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*American Journal of Evaluation* 1999; 20; 265  
DOI: 10.1177/109821409902000208

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# Focus Group Design and Group Dynamics: Lessons from Deaf and Hard of Hearing Participants<sup>1</sup>

GEORGE I. BALCH AND DONNA M. MERTENS

## ABSTRACT

Focus groups are a common tool in evaluation. Here we report experience conducting focus groups with deaf and hard of hearing people, from which we reflect on lessons learned about how we can more effectively “listen” to people in *all* focus groups—particularly those that *don't* intentionally include people with a hearing loss. We learned that: (1) focus groups with deaf and hard of hearing people can be highly productive on even the most sensitive issues and across disparate socioeconomic and ethnic differences if they share a common interest and mode of communication; (2) the physical environment of group communication may count more than we usually notice; (3) insuring communication requires a very high level of vigilance by moderators and observers; (4) it is hard to “focus” focus groups in some cultures, so one must allow for that; (5) genuine communication may require more time and patience than one might expect; (6) confidentiality in a marginalized community may require special attention; (7) an experienced moderator who is an “outsider” to the group’s culture or experience can be very useful; and (8) feedback from observers, evaluators, and participants can improve communication. Most of all, we learned that focus groups can be much more productive when we are sensitized to invisible communication difficulties.



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Focus groups are often used to elicit perceptions and experiences about specific issue areas. Sometimes using a familiar method under unusual circumstances or with different popula-

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tions can illuminate the strengths and limits of the method and lead to suggestions for adapting or replacing it. Our recent experience conducting focus groups with people who are deaf and hard of hearing suggests lessons with applicability when focus groups are deliberately constituted to include people from this population, and when focus group participants are selected for reasons other than their hearing status, but may or may not have a hearing loss. While much has been written on how to design and conduct focus groups, no prior work has explicitly addressed this particular population or conveyed the particular lessons we have learned here (Asbury, 1995; Goldman & McDonald, 1987; Krueger, 1994; Mertens, 1998; Morgan, 1996; Morgan & Krueger, 1998; Wells, 1974).

## BACKGROUND

People who are deaf or hard of hearing may appear in focus groups because the evaluator deliberately seeks them out, or because of the prevalence of this disability and its invisible nature. According to the National Health Interview Surveys, 8.6% of the U.S. population (or approximately 24 million people) have difficulty hearing (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1995). While hearing loss is more prevalent in persons 65 years and older, it is not limited to older people. For example, hearing loss is reported in 3.4% of people aged 18–34 and 6.3% of those 35–44 years old.

Hearing loss is sometimes termed an invisible disability, for several reasons. The presence of a hearing aid or use of sign language makes the hearing loss visible in a sense. However, only 5 million of an estimated 22 million hard of hearing people use hearing aids. In addition, the 2 million people who are deaf do not all use sign language, nor do they benefit from using hearing aids. Furthermore, experts estimate that there are millions of other people who have a progressive hearing loss that has not been formally diagnosed, either because they do not recognize they have a hearing problem, deny that they have a hearing loss, or do not have the financial or other resources to obtain a formal diagnosis (Trychin, 1997). Thus, the prevalence and invisibility of this disability emphasizes the importance of sensitivity to the issues raised in this article, especially for research in which hearing status is *not* a central concern.

The lessons presented in this article are based on a study that deliberately recruited people who are deaf and hard of hearing to participate in focus groups. Funded by a grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the American Judicature Society (AJS) conducted a three-year project to assist courts nationwide in making their facilities and procedures accessible to persons who are deaf or hard of hearing, in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and related federal and state laws. Focus groups were conducted with deaf and hard of hearing lay people who have had experience in the courts in various capacities (defendant, civil litigant, witness, juror, etc.) as input to develop training and education programs to show the courts how to achieve the requirements of the ADA. These focus groups were intended to identify the unmet communication needs of deaf and hard of hearing people who had experience in the U.S. court system. Their perceptions were used, along with those of the project Advisory Board (which included deaf and hard of hearing judges, attorneys, law professors, and court managers in four metropolitan areas)<sup>2</sup> and other court system representatives and experts in the communication needs of deaf and hard of hearing people, to develop training directed at improving court access for people who are deaf or hard of hearing.

## METHOD

Below we explain the choice of focus groups to collect data, the composition of our focus groups, and our focus group procedures.

### Why focus groups?

Focus groups are particularly well suited to identify and describe in depth issues that are not well known or understood by the researchers (Asbury, 1995; Goldman & McDonald, 1987; Krueger, 1996; Mertens, 1998; Morgan, 1996; Morgan & Krueger, 1998; Wells, 1974). Focus groups are guided discussions among a small group (6–12 participants), in which the interviewer serves as a “moderator.” Participants are the experts on the topic, since the topic is what they think, feel, or do. A discussion guide, a checklist of topics to be covered in an expected order, is used to direct discussion. The moderator guides conversation gently through each topic until it appears to have become unproductive, and returns to it later if it emerges in a different context. This flexibility allows the moderator to probe and clarify implied or unclear meanings. It allows participants to raise important issues and nuances which researchers often do not foresee. In a focus group, relatively homogeneous groups of participants have the opportunity to stimulate, support and build on each other’s ideas on the topic. They discuss the topic in their own framework and terms. As they become more sensitized to the topic and to each other, participants stimulate each other to take the discussion beyond the rhetorical or habitual. They “open up” and may reveal important material that would not have emerged in direct questioning.

For all of these reasons—group interaction, spontaneity and openness, peer support, descriptive depth, and opportunity for unanticipated issues to emerge—focus groups seemed well suited to understanding unmet and unanticipated communication needs among people who are deaf and hard of hearing. Moreover, this relatively non-threatening group setting provided a cost-effective, relatively fast way to learn about and show court officials the difficulties of communication that may be experienced and ways of overcoming them. Neither in-depth interviews nor mail surveys offered this combination of desired advantages.

### Group Composition

In general, participants in a focus group must meet two criteria: (1) they must have the experience or information that the research purpose requires, and (2) they must be able to communicate it to the group. In this project, all participants had to have had lay experience with the courts and had to be deaf or hard of hearing. Within each group, the central criteria were *homogeneity in preferred mode of communication* and *hearing status*. The practical matters of providing the appropriate human and mechanical assistance for different modes of communication among participants, moderators, and observers made this requirement crucial.

To include the most common different types of identifiable communication mode and hearing status, we decided to conduct five focus groups, one for each of the most commonly occurring forms of hearing impairment and level of ability to communicate. The budget did not permit more than one group of each type. Since the focus groups were not to be the sole basis for the training, we accepted this relaxation of the norm of requiring at least two groups

for each cell. We concluded that direct input from all types was of greater value for the project than replication of one or two types. The defining characteristics of the groups were chosen based on the recommendations of the project Advisory Board, as well as consultation of literature about the deaf and hard of hearing populations (Luetke-Stahlman & Luckner, 1991; Moores, 1996; Vernon & Andrews, 1990). We conducted the focus groups in four cities whose court systems had a relatively high level of interest in offering services for people who are deaf or hard of hearing—and who were willing to cooperate in recruitment. The groups and cities in which they were conducted were:

1. Deaf adults who are highly educated<sup>3</sup> and who primarily use American Sign Language (ASL) and could read and write English (Washington, D.C.);<sup>4</sup>
2. Deaf adults with limited education and reading ability who primarily use ASL, as well as one individual who relied on visual-gestural communication and a deaf-blind participant who required an interpreter at close range (Chicago);
3. Hard of hearing or late-deafened adults who use assistive listening devices such as hearing aids or cochlear implants (Los Angeles);
4. Deaf adults who rely on Mexican Sign Language (MSL) with no or limited ability to read English (Los Angeles); and
5. “Oral deaf” adults who rely on oral communication (who read lips by watching an oral interpreter who carefully enunciates speech instead of signing) (Miami).

The resulting groups were diverse on other characteristics, such as gender, race/ethnicity, presence of additional disabilities, and status with the courts overall; about half the participants were male ( $n=15$ ) and half female ( $n=17$ ). The participants were equally split between Caucasian ( $n=17$ ) and minority ethnicities (African American  $n=6$ ; Latino  $n=9$ ). Their reasons for interacting in the court system varied: ten reported being a victim of a crime, 11 were defendants, 12 served as witnesses, and nine were called for jury duty (multiple responses were possible on this item).

Recruitment was conducted through contacts with the courts, interpreters’ offices, advocacy groups, and the Advisory Board. Recruitment itself required a great deal of contact work to identify and invite participants, all conducted by a hard of hearing recruiter via TDD phone and letters. All participants were offered \$50 cash for their participation (about standard in commercial research for these markets). The Advisory Board had recommended a cash incentive both to motivate participation and to minimize possible over-representation of “advocates” among participants.

Each of the five focus groups had a character of its own, revealing different facets of the deaf and hard of hearing communities and debunking the myth of homogeneity that everyone who shares a particular disability or ethnicity or gender is the same (Stanfield, 1993). It was clear that communication involved more than providing sign language interpreters or a particular assistive listening device. Our actual participants, with minor exceptions, were close to the recruitment specifications. For example, the deaf highly educated ASL user group included one oral deaf person who relied on voicing, lip reading, and reading English; the deaf, limited education ASL user group included one person who had very low language functioning and communicated through some sign language, gestures and pantomime, and a deaf/blind adult who used an ASL interpreter at close range.

## Focus Group Procedures

All focus groups were conducted in centrally located market research focus group facilities, each equipped with a focus group conference-style room, a soundproof room with a one-way mirror for observers, operator controlled videotape recording and dual audiotape recorders (in the observation room), and a host or hostess to greet participants and serve snacks. These features are commonly available in more than 1,000 such facilities in the U.S. (Impulse Research, 1998; Qualitative Research Consultants Association, Inc., 1998).

The moderator (Balch) has been conducting focus groups professionally since 1980 in marketing/advertising, social marketing, non-profit marketing, and public policy. He has conducted over 1,000 focus groups personally and observed many more. He has also trained moderators in commercial and academic research. The Advisory Board suggested the use of a deaf, signing co-moderator to work with the hearing, non-signing moderator in the groups with deaf, signing participants. The co-moderator (Marsha Northrup, MSW) is a social worker who also works with people who are deaf or hard of hearing. She is hard of hearing and familiar with ASL. She received brief, intensive training about focus groups from the moderator and she provided the moderator considerable information about people who are deaf and hard of hearing. The co-moderator facilitated the discussion on several assigned topics and assisted with probing throughout.

The evaluator (Mertens) is also an expert in deafness and has an advanced level of sign language ability. Thus, she was able to provide insights to the moderator about issues that may not have been interpreted with complete accuracy. She has also conducted focus groups with deaf participants and was thus able to provide suggestions about group composition design, discussion guide, and procedures. The evaluator remained in the observation room during each session, but provided observations to the moderator(s) during breaks. After each session, the moderator(s) left the focus group room and the evaluator administered, with the assistance of interpreters where needed, an evaluation questionnaire. The evaluator also reviewed transcripts and videotapes, wrote a summary of each session, and reviewed the moderator's (independently written) summaries and report.

The exact nature of support services needed for the effective facilitation of communication varied with the characteristics of the participants in the group. In the first focus group, with highly educated professionals who use ASL (and one oral deaf man), the communication system consisted of a hearing moderator, whose words were interpreted into ASL by a hearing interpreter (there were two in the room, alternating for relief), and a real-time court reporter who recorded the words of all the people in the room for display on two TV monitors in the focus group room that were visible to all people in the focus group and observation rooms. The hearing interpreter also voiced what was being signed by the hard of hearing moderator and by the deaf participants. The oral deaf man relied on reading the captions and reading lips as much as he was able.

During the second focus group, another layer of complexity was added. In this group, one man had very low level language skills and needed an interpreter who could use a combination of sign, gesture, and pantomime (sometimes called a relay interpreter). The communication system included: the hearing moderator voicing in English, a hearing interpreter translating his words into ASL, and a deaf relay interpreter who would then use the combination of sign, gesture, and pantomime necessary to convey the concepts to this man at a level he could understand. For example, instead of using the sign for judge, the relay interpreter signed: "You remember the man in court; the man who wore black robes?" In that

same focus group, one woman was deaf and blind and she needed an interpreter who could sign into her hands or very close to her face. The hearing interpreter also voiced for the hard of hearing moderator and the other deaf participants in the focus group.

For the third focus group (deaf adults who rely on Mexican Sign Language), a deaf MSL interpreter served as a relay interpreter for the ASL interpreters. For the fourth focus group (hard of hearing or late-deafened adults who use assistive listening devices), an expert in assistive listening devices was in the focus group room to provide devices and monitor their functioning. For the fifth focus group ("oral deaf" adults who rely on oral communication), an oral interpreter was present, but no ASL interpreter.

Other procedures included: (1) removing the table from every focus group room and arranging participants and moderators, as nearly as possible, in a circle to maximize visual contact with facial and body language; (2) planning three hour sessions instead of the usual two hours; and (3) planning one or two breaks to allow interpreters, the court reporter, the moderators, the participants, and the observers to rest because of the intensive, attention—and energy-consuming nature of the communication and to check observers for comments.

Observers in the observation room (with focus group participants' informed consent) included between two and eight people: staff from the American Judicature Society, the evaluator, and members of the Advisory Board. The moderator(s) debriefed with observers after each group. All observers later received a copy of the transcript and summaries from the moderator and evaluators, and had access to the videotapes. These procedures enabled us to be particularly sensitive to group context and group setting (Carey and Smith, 1994).

## KEY FINDINGS AND REFLECTIONS ON PROCESS

Here we report key findings about how well the focus group process worked and reflections on the importance of the physical environment, the need for constant vigilance to insure communication, the difficulty of "focus" in some cultures; how much time communication takes; special attention to confidentiality in marginalized communities; how the matching of moderator and participant characteristics may matter; and the critical importance of feedback.

### The Process Worked

The most important process-related finding is that the process succeeded in identifying many experiences and unmet communication needs related to their hearing impairment. These included frustrating experiences trying to telephone to or from the court system; special difficulties in finding one's way around the court house; court resistance to providing the specific aids and services needed for access to the courts; unrecognized physical and architectural barriers to communication; major obstacles to efforts to serve on juries; common court procedures that limit access; and impatient, insensitive, uninformed, and prejudiced court officials who also limit access. Substantive findings were plentiful, detailed, and highly useful in the development of training for courts. These are reported elsewhere (Balch, 1996; Mertens, in press).

Participants usually *did* get involved in discussion, despite sensitive topics and initial reservations for some. This did not always happen immediately. For example, one woman, who had been raped and beaten but whose attacker was not convicted in court, wanted to be pulled in by direct questions rather than respond to general questions posed to the group. As

she became more comfortable, she eventually volunteered her story with considerable intensity. And she went on to help interpret for a man who had minimal language skills. The one person who chose not to discuss specifics of his own court case (consistent with the moderator's instructions) was very forthcoming on the issues, participated in the discussion, revealed his own intense concerns about these issues, and built on the experiences and ideas of others. In another group some participants volunteered problems with criminal acts they mentioned having committed, despite the moderator's early and repeated insistence on avoiding the details of cases. *In none of these groups did any participant "opt out" of the discussion process. This reaffirms the value of focus groups for sensitive issues.*<sup>5</sup>

In every group, participants were asked to evaluate the focus group discussion process at its conclusion. They rated very highly the flow of communication and their ability to say what they wanted to say. In no group was the mean response lower than 4.5 on any of the 5 point scales. Most of the participants' comments consisted of compliments on the ease of communication and the high level of comfort they felt expressing themselves in the focus group setting. When they experienced difficulties in one mode of communication, they were often able to pick up the information through another mode because of the redundancy of modes available. For example, several participants said they had missed some information because a participant did not articulate clearly or they were shifting their eyes from speaker to speaker, but they were able to read the information as it appeared in the real-time captions on the T.V. screen a few seconds later.

A related finding is that we observed considerable similarity of participants' unmet communication needs in court within each focus group, as well as communication and emotional support among participants from very different stations in life. Comprising focus groups based on the core criterion of participants' common experience and likely ability to communicate with one another revealed information about the core areas of interest for this project. *This study caused us to wonder whether, in deciding on group composition, we give this criterion—a key common experience—the importance it merits for achieving knowledge about that experience, rather than paying more attention to demographics or other selection variables than we should, perhaps overestimating their potential for divisiveness.*

One might wonder about the appropriateness of using focus groups for certain populations such as limited language functioning or deaf/blind individuals. Although it made communication more complicated and, at times, awkward, the presence of these individuals provided opportunities to learn about group processes that might be transferred to a court situation. Even with a relay interpreter (usually another deaf person who can understand the signing of the interpreter, but who "translates" the interpreter's signs into a simpler, more appropriate conceptual level for the lower functioning deaf person) the communication was challenging. The deaf man did not understand basic concepts such as "lawyer" or "judge." He described his experience as: "I was arrested for a crime, a killing, a stabbing. At the police station there was no interpreter. I signed papers, but I could not read." [The moderator asked if he had an interpreter with his lawyer, and if he could understand at that point.] The man responded that the interpreter was too fast; the information was too fast. He said "I couldn't do it." In court he was told to keep his hands at his sides and to only shake his head "yes" or "no," but not to sign. He said he was told: "I had to admit to what I was charged with." At various points, other deaf participants in the group assisted the relay interpreter by re-framing the questions directly to the man, usually with no greater success. So, in addition to providing the substantive statements that the man made that had implications for identifying problems associated with access to courts, *the very process of trying to communicate*



*the situation after the fact provided additional process data that reveals the nature of the problem in a very poignant way.*

### **The Physical Environment of Group Communication May Count More than We Usually Notice**

As mentioned above, participants found it important to maximize visual contact in order to read body language. Interpreters informed us of this from their lengthy prior experience. *How much body language and interaction do we and focus group participants miss by imposing the rectangular or trapezoidal conference table structure? Indeed, how much body language do we miss by having **any** table? Despite the obvious value of a **round** table, we rarely see one in a focus group room. The original marketing research focus groups were in living rooms—without a table (Goldman & McDonald, 1987).*

What is good for observers may be bad for participants. For example, in one facility some participants found a wraparound mirror particularly distracting, both because of the additional movement and reflection of light. This kind of one-way mirror maximizes observers' ability to view participants. In another facility it was necessary to close the blinds so that people could read lips more easily.

Real-time captioning was helpful in all groups. It must be observable to all participants and observers. Even "oral deaf" and "late deafened" adults rely, at least in part, on visual cues (ASL and real-time caption, respectively).<sup>6</sup> Sound qualities of the environment are also important, especially for late deafened or hard of hearing adults; flat, uncarpeted walls don't dampen reverberation and may make it harder for them to hear the conversation. *Do we pay enough attention to these environmental factors when we choose or design focus group facilities? How much communication do we and participants miss when we do not?*

### **Insuring Communication Requires Constant Vigilance**

Despite our elaborate preparation and our emphasis on making communication difficulties the topic of conversation, participants experienced some difficulties in the focus groups which they did not always communicate directly. For example, one observer noticed that a participant was straining to look at the real-time captioning. The participant had not complained but was very pleased when we moved it during the first break. In another group an observer noted that some participants' speech was hard to understand. As a result, we asked the oral interpreter to interpret as we went along—which we had not thought necessary earlier. *We found the planned breaks useful for checking with observers to find these sorts of things. In typical focus groups, do we use observers as fully as we might?*<sup>7</sup>

We learned in the post-session evaluation that some participants had been frustrated by the oral interpreters' not interpreting earlier. Also, some oral deaf participants found it very tiring to read lips constantly in the absence of an ASL interpreter—a fact they mentioned only on the written post-session evaluation. In another group, a participant did not have a cable to connect with the assistive listening device provided, but that concern was raised by a peer participant who offered one of her own. (Fortunately, an observer noted this and we remedied the situation with an additional cable.) People whose hearing is impaired commonly "smile and nod" when they do not understand what is being said. *Just because someone speaks clearly and doesn't ask questions doesn't mean they are fully communicating. Do we know how often this is a problem with our typical focus group participants? Might we be more*

*active in finding out, e.g., requesting substantive feedback from participants—communication checks—from time to time?*

### **It is Hard to “Focus” Focus Groups in Some Cultures**

During the second focus group (low education ASL), one of the project Advisory Board member observers expressed concern that the participants were taking time to explain what happened to them before they came into court. Since the central concern of this project is court access, the observer suggested that the focus group moderator try to direct the participants to talk only about their experiences in court. The moderator tried to follow the observer’s suggestion to get into the participants’ court experiences early in the focus group. However, because of the cultural mode of communication found in this group, efforts to focus on the “end point” of their experiences in the judicial system often failed. Evidence from the transcript of the MSL group illustrates this point:

MODERATOR: Let’s talk about court. Okay? Let’s start with court. Let’s say you just came to court. How many of you have been to court?

INTERPRETER: Everybody.

MODERATOR: Okay. Let’s start with when you go into court. Tell us about any problems you have had finding your way around.

RESPONDENT: I was arrested for stealing. I went to jail for three days. While I was in jail, I was trying to tell the officers that I needed to make a telephone call to have someone bail me out. The officers took my number or my request three times on paper. All the other hearing individuals could make phone calls. I couldn’t. I need an interpreter. An interpreter was never called to jail. I was bailed out. So what happened was I went to court. They gave me a chance to be released on terms of community service. I never did that because they didn’t explain clearly to me or warn me about the community service and the after effects. I then found out that I had a bench warrant, and it was out for quite some time because I didn’t realize that was the case. I didn’t understand the words and the language they were using. They had a sign interpreter, but I needed a clear definition as to the terms of community service.

The moderator then tried to re-focus the person on the court experience, but another focus group participant interrupted to “tell his story” from the time of his first encounter with the police on another charge. And so the stories continued throughout the focus group, with each person starting his or her individual story at the beginning, unable to begin toward the “end of the story,” thus describing the court experience itself.

During the first break, the interpreter explained that this way of telling the story is necessary in this population because their mode of communication is visual-gestural. In order to tell the story, they have to set up the context in which the actions occurred. In a culture that is print-based, a person can jump to the end of the book, so to speak. But in a visual-gestural culture, the context has to be established step by step, in order to reach the conclusion. Several of the deaf attorneys on the Advisory Board had made this point at their first meeting. The actual experience in the focus groups was very instructive to other members of the committee and heightened its importance in the resulting training.

*Focus group moderators might ask themselves how sensitive they are to the cultural and personal differences in the way a story is told chronologically.* If a cultural group requires “story telling” to get the point across, the moderator may need to focus harder and listen longer to get the “meat” intended and may need to prepare observers and clients for this

additional time requirement. Even in our own culture, how many people can tell a story synoptically or skip to the “point?” *How often do we ask focus group moderators too readily to cut off stories among those who communicate best through narratives in order to accommodate our own style or the potential impatience of other group participants?*

### **Communication Takes Time**

In every group, participants took longer to communicate than in our experience with countless other focus groups. This despite the fact that these were small groups (5–8 participants) with a small number of questions about the highly focused topic of communication difficulties in one’s experience in court.

The longer time was essential to ensure mutual understanding. Story-telling added time. The multi-step interpretation process added time. Some participants who relied on the real-time transcription needed to wait until it was on-screen and then read it. In the “oral deaf” group, some participants spoke indistinctly and had to repeat themselves for clarity. In the less educated ASL group, people had to repeat as well. And a particularly language-deficient participant created a whole new challenge for everyone in the group. Each group required at least three hours, not the customary one-and-a-half or two. Moderators and observers found this frustrating. It was a particularly enlightening experience for the court personnel among the observers. Yet, long and intense conversations with breaks are typical in deaf culture. Participants were neither fatigued nor impatient. And the added cost (a small increment) of the added time was necessary to get the required information.

*Do we always allow enough time for participants to understand others and explain their thoughts? Or do we pack in as many topics as we can? Are we always as patient as we might be? The moderator and observers must be ready to be patient and avoid feeling frustrated by the consumption of time for this process.*

### **Confidentiality in a Marginalized Community May Require Special Attention**

Another issue associated with running focus groups in this study is that participants in a marginalized community often live in closer social circles than those in the mainstream.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the participants may know each other. Indeed, we did find this in some of our focus groups, particularly the ASL and MSL groups. Including people who know one another is one of the unavoidable costs of studying such communities. The caution to discuss only communication problems served to permit participants to reveal only personal experiences that they were comfortable sharing.

We noted that the effect of knowing each other resulted in some participants limiting their comments only to communication issues without revealing any of their personal stories. In other cases, the participants seemed to be comfortable talking in front of each other, as they may have all known most of the stories they were telling already. Indeed, some participants provided useful information about others’ stories. *Moderators must be prepared to make people in such communities comfortable telling what they can and keeping quiet about what they must.*

### **Matching the Moderator and the Group can Matter in Surprising Ways**

It is widely agreed that a qualified moderator is crucial in focus groups. For this demanding work, co-moderators shared the burden in four of the five groups. The hard of

hearing co-moderator was able to detect some cues and derive some meanings that the hearing moderator could not. The hearing moderator was able to experience, detect, and demonstrate communication issues to hearing audiences. He had many of the same problems that a court official might have, such as getting participants to focus on a topic, being patient at the unusual amount of time required, dealing with interpreters, and trying to get clear answers to questions.

In these groups, the hearing moderator was very much an “outsider,” unfamiliar with deaf or hard of hearing communication. At times outsider status is particularly helpful in uncovering the implicit. Despite the presence of a hard of hearing co-moderator in four of the five groups, *participants seemed to view their task as educating the hearing moderator*. They took the task seriously, explaining such details as the nature of specific assistive listening devices, the manifestations of insensitivity among court officials, the problems they have had with attorneys and police, and the coping strategies they have used. *Having an “outside” moderator may have made it easier for us to encounter and learn about such things. An “inside” moderator, should one have been possible for every different combination of communication modes and hearing status, might not have been told such basic facts. This also reinforces the importance of having an **experienced** moderator, rather than insisting solely on one who matches particular characteristics of group participants.*<sup>9</sup>

### **Feedback is Very Important**

One of the critical factors in the success of this project was the multiple opportunities for feedback from others. Checking with observers during and after each group, as mentioned above, helped us to solve communication problems during the sessions. Post-session evaluation questionnaires showed a high level of satisfaction with communication and also uncovered some unexpressed and unanticipated communication preferences. A feedback summary to participants also seems to have been helpful, both to increase accuracy and completeness of findings and to show respect for participants’ experience. *Do we usually seek out as much feedback as we might from multiple sources—observers, evaluators, and participants themselves?*

## **CONCLUSIONS**

As Morgan (1996, p. 133) has observed, focus groups can be used well to “give voice” to marginalized groups. As he further notes (Morgan, 1996, p. 141), “the growing use of focus groups with cultural minorities and marginalized groups suggests that experience is the best predictor of where focus groups will and will not work.” Focus group methodology was very productive here; it served deaf and hard of hearing groups and the court system well by identifying important unmet communication needs in the courts.

Conducting focus groups with deaf or hard of hearing people is hard work intellectually, logistically, physically, and emotionally. It requires more planning and cooperation among more different people, more breaks, more time and patience in each session, and more feedback during and after each session. Despite our resources, expertise, and focus on communication, we needed to check on and change methods in every group. How much more might we all learn from doing that more self-consciously in *all* our focus groups? Do we

really know how comfortable people are with what they can see and hear from others? Might it help to interrupt all groups periodically to ask?

Would in-depth interviews, a survey, or intensive observational research have done as well? Would they have uncovered more or fewer, similar or different unmet communication needs? Would they have done so clearly, concretely, and quickly enough to engage and enlighten program decision makers? Without having used those other methods, we can only suggest that the group interaction, open-ended interviewing, observation by stakeholders, and relatively quick turnaround did the job optimally for the practical program decisions needed to develop the training that was the ultimate purpose of the focus groups. In any case, those other methods would not have generated reflections on focus group methodology.

The issue of unmet communication needs of deaf and hard of hearing people—and our lessons about focus groups with them—goes well beyond the courts. The ADA covers all sorts of public and private organizations, not just courts. And this is not just about complying with ADA, but about meeting people's needs—from civility to products and services. These unmet needs are often invisible, so we have to be especially sensitive to them. When we train people in focus group processes, do we raise issues related to hearing status as an invisible disability, or ways to accommodate different modes of communication or cultural expression? Do we know how many people with hearing loss are in our typical focus groups? Do we know how much more productive we might make our focus groups by being more aware of invisible communication difficulties? Raising that question may be the greatest lesson we have learned.

## NOTES

1. The authors thank Seth Andersen, Jona Goldschmidt, Wynne Harrison, Marsha Northrup, and the American Judicature Society's Advisory Board for their indispensable help throughout the project.

2. Chicago, Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, and Miami.

3. We chose two separate levels of education (high school graduate and above vs. non-high school graduate) for deaf adults who use ASL because this tends to differentiate segments in the nature of their interactions with the court system (McAlister, 1994).

4. Washington, D.C. has a relatively large, highly educated deaf community because Gallaudet University is located there. Gallaudet is the only university in the world with the specific mission of providing higher education for deaf people.

5. These were not "overdisclosures" in Smith's (1995) sense. Participants were aware of what they were saying and to whom. They were reporting either experiences on the public record or experiences that they felt comfortable sharing with a group of peers.

6. Krueger (1995) mentioned real-time transcripts as a tool for the future of focus groups because it allows analysis to begin closer in time to the group session. In some sessions, we left the focus group room with a transcript on diskette.

7. It is important to note that our observers in the observation room were free to move about, unobserved by participants. They were able to look for, as well as experience, communication problems that the moderator(s) did not. We had no observers in the focus group room itself, where they would not have had this freedom and likely would have been obtrusive. These were observers, not "recorders."

8. We are grateful to Carole Truman and members of the AJS Advisory Board who raised this issue concerning confidentiality and micro-politics in a marginalized community.

9. There are many additional reasons to use a professional moderator (Qualitative Research Consultants Association, Inc., 1995).

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