriate probing techniques. They do not record discussions systematically, and rely largely on their memory and limited notes. Thus it is not difficult to see that researchers are reluctant to acknowledge community interviews as their source of information because serious questions can be raised concerning their validity and reliability.

Both the quality and credibility of the findings of community interviews can be vastly improved if investigators follow a set of practical procedures. Although most of the procedures are similar to those suggested for focus group interviews, there are slight, but obvious, differences between them for three reasons. First, community meetings tend to be large, ranging from l5 to 30 participants, depending on the size of the community, the interest of the participants, and the time and place of the meetings. Second, because the meeting is open to all members of the community, there are significant differences in the background and experiences of participants. Third, the atmosphere in community meetings tends to be more formal. Therefore some of the procedures suggested for focus group interviews need to be revised for use in community interviews. Despite these differences, this section should be read in conjunction with Section 3 on focus group interviews.

The steps suggested here are based on the premise that community interviews should be more structured than focus group interviews.

{2}The word "interviewer" rather than "moderator" is used because of the structured nature of community interviews.

4.l Structured Interview Guide

Some researchers believe that community interviews should not follow a structured interview guide, which lists major questions, because its use stifles the creativity of the interviewer. Because the questions are not posed with reference to the immediate context, they do not capture the interest of participants, who then become passive. Such a structured guide curbs the spontaneity of the interview, and both the interviewers and the respondents feel constrained by the process.

However, there are also advantages in using a structured guide that should not be overlooked.

First, use of the guide facilitates the collection of comparable, systematic data from a series of community interviews. Suppose l0 community meetings covering an agricultural input supply project were being conducted to investigate the reasons for farmers' resistance to an improved variety of maize seed that has been highly recommended by the project. If different questions were posed at each meeting, the investigator would probably not be able to obtain comparable data. For example, an investigator would not be able to say that a majority of the farmers present at eight meetings suggested that if the improved seeds and fertilizers were available on time, they would adopt the package. Thus an investigator might get a general picture, but not the specific details that would serve the decision-making needs of management.

Second, a structured guide keeps the discussions focused. A problem with community interviews has been that discussions drift. Interviewers digress from the subject because of an interesting, but irrelevant point. For instance, a community interview organized to examine the availability of potable water might digress to a discussion of the nature of local dwellings. Such a digression could be avoided if a guide listing all the important questions and issues were used.

Third, when the questions are posed without reference to a structured guide, the success of the community interview depends largely on the skill and expertise of the interviewers. The interviewer should be able to pursue leads, recognize opportunities for questionning, and phrase questions so that all can comprehend them. This is not an easy task. The difficulty is further compounded when interviewers come from other cultures and are unable to speak the local language. In such situations, a structured guide is a great asset because interviewers can rely on preformulated questions.

The ideal course is to prepare a structured interview guide but still to allow interviewers considerable flexibility. The guide should not be used to enforce a rigid course of action. Interviewers should be free to add questions and issues that occur to them during the interview. They should be able to begin with the most relevant questions in the given context. For example, if the community leader has made an important point during his introductory remarks, the interviewers can begin with the questions most closely related to those remarks. If the community leader has commented on the late arrival of seeds, the interviewers can begin with questions related to this issue, or if someone has referred to the high prices of inputs, the interviewers may encourage further discussion on the subject.

Only a limited number of questions should be included in a structured guide, and major questions should not exceed l5. Each question should be included only after careful consideration.

Some important guidelines in this regard are as follows:

-- The language should be simple; technical jargon and folksy expressions should be avoided. It is important to remember that the questions should be able to reach the least informed members of the community. For example, such questions as "How many participatory organizations do you have in the village?" should not be asked. The word "participatory" may not be understood by many of those present. Participants will respond more accurately if asked, "Do you have village cooperatives, women's clubs, political parties, or similar organizations in the village?"

-- Questions that combine two queries should be avoided because they confuse respondents. (Example: "Do you have a medical center in the village, and are the people happy with it?").

-- Questions that lead the respondent should be used sparingly. An example of this type of question is: "Wouldn't you say that the extension services funded by the project have benefited the farmers in the project area?" The respondents are likely to agree with this statement to avoid the appearance of conflict with the interviewers in a group situation.

One caveat is necessary at this stage. A question that leads the respondent can sometimes be useful for stimulating discussion. One can prod a reluctant participant to speak by making strong statements. Box 6 gives an example of the judicious use of a leading question.

-- Emotionally charged expressions should not be used in questions. Biases can be introduced by terms such as "landlord," "city-bred leaders," "bureaucrats," "communists."

-- Societies or communities have their own taboos, inhibitions, and sensibilities, which should be respected. Many questions that can be asked in individual interviews cannot be raised in community meetings. For example, if questions about family planning are raised in community meetings in a Moslem society, it is unlikely that participants will answer. Even if some people respond, they will only say what is considered polite to say in public and will evade the real issues.

Box 6. Appropriate Use of a Leading Question in a
              Community Interview

In an East African country, a series of community interviews were conducted for a mid-term evaluation of an area development project. An objective of the evaluation

was to examine farmers' perceptions about the dissemination of a new technical package. The staff in one of the meetings was having difficulty getting most of the members to speak. Suddenly, the team leader posed the question: "Wouldn't you say that you don't receive any extension advice from extension staff when you need it most?"

There was sudden silence. Both the officials and the farmers felt a little embarrassed. But this loaded question generated considerable discussion and raised many issues that would not have been raised otherwise.

Source: International Fund for Agricultural Development
(1984).

-- Questions on major controversial issues should not be included in interview guides. They can generate strong emotions that contribute to overt conflicts and tensions in a meeting. If it is absolutely necessary to raise controversial issues, they should be carefully worded.

4.2 Selecting Communities

Conducting interviews in all or even most of the communities covered by a project or program is rarely feasible. In most cases, there are not enough resources and time to follow such a course. Even if possible, it is questionable whether interviewing all or a majority of the communities would generate more valuable information than interviewing a carefully selected sample of communities.

It is extremely important in community interviews that the communities selected be representative of the total population. When communities are selected on pragmatic rather than scientific grounds, the results may be biased. For instance, the results of an investigation of the social marketing of contraceptives that is based only on villages adjoining a major city will be biased to the extent to which these villages are exposed to the modernizing influences of the city. Moreover, people in such villages are likely to have better access to medical facilities than people in remote areas, which can indirectly affect the role of contraceptive usage.

Probability sampling can be used for selecting communities when the number of the communities included by a development intervention is not large. Consider the case of a farm input supply project that covers 200 villages. An investigator can easily obtain a list of these villages and select from it a random sample of l5 to 20 villages. However, if the sample size is very small, random probability sampling can give a distorted picture. For example, if only two communities are to be selected out of 200 for a study, it would be better to base the selection on the advice of experts rather than on probability sampling.

Reliance on probability sampling can result in the selection of cases that are not representative of the total population from which they are drawn. Probability sampling is suitable only if at least 15 or more cases are to be selected out of 200 villages.

There are two nonprobability sampling techniques that can be used for selecting communities for community interviews. One is quota sampling, which involves classifying communities according to relevant criteria and including a fixed number from each category in the sample. For example, if community sales data are available for a study of the social marketing of contraceptives, the communities covered by the program can be categorized on the basis of per capita sales (e.g., high, moderate, and low), and then the desired number of communities can be selected from each category. A more complex classification scheme would then subdivide these three categories according to other variables for which information was available, such as community size, level of economic development, and demographic composition, before selecting communities for interviews.

A second nonprobability sampling technique is to select communities on the basis of expert advice. Suppose the investigator is examining the effectiveness of extension services in a project area and intends to conduct community interviews for this purpose. The chief of extension services can be asked to identify villages in which extension services have been effective and those in which they have not. However, to guard against bias (the extension chief might want to present only a positive picture of the extension services and may deliberately misguide the investigator) or a misinformed source, it is advisable to consult more than one expert for sampling purposes.

Level 4: Size and Timing of the Meeting

4.3 Size and Timing of the Meeting

An investigator has little control over the size of a community meeting. The number of participants depends not only on the size of the population of a community, but also on such factors as the time and location of the meeting, adequate prior notice, and the interest of the target population. Thus, the number of attendees cannot be known before the meeting. Past experience, however, shows that if meetings are well publicized, many people turn up, if only out of curiosity.

Obviously, community interviews should not be held during the time when people are working. Unfortunately this advice is not always followed in remote villages that are difficult to reach by outsiders. In such cases, the interviewer often schedules a meeting in late morning or in the afternoon, which is certainly not a convenient time for farmers. As a result, the participants may not be representative of target populations or they may be forced to attend against their will. In either case, the validity of the information and recommendations thus

generated will be questionable.

If the size of the group exceeds 30, the investigator should consider dividing it into two or three smaller groups. For example, separate meetings can be held for men and women, which may facilitate more open discussions.

4.4 Interview Team and Protocols

Although community interviews can be conducted by one interviewer, a team is preferable for several reasons. First, it is extremely taxing for one interviewer to preside over a large group meeting, to ask questions, to probe the respondents, and to take extensive notes. Second, the team approach vastly improves the accuracy of the notes because all the members of the team take notes, which they compare at the end of the interview. Finally, team members, especially when they have different disciplinary backgrounds, complement each other in probing respondents. This generally improves the quality and depth of the information generated.

The following common ground rules for team members will help to ensure a smooth interview.

First, team members should each be given a turn to speak. In fact, they can arrange in advance to take turns asking questions; when one member finishes, another can proceed. Of course, it is not necessary that each member of the team ask questions on every point of discussion.

Second, interviewers should not interrupt each other. If they are afraid of forgetting their questions, they should write them during the course of the interview. This will enable them both to remember and to properly phrase their questions when their turn comes.

Third, interviewers should resist the temptation to help out a colleague by trying to interpret a participant's response. This should only be done when a team member is obviously misunderstanding a respondent and thus is creating an embarrassing situation.

Finally, team members should listen carefully to the responses and take detailed notes to prevent them from repeating a question. Some interviewers rephrase questions that have already been asked. Such situations are irritating and can undermine the credibility of the interviewing team.

The ground rules should be specified in advance. In some cases, particularly when there are more than two interviewers, one can assume sole note-taking responsibility. He or she should not ask questions but should simply report and observe the interactions between the team members and the participants.

4.5 Balancing Participation

One of the most difficult tasks for interviewers is to prevent a few leaders from monopolizing meetings. Past experience indicates that the community elites -- village chiefs, elected officials, political party members, or affluent residents -- dominate discussions. They probably feel obligated to speak for the members of the silent majority, who, they believe, cannot express themselves. Moreover, they have their own interests to promote. The very purpose of community interviews is thus defeated: the result is not a "community" interview but a key informant interview.

The investigator is likely to get a distorted picture in such cases because the interests of community elites are not necessarily those of the target populations. For example, village leaders, who come from the upper socioeconomic strata, might be interested in long-term loans for purchasing tractors, while the vast majority of smallholders prefer short-term credit for purchasing seeds and fertilizers. But because the discussions are monopolized by a few leaders, the team may be led to believe that the community is in favor of long-term loans for tractors.

Restraining leaders in community interviews requires great acumen and interpersonal skills on the part of the interviewers. Alienating local leaders might undermine support for the project itself; therefore, the interviewers should restrain the leaders without offending them.

One strategy that has proved effective is to meet with the leaders before the interview and seek their views on some of the intended topics of the meeting. This strategy has two merits. First, the leaders might not want to repeat themselves in large meetings once they had already articulated their views and concerns in a private setting. Second, this strategy enables interviewers to say publicly that they have discussed the subject with several of the leaders, and that they now want to hear other members of the community. This leaves the vocal leaders little choice but to remain silent during the meeting.

Not everyone in the meeting can be expected to participate in discussions; the large size of the meetings does not permit it. However, every effort should be made to encourage maximum participation. Interviewers can seek to balance participation in two ways. First, they can specifically address questions to those who appear reticent to speak. The interviewer can look in their direction and say, "I would very much like to hear what you have to say about this issue." Second, the interviewer can take polls on selected questions, asking participants to give their responses by raising their hands. So even if they do not talk, the interviewer obtains some indication of their opinions or experiences.

Box 7 provides an example of how an interviewer was able to successfully encourage balanced participation by his humorous remarks.

4.6 Generating Quantitative Data

Community interviews can also provide quantitative data or information that can later be quantified. Although such data have obvious limitations, they can still be of value for rational decision-making.

Often, useful statistical data can be obtained directly from participants. Rural participants, for example, can provide information on the number of families in the village, whether the village has a physician, the houses with access to water within their compounds, village residents who work in nearby towns, and the number of children who go to school. They can also provide information on the types of crops grown, average farm size,

Box 7. Involving Participants in Community Interviews

A series of community interviews were conducted in an East African country for evaluating an area development project that had been extremely successful in motivating farmers to establish farmers clubs. The team leader, concerned about the domination of meetings by a few leaders and by the nonparticipation of women, included the following remarks in his introduction.

When I was coming here, my boss called me and told me that he was interested in knowing the views of all the people in a meeting; he could not make his decisions on the basis of the opinions of a few individuals. In fact, to tell you the truth, he promised me a raise if I succeeded; otherwise he might even fire me. So please promise me that all of you will participate in discussions. If you don't, you will have to give me a piece of land so that I can join you [laughter].

The team leader then turned to the women, who usually sat separately, and added:

But this is not the only problem that I have. My wife has heard a lot about you and your participation in farmers clubs. She wants to know more about what you have been doing, what your experiences have been, and what can be done to improve your participation. If my boss gets angry he can only fire me, but if my wife gets upset I might be in greater trouble.

These remarks gave the team leader an excuse to humorously probe the participants in the meetings. Whenever some people were not participating in the discussions, he would simply say, "Oh, my friends, you seem to be forgetting my problem." Group member would laugh and respond to his questions.

Source: International Fund for Agricultural Development (1984)

number of tractors in the village, distance to markets, and the average yields in local units for many crops. Relevant data about the community can be also collected in urban areas through community interviews.

Box 8 lists some of the items for which data were collected through group interviews in Costa Rica; the data were found to be quite accurate.

When some participants provide quantitative data during a community interview, the interviewer should encourage the other participants to verify the information. For example, suppose a respondent says that 30 villagers work in the neighboring town. The interviewer can point to some of the participants and ask, "Do you agree with this estimate?" Some respondents will even be able to name the people from their village who are gainfully employed in the town. The interviewer should also try to understand the basis on which respondents have made their estimates.

An interviewer can take polls during community meetings to obtain quantitative information about the behavior, experience, opinions, or assessments of the respondents. In such cases, questions should be dichotomous, answerable by a simple "yes" or "no." The interviewer asks a question and requests participants to answer by raising their hands. For example, the interviewer could say, "All farmers who needed short-term loans for purchasing seeds and fertilizers during the last agricultural season please raise your hands."

The data generated through community interviews can be aggregated and analyzed in two ways. First, individual respondents can be treated as cases, for example, "l5 out of 20 (or 75 percent) participants secured credit from the project." The second alternative treats each community, rather than each individual, as a case. Suppose at a project planning stage, l5 community interviews were conducted in different villages for ascertaining their willingness to support health centers. In addition to general discussions, interviewers also took polls on whether the respondents were willing to contribute in cash or kind for constructing health center buildings. If investigators follow the second alternative for aggregating data, they will simply report that a community agreed or did not agree to contribute without giving details about voting patterns. The unit of analysis chosen is affected largely by the objective of the inquiry and the details that A.I.D. staff expect from the researcher.

Investigators should use quantitative data generated by community interviews with extreme caution. Such data have validity only if three essential conditions are met. First,

Box 8. Group Interviews for Generating Quantitative Data

In a research project in Costa Rica, a structured question-naire was used for group interviews in 860 communities to generate community-level statistics. Below are some examples of the questions used.

(7) What is the daily wage of an agricultural worker in this area?

__ daily (not for specialized workers, who earn more).

7.1 For how many hours per day __

7.2 Does this include
_____Yes___No__
Food_____
Housing_____
Land_for_growing_food_____

(9) What are the three main crops grown here?
_____, _____ , _____

9.1 Which is the most important? _____
Second most important? _____
Third most important? _____

9.2 How much is sold commercially?

Crop	Almost all	More than half	Less than half	Little
1				
2				
3				

(14) Where do people generally go to buy the things they cannot buy here?

Community _____ District _____ County _____

l4.1 How do they get there? _____

l4.2 How long does it take? _____
(Specify the cargo.) _____

(37) Is there a high school here?   Yes _____ No _____

(38) Is there a grade school here?   Yes _____ No _____

The authors complemented their information by including the participant observations and other sources of data. (In this

Costa Rica study, group meetings comprised selected community leaders and informants.)

Source: Ashe (l978).

participants must be representative of the target populations. For example, community interviews for ascertaining community support for health centers cannot produce valid findings if meetings are held at noon, when most of the adults are working on their farms. Such meetings would not be representative. Second, the group process should not inhibit free expression of views or preferences. For example, many respondents might be reluctant to acknowledge publicly that they will not contribute to the construction of a health center in their community. Third, questions should not be very sensitive. For example, rural people are not likely to disclose their use of contraceptives in community meetings. If sensitive questions are asked, participants will not give candid answers.

4.7 Informal, Post-Meeting Conversations

Post-meeting conversations with interested individuals are an integral part of the interview process. Despite their best efforts, interviewers often find that some participants who could have made useful contributions had remained silent during the meeting. Some are shy and reluctant to speak in public, especially in the presence of outsiders. Others regard contradicting previous speakers as impolite. Still others are not able to attract the attention of the interviewers and are therefore unable to make their points. Such people frequently can be induced to confide their opinions, feelings, or experiences in informal conversations with the interviewer following the meeting.

Before terminating a meeting, the interviewers should indicate that they have ample time and would be willing to discuss any relevant issues after the meeting. Such an explicit statement encourages people to stay and talk, which often brings forth fresh ideas and information. In a community interview session in a South Asian country, the interviewer felt that something was missing; there were people who seemed eager to say something but were not participating. So at the end of the meeting, he tried to engage them in discussions and found that the reluctant participants were in fact the smallholders, who believed that the village leaders were misusing project resources to further their own interests. Further inquiries revealed that the smallholders were right. The point is that post-meeting conversations can be extremely rewarding, and time (up to an hour) should be allowed for these discussions following each community interview.

4.8 Recording Community Interviews

Most of the observations stated in Section 3.11 on recording focus group interviews are also applicable to community interviews. Although it may appear that the best course is to tape record all of the interviews, this might not be practical, especially in rural areas. Usually, a tape recorder cannot adequately record the voices of 20 to 30 persons sitting in an open space. In addition, the tape recorder may distract the participants or make them feel uncomfortable.

A practical approach is to take elaborate notes. The interviewers should write key words, which can later be developed into full sentences. For example, instead of writing that respondent A expressed reservations about fertilizer distribution by the government depot, they can simply write "A: reservation fertilizers government." Even the full words need not be used if a careful system of abbreviations is devised at the outset.

In some cases, an inconspicuously placed stenographer can be used to transcribe the discussions. The interviewers can later compare their notes with those of the stenographer. The records of the stenographer, however, only supplement and should not be substituted for the interviewers' own notes. A stenographer is generally unable to capture the overall context of the interview, which is important for interpreting the various comments.

The interviewers' brief notes should be developed immediately after the meeting to recapture most of the points made in a session. If there is a delay of even 1 or 2 days, a substantial portion of the information may be lost.

As with focus group interviews, the nonverbal behavior of respondents should be observed and reported. A perceptive observer can judge the reliability of the responses by watching the participants. Exchange of glances with the village chief might suggest that the person is looking for the chief's approval in order to make a point that they might previously have discussed between themselves.

If close-ended, dichotomous questions are included in the interview guide, a reporting format can be developed in advance that permits appropriate data to be filled in during the interview itself.

5. GROUP INTERVIEWS AND INTERVIEWER/MODERATOR BIASES

As indicated in the preceding sections, interviewers should have great freedom and flexibility in conducting group interviews. Interviewers should take full advantage of the dynamic give and take of the group experience. Even when the interviewers use a semistructured questionnaire drafted by others, they should not be constrained by it. However, this freedom involves considerable risks; interviewer biases{3} can undermine the validity and reliability of the information and recommendations generated in group interviews. The following subsections focus on interviewer biases that may affect the

validity of the findings of a study.

{3}A distinction should be made between values and biases. Values refer to the commonly held standards by which people judge a behavior or a situation. Biases arise from inaccurate and distorted personal judgments that result from flaws in cognitive processing.

5.l Hypothesis-Confirmation Bias

Probably the most persistent bias in group interviews is that which arises from selectively focusing on information and ideas that confirm the preconceived notions and hypotheses of the interviewers. Often they hear what they want to hear and ignore what they do not want to hear. Examples of such biases are as follows:

   -- Reacting to comments that confirm the interviewers' views with enthusiastic remarks, nods, smiles, and other positive nonverbal behavior, while showing indifference, if not hostility, to opposite views

   -- Being patient with and encouraging those who seem to be supporting the interviewers' positions while showing impatience with others

   -- Not probing respondents who articulate a different viewpoint or who volunteer information that contradicts the interviewers' preconceptions

   -- Periodically summarizing the points that support the interviewers' opinions while ignoring differing views

Group participants, especially in rural areas, are sensitive to the views of the interviewers. When they believe that interviewers are committed to a position, they may not want to contradict that viewpoint, so their comments may not reflect their true views.

Thus if interviewers are not conscious of their own preconceptions and opinions, they may draw erroneous conclusions. For example, an interviewer who believes that village cooperatives are the most effective conduits for distributing fertilizers may conclude that the majority of the respondents have confirmed this thesis -- which might not be the case. To avoid such a situation, interviewers should begin the discussion by presenting competing hypotheses and explanations.

5.2 Consistency Bias

Interviewers seek consistency both within and across sessions; they search for coherence in the disparate, often irreconcilable remarks of participants in order to draw meaningful inferences. However, seeking consistency at an early stage of a study often leads to oversimplification of the complex realities by overlooking evidence that is inconsistent with the findings of earlier interviews.

For example, a series of group interviews are conducted to ascertain the most effective mode for distributing contraceptives in rural areas. The initial group interviews indicate that users prefer to buy contraceptives at grocery stores because of the convenience. However, if participants in a later interview suggest that users prefer contraceptives to be sold in distant health centers to ensure greater privacy, the interviewers may ignore their view because it does not fit the earlier findings. Such instances are common in hastily conducted group interviews.

Apparent inconsistencies in findings can contribute to fresh insights and information if the interviewers continue the investigation. For example, the disparate findings concerning contraceptive distribution might be related to the marital status of the user: married users prefer to buy contraceptives in grocery stores, while unmarried users prefer distant, remote health centers, where they cannot be seen.

5.3 Elite Bias

The third major source of bias is "elite orientation," meaning that interviewers may give more prominence to the views expressed by elites than to those expressed by other participants. Several factors contribute to this bias. Usually, the elites are more articulate and can express themselves more forcefully. They speak with a sense of authority, which carries conviction with the outside interviewers. Moreover, they manage to have more time than others for presenting their views in group sessions. Often, it is assumed that they speak on behalf of the whole group. Finally, elites can establish better rapport with interviewers, who generally come from upper socioeconomic strata. The cumulative result is that the views of elites leave a greater impression on the interviewers, thus influencing their conclusions and recommendations.

5.4 Concreteness Bias

Vivid descriptions and statistical data seem to impress interviewers more than general ideas and explanations. For example, if participants in a community interview mention specific cases in which farmers approached a credit agency and were denied credit because they lacked collateral, the impact will be greater than if they mention that some farmers are denied credit because of the lack of surety. Detailed descriptions of

a few cases, however, can sometimes give the erroneous impression that they represent a general situation, rather than isolated instances. Statistical data have similar effects on interviewers, even when the data are not reliable.

5.5 Increasing Interviewer Awareness of Potential Bias

The problem of biases in group interviews is difficult to resolve. The only definite advice is that interviewers should cultivate a scientific approach and a healthy skepticism about their hunches, hypotheses, and conclusions. Moreover, they should avoid drawing rapid conclusions without thoroughly investigating a subject in several group sessions. Interviewers should also encourage all participants to express themselves in group meetings and make every effort to see that they are not being unduly influenced by the views and judgments of a few. And finally, they should be constantly aware that group interviews, like other modes of rapid data collection, are susceptible to errors of judgment on the part of interviewers.

6. SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Although a considerable body of published literature exists on focus group interviews, most of it deals with marketing and advertising of new products in industrialized countries. Probably the earliest treatment of the subject is the book by Merton, Fiske, and Kendal (1956) on problems and procedures of focused interviews. Their book discusses both individual and group interviews.

Among the more useful shorter treatments of the subject are those by Axelord (1976) on the dynamics of group interviews; Bellenger, Bernhardt, and Goldstucker (1976) on qualitative marketing research; Chandler's (1954) evaluation of the group interview; and Dawson and Caulley (1981) on the use of group interviews as an evaluation technique.

Also of interest is the special issue of Studies in Family Planning (1981), which focuses on group interviews. Especially relevant are the articles by Schearer, Folch-Lyon and Trost, and Stycos. A.I.D. has sponsored several studies in health and family planning that used focus group interviews, but none describes the method in detail. Their value in this context is therefore limited.

There are almost no articles, manuals, or books on community interviews. However, the literature on qualitative methods is abundant, particularly on in-depth interviews, participant observation, and informal surveys. These can provide valuable guidance. Any textbook on ethnography will be useful. In addition, Field Research: A Sourcebook and Manual (Burgess 1982) is a valuable resource, as are Patton's (1980) book on

qualitative evaluation methods and Spradley's (1979) book on ethnographic interviews. The papers presented at the International Conference on Rapid Rural Appraisal held in Khon Kaen, Thailand on September 2-5, 1985 are also highly recommended.

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