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# Using Focus Groups to Facilitate Culturally Anchored Research[1]

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*Scholars have acknowledged the need to anchor scientific knowledge about social and psychological processes in the norms, values, and experiences of the particular population under study. This article describes how focus groups can be incorporated into the planning stages of a research program to facilitate these goals. After a brief overview of the central components of focus group research, an example from a program of research involving dual-earner African American families is used to as an illustration. The article describes how (a) the identification of cultural knowledge and (b) access to the language participants use to think and talk about a topic can help researchers formulate a conceptual framework, identify important constructs, and develop appropriate instruments for assessing constructs. Some strengths and limitations of focus group research are discussed.*

**KEY WORDS:** focus groups; African-American families; methodology.

Community psychologists and other social scientists have underscored the limitations of traditional scientific paradigms for research with diverse cultural groups. For instance, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) discussion of the "social address" model and Howard and Scott's (1981) discussion of "deficiency formulations" each criticize the comparative frameworks, which dominate the literature on ethnic minorities in the United States. They argue that comparative frameworks simply describe between-group differ-

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ences on particular outcome variables of interest, providing little insight into the range of social and psychological processes that occur within a cultural group. Other scholars have questioned the validity of studies utilizing constructs and measures developed in one cultural group to understand phenomenon in another (Boykin, 1979). Cultural norms, values, and experiences influence the relevance of a set of constructs to respondents, the range of behaviors and ideas that are valid indicators of the constructs, and how respondents interpret items employed to assess them (Hui & Triandis, 1989; Marsella & Kameoka, 1989). Inattention to these sorts of issues can undermine the accuracy of scientific knowledge about both intragroup processes and between-group similarities and differences.

These criticisms underscore the need for improved strategies for research on social and psychological processes within diverse populations. For social research to be good science, sound scientific methods must be merged with knowledge of, and respect for, a group's spirit. However, such a union requires conceptual and methodological tools. These tools should facilitate researchers' knowledge about the experiences and perspectives of the group under study, as well as the development of research instruments that are useful and relevant.

Focus group research is one qualitative method that can be used as such a tool. Focus groups are in-depth group interviews employing relatively homogenous groups to provide information around topics specified by researchers. They have several strengths that make them particularly useful for facilitating research that reflects the social realities of a cultural group. Focus groups provide researchers with direct access to the language and concepts participants use to structure their experiences and to think and talk about a designated topic. Within-group homogeneity prompts focus group participants to elaborate stories and themes that help researchers understand how participants structure and organize their social world. In their reliance on social interaction, focus groups can also help researchers identify cultural knowledge that is shared among group members as well as to appreciate the range of different experiences individuals within a group may have. Each of these brings researchers closer to a phenomenological understanding of a cultural group. Such an understanding can help investigators ask better research questions and develop the measures needed to study them.

In this regard, focus groups have advantages over quantitative and other qualitative methods that community psychologists commonly use. Unlike quantitative methods, they emphasize participants' perspectives and allow the researcher to explore the nuances and complexities of participants' attitudes and experiences. As well, they have unique strengths over other qualitative methods (Morgan, 1988; Morgan & Spanish, 1984). Unlike in-depth individual interviews, they permit researchers to observe social inter-

action between participants around specific topics (Morgan, 1988; Morgan & Krueger, 1993; Morgan & Spanish, 1984). Unlike naturalistic observational methods, they provide a mechanism by which the researcher can structure the content of such interaction. As Morgan (1988) noted, focus groups are neither as strong as participant observation in their ability to observe phenomena in naturalistic settings, nor as strong as in-depth individual interviews in providing a rich understanding of participants' knowledge, but they are better at *combining* these two goals than either of the two techniques alone. Therein, focus groups provide a body of material that differs in form and content from that provided by other research methods.

This article describes how focus groups can facilitate culturally sensitive research. In the sections that follow, a brief overview of the essential components of focus group research is provided. Then, using an example from a research program involving African American parents in dual-earner families, an illustration of how focus groups can facilitate culturally anchored research is provided.

## ESSENTIALS OF FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH

A focus group study is designed to accomplish a particular research objective. Thus, careful attention to the central components of the method — including sample selection, instrumentation, and data analysis — helps ensure that the study's research objectives are met. This section briefly describes the central components of a focus group study.

### *The Sample*

Focus groups are commonly conducted among a small nonrepresentative sample of participants who share one or more characteristics that are of interest to the researcher. The characteristics participants share may be demographic (e.g., age, ethnicity, gender), situational (e.g., employment status, health status), behavioral (e.g., substance abusers), ideological (e.g., political party membership), or any combination of these. The sample selection is purposive and based more on suitability and availability, rather than on representativeness (O'Brien, 1993). Thus, focus group samples are often small and nonrepresentative, allowing for in-depth description of phenomena but not for generalization to a larger population.

Each group is typically composed of 6 to 12 participants (Morgan, 1988; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). Within this range, appropriate group size depends upon the aims of the study. Small groups facilitate in-depth

exploration of issues, since participants each have more time to share their experiences and perspectives. Larger groups are appropriate when the aim of the research is to collect a breadth of experiences and perspectives, since each participant's experiences and perspectives are unique (Morgan, 1988).

In designing a focus group study, the composition of the group requires special attention. Many researchers suggest that groups be composed of strangers, since groups composed of acquaintances are more likely to focus on a narrow set of concerns (Basch, 1987; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). More important, intragroup homogeneity is believed to facilitate rapport among respondents (Knodel, 1993; Morgan, 1988; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). Participants with similar characteristics may more easily identify with each others experiences (Knodel, 1993; Morgan, 1988). Homogeneity also reduces the likelihood of mixing participants who have sharp differences in opinions or behaviors (Knodel, 1993). Finally, heterogeneity can result in social status differences within a group. Lower status participants may defer to the perspectives of higher status participants (Knodel, 1993; Morgan, 1988; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990), yielding biased focus group data. Thus, although focus groups may be used to compare and contrast different groups, researchers suggest that comparisons be made across homogenous groups rather than within heterogenous groups.

The number of groups needed to accomplish the aims of the study depends on the problem that is to be addressed and available time and resources. At a minimum, two groups are needed for each subset of the population the researcher intends to study, to ensure that the focus group data do not simply reflect the idiosyncracies of a particular group (Basch, 1987; Morgan, 1988). Some investigators recommend that researchers conduct focus groups until groups are producing redundant information (Krueger, 1988). This typically requires three to four groups per subset of the population under study.

### *The Interview Schedule*

The typical instrument for a focus group study is a discussion guide. The guide establishes a set of issues for the group to discuss and is used to channel the discussion towards accomplishing the research objectives. The guide may be more or less structured, depending on the purposes of the study. Exploratory studies call for relatively unstructured discussion guides that specify the broad topics participants are to discuss but not the order in which topics are introduced. Unstructured discussion guides facilitate insight into participants' thinking by allowing them to discuss any dimension of a topic they wish. In contrast, structured discussion guides

usually specify the order in which topics are introduced and include probes for specific types of information. They are most appropriate in studies designed to obtain information on a particular aspect of a topic. For example, in studies designed to compare differently defined groups, structured guides ensure that specific points are discussed or that similar points are discussed across groups (Krueger, 1988; Morgan, 1988; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990).

In either case, the discussion guide should facilitate a synergistic discussion and interaction around a particular set of issues. Simply reading lists of questions to participants produces a tedious focus group session and encourages participants to talk to the moderator more so than to each other (Morgan, 1988; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). Morgan (1988) suggested, that researchers create discussion guides by first preparing a full list of questions and then organizing the list into an ordered set of topics (see also Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990, for an in-depth discussion of framing focus group questions). Generating a list of topics rather than a set of questions allows the moderator to use participants' experiences to probe or introduce new topics, facilitating a more fluid and natural discussion.

### *The Moderator*

The moderator is the primary link between the goals of the research and the quality of the focus group data. The moderator channels the discussion to meet the objectives of the research, a role that involves several divergent skills (Krueger, 1988; Morgan, 1988). For instance, the moderator must create an atmosphere conducive to self-disclosure by building rapport within the group, conveying interpersonal sensitivity and diplomacy, and speaking in language that is comfortable to participants. The moderator must also manage group dynamics by encouraging quieter participants to share their perspectives and experiences, ensuring that outspoken participants do not bias the discussion, and encouraging respondents to elaborate perspectives that differ from the predominant one. At the same time, the moderator must remain neutral and nondirective: Leading probes and follow-up questions, as well as verbal and nonverbal cues, may signal participants to focus on certain aspects of a topic and not others. They also encourage participants to share experiences and attitudes believed to support the moderator's perspective.

The moderator's most important role is to track the focus group discussion in order to ensure that it flows smoothly and produces the desired information (Basch, 1987; Morgan, 1988). Such tracking involves storing perspectives and later using them to reintroduce a topic, introduce a new topic, or pursue an issue in greater depth. It also involves gauging when

participants have adequately elaborated a theme and when more information is needed. Finally, tracking involves evaluating the extent to which there is consensus or disagreement among participants regarding a particular topic.

### *The Setting and Equipment*

The physical setting for the focus group interview and the quality of audio taping equipment are critical to the success of each session and deserve special mention because they are so readily overlooked. Locations that are convenient and easy to find ensure adequate participation, saving the researcher time and money (Krueger, 1988; Basch, 1987). Since audiotapes are the primary form of data that focus group sessions produce the researcher should also take special care to ensure sound quality. Poorly recorded tapes result in large chunks of inaudible material. Inaudible material is difficult to transcribe, and valuable information may be lost in the process. Quality equipment is a worthwhile investment, since insensitive equipment is prone to miss softly spoken comments and to pick up background noise (Krueger, 1988).

### *The Focus Group Data*

Focus group data consists of moderator notes and audiotapes from each focus group session. However, because the data consist of group dialogue, it is distinct from that derived from surveys or individual interviews. Accordingly, it is also more tedious to manage than that derived from individual interviews.

An important characteristic of focus group data is that groups, rather than individuals within groups, are the unit of analysis (Krueger, 1988; Morgan, 1988; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). That is, although identifying redundant experiences and perspectives within and across groups can provide some useful information, data from individuals within a single focus group session are not independent. Thus, it is important to remember that data from individuals within a focus group session cannot be treated in the same manner as data from individual interviews with the same number of respondents. Group participants cue each other to frame events in particular ways, and to focus on some aspects of a topic and not others. Thus, it is critical to look for convergence in emergent themes across a sample of focus groups, rather than across participants within a group, to draw accurate conclusions.

An additional characteristic of focus group data is that, unlike survey data, focus group data consist of words and, unlike in-depth individual in-

terviews, focus group data consist of group dialogue. Thus, although focus group data can provide rich insight into the phenomenon under study, coding it is a time-consuming and sometimes ambiguous task. For instance, a single exchange may be quite long, containing numerous themes. Categorizing themes is a highly subjective endeavor, since the distinctions between them is often blurred. Further, different participants use different words to describe the same phenomenon; it can be difficult to judge the extent to which two participants are actually relaying similar perspectives and world views. Finally, in a group context, participants usually intend more than they actually say. Thus, the interpretation of participants dialogue requires researchers to tie the explicit content of a statement to its connotative meaning.

Researchers use many strategies to analyze focus group data. These range from simply listening to tapes, to using cut and paste techniques, to constructing hand-written charts and tables, to computerized text analysis. Computerized text analysis programs have made focus group research feasible for investigators with limited time and resources (Knodel, 1993; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). Among those commonly used are The Ethnograph (Seidel, Kjolseth, & Seymour, 1988), TEXTPACK V (Mohler & Zull, 1984), and the Key-Word-in Context Bibliographic Indexing Program (Popko, 1980). Decisions about the unit of analysis within transcripts (e.g., words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, themes), the coding schemes employed, and the extent of analysis each depend upon the research objectives. In later sections we describe our approach to analysis of focus group data. Readers are referred to Krippendorf (1980), Miles and Huberman (1984), and Weber (1985) for a full treatment of content analysis. Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) and Morgan (1993) discuss the analysis of focus group data specifically.

This brief overview of the essentials of focus group research was intended to introduce unfamiliar readers to the technique. Several comprehensive accounts are available to those who may be interested in planning and conducting a focus group study (Krueger, 1988; Morgan, 1988, 1993; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990).

## A RESEARCH EXAMPLE

In this section, an example from a program of research examining work and parenting issues in African American families is used to illustrate how focus groups can facilitate culturally sensitive research. To begin, a brief overview of the larger research project is provided.

*Overview of the Research*

The program of research from which the example is taken investigates characteristics of parents' jobs as they influence child socialization in African American dual-earner families. In particular, the research examines the ways in which parents' efforts to orient their children towards race relations (termed *racial socialization*) may be influenced by a range of race-related stressors that they are likely to experience in their occupational roles (termed *racial job stressors*). The primary study consists of structured interviews with a community-based sample of African American parents and their children.

The conceptual framework that guides the study is founded upon Kohn's research on relationships between occupational values and child-rearing practices (Kohn, 1969; Kohn & Schooler, 1973, 1978). Briefly, Kohn suggested that parents come to value skills and behaviors that enable them to function effectively in their occupational roles. In turn, they transmit these values to children in the process of socialization. It should be noted that Kohn's work focused primarily on how job autonomy and task complexity influence parents' disciplinary practices. However, in the present research program, it is hypothesized that the processes Kohn proposed may link parents' exposure to racial job stressors and their racial socialization practices. That is, African American parents continue to learn about modes of interracial contact, and about the structure and content of racial bias and discrimination, through their occupational experiences. In turn, African American parents may come to value particular ways of negotiating racial issues in the social world and transmit these values to their children in the process of socialization.

An important impetus behind this program of research is that the experiences, concerns, and perspectives of ethnic minority families have received little attention in the work–family literature, despite psychologists' increased interest in relationships between work and family (e.g., Crosby, 1987; Piotrkowski, 1979; Voydanoff, 1980). Thus, little is known about how the stressors associated with minority status in the workplace may influence family processes generally or about how such stressors shape parents' racial socialization practices in particular. In a similar manner, there is little empirical information about how African American parents' racial socialization practices are structured or about the factors that influence them. Thus, the quantitative study was designed to address these sorts of gaps in the social science literature.

When there is little prior research in an area, as is the case here, focus groups can be used to help the researcher to formulate a research model and to develop instruments that are appropriate to the population

and phenomenon under study. Focus group dialogues allow researchers to capture the in-depth contextual detail that facilitates an understanding of a group's experiences and perspectives. Without such an understanding, the theoretical model guiding the research may be misspecified. For instance, researchers may overlook essential components of a groups experiences, resulting in interpretations that distort the social realities of the group. In addition, because focus groups give researchers direct access to participants' language and experiences, they can facilitate the development of survey instruments that reflect these and are therefore appropriate to the population and phenomenon under study (Wolff, Knodel, & Sittitrai, 1993).

The objectives of the focus groups conducted as part of the program of research parallel the particular strengths of focus group research described above. The primary goal of the focus groups was to understand, from participants' perspectives, how being African American shaped their experiences as workers and parents. A second objective was to develop instruments to assess two constructs that are central to the study: racial job stressors and racial socialization. After a brief description of how the focus groups were structured, the following section describes the ways in which focus groups facilitated these objectives.

## *Conducting the Focus Groups*

Six focus groups were conducted among a total of 43 African American parents. Participants were recruited by telephone from communities in the New York Metropolitan area using a combination of snowball sampling and a data base provided by an ethnic marketing agency. Small groups, with six to eight participants per group, were organized in order to facilitate close rapport among participants and in-depth exploration of phenomenon.

In all groups, participants were full-time employed African American parents living in dual-earner families. However, since we were interested in exploring different kinds of occupational experiences, groups were homogeneous in terms of occupational category. As noted earlier, researchers warn against sharp intragroup differences in social status, as well as in the perspectives and experiences of group participants. Thus, in three of the groups, participants worked in blue-collar occupations as maintenance workers, hospital orderlies, food service workers, postal carriers, and so forth. These participants lived in homogenous middle-class African American communities. In the other three groups, participants held white-collar jobs as lawyers, marketing executives, engineers, bank managers, and so forth. Most of these participants lived in predominantly white upper middle-class communities. Although the intragroup homogeneity in occupa-

tional category was deliberate, the confounding of occupational category and neighborhood variables (e.g., ethnic homogeneity, social class) was unanticipated. The confound underscored the need to stratify the sample for the quantitative study by both occupational category and neighborhood ethnicity; this prompted us to develop strategies for doing so.

The moderator began each of the focus group sessions by describing the purposes of the session, providing ground rules for the discussion, and asking participants to introduce themselves. In particular, participants were told that the purpose of the group was to learn about their experiences as workers and as parents in order to identify issues that would be important to include in a larger study among African American parents.

After the opening statements, the moderator introduced the various topics for discussion, following a relatively structured discussion guide. The guide specified the order in which topics were introduced and specific topics that were to be covered in each group. The structured discussion guide facilitated a comparison of the themes and issues that emerged within the blue-collar and white-collar focus groups. As is common in focus group research, the discussion guide moved from the general to the specific in order to prevent premature narrowing of participants' dialogue. The guide specified an initial focus on work rewards and stresses and then narrowed in on topics related to race relations in the work environment. The structure of the discussion of parenting was similar; the guide specified an initial focus on the rewards and stresses of parenting and then narrowed in on special issues involved in parenting African American children. These sorts of general introductions put the topics of work and parenting on the table without cuing participants to our particular interest in race relations.

Each group discussion lasted about $1^3/_4$ hours. At the end of each discussion, the moderator distributed a set of items that had been generated to assess "racial job stressors" and "racial socialization." Participants were asked to complete the items and to comment on the clarity of item wording, as well as on the relevance of items to their experiences. Participants were also asked to discuss various strategies for recruiting subjects for the quantitative study. At the close of each session, the moderator thanked participants and they were given $35 as a token of appreciation for their time.

### *Understanding Race-Related Perspectives and Experiences*

As mentioned previously, one goal in conducting the focus groups was to understand, from participants' perspectives, how being African

American shaped their experiences as workers and parents. Although the discussion guide emanated from a particular conceptual framework, we were interested in the structure and content of racial bias, discrimination, and racial socialization, as these emerged in participants' own descriptions. Of particular interest was dialogue between participants in each of the focus group sessions, rather than between the moderator and each participant, about the meaning of race for participants' roles as workers and parents. Such dialogue allows researchers to view phenomenon through the lenses of group members, which can, in turn, facilitate their ability to frame relevant research questions and to identify particular concepts that are relevant to study.

The organization of the focus group data for this study was guided by an emerging literature on shared cultural knowledge. According to contemporary scholars, knowledge consists of concepts that individuals acquire by way of testing hypotheses about features of the social environment (Hecht, Collier, & Ribeau, 1993; Kreckel, 1981; Shweder & LeVine, 1984). Kreckel (1981) further distinguished between *common* knowledge and *shared* knowledge. In her view, common knowledge consists of similarities in concepts that individuals from similar cultural backgrounds acquire *separately,* due to similarities in socialization processes and to the increased likelihood that the process of hypothesis testing yields similar information. Shared knowledge emerges through social interaction as individuals test their constructions of the world through each other, identifying general principles that govern their common experiences. Shared knowledge cannot be held by individuals who have had no contact, even if their experiences are similar. As described in this section, we attempted to distinguish common knowledge that participants each brought to the group from shared knowledge that was negotiated and displayed during the course of group interaction. Redundant themes that emerged in participants' narratives within and across groups were classified as common knowledge. In contrast, consensual models that were developed within each group via participants' recognition of commonalities in their experiences and perspectives were classified as shared knowledge.

To facilitate the identification of common and shared knowledge, participants' narratives were categorized into one of three narrative forms—descriptive statements, stories, and abstract generalizations—using the framework Polanyi (1985) proposed for analyzing cultural stories. These three narrative forms each provide unique information that contribute to researchers' understanding of a phenomenon of interest. Though they are described separately, it is important to note that they were embedded in one another throughout the focus group transcripts.

### *Descriptive Statements.*

Descriptive statements are narratives in which participants characterize enduring actions or states of affairs that persist over time (Polanyi, 1985). The bulk of the focus group transcripts consisted of such descriptive statements. In response to queries made by the moderator and others in the group, participants described in detail the nature of their occupational roles; their relationships with supervisors, co-workers, and clients; their perspectives on race relations in their work environments; their child-rearing practices, experiences, and concerns; and their children's knowledge about and experiences with race-relations. These descriptive statements were most common during the first 40 minutes or so of each focus group session, as participants described to others their individuals experiences and points of view.

In coding descriptive statements, the goal was to identify patterns and redundancies in participants' reports about their environments, so as to elucidate participants' common knowledge. To facilitate this goal, the initial coding system grouped descriptive statements according to similarities in their surface content, using codes that were close to the words participants used. For instance, references to the need to go around people and events were grouped in a category labeled "going around." References to rules for advancement in the work place that change for African Americans were grouped in a category labeled "changed rules." The process of summarizing descriptive statements generated over 30 such codes. To illustrate the structure of the coding process and what it can yield, Table I contains examples of this first-level coding. Included in the table are categories that were mentioned more than once across two or more groups.

The first-level coding facilitated an understanding of participants' common knowledge regarding race relations by ordering text and providing a bird's-eye view of the content of descriptive statements. It permitted us to count the number of times a phrase or theme emerged within and across groups. For instance, Table I shows that having lower level positions and being paid less for equal work were mentioned by multiple participants in each of the blue-collar focus groups but were mentioned less often in the white-collar focus groups. The reverse is true for other phenomenon, such as different performance standards for blacks and blocked opportunities. Encountering stereotypes about blacks and efforts to teach children about racial bias were mentioned by multiple participants across both blue-collar and white-collar groups. Thus, this first level of coding permitted us to identify recurrent themes in participants' descriptive statements within and across groups.

An overarching goal in coding descriptive statements was not simply to count the number of times a specific theme emerged but rather to build an image of how African Americans perceive their race as influencing their

**Table I.** First-Level Coding and Pattern Coding of Participants' Descriptive Statements[a]

| | Blue-collar groups | | | | White-collar groups | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | Example | 4 | 5 | 6 | Example |
| **Racial phenomenon at work** | | | | | | | | |
| Blacks have less desirable assignments | 1 | 2 | 2 | They [managers] don't have whites doing those types of things [cleaning bed pans]. Those are the dirty jobs. Those are our jobs. | 0 | 0 | 0 | |
| Blacks have lower level positions | 4 | 2 | 3 | Most of us black people have like maintenance jobs but like the higher class white people, they have higher positions and they don't, like, put any minorities in those types of jobs they have. | 0 | 0 | 0 | |
| Blacks get paid less for equal work | 4 | 3 | 4 | When you start a job, sometimes you might think the position you came for, you getting paid this much money. And then you might hear that this guy got hired in the same position you got hired in and his check might not be the same as yours but more, as a white person. | | | | |
| Overt discrimination* | 9 | 7 | 9 | | 0 | 0 | 0 | |
| Different standards for blacks | 0 | 0 | 0 | | 4 | 5 | 4 | The mediocre white guys could rise to the top at my job. The people that they select for promotion—it's not because they're particularly great, talented, this or that. They weren't the best and the brightest. They were just OK. Then when it got to black people—see black people had to be super-black. They had to be like superman, had to have all the people skills, be the best everything. |

**Table I.** Continued

| | Blue-collar groups | | | | White-collar groups | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | Example | 4 | 5 | 6 | Example |
| Perceives blocked opportunity | 0 | 0 | 0 | | 3 | 3 | 1 | In terms of promotional opportunities, I look at certain blacks that are qualified and look at the black woman who used to sit next to me. She was a vice president who I thought would get a promotion. I thought she was just that qualified. And they've moved her off the business. I tend to start thinking "What is my future here? Where can I go?" |
| Glass ceiling | 1 | 1 | 0 | There's a few blacks in powerful positions but there's glass ceilings on how high they're going to let us at this time. It's already established that you're not gonna get but so far. | 4 | 2 | 4 | It's hard. I'm not really going to go any further. I've hit, in terms of management level, as far as I'm going to go. So, I'm saying, I'm there. |
| Covert discrimination* | 1 | 1 | 0 | | 11 | 10 | 9 | |
| Encountering overt hostility from whites | 6 | 5 | 5 | I have black patients and they're sweet. They'll come and sit with you. White people [are more likely to say] "Hey! Hey" ..."Don't touch this! Don't touch that!" | 0 | 0 | 0 | |
| Name calling | 1 | 4 | 3 | The Caucasians will call us directly to our face "nigger this, nigger that." But we won't to them. It's not right to build up to their level and do the same thing their doing. *So you got to go around* that too. | 0 | 0 | 0 | |

| | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Overt prejudice* | 7 | 9 | 8 | | 0 | 0 | 0 | |
| Issues around being one of few blacks | 2 | 0 | 0 | There was this one situation when there were only 2 black males and like 40 white males. And so any time an incident would happen in the paper they come and ask you "What's your opinion?" You have to explain for any incident happen with somebody black. | 6 | 7 | 9 | You walk into any of these corporations and you're maybe one of two or three. I've been in all these meetings in different organizations and I could probably count on my hands the meetings where there was another black face across the table from me. I know you've all seen it. When you have a point to make, it's like, people stop because first they want to see if you can put together a logical statement. |
| Encountering stereotypes about | 5 | 3 | 2 | In delivering mail, if you go upstairs and the woman is white and she looks through her peep hole and she should see a black brother...right away she thinks "Oh, that can't be a letter carrier. He's out to mug me." So, therefore, she won't open the door and you're stuck with a package. And, you've wasted your time. | 2 | 1 | 2 | |
| Subtle prejudice* | 7 | 3 | 2 | Orienting children towards race and race relations | 8 | 8 | 11 | |
| Tries to teach child not to be biased in attitudes | 6 | 3 | 3 | I talk to them [children] about there's good nd bad in all races. There's bad in all people period. So, you got to weed out and judge for yourself. | 2 | 3 | 3 | |

**Table I.** Continued

| | Blue-collar groups | | | | White-collar groups | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | Example | 4 | 5 | 6 | Example |
| Tries to teach child to treat everyone equal | 3 | 7 | 6 | I teach my kid to enjoy each and everyone. And everyone's a human being regardless of what color skin they are. Try to have fun with each and every person. | 0 | 0 | 0 | |
| Teaches cultural equivalence* | 9 | 10 | 9 | | 2 | 3 | 3 | |
| Tries to teach child street knowledge | 9 | 5 | 3 | I also try to teach my kid street knowledge, you know? That's very important because in school they don't give you that type of education. They give you a lot of bull crap and really that's not helping in dealing with real life, with reality. | 2 | 3 | 2 | My husband strongly believes in teaching our kids street sense. He says a lot of his street smarts that he learned from hanging out with the brothers have helped him in the corporate world today. So we try to do a similar thing with our son. We have him in a course at Essex Community College because we want him to start knowing the guys from Newark and some of these less fortunate kids. |
| Tries to protect child from the streets | 6 | 2 | 0 | I try to teach my child everything he needs to know to deal with the streets. And that's one of the hardest things to do. Cause the streets will change your child. So I try to make sure everything's safe for him. | | | | |
| Teaching to negotiate the street* | 15 | 7 | 3 | | | | | |

| | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Teaches child about "going around" | 1 | 2 | 2 | I teach my daughter that there's gonna be people that's coming along that's gonna try to play games with her. And, she has to be aware of what's gonna happen. I teach her that she's got to know how to dodge obstacles that comes towards her because it's not always gonnna be straight up. | 1 | 0 | 1 | I tell her, you know, people are gonna try to get in your way—to tell you you can't do what you think you can. Cause, you know, ...and you just have to go around that, maneuver around it. Cause otherwise it's gonna hold you up, get in your way. |
| Teaches child he has to be better than whites | 0 | 0 | 0 | | 5 | 8 | 4 | My won children, I tell them, you know, life's just not fair. And what I try to instill in my children is that they have to be better. |
| Teaches child about racial bias against blacks | 4 | 3 | 4 | I try to let my children know about racial bias. Its really not an, um, racist thing—actually pointing towards black and white. So, I try to let them know that also. | 4 | 5 | 5 | I tell [my daughter] there's gonna be people out there who are going to dislike you—gonna think they're better than you—because of the color of your skin. She'll have to work that. But it's gonna happen. |
| Teaching to negotiate white environments[*] | 5 | 5 | 6 | | 10 | 13 | 10 | |
| Exposes child to black culture | 2 | 1 | 1 | We go to the Shaumberg, Black expo, things like that. | 5 | 3 | 4 | We have books that we read them. We tell them about our culture and we do different things like Kwanza. |

Table I. Continued

| | Blue-collar groups | | | | White-collar groups | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | Example | 4 | 5 | 6 | Example |
| Teaching black history | 2 | 3 | 2 | I find myself thinking about entering the Muslim religion just so my son can get force fed what I didn't get and what he hasn't got yet. But he needs to get what only the Muslim religion can give him: Understanding of our history and pride in the black man. | 5 | 4 | 4 | I try to reinforce what the school does. Cause they do a lot around Dr. Martin Luther King and so-on. I tell him stories about the white water fountains, Rosa Parks. We're constantly talking about it. |
| Enhancing positive black identity | 3 | 2 | 2 | I teaches my daughter we come from royalty. I teach her to be proud of her blackness. Cause we come from royalty. And if they [whites] don't see that, that's on them. | 5 | 4 | 6 | I'm constantly talking to them about building their self-esteem, getting them to feel comfortable with their features. |
| Teaching positive orientation towards black culture* | 7 | 6 | 5 | | 15 | 11 | 14 | |

[a]Rows marked with an asterisk summarize first-level codes.

roles as workers and parents. To facilitate this goal, first-level descriptive codes were grouped into a smaller number of overarching constructs, a process Miles and Huberman (1984) referred to as "pattern coding." Pattern coding requires that researchers go beneath the surface of descriptive codes, identifying subtle commonalities so as to reduce data yet amplify its meaning. In essence, the researcher must look for higher order threads that connect descriptive codes.

Pattern codes developed to summarize first-level descriptive codes are shown in the rows marked with an asterisk in Table I, again for the purposes of illustration; these pattern codes summarize a large volume of data using a small number of constructs which seem to adequately represent it. Further, pattern codes highlight general gestalts governing participants' descriptive statements. In particular, they highlight the differences between blue-collar and white-collar focus groups in the constructs underlying their common knowledge. For instance, pattern codes suggest that descriptions of work environments that are overtly discriminatory, antagonistic interracial contact, and parenting strategies that emphasize cultural equivalence and the importance of street knowledge were more common in blue-collar than in the white-collar focus groups. Descriptions of covert prejudice and discrimination at work, along with of parenting strategies that emphasize positive ethnic group orientation, were more common in white-collar than in blue-collar focus groups.

### *Stories*

Stories are a narrative form through which individuals reconstruct particular events that took place at a particular time in the past, involving particular actors and particular settings (Polanyi, 1985). They are a central medium through which people reconstruct and interpret their experiences and are a primary channel for the transmission of cultural knowledge (Bruner, 1991; Howard, 1991; Mair, 1988; Plas, 1986; Polanyi, 1985). Stories are a fundamental element of social interaction and, in the focus groups described here, were used often by participants to achieve a variety of ends. For instance, participants used stories to amuse, inform, illustrate, and explain perspectives that were most readily justified by way of concrete examples.

The coding of participants' stories proceeded in a manner similar to that outlined for coding descriptive statements. That is, to identify patterns and redundancies (e.g., common knowledge), stories were grouped into first-level codes according to their surface content. The first-level coding categories were labeled with words that were close to the events participants described (e.g., "different rules for blacks," "stereotypes," "teaching children to respect all races"). Then, as in the coding of descriptive state-

ments, pattern codes were generated to group first-level codes into a smaller number of themes, using the strategies that have been described.

Although the coding of participants' stories paralleled the coding of their descriptive statements, stories provided unique information. While descriptive statements provided access to the content of participants' common knowledge, stories elucidated the discrete events that shaped them. Thus, events described in stories seemed to be the basis upon which participants generated descriptive statements. For instance, consistent with descriptive statements, which suggest that blue-collar workers' common knowledge included recognition of overt discrimination and interracial hostility, 70% of the stories told across the blue-collar focus group indexed overt interracial hostility. Only one of the stories across the white-collar focus groups indexed such overt interracial hostility. In contrast, most of the stories in white-collar focus groups referenced more subtle forms of interpersonal racism such as ignorance about, as well as insensitivity to, black cultural phenomenon. Of the stories in the blue-collar focus groups 20% indexed subtle interpersonal racism. Thus, participants' stories and descriptive statements tend to converge around similar themes.

Stories not only illustrate specific events shaping participants' descriptive statements but also prompt participants to compare and contrast their experiences. The data produced by such comparisons were the initial impetus for the development of shared knowledge within a group and can only be garnered using methods that rely on group interaction (Morgan & Spanish, 1984). More specifically, comparisons prompt participants to synthesize the knowledge present in stories and then to elaborate more abstract summaries of their experiences and perspectives (Morgan, 1988; Morgan & Spanish, 1984). In terms of the conceptualization of knowledge previously described, stories facilitated the translation of common knowledge displayed by individuals into shared knowledge that was elaborated consensually by the group. This process is illustrated using a segment from one of our focus group transcripts. In this segment, the moderator is probing participants for descriptions of their perspective on race and race relations:

*Example 1.*

1 M: Have you ever experienced racism or prejudice at your workplace?
2 R1: No, not in the workplace. I have experienced it elsewhere though.
3 M: Where else? Where at?
4 R1: I was stopped . . . I went into the service at 19 and by 21 I had me a car that was fairly brand new, about a year old. I was always pulled over by the cops. I was young, I was black, and I was in a poor neighborhood, South Bronx, with a car. And I guess they pulled me over — I know they pulled me over — cause they know I didn't make this by earning it, you know. Why they pulled me over was: "this guy dealing drugs or he know somebody but he stole this car."

5 R2: [If you're white] You're allowed to have a car. They pulled over Branford Marsalis with his BMW.
6 R3: Right!
7 R4: I was riding with a girl who was white and the cop stopped me. I had a new car. He wanted the registration and insurance and everything else. I said, "Well, what's the problem? Why did you stop me?"
8 R3: [Me], my father and a white kid one time going down town. The cops pull us over. Spread eagle . . . the whole nines. He [father] said, like, "What's this all about?" [The police said] "Uh, we got a report. Two black guys and a white guy robbed."
9 R5: I was frisked up. I was in the car with my mom before and they like, you know, I just had problems.
10 R6: Yeah, I've experienced that. Now what's the problem officer? "We just got a report . . ."
11 R3: Yeah!
12 R1: That's part of being a black man in NYC.
13 R4: Right!

In this segment participants describe their perception that different rules are applied to African Americans than to white Americans. Being pulled over by the authorities was a familiar and shared experience. Each story was less fully elaborated than the next, suggesting that focus group participants could draw on their common knowledge to complete each story themselves. Such a phenomenon could not be detected using individual-level data collection methods.

Of particular interest in this segment, and in the many others like it which appear in the focus group transcripts, is the pattern of emerging consensus within the group regarding the meaning of being African American for one's social experiences. The story told in Exchange 4 is the initial stimulus that prompts participants to interpret their experiences within the context of the experiences of other group members. Participants' recognition of their shared experiences begins to emerge in Exchange 6, via consensus statements (e.g., Right; I've been through that). By Exchange 12, participants begin to focus less on individual circumstances and actual events and more on patterned experiences of African American men. Thus, by comparing their experiences, participants extract general principles that can explain their common experiences.

### *Abstract Generalizations*

Abstract generalizations are summary statements describing principals that participants have extracted from their own and other group members' common experiences. Like descriptive statements, they are characterized by durative clauses which depict ongoing states of affairs. However, abstract generalizations have several characteristics that distinguish them from de-

scriptive statements. Rather than describing particular individuals, participants describe classes of people. Rather than using singular pronouns such as "I" or "my kids," participants use plural pronouns such as "we" or "our kids." Rather than describing particular people, places, or things participants describe larger patterns of behavior and general ways of perceiving and responding to the social environment.

An additional distinguishing characteristic of abstract generalizations is that they emerge in a context that is inherently synergistic: Participants build upon each others statements, complete each others sentences, and collectively represent ideas. Thus, abstract generalizations are more prevalent in the latter parts of each focus group session, when the nucleus of the focus group discussion is located in group dialogue rather than in exchanges between each participant and the moderator. The segment of text presented below illustrates the structure of such abstract statements.

*Example 2.*

1 M: Do you think there are things that black parents deal with when raising children that white parents don't have to deal with?
2 R1: Our kids may not have access to, you know, the updated materials, books, the computers . . .
3 R2: Yeah! Computers in the school.
4 R3: Touché!
5 R1: White folks have it all, you know, and that's a big problem because you're hindering this child's education. And he already has a strike against him because he's black.
5 R5: Because he's black!
6 R3: Touché!
7 R2: So, we're always playing catch up.
8 R3: They got more tools. They got more tools.
9 R4: It never evens out.
10 R3: It can't! We're playing on a slanted field.
11 R2: It may even out. But, I tell myself . . . you gotta be aware of what's happening, and when . . . and they got the ball. It's their ball in their court, you know what I'm saying. And they don't want to play? They take the ball and go home. And you just gotta realize that and then when you . . . then you can play the game better. When you realize it ain't gonna be a fair game, when you got loaded dice, then you play.
12 R1: Yeah! It's a steady uphill climb for us being black and that's the way it's gonna be for the kids.

In contrast to the segment presented in the discussion of stories, the dialogue in this segment is characterized by a series of statements which reflect a broader model of intergroup relations. These statements do not refer to particular individuals but rather to social units (e.g., "our kids," "white folks," "us being black," "the kids"). Statements contain nonspecific referents, suggesting that the principals described are the same regardless of the particular actors or the particular place and time.

Like descriptive statements and stories, participants' abstract generalizations could conceivably be coded using first-level codes and pattern codes that group statements according to similarities in their surface and implicit content. However, the most useful information contained in abstract generalizations is held in their connection to other abstract generalizations. Thus, coding such generalizations acontextually can obscure much of their meaning. In this regard, it is especially noteworthy that the cognitive models embedded in participants' abstract generalizations tend to be collectively supported within the group. That is, these models are group rather than individual-level phenomena. For instance, the segment presented above is organized around a series of semantic structures that link one participant's statement to another's. Five of the 12 exchanges contain a consensus statement (e.g., "touché," "right"). Many of the exchanges also contain isomorphic metaphors, such as "playing catch-up," "slanted field," "loaded dice," and "uphill climb," which underscore the similarities in participants' world views and which reference structural inequities that participants perceive as characterizing intergroup relations between African Americans and whites.

To the extent that similar abstract generalizations are put forth across two or more focus groups, they facilitate researchers access to the shared cognitive models that groups develop to interpret and give-meaning to their experiences. They can also facilitate researchers' identification of between-group differences in these cognitive models, although such differences did not emerge in this study.

### *Contributions of Enhanced Understanding to Culturally Anchored Research*

Thus far, the description of the research example has highlighted the structure of focus group transcripts and how they can be organized to facilitate an understanding of participants' common and shared knowledge. In this section. the discussion shifts to a consideration of how an understanding of such knowledge can contribute to the development of a culturally anchored quantitative study.

One important contribution of such an understanding is that it enables researchers to evaluate and challenge their a priori conceptualization of a phenomenon within a model. A priori conceptualizations may reflect the researchers ideas about what processes are important and how they operate more so than they reflect the social realities experienced by the target population (Morgan, 1988). In the present research, this was an important function of the focus group sessions. More specifically, the common knowledge identified in participants' descriptive statements and stories

highlighted limitations in the conceptualization of racial job stressors, which was a construct of central importance to the study.

Based primarily on studies of white-collar African American workers (e.g., Alderfer, Alderfer, Tucker, & Tucker, 1980; Davis & Watson, 1982; McAdoo, 1982; Quinn & Staines, 1979; Work, 1980) the initial conceptualization included four constructs. These were (a) structurally induced bias in wages, benefits, job quality, and opportunities for advancements (institutional discrimination); (b) racial bias in interpersonal interactions (interpersonal racism); (c) demands for adaptation of culturally based behaviors and affective styles (cultural discordance); and (d) detachment from work-based social networks (social isolation). It was hypothesized that variation on these constructs would predict different patterns of racial socialization. However, an additional dimension of racial job stress emerged from the focus transcripts. Both descriptive statements and stories suggested that participants' jobs varied in the extent of exposure to overt versus covert racism and discrimination. In fact, the distinction between overt and covert racial job stressors differentiated the descriptive statements and stories emergent in blue-collar and white-collar focus groups. Had we overlooked this distinction, important differences in the experiences of blue-collar and white-collar workers may have been masked. Thus, the focus groups highlighted important gaps in the conceptualization of a central construct.

Focus groups can also identify constructs that have been omitted completely from a conceptual framework but that are important to a group's experiences. Such omissions constitute a form of model misspecification, which can undermine the validity of research findings and can distort the social realities of a group (Blalock, 1982). In our focus groups, several such constructs were identified based on the interpretations of participants' descriptive statements, stories, and abstract generalizations. For example, encounters with subtle and overt discrimination and racism outside of the work environment were mentioned repeatedly in both blue-collar and white-collar focus groups but were omitted from the initial conceptual model. Such encounters were referred to as frequently within each group as were similar work-based encounters. Insofar as such encounters, in turn, influence racial socialization practices, omission of the construct could result in a biased estimate of relationships between racial job stressors and racial socialization. In a multiple regression framework, the influence of racism and discrimination outside of work on dimensions of racial socialization would be relegated to the error term for relationships between racial job stressors and racial socialization, and the power to detect relationships of interest would be reduced.

It is also important to note that an understanding of participants' common and shared knowledge may help researchers interpret data from

a quantitative study, although this possibility has not yet been evaluated in the research described here. However, it is not uncommon for contradictory or anomalous findings to emerge in any research endeavor. An understanding of culturally based world views and perspectives may equip researchers with the tools to make sense of such findings. Moreover, the contributions to conceptual and theoretical aspects of the study illustrate both the limitations of implementing a quantitative study without adequate understanding of participants experiences and how understanding obtained from focus group sessions can contribute to the development of a more useful conceptual model.

## REVISION OF THE SURVEY INSTRUMENT

In the research program described here, a second objective in conducting focus groups was to develop items to assess race relations at work and racial socialization. To our knowledge, established measures for adequately assessing these constructs were not available in the published empirical literature. Thus, evaluating and refining the items developed to assess them was a central aim of the focus group study. In this section, examples are used to illustrate how focus groups contributed to the development of the survey instrument.

### *Developing Additional Survey Items*

Focus groups can serve important functions when researchers have identified the relevant constructs to be measured but have not identified the specific items that will be used to assess them, as is often the case when little is known about the central research question. Most notably, participants' descriptions of their experiences and perspectives can provide concrete materials from which to generate survey items.

One example of how the focus groups for this study contributed to the development of the survey instrument comes from our development of items to assess "interpersonal racism," a component of racial job stress. The conceptualization of racial job stressors was based on the literature on African American white-collar workers. The conceptualization reflected a corporate model in which subtle racial biases, such as expectations for failure and ethnocentrism, were important concerns. In reviewing the focus group transcripts, however, it became evident that these items did not adequately cover the universe of experiences that were relevant to the construct. For example, the items primarily covered interactions that occur

within an organizational setting. However, many participants described exposure to individual racial bias in encounters with clients or the general public — exposures that occurred outside of the work group and would not have been captured using the initial item pool. In addition, items assessing blatant interpersonal racism (e.g., overtly antagonistic interracial conflict, use of racial slurs and derogatory terms, and blatant disrespect for African Americans) were conspicuously absent from the index. Yet, these sorts of interactions were mentioned frequently in the context of the focus group discussions. Finally, many of items reflected the experiences of African Americans who worked in predominantly white work environments. Consequently, they did not adequately reflect the experiences of those who worked in predominantly black environments or in clerical/technical occupations.

Thus, the focus groups prompted the development of additional items to assess interpersonal racism that more adequately represented a broad range of experiences. The words participants used provided a basis upon which to generate these items. Examples of items generated based on participants descriptions are: "On my job, I sometimes deal with people who treat me badly because I am black" and "On my job, I see racial bias in how people are treated day to day."

### *Revision of Item Wording*

Focus groups, like other in-depth interviews, can contribute to questionnaire development by providing the researcher with direct access to the language participants use to think and talk about their experiences. Such access enables researchers to gauge the appropriateness of item wording for a specified population. For example, by listening to the words participants use and the way they speak, researchers may be better able to bridge the gap between their own language and that used by the population of interest.

In the focus groups for this study, participants used much simpler language than that contained in the original item pool. For instance, they referred to African Americans as blacks rather than as African Americans. In our revisions, all items were changed to reflect this use of language. Participants also used simple words and spoke in short sentences. We revised many questionnaire items to reduce the number of words and syllables in contained in them. As an example, the item "Have you ever done something to prepare your child for the possibility that s/he might experience racism or discrimination in his/her childhood" was changed to read "Have you ever told your child that some people might treat him/her badly

because s/he is black." Thus, the focus groups highlighted differences in the language commonly used by the focus group participants and that typically used by academic scholars.

### *Evaluating the Clarity and Relevancy of Existing Items*

A final contribution of the focus groups to the development of the survey instrument was that it enabled us to evaluate the clarity of items that had been generated a priori and to gauge their relevancy to group participants. The set of items to assess racial job stressors and racial socialization were distributed to participants at the close of each focus group session. Participants were asked to identify items that were irrelevant to their experiences, awkward, or unclear.

For the most part, participants' responses to the survey items increased our confidence in the items that had been developed. Comments participants made while completing the questionnaire suggested that most items were clear and relevant (e.g, "Yeah, you getting to the nitty gritty with these questions"; "You hitting the nail on the head with these questions." Thus, feedback from participants suggested that items were appropriate and clearly understood. However, participant feedback also cued us to certain questions that participants misinterpreted or misunderstood. For example, several participants questioned the item "Have you ever told your child that race is not important," an item generated to assess racial socialization. For example, one participants words capture the confusion this item caused: "I don't know how to take that because you're asking about racism and then how could you tell her that race is not important." Another item, "Have you ever told your child that s/he cannot behave in certain ways because s/he is Black," which was generated to assess adaptive strategies parents use to protect children from racial bias, was consistently misinterpreted by participants. For example, one participants said: "That's absurd! I think this question is a little off. I think my child is very well behaved. I never have to tell her that."

## SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

In this article, focus groups were described as a tool for facilitating research that is grounded in the experiences and perspectives of a particular population. More specifically, it was argued that focus groups can facilitate a rich understanding of particular phenomena and can provide the raw materials with which to develop instruments that are appropriate to a particu-

lar problem or population. Focus groups achieve this end by (a) emphasizing participants' own perspectives and experiences regarding the phenomenon of interest and (b) providing a mechanism by which researchers can observe social interaction among group members around issues the researcher specifies. Each of these can help facilitate culturally anchored research.

The qualitative and unstructured nature of focus group interviews gives researchers access to *how* participants think and talk about issues that are of interest to the researcher (Morgan & Krueger, 1993; O'Brien, 1993). As in other qualitative interviews, participants are able to respond to questions in their own terms rather than terms provided by the moderator, providing for a more grounded approach to the development of constructs and theories. Although ethnographic interviews may offer similar opportunities, the dialogue that takes place among participants from similar sociocultural backgrounds may more textured, less formal, and less regulated than that between an interviewer and a respondent. For instance, a trained interviewer is less likely to disagree with or challenge a respondents' point of view or recollection of an experience than is another focus group participant.

Related to this, group interaction may also yield data that are less readily available using individual-level data collection methods. For one, group dialogue inherently fosters agreement and disagreement among participants, encouraging them to clarify or justify their statements. The within-group homogeneity that characterizes most focus group research facilitates self-disclosure, and thereby, the elaboration of experiences and perspectives that may be less readily available to the researcher in one-on-one situations. Most important, however, group interaction prompts comparative processes within focus groups that prompt participants to elaborate more abstract models of the phenomenon of interest, providing researchers with access to consensual models that underlie participants' experiences and perspectives.

The example presented here, based on a program of research among African American dual-earner families, provides a concrete illustration of how focus groups can contribute to culturally anchored research. It was argued that focus group dialogues contain distinct narrative structures that facilitate the identification of cultural knowledge. Descriptive statements, describing enduring states of affairs, enable researchers to identify recurrent themes that emerge within and across groups, termed common knowledge. Identification of recurrent themes can facilitate the development of a relevant conceptual framework that is rooted in the social realities of a group. Moreover, rather than imposing a framework on participants' experiences, descriptive statements permit a framework to emerge from partici-

pants' own dialogue. Although in-depth individual interviews can also facilitate the emergence of such a framework, the focus group format can provide more depth and texture in this regard. In the focus groups described here, participants moved discussions of race-related issues in directions that facilitated the research objectives, suggesting that the discussion reflects participants' world views rather than just the researcher's. This dynamic is more likely to occur in a group than in an individual in-depth interview, since the interviewer's control over the discussion is diffused (Morgan, 1988).

Stories, describing discrete events, facilitated an understanding of participants' common knowledge regarding race relations by elucidating the concrete events that shape participants' descriptive statements. They also prompt participants to compare and contrast their experiences and, thereby, to extract more general information from the commonalities across their experiences. In this regard, it should be emphasized that the coding scheme developed to categorize participants' stories in the present study did not fully capture the information contained within them. Although some stories were embedded in lengthy monologues, many were immediately followed by other participants' similar stories, as the example presented suggests. The give-and-take of these sorts of transactions provided information about the commonalities participants themselves recognize, information that cannot be garnered by simply counting redundant themes within and across groups.

Abstract generalizations can be an important source of information on group members' schematic representations of the phenomenon of interest. They provide a context for interpreting earlier narratives and gave them both texture and meaning. In addition, to the extent that abstract generalizations are embedded in larger consensual models that are agreed upon by the group, they can facilitate researchers' identification of shared knowledge that governs the members' experiences and perspectives. In the present focus groups, multiple focus group sessions among different segments of the population proved to be especially useful. Though participants each describe unique situations and their own individual stories, the shared knowledge that emerged within each of the focus group sessions tended to be remarkably similar across groups.

Thus, focus groups have many strengths that make them particularly useful for facilitating a culturally anchored quantitative study. However, it is important to note that focus groups can be designed in a variety of ways to facilitate insights into cross-cultural and intracultural phenomenon. As described here, they may be used during the planning stages of a larger study to identify relevant constructs, to generate conceptual frameworks, and to develop adequate question wording and response categories for

questionnaire items (e.g., Joseph et al., 1984; O'Brien, 1993). They may be conducted in conjunction with other methods to triangulate information on a phenomenon of interest (e.g., de Vries et al., 1992; Gottlieb et al., 1992; Hugentobler, Israel, & Schurman, 1992). They may be used as a follow up to a quantitative study to clarify and amplify study findings (e.g., Wolff et al., 1993) or they may stand on their own as explorations into the norms, phenomenology, and experiences of a group of participants (e.g., Lengua et al., 1992; Morgan, 1989; Morgan & Spanish, 1984; Pramualratana, Havanon, & Knodel, 1985; Wolff et al., 1993).

While the strengths of focus groups may facilitate a rich understanding of phenomena, it is important to recognize that they also have limitations. For example, they are expensive and time-consuming. Incentives for hard-to-reach populations, moderator fees, transcription fees, room rental fees, and costs for refreshments can consume a large portion of a research budget. In addition, coding and analysis of group dialogue is tedious and time-consuming. Although computer programs may speed the process of organizing data, they are not capable of interpreting it. In addition, it is important to recognize that the structure imposed on the group by the moderator may threaten the ecological validity of the interaction the researcher is able to observe. More specifically, interaction that is generated in a formal environment around research questions specified by an investigator may differ in unknown ways from the interaction one might observe in more naturalistic settings. Thus, in choosing the focus group method, the researcher compromises the ecological validity of observations in favor of control over the topic of discussion. Finally, focus group samples are typically small and nonrepresentative. Although groups can be organized to represent the diversity of experiences within a population, findings from a focus group study cannot be generalized to a larger population. Thus, focus groups more readily facilitate exploration rather than hypothesis testing. However, we have argued that focus groups can be ideally suited to increase researcher's knowledge or understanding, to rethink how problems are framed and how to interpret data, and to provide the researcher with a broader and richer understanding of phenomenon. Each of these may facilitate the development of more culturally anchored research.

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