

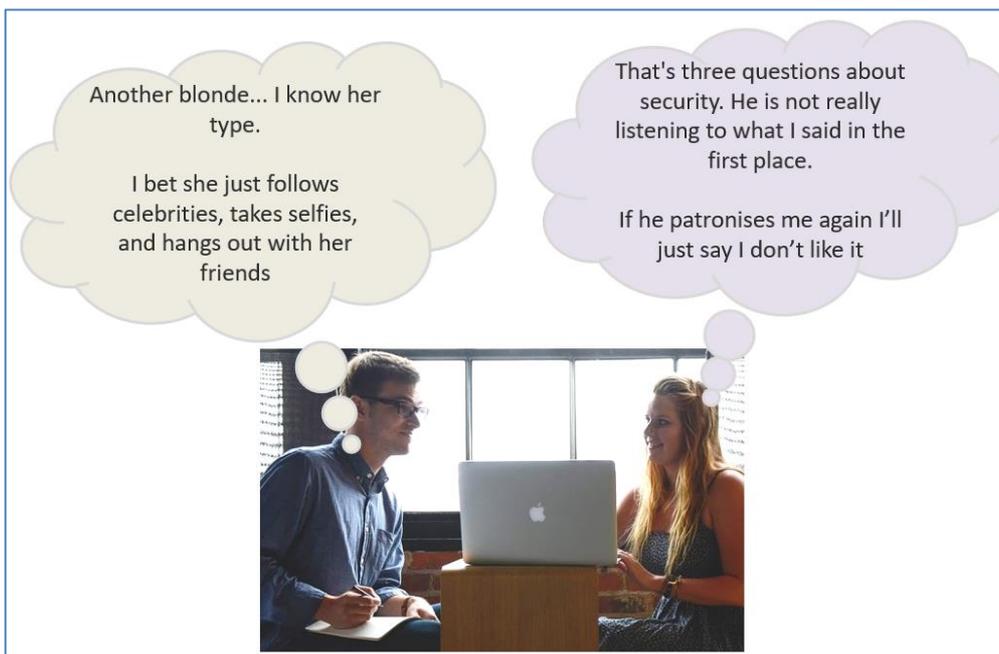


Managing Research Relationships in Focus Groups

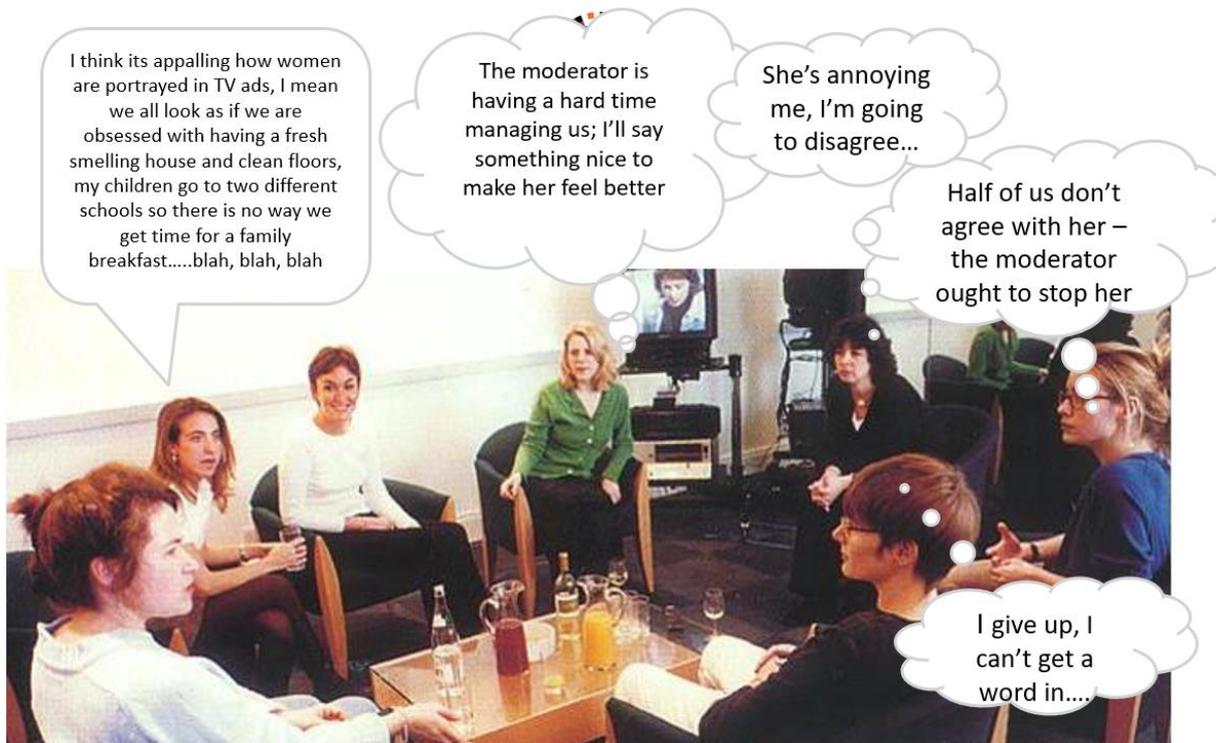
Contents

Models for group processes and dynamics	2
The Tuckman model	3
Firo B	6
Bennis and Shepherd (good for workshops)	7
Group process online	7

Research participants do not just sit there, totally focused on answering your next question. They will be thinking about who you are and what you want from them, whether you are evaluating or judging them in some way....whether they like you, want to impress you, or feel they can relate to you. Their feelings about you and the situation will affect they kind of responses they give.



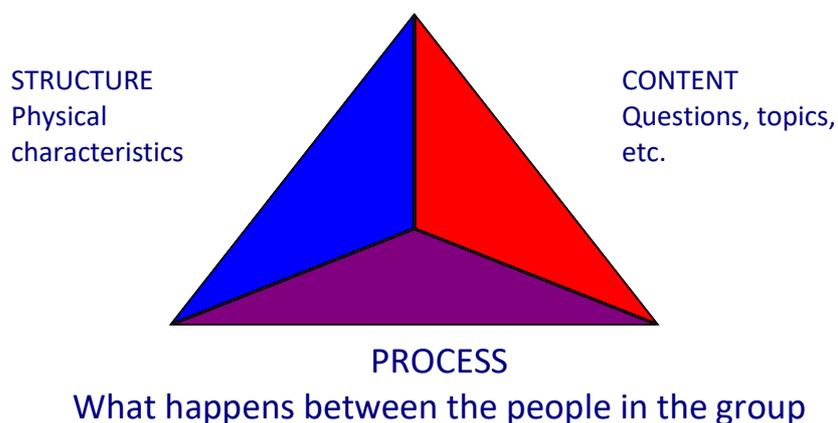
In a group, this effect is multiplied as everyone reacts to everyone else in the group and what they say and do.



The principles of building and managing relationships in depth interviews and in groups are very similar. You need to be aware of what is happening underneath the content (what is being said) and that you have to do different things at different stages.

Models for Group Processes and Dynamics

The physical structure of the room and seating can affect how people talk and what they are willing to say. Imagine the difference between a group held in a boardroom and one in a pub. Clearly the content (the questions you ask) affect how people will respond, but what many people don't see is that there is a third factor that affects what you get from groups: group process.



Process includes:

- Who talks to whom and how much? Degree of disclosure
- Eye contact?
- Types of interactions, involvement and intimacy felt by the group
- Likes and dislikes within the group, defence mechanisms and conflict
- Ways of decision-making within the group
- Patterns of response to questions and situations

The group has an 'unconscious' will, which can get in the way of the content. This is because groups trigger unconscious feelings and associations about previous experiences or authority, need for emotional space, rivalry, etc.

The moderator's job is to manage both the task and the process. A moderator who is fixated on the task can end up with a compliant or rebellious group without having any idea why, while a moderator who is too people/process oriented will have enjoyable and interesting groups, but be unclear as to whether all the research objectives have been covered properly.

An understanding of how groups develop and change helps moderators manage process by making the right interventions at the right time.

The Tuckman Model of the group life cycle: summary

(Adapted by Joanna Chrzanowska)

Stage	Underlying Processes	What you notice/ what happens	Moderator's task
Forming	People feel separate, dependent, anxious, relatively powerless Who am I here? How will I fit in? What are the risks?	Awkwardness Caution Light social chit chat	Empower & make safe by explaining the task, modelling behaviour and encouraging interaction. Behave as you would want them to
Storming	Share of voice, demanding attention Challenges to moderator and others 'Pecking order' Opting out or rebelling	Challenge moderator or each other; play up Question the task Emphasise individuality Dominant & passive emerge Testing behaviours	Signal strongly that you value all opinions equally Accept negative views but look for the positive too Stop potentially dominant respondents becoming overbearing Look for fight or flight responses
Norming	Sense of harmony, cohesion & support Norms emerge Group takes off	People take turns in speaking without you having to ask The energy feels more positive and harmonious	Notice and reinforce norms Deal with any implicit rule breaking Time to make plans and set agendas

Performing	Individuals are subservient to the group Roles are flexible and task oriented	Concentration and flow Everything seems easy High energy Group works without being asked	THE time to introduce difficult issues, stimulus material or projectives
Re-adjustment: Performing uses energy, so after a while the group slips back into one of the other stages before it can perform again			
Mourning or Adjourning	Completion of the task and disbanding of the group May be a sense of loss and anxiety Need for closure	If you haven't completed it, people may not want to go If someone leaves early, the process feels incomplete	Signal that the end is coming Summarise to give a sense of achievement Ask if there is anything else they want to say and thank them

Please note you do not have to believe in any specific model, just as long as you acknowledge there are stages in group process. Hence some alternatives are offered here. You will note they have strong similarities.

Tuckman: Stages of Group Formation and Development – more detail

Forming

Since the group don't know each other, or the task, they are dependent on the moderator as a leader figure. Leaders are supposed to know where they are going, take care of their followers, and exert appropriate discipline and authority. Leaders who don't fulfil these criteria – or don't hand the power over to the group – can set the scene for discomfort and rebellion later on.

Group members may be feeling any or all of: dependent (in an almost childlike way), ignorant, powerless, and in need of affection and approval (from the leader – and the rest of the group). You may notice a palpable sense of separateness in the group.

The way you handle the introduction and warm up needs to address and resolve all of these issues, otherwise the group will stay dependent and say only what you want to hear, or become resentful and full of difficult respondents.

Storming

This may not always be very evident in research groups, nor does it always happen after forming – the group can run into storming at any time. Signs of storming include challenges to the moderator or other respondents, strong statement of individuality and physical disruption (like standing up to get drinks or having a cigarette).

It can't happen until respondents have been empowered – or they decide to take power for themselves. Storming is about share of voice, about influence on the group, and it may involve challenge to the power of the moderator, or challenges between respondents. It is at this stage the dominant respondents emerge, while others may go into a passive sulk – which is why it is important to deal with potentially difficult respondents early on. You may have to signal or repeat that you need to hear equally from everybody to spread the power evenly through the rest of the group.

The energy at this point may feel quite negative.

Norming

In a sense this happens right from the start of the group, when the moderator models the group norms. It develops rapidly once storming is over and the power issues are sorted. This is the time when the group seems to take off, and there is some harmony and co-operation. It is a good time for additional explanations about the task and making plans about handling it.

Every group needs 'rules' to keep it safe and functioning well. However respondents also negotiate these between themselves, often without being aware of it. Some of the more obvious ones are the level of politeness or banter, the degree of disclosure, the turns which people take in speaking. There may also be norms around decision making in the group, which will emerge as patterns. There will be a lot more unconscious norms, which only come to light if one is broken. If somebody becomes abusive it will become clear that this is unacceptable to the group, and the group will look to the moderator to openly state that rule.

Challenging or explicitly stating norms may feel uncomfortable to do, but it helps keep the group functioning well.

Performing

There is a sense of concentration, task orientation and flow. This is the time when it feels easy, everyone communicates well, energy is high, and the moderator feels it has all been worthwhile. Individual disputes are forgotten as the whole group focuses on the task at hand. This is the time to introduce projectives, stimulus material and any difficult questions you need the group to work on.

One of the ways to move into performing is in fact to introduce a task which will absorb the group as a whole and enable them to forget all their earlier concerns. This stage uses group energy, so after a time it runs out, and the group slips back into one of the other stages or needs to have a quiet period to re-energise.

Mourning

Having gone through all of these stages the group will have bonded to the stage where it now feels more comfortable to be in it than to be separate from it. The mourning stage is to enable group members to let go. It should be signalled when approaching the last topic or in the last 10 or 15 minutes, that the group will finish soon. Summarising at the end gives respondents a sense of what they have achieved – and the moderator a chance to check their understanding of the situation. It is good to ask respondents if there is anything they want to say that they have not been able to say so far – it really 'closes the circle'.

Mourning has a relaxed but satisfied energy about it.

This extract from Interviewing Groups and Individuals in Qualitative Market Research, by Joanna Chrzanowska, Sage Publications 2002.

Other Models of Group Development

Will Shutz's FIRO Model (Fundamental Interpersonal Relationship Orientation)

Described as a theory about the interpersonal underworld of a small group, and also developed into a personality test.

Stage	Issues/ Signals	Moderator's task
Inclusion (Forming Norming)	Do I belong? Do you? Do I want to? Do I deserve to? Do you? May try to impress, shock, set out personal boundaries Anxiety about when to join in	Make everyone feel equally welcome and valued Understand that people use different strategies when looking for security and power in groups Make it easy to join in Show Approval and Appreciation
Control (And conflict) Storming/Norming)	Individual strengths and weaknesses are forced into the open. People are more vulnerable Squabbles over trivial matters Frustration masks anger Need for leadership to resolve these issues, otherwise there is only surrender which does not lead to authentic openness	Stay aware that underneath the 'difficult behaviour' people are anxious and wanting to belong, while being afraid they may end up powerless in the group. Resolve conflicts rather than avoid them – at the very least acknowledge them Make sure everyone has a voice
Openness (Performing)	Build trusting relationships Facades drop away A more intimate atmosphere Disagreements can be respected or come from affection (teasing)	Use this time for the key issues of the research Show 'Affection' Be aware that the group may cycle back into Control after a while

Schutz, W.C. (1958). FIRO: A Three-Dimensional Theory of Interpersonal Behavior. New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston

Warren G Bennis and Herbert A Shepherd (A useful model for workshops)

Dependency

Members are looking for leadership, structure and goals

Dominant personalities go unchallenged

Group members feel insecure and there may be some frustration if the issues are not resolved.

Counter-dependency

More overt expressions of concern regarding leadership, membership and authority. May be some conflict. Group moderator/ facilitator / trainer may be attacked – giving the group its first common purpose.

Working Resolution

Increased tolerance, trust and sharing by having worked through the conflict

Members clearer about purpose, role and methods, and demonstrate greater sensitivity and awareness.

Cohesion

High morale, a working culture that can tolerate conflict and address uncomfortable issues, and a willingness to experiment.

Termination

Regression to some characteristics of an earlier stage, plus some elements of grief such as low energy and a sense of loss.

Warren G Bennis and Herbert A Shepherd, 'A Theory of Group Development', Journal of Human Relations, vol 9, No4. 1956.

Group Process Online

Meetings online demand more focus because they have fewer non-verbal cues for social interaction.

It is harder to pick up subtle emotional signals and respond empathically.

The 'constant gaze' of faces online can be stressful and increase pressure to perform.

See also the reasons for [Zoom fatigue](#)

Online meetings, training, and research are all influenced by group processes and dynamics. These are often less obvious online because there is less chance for 'emotional contagion' – picking up on mood and atmosphere through sensing non-verbal cues from others. (Despite the name, emotional contagion is useful for group leaders because it increases empathy, smooths social interaction – and sets alarm bells ringing if something is going wrong in a group.)

Being stared at by a screenful of people can be stressful. Although the brain knows they are not staring in a threatening way it can still feel intrusive. And there can be more social pressure to perform when being looked at by others. While the online environment differs, people bring reactions and behaviour shaped by years of face-to-face encounters.

Online groups have the same inner life as face-to-face ones, including:

Set the group norms you want consciously at the start.

Allow people to express dissenting opinions to avoid groupthink.

Use decision-making tools to account for all opinions.

Most of the 'difficult roles' reveal underlying needs for appreciation, validation or security.

Group norms – both formal and informal. What is acceptable behaviour in the group, the type of language that is used, and the patterns of interaction between individuals.

There are conformity pressures which are both good and bad. They keep groups working together with common goals and minimise distractions, but too much conformity can lead to **groupthink**.

Roles that people play in that group. These can be formal work roles or positions, or less formal roles, that people adopt according to cognitive style and personality.

Status is 'social worth'. A complex mixture of some or all of: approval, respect, power, admiration, and prestige.

Status is important because it gives people **influence**, even if they don't have actual power. They have credibility and trust. They can affect people's opinions, shape the framework of a discussion, recommend products and ideas – and be heard.

Hierarchies and Power

Power often goes with status, but technically it is about having control of critical resources. A stereotypical example is the accountant who may not enjoy high status but can turn the money tap on or off. High power-low status people may struggle to build effective teams because they direct rather than influence people to do what is needed.