Beyond spontaneity: the accomplishment of focus group talk

This item was submitted to Loughborough University's Institutional Repository by the/an author.

Additional Information:


Metadata Record: [https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/27162](https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/27162)

Publisher: © Claudia Puchta

Rights: This work is made available according to the conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 2.5 Generic (CC BY-NC-ND 2.5) licence. Full details of this licence are available at: [http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/)

Please cite the published version.
This item was submitted to Loughborough University as a PhD thesis by the author and is made available in the Institutional Repository (https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/) under the following Creative Commons Licence conditions.

For the full text of this licence, please go to: http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/
Please note that fines are charged on ALL overdue items.

14 APR 2000

LOAN COPY
Beyond Spontaneity:
The Accomplishment of Focus Group Talk

by

Claudia Puchta

A Doctoral Thesis
Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the award of
Doctor of Philosophy of Loughborough University

23 April 1999

© by Claudia Puchta 1999
ABSTRACT

This thesis is concerned with the analysis of talk in a corpus of German market research focus groups. The nature of interaction taking place in these focus groups is studied from a conversation analytic and discourse analytic perspective.

The research project has two basic goals.

First, it is intended to provide an analytically based technical understanding of interaction in focus groups. Second, it will contribute to two bodies of work: conversation analytic studies of talk in institutional settings and discursive psychological studies of the way participants' evaluations are managed in practice.

The two introductory chapters describe the development of focus groups as a research technique and highlight the difference between the thesis' analytic approach and other current research on focus groups. The thesis' concern is not whether focus groups are a good or bad research instrument, but will concentrate on the accomplishment of focus groups per se, independent of their virtues in market research.

The thesis' five analytic chapters' focus is as follows:

1. The opening sequences and how moderators nudge the participants into non-prompted 'POBA talk' (POBA stands for perceptions, opinions, beliefs and attitudes).

2. Asking elaborate questions and how moderators manage the tension between demanding answers from the participants and the ideal that group members should answer as spontaneously as possible.

3. Manufacturing individual opinions and how moderators help to produce rhetorically organized and constituted opinions as if they were free-standing.

4. Repeat receipts (that is how moderators receipt participants' contributions in repeating them) and their role in producing the non-debative nature of talk.
5. The moderators' silent recipiency of participants' contributions and how it does generate talk, although not always good material from the moderators' point of view which might be the reason why silent recipiency is relatively unusual in the corpus.

The thesis' last chapter presents a mock focus group between a market researcher, a discursive social psychologist and a feminist researcher discussing the use of the thesis.
CONTENTS

Acknowledgements 1

Introduction 3

Chapter One
Background: The Mainstream Story of Focus Groups 9
1. Main characteristics of focus groups 9
1.1. What are focus groups? 9
1.2. The advantages which are connected with focus groups 11
1.2. Spontaneous and natural interaction 15
1.4. Focused discussion and spontaneous/natural interaction 17
1.5. The balancing act of moderating a focus group 21
2. A history of focus groups 23
3. Uses of focus groups 26
4. On how to analyze focus groups 31

Chapter Two
Methods: Focus Groups as an Interactional Phenomenon 35
1. Three methodological approaches to focus groups 36
1.1. The traditional view of focus groups 36
1.2. Basic themes and specific assumptions of CA 43
1.3. Discursive Social Psychology 55
2. On the data basis and on issues of transcription and translation, analytic procedures, and validity 59

Chapter Three
The Opening Sequences and how Moderators Nudge the Participants into Non-Prompted 'POBA Talk' 70
1. Introduction 70
2. The production of informality in the opening sequence and the orientation to the voluntary character of the focus group

2.1. Displaying casualness via pauses and hesitations

2.2. Displaying casualness via lexical choices and voice changes

2.3. Promoting the focus group as a chat and non-classroom experience

2.4. Promoting the focus group as a voluntary event

3. Requests for non-prompted contributions by the participants

3.1. Explicit requests for non-prompted contributions

3.2. Requests for contributions by individual participants

3.3. A non-vocal request for a non-prompted contribution

4. Request for 'POBA talk'

4.1. Socialization into 'POBA talk'

4.2. Moderators' motivations for asking for 'POBA talk'

4.3. Participants' motivations for doing 'POBA talk'

Chapter Four

Asking Elaborate Questions: Focus Groups and the Management of Spontaneity

1. Introduction

2. Elaborate questions I: Guiding understanding of 'non-mundane' market research questions

3. Elaborate questions II: Securing participation by providing an array of alternative items

4. Elaborate questions III: Managing opinion production

5. Discussion: Elaborate questions and the production of spontaneous and variable opinions
Chapter Five
Manufacturing Individual Opinions: Focus Groups and the Discursive Psychology of Opinion

1. Introduction
1.1. The Discursive Psychology of Opinion
1.2. Focus groups and interaction
1.3. Dilemmas
1.4. Research questions

2. Analysis
2.1. Rhetorical construction and moderator recipiency
2.2. Displaying inconsequentiality
2.3. Meta requests for free-standing opinion talk
2.4. Stripping off the rhetorical context
2.5. Deviant cases

3. Discussion

Chapter Six
Repeat Receipts

1. Introduction
2. Repeats addressed to the prior speaker: Understanding checks without understanding problems
3. Repeats addressed to potential next speakers: Organizing talk as non-debative talk
3.1. Repeats in 'party game modes'
3.2. Repeats in 'feature collecting modes'
3.3. How debative talk is avoided and how debative talk is closed down

4. Discussion

Chapter Seven
Chances and Drawbacks of Silent Recipiency in Market Research Focus Group
1. Introduction 227
2. 'Smooth' display interactions 229
3. Interlude: The psychotherapist remains silent 236
4. Analysis 241
4.1. The moderator's silent recipiency and the participants' formulation of 'empty information' 241
4.2. The moderator's silent recipiency and the participants' 'backing down' 254
4.3. The moderator's silent recipiency and the participants' provision of simple evaluations 260
4.4. The moderator's silent recipiency and the participants' offer of new topics 266
5. Silent recipiency and the Discursive Psychology of Opinion 270
6. Discussion 273

Chapter Eight
Conclusions: Focus Groups: Spontaneous Production of Decontextualized Talk?
1. Chapter-for-chapter-summary 278
2. General themes 285
7. Experts discuss the general conclusions of this thesis 288

References 295
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to Jonathan Potter and Margaret Wetherell that they wrote such a fascinating book that I tried to call them at St Andrews University and learnt that a place called 'Loughborough' existed. The three years writing my PhD thesis became the intellectually most satisfying in my life.

What sounds like a fairy tale - calling book authors and writing out of the blue a PhD thesis with Jonathan being my supervisor - was not always a fairy tale. Living abroad, speaking and writing in English, being twice as old as the other postgrads and above all being a student again was a real challenge. Jonathan was throughout the time a guarantor that what I was doing made sense and was even interesting. Without him I would have given up.

Without Herrn X in Germany the PhD thesis would not have been possible. He not only allowed me access to the archives, but also let me use his office to check and select video tapes and even asked technical employees to transfer the video tapes to audio tapes.

Thanks to the department which considered my case as a 'special case' and supported me with a studentship. Many thanks that I was provided in my last year with an excellent PC which could handle my complicated transcripts in the form of tables.

Last but not least many thanks to Carol and Martin and their sons Philip, Chris and Daniel.
Living together with them in their 'Hotel Falkland' in a 'room with view and balcony' was so peaceful. I am particularly grateful to them for tolerating me even when I was not exactly in a good mood.

Chapter Four 'Asking Elaborate Questions' is based on a paper (C. Puchta & J. Potter) which is in press (Journal of Sociolinguistics). Chapter Five 'Manufacturing Individual Opinions' is based on a paper (C. Puchta & J. Potter) which is submitted to the British Journal of Social Psychology.
INTRODUCTION

Focus groups are a 'hot' topic, even now the general election has passed. It is hard to avoid reading something about focus groups. What is this focus group in process?

This is what 'Mrs Blair' wrote in her 'diary':

Meanwhile, spin doctors’ latest wheeze here is telling Tony to lose his grin, various focus groups having spent hours in darkened rooms staring at walls-full of Brobdingnagian black-and-white blow-up pics of dear husband’s smile, while listening to loud, endless loop-recording of his famous ‘New Labour! New Britain!’ clarion call. Reaction generally not too favourable, apparently, though only two of them are actually suing for post-traumatic stress disorder.

(The Observer, 16 February 1997)

After the comprehensive failure of quantitative survey research to predict the outcome of the 1992 British general election, the resulting 'deep
scepticism' fostered focus group research as an alternative (Wring, 1998). The way this research alternative was presented in the newspapers is particularly interesting. In 1997 I collected all articles in the major English newspapers which mention focus groups. I discovered four tendencies when writing about focus groups:

- focus groups are something mysterious
- 'focus groupies' are different to 'real people'
- focus group judgements are (often) opposed to good judgements

and

- focus group minded politicians are opposed to 'real politicians'.

**Mysterious focus groups**

If one had no idea what the word 'focus group' stands for, one might get the impression that a 'focus group' is some sort of a chemical test we all know from our school days. One puts a strip of prepared paper into a glass with the substance one wants to test; the strip of paper changes its colour, becomes green or red and makes the pupil happy as (s)he knows immediately whether the substance in the glass is x or y.

In the same way focus groups are treated as a mysterious testing device which signals unequivocally, whether something is black or white.

'New Labour's first 100 days have identified the weak link in the Labour Government,' said John Redwood, the Shadow Trade Secretary. 'Peter
Mandelson is perceived by much of the public as running the Government, and our focus group evidence shows the public dislike his tactics and his refusal to answer legitimate questions.' (Paul Routledge, The Independent, 10/8/97, emphasis added)

or

Culturally, there are already signs of a backlash. The focus groups used to test public opinion have detected that there is a reaction against anonymity and alienation, so we are seeing shopping malls renamed as 'villages' and big organisations broken down into smaller 'families'. (Larry·Elliott, The Guardian, 7/7/97, emphasis added)

If we were psychoanalysts we might venture the following interpretation. Focus groups are frightening as they ...

... 'somehow' produce assessments and judgements which affect all of us. Bill Clinton allegedly said that 'there is no one more powerful in the world today than a member of a focus group'

and as they ...

... have to do with gut feelings and lost gut feelings. Michael Portillo denounced them the 'the last refuge of the politician who has lost touch with the people and who can no longer rely on his own gut beliefs.' (Patrick Wintour, The Observer, 9/2/97)

Making jokes about focus groups could then be seen as a way of coping with their frightening character. But as we are of course no psychoanalysts we will not indulge in further interpretations. Back to the facts.
On the one hand, there are ‘focus groupies’ and, on the other hand, there are ‘real people’. For example when the new design of the (Daily) Mirror is described, the author writes:

The new Mirror is, in fact, the New Musical Express. Focus groups may love it. But will real readers? (Roy Greenslade, The Guardian, 13/1/97, emphasis added)

And when focus groups assess politicians’ wives it is said that:

Norma Major and Cherie Blair have already been repackaged to suit the tastes of the focus groupies. (Joe Murphy & Rod Tyler, The Mail on Sunday, 2/3/97, emphasis added)

‘Focus groupies’ don’t exactly seem to be smart people:

... we rejected Paul McCartney (too clever), Phil Collins (opposite), Mark Knopfler (too dull), ... before settling on Richard Branson. Someone - me? - did point out that, while Branson is undoubtedly beloved of focus groups and the most clinically stupid people in Middle England, neither of these groups being mutually exclusive, he had no qualifications whatsoever ... (Mrs Blair’s diary, The Observer, 21/9/97, emphasis added)

And as ‘focus groupies’ are equated with not exactly smart people, decisions which are based on them cannot be exactly smart:

Focus groups are often no more than an outing for British hypocrisy. And they are an abnegation of responsibility for those who rely on them. People in positions of power and
influence are paid large sums of money to have the right instincts and the proper judgement. These are the talents they should use to take important decisions. ... The more focus groups are allowed to influence important decisions, the more likely the nation's lifeblood will be dominated by the mediocre, the cautious, the safe and the second-rate. (Andrew Neil, Daily Mail, 15/9/97, emphasis added)

When TV is considered as 'shallow and unsatisfying' ... it must be a result of a focus group of directors:

I like classic new things or classic old things; what I don't like is a cobbled together of various past original successes - from The Exorcist and The Omen, via Silence of the Lambs and Seven. This is TV as commissioned by a focus group of video directors - shallow and unsatisfying. (David Aaronovitch, The Independent, 6/7/97, emphasis added)

And when a focus group gives 'thumb down', this might have been caused just by a 'bad slice of pizza'.

But one should hardly blame the political class; big business got there first, with Hollywood at the forefront. The makers of the IRA thriller the Devil's Own reportedly altered the plotline and ending of their film, following bad response from focus groups. Audience members said they didn't like the story - but maybe they just had a bad slice of pizza. (Jonathan Freedland, The Guardian, 14/7/97, emphasis added)

Politicians or other powerful people who rely on focus groups are considered as 'held in thrall' or at least 'cowards':

People used to complain that Labour was in danger of being hijacked by organisations such as the International Marxist Group. Yet the Tony Party is in the thrall of the Focus Group, a tightly organised cell of faceless interlopers
trying to overthrow party policy. (Billy Bragg interviewed by Paul Kelso, The Guardian, 26/4/97, emphasis added)

There is something cowardly about the high and mighty's need to resort to focus groups. (Andrew Neil, Daily Mail, 15/8/97, emphasis added)

In contrast, those who avoid focus groups are described as 'refreshingly' independent:

The defence of the Booker's apparent elitism is that juries have regularly directed readers to neglected writers. A prize in line with the spirit of the times would be one which asked paperback buyers to choose between the biggest-selling titles of the year. So there's something refreshing about Booker's reluctance to accept focus group culture ... (Mark Lawson, The Guardian, 13/9/97, emphasis added)

***

Let me end this brief overview of how focus groups are presented in newspapers. I hope it has stimulated a curiosity about what is 'really' going on in focus groups. I have done my best to give a detailed insight into the interaction of a special kind of focus groups: German market research focus groups. And I hope your patience will not be stretched too far when going through the long and admittedly not easy to read transcripts!
CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND: THE MAINSTREAM STORY OF FOCUS GROUPS

This chapter aims to describe the central features of the mainstream story of focus groups. First, it will describe what are considered to be the main characteristics of focus groups. Second, it will review shortly the history of focus groups. Third, it will overview the uses of focus groups. Fourth, and finally, it will discuss 'how to analyze focus groups'.

1. Main characteristics of focus groups

1.1. What are focus groups?

The market researcher Greenbaum describes three different types of focus groups: full groups, minigroups and telephone groups:

A full group consists of a discussion of approximately 90 to 120 minutes, led by a trained moderator, involving 8 to 10 persons who are recruited for the session based on their common demographics, attitudes, or buying patterns germane to the topic. (1998:2)

A minigroup is then the same as a full group except that it contains less participants and in a telephone group people participate in a telephone conference call. As a former market researcher the above definition is a familiar one to me: a focus group is described as an event by its length and by
those who participate (the moderator and the focus group participants).

Definitions of focus groups in social research seem to be more complex. According to Vaughn et al. these definitions usually contain the following core elements:

· The group is an informal assembly of target persons whose points of view are requested to address a selected topic.

· The group is small, 6 to 12 members, and is relatively homogeneous.

· A trained moderator with prepared questions and probes sets the stage and induces participants' responses.

· The goal is to elicit perceptions, feelings, attitudes, and ideas of participants about a selected topic.

· Focus groups do not generate quantitative information that can be projected to a larger population.

(1996:5)

Let me add the definitions of two leading focus group researchers. For Krueger

a focus group is a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, nonthreatening environment. (1994:6)

And Morgan defines

\[\text{1 Krueger offers a nice metaphor. He writes that in some circumstances such as long distance travels by bus or plane people will reveal much about themselves because the environment is nonthreatening and travellers might never see each other again. 'Effort is made to produce this permissive environment in focus groups' (1994:13).}\]
focus groups as a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher. (1997:6)

In the 'Focus Group Kit' Morgan (1998) draws attention to the abuse of the term focus group, as there are any number of 'things' which are called focus groups, but fall outside the current definition. These groups

- do not involve research such as support groups
- are not focused because the moderator cannot keep the group focused
- do not engage in discussion such as nominal groups. In nominal groups which are described in Steward & Shamdasani (1990) participants do not interact with each other, but are interviewed as individuals.

The picture which we get up to now from focus groups is, then, that these are group discussions in which on the one hand, the 'focus' is important and, on the other hand, the interaction among the participants or as Morgan puts it: 'The hallmark of focus groups is their explicit use of group interaction to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group' (1997:2). What other advantages are claimed for focus groups?

1.2. The advantages which are connected with focus groups

The feminist focus group researcher Wilkinson (1998) lists advantages which derive from the interactive nature of focus group data. Among them are that focus groups provide access to the participants' own language and concepts and that they
encourage the production of more fully articulated accounts.

**ACCESS TO THE PARTICIPANTS' OWN LANGUAGE AND CONCEPTS**

Wilkinson compares the listening to focus groups with the metaphor of 'structured eavesdropping' (Powney, 1988, quoted after Wilkinson, 1998) as it enables the researcher to become familiar with the way research participants habitually talk, the particular idioms, terminology and vocabulary they typically use, the ways in which they joke, tell stories, construct arguments, and so on. Focus group interactions reveal not only shared ways of talking, but also shared experiences, and shared ways of making sense of these experiences. The researcher is offered an insight into the commonly held assumptions, concepts and meanings that constitute and inform participants' talk about their experiences. (1998:189)

Market researchers use focus groups for similar reasons as preliminary research and for questionnaire construction and Goldman & McDonald give examples which I can easily recognize as familiar ones. In one case the client had to close a language gap between him/her and the consumers as terms such as 'mass merchandiser' or 'discount drugstore' may be well-known with marketers but not with consumers. Focus groups are therefore considered to help providing answer categories in questionnaires that reflect 'real world perceptions' (Goldman & McDonald, 1987) and not the vocabulary of the clients.

Another example involves the sale of boxed cake mixes. This product flopped at first on the market
and women disclosed in focus groups that they felt they should put more effort into making a cake for their families than merely adding water. This result led to another strategy which required the cook to add a real egg in the preparation of a boxed cake mix and not just a powdered one plus water. It was assumed by the market researchers that the act of breaking an egg creates more of the feeling of 'baking a cake' (quoted after Morgan, 1998).

**THE PRODUCTION OF MORE FULLY ARTICULATED ACCOUNTS**

According to Wilkinson

many focus group researchers comment on the extent to which interaction between participants generates accounts which are more fully articulated - in extent and detail - than are often achieved through a one-to-one interview. In focus groups people typically disclose personal details, reveal discrediting information, express strong views and opinions. (1998:190)

Goldman & McDonald provide a theoretical foundation for this. When a group is hierarchically integrated in the sense, that it has both leaders and followers, 'it mimics the same interactive processes that take place in the broader social environment outside of the group' (1987:67,68). They conclude that in such a hierarchically organized group interview two important events occur. First, the attitudes and feelings of participants are exposed. Second, the social process by which these

---

2 The term 'marketer' is used in American publications and comprises market researchers and marketing people.
attitudes are shaped become manifest and public rather than inferred.' (1987:68)³

To sum up, then, focus groups are considered a valuable research instrument, because they explore the actual language people use while discussing a topic informally and because they allow access to the participants' 'own meanings', by which Wilkinson understands their 'understandings, concepts, representations, beliefs, etc.' (1998b).

Both Krueger and J. Kitzinger use the metaphor of tapping into 'human tendencies', 'interpersonal communication' and 'underlying assumptions'. According to Krueger

The focus group interview works because it taps into human tendencies. Attitudes and perceptions relating to concepts, products, services, or programs are developed in part by interaction with other people. (1994:10, emphasis added)

For J. Kitzinger

Group work also helps researchers tap into the many different forms of communication that people use in day to day interaction, including jokes, anecdotes, teasing, and arguing. (1995:299, emphasis added)

She considers the focus group method as ideal for the examination of the construction of experience as

³ See also Vaughn et al. who offer four assumptions underlying the focus group interview; among them is the following one: 'There are effects of group dynamics that enhance the likelihood that people will speak frankly about a subject, and these cannot occur through individual or small-group interviews. Related to this assumption is that the information obtained from a focus group interview is genuine information about what each person feels rather than a group mind in which people conform to what others believe' (1996:7).
it taps into people's underlying assumptions and theoretical frameworks and draws out how and why they think as they do. (1994:172, emphasis added)

If focus groups are considered as tapping into human tendencies and especially into different forms of communication, focus group interaction is obviously considered as being natural and spontaneous. The next sub-section focuses on descriptions which claim this explicitly.

1.3. Spontaneous and natural interaction

Apart from the metaphor that focus groups tap into human tendencies and into different forms of communication, the focus group interaction is quite often described as spontaneous and natural, although some authors qualify these terms in saying that focus group interaction might not be as spontaneous as natural occurring interaction and the setting might be not as natural as 'real life'.

Wilkinson for example states first that as in focus groups the participants talk primarily to each other rather than to the moderator, they talk in a way which is more "naturalistic" or "ecologically valid" (Liebes, 1984 and Albrecht et al., 1993, quoted after Wilkinson, 1998) than in a one-to-one interview'. She adds then, however, in a footnote:

Of course, focus groups are not 'naturalistic' to the extent that they are organized as part of a research enterprise, rather than constituting everyday social contexts, and there are some important differences between 'naturally occurring' talk and talk in focus groups (c.f.
Mainstream Story of Focus Groups


Krueger does not qualify his statements when writing about the advantages of focus groups as socially oriented research procedures, but states unambiguously:

People are social creatures who interact with others. They are influenced by the comments of others and make decisions after listening to the advice and counsel of people around them. Focus groups place people in natural, real-life situations as opposed to the controlled experimental situations typical of quantitative studies. (1994:34, emphasis added)

The spontaneous character of focus group talk is mentioned by Stewart & Shamdasani when they list the advantages of focus groups relative to individual interviews:

Spontaneity: Since no individual is required to answer any given question in a group interview, the individual's responses can be more spontaneous, less conventional, and should provide a more accurate picture of the person's position on some issue. In the group interview, people speak only when they have definite feelings about a subject and not because a question requires a response. (1990:19)

If we summarize all these features of focus groups we might go as far and say that focus groups are considered as offering something like 'a slice of life'. But how can focus groups be simultaneously focused and more or less spontaneous and natural? In the next sub-section I will pursue the question of how authors manage this tension when they describe focus groups as I would like to highlight this feature of the literature in preparation of exploring it further in my analysis.
1.4. Focused discussion and spontaneous/natural interaction

Authors manage the tension between describing focus groups as a focused discussion which is nevertheless more or less spontaneous and natural in two different ways. Firstly, some state that focus groups are just *not* focused in the sense that the moderator sets the agenda, but that the participants follow their own ones. Others state that focus groups are only spontaneous and natural *if* the facilitator follows a non-directive moderating style. Secondly, it is claimed that it depends on the quality of the question guide whether a focus group has the chance of being spontaneous. Let us take both approaches in turn.

**Focus groups with non-directive moderators empower participants to follow their own agendas**

Wilkinson (1998b) considers focus groups as a relatively 'egalitarian' method as by the sheer number of participants involved, the power of the researcher is reduced. She quotes from studies in which group discussions led the researcher change the research question and in which the participants draw attention to phenomena which had been neglected before by the researcher. For example

In a study of women’s reactions to violent episodes on television, Schlesinger, Dobash, Dobash, and Weaver (1992, p.29) also saw the group discussions as an opportunity for women to ‘determine their own agendas as much as possible’. (1998c:115)

In giving directions for 'qualitative marketing and consumer research' Parker describes the
phenomenon of 'relatively unstructured conversation' in focus groups and states that

when a moderator is relatively nondirective and unobtrusive, and when participants become caught up in the flow of a discussion, the resulting interaction will closely resemble a spontaneous, everyday conversation (Garfield, 1982). Under these circumstances, the focus group may be used as a surrogate for truly spontaneous word-of-mouth. (1988:224, emphasis added)

In considering focus groups as a research instrument which enables the participants to set their own agendas, the obstacle that is the tension between focusing the discussion and aiming at a spontaneous and natural discussion, is negotiated. On the other hand, it might be possible that other authors will not consider these focus groups as being focus groups at all; see for example Morgan (1998) who emphasizes that groups in which the researcher does not take the role of directing the discussion are not focused enough for being called focus groups. Vaughn et al. also point to what they call another potential misuse during the conduct of the focus group:

A common misunderstanding about the conduct of focus groups is that they are 'loose' and not precise in the way they are conducted and organized. Although the interview often gives the impression of being causal and 'informal' conversation, it is actually the result of a highly planned session with clearly identified objectives and carefully composed questions. (1996:151)

Furthermore, the obstacle does not seem to be completely negotiated as researchers point more or less explicitly to the topic which should not be lost touch with. Stewart & Shamdasani for example write:
The moderator is the key to assuring that a group discussion goes smoothly. The focus group moderator generally is well trained in group dynamics and interview skills. Depending on the intent of the research the moderator may be more or less directive with respect to the discussion, and often is quite nondirective - letting the discussion flow naturally as long as it remains on the topic of interest.

(1990:10,11, emphasis added)

It seems to be a difficult job for the moderator passing between Scylla and Charybdis', as the same authors expound later on:

the presence of a moderator or facilitator ... may create an atmosphere of artificiality and potentially inhibit the free flow of discussion.

(1990:35)

A GOOD QUESTION GUIDE PRODUCES A SMOOTH DISCUSSION

For some authors a focus group can be both focused and spontaneous/natural because of a good question guide. As Morgan writes

With a good question guide and perhaps a little pretesting, the discussion should flow from topic to topic. (1997:48)

Shortly later he adds:

the concept of a 'guide' emphasizes that the researcher's list of questions or topics should help channel the discussion without necessarily forcing the group into a predetermined mold. In essence the moderator uses the guide as a resource to maintain the balance between the researcher's focus and the group's discussion.

(1997:48)

and

Hence, when I train novice moderators, I pay as much attention to constructing a good guide as

4 In Greek mythology a sea-monster and a whirlpool which swallowed ships whole in the Straits of Messina.
to managing the actual group dynamics. The reason is that an effective guide can produce a discussion that manages itself ... (1997:48, emphasis added)

Krueger stresses that specifically the questions themselves should appear spontaneous:

The moderator uses predetermined, open-ended questions. These questions appear spontaneous but are carefully developed after considerable reflection. The questions - called the questioning route or interview guide - are arranged in a natural, logical sequence. (1994:20)

Debus, a social marketer, who provides suggestions for modifications of focus group group research to Third World realities, similarly stresses the 'flow of the topic guide' (1986) and offers another solution on how to handle the tension between a focused but nevertheless spontaneous discussion. She differentiates two different questioning techniques (a directive and a non-directive\(^5\) moderating approach) and two different focus group flows (a structured focus group and a non-structured focus group) and recommends the following:

Except in unusual situations, focus groups should use the non-directive, structured moderating approach. In practice, most effective groups are actually semi-structured - the moderator is skilled enough to cover all of the issues in the structured topic guide while maintaining a flexible flow of conversation, a conversation that pursues issues as they are

\(^5\) According to Debus a non-directive moderating approach uses open-ended questions such as: 'What were your reactions when you first saw the character in the poster?' (1986:30). In a structured focus group the moderator works with a topic guide that contains only issues which should be addressed.
mentioned by respondents and relevant new topic as they arise. (1986:30, emphasis added)⁶

Thus we gain the impression that not only the ingenious question guide but especially the qualified moderator is considered as being an asset in running a focus group smoothly and nevertheless focused. (S)he is the one who 'carefully and subtly guides the conversation back on target' (Krueger, 1994:101) if participants offer irrelevant topics; (s)he is the one who 'leads rather than guides' (Vaughn et al., 1996:88), whatever this exactly means! The next subsection provides further discussion of the moderator's qualities.

1.5. The balancing act of moderating a focus group

Throughout the literature the importance of the moderator is stressed; Greenbaum, for example, puts it like this:

Few people involved in qualitative research today would not agree that the most important element in the focus group process is the moderator. The moderator is often compared to an orchestra conductor, in that he or she sets the tone for the session and directs it in such a way that the research objectives are achieved. (1998:73)

In all how-to-do-focus-group manuals the characteristics of a good moderator are described. Greenbaum (1998) lists what he calls 'natural characteristics' such as a 'superior listening ability' and a 'high energy level'. According to him

⁶ See also Millward (1995) who suggests the following moderator styles: high control of process, that is the moderator facilitates interaction amongst the participants and low control
some of these characteristics can be learned, but a large number of them are inherited traits that a person either does or does not have. (1998:77)

Some authors not only point to the desirable moderator qualities, but explicitly go into the above mentioned area of conflict between the focus group's spontaneity and a more or less fixed agenda; above all Fontana & Frey:

The interviewer must be flexible, objective, empathic, persuasive, a good listener and so on. But the group does present some unusual problems. Merton et al. (1956) note three specific skills needed by the group interviewer: First, the interviewer must keep one person or a small coalition of persons from dominating the group; second, he or she must encourage recalcitrant respondents to participate; and third, he or she must obtain responses from the entire group to ensure the fullest possible coverage of the topic. In addition, the interviewer must balance the directive interviewer role with the role of moderator, which calls for the management of the dynamics of the group being interviewed: 'The group interviewer must simultaneously worry about the script of questions and be sensitive to the evolving patterns of group interaction' (Frey & Fontana, in press). (1994:365)

To sum up, then: up to now we considered the main features of focus groups. We saw what manuals suggest being the advantages of focus groups and wondered how both is possible - a focused discussion with spontaneous participant interaction. Feminist focus group researchers seem to solve this dilemma by standing up for egalitarian focus groups; or better: focus groups are considered as being automatically

of content, that is only the issues to be focused on are determined in advance.

7 See for example also Watts & Ebbutt: 'The interviewer wants to allow free discussion and yet at the same time keep the thread
egalitarian because of the numerical ratio of moderator to participants. On the other hand, focus groups without a moderator who focuses the group on a certain topic are not regarded as focus groups by some authors. Other manuals point either to the quality of the question guide and/or the qualities of the moderator, which/who manages a smooth and nevertheless focused discussion. All manuals give lengthy descriptions of moderator qualities. A good moderator seems to be able to be both: participant-centred and participant-controlling. However, the research quoted here does not give us any answer how exactly the moderator manages this tension and we will come back to it in the course of this thesis.

The next sections will briefly overview a history of focus groups and the uses of focus groups in particular in market research. This chapter will end with a general account 'on how to analyze focus groups'.

2. A history of focus groups

Before focusing on the use of focus groups it is worth rehearsing the standard history, which is presented elsewhere in much more detail; see for example Johnson (1996), Vaughn et al. (1996) and Morgan (1997,1998).

As Morgan (1998) describes it very clearly, the history of focus groups can be divided into three periods: the earliest work was carried out both by moving in a particular direction so that the needs of the research design are met' (1987:29).
academic and applied social scientists. From World War II until about 1980, focus groups were almost exclusively used in market research. Most recently, focus groups are conducted in many different fields.

SOCIAL SCIENCE ORIGINS

Merton is considered as being the father of focus groups and the first example of focus group research cited is Lazarsfeld's and Merton's work at Columbia University in 1941 when they tested the reactions to war-time radio broadcasts. After the war, Merton and two of his students, Kendall and Fiske, wrote a book on focus groups, which has been reprinted several times (Merton, Fiske & Kendall, 1956, 1990).

FOCUS GROUPS AS AN ISOLATED MARKET RESEARCH METHOD

From roughly 1950 to 1980, focus groups were seldom found outside of market research. Merton and Lazarsfeld themselves were increasingly attracted more by survey research than by focus groups, but, as Lazarsfeld often used marketing projects in order to finance his research projects, a direct connection between market research and focus groups was made. The move to marketing was, however, also driven by the uses that market researchers themselves created for focus groups. They frequently referred to focus groups as 'group depth interviews' (Goldman & McDonald, 1987), as the emphasis was on uncovering the unconscious sources of behaviour (see the cake mix example from above). Techniques on running and analyzing focus groups were neither taught in psychology departments nor business schools. For
example I myself received only an on-the-job training. I was hired as a psychologist as it was expected that psychologists were prepared through their studies for doing market research and needed only practice.

Morgan (1998) emphasizes that the developments that market researchers made in the focus group techniques were not nearly as influential as they could have been as very few researchers published descriptions of their methods.

**FOCUS GROUPS AS A WIDESPREAD RESEARCH METHOD**

According to Morgan (1998) the applied social research was the vehicle that spread focus groups beyond the world of product marketing. In 1981 Folch-Lyon and her colleagues published articles on their efforts to promote the use of contraceptives in Mexico (see for example Folch-Lyon et al., 1981). They used both focus groups and surveys to explore the knowledge, attitudes and practices about contraception among several segments of the Mexican population. Another early applied research project was run by Joseph and her colleagues (1984). They constructed a questionnaire that surveyed the reactions of gay and bisexual men regarding the emerging AIDS epidemic with the help of focus groups.

In the meantime focus groups have become an increasingly popular tool in applied social research, especially in the health field. It is worth mentioning Knodel's (1995) work in Thailand on the declines in fertility, attitudes towards prostitution and the support adult children supply to their aging
parents and Basch' work on focus groups as a research technique for improving theory and practice in health education (1987) and, with his colleagues, on the decision processes of young drivers (1989). In 1996 the psychologists and communication researchers Lunt and Livingstone started using focus groups in order to examine how an audience interprets media messages. In the same year focus groups came to prominence as a research tool in Britain when the Tory communications strategy of using focus groups for winning the next general election became known (Johnson, 1996).


3. Uses of focus groups

In order to provide a context for my own focus group data I will at first give an overview on the uses of focus groups in general and will later on focus on the uses of focus groups especially in market research. Morgan (1997) identifies two broad traditions of focus group research (see also Wilkinson, 1998): focus groups as a self-contained source of qualitative data and focus groups combined with other methods. The key defining feature of self-contained focus groups is 'the ability to report the
data from the focus groups as a sufficient body of knowledge' (Morgan, 1997:21). When focus groups are used as an adjunct to other research methods, they are according to Morgan (1997) linked with either individual interviewing, participant observation, surveys or experiments. The two most common research designs involve according to Wilkinson (1998) the use of focus groups in an initial exploratory or hypothesis generating phase and the use of focus groups in a final follow-up phase that pursues exploratory aspects of the analysis.

Apart from the desired type of outcome the use of focus groups can also be considered in relation to the type of research question. When focus groups are used in the context of marketing both in profit- and nonprofit-organizations the research is mostly concerned with an evaluation of the marketing products and/or services. See focus group studies on the acceptability of new cars (for example Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990) and on the evaluation of mental health programs (for example Richter et al., 1991).

The market researcher Greenbaum (1998) specifies the uses of focus groups in marketing and lists among others the following research questions:

- New product development studies in which the consumer reactions to a new product concept or prototype are tested.
- Positioning studies which aim at identifying the most effective way to communicate a particular product.
- Advertising/copy evaluations.
- Packaging assessments.
Mainstream Story of Focus Groups

- Promotion evaluations.
- Attitude studies on how target consumers feel about different products, services and programs.

When focus groups are used in the context of health education the research is mostly concerned with the promotion of awareness and the facilitation of behaviour change. See focus group studies on sex education, particularly on the promotion of safer sex in the context of HIV/AIDS (for example Kline et al., 1992) and on the responses to health-related messages (for example Philo et al., 1994).

Focus groups are also used in the context of participatory and action research with the intent to 'empower and to foster social change' (Johnson, 1996:536; see also Cunningham-Burley et al., 1999). See for example the action research conducted to enable Hispanic students in a community college to overcome barriers to success (Padilla, 1993).

THE USE OF FOCUS GROUPS IN MARKET RESEARCH

In the United States alone are according to Goldman & McDonald (1987) over 700 focus group facilities; they estimate that the dollar volume spent on focus group studies conducted for advertising and market research in 1985 was between $283 and $378 million. As there are no official statistics that cover the qualitative research industry, Greenbaum (1998) only roughly estimates that the number of focus groups conducted in the United States may have doubled between the mid-1980s and the early 1990s; there does not seem to be a similar growth pattern since the early 1990s, but
focus groups continue to be according to him a very important part of the overall marketing mix of major organizations.

Before discussing in more detail the use of focus groups in market research I would like to quote a short passage from Millward's chapter on focus groups in which she glosses the current use of focus groups in marketing:

For decades, the use of focus groups within the marketing context has relied on the untested assumptions that generating data by focus groups is the quickest and most efficient means of generating consumer relevant information. Currently, the focus group method - at least in the marketing domain - has largely evolved into a 'quick and dirty' means of fulfilling client needs rather than as a sophisticated research tool. (1995:275)

Similarly Parker observes how focus group data are largely used to give 'anecdotal evidence' (1988) as focus group reports typically contain generalizations on the assumed underlying attitudes which are backed up with participants' 'verbatims' (quotations).

At least in Germany, however, there is another development apart from the 'quick and dirty' line. As the competition among market research institutes offering focus group research becomes stronger, there are now institutes which aim to offer superior quality either in providing especially trained moderators, especially careful analyses, or analyses which are based on an especially interesting or an

---

8 See also Rothenberg's witty description on the interaction between advertising agencies and market researchers: "Where the
unusual theory\textsuperscript{9} or just one theory, as most institutes work without any theory.

But let me now give less 'anecdotal' and more 'scientific' evidence on how focus groups are used in market research. In his seminal paper on the 'nature of qualitative research' published in the 'Journal of Marketing Research' Calder (1977; see also Calder, 1994) describes three different approaches to focus groups - the exploratory, the clinical and the phenomenological approach. Whereas the exploratory approach seeks to obtain what Calder calls 'prescientific knowledge' in areas that are relatively unknown to the researcher, the clinical approach seeks 'quasiscientific explanations' and is based on the premise that the real causes of behaviour must be discovered (and can be discovered) through the clinical judgement of trained analysts. For us the most interesting approach is the third one, the phenomenological one, as this seems to be the most common one in market research. As marketers usually belong to other social groupings than the target groups, focus groups are considered as a way of bridging the social gap and to 'experience' a 'flesh and blood' consumer (Axelrod, 1975, quoted after Calder, 1977). The logic of the phenomenological approach dictates that the researcher must share the experience of consumers; that (s)he must be somehow personally involved with them. Focus groups should not only transport the

\textsuperscript{9} I have here a very expensive institute in mind which is proud of working together with a University professor and which bases its work and analysis on a theory called 'morphology'; my sample includes two focus groups run by this institute.
Mainstream Story of Focus Groups

experience of consumers, but the 'experiencing of the experience of consumers' (1977:360).

The focus groups of my sample are mainly conducted in order to give the advertising people and product managers the possibility to experience the experience of smokers (although from behind the one-way-mirror). All 'my' focus groups are run for a tobacco company which employs very expensive product managers and works with very expensive advertising agencies; both groups are hardly ever in contact with 'normal' smokers. On the other hand, however, the focus groups are run either by institutes which claim to have superior focus group knowledge or by market researchers who work in the market research department of the company and who claim to know 'their' smokers. They might claim if asked that they do not just want to give phenomenological evidence, but clinical judgement on the smoker's assessments, evaluations and preferences.

4. On how to analyze focus groups

Focus group manuals give as one possible explanation for the popularity of focus groups the quick turnaround from implementation to findings (Vaughn et al., 1996). This quick turnaround is possible as the results of focus groups are treated as readily apparent in contrast for example to survey researches. Stewart & Shamdasani point to the negative side of this:

---

10 One free-lance moderator, however, seems to be an exception.
11 There is, however, one young and inexperienced employee/moderator.
The 'live' and immediate nature of the interaction may lead a researcher or decision maker to place greater faith in the findings than is actually warranted. (1990:17)\textsuperscript{12}

It is interesting, however, that even when authors point to the 'too high' face validity of focus groups they do not give focus group users elaborate guidance regarding the analysis. Vaughn et al. (1996) for example dedicate in their book with ten chapters only one to 'Data Analysis', but for example each one to 'Preparing for the Focus Group', 'Selection of Participants' and 'Role of the Moderator'. The recommendations they give on how to analyze focus groups are rather straightforward and summed up in a box:

Lederman (1990) identified analytic approaches that could be used for data analysis. These include the following:

1. Code data into predetermined categories.
2. Develop categories based on the data and then code the data.
3. Use the data as a basis for summary statements that capture the main ideas of the interviewer.
4. Interpret the data through an intensive analytic technique.

We suggest that, when applying any of these procedures, one should use quotes from the participants to support the categories, and summary statements.

\textsuperscript{12} See also Krueger: 'If anything, the face validity of focus groups may be too high. Focus group results seem so believable that decision makers may have the tendency to rush out and implement the resulting recommendations without adequate skepticism' (1994:32).
\textsuperscript{13} See also the market researcher Greenbaum who does not even list 'analysis' in his index and offers only a chapter with 'Common Mistakes in Focus Groups' in which just three pages refer to analytical mistakes such as 'The Observers are Biased' (1998).
If one follows this guideline, one uses focus group data as one-to-one interview data and as Wilkinson (1998c) writes, most of the well over 200 focus group studies she reviewed do the same and rarely report or analyze interactions between participants (see also J. Kitzinger, 1994). Both J. Kitzinger and Wilkinson stress the importance of interaction - in the way a focus group is conducted (see especially J. Kitzinger, 1994) and in the way a focus group is analyzed:

The only distinct feature of working with focus group data is the need to indicate the impact of the group dynamic and analyse the sessions in ways that take full advantage of the interaction between research participants. (J. Kitzinger, 1995:301,302)

While the process of analyzing focus groups is in the 'mainstream literature' not considered as a problem, drawbacks of focus groups are described in the manuals particularly as inappropriate uses and potential abuses. According to Vaughn et al. (1996) one of the greatest abuses is to use focus groups as a research tool when they are not compatible with the research questions and Morgan (1998) asks researchers to steer clear of focus groups when the project requires statistical data.

14 The market researcher Greenbaum states that 'Much greater emphasis is being placed on encouraging interaction among group participants. Many moderators formerly conducted sessions as if they were 10 separate one-on-one interviews, with the bulk of the discussion occurring directly between them and individual participants. Clients are now demanding significantly more interaction among the participants so that group dynamics can be used to elicit various points of view from the participants' (1998:174).

15 See also Burgess et al. (1988,1988b) and Holbrook & Jackson (1996).
Some authors deal explicitly with the analysis of focus groups. Beach (1990), Agar & MacDonalds (1995), Myers (1998) and Myers & Macnaghten (1998, 1999) work with the verbatim records in focus groups. Their analysis, however, moves away from a purely instrumental concern with focus groups and starts to become concerned with interaction in focus groups as a phenomenon in its own right. These authors work within a conversation analytical framework which means that they do not regard verbatim records as a gateway to attitudes, opinions or views, but treat them as jointly constructed for local purposes. The next chapter’s focus is on different methodological approaches to analyze focus groups. The basic themes and specific assumptions of Conversation Analysis will be discussed in detail.
CHAPTER TWO

METHODS: FOCUS GROUPS AS AN INTERACTIONAL PHENOMENON

In this chapter I aim to describe a methodological approach to analyze focus groups as an interactional phenomenon. It is necessary to make an important distinction right at the beginning. Focus groups could be analyzed from an 'utility-point of view': what is the value of focus groups for social research? Are focus groups a good or a bad research instrument? How can focus groups be better analyzed? There are researchers who follow this line of research (J. Kitzinger, 1994, 1995; Wilkinson, 1998c). Our research question, however, is a different one. We will concentrate on the accomplishment of focus groups per se, independent of whether they are good or bad. We will ask: how do focus groups operate? How are for example opinions and assessments produced in the focus groups? Or, more general, what does the interaction in focus group look like?

The chapter will provide at first a short overview on different methodological approaches and will start by outlining the traditional view of focus groups; J. Kitzinger's (1994, 1995) and Wilkinson's (1998c) work will be considered as an attempt to improve focus group analyses in this field. Thereafter it will review conversation analytic approaches of interaction in 'talk at work' settings (Drew & Heritage, 1992) such as interviews (Suchman & Jordan, 1990; Schaeffer & Maynard, 1996). The first part of the chapter will come to an end with an
overview of Discursive Social Psychology (Potter, 1998) and a discussion of how this perspective provides a new approach for conceptualizing attitudes and their construction in focus groups. The second part of the chapter will describe the materials studied.

1. Three methodological approaches to focus groups

1.1. The traditional view of focus groups

In the following I will discuss the underlying assumptions of focus groups as seen by the users of focus groups and authors of focus group manuals. Focus groups are considered to elicit attitudes. Vaughn et al. who overview definitions of focus groups state that they usually contain the following 'core element' (see Chapter One):

The goal is to elicit perceptions, feelings, attitudes, and ideas of participants about a selected topic. (1996:5)

Eliciting attitudes is considered to be easier in a group as compared with an individual interview. In listing five underlying assumptions of focus groups Lederman compares the interview of a group with a brainstorming and states:

The group provides a synergy which results in more than the sum total of what individuals alone could create. The group is 'focused' in on a topic of concern. By talking with the group, researchers, acting as group interviewers, are able to encourage group members to recount their inner experiences in relation to the object of focus in the interview. Group members can also be encouraged to add to those commentaries as
they hear what other group members contribute. (1990:119)

Merton, Fiske & Kendall (1956) as the first to write about the focus group technique have conceptualized focus groups as a kind of depth interview designed to allow for deeper psychological reactions than interviews concerned only with more superficial data collection. According to them:

The group interview utilizes the same kinds of social mechanism for releasing the inhibitions of individuals who are otherwise reluctant to disclose what are for them intimately private matters. (1956:141,142)

If we follow these authors we visualize individual interviews as events where the interviewees impart information such as their attitudes about themselves and focus groups as events where the focus group members impart even more 'deeper' information about themselves. Let us look at Goldman & McDonald's (1987) explanation for that. They state that under the condition that the group could develop into a 'hierarchically integrated group' (1987:67) with both leaders and followers, advocates and adversaries one can test the strength and the structure of consumer views in a setting that more closely approximates the environment in which people arrive at opinions and make decisions. The restrained impartiality of the individual interview does not normally subject respondent views to so grueling or realistic a test. By contrast, a hierarchically integrated group provides an environment in which candid, often unexpected, disclosures are encouraged by participants' freedom to challenge or support one another. (1987:68)

Whereas the advantages of interaction in focus groups are stressed, or better, as the interaction
between the participants in the focus groups is considered as their 'reason for being', the analysis itself seems to avoid considering interaction between the focus group members, but instead concentrates on participants' individual contributions. To illustrate this approach, I would like to quote from Krueger's book 'Analyzing and Reporting Focus Group Results', which neatly captures the recommended analytic procedure under the heading 'Long table, scissors and colored marked pens':

Soon my paper is filling up with participant quotes. After I've placed everything into categories, I'm ready to begin analysis of specific themes or questions. ... Now I look over each category and write descriptive summaries of each section. ... When I am finished placing items in categories and developing descriptions, I take a break and refocus on the big picture. ... The long table approach is still quite effective. Quite a number of variations are possible, but the core elements are basically cutting, sorting, and arranging. (1998:58, 59)

Focus group manuals typically treat the analysis of data as unproblematic. Where problems are highlighted it is with the representativeness of the data because of its very small respondent-base. For example:

The intent of focus group interviews is to report the views of participants, not to generalize to larger groups. Indeed, one of the potential misuses of focus groups is to project findings to a larger population. (Vaughn et al., 1996:154)

That is why, Vaughn et al. suggest that the best is to identify attitudinal dimensions without any attempt to quantify the extent to which these are held in any subgroup (1996:155).
In contrast to the mainstream focus group manuals J. Kitzinger (1994, 1995) and Wilkinson (1998c) stress, however, how both interviewer and interviewee and focus group moderator and focus group participants are engaged in social action and that interviewees and participants do not merely impart information or attitudes. In Chapter One we already mentioned Kitzinger's and Wilkinson's emphasis on interaction. Here we will present their approach to interaction as an approach on how to analyze focus groups in a better way.

J. Kitzinger argues for the 'overt exploitation and exploration of interactions in focus group discussions' (1994:116). She lists ten main advantages to be gained from having interaction between participants; among them are the following ones:

Such interaction:

- highlights the respondents' attitudes, priorities, language and framework of understanding

- encourages a great variety of communication from participants - tapping into a wide range and form of understanding. ...

Through detailed attention to the interaction between different members of the group a researcher can:

- ... use the conflict between participants in order to clarify why people believe what they do. Examine the questions that people ask one another in order to reveal their underlying assumptions and theoretical frameworks.

(1994:116)
Given this ambitious approach, one is surprised to find only the following concrete advice on how to analyze focus groups:

A focus group research report that is true to its data should also usually include at least some illustrations of the talk between participants, rather than simply presenting isolated quotations taken out of context. (Kitzinger, 1995:302)

Wilkinson (1998c:121,122) on the other hand illustrates how the researcher should make full use of the interaction in a focus group by referring to Billig's (1992) analysis of group discussions about the British Royal Family. Billig’s general goal was to explore the ideological business done by people’s talk about Royalty. In his chapter on ‘Desire, denial and the press’ Billig analyzes the process by which some people are constructed as ‘Gullible Consumers’ of the media and are used as 'Contrastive Others' to depict the speaker’s own critical position. According to Billig this marking of a family's great-grandmother was achieved with the help of 'an act of collective deafness' (1992:159) as the younger family members did not show any interest in great grandmothers' first-hand experiences of the press during the First World War. 'Being admittedly not a feminist study' (1998c:121) for Wilkinson it is nevertheless one 'that incorporates theoretical and methodological approaches that feminists may usefully adopt in analysing the interactive feature of focus group data' (1998c:121).

Silverman’s points about interactionism in open-ended interviews could be applied to both Kitzinger's and Wilkinson's approach to focus groups. Just
Focus Groups as an Interactional Phenomenon

According to interactionism, interviewees are viewed as experiencing subjects who actively construct their social worlds; the primary issue is to generate data which give an authentic insight into people's experiences; the main ways to achieve this are unstructured, open-ended interviews ... (Silverman, 1993:91)

Silverman shows sympathy for this approach, which is for him a "humanistic" position (Silverman, 1993:95), as this alternative to the positivist way of generating valid and reliable data in standardized settings seems to blend commonsensical humanity with political concern. However, he sees important issues being neglected, and we are especially interested in his account of the assumptions made in open-ended interviews and the 'truth' of interview data.

1. **Open-ended interviews are not control-free.**

   Following Hammersley & Atkinson (1983) Silverman (1993) points out that it is naive to assume that open-ended or non-directive interviewing is not a form of social control. For example, the passivity of psychotherapists can be a powerful device to get clients talking.

2. **Open-ended interviews are not more 'true'.**

   Whereas interactionists claim that a deep mutual understanding can be achieved in open-ended interviews via 'intersubjective depth', ethnomethodologists such as Cicourel (1964) claim that they do not explicate more than the 'basic properties of social interaction' (Silverman, 1993:98). For ethnomethodologists interviews thus cannot be seen as a technique which provides data on
external realities; they are rather 'interviews-as-local-accomplishments' in which a 'common-sense knowledge of social structures (is) used to produce "adequate" utterances' (Silverman, 1993:104). For ethnomethodologists (for example Garfinkel, 1967) talk has always this quality: participants never respond in a passive way to what is going on, but they produce interaction on each occasion with the help of tacit, practical reasoning skills and competencies. The analytic attention is thus directed towards the in situ accomplishment of particular events and activities.

If we apply Silverman's criticisms of open-ended interviews to focus groups, we learn that in focus groups like in open-ended interviews interaction is produced and that the produced interaction cannot be taken at its face value. Whereas for Silverman, however, this is a reason for discussing the value of open-ended interviews, whether they are a good or bad research instrument and how the analysis of open-ended interviews can be improved, readers should keep in mind that this evaluation is a separable concern from the accomplishment of open-ended interviews or focus groups per se.

Silverman's criticisms of open-ended interviews are based mainly on ethnomethodological arguments. We will turn now to Conversation Analysis which has according to Heritage over the past twenty-five years 'developed into a prominent form of ethnomethodological work' (1984:233).
1.2. Basic themes and specific assumptions of CA

The study of talk-in-interaction (Conversation Analysis, CA) is based on Sacks' (1992) work which shares many of Garfinkel's concerns. According to Heath,

the uniqueness of practical activities which informs ethnomethodology and conversation analysis is more radical than the notion of context that is found elsewhere in the social sciences. All too often 'context' is treated as realm of local variables which can be invoked to explain the specific character of practical activity within some particular occasion or circumstance. ... By contrast, in ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, social actions and activities are inseparable from, or, better, part and parcel of, the 'context at hand'. The intelligibility of a scene, the character of the event, ... are ongoingly accomplished in and through the practical and concerted actions of the participants themselves; there is 'no time out' from the moment by moment production of the 'objective order of social facts'. (1997:186)

Before presenting more of the basic themes and specific assumptions of CA, I wish to point to a general issue in ethnomethodology and CA. The participants are considered as competent partners in the production of social actions and activities and the aim is to characterize the methodological resources on which the participants rely in order to accomplish their activities.

Schegloff & Sacks (1973) analyzed telephone conversations and discovered behind the apparent messiness of the recorded exchanges systematic properties in the way that conversation is organized. The adventure which lies ahead of us is to study the
messiness of focus group data. How is interaction in the special kind of focus groups we are looking at (German market research focus groups) organized? With a CA background we aim not at optimizing focus groups, but we aim at discovering the skillfulness of the focus group participants in organizing focus groups.

The development of CA as a distinctive field of research is linked with Sacks' (1963) criticism of sociological concepts, generalizations and idealizations. His response was to concentrate on the primary data of the social world: 'When I started to do research in sociology I figured that sociology could not be an actual science unless it was able to handle the details of actual events' (1984:26). He started to work on tape-recorded conversation to pursue this aim: 'I started with tape-recorded conversation ... simply because I could get my hands on it and I could study it again and again' (1984:26). Contemporary CA still forestalls the process of idealization and still focuses on the details of actual interactions. It insists on spoken language produced independently of the actions of the researcher and stresses the difficulties of working

---

1 See also Silverman when he differentiates in a footnote between a more analytic version and a more practical version of 'skillfulness': 'Anssi Peräkylä (personal communication) has raised the provocative question of whether I am implying that all counsellors, whatever they do, are always skilful. I see that we might reach this (presumably absurd) conclusion by an over-mechanistic reading of conversation analysis's emphasis on the local functions of any turn-at-talk. It is obviously important to distinguish between this analytic version of 'skillfulness' and more practical versions which, quite properly, in their own terms, seek to identify skill 'deficits'. The only sense in which the latter version may be limited would be when its users failed to relate their identification of professional 'skills' to what-we-all-do in everyday conversation.' (1997:225)
with interview talk as it is contrived (see Potter, 1997, on 'Naturally occuring talk as topic').

In contrast to other forms of social science inquiries, CA does not provide a 'method' in the sense of procedures which one has to follow to generate valid results. Conversation analysts such as Psathas (1990) talk of developing an analytic mentality. What kinds of questions are then considered as being coherent with CA? Before coming back to this question, I will present the specific CA assumptions according to Heritage (1984). Having this CA background in mind, we will find it easier to delineate specific CA tasks.

1. No details in interaction can be dismissed a priori as insignificant. Neither pauses nor repairs, the selection of particular words or the placement of overlaps, should be assumed to be irrelevant to interaction.

2. The contributions to interaction are contextually oriented. Heritage suggests that talk in interaction is both 'context shaped and context renewing'; 'a speaker's contribution is both designed with regard to the local configuration of activity and in particular the immediately preceding actions, and itself inevitably contributes to the framework in terms of which the next action will be understood' (1984:242).

3. The most fundamental assumption of conversation analysis is, however, that all aspects of social action and interaction 'can be found to
exhibit organized patterns of stable, recurrent structural features' (Heritage, 1984:241). These organizations are independent of psychological characteristics of particular speakers. They are known and oriented to by ordinary speakers. This is an important distinction in the conversation analytical framework: norms are oriented to; they are not templates for action.

Let us take the example provided by Potter (1998). A normal thing to do is to return a greeting. If a greeting, however, is not returned, people do not start to doubt the normative basis of greeting. Instead, they are likely to engage in a range of inferences about the person and his/her motives of not greeting; is (s)he rude, sulking or whatever? Or, in other words, the absence of a non-returned greeting is inferentially rich and normatively accountable.

Let us come back to the question asked above. What kinds of analysts' tasks are then coherent with CA? There is a dual focus both on the methodological resources used by the participants themselves in the production of social actions, on the participants' orientation to each other's conduct and on the participants' identification of the resources on which they rely. In order to describe the procedures and expectations through which participants produce and understand conversation, CA focuses on action sequences and analyzes the placement of utterances in sequences of action.

Having the basic CA assumption of the context shaping and the context renewing feature in mind, we
can see how the production of a specific conversational action proposes a local definition of the situation to which subsequent talk will be oriented. The strongest form of this sequential interrelation are paired actions: a 'current' action like a question projects the production of a relevant 'next' action like an answer by another speaker. When the question is answered, the answer as the relevant 'next' is non-accountable. When the answer, however, does not occur, the matter is specifically accountable and accounts might be offered by the party who has not provided the relevant 'next'; in the case of a question-answer-sequence, the recipient of a question could, for example, offer an account for the missing answer.

Sacks (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973) used the notion of 'adjacency pairs' for very tightly organized sequences such as greeting-greeting- and invitation-acceptance/refusal-sequences. Of course, conversation is not an endless series of adjacency pairs. The general assumption of conversation from the point of view of the participants follows, however, a similar principle: the assumption of adjacent utterances. An utterance which is placed next to a prior one, is understood as a response in relation to that prior one. Developing this argument further, the generic phenomenon of 'next positioning' is crucial for the maintenance of continuously updated intersubjective understanding. Any 'second' action displays implicitly an understanding of the 'first' action and in any 'third' action, the producer of the 'first' action has the opportunity to repair any misunderstanding of the 'first' action as displayed in the 'second' action.
CA AND INSTITUTIONAL INTERACTION

Having outlined the basic themes and specific assumptions in CA, it might be now helpful to provide a brief overview of the conversation analytical approach to institutional interaction.

With a dynamic view of context, which considers context not as given, but as an active accomplishment, CA makes a break from conventional approaches of institutional settings that adopt a 'container' model of institutional contexts (see also Heritage's, 1987, 'bucket' theory of context). Whereas in this model the setting's already existing structures impose certain interactional constraints, CA starts with the view that 'context' is both a project and a product of the participants' actions. Heritage concludes:

The assumption is that it is fundamentally through interaction that context is built, invoked and managed, and that it is through interaction that institutional imperatives originating from outside the interaction are evidenced and made real and enforceable for the participants. (1997:163)

He gives the following example:

T: Where else were they taking it before they (1.0) started in Western Australia? (2.0) Mm hm?
(0.5)
P1: Melbourne?
(0.5)
T: No:::
P2: [
T: No::
(1.0)
T: Where does BHP get its iron ore from?
P3: [
P4: [
P5: [
P6: (New South Wales)
Focus Groups as an Interactional Phenomenon

...  

T: You're guessing  

(McHoul quoted after Heritage, 1984:288)

Without seeing the desks or the blackboard, any reader of this extract will have no trouble inferring that the questions are asked by a teacher and the answers are produced by pupils. A pedagogical frame of reference is established - regardless of whether this sequence takes place in a classroom or not. An educational context is established and renewed with every 'third' turn as the teacher proposes with his comments that the prior question was an exam question and not a real question.

How can we characterize the institutional nature of classroom interaction? Drew & Heritage (1992) who studied institutional settings focused on three features: Institutional encounters are seen as basically task-related; they involve special constraints on what will be treated as appropriate contributions; institutional talk is finally associated with special inferential frameworks. When for example in a news interview environment the 'professionals' withhold surprise or sympathy, such withholdings are - in contrast to a conversational context - not interpreted as disaffiliative.

In the following I will present two analyses of institutional talk which will pave the way for our analysis of focus groups - these are Suchman & Jordan's (1990) and Schaeffer & Maynard's (1996) studies on survey interviews.

---

2 See Searle: 'In real questions the speaker wants to know (find out) the answer; in exam questions, the speaker wants to know if the hearer knows.' (1969:66)
In their seminal paper Suchman & Jordan (1990) analyzed sequential organizations in structured face-to-face survey interviews. They identified troubles in recordings of three interviews using the General Social Survey and two interviews using the National Health Survey. Discussions of the data with veteran survey researchers lead Suchman & Jordan to believe that the troubles identified are not completely idiosyncratic.

In the interest of standardization the interviewers who administer a questionnaire to the respondents are constrained to ask the same questions in the same order and in the same way every time. Whereas in mundane conversation speakers can accommodate specific hearers and the specific history of the current talk, interviewers are trained not to redesign questions. When questions must be designed for anyone, they need to exhaust the range of possible circumstances. This by Suchman & Jordan called 'exhaustive specification of conditions' (1990:233) results in awkward questions such as the following one:

Interviewer: During those two weeks, did anyone in the family receive health care at home or go to a doctor's office, clinic, hospital or some other place. Include care from a nurse or anyone working with or for a medical doctor. Do not count times while an overnight patient in a hospital.

Interviewee: ((pause)) No:

(1990:233)

Respondents can take such question expansions as problematic as the following fragment shows:
IR: Was the total combined family income during the past twelve months, that is, yours, your wife’s, Judith’s and Jerry’s more or less than twenty thousand dollars.

IE: More.

IR: Include money from jobs, social security, retirement income, unemployment payments, public assistance, and so forth. Also include income from interest, dividends, net income from business, farm, or rent, and any other money income received.

IE: More. It was more income.

(1990:234)

Note the interviewee’s "More. It was more income.". Following Schegloff’s (1990) comment on Suchman & Jordan’s (1990) paper, the respondent builds into her answer three aspects: a) she implicates whether the interviewer had understood her answer before or not; b) by using elements of the first question ('more income') she raises the issue whether her second response would be understood as addressed to the initially asked question; c) she displays that a one-word-reply such as 'more' might not be recognizable as an adequate answer to the expanded question.

Suchman & Jordan conclude that however successful the effort to improve the wording of survey questions may be,

word choice will never eliminate the need for interviewers and respondents to negotiate the meaning of both questions and answers.

(1990:240)

They recommend a more collaborative design for the interaction between interviewer and interviewee. In such a 'collaborative interview' the questionnaire is at least visually available to both parties.
Schaeffer & Maynard's (1996) chapter on the 'Interactive aspects of cognitive processing in standardized survey interviews' picks up from Suchman & Jordan's work. Survey interviews for the Census Bureau allow the interviewers to avoid repeating questions where the respondent has already volunteered an answer, or where an answer can be reasonably inferred from previous answers. Census Bureau interviewers can use a practice called verification, with the help of which interviewers display that they have heard and remembered information given by the interviewee and that this information is the correct answer to the current question. If, for example, a respondent has already mentioned her age, the interviewer can ask her something like: 'I think you said you are twenty-four years old. Is that the age I should record for you?'. Having listened to actual interviews, Schaeffer & Maynard state, however, that although most of the verifications are used in the intended sense, it is sometimes difficult to decide whether the interviewer has changed the wording of a question as part of an acceptable verification or for another reason that is less justified under the given rules. In any case, the interviews being analyzed by Schaeffer & Maynard include fewer ideal cases of exactly standardized interviewing of a certain survey question than deviant cases and they conclude:

Our analysis of these deviant instances suggests that seeing the point of a question is an interactional accomplishment: in the face of anticipated and actual problems, participants regularly resort to orderly activities of
heightened coinvolvement in which the interviewer's contributions to the respondent's answer become intensified. (1996:84)

Let us look in detail at a sequence from Schaeffer & Maynard.

**IE:** Insurance Company
(13.0) ((typing))
**IR:** And what kind of business or industry is this?=
**IE:** the insurance industry
(7.0) ((typing))
**IR:** Is this business or organization mainly manufacturing retail trade whole- wholesale trade or something else?
(1.0)
**IE:** It's a service industry
(1.8)
**IR:** So it'd be under::?
(2.0) ((3rd voice whispers "something else"))
**IE:** Well: it wouldn'- wouldn't be manufacturing or retail or
(.9)
**IE:** or anything like that it's:
(.7)
**IE:** I don't know how- I don't know what you'd (. ) classify it=
**IR:** =Under something else=
**IE:** Yeah:
(1.0)
**IR:** And what kind of work do you usually do at this job that is (. ) what is your occupation.
(1996:73)

Schaeffer & Maynard point to the interviewer's probe ("So it'd be under::?") and the interviewee's ensuing extended turn of talk, which ends with a formulation of uncertainty ("I don't know how- I don't know what you'd (. ) classify it="). It invites the interviewer to produce a candidate answer in the form of one of the questionnaire categories ("=Under something else=") - a response which can be nevertheless seen as the interviewee's one. In this fragment we can see how the interviewee solicits the interviewer's help and how the interviewer finally offers help; in other extracts provided by Schaeffer & Maynard (1996), interviewers offer help for answering questions.
When considering the 'institutionality' of interaction Heritage (1997) suggests to analyze six features. Among them are the turn-taking organization and the sequence organization ('does the interaction I am looking at involves the use of a special turn-taking and/or sequential organization?').

According to Suchman & Jordan's (1990) and Maynard & Schaeffer's (1996) analysis, the turn-taking organization is not the result of a sanctionable norm, but the imbalance between the two parties is a product of the task the parties are engaged in.

Both the sequential organization of the interviewee's turns in Suchman & Jordan's (1990) and Maynard & Schaeffer's (1996) study show the respondent's solution of how to handle a 'difficult' situation, that is a non-recipient designed question and a recipient who displays 'silent recipiency' in withholding 'help'.

Do these two studies show how through the specific design of turns and sequences the institutional context of survey interviews is 'brought into being' (Heritage, 1984:290)? We would not go as far as this, and would follow Schegloff, who states in his comment on Suchman & Jordan (1990):

It is by no means clear that we have such elementary understanding of the constitutive components of the survey interview. In addition to the research that Suchman & Jordan recommend ... a more general inquiry into the features of the survey interview as an organized occasion of talk-in-interaction may help us think through in a thoroughly informed way how exactly to understand the methodological, epistemological,
and theoretical features and status of the interview as a tool of inquiry. (1990:249)

Analyzing focus group data I will not take any specific technical features out of Suchman & Jordan's (1990) and Schaeffer & Maynard's (1996) studies. I would like to use them to illustrate the general way of thinking about social research processes and how particular pragmatic features can be revealed by a detailed CA.

So the general thing I want to emphasize then is that our analysis of focus groups will be based on a conversation-analytical talk-at-work approach like the one by Suchman & Jordan (1990) and Schaeffer & Maynard (1996), but we will extend our theoretical framework with the specific development of the Discursive Social Psychology (DSP) as its consideration of attitudes helps further understand the focus group practices. More on DSP and 'From Attitudes to Evaluative Practices' (Potter, 1998) will be written in the next sub-section.

1.3. Discursive Social Psychology

Discursive Social Psychology is a general approach to social psychological topics. It is the application of ideas from discourse analysis which was developed by and in for social psychology by Potter & Wetherell (1987). DSP draws also on ideas and developments from CA (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984; Sacks, 1992) and rhetorical social psychology (Billig, 1996).
DSP is part of the methods chapter as it respecifies amongst others the traditional notion of 'attitudes' and as the elicitation and measurement of 'attitudes' are often part of focus group aims. DSP highlights concerns that will come up in the analysis. In our short overview of DSP we will focus on three themes which are relevant to our analysis. First, we will deal with people's practices of evaluations. Second, we will discuss attitude variability. And third, we will consider the notion of neutrality, that is of not holding an attitude.

**ATTITUDES AND EVALUATIONS**

In contrast to mainstream sociology DSP does not consider attitudes as underlying mental constructs. While traditionally 'interviews are treated as a machinery for harvesting psychologically and linguistically interesting responses' (Potter, 1997:149), within DSP verbatim records are not regarded as a gateway to attitudes, opinions or views, but are jointly constructed for local purposes. The shift is from considering attitudes as mental states to the notion of evaluative practices. The questions are then: What are people doing with evaluations in their 'home' environment? What are people doing with their everyday evaluation? Furthermore: How are evaluations constituted from the participants' point of view (and not from the psychologist's point)? And: How can their practices be explicated (and not improved)? The question is not, whether people are able to perform the task of an interview with attitude scales; it is more what people are doing with their responses and avowals.
DSP pays attention to what is done by attitude talk as talk is oriented to action. DSP furthermore does not distinguish - like attitude theory typically does - between the attitude on the one hand and its object on the other hand (Potter & Wetherell, 1988; Verkuyten, 1998). The assumption behind comparing people's attitudes is that the evaluated object is the same for everybody; discourse studies, however, highlight the difficulty in separating the object from the attitude, which means that 'people do not construct neutral versions - whatever they would be - of attitudinal objects and then evaluate them; they construct versions of the object which display evaluations' (Potter & Wetherell, 1988:56).

**Variability of Attitude Expression**

The second move of DSP is closely related to what was said in the last paragraphs. If attitudes/evaluations are not carried around by the participants in a preformed manner, but are performed as specific actions, one would expect 'attitude variability' and not 'attitude consistency'. Whereas variability is either ignored or dismissed or homogenized with more traditional techniques of attitudes measurement, DSP uses it as a resource for analyzing the performed actions. Like the identification of evaluative practices the identification of variability asks for the analysis of evaluations in their 'home' environment of argument. Billig's conclusion from various studies (e.g. 1988, 1988b, 1989) is that people produce evaluations where there is at least the possibility of an argument; people do not argue things which are taken as something that simply exists.
NON-HOLDING OF ATTITUDES

While traditional researchers have focused on attitudes, not holding an attitude ('I don't know'), displaying neutrality or providing a description instead of an attitude has hardly ever figured as a topic. However, recent work in DSP has focused specifically on descriptions and the formulation of factual accounts; the topics of descriptions and fact construction are explored at length in Potter (1996). One main result of discursive studies such as the ones by Edwards & Potter (1992, 1993; Potter, Edwards & Wetherell, 1993) was that when people perform sensitive actions such as turning down invitations, they often do this with the help of descriptions. Furthermore, descriptions can also be used to construct negativity about members of minority groups as 'being out there', as being factual and independent of the speaker (Potter & Wetherell, 1988; see also Wetherell & Potter, 1992). If descriptions are as important to perform sensitive actions, a further research question is, how exactly descriptions are constructed as factual and independent of the speaker.

To sum up, then, the major contribution of DSP to the respecification of attitude concepts. In contrast to the traditional view in attitude research DSP works with a more straightforward notion of function when its topic are evaluative practices and the question: what are people doing by making evaluations (or displaying a lack of evaluation) in particular settings? This discursive notion of function needs a rather different corpus of data: no decontextualized materials but talk in naturally
Focus Groups as an Interactional Phenomenon

occurring settings. We will provide in this thesis this kind of data as focus group talk can be considered as naturally occurring talk – at least if one follows Potter’s definition:

Naturally occurring talk can be relatively straightforwardly defined as spoken language produced entirely independently of the actions of the researcher, whether it is everyday conversation over the telephone, the records of a company board meeting, or the interaction between doctor and patient in a surgery. It is natural in the specific sense that it is not ‘got up’ by the researcher using an interview schedule, a questionnaire, an experimental protocol or some such social research technology. (1997:148,149)

In this chapter’s last section I will describe the materials analyzed in my thesis.

2. On the data basis and on issues of transcription and translation, analytic procedures, and validity

In the second half of this chapter I will provide information on the data basis and on the selection of data. Furthermore I will focus on the transcription and translation process (a table of transcription symbols is included), on analytic procedures and on the issue of validity.

The data basis and the selection of data

The analyses developed in this thesis are based on market research focus groups conducted in Germany for a large tobacco company. The market research department of this company runs about two hundred focus groups a year (at a cost of something like two
thousand pounds each) and works with a broad range of market research institutes and focus group moderators. About two third of the focus groups are conducted by moderators from market research institutes, about one third by workers from the company's own market research department. It is hard to make a stronger claim to generalizability as there are no other published examples of market research focus groups. However, as we have used a random sample of focus group tapes from a company which orders large numbers of focus groups, and works with many different institutes, we are as confident as we can be that our results are typical for German market research focus groups.

As with other companies manufacturing goods, focus groups are regarded as helpful, when:

· Product Management starts a new project like a new 'line extender' of an existing brand and co-operates with the advertising agency and the market research department to get a first general impression of its acceptability to the target group

and/or

· Product Management and the advertising agency want to get the so-called authentic reactions of the target group by watching it from behind a one-way mirror.

Focus groups are routinely video-recorded. A sample of eight focus group tapes run by six different moderators was used in this study. These were selected as satisfying the following criteria:

· They used a range of different moderators;
· The moderators varied in their skill (this was judged by the head of the research department);
Some of the groups covered broad and some narrow topics.

Two focus groups were run by two moderators. Most of the time, however, these moderators divided their task in such a way that - regarding a certain topic - one moderator was more active, while the other one was more passive.

As the available archive of focus groups dealt exclusively with 'narrow' topics, such as the acceptance of a planned new line extender of an existing brand, two focus groups were run for me in Hamburg in December 1996 on 'advertising in general'. I watched one of these groups from behind the one-way-mirror; in the other group I played the role of an assistant. These two groups were both included in the final sample. The other focus groups were run in 1994, 1995 and 1996.

Out of six moderators in the materials four were male and two were female; this broadly reflects the employment pattern in the area. In all groups, about half of the participants were female; the number of participants varied from seven to eleven. As participants are chosen to reflect the target group of the discussed cigarette brand, only one group consisted of middle-aged participants, all the others consisted of 'young' smokers - from the age of eighteen until about twenty-eight.

The moderators work with planned question guides, but are free to change questions during the course of a group. However, as they have to write a report on the results of the focus groups based on
the planned questions, they rarely deviate too far from the guide. The focus groups are watched from behind the one-way mirror by the client (market researchers and product managers from the company) and the advertising agency which developed the material being discussed in the focus group (packets, ads, and so on).

THE TRANSCRIPTION AND TRANSLATION PROCESS

Each focus group lasted for ninety minutes or more; the number of participants varied from seven to eleven. I transcribed two focus groups from beginning to end, segments of thirty minutes from six focus groups and the opening sequence from every focus group, making altogether more than six hours of transcribed talk. Further transcript was made as needed.

I transcribed from the audio tapes. However, I had to work most of the time simultaneously with the video tapes for the following reasons: 1. Speakers were often difficult to understand and seeing them speaking helped my understanding. 2. Often I had to check on the video whether the 'next' speaker was a 'new' speaker or whether (s)he had already spoken before. 3. I had to check on the video, who coughed, cleared his/her throat or said something like 'um mm'. Was it a 'new' speaker or a speaker who had already said something? 4. But, most important, I had to check all the time on video, whether a participant spoke because the moderator addressed him/her by gaze or whether (s)he spoke 'deliberately'.
In general the extracts from the transcripts have five columns for

- the arrow(s) as (a) pointer(s) to the turn(s) which is/are discussed
- the line number
- the speaker
- the English translation
  and
- the German original.

A sixth column between the English and the German text is included if the non-verbals are considered to be important.

In the extracts participants are shown as 'P1', 'P2', etc, the moderator as 'mod.'. Cigarette brands are pseudonomized as capital cities. There is one exception. Included are also focus group data on cigarettes which belong to one 'brand family'. In order to show that these brands are related they were given the pseudonyms of the airports Heathrow and Stansted.

The focus groups were conducted in German and the transcripts were translated into English; all translations were checked by a bilingual English speaker. The analysis was done on the German original, but for presentation purposes I will use the English translation. I discussed with my translator from case to case, how best to transfer pauses and characteristics of speech production such as emphasized sounds from the German original to the English translation.
The transcription of the chosen extracts is in the standard Jeffersonian form. However, pauses under 0.5 seconds have not been timed.

**USED TRANSCRIPTION SYMBOLS**

[ ] Square brackets mark the start and the end of overlapping speech.

↑↓ Vertical arrows precede marked pitch movement.

→ Side arrows are not transcription features but draw analytic attention to particular lines of text.

Underlining Signals speaker's emphasis.

CAPITALS Mark speech that is obviously louder than surrounding speech.

°I know it,° Raised circles ('degree' signs) enclose obviously quieter speech.

(.8) Numbers in round brackets measure pauses longer than 0.5 seconds.

(.) A pause of 0.5 seconds or less.

((text)) Additional comments from the transcriber.

*Why?* ((smiley voice)) Asterisks enclose characteristics of the speech which is described in the brackets.

::: Colons show degrees of elongation of the prior sound; the more colons, the more elongation.

hhh Aspiration (out-breaths); proportionally as for colons.

.hhh Inspiration (in-breaths).

Ye:ah, Commas mark weak rising intonation, as used sometimes in enunciating lists.


? Question marks signal question intonation, irrespective of grammar.

bu-u- Hyphens mark a cutoff of the preceding sound.

> < Enclosed speech is produced noticeably quicker than the surrounding talk.

< > Enclosed speech is produced noticeably slower than the surrounding talk.

= Equals signs mark the immediate 'latching' of successive stretches of talk, with no interval.
Analytic Procedures

Heath states that

Unlike other forms of social science inquiry, ethnomethodology and conversation analysis do not provide a 'method', in the sense of clear-cut set of procedures that if followed will generate scientifically valid results or findings. (1997:184)

For Potter,

Discourse analysis is a craft which is developed with varying degrees of skill. (1998:239)

This makes our sub-section on 'Analytic procedures' nice and short, as there is not much more to say than: 'Most analysis, whatever its overall goal, benefits from a good understanding of features of mundane conversational organization such as turn taking, adjacency pairs, repair, and preference organization' (Potter, 1998:239,240). There is, however, one important analytical concept, which we will discuss in the next sub-section on validity: the analysis of deviant cases.

The Issue of Validity

'As working with tapes and transcripts eliminates at one stroke many of the problems that ethnographers have with the unspecified accuracy of field notes and with the limited public access to them' (Peräkylä, 1997:203), we can immediately move from the issue of reliability to the one of validity in research which is based like mine on tapes and on transcripts. Peräkylä (1997) lists among others the
apparent validity, the validation through 'next turn', the deviant case analysis and the
generalizability of conversation analytic findings, which we will consider in turn.

a) The apparent validity.

Good results of conversation analytic research
display what is called by Kirk & Miller (1986)
'fishing' as an example. Participants 'fish' for more information from one another by telling what they
themselves know, by 'telling their side'. Reading both Pomerantz' description of an activity as
'fishing' and the extracts provided by her tends to 'ring a bell'. Her analytic claims are transparent
and have a genuine 'apparent validity'.

b) The validation through 'next turn'.

According to Sacks et al. 'a turn's talk will
display its speaker's understanding of a prior turn's talk' (1974:728). The next speaker's interpretation
of the preceding action provides a 'proof procedure' for the interpretation suggested by the analyst.
Peräkylä refers again to Pomerantz' (1980) study and how her interpretation passes the test. He then adds:
'In much conversation analytic work, things are not as nice and simple as in Extract 1 ((comment: the
presented extract from Pomerantz', 1980, study)): the next turns may be ambiguous in relation to the action
performed in the preceding turn. However, the "proof procedure" provided by the next turn remains the
c) The deviant case analysis.

Conversation analysts aim at establishing regular patterns of interaction. If such a pattern is established, the analyst might consider it as helpful to search for 'deviant cases' where an element of the suggested pattern is not associated with the other expected elements. In Pomerantz' (1980) paper on 'fishing' for example, one speaker's display of 'her side' did not elicit the recipient's version of the event. After the recipient, however, failed to respond to the prior speaker's 'fishing', she (the prior speaker) solicited directly the information. Thus this 'deviant case' supports the initial hypothesis of 'fishing' as a device for indirect solicitation of information.

There are, however, also deviant cases which cannot be integrated into the initial hypothesis as Schegloff's (1968) analysis of a single deviant case in his corpus of 500 telephone call openings has shown. In one case the caller and not the answerer spoke first which led Schegloff to reconceptualize his hypothesis. Instead of thinking of a norm obligating the answerer to speak first, he considered the first moves of telephone calls as an adjacency pair and as in the deviant case the answerer did not produce the relevant second pair (an answer) after the summons (telephone ringing), the caller displays another summons by speaking first.

According to Clayman & Maynard (1994) there are also deviant cases which cannot be integrated either into the existing or into the reconceptualized hypothesis, but an explanation can be sought from the
Focus Groups as an Interactional Phenomenon

individual contingencies of this single case. Peräkylä (1997) provides an example from his study on the delivery of diagnosis in primary health care (1995b). He found a pattern in which the doctors delivered the patients' diagnosis without verbal reference to the evidential basis of the diagnosis only in sequential positions where the evidence had just been made present for example through the physical examination. In two deviant cases the diagnosis was delivered without that kind of evidence. Peräkylä, however, analyzed that these cases were different from the rest of the data as in these cases the diagnosis was delivered for the second time during the same consultation.

d) The generalizability of conversation analytic findings.

Like the data collected for this thesis case studies on institutional interaction are usually based on data collected from one or few sites only. Peräkylä (1997) for example refers to his study on AIDS counselling in a London teaching hospital (1995), where counsellors, following the Milan School Family Systems Theory, applied specific questioning practices such as 'circular questioning' (one party's description of his/her mind is elicited by first asking another party of his/her account of it). Peräkylä (1997) assumes that this particular kind of questioning is not used anywhere else and states that his results cannot be directly generalized to any other site of AIDS counselling. He emphasizes, however, that his study showed how these practices were made possible and concludes:
As possibilities, the practices I analysed are very likely to be generalizable. ... The results were not generalizable as descriptions of what other counsellors or other professionals do with their clients; but they were generalizable as descriptions of what any counsellor or other professional, with his or clients, can do. (1997:215,216)

To sum up, then: this chapter's goal was to provide a methodological approach to analyze focus groups as an interactional phenomenon. We had discussed J. Kitzinger's (1994,1995) and Wilkinson's (1998) work and had seen how they aim at improving the practice and analysis of focus groups. With a CA background in mind, however, we consider focus group participants as competent partners. We do not aim at optimizing focus groups, but we aim at discovering the skillfulness of the focus group participants in organizing focus groups.

Having 'warmed' the readers 'up' with methodological considerations we would like to move now to the focus group moderator's way of 'warming up' the participants. The next chapter will focus on the moderator's introductory remarks and on his/her efforts to put the participants at their ease. We hope we also put our readers at ease. Perhaps we even made them a bit curious about the adventure which lies ahead of us: the analysis of the messiness of focus group data.
CHAPTER THREE

THE OPENING SEQUENCES AND HOW MODERATORS NUDGE THE PARTICIPANTS INTO NON-PROMPTED 'POBA' TALK

1. Introduction

... *otherwise,* ((smiley voice)) (.9) u:h, (.8) first of all my heartfelt thanks, (.8) that you're, (. ) here and that despite all the traffic, (. ) you've, (.7) actually succeeded, (. ) *in getting here* ((smiley voice)) ((smiles)) u:m, (1.7) my name is >xxxxx²,=like the elephant, (. ) only with y,< (1.2) and,=uh,=!I,=uh, now want to, (.) pester the living daylights out of you a bit, ((continues)) (lines 11-26).

By saying this the moderator welcomes the members of a focus group. The first minutes of a market research focus group before the official interaction begins are described in the question guides used by the moderators as 'warming up' without any explicit information on how to handle the opening routines. Krueger (1998) differentiates in 'Developing Questions for Focus Groups' topic guides from questioning routes³. He proffers examples for both types of question guides and gives examples for opening questions which purpose is to get the participants acquainted and feel connected like 'Tell us your name and where you live' (1998:22). He does

---

¹ POBA stands for perceptions, opinions, beliefs and attitudes; more explanations in sub-section 4.
² For reasons of confidentiality the moderator’s name is not given.
³ The topic guide is a list of topics or issues to be pursued in the focus group. This list consists of words or phrases that remind the moderator of the topic of interest. By contrast, the
not give, however, any advice on what the moderator might say in the first minutes of a focus group before the first question is being asked. To solve this situation, the moderator is thrown back on his/her experience on how to handle opening routines. We reproduce the speech of one moderator—together with the German original—before the participants introduce themselves one after another at the end of this section. In the following analysis we are mainly using this opening sequence, but will also refer from time to time to other introductory remarks by other moderators.

Let us compare for a start only the short extract quoted above with the beginning of an university ceremony:

It is (1.0) my very great pleasure (1.0) to welcome you all to this ceremony (1.5) This is the eighth (1.0) of twelve (1.0) Open University (.5) degree ceremonies to be held in nineteen seventy-eight. (Atkinson, 1982:90)

The most striking similarity between these sequences is that they both contain relatively long within-turn pauses. The opening sequence by the focus group moderator, however, appears more 'informal' than the speech held at the university. In the following section we are looking at how informality is achieved and we will see that the moderator puts some effort in presenting the attendance at the focus group and contributions to the focus group as a voluntary matter. Thereafter we will analyze the moderator's reactions when participants do not
produce voluntarily talk during the focus group and will show how (s)he explicitly requests for non-prompted contributions. The last section of the chapter is dedicated to the kind of talk, which the moderators display to expect in the opening sequences and which we would like to call 'POBA talk' following the market researcher Henderson (1991).

But first of all let us reproduce here the whole opening sequence:

(1) File: opening\london3

1. Mod. And, (.), well, (4.2) Und, (.) na ja, (4.2)
2. ((groans)) We'll er make a ({stöhnt}) Wir fangen ma sonen
3. start, perhaps there'll be, bisschen an, vielleicht kommt
4. (. ) someone else along in the, so, (.) irgendwie noch jemand
5. (. ) next five or six minutes, im laufe der, (.) nächsten
6. (1.2) and, (.) they'll be fünf oder sechs Minuten, (1.2)
7. allowed, to take part in this und, (.) dem gestatten wir
8. illustrous circle of ours, noch, in dieser illustren
9. some Runde teilzunehmen,
10. ((cough and clear their (.) husten und räuspern sich)
throat))
11. Mod. *otherwise, *((smiley voice)) *ansonsten,* ((lächelnde)
12. (.9) uhm, (.8) first of all Stimme)) (.) eh, (.)
13. heartfelt thanks, (.8) that zunächst mal schönen Dank,
14. you're, (.) here and dass Sie, (.8) da sind und
15. despite all the traffic, (. ) trotz dem Verkehr, (.) dieses,
16. you've, (.) actually (.7) wohl ge sandt haben,
17. succeed, (.) *in getting (.7) *hierher zu kommen,*
18. here* ((smiley voice)) ((schmunzelnde Stimme))
19. ((smiles)) ((schmunzeln))
20. some ((smile)) ehm, (1.7) mein Name ist
21. Mod. uhm, (1.7) my name is (.)
22. >xxxxx,=like the elephant, (.) nur mit ypsilon,< (1.2)
23. only with y, < (1.2) und,=eh,=ich,=eh, will Sie
24. and,=uh,=i,=uh, now want to, also nh< bisschen, (.) nen
25. (. ) pester the living paar, (.) Löcher in den Bauch
26. daylight out of you a bit, in fragen, in der Hoffnung, dass
27. the hope, that you, (.9) will Sie, (.9) möglichst, (.)
28. answer as spontaneously as spontan antworten, (.)
29. possible, (.8) there's no was Falsches gibt nicht, was
30. wrong answer, there's also no Richtiges gibt auch net,=es
31. right answer,=it's *just, (.) geht eigentlich *nur, (.) so
32. to find out, (.8) what your um das was Sie, (.8) in Ihrem
33. gut reactions are, or* (moves Bauch haben, oder in Ihren*
34. both hands circling away from ((bewegt beide Hände kreisend
35. his torso) what you feel or von seinem Oberkörper weg)
36. what you think you know, (.) Gefühlen haben oder was Sie

*adapted from text in the original document*
2. The production of informality in the opening sequence and the orientation to the voluntary character of the focus group

Comparing a short fragment of an opening sequence by a focus group moderator with a short fragment of a speech held at a university we

uh everybody thinks about the things in life *in a different way, has,*= (smiley voice) things we're talking about, (.8) because of that, (clears his throat) (.8) it's not like in school or anything like that, (.8) and, (1.0)

P? (clears her/his throat)

PI Orange juice?

P2 It's alright, thank you,

[(XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX)]

Mod. [Yes, (.) you can ]

of course, (.8) help yourself as you wish, (.8) to all these things, (.8) around you,

P3 °Thanks°

Mod. food and drinks, (1.2)

u:h,=we're also taping this, so that I (then don't) have to write down (here everything), because, (.6) uhuh, (.8) with my, (.8) scribble it would be a little *difficult, *to read, (.8) it all again afterwards,* (smiley voice) (.8) but perhaps you could tell me a little bit about, (.8) yourselves, before we get to grips with with the topic, (1.0) about how old you are, what kind of a job you do and, *(.8) so on,* (turns to P3)

Um mm, (after she has said "um mm", the mod. turns away from her)

(1.0)

P3 Shall I begin, (.) if you wish Mod. ↑Yes, (.)

Good, *well,* (.) (mod. turns again to P3) (continues)

Hm mm, (nachdem sie "hm mm" gesagt hat, dreht sich der Mod. weg)

Soll ich anfangen, ↑Ja, (.) wenn Sie ↑wollen

Gut, *also,* (.) (Mod. dreht sich wieder zu P3) (fährt fort)
suggested in the last section that the former one appears more 'informal'. In this section we will study how informality is achieved by the focus group moderator, and we will come to the conclusion that the moderator puts some effort in presenting the attendance at the focus group and contributions to the focus group as a voluntary matter.

We are suggesting that informality is mainly produced by displaying casualness via pauses and hesitations; by displaying casualness via lexical choices and voice changes and by promoting the focus group as a chat and non-classroom experience.

2.1. Displaying casualness via pauses and hesitations

Atkinson analyzes the 'categorization and production of "formal" interaction':

... in situations where a co-present party is not actively involved in some sequence of talk, and where there may be little or no chance of getting a turn to talk, there is little scope for either displaying or checking understanding in the same ways as are operative in conversation. (1982:100)

When in multi-party settings the present parties may find it difficult to display and check their understanding, there is a greater potential for lapses in attentiveness than in mundane interaction and Atkinson shows how certain features of multi-party interaction operate to facilitate shared attentiveness. Apart from turn allocation, speaker identification and visibility Atkinson describes characteristics of the utterance design and utterance production:
Some of the more obvious ways in which talk in such settings contrasts with conversation can be summarized with reference to its production, which tends to be done (a) at a greater volume, (b) at a slower pace, (c) in segments separated by relatively long within-turn pauses, and (d) with relatively infrequent hitches, perturbations and same turn repairs. (1982:109)

According to Atkinson pauses within turns provide the speaker with opportunities to formulate the following segment or to read the upcoming segment, and reduce thereby the chance that something is being said hesitantly. Both short extracts we have shown at the beginning from an official event at a university and from an opening sequence of a focus group show frequent and lengthy within-turn pauses. In the extract provided by Atkinson we find pauses and no hesitations; in the focus group extract, however, we have pauses and hesitations and repairs. Whereas in the extract with the university speaker the pauses seem to reduce the chance that something is being said hesitantly, in the case of the focus group moderator, pauses and hesitations seem to serve as devices to display casualness.

Let us look more closely at the moderator's opening remarks. After having given an account that latecomers are welcome, are ‘allowed, to take part in this illustrious circle of ours’ (lines 7+8) (we are coming back to this utterance in sub-section 2.4.), the moderator says:

... *otherwise,* ((smiley voice)) (.9) u:h, (.8) first of all my heartfelt thanks, (.8) that you're, (.) here and that despite all the traffic, (. ) you've, (.7) actually succeeded, (. ) *in getting here* ((smiley voice)) ((smiles)) ((some participants smile)) u:m,
(1.7) my name is >xxxxx,=like the elephant, (.) only with y,< ((continues)) (lines 11-23).

The moderator shifts at the beginning of this sequence from the focus group members who might come later to the ones who are already present. As some participants cough and clear their throats, the moderator announces the start ('otherwise,'; line 11), pauses, announces with a stretched 'u:h,' (line 12) another remark, but delays this remark with another pause. The moderator focuses the attention of the participants to his speech like the editor at an editorial conference analyzed by Meier (1997) - a phenomenon which is described by Schegloff (1988) as a 'recycled turn beginning' and which manages to keep one speaker's utterance free from overlap with another's. The moderator continues by describing in a jocular way that it looks as if the participants 'actually succeeded, (.) *in getting here* ((smiley voice))' (lines 16-18) which is acknowledged by a laugh (or rather smile) token of some focus group members5. With an 'u:m' (line 21) and another pause the moderator focuses again the participants' attention on what he is going to say next - his name and the image he uses to present it (see the next sub-section on the moderator's lexical choices).

5 This opening sequence is very difficult to translate. The translation presented here is the result of discussions with two bilingual translators. However, many subtleties seem to defy translation as it is following the German original more plausible why the participants acknowledge the moderator's remark with a smile token. The irony in the above case is not only based on stating that it looks as if the participants have been successful in arriving at the focus group in time, but also on a slightly old-fashioned way of expressing himself and a slightly old-fashioned word order. As these are only tendencies, it seems almost impossible to convey this in the English translation. See also sub-section 2.2. on the moderator's lexical choices.
Opening Sequences and ‘POBA Talk’

After another pause he produces a hearably perturbated speech:

(1.2) and,=uh,=I,=uh, now want to, (.) pester the living daylights out of you a bit, in the hope, that you, (.9) will answer as spontaneously as possible, (.8) there's no wrong answer, there's also no right answer,= (lines 23-31).

Instead of saying that he is going to ask the participants a few questions (the untranslatable repair of the German original suggests that this is what the moderator intended to say), the moderator makes hearably a joke by deploying an extreme formulation: 'to pester the living daylights out of the participants'. In the next sub-section we are looking more closely at the hereby conveyed casualness, but let us concentrate at first on the put in pauses and on the displayed hesitancy.

In Atkinson's analysis of formal speeches we have seen how within-turn pauses seem to reduce the chances of something being said hesitantly or in a way, which requires later correction. By putting in pauses, the speakers in formal situations display a great care in being concise and in choosing the right terms. The moderator in the sequence above, however, does not seem to be concerned saying the right thing

---

6 Unfortunately, in this passage are again subtleties which seem to defy translation. As the equivalent image of the German 'jemanden Löcher in den Bauch fragen' is in English a rather different one is ('to pester the living daylights out of somebody'), softeners used by the moderator (he would like to ask some holes into the participants' stomachs) are not sufficient translatable into English. Similarly not translatable is that the moderator initiates a self-repair in this turn: '... will Sie also >n< bisschen, (.) nen paar, (.) Löcher ...' (continues)) (lines 24-26). The literal translation is: 'I now want to >n< bit, (.) a few, (.) holes ...'. The moderator might have wanted to complete the sentence by saying 'I now want to ask you a bit,'.
as pauses tend to come not before the consequential terms. To give two examples:

- the pause of nine tenth of a second in line 27 does not come before 'answer' or 'spontaneously' (both in line 28), but before the whole chunk

- the pause of eight tenth of a second in line 29 also comes before the whole chunk 'there's no wrong answer,' (lines 29+30) and not for example before 'wrong answer' so that the utterance would be 'there's no (.8) wrong answer,'.

The moderator thus does not display a certain concern of a careful word selection and he does not mark a certain trouble concerning particular lexical terms. The moderator more likely seems to say: 'We're just chatting here and I'm improvizing my little speech'. This display of casualness is furthermore stressed by the hesitant speech production (word search like 'and,=uh,=I,=uh,'; line 24) and by the moderator's self-repair, which unfortunately cannot be shown in the English translation. With these features the moderator similarly displays that he does not just repeat ready-made formulations, but spontaneously gives some introductory remarks.

2.2. Displaying casualness via lexical choices and voice changes

The moderator proffers in the German original of his opening remarks four metaphors. First of all, he introduces himself in connecting his name with an elephant which is a non-translatable play on words, but cannot be shown here in any case as the moderator's name is for reasons of confidentiality not given. He then announces, that he will
pester the living daylights out of you a bit, (lines 25+26)

and that he would like to find out

what your gut reactions are (lines 32+33).

The moderator uses twice the picture of a 'stomach': a) The German equivalent to 'pester the living daylights out of somebody' is 'to ask somebody holes into the stomach'. b) In German one does not speak about one's 'gut reactions', but about what is in one's stomach. Last but not least the moderator describes his handwriting in German as being as bad 'as if he does not write with a hand, but a paw'; the English translation is much less colourful ('we're also taping this, so that I (then don't) have to write down (here everything), because, (.6) uhuh, (.). with my, (.). scribble it would be a little *difficult, "to read, (.). it all again afterwards," (smiley voice))'; lines 58-65).

Formal language tends to be a neutral language and does not provide colouring or extreme cases and a colloquial language like 'pestering the living daylights out of somebody' would not appear in a formal questionnaire. With a metaphor like this the moderator can display informality against the kind of formality that might be expected in such a situation. His metaphorical language is both contrastive to 'social research language' and to the idea of neutrality as social researchers should not 'pester the living daylights out of' their interviewees. Formality and informality thus do not seem to be abstract intrinsic things, but they are rhetorically organized against the informality/formality being relevant in a certain kind of situation and the
moderator in the opening sequence 'does informality' by hearably departing from the formality in a research situation.

There seems to be another 'ingredient' of displaying casualness which we would like to mention here only shortly: the changes of register. It is notable that the moderator changes in his opening remarks four times his voice into a smiley one (lines 11, 18, 39 and 65) and displays in doing so a certain playfulness.

2.3. Promoting the focus group as a chat and non-classroom experience

Informality in the moderator's opening remarks is not only produced by the display of casualness, but also by an orientation to what is called by Sacks 'cover-identities' (Antaki & Rapley, 1996; Sacks, 1992): he acts as someone other than a market researcher whose aim it is to elicit views from the participants, but notably sets up a normal status under which he and the focus group members are going to organize their interaction. The rationale for the forthcoming interaction is described as 'talk': 'things we're talking about,' (line 40) and 'but perhaps you could tell me a little bit about, (. ) yourselves,' (line 65-68). Other moderators display the following rationales to the group:

7 The German original in the last case is even more unspecific as the moderator asks the participants to 'erzählen' something about themselves; 'erzählen' is 'to recount' or 'to relate' and one usually recounts a dream or story and not one's age or profession.
And=uh, (. ) >we'll then< simply talk about it, (.8) nothing more and nothing less.

I think, (. ) we want to have a chat today about, (. ) cigarettes, (. ) >I think, <.

'Talking' and 'chatting' are examples of what Sacks calls 'pro-verbs': euphemisms which stand in for more specific descriptions (Antaki & Rapley, 1996; Sacks, 1992). 'Having a chat' is also describable as a ninety minutes controlled and video-taped interview in a special situation of surveillance as it is also mostly watched by an audience behind the one-way-mirror. If we tried to find a hypothetical version of what the moderator could say, it would perhaps be 'I want to elicit your views'. Instructively, the closest the moderator in our data comes to such a display of the official motivation is in Extract One when the moderator talks about pester the living daylights out of the participants - a formulation which is by its expressed extreme nature ironic and which does not mention the topic on which he is going to 'pester the living daylights out of' the participants. In our sample of eight transcribed opening sequences, it is mentioned only once - and only rather vaguely - that the discussion will be on cigarettes: 'I think, (. ) we want to have a chat today about, (. ) cigarettes, (. ) >I think, <'. The moderators thus manage to promote the focus group as a piece of ordinary, relaxed and friendly chat, as something which is not dry, very focused, and task-oriented. It is as if they want to convey: 'Don't think that I'm only

8 See also Antaki & Rapley on the 'general taboo on mentioning the official motivation for the ((comment: Quality of Life)) interviews' (1996:302).
interested in fags - my interest in you is much broader!

But let us come back to the moderator's announcement, that he will

pester the living daylights out of you a bit, (lines 25+26).

He immediately adds what he is hoping for:

that you, (.9) will answer as spontaneously as possible, (.8) there's no wrong answer, there's also no right answer, (lines 27-31).

Whereas 'talking' and 'chatting' are euphemisms which stand in for more specific descriptions, 'pestering the living daylights out of somebody' is an extreme case formulation and ironizes so the serious purpose of the event - the interviewing of people in exchange for money, which is furthermore softened by adding that the participants' answers are not evaluated. The moderator's orientation to making the participants feel loose can be also seen in the way he glosses later on what he means by 'it's just, (. ) to find out, (.8) what your gut reactions are, or what you feel or what you think you know,' (lines 31-36): 'uh everybody thinks about the things in life *in a different way, has, *= ((smiley voice))' (line 37-39). In this gloss the moderator takes care that what has been said before should not be understood as a threatening formulation. He stresses that all he is saying is that he wants the participants to express their views and that he does not want to convey that he judges them and assesses their knowledge as inadequate. Later on, he adds furthermore: 'it's not like in school or anything like that,' (lines 42-44).
Notable is on the other hand, the — although hesitantly produced — usage of 'I' in the context of 'pestering the living daylights out of the participants' (‘and,=uh,=I,=uh, now want to, (.) pester the living daylights out of you a bit,’; lines 24-26). The moderator uses otherwise in the opening sequence 'we's'9:

- We'll er make a start, (lines 2+3)
- things we're talking about, (line 40)
- =we're also †taping this, (line 58)
- but perhaps you could tell me a little bit about, (.) yourselves, before we get to grips with with the topic, (lines 65-69).

In connection with 'pestering the living daylights', however, the moderator does not use the 'royal we', but an 'I' and expresses that he wants something. This display of determination is, however, softened as we have seen, in deploying an ironic formulation for asking the group questions and in presenting his determination in a hesitating and improvised way.

To sum up, then, we have seen in this subsection two different ways of promoting a focus group as a chat and non-classroom experience. On the one hand we pointed to the use of euphemisms like 'talking' and 'chatting' which stand in for more specific descriptions and on the other hand we showed how extreme case formulations like 'pestering the living daylights out of somebody' ironize the task-

---

9 In the German original, the moderator uses another 'we' which is not taken into the English translation because of a passive
oriented feature of the event - the collection of the participants' views.

2.4. Promoting the focus group as a voluntary event

We would like to introduce here a last aspect of informality. Up to now we have seen how informality is produced both by the display of carelessness of lexical choices and by lexical choices which depart hearably from the expectation in a social research situation. In the last sub-section we presented either the use of euphemisms or the use of ironic uptakes as further ingredients of informality as they both promote the focus group as a 'chat'. In this sub-section we will look how ironic uptakes also promote the focus group as a voluntary event.

In the following two extracts the moderator deploys ironic takes not as extreme case formulations, but as inversions. He starts the session by saying:

And, (.), well, (4.2) ((groans)) We'll er make a start, perhaps there'll be, (.) someone else along in the, (.7) next five or six minutes, (1.2) and, (.) they'll be allowed, to take part in this illustrious circle of ours, (lines 1-8).

The moderator stresses that latecomers are allowed to join the group, and it is not just a group, but an 'illustrious circle'. To allow somebody something is formal and strict; when the moderator allows latecomers to take part, he gives them the permission to do so. In the German original, the construction: 'dem gestatten wir noch,' ('they'll be allowed,'; lines 6+7).
ironic take might be even clearer as the moderator uses a slightly old-fashioned expression; he does not use 'erlauben', but 'gestatten', which can both be translated as 'to allow something'. 'Gestatten Sie?' was applied in former times, when a man asked a woman for a dance and it is nowadays used in an ironic way when a man displays politeness towards a woman and knowledge that this kind of politeness is no longer up-to-date. The moderator's permission to latecomers to attend the focus group has to be seen similarly ironic as his description of the ordinary bunch of people in the focus group, who are going to tell their views, as an 'illustrious circle'. In giving this permission in an exaggerated way, the moderator displays the character of the focus group as voluntary. The German original contains another 'royal we': not only the moderator allows potential latecomers to blend in, but he displays it as a permission which is given by him and the group. The moderator thus displays not only the focus group attendance as something voluntary, as something which is not paid for, but also as something symmetrical, as the group members have the same rights as the moderator.

Let us shortly add another remark regarding the moderator's lexical choice 'gestatten' ('to allow'). As described in sub-section 2.2., the moderator does not just use again an old-fashioned word, but one which is a hearable departure from doing a dry standard research task with the help of a dry and standard research language and which becomes by this contrast playful and colloquial.
In the next fragment the moderator deploys another ironic take not as an extreme case formulation, but as an inversion when he thanks the participants for coming by saying:

first of all my heartfelt thanks, (.8) that you're, (.) here (lines 12-14).

Thanking somebody includes somebody's voluntary action as it constitutes someone's turn as being done on the basis of good will rather than money. The focus group members of the here analyzed sample, however, do not just do the moderator a favour, they are well paid\(^\text{10}\). The moderator, however, treats their participation as something for which he has to thank them for. Furthermore he expresses his thankfulness in a more-than-required ironic way; he does not only just thank the participants for joining the discussion, but he expresses his 'heartfelt thanks'\(^\text{11}\).

What we could see in this and the last sub-section is how the moderator's use of ironical hints disguises aspects of the focus group like the special situation of surveillance and the payment of the participants. Irony seems to be a way of managing the tension between announcing on the one hand discipline and task orientation and on the other hand the

\(^{10}\) The participants get about 60 DM (which are about £ 20) for a discussion of one hour and a half.

\(^{11}\) Another remark regarding the translation: we have translated the German 'zunächst mal schönen Dank,' with 'first of all my heartfelt thanks,'. The English reader, who is a bit familiar with German, might be surprised that we have chosen an English idiom, which expresses that something is strongly felt, as (s)he might recognize 'danke schön' in 'zunächst mal schönen Dank,'. The difference between both ways of expressing one's thankfulness is, however, notable. A similarly more-than-required ironic thankfulness is e.g. displayed in the following opening sequence spoken by another moderator: 'Yes, (1.0) I'm <de(.).lighted, (.) to see you,>, (.) all here, (.) in such large numbers,'.
orientation to putting the participants at their ease and the construction of the focus group as just a chat.\textsuperscript{12}

To sum up the major points of the previous section: we have singled out different 'ingredients' in the production of informality. On the one hand we focused on the moderator's speech-production and lexical choice and showed how he just not displays concern in choosing the right terms and how he uses hearably deviations from a dry social research language.

On the other hand we described the moderator's usage of irony and could see, how he softens the announced regulations of the forthcoming event and orients to putting the participants at their ease. Particularly we observed how he puts some effort in presenting the focus group as a friendly chat (and not as a research situation in which the participants are under heavy surveillance) and a voluntary event with equal rights for all being present (and not something for which the participants are paid for and where the moderator is the one who chooses the topics). Whereas we documented up to now the moderator's orientation to the attendance at the focus group as a voluntary event, we will concentrate in the next section on his/her orientation to the participants' contributions to the focus group as being voluntary that is non-prompted.

\textsuperscript{12} See also sub-section 2.2. where we described the moderator's way of exaggerating the bad quality of his handwriting and how he displays an ironic reason for taping the forthcoming focus group session. Again irony is deployed when there is on the one hand the moderator's task-orientation - to tape the focus group session - and on the other hand the moderator's orientation to
3. Requests for non-prompted contributions by the participants

3.1. Explicit requests for non-prompted contributions

My start point for this section is to look at explicit requests for participants' non-prompted contributions. Recall the moderator's announcement in the opening sequence:

and, =uh, =I, =uh, now want to, (. ) pester the living daylights out of you a bit, in the hope, that you, (.9) will answer as spontaneously as possible, (lines 24-29).

In the next chapter on 'Elaborate Questions' we will focus on the tension implied in this introductory statement and how the tension is managed through the construction of particular kinds of question. For the time being we are less concerned with that; what we want to point to is the way the moderator orients to the requirement that the participants make their contributions spontaneously.

According to German etymological dictionaries the German 'spontan' was borrowed in the early 19th century from the Latin 'spontaneus', which means 'voluntary'. Apart from 'voluntary' the current usage of 'spontan' includes 'on one's own initiative' and 'immediate'. The moderator in the next extract deploys 'spontan' in the sense that he is interested in the 'immediate inspirations' of the participants; we have therefore translated it as 'immediately'.

putting the participants at their ease and to making them feel relaxed.
The moderator here takes control of turn-taking and orients to the requirement that each participant should have the opportunity, or be obliged, to have a turn (see the ‘all’ in lines 7 and 12). He encourages the participants to make their contributions spontaneously, without having to be prompted and policed into doing so:

=>you can all just, < talk now any old how, (. ) [well I don’t need] to pick on you. (lines 12-15)

These lines are comparable the kind of requests used by teachers and parents: ‘Don’t make me have to keep telling you’. Lines 12 to 15 show not only the
moderator's orientation to the requirement that they all make contributions, but also to his role own role in getting them to do that as something possibly a bit delicate or formal. The moderator is attending to his role in 'going meta' (Simons, 1989), effectively reinforcing that role by disclaiming having to do it ('[well I don't need] to pick on you.'; lines 14+15)\(^{13}\).

Let me use another example to support and develop the point. The next extract shows the calling for the participants to engage in free-wheeling and non-prompted discussion.

(3) Source: R18,908; file: ooopen\seq\wheel1; video: 32:33

1  Mod. So I'll just give everyone, (1.3) (xxxx) the, (1.6) packet of the Stansted Mit\nma (2.3) (can pull out.) (2.6) Please don't open them, because we still, (.) need to examine them as they are. (36.7) (in the pause the Mod. unpacks the packets and distributes them) Then describe,=what \u201chave you got in your hand.\u201d

14  (2.4) Dann geb ich jetzt mal allen, (1.3) (xxxx) die, (1.6) Packung der Stansted Mit\nma (2.3) (ausreissen k5nnen.) (2.6) Bitte ich nicht zu \ufffdfffnen, weil wir die noch, (.) so als Untersuchungsmaterial gebrauchen. (36.7) (in der Pause packt der Mod. die Packungen aus und verteilt sie) Dann beschreibe,=was Ha\ufffd{}n\ufffd{}n in der Hand.

16  P1  A cigarette for housewives. Hausfrauenzigarette.
17  \rightarrow 16  Mod. A cigarette for housewives. (.) Yes, (1.8) go ahead and just throw in some ideas=it's kind of, (1.6) slow here.=Feel free to just, (.) talk! (.) any old how (.) talk,=okay, a cigarette for housewives.
21  P2  I know now, why I didn't choose it at that time, (.) because it has only zero one.\ufffd{}=\ufffd{14}\n
\(^{13}\)Thanks to Derek Edwards for his comments on this sequence.

\(^{14}\)The participant refers to the tar and nicotine contents of the cigarette.
The moderator appears to treat the delay of P1's display of his view, and the lack of contributions from other participants after his 'repeat receipt' (line 16; see also Chapter Six) as indicating a problem. His response is an emphatically delivered speech on what has gone 'wrong' and how it may be remedied.

Yes, (.8) go ahead and just throw in some ideas!=it's kind of, (.6) slow here.=Feel free to just, (. ) talk! (. ) any old how (. ) talk,=okay, a cigarette for housewives. (lines 17-22)

The moderator asks for non-prompted contributions in no particular order: it is 'right' to quickly 'go ahead and just throw in some ideas!= ' (lines 17+18). Desirable focus group talk is talk which is not prompted and talk which is not addressed to the moderator or the previous speaker as it is supposed to be 'thrown in'. Likewise the moderator does not re-start the discussion by repeating or reformulating his previous question ('Then describe,=what have you got in your hand.'; lines 10-13), but he only repeats the prior speaker's contribution 'okay, a cigarette for housewives.' (lines 21+22). The next speaker (P2) displays her understanding of 'throwing ideas in' in opening a new topic: 'I know now, why I didn't choose it at that time, ... ' (lines 24+25).

Asking the group to 'talk any old how' constructs the moderator as an overhearing moderator. His role is not to provide prompts as the focus group members are supposed to display non-coached contributions. When the moderator orients to the
requirement of achieving non-prompted contributions by the participants, then we should not find specific requests for contributions by individual participants. In more than six hours of transcribed talk we found, however, two instances in which the moderator requires silent participants to provide a contribution. We will treat these as deviant cases worthy of further examination. In the next subsection we are going to show that even when asking single focus group members explicitly for an active participation, the moderator orients to the requirement of non-prompted contributions.

3.2. Requests for contributions by individual participants

In this sub-section we will discuss the two instances in our data when the moderator requires silent participants to provide contributions. In the run-up to the fragment below the moderator asks participants how they have chosen their current cigarette brand and whether they chose Stansted - the brand under discussion - by chance.

(4) Source: Garsted8,848; file: paper\elicit\seq\hm7e; video: 31:10

1. P1 Well I think,=I've dealt with all the cigarettes, which are <this *light,*> (.) somehow,
   2. (.7) (. (>
   3. P2 <havin' t I,>)
   4. (. (>
   5. (. (>
   6. (. (>
   7. (. (>
   8. (. (>
   9. (. (>
   10. (. (>
   11. (. (>
   12. (. (>
   13. (. (>

15 light cigarette brand
After P1's and P2's contributions and a pause of three seconds the moderator addresses the up to then silent participant P3:

You haven't said (. ) very much at all yet ["today"] (lines 15+16).

This statement is understood by P3 as a request as he starts immediately to give an account which orients to the requirement of 'saying something' by simultaneously displaying difficulties of what to say exactly as P3's turn is mostly unintelligible and ends in an understanding check by the moderator ('The Stansted?='; line 33).

In stating unspecifically that the participant 'has not yet said much today' without asking him a
specific question, the moderator orients both to the requirement that each participant should be obliged to have a turn and to the requirement to receive unprompted contributions by the participants.

The next extract shows the second instance in our data when the moderator explicitly addresses a passive participant. We enter the scene at the point where one participant suggests what two cigarette brands or, better, the 'Kingsize' and the 'Classic' version of the brand London might say if they could talk.

Note that P3 in this extract is not the same participant like P3 in the last extract. The participants are numbered in every extract according to the order in which they speak.

(5) Source: London, 1554; file: ostern\London\se\hm16b; video: (2) 15:40

<p>| | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>P1</td>
<td>Yes, and Kingsize asks, (.)</td>
<td>Ja, und Kingsize fragt, (.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>P1</td>
<td>Classic: &quot;What's the latest.&quot;</td>
<td>Classic: &quot;Was gibts Neues.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>P1</td>
<td>((smile))</td>
<td>((schmunzeln))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>oth-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>ers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>P2</td>
<td>What's the latest?</td>
<td>Was gibts Neues?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
|8  | P1 | ((laugh)) | ((lachen))
|9  |   | [((continue laughing))] | [((lachen weiter))] |
|10 | oth- |   |   |
|11 | ers |   |   |
|12 | Mod. | [What's the latest ] | [Was gibts Neues ] |
|13 | P1 | ((continue laughing)) | ((lachen weiter)) |
|14 |   |   |   |
|15 | oth- |   |   |
|16 | ers |   |   |
|17 | Mod. | ↑Ja: | ↑Ja: |
|18 | P1 | Well, (.) yes, | So, (.) ja, |
|19 | (1.0) |   |   |
|20 | Mod. | What else? (1.0) Youyouyou'13 | Was noch? (1.0) Siesiesie sind |
|21 |   | are today a bit, (1.1) you | heut nen bisschen, (1.1) Sie |
|22 |   | must just say a bit more about | müssen mal nen bisschen mehr |

'13 addresses P3
The moderator in the fragment above displays at first his interest in obtaining 'more' from P1 ('^[Ye::s'; line 17). When P1 signals that there is not 'more' to come and as no other focus group member takes the turn after the moderator's unspecific prompt 'What else?' (line 20), he addresses P3:

Youyouyou are today a bit, (1.1) you must just say a bit more about it.=uh ststart, (.6) if you wouldn't mind, with a story. (.6) What are they talking about. (.6) Just invent something.

(lines 20-27)

Whereas the moderator's statement in the previous extract ('You haven't said (.) very much at all yet ["today"]'; lines 15+16) was immediately addressed by the up to then silent participant, P3 in the extract above does not come forward after the moderator's 'Youyouyou are today a bit, (1.1)' (lines 20+21) and 'forces' hearably the moderator to say 'more'.

19 P3's turn seems to defy translation as she does not use the 'correct' German term 'bodenständig'. She says 'bodenbeständig' which we translated nevertheless with 'rooted in the soil' (which is 'bodenständig').
The moderator's ensuing question (or better: 'directive as question substitute'; see Heritage & Roth, 1995) is 'elaborate'. In the next chapter we will suggest that one of the functions of elaborate questions is to guide participants with the help of added question components to produce a range of opinion relevant responses. For the time being let us only state that in providing an 'option menu' the moderator displays the participant's opportunity to choose the component she wants to address. Or, in other words, in providing not one specific, but different prompts, the offered answer can be considered as not having been specifically prompted.

Regarding Extract Four we noted that in stating unspecifically that the participant has not yet said much today without asking him a specific question, the moderator orients both to the requirement that each participant should be obliged to have a turn and to the requirement to receive unprompted contributions by the participants. The moderator's multi-unit question in the last extract can be seen as another device for 'prompting unprompted contributions'; we will extend this topic in the next chapter on 'Elaborate Questions'.

3.3. A non-vocal request for a non-prompted contribution

Up to now we analyzed the moderator's vocal requests for non-prompted contributions. In this subsection we will focus on the interactional work being done by gaze. Not asking a participant verbally, but addressing her non-verbally treats the participant as a voluntary speaker. Let us proffer a small bit of
interaction, which takes place at the end of the moderator's introductory remarks when he asks the participants to 'tell' him 'a little bit' about themselves:

(6) Detail from Extract One, lines 65 to 81

Mod.: but perhaps you could tell me a little bit about, (. ) yourselves, before we get to grips with the topic, (1.0) about how old you are, what kind of a job you do and, "( .8) so on," ((turns to P3))

P3: Um mm, ((after she has said "um mm", the moderator turns away from her))

(1.0)
P3: Shall I begin,

Mod.: Yes, (. ) if you wish

P3: Good, *well,* ( .) ((the moderator turns again to P3)) ((continues))

At this point the focus group consists of six participants and the moderator; later on two more young people will join the group. The group sits at a rectangular table; one of the short sides is round, the other one is straight; the moderator sits at the straight side and P3 sits next to him. While still formulating the task description, the moderator already turns to his neighbour P3 and nonverbally indicates that she should begin. The moment, however, she starts, the moderator turns away from her and seems to look down at his papers. When P3 asks after a pause for a verbal confirmation, whether she should begin, the moderator says: 'Yes, (. ) if you wish' in a distinctive and almost mocking voice as if he makes fun of the participant's understanding check. P3 has been selected by the moderator as the next turn speaker, but as it has been done nonverbally, it gives him the opportunity to withdraw his request
shortly thereafter. The moderator seems to put quite a lot of effort in fixing P3 as a voluntary speaker, which means as a speaker who has chosen herself as the next speaker. The participant, however, understands quite well that a contribution is required by her and she seeks for reassurance in asking 'Shall I begin,'.

Again we find evidence for our hypothesis that moderators orient to a normative feature of focus groups as a discursive event where the moderator must not tell the participants what they are going to do, but where they are supposed to act along their own ideas. In the short Detail Six from above we can already see the institutional context of focus groups which reminds us of classroom interaction, where according to Edwards & Mercer (1987) and Billig et al. (1988) teachers make systematic efforts to bring off knowledge as stemming from the pupils and not provided by teachers. Edwards & Mercer (1987) have presented the strategies which are adopted by the teachers to elicit - at least apparently to elicit - 'things' from pupils that they did not already know. Examining the teacher-pupil-interaction closer, however, revealed that the required responses from the pupils are cued or provided by the teacher, so that Edwards & Mercer call this process 'cued elicitation'. Billig et al. conclude, that

The notions of innate knowledge, and of education as drawing out (or 'bringing out') from pupils the capacities and cleverness which they possess already within them, are clearly reflected in modern educational theories. Indeed, they are cultural heritage, an ideology of education that we have inherited from Plato. In the Thaetetus he calls it 'mental midwifery', and in keeping with the metaphor the modern word
'concept' has the same root as 'conceive', in the sense of 'become pregnant with'. It derives from the Socratic dialogical method of drawing out meanings - the 'maieutic' (midwifery) method, with Socrates the midwife, and the pupil giving birth to ideas that were latent within. (1988:62)

The (male) moderator presents himself also as kind of a mental midwife/man. In explaining the rationale to the group he says:

(7) Detail from Extract One, lines 31 to 36

=it's *just, (.) to find out, (.8) what your gut reactions are, or* ((moves both hands circling away from his torso)) what you feel or what you think you know,

As has already been mentioned in the preceding section, the moderator uses in the German original twice the picture of a 'stomach'. First of all he announces that he is going to ask 'holes into the participants' stomachs', which is the German equivalent to 'pester the living daylights out of the participants'. Thereafter he asks for 'what the participants have in their stomachs' ('was die Teilnehmer in ihrem Bauch haben') which is the literal translation of asking for their 'gut reactions'. By saying this, the moderator 'enacts' what he is going to do in the focus group session in moving both hands circling away from his torso: he is going to get out of the participants' stomachs what is in their stomachs. The analogy with a mental midwife, however, is not optimal, as the moderator asks not only for getting the things out of the participants' stomachs, but, as we have seen in the short interaction with one participant, stresses that
the participants should - to stick to the picture - offer the 'things' in their stomachs voluntarily. The moderator constructs himself as the invisible supporter or a 'noninterventionist ... that guides and elicits, rather than imposes understandings' (Edwards, 1993b:220). The physical setting of the focus group already tells us something about this focus: as the video camera is placed behind the moderator to film the participants' reactions the focus is on their responses, their responses are required.

To sum up, then, the major observations of the first two analytic sections: at the beginning we have been looking at how a moderator achieves informality in his opening remarks and how he puts some effort in displaying the attendance at the focus group as a voluntary matter. During the focus group talk itself moderators display the requirement of achieving contributions on the participants' own initiative. The moderator's orientation to voluntary and non-prompted contributions could also be seen when silent participants are requested to become more active. We suggest that while 'doing' a focus group the moderator displays a concern with his/her actions being non-interventionist ones. Whereas we focused up to now on the way, the moderator would like the participants' contributions to be expressed, we will pursue in the next section extracts regarding the kind of talk the moderator is after. In particular we will suggest motivations for the required 'POBA talk'.

20 The term 'to enact' is here used like in Streeck's article (1994).
4. Request for 'POBA talk'

The rest of this chapter is dedicated to the kind of talk which the moderator announces in the opening sequence should be provided by the participants and which we would like to call following the American market researcher Henderson (1991) 'POBA talk' with 'POBA' standing for perceptions, opinions, beliefs and attitudes. After having introduced some more fragments out of other opening sequences regarding the talk the moderators display they are searching for, I will pursue an elaborate example on how a moderator 'socializes' a participant to deploy this kind of talk. Thereafter I will suggest motivations for nudging the participants into 'POBA talk' and motivations on part of the participants for doing 'POBA talk'.

4.1. Socialization into 'POBA talk'

Let me start with the idea that at the centre of the issue is a tension: on the one hand, there is the account that focus groups are something naturalistic as what is done in a focus group is what one does also in real life. See for example the following fragments from moderators' opening remarks:

(8) File: opening\intro5

1 Mod. (1.4) And=uh, (. ) we'll then<
2 simply talk about it, (.8)
3 nothing more and nothing less.
4

Moderators in market research focus groups always sit with their back to the video camera (and with the back to the one-way-mirror, if the room is provided with such a mirror).
Opening Sequences and 'POBA Talk'

Focus groups are furthermore displayed as being naturalistic as they revolve around opinions and opinions are treated as unproblematically existing objects which people can access like in the following fragment:

What the moderators do not to say, for example, is that the focus group is a very special conversational environment and takes place in a very special surveillance situation.

On the other hand, moderators do a certain kind of 'policing' of what the focus group is about. We saw this in Extract One: 'it's just, (..) to find out, (.8) what your gut reactions are, or what you feel or what you think you know,' (lines 31-36). Consider here further fragments in focus groups run by other moderators:
Focus group moderators claim that they will 'just find out the opinions which are there', on the other hand, what is 'just there' is constructed as opinions. But what do moderators do, when participants do not display opinions? In the following we will look at a moment of 'socialization' during the course of a focus group. The fragment starts with a question being asked by a participant. Participants' questions appear only very rarely in our data corpus (no question at all or at most one question in a segment of thirty minutes), but, in contrast to clients' questions in AIDS counselling, they are not accompanied by accounts and requests for permissions (see Peräkylä, 1995). Also in contrast to

\[22 'Opinion production' is discussed in more detail in the\]
AIDS counselling, questions are never answered by the moderator. Let us analyze how the moderator manages not to answer P1's question relating a cigarette brand called Stansted Zero.

(13) Source: R18,105; file: ooopen\seq\weissni3; video: 12:36

---

1  P1  Wasn't there once a Stan, (...) called Stansted Zero or something?

2  Mod.  A what?

3  P1  ((laughs)) (xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx) (...)

4  Mod.  [Do any of you know it?]

5  P2  [((xxxxx chocolate xxxxxxxx)]

6  P1  [((laughs))]

7  Mod.  What would Stansted Zero be then,

8  P1  I >don't< know,=I only know, that my aunt some years ago, *well,* ((smiley voice))

9  P1  ((laughs)) smoked a cigarette like that, (...) and, (.9) it was really, there were such, (...) there was kind of a, (...) how is it called,

10  Mod.  Hm mm, (...) with a charcoal filter,="

11  P1  (=With a charcoal filter,

12  P1  (>but<) you could only get it >at< the station, (...) and I always had it in my head, (...) that, (...) "this was from Stansted,=

13  Mod.  Hmm,

14  P1  >But I don't know,=whether all this is true, "I thought, you

---

chapter on 'Manufacturing Individual Opinions'.

23  a light cigarette brand

24  The turns in lines 12 to 14 seem to defy transcription; they take place in overlap shortly one after each other.
might know it perhaps, "<

It doesn't matter, (whether)

anything here is true or not

true, = uh, (.) if you have an

as

[sumption, you can let it out

here, ]

[((laugh softly))] ((continue

+ laughing softly))

The moderator starts with an understanding check

('A what?'; line 5) which is followed by Pl's

reformulation of her question and an added softener:

'By any chance,' (lines 10+11). Because of another

participant's talk and Pl's laughter the moderator's

attempt to redirect Pl's question to the group ('Do

any of you know it?'; line 12) is unsuccessful. He

then addresses again Pl with another question: 'What

would Stansted Zero be then,' (lines 16+17). Whereas

Pl has asked, whether a brand called Stansted Zero

had existed, the moderator returns the question in

asking what this Stansted Zero would be, implying the

addresses another participant
irrelevance of whether it had existed or not. P1 does not answer this question, but gives an account for her asking the preceding question ('I don't know, I only know,'; line 18) and ends by offering a metapoint and signalling thereby trouble: '>But I don't know, whether all this is true, 'I thought, you might know it perhaps,' (lines 39-41).

Let us look now more closely at the moderator's long reply. In the course of his response, he first asserts that ...

It doesn't matter, (whether) anything here is true or not true, =uh, (.) if you have an as [umption, you can let it out here,] (lines 43-48).

and then continues ...

[this is not a, (.6) know=knowledgetest here, or anything like that,] (..) you can't win money either. (..) *you'll get your money anyhow.* ((smiley voice)) (.8) please fire away, =now have=have you any other ideas. about Stan^ste:d (lines 53-61).

We have called this fragment a moment of socialization because the moderator makes explicit the rules of a focus group while at the same time displaying the inappropriateness of the participant's contribution. Note, however, how the coaching of the participant is not done in a finger wagging way, but through a collaborative exchange between moderator and participant interspersed with laughter. The main message from the moderator is of reassurance. He contrasts images of a knowledge test and a focus group: whereas the condition for winning money in a knowledge test is to give right/true answers, a focus group member gets money regardless of his/her
A focus group participant does not have to first check the correctness of an answer-to-be; nor does (s)he have to give accounts for factual judgements; instead (s)he can 'just let his/her assumptions out' and can 'simply fire away' his/her ideas. The moderator shows that the discourse he is after is not factual 'school' knowledge: 'it's not like in school or anything like that,' (see Extract One, lines 42-44). Correspondingly, the moderator's summary of the participant's talk which he addresses to the other focus group members reformulates PI's question whether there was once an Stansted Zero into a statement: 'You said, (.) well there was already something like the Stansted Zero.' (lines 65-67), regardless of whether this is 'true' or 'false'.

The participant in the above extract has been 'taught' the difference between a factual, school knowledge and 'POBA talk'. We will now consider the motivation for nudging the participants into such a 'POBA talk' and will make a distinction between the 'official' or psychological research motivations which are the participants' (in the sense of the focus group members) business and interactional motivations which are our business and which we are going to analyze.

It will become clear that these motivations can have three elements:

Asking for POBAs can ...

• preserve the moderator from answering questions
• counter 'it depends-answers'
and
can prevent 'I don't know-answers'.

At the end of the chapter I will finally offer motivations on part of the participants for declaring their own talk as 'POBA talk'.

4.2. Moderators' motivations for asking for 'POBA talk'

A) ASKING FOR POBAs PRESERVES THE MODERATOR FROM ANSWERING QUESTIONS

In this section we will study two extracts in which participants ask the moderator for 'facts' and in which the moderator returns the question emphasizing the relevance of the participants' 'opinions'. Both fragments are similar to the one in the last sub-section, the moderator does not, however, use the occasion for a 'training' of the participants. The first extract starts when the moderator asks what the brand name 'Cape Blue Ultra' says about the product (the cigarettes):

(14) Source: Blue19,451; file: ooopen\seq\weissni2; video: 39:55
As P2 concentrates in his answer on the meaning of 'Ultra', the moderator asks another question on the meaning of 'Blue Ultra'. The participant, however, returns the question and implies a suggestion ('=does it mean, (.) the, the, smoke,=the smoke (then) is particularly ↑blue,'; lines 24-26), which is formulated in a hearably provocative way and which is after the moderator's turn immediately addressed to by another participant: 'Blue mist,' (line 29). But let us concentrate here on the moderator's turn:

<Whatever you understand by it.> (lines 27+28).

The moderator speaks slowly as opposed to the participant's displayed hurry ('>but what about the Blue before it.<'; lines 21+22) and does not - unlike P1 - react to the participant's 'provocation' of speaking of the cigarette's 'smoke' (the German 'Qualm'; see footnote). He rejects P2's question '›but what about the Blue before it.<' and emphasizes saying '<Whatever you understand by it.>’. That is,

P2 uses the German 'Qualm' which is more negative than the English 'smoke'; 'Qualm' might be described as a term which is used by strict non-smokers when they describe the 'smoke' of cigarettes.
it is not about the 'truth' or how it is 'in reality', but how it is from P2's point of view. This is rather different from his earlier question formulations:

Well, what does the name say about the product. (lines 1+2)

and

[What does] Blue Ultra mean then. (line 19+20)

In these question formulations, the moderator asks for descriptions, for the 'objective' meanings of the given name. When P2, however, returns the question, the moderator 'makes more explicit' or 'reminds' the participant what these questions mean in focus groups and that he is interested in the participant's point of view. The moderator's emphasis on personal views seems thus to be situationally occasioned and gives him - in case he does not know the answer - an (elegant) excuse for not answering the participant's question. Because even if he knows the product management's and/or the advertising agency's arguments for choosing the name 'Cape Blue Ultra' for a new line extender - stating the 'real' reasons for the naming might put him into the trouble of having to defend these reasons.

Let me briefly introduce another fragment with a question asked by a participant:

(15) Source: R18,606; file: ooopen\seq\weissni4; video: 25:03

1. Mod. As I hear it, well what links the three brands, is that the packaging, is (.) similarly, (.). discreet,

2. W. Wie ich höre, also ist das Verbindende an diesen drei Marken, dass die Verpackung, (.). ähnlich, (.).
Opening Sequences and ‘POBA Talk’

Note P2’s re-formulation of her question after the moderator’s understanding check in lines 12 to 13 and note how she adds an account for her question ("(xxxx) I’ve forgotten."; lines 13+14) after the moderator does not immediately react. The moderator hearably allows more space for a continuation of her account, but comes finally in after a long pause with the question:

What would you assume, (line 16).

The participant repeats that she does not know it and displays thereafter her ‘attitudes’ on the importance of white filters. Again, we do not know, whether the moderator withholding his knowledge or whether he ‘really’ does not the answer to the participant’s question. In any case, diverting the question back to the participant elicits more precise displays of the participant’s attitudes on the topic under discussion.
b) Asking for POBAs Counters 'It Depends-Answers'

In this paragraph I will suggest another moderator's motivation for nudging the participants into talking about their opinions and attitudes. Several times in our data corpus participants display difficulties in 'simply' answering the moderator's question with reference to different conditions or different aspects which one should take into consideration. Let us look at such an 'it depends-argument' in the following extract:

(16) Source: 17A,482; file: fgwork\se\spontan2; video: 15:48

1. Mod.    Do people talk more about advertising or politics.  
2.  
3. (1.3)  Advertising  
4. P1       Advertising  
5. P2       Advertising  
6. P3       Hm mm,  
7. P4       That depends  
8. (1.4)   (xxxx[xxxx]xxxx ]  
9. P5       [Well, it varies]  
10. P6²⁷   >Well< of course. (1.4) um, (.) just give your, (.) your impression quite spontaneously, do people, (1.8) uh hh talk more about advertising, or more about hh (1.1) who can think of *something sensible, (.) which we can compare,* ((smiley voice)) (.) on the subject of music.  
11. Mod.    Wird mehr über Werbung oder mehr über Politik gesprochen.  
12.  
13. (1.3)  Werbung  
14. P1      Werbung  
15. P2      Hm mm,  
16. P3      Kommt drauf an  
17. (1.1)   [xxxx[xxxx]xxxx]  
18. P5      [Na, ist unterschiedlich]  
19. P6²⁷   >Ja< na klar. (1.4) em, (.) nur so mal gau;ng spontan Euren, (.) Euren Eindruck, =wird mehr, (1.8) e:h hh über Werbung, oder mehr über, hh (1.1) wem fällt was *Kluges ein, (.) was wir vergleichen können,* ((lächelnde Stimme)) (. ) Über Musik gesprochen.

After two participants have already answered the question whether people talk more about advertising or politics, others start problematizing their decision ('that depends'; 'it varies'). The moderator comes in very quickly in confirming

²⁷ I cannot see on the video, whether this speaker is really the sixth one or whether he is identical with P4 or P5.
emphatically at first the participants' doubts ('Well< of course.; line 11), but urges them thereafter to ...

um, (.) just give your, (.) your impression quite spontaneously, (lines 11-14).

By adding another pair of options ('do people talk more about advertising or about music'), he shows that he is not interested in a more differentiated or sophisticated analysis regarding the decision between advertising or politics, but that the answers already given ('advertising') are sufficient. 'That depends-' or 'it varies-answers' are shown by the moderator to not reflect the 'spontaneous impressions' of the participants, and these 'spontaneous impressions' are exactly the contributions the moderator shows he is after.

Let us pursue another fragment, in which the moderator asks for an evaluation of a brand name.

(17) Source: Blue17,1001; file: ooopen\seq\weissni5; video: 29:14

1. Mod. "Is that a good name,"
2. (.)
3. P?
4. Mod. [((clears throat))]
5. [>for this< ] brand, (.)
6. or?
7. (.)
8. P1 It depends, how it tastes,=
9. [well, because taste] (like)
10. *the name* ((smiley voice))
11. 
12. Mod. [Yes, (.) you, ]
13. (1.3)
14. Mod. You would, (.) well you don't
15. know it "yet." just from
16. [your, (.) your] gut feeling.
17. P?
18. (3.4)
19. P2 (Well,) (.) it hasn't got any

"Ist das nen guter Name,"

[(((räuspert sich))]

[>für diese< ] Marke, (.)
oder?

Kommst drauf an, wie sie dann schmeckt,=
[ne, weil Geschmack] (nach)
*dem Namen* ((lächelnde
Stimme))

[Ja, (.) das, ]

Das würdet Ihr, (.) das wisst
Ihr ja "noch nicht," nur jetzt
[vom, (.) vom] Gefühl her.

[[(hustet)] ]

(Also,) (.) s hat halt keine
The moderator comes in immediately after P1's assertion, that 'It depends, how it tastes,' (line 7). As P1 continues speaking the moderator fades out and recycles in line 14 his interrupted start:

You would, (. ) well you don't know it "yet." just from [your, (. ) your] gut feeling. (lines 14-16)

After this intervention and a long pause another participant offers a simplistic assessment ('(Well,) (. ) it hasn't got any message.'; lines 19+20)²⁸.

Asking for one's 'spontaneous impressions' as in Extract Sixteen or one's 'gut feelings' as in the previous extract diverts participants' objections and displayed difficulties in answering questions. Asking for 'POBAs' can thus be seen as a device to counter 'It depends-answers' and in the next sub-section we will see, how asking for opinions and attitudes can be similarly used to prevent 'I don't know-answers'.

c) ASKING FOR POBAS TO PREVENT 'I DON'T KNOW-ANSWERS'

Nudging the participants into talking about their opinions and attitudes and not about facts gives the moderator also the chance to head off pending 'I don't know-answers'. Look for example at the following extract²⁹.

²⁸ See also Chapter Seven were we will show how one of the participants' options when they deal with the moderator's 'Silent Recipiency' is the production of 'useful information' in the sense of 'POBA talk'.
²⁹ More on other strategies on how to forestall 'I don't know-answers' in the chapter on 'Elaborate Questions'.
Opening Sequences and 'POBA Talk'

(18) Source: 17B,898; file: elicit\seq\hm11d; video: (2) 14:10

1. Mod. Do you think, uh, that
2. moiré,
3. (.)
4. ?
5. Mod. "unbelievable") cigarettes are smoked, because
6. of ads->because there are ads
7. for cigarettes<
8. →
9. Part? (What,)=
distinction between 'gut feelings' on the one hand and 'factual knowledge' on the other hand and states emphatically that he is not interested in the participant's knowledge, but only in his assumptions.

Let us now look in the last sub-section on participants' motivations for referring to their talk as 'POBA talk'.

4.3. Participants' motivations for doing 'POBA talk'

In this last section we will consider the way participants can display their contributions as being 'just' their opinions in a way that closes a topic off. When opinions are displayed as 'bottom line units' participants have an account for resisting further enquiries about their answers. In more than six hours of transcribed talk we found two instances where participants explicitly formulate their contributions as opinions. In doing so they head off further questions.

In the first fragment the moderator asks the focus group members to vote for one of the two brand names under discussion: either for 'Ultra Blue' or for 'Blue Ultra'.

(19) Source: Blue19,1011; file: ooopen\seq\gefuehl2; video: 51:41

1. Mod. And which of these two, (.9) >Ultra Blue or Blue Ultra,< (.4) Ultra Blue. (2.0) For whatever reason. (.9) One, two, three, four, five, (.7) all, (1.3) One is gone, (.) in the meantime, (1.9) >then I

Und welche von diesen beiden, >Ultra Blue oder Blue Ultra< (.4) Ultra Blue. (2.0) Warum auch immer. (.9) Eins, zwei, drei, vier, fünf, (.7) alle, (1.3) Einer ist gegangen, (.) zwischendurch, aber, (1.9) >da brauch ich ja
Opening Sequences and 'FOBA Talk'

The moderator hearably 'fishes for more' (see Pomerantz, 1980) in repeating the participant's 'That's what you're thinking.' (line 30). The participant, however, does not provide 'more', but counters ...

((laughs) *I'm just saying my opinion.*) ((laughing voice)) (lines 31-34).

As indicated by the square brackets, the moderator comes in very early and reassures the participant that this is her opinion indeed and does not 'fish' any longer. In overlapping his turn with the participant's the moderator perhaps displays the importance of his confirmation of the participant's
view and accepts the signalled closing down of the topic. Declaring one’s statement as one’s opinion thus seem to ‘immunize’ against further inquiries.

A similar mechanism can be seen in the next fragment. We enter the scene of the following extract at the point where the moderator comments on the results of a task: the participants have been asked to mark the 'strength' of three cigarette brands (the Cape, the Cape Lights and the Cape Blue Ultra) with points on a clipboard and the moderator addresses his question to the only participant who has rated the Cape Blue Ultra as being stronger than the Cape Lights, but lighter than the Cape; the other participants have positioned the Cape Blue Ultra as being lighter than the Cape Lights.

(20) Source: Blue17,488; file: paper\elicit\seq\gefuehll; video: 17:07

1  Mod. ... Um, (...) I'm always of... 
2  course interested, first of 
3  all in the <outliers,> (...) 
4  <"who pinned that point 
5  there?> ((points to the 
6  clipboard)) 
7  () 
8  Part. ME! 
9  (1.4) 
10  Mod. And, (...) uh, *how have you 
11  come to this decision?* 
12  ((smiley voice)) 
13  () 
14  Part. Yes, (...) I, (...) think, that 
15  is, (...) something, (...) like a 
16  cross, (...) between, (...) Cape 
17  and Cape *Lights,*= 
18  Mod. =Hm mm, (1.7) Just like that, 
19  (9) 
20  [(you've come xxxxxxxxxxxxxx)]= 
21  Part. [(xxxx it's a a gut feeling)]= 
22  Mod. =Well it's a gut feeling, (...) 
23  hm mm, 
24  (2.6)

31 A participant who had left the room comes back.
When the moderator asks the participant, how she came to her decision and the participant does not give a reason, the moderator 'fishes for more'. At first she offers a 'passive recipiency token' \(^{32}\) ('Hm mm,'; line 18) and states as the participant does not produce more 'Just like that, (.9) [(you've come xxxxxxxxxxxxxx)]' (lines 18-20), which is overlapped by the participant's [(xxxx it's a a gut feeling)]' (line 21). After the moderator's partial repeat the participant exclaims:

\[ \text{\uparrow Yes (.) my opinion! (line 25) } \]

The participant thus displays that her gut feeling/her opinion is something which is not further questionable and to which she cannot add anything more. Displaying an utterance as a gut feeling or an opinion can be used by participants as kind of an immunization against further enquiry or elaboration. Similarly moderators block participants' questions by referring to focus groups as being a place for delivering opinions and them as being 'collectors' of delivered opinions, the participants in the sequences shown here block the moderators' fishing by displaying the status of the statements offered by them as gut feelings/opinions. Declaring something as one's perception, opinion, belief or attitude does

\[^{32}\text{See Jefferson (1984) and Chapter Seven on 'Silent Recipiency'.}\]
not only close the topic off, but similarly provides sufficiency and kind of completeness of the topic.

Let me come to an end by summarizing the points I made in the preceding section: the official 'reason for being' of focus groups is that they elicit opinions and attitudes from the participants. Vaughn et al. analyzed definitions on focus groups and state, that these definitions usually contain the following core element:

The goal is to elicit perceptions, feelings, attitudes, and ideas of participants about a selected topic. (1996:5)

We have seen how a moderator socializes a participant into a discourse on opinions and attitudes and have discussed motivations for the moderators of nudging the participants into 'POBA talk' which are distinct from the official story of focus groups. The moderator's insistence on 'POBA talk' does not only save him/her from the trouble which may be caused by participants' questions, but it also works as kind of a device for guaranteeing the participants' collaboration in the sense that it preempts 'I don't know-answers' and 'It depends-answers'. I also pointed to participants' motivation of naming their own contributions opinions or attitudes: it signals completeness and gives them license to close a topic off.

One of the main topics of this chapter was the tension that focus groups are, on the one hand, considered as something naturalistic as what is done in a focus group is what one also does in 'real life'. On the other hand, moderators do a certain
kind of 'policing' of what focus groups are about. The next chapter focuses on how questions are being asked by moderators. How do they manage the tension between providing, on the one hand, a non-threatening and permissive environment and, on the other, working from a detailed question guide?
CHAPTER FOUR

ASKING ELABORATE QUESTIONS: FOCUS GROUPS AND THE MANAGEMENT OF SPONTANEITY

1. Introduction

Let us start with a fragment from a moderator’s opening sequence which we discussed at the beginning of the last chapter:

(1) Detail from Extract One (Chapter Three), lines 24 to 31

I, (. ) uh, (. ) now want to, (. ) pester the living daylights out of you a bit, in the hope, that you, (. ) will answer as spontaneously as possible, (. ) there's no wrong answer, there's also no right answer, ((continues))

In standard introductions to focus group techniques moderators are advised to make similar statements. For example, Vaughn et al. write:

This interview is not a test, nor should it in any way be viewed as a series of questions with right or wrong answers. Remember, we are very interested in what you think and feel. (1996:41,42)

This chapter focuses on the tension implied in this introductory statement and how it is managed through the construction of particular kinds of question. This is a tension, on the one hand, between the activity of 'pestering the living daylights' out of participants and, on the other, the ideal that group members should 'answer as spontaneously as
possible'. Put another way, it is a tension between the licence to give answers that are 'neither right nor wrong' and a demand on participants to actually produce answers rather than 'I-don't-know's'. For moderators this means, on the one hand, having to provide a non-threatening and permissive environment and, on the other, working from a detailed question guide. More specifically, this chapter considers the way this dilemma between an authoritarian and a laissez-faire concept of focus groups is evidenced in, and oriented to, through the design of the moderators' questions.

This chapter will focus especially on how questions are asked by moderators. It will describe the phenomenon of 'elaborate questions' and will suggest that these questions offer the participants an array of question components to which they can respond to. The question design itself manages the tension between focusing participants on a certain topic while simultaneously offering them the choice to which specific question component 'spontaneously' to respond to.

Apart from allowing focus group members to select different question components for their answer, elaborate questions seem to have other functions too: they illustrate specific (and slightly esoteric) market research tasks and they secure participation by providing a maximal number of stimuli; we will discuss these functions in turn.
2. Elaborate questions I: Guiding understanding of 'non-mundane' market research questions

In our market research focus group data question and answer sequences are pervasive. Krueger recommends that questions should be limited to a single dimension, otherwise moderators 'may inadvertently include words that they think are synonyms but that participants see as entirely different concepts' (1998:4). Furthermore he cautions against adding 'a second sentence, phrase that supposedly amplifies the question' for this may confuse the respondents 'by introducing another dimension' (1998:4). In contrast to this injunction, in our materials rewordings and reformulations of questions are pervasive; in our corpus questions are routinely asked in an 'elaborate way'.

Krueger gives examples of questions from question schedules to be administered within groups:

- What does the word violence mean to you?
- If you could do one thing to reduce violence in your community, what would it be?

(1998:94)

(Remember that these are not actual questions used in actual groups.) Now compare these questions with the arrowed question asked in the following extract from our data.

(2) Source: R18,29; file: db7; video: 10:02

1  Mod.  How >is=it< with the
2  ↑other·ers (.) Did you get,
3  (.) something similar,
4  Wie >is=des< bei den
   ↑An·dern (. ) Habn die da,
   ( . ) Ähnliches
   mitbekommen,
The moderator starts by asking, how the participants would generally 'assign,=classify,' (line 25) the role of the cigarette brand Dublin. He rises his voice to signal that his turn has not come to an end yet and continues by adding 'have they followed a ↑trend,' (lines 27+28). Another question component is latched onto the previous one ('=uh, (.)
how would you er, < (1.7) describe the Dublin, ';
lines 28-30). A next question component is similarly added, but left incomplete: 'how has it, (1.0) well
regarding this development now: (.8) to
ultra-light,'; lines 30-32). After a pause the moderator finally delivers another component ('well
where does this one stand,'; lines 33+34).

Let us start by eliminating one initially plausible explanation for the complex structure of this question. Could the question components be added as the moderator pursues responses from reluctant participants (Pomerantz, 1984b)? The evidence does not support this interpretation. In particular, note the way the first component ends with an upward intonation, and the next ones are latched to the previous ones, with continuing intonation again used in each case.

In four thirty minutes segments from focus groups run by different moderators, we found the following question frequencies, which contain more than one question component and which seem to be delivered 'deliberately' by the respective moderator.

- Moderator Isabella: 14 elaborate questions
- Moderator Richard: 10 elaborate questions
- Moderator Tom: 9 elaborate questions
- Moderator Sandra¹ (judged by the head of the research department as the least skilled moderator): 7 elaborate questions.

The degree of elaboration varies in our materials. Questions are most elaborate when the

¹ These are pseudonyms which reflect the moderators' sex.
moderator nominates a new topic and when this topic is one that is unlikely to be discussed in everyday conversation. In these cases elaboration will include: (a) a prefatory statement; (b) added question components (e.g. reformulations of questions and candidate answers); (c) rewordings; (d) displays of delicacy (orienting to the intrusiveness of asking for views, the asking of hearably trivial questions, and the moderator’s care for what participants are saying); and (e) non-vocal enactment (emphasising and dramatizing points with gestures). The main focus of the chapter is on components (b) and (c).

More ‘mundane’ topic initial questions are delivered with prefatory statements, question reformulations and rewordings, but with less displayed delicacy and non-vocal enactment. When moderators pursue a topic with the group as a whole they miss out the prefatory statement, but elaborate with added components and rewordings. When they pursue a topic with individuals, moderators are more likely to use elaborate questions if a participant’s answer has been problematic in some way.

Minimal questions are also common in focus groups, but they tend to occur in three specific environments: (a) when the moderator is following up a topic with an individual who is answering in (what the moderator considers) an appropriate manner; (b) when eliciting background information from participants; (c) when questions relate to tasks which are not a direct part of the focus group.

Having outlined some of the broad patterning of question use in our materials, let us go back to the
individual question components in Extract Two. The moderator asks first for a classification of 'Dublin' and following this delivers a question component which includes a candidate answer and could be answered with 'yes' or 'no' ('have they followed a trend'; lines 27+28). In his answer, participant P2 uses this exact formulation: 'Well I do think, that it has followed the trend,' (lines 36-38). What might this question component be doing? One possibility is that it facilitates the answering of an abstract and unusual question - it is unlikely that participants discuss developments in the cigarette market like this when they are at home. One motivation for such question components, then is as illustrations of how participants should cope with 'non-mundane' questions.

The following pair of extracts supports this hypothesis. Coincidentally we have in our corpus the same question asked by the same moderator in two different groups. It is a 'projective' question in which participants are asked to imagine the different varieties of a cigarette brand (the light, medium and strong version) as a family and to make suggestions of the role of the new family member (the light version) in this family. In one group the moderator's question causes hearable trouble; let us start with this extract.

(3) Source: Blue17,645; file: db60; video: 21:00

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>P1</td>
<td>[Yes, but] if had been completely light blue,=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>=((clears throat))=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>=then it would have been</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>P1</td>
<td>(. ) hard to distinguish it from the, (. ) Cape Lights too,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td>[Ja, aber] wenn sie ganz hellblau gewesen wäre,=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td>=((rauspert sich))=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td>=dann hätte mans (. ) von der, (. ) Cape Lights auch schwer unterscheiden können, so auf</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The moderator's question is followed by a long silence. P2, who sits next to the moderator seems to display his lack of understanding, after which the moderator shouts emphatically '=?Person!' (line 37) and that it is possible to imagine brands as persons.

In the following extract the same moderator asks another group also about the status of the new member of the existing brand family.
In this case it is after the completed question that a participant offers 'It's the baby,' (line 35).

Let us compare the two question deliveries which lead in one group to hearable trouble and in the other to a smooth transition to the next speaker. In Extract Three the moderator asks to imagine the brand as a person and to imagine what kind of a person this brand would be in the existing family. In
Extract Four, however, where there is less trouble, the moderator introduces at first the brand as a member of the existing family. He then asks: 'What kind of a, (.) family member °is this.°' (lines 23+24) and adds after having left uncompleted two other statement or question beginnings: 'which characteristics could one give this, (.) new member of the, (.) family, (1.2) the Copenhagen.' (lines 30-34). In her non-delayed answer ('It's the baby,'; line 35) participant 4 addresses the first question component after the status of the new brand in the family. Note how the moderator offers a choice of two different questions and note also how he elicits more information about the 'baby' by echoing the participant's answer. In contrast to Extract Three the moderator splits here the question after the 'brand as person' up into two facets which seems to work as a 'foot in the door technique' as, when the participant addresses one facet, the moderator asks implicitly for addressing the other one. The question elaboration, then, can be understood as orienting to the subtle pragmatics of eliciting and guiding participation.

Like the moderator's question in Extract Two the questions in Extract Three and Extract Four deal with 'non-mundane' topics on cigarette brands and trends on the cigarette market. In Two the moderator specifies the original question in adding a candidate answer; in Four he provides alternative questions on how one can approach the topic under discussion. Where he fails to provide alternatives in Extract Three, he receives no answer. Complex question structures, which include more than one question component thus seem to be delivered when the
moderator has to get participants working with marketing-oriented topics. However, as we will see in the next section, this is only one function of 'elaborate questions'.

3. Elaborate questions II: Securing participation by providing an array of alternative items

In Extracts Three and Four in the previous section moderators ask for very special information such as characteristics of a brand 'if it was a person'. The following extract deals with a less esoteric topic, but the moderator nevertheless asks the question in an elaborate way as he adds question components to the original question. Again the start of the elaborated question is arrowed.

((Forts.)) Ja, hier wurde es, (.2) wurde ja, (.1) ich glaube, (.2) eher, (.1) nicht nur eher positiv, <sondern> (.3) Du hattest negativ berichtet gehabt, also >nega<- ein negatives Gespräch, (.7) die anderen (.2) so in der Tendenz, (.3) bei Dir war es, positive Positiv. (.1) >Kann es jetzt nicht mehr so genau sagen können< (.7) also war es eher positiv. (.1) Ehm, (2.6) pt aber mal jetzt abgesehen von positiv oder negativ, (.7) ehm, (.2) woran (.1) entzünden sich so Diskussionen oder Gespräche über "Werbung", (.1) >Was steht da dahinter, was ist da der Anlass,< (.1) meistens, (.2)
Note first of all how, when the moderator asks what sparks off conversations about advertising, he adds quickly:

> What's behind it, what's the cause, mostly or often, or sometimes, (lines 26-29).

The moderator presents the question in different forms and attaches a variety of options to the last component which state precisely when the cause is worth mentioning: 'mostly', 'often' or 'sometimes'. Let us look first of all at this part of this complex question. The listing at the end of the question is close to the textual form of a survey questionnaire. For example, an interviewee in a questionnaire study might be asked if (s)he buys cigarettes at the supermarket checkout most of the time, some of the time or never. The form is a menu of multiple choices where one must be selected. The moderator, however, does not offer a multiple choice question, but stretches the horizon when the reason which sparked off a discussion on advertising is worth mentioning - it can be mostly, often or sometimes. He thus does not exclude options, but he includes them all with
the effect that the participant who answers first (P2) seems to summarize the three quantifying options ('Well, if it, you know, (.) creates (.) certain feelings, or, um (.) (xx) emotions somehow'; lines 32-35) and the second (P3) combines 'mostly' and 'always' in his answer ('These are also almost always things, which one, you know, keeps in one's memory somehow.'; lines 38-41).

Let us go back to the three question components:

>what (.) sparks off these discussions or conversations about "advertising," (1.1.)
>What's behind it,=what's the cause,< ((continues)) (lines 22-27).

At a superficial examination it is not easy to distinguish these three components. But consider P2's answer: 'Well, if it, you know, (.) creates (.) certain feelings, or, um (.) (xx) emotions somehow (lines 32-35). This answer closely matches the third question component, but could not easily have been given to the first one. The moderator thus provides a complex question which contains similar, but different stimuli, which the participants can address. As the moderator gives the participants the opportunity to address this or that facet of the question, he rises the probability of an actual answer production and minimizes the probability of silence or 'I-don't-know's'.

The following extract does not contain question reformulations, but it does contain a rewording. Let us see whether such a rewording might have a similar function to reformulation.
The moderator starts by asking for the reactions of other people regarding the participants' cigarette brand, when they put it on the table. She then further specifies 'people':

people >from< your circle of acquaintances, in your milieu, (lines 8-11).

Whereas the notion of people in general might provoke 'I-don't-know's' (it may be difficult to think of anybody who is not included), when the moderator refers to people 'from your circle of acquaintances' and to people 'in your milieu' a more manageable grasping is invoked. This again minimizes the probability of silence or 'I-don't-know's'. Again the question elaboration has a direct pragmatic link to the elicitation of material.²

² Suchman & Jordan analyzed individual face-to-face survey interviews and observed that, because interviewers are trained not to redesign questions, questionnaires contain questions with exhaustive specifications ('During those two weeks, did anyone in the family receive health care at home or go to a doctor's office, clinic, hospital or some other place ...'; 1990:233). Suchman & Jordan conclude that by providing such exhaustive specifications, interviewer and interviewee do not need to negotiate. Although we cannot exclude this motivation for focus
We have seen in the last two extracts how another possible function of asking questions in an elaborate way is to secure participation by providing a portfolio of stimuli participants can address. Support for this idea can be seen in instances where the moderator asks questions in a 'minimal way' without adding question components or rewordings. Let us take for example the following fragment in which the moderator asks questions about a task the group members had just performed: marking the strength of three different varieties of one brand on a scale going from 'light' to 'strong' with the help of magnetic counters.

(7) Source: Green17,488; file: db57; video: 17:00

---

1 Mod. There are now so to speak three groups, (wait a minute) I am shortsighted, I'll just look again briefly, (.) (goes to the clipboard) (xxxxxxxxxxxxxxx) ah yes six! (1.1) so then six times, (1.1) this one ought to go, (.) somehow, (.) ye:s there, in between, (.) (the,) (.) supersuperlight Cape, and the >Cape Lights, <= three time- yes it is clear, (.) (.) lighter than the Cape Lights, (.) and one man, (.) or one woman, (.) says finally, 'No, (.) this one is probably a little bit stronger, (.) than the Cape, (.) Lights.' (1.6) Um, (.) I'm always of course interested, first of all in the <outliers,> (.)
Asking Elaborate Questions

Note how the question about who positioned a certain point on the scale is asked in a straightforward manner:

"who pinned that point there?" (lines 27+28).

And note also how the moderator's follow up question is similarly asked in a minimal fashion:

And, (.) uh, *how have you come to this decision?* ((smiley voice)) (lines 34-36).

In contrast to the extracts we studied previously, the moderator does not provide a portfolio of stimuli for participants to address. Nevertheless P1 provides an immediate answer. One possible function of asking questions in a complex way is to secure participation. The moderator in the above extract, however, treats the participation as guaranteed. The moderator treats as unproblematic tasks such as asking the group for information which can be given with the help of an one-word-sentence or even non-vocally by rising the arm ('"who pinned that point there?"'; lines 27+28) and asking a group member who volunteered already an answer for further
details, that is for her 'motives' in pinning the chip in the way she did it.

To sum up, then: moderators secure participation by offering a portfolio of stimuli for participants to address. When questions are asked in a minimal way, members' participation is displayed as unproblematic. Although we have established the link between a portfolio of stimuli and group members' participation we are not able to fully exclude a further possible role for this question design. The delivery of such an array of items could help secure participation by providing members time for reflection which may enable them to come up with topics or answers. Whether this plays some role in the pragmatic effectiveness of elaborate questions (and we are not convinced it does) it complements rather than excludes the account we have developed in this analytic section.

In the next section we will use other minimal questions as a starting point for developing a third hypothesis on the function of elaborate questions in market research focus groups.

4. Elaborate questions III: Managing opinion production

Moderators stress that, although they may be tenacious in their questioning ('I ... want to ... pester the living daylights out of you'), there is no 'wrong answer, there's also no right answer' (see the moderator's opening remarks quoted in Detail One). This raises the issue of whether elaborate questions are a way signalling that there are a range of
different but nevertheless appropriate answers. Or, looked an another way, does a minimal question signal that a single appropriate answer is required?

A careful check of the videotapes showed that moderators ask minimal questions when they require participants to reveal themselves by putting their hands up (see the previous Extract Seven) and they employ simple wh-questions when in dialogue with a single participant (see also the previous Extract). There are, however, exceptions. We identified a very small number of minimally asked questions (n=7) when the moderators are neither engaged in a dialogue with an individual participant nor in survey-like questioning such as 'Who voted for this option?' or 'Who knows the brand x?'.

Following a tradition in conversation analysis, these deviant cases were not considered as a 'nuisance, but a treasure' (Peräkylä, 1997:212). Deviant cases can lead to a reconceptualization of the initial hypothesis. They can, however, also provide additional support for the initial claim (Heritage, 1988). In our study we consulted the small corpus of deviant minimal questions to further explicate the function of elaborate questions. I will focus here on one particularly revealing example.

The following fragment deals with an 'accident' in which the moderator drops two cigarette packets he has been holding before completing his question:

(8) Source: LondonB,1282; classic4; video: 46:00

1  P1  No, but it is not more expensive,  Nee, die ist aber nicht
2
We do not know how the moderator might have completed the question if he had not been distracted by the falling packets; we do not know either whether he might have added another question component asking about the difference between the two packets. In any case, the question as it stands is a straightforward minimal one about the difference between the packets and cigarettes under discussion:

=Yes, what, what, (. ) where, (. ) oops, (. ) the difference now. (lines 6-10)

P2 treats the moderator's question as one which requires a 'right' answer and displays his uncertainty whether he provides the correct answer. After a very hesitantly produced assessment ('[Well for me it seems simply,] (. ) now they seem to be, these Berlin ones also seem to be a bit longer than the Kingsize ones,'; lines 14-19), the participant pauses for 1.2 seconds. As the moderator does not
confirm the participant's statement, but displays 'silent recipiency' (see Chapter Seven), P2 asks explicitly whether his assumption is correct - a question which is not answered by the moderator but by another participant.

The point here is that the moderator's (accidental?) minimal question is heard as an exam question which requires one answer - the correct answer, which the participant attempts to provide. The moderator's question seems to be understood as a factual question such as 'what is the capital of x?'. The participant orients to the exam character of the question by producing hesitation which occurs in 'inauspicious environments' (Drew & Holt, 1988; Wooffitt, 1992) where there is a strong possibility of rejection or disapproval of one's talk.

Let us turn from this deviant case to another typical elaborate question where the moderator provides an array of question components.

(9) Source: LondonB,348; file: verteid2; video: 27:50

1 P1 =well, perhaps so:, (. ) a
2 bit more natural taste or
3 something, (. )
4 [somehow perhaps,]
5 Mod. [Um, um, ] . hh
6 what is,=if,=if
7 somebody,=u::h=um we:re
to atta:ok you now, (. )
8 as, (. ) a smoker of this
9 London, (1.0) *it doesn't
10 happen, (. ) as a rule,
11 but, (. ) one could imagine
12 it happening,. . hhh and
13 you had to deTEND the:
14 cigarette, (. ) or the
15 brand as such,=what would
16 you,. hh (.8) >now< name
17 as the goo:d, (1.0)
18 =also, vielleicht so; (. )
nbisschen naturellerer
Geschmack oder so, (. )
[irgendwie so vielleicht,]
[Hm, hm, ] . hh wie wärn
des,=wenn,=wenn jetzt
jemand,=e::h=em Sie, (. )
ais, (. ) Raucher dieser
London angrei:fen würde,
(1.0) *gibt ja im, (. )
Regelfall nicht, aber, (. )
kann man sich ja ma
vorstellen," . hhh und Sie
würden jetzt die:
Zigarette, (. ) oder die
Marke als solche
verTEidigen müssen,=was
würden Sie denn, . hh an
Following our analysis up to now, we see the functions of the different question components in lines 5 to 30 both as a guide in the understanding of a non-mundane market research question and a device for securing participation by providing an array of alternative items.

The comparison of Extract Nine with the deviant case points to a third function. In not simply asking 'how would you defend this brand?', but in reformulating the original question, the moderator displays that he is not after one answer. In providing a question portfolio, the moderator shows that there is more than a single answer. Offering an array of questions is a display of being interested in an array of answers. It might be argued that the obvious business at hand in focus groups is the production of opinions and that opinion production is facilitated through asking both minimal and elaborate questions. However, we have tried to show that by asking in an elaborate way the questioner orients to the difference between factual questions and opinion eliciting questions in an environment where participants may need to be reminded that the
questions being asked are not just classroom questions.

5. Discussion: Elaborate questions and the production of spontaneous and variable opinions

In this chapter we have tried to show how elaborate questions in focus groups are organized in ways which provide the kinds of answers that focus group moderators require. In particular, they have three roles. First, they are used to guide the responses made by participants, and head off trouble, when the question is likely to be unfamiliar in everyday interaction (such as 'projective' questions about the family associations of cigarettes). Second, they help secure participation by providing participants with an array of alternative items to respond to. Third, they provide guidance in producing the kinds of responses that are appropriate to market research reports and to the company representatives and advertising people who may view the sessions from behind one-way mirrors.

Elaborate questions may appear clumsy or confusing when considered by abstract or strictly grammatical criteria, and when compared to the (cleaned up) questions which appear in focus group manuals (see, for example, Krueger, 1998). Yet we have shown how various features of question elaboration can have a pragmatic motivation in doing three 'jobs' at the same time.

Searle has made a distinction between 'real' and 'exam' questions:
In real questions the speaker wants to know (find out) the answer; in exam questions, the speaker wants to know if the hearer knows. (1969:66)

Focus group questions do not fall neatly into either of these categories. There are both real questions and exam questions in our corpus: one moderator asks for example 'What are you after?' when two participants talk with each other (and the answer is 'A bottle-opener.') and another asks which were the first light cigarette brands on the market. Both questions are asked minimally and aim at one correct answer; the first is a real question, the second an exam question. However, the elaborate questions we have studied do not require one specific answer, but answers that address one or more of the question components. Answers of this kind are treated by moderators as providing opinions.

We started our analysis by emphasising the moderator's dilemma between focusing the members' talk on a certain topic and eliciting spontaneous conversation. The different elements of elaborate questions help them meet this task. The portfolio of question components gives the participants the choice to spontaneously focus on one or more of the presented elements. Moreover, by offering a portfolio, elaborate questions discourage responses that are only 'right or wrong' answers. The art of the elaborate question is to delicately manage the production of the required social science entities - opinions - while sustaining interaction that has a relaxed, spontaneous and unconstrained quality.

Moderators claim to elicit spontaneous conversation and a discussion among the participants. The preceding chapter has shown how moderators manage
the dilemma between focusing the members' talk on a certain topic and eliciting spontaneous conversation. The next chapter will focus on how moderators manage to elicit individual opinions while simultaneously claiming to engage the participants in a group discussion.
CHAPTER FIVE

MANUFACTURING INDIVIDUAL OPINIONS: FOCUS GROUPS AND THE
DISCURSIVE PSYCHOLOGY OF OPINION

1. Introduction

1.1. The Discursive Psychology of Opinion

This chapter argues with the major claim of what
would be called the traditional social psychology of
attitudes. In traditional social psychology
attitudes are treated as having a number of core
features. They are (a) located within the individual
(and are perceptible as subjective experiences); (b)
these internal states can be observed in verbal,
behavioural or physiological reactions; (c) they are
(generally) static; (d) individuals differ regarding
their evaluative reactions; and (e) these reactions
can be measured by attitude scales.

This traditional notion has been reworked from a
discourse and rhetorical perspective. The rhetorical
nature of attitudes is stressed by Billig
carry attitudes around as fixed entities, people:

• give views in particular contexts

• produce evaluations where there is at least
the possibility of argument (they tend not to
argue about the virtues of gravitational force)
while expressing an evaluation for something, and marking the justification of their own position, often simultaneously express criticisms against the counter-position.

Whereas Billig stresses that attitudes are rhetoric ally occasioned and are therefore inextricable from the arguments in which they occur, Potter & Wetherell (1987; Potter, 1998) have emphasised what people are doing by making evaluations (or displaying a lack of evaluation) in particular settings. The point is here that evaluations are not treated as ready-made cognitive objects, but as being worked up by the participants in ways that are suitable for what is being done (compliments and complaints, persuading people against courses of action, and so on). Potter argues that in 'discursive social psychology attitudes are performed rather than preformed' (1998:246). Moreover, Potter & Wetherell (1988) emphasise that the nature of 'attitudinal objects' and evaluative talk is often inseparable in everyday interaction. That is, it is common for evaluations to be delivered in the lexical construction of descriptions.

Our particular interest here, then, will be in whether the conduct of focus groups will involve particular interactional practices to strip off these rhetorical and performative elements of evaluative talk.

1.2. Focus groups and interaction

Focus groups derive their results from interaction. If the Discursive Social Psychology
(DSP) is correct we ought to see moderators work to produce attitudes and opinions as internally consistent mental objects, and to separate out evaluative talk removed from its rhetorical contexts. Both focus group manuals and focus group moderators emphasise the importance of interaction and the participant centred nature of such groups. An extract taken from the moderator’s introductory remarks to a focus group illustrates this:\footnote{See also Morgan’s definition of focus groups. He broadly defines focus groups as a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher. In essence, it is the researcher’s interest that}

It would be nice, (.) ((clears her throat)) all in all, (1.0) if we could have a >so-called< group-discussion, if we could really get into a discussion,=and I don’t want to interrogate,=and I certainly don’t want to test you, (.) and it’s not about knowledge,=you just always say,=whatever comes to mind, (.) and there are< no, (.) right or wrong answers.

Note the way the contrast is built between knowledge and opinion, and how participants are encouraged to avoid treating answers as right or wrong. My claim is that moderators nevertheless carefully manage to pick out attitudes and opinions as decontextualized and freestanding entities.

It will help clarify what is going on here to note that there are two potential notions of interaction in play. On the one hand, there is a traditional social psychological notion of interaction that considers people as owning memories, beliefs and attitudes and considers interaction as an arena in which those things are expressed and
Manufacturing Individual Opinions 149

communicated. In DSP, on the other hand, interaction is treated as a set of occasioned practices where evaluations may be developed and undermined, often built contrastively for ongoing arguments, and where they may sometimes be constituted as attitudes or beliefs tied to individuals. Our analytic concern will be how moderators ignore or suppress the rhetorical finessing of argumentation and re-package formulations which are ‘doing business’ into freestanding entities. We will also be concerned with evidence that moderators train participants to produce freestanding opinions.

1.3. Dilemmas

Focus groups are structured around an interactional dilemma. On the one hand, focus group participants are asked to ‘always say, whatever comes to mind’ (see extract above). On the other hand, participants seem to be carefully policed into ‘what exactly comes to mind’. This focus group dilemma parallels the basic dilemma in institutions such as education. According to Edwards & Mercer (1987) and Billig et al. (1988) teachers make systematic efforts to construct knowledge as stemming from the pupils rather than being provided by the teachers. Edwards & Mercer (1987) show that required responses from pupils are cued in an indirect manner that makes them appear to originate from the pupils themselves. Billig et al. conclude that:

the very process of child-centred elicitation, of conceptual midwifery so keenly espoused by the liberal educationists, contains also the

provides the focus, whereas the data themselves come from the group interaction’ (1997:6).
predetermined curriculum, the character training, social values and constraints of the opposed camp (1988:63).

In the same way that Edwards & Mercer (1987) reveal the communicative devices used by the teachers to construct curriculum knowledge as originating within pupils, while overtly eliciting it from them, we will investigate the procedures that focus group moderators use for discovering the traditional notion of opinion within participants, while overtly eliciting it from them. In this study we have drawn heavily on the theoretical assumptions and analytic perspective of Conversation Analysis. Let us indicate how we have done this.

1.4. Research questions

Our research questions are stimulated by the contrast between the claims of DSP about the rhetorical and performative nature of evaluative talk and the presence of a large body of focus group market research that purports to work with and identify individual attitudes and opinions. In particular, we will address the following questions.

- How do moderators deal with interaction between participants in which opinions may be rhetorically developed?

- How do moderators use meta-formulations to encourage freestanding evaluations?

- What procedures are used to strip off the rhetorically embedded nature of evaluations?
2. Analysis

2.1. Rhetorical construction and moderator recipiency

Let us start with a relatively coarse grained observation about moderator recipiency. The moderators in our sample display attention (that is, visibly attend) to free-standing opinion formulations and display disattention to (explicitly) rhetorically embedded formulations. In Figure One the talk is schematically summarized rather than directly transcribed to highlight this pattern of interaction. The arrows indicate to whom speakers address their contributions (shown by posture and gaze).
"It's difficult but how could one describe the taste of this cigarette?"

"It's not lighter than Washington"

a) "I don't know"
b) makes a suggestion

a) "I like the taste"
b) "I don't think it's bad either"

* no literal transcription but only the upshot of what was said altogether 10 participants
a) ~ "But it tastes like Menthol"
b) ~ "No, I don't think so"
c) ~ "Yes, a bit"

MODERATORS

b) ~ "No, not at all"
c) ~ "Yes, a bit"

VII

a) ~ "Well I'll stick to it"
b) "Hm mm,"

IX

a) ~ "But it irritates the throat"
b) "Hm mm,"

PAUSE;
MODERATORS
WRITE

Question addressed to all:
~ "Do you accept the cigarette or is it a flop?"
Asked for the description of a cigarette's taste the participants P1, P3, P4, P5 and P6 initially report assessments directly to the moderators (there are two moderators in this focus group) and the moderators take notes. However, participants P3, P4 and P5 then address comments to each other (see circles V and VI). The point of interest here is that the moderators do not write down these comments. In VII P2 redirects interaction to the moderator with his comment:

Well I'll stick to it.

This not only receives an explicit receipt from the moderator ('Hm mm,'), but is also written down. The contrast here, then, is in the moderator's differential attention to contextually and rhetorically formulated contributions such as 'No, I don’t think so' (see circle V) and free standing individual opinions such as 'Well I’ll stick to it' (circle VII).

This example is a useful start-point as it illustrates the kind of phenomena of interest. However, what is going on is often more subtle than this. In the following 3 sections we will look at techniques that moderators use to head off interaction between participants with its associated rhetorical construction of evaluations and to formulate free-standing opinion packages from rhetorically organized talk.
2.2. Displaying inconsequentiality

One of the most straightforward techniques for displaying the inconsequentiality of rhetorically embedded evaluations is to ignore them. This is was seen in the interaction patterns above. Let us consider two further examples.

The following extract comes from a focus group where the participants are discussing the name for a new cigarette brand. ‘Cape Blue Ultra’ is the proposed name for a planned light line extender (lower tar version) of the stronger ‘mother brand’ ‘Cape’; the Cape Blue Ultra packet is blue, the Cape packet is red.

(2) Source: Blue17,919; file: diagrala; video: 27:11

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>Mod.</th>
<th>What do the others think? (1.0)</th>
<th>Was meinen die andern?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>What kind of a name is this? (1.3)</td>
<td>(1.0) Was ist das fürn Name?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>Or, (1.1) how do you like it? (.8)</td>
<td>(1.1) Oder, (1.1) wie findet Ihr den?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>Or what do you associate with it?</td>
<td>Oder was fällt Euch dazu ein?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>P1</td>
<td>=That says absolutely nothing to me at all.</td>
<td>=da kann ich mir überhaupt nichts mehr drunter vorstellen.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td>(.8) Ultra, okay, well I can, (.) consider,</td>
<td>(.8) Ultra, okay, da kann ich, (.) mir noch überlegen, ob das nun (.8) leicht, oder, (.) besonders schwer is, oder sonst was, aber, (.6) blue hat irgendwie überhaupt keine Aussage, find ich.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td>whether it is (.) light, or, (.) especially strong, or whatever,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td>but, (.6) blue is totally without a statement, I think.</td>
<td>(.Ja, &lt;) vielleicht heisst die blue extra, um die von den roten abzusetzen.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>P2</td>
<td>(=Well,&lt;) perhaps it is called blue purposely to set it apart from the red ones.</td>
<td>Ja, dann müsste ja bei der, (.) blau- (.) bei der roten, (.) müsste red draufstehen.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td>13 lines omitted</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>P3</td>
<td>Well, then it ought to say on the, (.) blue- (.).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>P1</td>
<td>say on the, (.) blue- (.).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>P3</td>
<td>(.8)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Without going too far into the complexities of this extract, what we wish to concentrate on are the arguments put forward in particular by P1 against the usefulness of the name ('blue is totally without a statement, I think.'). lines 27-9) and P2's defence of the brand name: ' (>Well, <) perhaps it is called blue purposely to set it apart from the red ones.' ( lines 31-4). P2 thus offers an argument for calling the brand 'Cape Blue Ultra'. When P3 rejects this by pointing out, that, following his argument, the Cape in the red packet should be called 'the red Cape', P2 claims, that this argument is a theoretical one, as the original Cape was introduced a long time before light cigarette brands have been on the market. The moderator then asks, or, more precisely, gives a
Well presumably, (.) someone did indeed, have something in mind here, and if you would just try to, (.) put yourself, in their place, ((continues)) (lines 81-7).

Note the way that the moderator avoids acknowledging P2's argument. In emphasising that someone did have something in mind in giving the line extender the name 'Cape Blue Ultra' she implies, that up to then nobody in the group 'had something in mind' and urges the group members to put themselves 'in their place'. The point of interest for us here is that although the moderator has tolerated talk between participants, she displays it as inconsequential.

Now we will consider a further example. The next extract is taken from a different focus group, but revolves around the same topic, the name 'Blue Ultra'. The moderator has shown participants the cigarette packet and asked them for their spontaneous reactions. We enter the scene at the point where the participants discuss among themselves the meaning of 'Blue Ultra' in connection with a light cigarette.

(3) Source: Blue19, 'non basis-transcribed'; file: eviden12; video: 6:25

1 P1 If one basically only
2 smokes light cigarettes,
(.). Blue Ultra doesn't
3 necessarily tell one,
(.). that it is, (.8)
4 light,=
5 6 P2 =Ultra!=
7 addresses P1
8 addresses P2
9 P1 =Yes,=

Wenn man grundsätzlich nur leichte Zigaretten raucht, (.) sagt einem, Blue Ultra nich unbedingt, (.) dass das nun, (.8) leichte sind.= =Ultra!= =Ja,=
After P1's claim that the name's appendix 'Blue Ultra' 'doesn't necessarily tell one, (.) that it is, (.8) light,' (= (lines 3-6), P2 argues that she connects 'blue' with 'light' as clouds are also something light. P1 disagrees, but prefaces her disagreement with an agreement token ('(okay ...) when you stand ...'); lines 25-8). Note the way the moderator ignores the discussion between the participants, but addresses P1 by re-formulating the question he had addressed before to the group:

What did you think about, °(when) you read or saw (.) Blue Ultra?° (lines 31-3).
The detail of the interaction supports this interpretation. In asking for P1's thoughts, when she "read or saw (.) Blue Ultra?" the moderator displays she does not consider P1's previous contributions in the exchange with P2 to be appropriate 'thoughts'. P1 orients to this implication by offering a 'new' answer ('Well actually I think more of holidays or, (.) yes, (.) [blue,] (.) sky,'; lines 36-9). The point to note, then, is the way that the moderator encourages participants to produce free-standing opinions by ignoring opinions that are produced in discussion between participants.

2.3. Meta requests for free-standing opinion talk

Sometimes moderators 'go meta'. That is, they provide explicit formulations of the kind of contributions that are welcome (cf. Simons, 1989). These formulations do not explicitly ask for free-standing opinions; however, they provide examples where this feature is apparent.

Consider the following extract. It revolves around a so-called projective question concerning the features of a typical smoker of the brand London.

(4) Source: London,596; file: eviden3; video: 33:04
The notable thing here is that when Pl, P2 and P3 begin a joint description of the typical smoker of London cigarettes, the moderator shouts emphatically:

=Yes, EVERYBODY IS ALLOWED [TO ]=

P1:  [Yes,]=

=describe his own.=now [don't lets talk] (lines 29-33).

The turn is left hearably incomplete, but participants would be expected to be able to project it as 'don't lets all talk at once' (the incompleteness here might lessen the effect of telling the participants off). The moderator goes
meta in the sense that he explicitly offers a rule on how to provide contributions: everybody has the right to describe his/her 'own typical smoker'. It is notable that after this turn the participants return their focus to the moderator, addressing their contributions to him. Thus P1 elaborates on her own projective smoker, and produces it as a free-standing description addressed to the moderator:

[P1: Educated,] (.) and well also a hedonist, that's it [(now)] (lines 34-7).

The moderator acknowledges and confirms the description ('[Hedo-] okay, yes, that's already pretty vivid'; lines 38-40).

Note the way the detail of the interaction is in line with our general account. P1's description in 34-7 is more or less a combination of her own and P2's earlier contributions (P2 has provided 'He[donist,]' (line 19) and P1 'Educated,'] yes,' (line 20)). When the three participants produce contributions linked by agreement tokens ('yes') these are queried by the moderator. However, when a participant formulates very similar contributions as a freestanding opinion, and when it is addressed to the moderator, the opinion is not only accepted but also praised.

Let us take another example of moderators formulating the kind of talk that is appropriate. Although here the moderator's explicit request is for spontaneous and immediate reactions, it works in context to produce free-standing opinion packages.
In the extract the participants are asked to smoke the cigarette brand under discussion. We cut into the interaction at the point where the cigarettes are distributed and participants are opening them.

(5) Source: London, 1451; file: eviden10; video: 49:07

1  Mod. If you now just, (. ) take, (. ) take one (. 7) take one, = and, = uh, (. ) then light it, ( 4. 0) no = no = not at, (. ) YES DON'T look at it (. ) well = uh, = forget your old one now.

9 lines omitted

19  P1 = No, (. ) I don't like it.
20  P2 No, addresses P1
21  P3 = No, addresses P2
22  P3 = No, addresses P1
23  (1. 1)
24  P2 = Yes, but it looks good!
25  (2. 1)
26  P3 = No, I don't like it either
27  P2 = (That, that was now,)
28  P2 = addresses P3
29  P3 = Hm, addresses P2
30  P2 = Hm, addresses P3
31  some ((P2 and P3 talk softly with each other; P3 asks another participant whether she has got a light))

→ 37  Mod. > Tell me, (. ) yes, if if (. ) some- (. ) spon- < if you spontaneously say, (. ) "then immediately."

38  mod. starts talking immediately after the 'side sequence' (the preceding turn) has begun

39  P2 = Uh, (. 9) I don't like the packet, it looks
40  = Nee, (. ) ich mag sie nicht.
41  = Nee,
42  = Ja, sieht gut aus, aber!
43  = Nee, ich mag sie auch nicht.
44  = (Das, das war jetzt,)
45  = Hm mm,
46  = ((P2 und P3 sprechen leise miteinander; P1 bittet eine andere Teilnehmerin um Feuer))

2 The moderator does not want the participants to look at the label on the packets with information on the nicotine and tar level of the cigarettes.
In the course of this interaction some participants start a 'side sequence' (lines 32-6). When this takes place the moderator comes in with:

> Tell me, (.) yes, if if if if some- (.) spon-< if you spontaneously say, (.) "then immediately." (lines 37-40).

This turn is slightly clumsy, even in the original German. But we hear it as a request to convey spontaneous thoughts without thinking too long about them. Interestingly, it comes after the sequence where participants are talking together in what might be thought of as a spontaneous manner. However, the very fact that the moderator introduces this meta formulation of focus group 'rules' at this point reflexively constitutes what has just happened as some kind of breach that requires comment. And this is how the participants take it, as the next turn has P2, who was previously addressing comments to P1 and P3, addressing the moderator with an opinion of the packet: 'U:h, (.9) I don't like the packet, it looks' ((continues)) (lines 48-53). The general observation here is that, as with the previous extract, the moderator's intervention with a meta observation about the conduct of the participants leads to the production of a freestanding opinion package.

So far we have considered how the moderators deal with rhetorically oriented opinion production by
ignoring it or making explicit injunctions against it. We will now consider another approach, which is for moderators to ‘strip off’ the rhetorical elements and thereby formulate freestanding opinion packages.

2.4. Stripping off the rhetorical context

Let us take as a first example of stripping off rhetorical context an exercise where the moderator asks which brands the participants would place near the light cigarette brand Stansted in a hypothetical shelf.

(6) Source: Henstedt, 932; file: echo53; video: 29:30;

1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7
---|---|---|---|---|---|---
Mod. | ((continues)) imagine,=>you go and stand in front of a gigantic,<(.) u:h, (.6) shelf, (.) with only cigarette brands on it. (1.0) Which brands would you place (.) near the Stansted.

29 lines omitted

37 | 38 | 39 | 40 | 41 | 42 | 43 | 44 | 45 | 46 | 47 | 48 | 49 | 50 | 51
---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---
P1 | ((continues)) because I would just mechanically sort them according to the contents labels,

After the contents labels um

P1 =I would do it just mechanically according to the contents labels=

Well I [(xxxxxxxxxxx)]

[Without first] ev- looking at the packet, so then exactly as is the case >somehow< in the tobacco shop too,

P2 (=Einfach stur nach den Werten würde ich gehen=

=Also ich [(xxxxxxxxxxx)]

[at first] (je-) auf die Packung zu gucken,

also genau wie in den Tabakladen >irgendwie< auch der Fall ist,

21 lines omitted

73 | 74 | 75
---|---|---
P2 ((continues)) product wants to position itself, then on no account next to other light

(fährt fort) Produkt sich selbst plazieren will, dann doch auf gar keinen Fall

3 The pseudonyms of two brands are airports to show that they belong to the same ‘family’.

4 The participant refers to the nicotine and tar level of cigarettes as declared on the respective packet.
Near the start of the sequence P1 stresses he would categorize brands 'mechanically' according to 'labels' (lines 37-40). During P1's turn the moderator orients his attention to other participants and P2 starts to come in. However, P1 continues displaying his opinion. P2 then presents his opinion in using an extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986):

on no account next to other light products, (lines 74-6).

He constructs his argument as a counter-argument to P1 and stresses that the very light Stansted should be positioned next to the less light Heathrow, so that Heathrow smokers with an 'irritated throat' (line 80) might say: "Oh, then I'll just try its younger brother" (lines 81-2).

Now comes the phenomenon of interest. At the end of P2's long turn, a third participant (P3) tries to gain the floor, but is interrupted by the moderator:
=(A moment) the Stansted would then be the younger brother of the Heathrow. (lines 123-5)

The moderator formulates an element of P2’s talk which has been used to undermine P1’s argument (see Heritage, 1985). What we see, then, is that the moderator picks out an argument used to support a particular position and presents it as a freestanding thing.

The same ‘slicing out process’ can be seen in the next extract, when two participants discuss their associations on a certain light cigarette brand.

(7) Source: Hensted8,1056; file: hm8a; video: 36:43;

1  Mod.  Have you got any idea  Haben Sie ne Idee
2  P1  [When, (xxxxx)]  [Als, (xxxxx)]
3  Mod.  [You you ] left the Stansted Minima, for= [Siesie ] sind von der Stansted Minima weggegangen, for=
4 5
6  P1  =Yes, exactly. (1.0) But this hiding thing I don't see in it=well I acutally don't see, (1.9) anything at all! (. ) in it,
7 8
9 10  (1.0)
11 (1.0)
12 ?  [(xxxxx)]  [(xxxxx)]
13 P1  [Well ] I=I, (1.2) for me well it would be, (.5) this would be very compatible with <einer,>=e:::h, (.7) person,
14 15
16 <g,>=u:::h, (.7) person, dressed in white,
17 18
19 (1.6)
20 21  like an angel.  engelartig.
22 23
24 lines omitted
24
46  Mod.  Do the others (. ) see it like this too=has it got anything _ 24
47 48  _ 24 49
50 51  P2  Well regarding the colours yes=also with this, ( . ) gold  Also von den Farben her
52 53  _ 24
54 55  said it once already, like a
Early in this extract we see P2 developing her opinion as a contrast to P1 (lines 50-62). Note the agreement prefaced disagreement: "Well regarding the colours yes=also with this, (. ) gold ↑here=but otherwise I don't find that at all' (lines 50-2) (cf. Pomerantz, 1984; Myers, 1998). But note the way the moderator, in his formulation, strips the participants’ positions off from their rhetorical context and re-packages them as ‘two tendencies’:

>I'll=just show you now two tendencies< (lines 112-23).

The general point here is that when participants produce evaluative talk, which develops explicit rhetorical contrasts, these can be removed to leave the evaluations as free standing entities tied to individuals.

In our corpus there is, however, evidence that there is a conversational environment in which the
production of non-free-standing opinion displays is tolerated, that is, attended to, and formulated as focus group relevant. In our final section we will attend to such deviant cases and consider their implications for our general claims.

2.5. Deviant cases

Up to now we have claimed that moderators in market research focus groups display a preference for individual opinions in the form of freestanding packages. They systematically ignore rhetorically developed opinions, or explicitly offer 'rules' against their use, or they formulate such opinions with their rhetorical elements stripped off. However, there are certain occasions where agreement tokens are tolerated as rhetorically formulated contributions. These are particularly interesting as potential cases which might raise problems for the sorts of pattern we have identified, or which allow us to refine our claims. In this section we will look more closely at the environment in which such sequences are embedded.

The following extract revolves around discussion of the 'typical smoker' of Cape Blue Ultras. The moderator is following up on a participant's description, asking her whether the 'typical smoker' is a man or a woman.

(8) Source: Blue17,334; file: eviden7; video: 12:13

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mod.</th>
<th>Hm mm, (.) this was</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Mod.</td>
<td>Hm mm, (.) this was</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>already a very vivid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>description,=was it a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>man or a woman, (.) in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Hm mm, (.) das war schon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Beschreibung,=eher Mann</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>oder Frau, (.) Deiner</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In response to the moderator's question at the start of the extract P1 says the gender of the imaginary smoker does not matter. This is immediately contradicted by P2: 'I'd say, probably a woman.' (lines 9-10). P3 supports P2 ('Me too,'; line 11) and several other participants join in and signal their approval. The moderator makes a hearably and visibly humorous attempt to address this group of participants and asks for their reason for the judgement (line 13). What is interesting here, is the way that the 'me too-advocates' are treated as a single entity with a collective view. Unlike other interactions, they are not asked to describe their individual judgements 'in their own words'.

5 This defies transcription as the participants say one after another and simultaneously 'Me too,'.
How can we account for this deviant case? We suggest that it marks out a distinction between qualitative opinions and categorical judgements. Think of the difference between the question 'do you smoke Marlboro?' which can be answered with a yes or no, and 'what is it about Marlboro that you like?' that would require you to specify some qualities or attributes. In the former case, agreement tokens are readily interpretable as placing participants in a category; while in the latter case they leave the association of particular participants with individual qualities opaque or ambiguous.

Let us take a further case to explore this. While Extract 8 involved a categorical judgement about gender, the moderator in the next extract asks for a numerical judgement:

how long does one need when one tries a new brand, until one, (.6) <comes to a reasonably satisfactory conclusion about it,> (lines 1-5).

Note the way the moderator again accepts again agreement-tokens (line 29).

(9) Source: Blue19,773; file: eviden6; video: 46:16

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mod.</th>
<th>By the way how long does one need when one tries a new brand, until one, (.6) &lt;comes to a reasonably satisfactory conclusion about it,&gt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>Wie lange braucht man eigentlich wenn man eine neue Marke probiert, bis man so, (.6) &lt;einigermaßen für sich nen stimmiges Urteil hat,&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
<td>omitted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>P1</td>
<td>(It's) about half a packet, or, at least &quot;three or four should &gt;then&lt; I think certainly,&quot; (.7) [well for me (at least xxxx)]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td></td>
<td>(Des is) eine halbe Packung, oder, zumindest &quot;drei vier Stück sollten &gt;dann&lt; glaub ich schon,&quot; (.7) [also brauch ich (zumindest xxxxx)]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td></td>
<td>[also brauch ich (zumindest xxxxx)]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
<td>[Also das kommt echt darauf an] (.&gt;) (also)&lt; es gibt echte Marken, da rauch ich zwei Züge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>P2</td>
<td>[Well but this really depends] (.&gt;) (well)&lt; there really are brands, from which I take two</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td></td>
<td>(Also das kommt echt darauf an) (.&gt;) (also)&lt; es gibt echte Marken, da rauch ich zwei Züge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In this case the judgement is again categorical; you can be in the category of people who say 'two pulls' is enough to evaluate some brands or not, and one can be in the category of people who 'wouldn't know' about how many pulls are needed.

The general point, then, is that there is an environment in these market research focus groups where agreement and disagreement tokens are treated as acceptable. This environment is one where the participants are offering categorical judgements rather than qualitative opinions.

3. Discussion

Let me summarise the main points of our analysis before discussing some more general issues to do with focus group practice and the discursive social psychology of attitudes. We have tried to show the way freestanding individual opinion packages are manufactured in focus groups. That is, although evaluative talk is recurrently produced in the form

6 This defies transcription as the participants say one after another and simultaneously 'Yes,.'.
7 This defies transcription as the participants say one after another and simultaneously 'No,'.
of rhetorical contrasts and agreement/disagreement
tokens, the moderator manages this kind of talk in
three particular ways.

· First, and most simply, it is ignored
  (Sections 1 & 2).

· Second, various occasioned meta rules or
  injunctions are developed to support the
  production of freestanding opinion packages
  (Section 3).

· Third, when moderators formulate opinion
  packages out of sequences where participants
  produce them rhetorically and contrastively,
  these rhetorical elements are stripped off to
  leave freestanding opinion packages (Section 4).

Finally, we considered deviant cases. The only
eamples that fell outside the three management
techniques where those where participants were
offering categorical judgements.

We have concentrated in this chapter
specifically on the individuation of evaluative talk
into personal opinion packages. However, in the
preceding chapter we have considered the way in which
moderators generate 'opinion talk' rather than
'factual talk', as well as the use of 'repeat
receipts' as a common device for stripping off
rhetorical orientations in the next chapter.

With respect to the practice of focus groups,
the production of individual and freestanding
opinions is typically what is required. For example,
one of the most popular manuals on the conduct and
analysis of focus groups describes three different
models of report writing:
The first style of presentation consists of the question or idea and is followed by all participant comments (the raw data model). The second style is a summary description followed by illustrative quotes (the description model). The third style is a summary description with illustrative quotes followed by an interpretation (the interpretative model). (Krueger, 1994:167, emphasis added)

Krueger gives examples of 'illustrative quotes' for a focus group on the topic what parents look for in youth organizations:

The person in charge must be a good influence because children idolize their leaders.

Leaders are the most important thing in a youth organization. I don't want a crank for a leader.

I want a adult who is patient and kind to work with my kids. (1994:167)

Such quotes are in the form of what we have called freestanding opinion packages. For example, they are similar to the participant's utterance in Extract 1 that was considered worth writing down by the moderator:

>Well I'll stick to it.< I think it's a bit aromatic.⁶

What we have observed in our materials, then, is in line with the 'good practice' formulated by Krueger. We can speculate that such freestanding opinion packages are relatively easy to understand for the audience watching the group, and relatively easy to draw market-related conclusions from.

⁶ Utterance is in contrast to Figure 1 not schematically summarized, but directly transcribed.
Furthermore, they provide relatively straightforward raw material for the moderator to write up. Colourful descriptive evaluations can be tied to individual participants and the scope of agreement/disagreement tokens does not have to be determined. What we have revealed are the detailed interactional procedures through which these opinion packages are produced.

We do not wish to criticise this practice here; it seems to be well suited to the goals of market research. At one level this chapter is a study of the procedures used to make this market research instrument in practice. However, we have a broader concern with the nature of opinions and attitudes and their conceptualization in social psychology. Put simply our question at the start was: do focus groups discover free-standing opinion packages, or do they manufacture such opinion-packages? And our conclusion is that free-standing opinion packages are manufactured using the three techniques documented above. The existence of such manufacture techniques helps explain why large amounts of work, both quantitative and qualitative, can continue to be produced using traditional conceptions of attitudes and opinions. This study provides further (indirect) evidence for the DSP respecification of attitudes. It highlights the need to develop research into the role of evaluative practices in a range of different settings.
CHAPTER SIX

REPEAT RECEIPTS

1. Introduction

Whereas I focused in the last two chapters on the questions being asked in my corpus of market research focus groups ('Elaborate Questions'; Chapter Four) and on the kind of outcome moderators attempt to achieve ('Individual Opinions'; Chapter Five), I will analyze in this and the next chapter the moderator's receipts of participants' contributions ('Repeat Receipts' in this chapter and 'Silent Recipiency' in Chapter Seven).

Let me start by reporting the analysis of question-answer sequences in another institutional setting, that is in news interviews (Heritage, 1985). Heritage started his analysis with the observation that, in contrast to mundane conversation, third-turn receipt objects such as news receipts ('oh'), newsmarks ('did she') and assessments ('good') are absent in courtroom and news interview interaction. In considering this lack of 'alignment work' Heritage considers the following three issues:

1. While in mundane conversation third-turn receipt objects align the questioner to the answerer as a recipient of reported information, such

---

1 See also Greatbatch (1988) and Heritage & Greatbatch (1991).
alignment work can be dispensed in circumstances in which the roles are institutionally preestablished and some participants are restricted to asking questions and others to answering them.

2. Whereas most receipt tokens display some commitment to the adequacy of the talk they receipt, both in courtrooms and in news interviews the task of the interviewer is not to judge the given information, but to achieve a 'posture of neutrality'.

3. Both talk that takes place in courtrooms and news interviews is produced for 'overhearers' - either a judge and a jury or a news audience. In the context of an overhearing audience it would be inappropriate to produce tokens such as news receipts and assessments as they treat the prior talk as news for the questioner and identify their producer as the primary addressee of the elicited talk.

Heritage concludes that through the avoidance of third-turn receipt objects questioners decline the role of report recipient while maintaining the role of report elicitor. (1985:100)

Against this background Heritage considers a particular aspect of news-interview conduct - the use of 'formulations' with which the questioner summarizes, glosses or elaborates the informant's prior given statement. He gives the following extract as an example in which the interviewer's utterance formulates the 'slimmer of the year's' experiences; IE is the interviewee and IR the interviewer.
IE: You have a shell (1.2) that for so long protects you. (0.7) But sometimes: things creep through the shell and (.) then you become really aware of (.) of 'ow awful y'feel. .hhh I never ever felt my age or looked my age,=-I was always (.) older,-=people always took me for older. .hhh And when I was at college I think I looked a ma:tronly fifty. .hh And (.) I was completely alone one weekend and I got to this stage where I almost jumped in the river(hh).=-I just felt life wasn't worth it anymore,-it hadn't anything to offer (.). .hhhh and if this was living I had had enough.

IR: You really were prepared to commit suicide because you were a big fatty.

IE: Yes, 'cuz I-I (.) just didn't see anything in life that I had to look forward to ...  

(1985:101)

The interviewer's formulation is fitted to the news-interview context. It invites the 'slimmer' to confirm or deny the interviewer's re-presentation of her experiences and serves to elicit more information by being at the same time neutral as any comment or assessment of these experiences is avoided. Heritage concludes that

Formulations are, in short, a form of response through which prior talk can be treated as news and maintained as a topical focus while, at the same time, an institutionally appropriate footing is maintained in relation to the news audience. (1985:104)

The three issues discussed above also seem to apply to market research focus groups:

1. The roles are institutionally preestablished as the moderator is the one who asks the questions and the participants are the ones who answer them.

2. The moderator's task is not to reveal any of his or her own biases and to achieve the production of opinions which are not 'planted' by him/her.
3. Focus group talk is - apart from being 'exploited' for the report - mainly produced for an overhearing audience, that is the audience behind the one-way-mirror.

In contrast to courtroom interaction and news interviews, however, formulations appear seldom in our corpus and seem to be confined to more or less 'difficult' situations. For example, we will later consider a sequence (Extract Thirteen) in which the moderator interrupts an ongoing argument between participants by offering a formulation in the form of a banal statement which would be hard to contradict.

For the moment, however, we will discuss another sequence in which the moderator's statement looks at first glance like a formulation. It is offered in a situation which is difficult for the moderator as two participants challenge his question. We enter the scene after the participants' vote on whether the brand under discussion will be successful on the market or not, and the moderator summarizes the result. The moderator's turn we are interested in is marked with an arrow.

(1) Source: Blue19,897; file: formula2; video: 48:26

1. Mod. Once small, and, (.) seven times medium.° (3.0) "Right then, is this," (.) >is this good=or is this not good.<
2. P1 (1.0) FOR a, (.) NEW BRAND.==I
3. mean,=
4. P2 [WELL THIS IS] NOT A NEW BRAND. (.) And Cape is, (.)
5. > (or) let me put it like this all the big, (.) companies live mostly from their image anyway. (.) in this respect the young people (will) try it.< (.) (just) because it's Cape!
17. Mod.  Um mm, 18. P2 =Perhaps they will also stick
to it. but,= 19. → 20. Mod. =(And) you wouldn't call it a
new brand,= because I
 21. [mean,] 22. P2 [No, ] 23. 24. Mod. =as it does not yet exist in
brand= 28. 29. P2 =It's a new variant. but, (.).
30. =It's a new variant. but, (.).
31. not a new brand 32. (.).
33. Mod. =Well, there are, (.). above
all. (.6) well there are also
other different variants. 34. =Well, there are, (.). above
other different variants.

Hm mm=
=Vielleicht auch dabei
bleiben. aber,=
=(Und) das würdest Du nicht
als neue Marke,= weil ich
[mein,]
[Nee, ]
die gibt es ja noch nicht in
[der ] Form,=
[nee,]
=Nee, ist aber keine neue
Marke=
=Is ne neue Variante. aber,
(.) keine neue Marke
Na, es gibt ja, (.). vor allen
Dingen. (.6) ja auch
verschiedene andere Varianten.

After P2's emphatically displayed objection to
the underlying assumption of the moderator's question
("[WELL THIS IS] NOT A NEW BRAND."); lines 8+9), the
moderator re-presents the participant's prior report
in a summary fashion, which could be called a
formulation "(And) you wouldn't call it a new
brand,"; lines 20+21). He uses here, however, the
summary as a preliminary to a next action (see
Schegloff, 1997) - that is a challenge of the
participant's position "(it does not yet exist in
[this] form,"; lines 24+25).

To sum up, then: in contrast to news interviews
formulations are only rarely used in focus groups.
They do not seem to be produced as a routine matter,
but seem to be only provided in 'difficult'
environments (see sub-section 'How debative talk is
avoided and how debative talk is closed down'). But
how does the focus group moderator then receipt
participants' contributions?

We find five different classes of receipts.
These are:
Repeat Receipts

- follow-up questions addressed to the prior speaker
- probes such as 'asking for the opinions of the others'
- repeats of the prior speaker's statement
- continuers and acknowledgment tokens such as 'hm mm' (see Chapter Seven)

and last but not least
- withholding of turn initiation ('Silent Recipiency'; see Chapter Seven).

The main focus of this chapter is the use of repeats. These appear in two different environments: repeats addressed to the prior speaker and repeats addressed to potential next speakers. This mechanical distinction proves to be useful, as the repeats - according to whom the repeat is addressed - seem to have different functions. Repeats tend to be addressed to the prior speaker if the previous statement is considered as 'response-worthy' (Schegloff, 1997) and they tend to be addressed to potential next speakers if the moderator aims at a particular outcome - an accumulation of separate and discrete contributions. In analyzing how the moderator provides templates for future answers we will point to how the moderator's repeats 'strip' the participants' utterances 'off' the rhetorical context and will discuss how the moderator organizes the focus group as non-debative talk.

2. Repeats addressed to the prior speaker: Understanding checks without understanding problems

Before coming back to our focus group data I will shortly present Schegloff's (1997) work on the
practices of repeats in mundane conversation. He does not use the term 'repeat' in a mechanical sense as he includes transformations which are geared to deixis and tense shift, speaker change and change of prosody, but excludes paraphrases and other substantial rewording. Apart from targeting a next action when the repeat is rendered as a 'preliminary' to what follows, repeats are deployed as a practice for initiating repair and they serve as a receipt of what another has said. Whereas many repair initiation deployments have a continuing intonation, a repeat which is produced with a downward or final intonation indicates the usage as a receipt. However, repeating all or parts of a prior turn, even with an upward intonation, will not necessarily initiate repair.

In older papers Jefferson (1972) and Schenkein (1978) also analyzed repeats in conversation and conclude that they elicit corrections. Schenkein describes 'passes' which are usually organized in a four turn 'Puzzle-Pass-Solution-Comment' sequence. Jefferson describes 'questioning repeats' as in the following sequence:

A: But the air's gotta come in there and the air is sorta infiltrated with little uh pixy dust.

...  
B: 'Pixy dust'!?  
...  
C: 'Radioactivity' I think is what he means.

(Jefferson, 1972:316)

The questioning repeat in this sequence (''Pixy dust'!?'') demonstrates the failure to understand and solicits remedies for such failure.
When repeats in our data are addressed to the prior speaker, this speaker elaborates on his/her previously made statement - and this is not dependent on the repeat's intonation (rising versus falling intonation). When the moderator addresses the prior speaker via gaze this participant will display an elaboration of his/her former turn. The instances of moderator's repeat we found in our corpus do not occur in environments of misunderstandings or ambiguities such as in Jefferson's extract ('pixy dust'). The moderator, however, uses the format of an understanding check and the repeat appears to be designed to thematize and elaborate a prior comment.

Moderators seem to use repeats like interviewers use formulations. Heritage (1985) notes in a footnote that the interviewer's utterance in the interview with the 'slimmer of the year' (see the fragment in the last section) also displays an understanding of the slimmer's story although there is no context for a potential or actual misunderstanding. In his unpublished paper 'The institutional specificity of news interview talk: An exercise' Heritage has elaborated this idea in showing how in formulating an 'understanding' of an unproblematic interviewee's statement, this statement is subsequently elaborated on by the interviewee and not just minimally confirmed as in understanding checks in mundane conversation.

Let us look more closely at a focus group sequence in which the moderator repeats a part of the prior speaker's statement while still addressing him. We enter the scene of the first extract at the point where the moderator asks the group to smoke the offered cigarettes and to 'spontaneously' share their
thoughts. The moderator's repeat is marked with an arrow.

(2) Source: London, 1451; file: echo22; video: 49:07

1. Mod. [If you now just, (.)
2. take, (.) take \uparrow one (.7)
3. take \uparrow one,=and,=uh, hh,
4. (.) then light it, (4.0)
5. no=no=not at, (.) YES
6. DON'T \uparrow LOOK AT \downarrow IT\textsuperscript{2} (.)
7. well=uh=forget your old
8. one now. ]
9. 
10. many
11. (2.7)
12. Mod. ("Your xxxxxxxxx")
13. (5.3)
14. P1 (xxxxxxxxxxxx)=
15. P2 =No, (.) I don't like
16. it.
17. P1 No,
18. (1.1)
19. P1 Yes, but it looks good!
20. (2.1)
21. P3 No, I don't like it
22. either
23. P1 (That, that was now,)
24. P3 Hm mm,
25. Mod. [>Tell me, (.) yes, ifif
26. you spon- (.) (what )<
27. if you spontaneously
28. say, (.) \"then
29. immediately.\"
30. many
31. (talk and laugh
32. together in the
33. background)]
34. (.)
35. P1 U:h, (.) I don't like
36. the packet, it looks
37. somehow, (.8) (>this
38. sounds now xxx or so<)
39. kind of effeminate
40. somehow,
41. some
42. ((laugh))

\textsuperscript{2} The moderator does not want the participants to look at the label on the packets with information on the nicotine and tar level of the cigarettes.
The participant's statement ("U:h, (.9) I don't like the packet, it looks somehow, (.8) (this sounds now xxx or so) kind of effeminate somehow,"; lines 38-43) is hearably non-ambiguous. There does not seem to be any need to clarify the statement through the use of a repeat. The participant's notion of 'effeminate', however, seems to be worthwhile of 'making something more out of it' and the moderator repeats it: ">Effeminate," (line 45). The participant then does not treat the moderator's repeat as an occasion for a brief confirmation, but elaborates his former answer - at least, for as long as he holds the floor. The moderator's repeat elicits an elaboration on a given answer and this is also the case in the next fragment.

This extract revolves around the moderator's projective 'brand-as-person-question' regarding the new 'member of the Cape family'. Unlike the repeat in the last extract this one is provided with a downward intonation (see the arrowed turn).
The moderator's repeat "The baby." (line 25) is addressed to the prior speaker. Like the speaker in the previous Extract Two, the participant elaborates on his prior statement. It does not seem to be the rising or falling intonation of the moderator's repeat which elicits further elaboration, but it seems to be the moderator's gaze, which determines whether a speaker continues to speak or not. As we have already seen in Chapter Three, Sub-Section 'A non-vocal request for a voluntary contribution', focus group participants monitor closely the moderator's gaze and the moderator directs speakership not only vocally, but also non-vocally.
To sum up, then: repeats addressed to the prior speaker have the form of an 'understanding check' in an environment without trouble in the prior turn. Participants treat the check not as an occasion for brief confirmation as would be expected from research on understanding checks in mundane conversation (see especially Heritage's unpublished paper on the 'institutional specificity of news interview talk'), but elaborate on their previous statement. Repeats thus seem to have a questioning function which becomes especially clear in the following extract.

This extract revolves around the moderator's projective 'brand-as-person-question' regarding the new 'member of the Cape family'. Like the repeat in Extract Two this one is also provided with an upward intonation, which has in the following extract the quality of an 'exclamation-mark intonation' (see the arrowed turn).

(4) Source: Blue19,93; file: eviden5; video: 32:25

1. P2 [>I< would also have
2. said, (.) a ↑child (.)
3. (that's how I'd, (.) see
4. it,)] (. Cape, (.)
5. father, Cape Light, (.)
6. mother. (. Ultra Lights
7. (. or Blue Ultra "is
8. then the child of the
9. family."^)
10. (1.5)
11. Mod1 And what characteristics
12. might this child have?
13. (1.0) "Or so (just
14. simply xxxxxx so)"^
15.
16. P2 Yes, er ↑light as a
17. child (. well
→ 18. Mod1 [Light as a child! ] addresses
19. P2
20. some (((laugh softly))) ]
21. P2 Yes, well, (1.2)
22. [Fa: ]
At first the moderator repeats the participant's contribution with a slightly modified intonation: "[Light as a child!]"; (line 18). As with the last two extracts, the moderator's repeat elicits further elaboration and the participant begins distinguishing the 'paternal cigarette' from the 'maternal cigarette'. Right then, the moderator specifies his repeat and displays his interest in a different aspect of the participant's prior contribution: "but there are children and children." (lines 27+28).

Let us consider for a moment what the moderator could have asked and what he might have asked for example in an open-ended interview: 'What do you understand by "as a child" in the context of cigarettes?'. The moderator, however, does not explicitly ask, neither in the first instance, when he offers instead a repeat ("[Light as a child!]"; line 18) nor in the second instance when he explicates his interest in 'child' not as contrasted with 'parents', but with other 'children'. The moderator repairs his repeat as he realizes it might be misunderstood, but again 'avoids' asking a
question and uses instead a repeat with a questioning function.

Up to now we have seen how moderators use the discursive format of an understanding check in an unambiguous environment and how participants do not provide a minimal confirmation, but orient to the requirement of further elaboration. We find in our corpus an interesting deviation from this 'rule' when the moderator’s understanding check is only minimally confirmed by the participant. Let us look more closely at this 'deviant case'.

The deviant example takes place in a focus group which is in two aspects different from the other focus groups of our corpus. Firstly, the focus group is run by two moderators, an 'experienced' older male moderator and a less 'experienced' younger female moderator. Secondly, both moderators take notes: the female moderator often and the male moderator sometimes. The female moderator is in the following extract 'Modl'.

(5) Source: Blue17,p.1; file: echo26; video: 4:00

1. Modl A:nd, (.) if you just
2. think about it (.) >how:
3. might< (.) this
4. cigarette (.) (xxx)
5. particularly taste
6. =>well I mean, this
7. happens often,< that
8. one, (.) see:s some
9. packet or other and
10. then, (.) speculates on
11. (.) how this
12. >cigarette might
13. taste<what would you
14. assume regarding the
taste, (.) perhaps
15.
16.
17. (.)

Und, (.) wenn Ihr jetzt
einfach mal Überlegt (.)
>wie: könnt< (.) diese
Zigarette (.) (xxx)
besonders
schmecken=>also ich
mein, das hat man ja
oft,< dass man, (.)
irgendsone Packung
sieht und dann, (.)
Überlegungen drüber
anstellt (.) wie die
>Zigarette wohl
schmecken könnt<=>was
würdet Ihr da vermuten
vom Geschmack her, (.)
vieelleicht
18. P1 Does not irritate the throat like the others, (. ) from Cape
19. Mod1 ↑Um↓mm
20. (. )
21. ? [xx ]
22. Mod1 [And] why, (. ) do you think this?*
23. * starts writing
24. 20. (2.2)
25. 20. P1 Uh, = well < if we assume
26. that, it is ↑bright and
27. light, (. ) then, (. )
28. light ↑well these are
29. mostly < not > exactly as <
30. irritating [as, ] (. 7)
31. stronger ones
32. (um mm,)
33. Mod2 [xx ]
34. (. 7)
35. 20. P2 ((clears throat))
36. (2.5)
37. 20. Mod2 "Not as irritating, good."
38. looks around
39. (3.5)
40. 20. Mod1 *What do the others think, ( . ) Well how does this cigarette taste
41. * starts writing
42. 20. P3 >Extremely < light,
43. > the are mostly not as irritating
44. (. 7)
45. > the are mostly not as irritating
46. Mod1 *Extremely light.**
47. * addresses P3, who nods after the repeat
48. ** starts writing
49. 20. (1.1)
50. 20. P4 * Or pleasant, or full-bodied,
51. 20. (. )
52. ? [xxxx ]
53. 20. P1 [Wenn man ] > das so
54. 20. (1.2) (xx) in any case
55. 20. (xx) one gets a quite
56. positive impression.—FROM THE
57. PACKET ((laughs))
58. 20. Mod1 Um mm,
59. 20. 187
60. 187
61. 187
62. 187
63. 187
64. 187
65. 187
66. 187

During this sequence Mod1 writes for much of the time, and in doing so displays the importance of the topic under discussion and the importance of the provided contributions - the assumed taste of a new
cigarette. We would like to focus here on Modl's repeat receipt in line 46: "Extremely light." The moderator uses the same words as the participant, but a different intonation, in this case falling. In nodding after the moderator's repeat, the participant displays his understanding of the repeat as an understanding check. The moderator starts writing after the participant's confirmation. The repeat is here not used as a request for more information, but the moderator displays hearably the 'worthiness' of the participant's contribution and the importance of 'getting it right' for the record. In repeating the contribution before taking a note, Modl furthermore makes transparent what she is going to write down.

To sum up, then: moderators in focus groups decline the role of a report recipient by avoiding third-turn receipts, which are so characteristic for mundane conversation. Moreover, by deploying repeat receipts as questions the moderator also declines the role of an explicit report elicitor. Repeats can be seen as doing two 'jobs' at the same time: they work as receipts and as further questions. What might be the reason for preferring repeats which do questioning work instead of more explicit question formulations? We will come back to this question in the discussion section of this chapter.

Whereas we looked in this section at repeats addressed to the prior speaker, we will concentrate in the next one on repeats addressed to potential next speakers. They seem to be deployed when the moderator aims at a particular outcome, that is an accumulation of separate and discrete contributions.
3. Repeats addressed to potential next speakers: Organizing talk as non-debative talk

The last section analyzed repeats addressed to the same speaker. In this section we look at repeats addressed to other potential speakers. These repeats occur mainly in two different environments which I call the 'party game mode' and the 'feature collecting mode'. As we will see later on, however, both 'modes' are organized by the moderators in such a way to collect participants' contributions. By providing repeats which are stripped off the rhetorical or argumentative form as prompts and by regulating the turn taking, the moderator organizes the focus group not as a debate but as an accumulation of separate descriptions. The moderator's orientation to the organization of focus group talk as non-debative talk will be furthermore shown with the help of an elaborate extract containing an ongoing argument between participants and the moderator's attempt to harmonize the argument.

But let me describe at first the moderator's repeats when (s)he organizes talk such as a 'party game'.

3.1. Repeats in 'party game modes'

Any gross inspection of the market research focus group tapes shows the prevalence of 'games' which could be played in a similar way at parties. Whereas at parties the question might be 'If friend x was a flower, which flower would (s)he be?', in the
focus groups we find questions such as 'If the cigarette brand x was a person, what kind of person would it be?'.

These questions are called 'projective' questions and they are supposed to help the participants to impart an especially 'deep' output as - at least according to the psychoanalytic theory - the upper layer of consciousness is penetrated and social, rational and cognitive barriers are overcome (see for example Branthwaite & Lunn, 1985). In his volume on 'Developing Questions for Focus Groups' Krueger gives the following examples for projective questions:

· Suppose that this agency was a restaurant. What sort of place would it be and what would it be like?

· Suppose that this program was a family. What other programs would be in the same family?

· Three foundations are suddenly changed into people. They are the Kellog Foundation, the Northwest Area Foundation and the McKnight Foundation. They are now people, and you're at a social gathering with these three people. What are they like?

(1998:75,76)

In focus group manuals and papers projective questions are presented as being helpful for both social science and market research focus groups (Branthwaite & Lunn, 1985; Krueger, 1998). But as projective questions seek information on a particular topic by asking about a different and often easier topic, it suggests itself that this technique is more used in marketing or social marketing research focus groups when the discussion revolves around concrete
products, organizations or programs than in social science focus groups on for example breast cancer.

In the following we will look more closely at the organization of such games and develop the suggestion that, in repeating the individual contributions stripped off the rhetorical context, the moderator organizes talk as a non-debative accumulation of statements. Let us start with a projective question with which the moderator solicits a personification.

(6) Source: Blue17,645; file: echo3035; video: 20:27

1. Mod. If you just imagine it
2. (.9) as person, (1.7)
3. [brand as person,]
4. only now just take this
5. here ("into"
6. consideration")
7. P?
8. [[(pours himself
9. something)]]
10. Mod. What kind of person
11. would this one be, (.)
12. in the= in the Cape, (.)
13. family"
14. (4.9)
15. P1 ("what, (.) person,")=
16. Mod. =Person! (.) It is
17. possible to imagine,
18. (. ) brands, (. ) or, (. )
19. packets as persons.
20. 
21. P1 (I see,)
22. P2 The
23. [funniest! (. ) Most
24. live
25. [Youngest child!]
26. Mod. What?
27. P3 Youngest child!
28. (1.1)
29. Mod. *looks down
30. (singing voice) (. )
31. **looks round the
32. characteristics of the
33. youngest child?
34. 35. P4 [(And) vivacious,]=

Wenn man sich die ganz
†mail (. ) als Person
vorstellt, (1.7)
[Marke als Person, nur
jetzt mal nur auf diese
hier ("betrachtet")]

Was fürne Person war das,
( .) in der= in der Cape,
(.) Familie"

( "was, ( .) Person,"
=Person! ( .) Man kann
sich doch auch, ( .)
Marken, ( .) oder, ( .)
Packungen als Personen
vorstellen.

(Ach so,)

Wit
[zigste! ( .) Peppligste!

[Jüngster Spross!]
Was?
Jüngster Spross!

*Jüngs**ter **Spro**ss (. )
((singende Stimme))
**Welche Eigenschaften
hatn der jüngst Spross?

[(Und) temperamentvoll,]=
The participants have started a joint description of the 'youngest child' in the Cape family (which is the planned new line extender of an existing brand): P4 and P3 describe it simultaneously.
as "[(And) vivacious,]=" and "[(Sporty,)]=" (lines 35+36). P3 then refers to P4 who has repeated "Sporty," (line 42) in saying "High- highly imaginative, (.) sporty, yes," (lines 43-45). P2 adds "Um a little bit witty," (line 47) and P4 draws the conclusion "No <hou:se-mouse either.>" (lines 55+56). The participants display rhetorical forms in which their ideas are connected with the contributions of other participants, the moderator, however, does not pick these connections up.

Let us look more closely at the structure of the moderator's receipts. The participant's contribution "[(And) vivacious,]= (line 35) is repeated as "=Viva\textsuperscript{cious}\" (line 37). P2's "Um a little bit witty," (line 47) is similarly partially repeated as "Witty," (line 49). And P4's "No <hou:se-mouse either.> (lines 55+56) is, before the moderator starts laughing, shortened to "No hou-" (line 57). The moderator thus strips the contributions off the offered rhetorical context and the description of the 'brand as person' is constructed out of different individual contributions, but treated as if produced by 'one voice'.

In order to better understand this piece of interaction I would like to compare it with another institutional setting and that is kindergarten interaction and Edwards' (1993, 1993b) studies on pedagogic discourse. He comes to the conclusion that the teacher does not organize the lesson as a debate or an argument,

Rather, she ((the teacher)) organizes the children's contributions according to a different principle altogether - that of a
sequential accumulation of separate bits of knowledge. Indeed, efforts by the children to talk with each other, to dispute each other's formulations, or to take turns at talk which are not invited by the teacher, are systematically sanctioned. ... The result is not merely a social ordering of children's contributions, but a conceptual one also. Ideas that might have been discussed, debated, disputed, or argued, become shaped into a list of separate and discrete contributions. (1993b:213, emphasis added)

And how does the moderator shape the individual contributions into a 'list of discrete statements'? Let us consider here only how the moderator reformulates his original question

What kind of person would this one be,(.) in the Cape, (.) fami°ly° (lines 10-13)

into

So what are the characteristics of the youngest child? (lines 31-33),

and

Yes, some other, (.) characteristics. (.) "perhaps," (lines 63-65),

and

=Have you also got a characteristic? (lines 76-77)

While the moderator begins by asking for a description of the 'person', he continues by collecting attributes of this person. He displays that he is after an accumulation (or a list) of these characteristics and the participants orient to this requirement. Whereas at the beginning of the 'game session' they offered contributions embedded in rhetorical forms, they end in providing formulaic statements such as "Full of energy," (line 66),
"Active," (line 74) and "Not conservative," (line 78). Like the kindergarten teacher who prompts the children to produce discrete, unique formulaic statements, the moderator directs the turn taking and prompts with the help of certain kind of receipts (the stripped off repeats) and a certain kind of questions to produce similarly formulaic statements.

Let us look now at another extract and let us consider again the questioning and shaping function of the moderator's repeats. The fragment revolves around another projective question and again the participants hearably have fun playing the game 'brand as person'. We enter the scene at the point, where the participants have finished their previous task: they were asked to consider the cigarette packets on the table as people who went to a party and to decide which groups might be formed over the course of the evening; which means who - which 'brand as person' - talks with whom. The moderator asks thereafter what the group with the 'person' London is talking about and addresses repeats of the prior speaker's answer four times as prompts to potential next speakers; see the arrowed turns.

(7) Source: London, 901; file: echo1215 (second part); video: 39:38

1. Mod. And the, (.) the large
2. pile there, where
3. Janeiro, Cairo, New York, Washington, (.)
4. Cape and so on axe,
5. [well what is their common, (.) theme?]
6. [xxxxxxxxxxxxx ]
7. 8. P2 Sorry?
9. Mod. They are talking about men and women there,
10. P2 ((gives a laugh))
11. Mod. Und der, (.) der grosse Haufen da, wo Janeiro, Cairo, New York, Washington, (.) Cape undsoweiter drin ist, [was ist denn deren gemeinsames, (.) Thema?]
12. [xxxxxxxxxxxxx ] Bitte?
  Die reden über Männer und Frauen da,
((lacht kurz auf))
13. P4 just small [talk] (xxxx) too,
14. P4 does not nod; * mod.
15. P2 *Small talk,
16. Mod. looks at others
17. P4
18.  
19. P2
20. P4 About pubs and discos,=
21. P1 =Yes, exactly,=
22. P4 =what's going on there,
23. yes,
24. P6 Mod. Hm mm,
25. P6 Talk about, (...) clubs
26. mod. reads his notes
27. P7
28. some (((smile))]
29. Mod. And=the, (...) the, (...) group, with er, hh the
30. >London in it,
31. P7
32. P1 They are sitting in
33. front of the fireplace,
34. (laugh)
35. some
36. P7 Well, they are at a
37. wine-tasting
38. many (((laugh)))
39. (((continue laughing)))
40. Mod. [*At a wine-tasting! ]
41. * looks at others; P7 doesn't nod
42. P2
43. P4 Talking about a concert,
44. P4
45. P4 [where, ] (...) they they
46. were one night,
47. P1
48. Mod. *Concert, (...) um mm,
49. P6
50. P4 Yes, or also (with which
51. [xxxxx ])
52. P2
53.  
54. P1 [Theatre, perhaps, (...) and art,]
55. P6 "Opening day, exactly,"
56. "Opening day, well,
57. * looks at others; P6 doesn't nod
58. Mod.  
59. (1.9)
60. (3.2)
61. (1.9)
62. Mod. Anything el-?
63.  
64. P3 Yes, something in the
65. way of current affairs, and maybe a few
66. political themes, or,=
67.  
68.  
69. Mod. =Um mm,
70. (1.9)

Ja, genau,= was da los ist, ja,

Hm mm,

Vereins, (...) meierei

Ja,

(((schmunzeln)))

Und=die, (...) die, (...) Gruppe, wo jetzt die, hh die >London dabei ist,

Die sitzen vorm Kamin,

(lachen)

Ach, die sind zur Weinprobe

(((lachen)))

(((lachen weiter)))

*[Zur Weinprobe! ]

Unterhalten sich übers Konzert,

*[Konzert, (...) hm mm,

Ja, oder auch (mit welcher
[xxxxx ])

[Theater, vielleicht, (...) und Kunst,]

*vernissage, genau,=

*somewhere, aha,

Sonst noch irgendein-?

Ja, irgendein so über aktuelle Themen, auch vielleicht mal en paar politische Themen, oder,=

=Hm mm,
At first the moderator partially repeats P4's "just small [talk] (xxxx) too," (lines 13+14) as "Small talk," (line 16) and addresses this repeat to other members of the group; it is, however, the same speaker (P4) who continues speaking. Similarly the moderator partially repeats P7's "Well, they are at a wine-tas[ting]" (lines 36+37) as "[At a wine-tasting!}" (line 40). As already seen in Extract Six, this prompt also achieves 'questioning work' as another participant without having been asked explicitly offers "Talking about a concert," (line 43). After the moderator's next repeat "Concert, (.) um mm," (line 48), P4 offers a longer - partly unintelligible - statement what the group at the party might talk about and we would like to focus here on another participant's (P6) suggestion "Opening day, exactly," (line 56). Whereas the first three contributions were offered in more complex discursive frames, the last one adopts the form of the moderator's partial repeats.

The teacher in Edwards' (1993b) kindergarten analysis sanctions the children's efforts to dispute each other's formulations. The moderator, however, does not sanction individual contributions. He receipts the contributions by repeating them in a 'stripped off way' and signals so the discursive format of the required answers. Participants understand what is required and finally fall into the pattern of offering simple and formulaic responses.
In the end P6 just provides "Opening day, exactly," (line 59).

Just like the teacher in Edwards’ (1993b) kindergarten analysis, the moderator tries to elicit discrete statements. The teacher writes a list with the individual contributions and when she has got a list with ten items, she calculates that nine more are required as there are nineteen children in the kindergarten. How then is the end of the game sequences in the focus groups organized?

Before analyzing how the end of the 'game session' in the previous Extract Seven is organized let me provide with another extract the transcript of the interaction which took place shortly before Extract Seven. How is the transition between the two tasks - the one in Extract Seven and the one in Extract Eight organized? The task has been similarly to assign topics to 'people' (which are brands):

(8) Source: London,901; file: echo1215 (first part); video: 39:38

1. Mod. =U:::nd, (. ) in
diese=diese Jungs hier oder Mädels hier links, (. ) Brussels, Stansted, (. ) Moscow, [Rome, (. )]
was machen die denn
gef:::in:::sam

2. P1 [(xxxx )]

3. P2 [Old people!]

4. P3 [Old people!]

5. P4 [Old people!]*

6. P5 (lachende Stimme)

7. Mod. >Was=alte Leute!<

8. P2 [Old people!]*

9. P1 [Old people!]*

10. Mod. =Ja,=

11. P2 [Old people!]*

12. P3 [Old people!]*

13. P4 [Old people!]*

14. P5 [Old people!]*

15. Mod. =Yes,=

16. P6 [Old people!]*

17. P7 [Old people!]*

18. P8 [Old people!]*

19. P9 [Old people!]*
There is a hearably smooth transition between this 'set' (what the brands Brussels, Stansted, Moscow and Rome are 'talking' about) and the next one (which was shown in Extract Seven, that is the topics of Janeiro, Cairo, New York, Washington and Cape).

The moderator finishes the set of Extract Eight by repeating P2's statement in a summarizing way: "Older ones [at] a family party." (lines 29+30). He does not seem to look at anybody in particular and his repeat appears to be designed to 'get it on the record'.

This getting it 'on the record' is being used in this special case to develop a topical boundary before the moderator comes to the second set (Extract Seven).

The end of this one is organized in a different way. Let me here reproduce the last turns of Extract Seven:

**Detail from Extract Seven, lines 56-75**

P6: "Opening day, exactly,"

Mod.: Opening day, well,

(1.9)

Mod.: Anything el-?

(3.2)
P3: Yes, something in the way of current affairs, and
maybe a few political themes, or,=

Mod.: Um mm,

(1.9)

Mod.: Good, (. ) okay, (.8) everything's all right then,
((packs up the cigarette packets and continues))

As the moderator's last prompt "Opening day,
well," (line 58) which he has addressed to next
potential speakers does not elicit further
contributions, the moderator asks "Anything el-?"
(line 62) and P3 provides after a long pause a vague
and cautiously formulated option, which signals that
the topic could come to a close. Topic closure is
here done collaboratively as in Myers' (1998) focus
group data where moderators step in and close the
topic after participants' signals such as jokes,
laughter or commonplaces. In our extract, however,
the moderator himself already seems to signal a
possible topic closure by not even spelling out the
question ("Anything el-?"; line 62).

The moderator's (stripped off) repeats in the
sequences with projective questions we studied up to
now seem to do a double 'duty': they do questioning
work and they serve as templates to shape future
answers. In the next sub-section we will look at
repeats in another environment - in 'feature
collecting modes', when the moderator asks non-
projective questions.

3.2. Repeats in 'feature collecting modes'

The last sub-section considered the way
moderators' repeats provided in an environment which
we called a 'party game mode' as the focus group members answered projective questions in a hearably playful manner. Here we will analyze moderators' repeats of participants' contributions addressed to potential next speakers when no projective question is asked. As already indicated, however, the differentiation between these two 'modes' seems to be an artificial one as talk in both is not organized as a debate but as an accumulation of separate contributions.

We will show in the following another function of the moderator's repeat receipts which was less apparent in the extracts discussed above. (Partial) repeats of the prior speaker's statement which are addressed to other focus group members do not only do questioning work and do not only work as 'templates' for future answers, but they also signal the 'worthiness' of a given answer.

Let us look at the following sequence which we enter at the point where the moderator asks the group at first about differences between the brand under discussion and other brands and secondly for a description of the cigarette's taste.

(9) Source: London,131; file: echo5-7; video: 23:40

1. Mod. Uh=would you, (.)
2. uh=this is now
3. interesting (>well
4. would you) say, there
5. are definitely
6. similarities .hh (1.2)
7. umm, (. ) how does

---

3 In constrast to Branthwaite & Lunn (1985), we use the term 'projective' in a stricter sense as we do not include questions on 'associations' such 'spontaneous reactions' or 'spontaneous impressions' as projective questions.
then, the London stand out against these, (.9) <somehow> (. )

11. similar ones.

12. Mod. What do you think,
that was it, that=that=that=that, um,
(. ) London was known
precisely for the, (1.1)
for this, (. ) lux-, (. )
luxurious, (. )
tobacco=uh:uh, (1.0)
[cigars,] and,
mod. looks
round the circle

23 lines omitted

Was meinen Sie,
Ja, das war das,
dass=dass=dass=dass, em,
(. ) London eben für den,
(1.1) für diesen, (. )
lux-, (. ) luxuriösen,
(. ) Tabak be-=me:ih, (. )
Zigarren, (1.0) be
[kannt war,] und,

[hm mm, ]

Aber trotzdem aktuell
ist,=also jetzt im
Gegensatz zu (. ) Paris,
find ich also Paris
verbind ich immer, (1.4)
eher was Konservatives, ne,

>hm mm, [hm mm,< ]

Eih, (. ) jetzt habn wir
schon so oft eben auch
über den Tabak
gesprochen, (. ) *was ist
denn eigentlich, (. ) em
*an* ((zögert sehr bei
dem Wort)) der, (. )
Zigarette selbst,=eheh,
( . ) wie würden Sie den,
(. ) GESCHMACK SELBST
beZEICHEN, .hh >ausser
dass es Ihnen schmeckt,<
.hhh eh "gibts," (. ) wo
gibt=wo würden Sie den
Geschmack zunächstmal
globAL
verGLEICHEN,=oder,
können Sie ihn auch
igendwie näher,
beischreiben,
Let us start with the moderator's repeat in line 28, although this one is addressed to the prior speaker. As in Extract Two, the moderator treats the participant's notion of 'tradition' as worthwhile of 'making something more of'. The moderator repeats it and keeps looking at the same participant who does not, however, elaborate her former answer. The moderator then addresses via gaze, another
participant (P3) who provides a long answer. In contrast to P2's notion of 'tradition', the moderator does not seem to treat P3's description of the competitor brand Paris as 'conservative' as worthwhile of 'making something of'.

Let us proceed to the moderator's next question about how the brand under discussion should be described. P3 provides the following descriptions:

Yes, aromatic, (= line 65)

and

=And above all not as ↑perf↓fumed (lines 67+68).

The moderator's receipt - addressed first to P3 and then to another participant - is:

> Aromatic, not perfumed.< (.) um mm, (lines 69+70).

The moderator partially repeats the participant's answer. In the last section we had seen how the moderator strips contributions off the rhetorical context; here we can see how the moderator's receipt preserves the participant's description of the taste whilst simultaneously deleting the priority given by the participant to the second characteristic ('and above all ...'). Whereas the participant displayed an evaluation of the two features given by her, the moderator adds the second characteristic to the first without displaying this evaluation. The moderator strips in this extract the participant's contribution from the 'evaluative context'.

From the last sub-section's extracts we drew the conclusion that the moderator organizes talk not as a discussion but as a collection of participants' contributions. This idea is confirmed by the previous extract as the moderator similarly displays his interest in the listing of features and not in the way the participant connects the various mentioned features. See also the next two turns where the moderator similarly repeats only the feature itself ("[Doesn't irritate.]"; line 76) and displays his lack of interest in the participant's account why this is an important feature for her.

While in these turns the moderator displays his interest in the features themselves (and not in the evaluation of the respective features), he acknowledges only minimally P2's contribution at the end of the extract. He does not, for example, partially repeat her turn in saying 'Sydney always irritates the throat', but provides only an "Um mm," (line 103) and asks P6 after a pause "Have you °got an- i-°" (lines 103+104).

(Partially) repeating or not (partially) repeating seems to be an elegant device to signal the 'worthiness/unworthiness' of given answers. Repeats thus seem to be able to do in an economical way three 'jobs' at the same time:

- they signal the 'worthiness' of a given answer
- they do questioning work
- with the help of their stripped off character they serve as templates to shape future answers.
The next extract will illustrate especially the last function, where the moderator seems to give 'extra tuition' on what kind of answers is required in the session. We enter the scene of the following sequence at the point where the moderator asks the participants for 'spontaneous reactions' regarding the brand Stansted.

(10) Source: R17,526; file: echo49; video: 20:31

1. Mod. =We can go into it, more deeply soon, (.)
2. because, (.) well=uh I'd be interested, (.) <for
3. quite a particular reason> also, (.) this Stansted, (.) If you would just now *all, (.)
4. just now try, to kind of concentrate a little bit uh,* ((speaks very hesitantly)) (. on the Stansted=what comes to mind immediately=>you can all, <talk now at the same time, (.)
5. [well I don't need] to pick on you.
6. P?
7. P1 I can't say that!
8. ([laughs])
9. P? (((laughs)) (Really!))
10. P? (((laughs) loudly))
11. some [[(talk, laugh and cough in the background)]]
12. Mod. [Stansted! (.) Well now we've just had it said] something like
13. ->
14. ten ^yes:rs (.)
15. [is (xxxxxxxxxxxx) being advertised,]
16. P2 [White packet,] 
17. Mod. What?
18. P2 White packet,= =Discreet,
19. P3 =Können wir gleich noch mal vertiefend, drauf eingehen, (.) weil, (.) mich würde noch mal=eh interessieren, (.) <aus ganz besonderem Anlass> auch, (.) diese Stansted, (.) Wenn Sie jetzt mal *alle, (.) sich jetzt mal versuchen, schon
20. bisschen eh,* ((spricht sehr zögerlich)) (. auf die Stansted zu konzentrieren=was fällt Ihnen da spontan ein=>Sie können jetzt alle, (. durcheinander reden, (. [ich brauch] Sie also nicht aufzurufen.
21. [(xxxxxxxxxxxx)]
22. Das kann ich nicht sagen! (.[lacht])
23. (.[lacht]) (Echt!)
24. (.[lacht laut])
25. (((reden, lachen und husten im Hintergrund)))
26. [Stansted! (.) Also eben hatten wir schon ] so was wie ^Ve:rrreiter gibt seit zehn ^Ja:ahren (.)
27. [macht (xxxxxxxxxxxx)]
28. Werbung,]
29. [(Weisse Packung,)]
30. Was?
31. Weisse Packung,= =Dezent,
39. Mod. \^White (.) discreet (.) the mod. doesn't seem to look any longer at the former speakers and they don't nod

40.  
41.  
42.  
43.  
44.  
45.  
46.  
47.  

48. P1 \^Is it now only about the packet, \[or about the cigarette? \]

49.  
50. some \[\{(laugh softly)\} \]
51.  
52.  

53. \[\{(continue laughing softly)\} \]

54.  
55. P4 [About the cigarette]

56. (xxxxxx)

57. Mod. >Say it,< (.) it doesn't matter.

58.  
59. (.)

60. P1 U:h, well I have \^smoked the Stansted before (.)

61.  
62. and,=

63. Mod. \"Um mm,=\" =I as a, (.) doctor's receptionist, \>I work in a doctor's office, (.) a:nd,<=

64. P1 \"Um mm,\" =I light one too sometimes when I'm under stress, (you know) at the back in the kitchen=but then I have to run back to the \^front again, andand (come to) telephone,=go to the back again, .hh <the Stansted, it smokes away like mad> (when it's) left lying in the ash'tray, (.) quicker than

65.  
66.  
67.  
68.  
69.  
70.  
71.  
72.  
73.  
74.  
75.  
76.  
77.  
78.  
79.  
80.  
81.  
82.  

83. Mod. \[\"Um mm,=\"

84. P1 \"Um mm,=\" my Washington Lights, [Yes, ]

85.  
86. many \[\{(laugh)\} \]

87. P1 [No, (.) that's true! ]

88. many \[\{(continue laughing)\} \]

89. P4 This is so crappy

90. P1 No, I don't find this funny,=I assume, that the tobacco is not as firm, or some[thing,]

91.  
92.  
93.  
94.  
95. P? [Yes, ]

\[\"Hm mm,=\"
meine Washington Lights, [Ja, ]
[\{(lachen\})
[Nee, (.) ist wahr!]
[\{(lachen weiter\})
Das ist so bekackt Nee, das find ich nicht lustig,=ich nehme an, dass der Tabak nicht so fest, oder was weiss [Ich,]
[Ja, ]
When the participants display helplessness and embarrassment in providing 'spontaneous reactions' regarding the brand under discussion (lines 21-26), the moderator provides examples of the required contributions:

[Stansted! (. ) Well now we've just had it said] there have been "forerunners around for ten years (.) [is (xxxxxxxxxxx) being advertised,]" (lines 27-33).

What is required, then, are statements such as "something like "forerunners around for ten "years" (lines 29-31), which are added like buzzwords without any pause between them. The moderator here lists the individual features exactly in the same way as moderators' repeats are usually constructed: without any rhetorical and evaluative frame.

In their answers the participants P2 and P3 follow the given template ("White packet,", "Discreet,"; lines 36+37). The moderator shortens them ("White (.) discreet (.) what else?="; lines
39+40) without distinguishing the different authors (see our notion of contributions as being treated as if produced by 'one voice' in the last sub-section). He then addresses via gaze the remaining focus group participants. P1, however, does not understand the task and, as the moderator's template is provided without any 'context', asks for an explanation:

=Is it now only about the packet, [or about the cigarette?] (lines 48-51)

After the moderator has signalled that he does not care, P1 starts a 'personal narrative': "I as a, (.) doctor's receptionist, ((continues))" (from line 64 on). In a similar situation a kindergarten teacher might have sanctioned a contribution like the one by P1; see the teacher in Edwards' 'greenhouse-study': 'OK, now. I don't want to know about what happened in the greenhouse in terms of what the greenhouse looked like.' (1993b:209). The moderator, however, seems to switch over to a different 'mode'. Whereas he has organized talk during the last minutes as an accumulation of features, he accepts now the participant's narrative as he supports her 'story' with continuers and displays interest by asking her (for example in lines 110-114).

To sum up, then: we developed in this section our idea that the moderator organizes certain sequences of focus group talk as an accumulation of discrete statements. By repeating the participants' contributions in a special way by stripping off provided rhetorical and evaluative forms the moderator shapes future participants' contributions to fulfill this requirement. And by controlling a dialogical turn-taking the moderator organizes the
focus group as an accumulation of separate
descriptions rather than as a debate.

As the following extract shows these
descriptions are considered by the moderator as worth
taking down as a note. This focus group too is run by
two moderators where one of the two takes notes more
or less regularly. The female moderator is again
'Mod1'. The following extract revolves around a
cigarette tasting of a new cigarette with the name
Cape Blue Ultra. It is a cigarette tasting with
cigarettes which do not yet look like 'real' new
cigarettes as the stamp on them is still missing.

(11) Source: Blue19,589; file: diktal; video: 42:53

1. Mod1 we'll pass this^ round
2. you all, and if you
3. would just take, (.)
4. perhaps >(a fe- out)<
5. and pretend, you (.)
6. JUST opened the packet=
7. 
8. Mod2 =There is no ^stamp on
9. it yet=
10. Mod1 =Um mm,
11. Mod2 well, you must (>imagi-
12. < there is (.)) <Cape.
14. 
15. (.)
16. P1 *(xx it) has no blue
17. fil[ter]*
18. 
19. P2 *[Is ] disappointing
20. addresses
21. his
22. Mod2 WHAT does it not have?
23. P1 *It hasn't got a blue
24. filter* ((laughing
25. voice))
26. P3 ((laughs))
27. P2 (xxxxxx[xxxxx] ]
28. Mod2 *[Is this]
29. disappointing?=

4 'dummies' (packets with cigarettes)
30. P4 =Then I wouldn't have smoked it=
31. P1 =NO!=" ((smiley voice))
32. P4 then I would °(never
33. xxxxxx) °
34. P? ((clears throat))
35. Mod2 °((laugh))
37. (...) looks around
38. Mod2 Um mm (. ) a blue ring
39. (...) (xxx)
40. P5 °(something like that) °
41. P5 °(gives a short
42. laugh) °
43. P5 °(would be enough, also
44. (.) °(one doesn't need
45. to touch it on the
46. filter) °. hhh
47. (...) (.)
48. Mod2 Um mm (. ) a blue ring
49. (...) looks around
50. (...) (xxx)
51. P5 °(something like that) °
52. (5.7) see footnote 6
53. P1 °(gives a short
54. laugh) °
55. (...) (xxx)
56. (...) (xxx)
57. (1.4) see footnote 6
58. Mod1 No °(gives a short
59. it is,=)
60. Mod2 °(No, no,
61. Mod1 °(xxxxxxxx)
62. Mod2 WELL THESE HERE ARE, (.)
63. °(for these°
64. P? °(xxx)
65. P2 °(They have an extreme
66. short filter, well,
67. (...) (1.4)
68. P3 °(You can make it
69. even short ]er
70.Mod1 [D'you=want=to,] offers
71. cigarettes to Mod1
72. cigarettes
73. 16.35 sec not transcribed, in which one Mod2 searches in his suitcase
74. for more cigarettes

5 and others
6 This turn is not translatable as I could only identify some words on the tape. I assume that the participant suggests that the offered cigarettes are the ones which are already available as 'normal Cape' cigarettes. A free translation would be: "These aren't the normal Cape are they?"
7 I assume that the moderator intends to say that, although the packets are 'dummies', the offered cigarettes are really new ones.
Have no blue filter (line 75).

After a short pause Modl starts writing. In dictating the participant's statement in this way, the moderator displays two things: firstly the orientation to the report as the 'real' recipient of the talk. In repeating the participant's contribution ("°(xx it) has no blue fil[ter°]"; lines 16+17) in a stripped off way, the moderator secondly signals which kind of contributions are required and the next contribution by another participant (P3) imitates exactly the here provided frame of a formulaic statement: "Um mm, surprisingly strong." (lines 81+82). The participant shapes her contribution according to the discursive form prompted by the
moderator like the kindergarten children shape their conceptualizations according to the discursive pattern prompted by the teacher (Edwards, 1993b).

Comparing the focus group interaction with Edwards' (1993b) kindergarten data we have seen similarities such as the one just mentioned and differences such as the organization of the end of a 'session'. In the following we will elaborate on another difference - on how 'deviant' contributions are handled by the teacher/the moderator.

3.3. How debative talk is avoided and how debative talk is closed down

In the last two sub-sections I have tried to show how the moderator organizes talk not as a debate but as an accumulation of separate 'describables'. In this sub-section I will give more evidence on the organization of the focus group as non-debative by showing how a 'deviant' opinion is handled and how an argument between participants is harmonized.

In Edwards' (1993b) kindergarten 'greenhouse talk' certain contributions by the children were not allowed to become part of the 'accepted list of common knowledge'. There we have the notion that the teacher knows more than the kids do; that it is a matter of knowledge rather than opinion or impression; that the teacher can rule out various contributions as incorrect, and so on. The focus group interaction, on the other hand, is produced as the production of - at least according to the focus group moderator's terminology - opinions and feelings
Questions are explicitly rejected in our corpus (see also Chapter Three), but contributions are never explicitly labelled as 'wrong', as there is "no wrong answer, there's also no right answer" (see the opening remarks of a moderator discussed in Chapter Four).

The moderator, however, does not repeat formulations which are constructed as disagreements. They are, so to speak, not added to the virtual list of features, attributes, characteristics, or whatever the moderator asks for.

(12) Source: Blue17,763; file: echo-dcl; video: 22:50

1. Mod. <Which characteristics could one, (.) give this person> <Welche Eigenschaften könnte man, (.) dieser Person geben>

2. P1 [a bit more classical,] [Für bisschen klassischer,]

3. Mod. [Colourless,] [Farblos,]

4. Colourless, (.) klassisch, * looks from here on round the circle Farblos, (.) klassisch, looks from here on round the circle

5. Mod. * looks from here on round the circle

6. P2 I think a bit calmer, Ich finde etwas ruhiger,

7. Mod. A *bit ↑calmer Etwas ↑ruhiger

8. * looks from here on round the circle

9. Mod. +Con[templative.]

10. some [(smile)] [((schmunzeln))]

11. (+)

12. P2 [Contemplative,] [Besinnlich,]

13. Mod. [(smile)] [((schmunzeln))]

14. some [((smile))] [((schmunzeln))]

15. (.)

16. (+)

17. Con[templative.] [Besinnlich.]

18. P1 [((smiles))] [((schmunzelt))]

19. some [((smile))] [((schmunzeln))]

20. (1.7)

21. Mod. Is that a good thing. Is das was ↑Gutes.]

22. (.)

23. P3 Uh, (.) in good time Och, (.) beizeiten, [(smiles)]] [((schmunzelt))]

24. (.)

25. some [((smile ))) [((schmunzeln))]

26. (1.3)

27. P3 But also a hedonist, (.) Perhaps also a hedonist, (.)

28. Mod. Hm mm, Aber auch nen Genussmensch, (.) vielleicht auf ne

29. (1.8)

30. P3 Perhaps in a milder perhaps in a milder
34. [form, ] (. ) "ja,"
35. gedämpftere [Art und] Weise, (. ) "ja,"
36. [Hm mm, ]
37. P? [Hm mm, ]
38. P3 no dull old "stick
39. either
40. (. )
41. Mod. No *[dull ] old stick. * looks from here on round the circle
42. Kein [Stock ]fisch.
43. 44. 45. P? [Hm mm, ]
46. P3 ((smiles))
47. 10 lines omitted; moderator refers then to another packet
48. Mod. And characteristics of
49. this ↑person (. ) if you
50. can imagine,
51. (. )
52. P4 Powerful,
53. (. )
54. Mod. "Powerful," by saying it he looks round the circle "Kraftvoll,
55. 56. 57. 58. P3 DOMINANT!
59. (. )
60. Mod. Dominant,
61. (1.4)
62. P3 ((smiles)) perhaps=a bit daring also,
63. viellicht=men bisschen verwehen auch,
64. ((schmunzelt))
65. Mod. Da-
66. P3 Perhaps also, (. ) because of the, (. ) red
67. ↑colour
68. ↑Farbe
69. Mod. Hm mm,
70. (. )
71. P3 Well not too bour↑gois.
72. Also nicht allzu ↑spiessig.
73. (. )
74. P5 Well I would rather have mod. hasn't said, perhaps a bit looked at her.
75. con↑servative.
76. ((lachen sanft))
77. ((lauffs))
78. some ((laugh softly))
79. 80. (. )
81. Mod. You said it too, right? addresses P6 Hast Du auch, ne?
82. P6 Um mm.
83. 84. (2.3)
85. Mod. "Um mm,"
86. (8.1)
87. Mod. Now these ↑two together. *( . ) how do Jetzt mal die ↑beiden mitnander. (. ) wie
88. 89.

8 points at two other packets
90. they get on with each other.

We are particularly interested in the arrowed turn at the end of the extract. Up to then, the participants have described the 'brand as person' as "Powerful," (line 52), "DOMINANT!" (line 58) and "Well not too bourgeois." (line 71). P3 then says:

Well I would rather have said, perhaps a bit conservative. (lines 74-76)

This delayed and weakly stated disagreement can be characterized according to Pomerantz (1984) as a disagreement while an agreement is preferred. Some participants and the moderator acknowledge P3's contribution with laughter. The moderator then addresses P4 and asks her:

You said it too, right? (line 81)

Up to this line the moderator has received displayed characteristics of the 'brand as person' with repeats. The last characteristic, however, which was formulated as a disagreement, is not repeated by the moderator. Instead, he asks another participant to confirm that she has made a similar contribution a while ago ('You said it too, right?'; line 81) which she does in a minimal way ('Um mm.'; line 83). The moderator then starts after a very long pause a new topic.

Note how the moderator does not pursue the difference between the displayed descriptions - 'not too bourgeois' versus 'a bit conservative'. He could have asked the group for example: 'Which description fits better - is this brand as person bourgeois and
conservative or just the opposite? A participant might have come forward with a position such as 'Yes, I think he is x' and according to Pomerantz (1984) we expect after one speaker's evaluative assessment a second assessment by the recipient or one out of his/her audience. The moderator, however, does not solicit position taking, but asks for a confirmation by P4. He does not organize the talk as an argument between the focus group members, but organizes it in such a way as to receive discrete individual contributions 'as if of one voice'.

With his intervention "You said it too, right?" (line 81) the moderator keeps controlling the dialogical turn-taking in which repeats serve as prompts.

Let us now look at one of the very rare arguments between participants in our focus group data when the moderator's effort to manage the turn-taking fails. We are particularly interested in this 'deviant case' as, although the moderator addresses a repeat of the prior speaker's turn to other potential speakers, the prior speaker continues displaying his 'point of view'. After another participant contrasts this 'point of view' with his own, and as a third participant tries to gain the floor in order display his opinion, the moderator stops the on-going argument with a harmonizing formulation.

As the sequence starts the moderator has asked the participants which brands they would place near the light cigarette brand Stansted in a hypothetical shelf (we had already looked at a shortened version of this extract in the last chapter).
With which brand would you compare the Stansted in general. = Are there any brands at all, which, eh, I think, come close to it, (1.0) well if you now, imagine, you go and stand in front of a gigantic shelf, with only cigarette brands on it. (1.0) Which brands would you place near the Stansted.

>somehow< I think, personally, have to be included, what have both in common? ((coughs))

This is a different image, but I'd know, well, everyone would have their own way of proceeding to a certain extent, because I would just mechanically sort them according to the contents labels, after the contents labels =<

Would do it just mechanically *according to the contents labels* =<

Well I [(xxxxxxxxxx) ]

[Without first]

ev- looking at the packet, so then exactly as is the case >somehow< in the tobacco shop too,

>Um mm, [um mm, <]

one side then

---

The participant refers to the nicotine and tar level of cigarettes as declared on the respective packet.
there's, umm, (.)

>God knows< what sort of stuff like Dar es Salaam\(^\text{10}\) without Filter, (just) tolerated, .hhh

[([laughs])]

and somehow the whole range

downwards

But, (.) this is-is from from the Stansted now]

((clears throat))

as, (.) product wants to position itself, then on no account next to other light products, (.8) but certainly next to the Heathrow\(^\text{11}\),=then the (. ) loyal Heathrow smokers, who have perhaps, (.) kind of an irritated throat anyhow, .hh say "Oh, then I'll just try its younger brother" (.) so to speak,

((rauspert sich))

Ja und also immer]

würd ich, (.) also wenn ich, (.) die unbedingt verkaufen will, würd ich die immer neben leichtere Zigaretten stehen=stellen lassen, (weil man immer) sagt, (.7) "(also) ich nehm mal ne leichte Alternative"=und dann hat man die direkt .hhh im Sichtfeld, wenn man halt [nach starken] [Hm mm,]

cigarettes. (.) If you u::h a (look into the ultra corner,) (1.0) you see, (.) that none of these Ultras or these

\(^{10}\) a very strong cigarette brand

\(^{11}\) Stansted and Heathrow belong to the same 'brand family'; they are both light cigarette brands, but Stansted is even lighter than Heathrow.
What is going on in this sequence? As P1 explains in a lengthy statement that he would sort the cigarette packets "according to the contents labels" (lines 36+37), that is according to the nicotine and tar level of the cigarettes as declared on the respective packet, the moderator provides as a receipt a partial repeat:

After the contents labels um mm, = (lines 38+39).
According to what we have learnt in the previous section on repeats addressed to the prior speaker, the participant's notion of 'after the content labels' seems to be worthwhile of 'making something more out of it' and the participant starts elaborating on it. After P1 has stressed, however, that this categorizing system is his 'point of view':

=I would do it just mechanically ((continues))
(from line 40 on)

the moderator addresses via gaze other participants and P2 starts talking, but is overlapped by P1, who continues displaying his 'point of view'. In this instance, P1 does not 'do focus group'. That is, he does not give in to the (vocally and non-vocally) moderator-controlled turn-taking, but continues displaying his 'point of view'.

P2 then presents his counter-argument in using an extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986)

on no account next to other light products,
(lines 70-72)

and active voicing (Wooffitt, 1992) of an imaginary customer in the tobacco shop

"Oh, then I'll just try its younger brother"
(lines 79-81).

At the end of P2's long speech, another participant (P3) tries to gain the floor with the presentation of his 'point of view' ("But I find, that you="); line 119), but is interrupted by the moderator:
Detail from Extract Thirteen, lines 121-133

Mod.: =(A moment) the Stansted would then be the younger brother of the Heathrow.

P2: Yes,

(2.7)

Mod.: If you disagree, immediately,=

P? =No,=

P? =No, no=

Mod.: =step into the breach (>and say<) "\$STOP=$ I disagree,"

The moderator's "(A moment) the Stansted would then be the younger brother of the Heathrow." (lines 121-124) is one of the very rare instances where formulations appear in our focus group data. According to Heritage a formulation such as this be seen as a prompt:

The most straightforward use for formulations in the news-interview context is ... as a form of collapsed newsmark sequence. In these cases, some minor inference based on prior statements is used as a means to prompt interviewees to reconfirm and elaborate their prior remarks. (1985:104,105)

In our case, however, it might be better to say that the moderator displays his formulation as a formulation, as it contains a statement, which has been given by the participant only as an illustration for his case (that very light cigarettes should be positioned on the shelf next to less lighter ones) and which is not the main message of his argument. P2 displays his argument as a counter-argument to P1 and stresses, that the very light Stansted should be positioned next to the less light Heathrow, so that Heathrow smokers with an "irritated throat" (line 78)
might say: "Oh, then I'll just try its younger brother." (lines 79-81).

The moderator's formulation is confirmed weakly and minimally by P2 ("O~YesO", line 125) and another participant (P4) highlights the banality of the moderator's statement: "[The] lights are always the younger brother of the, (.) adult ones," (lines 135-137).

On the one hand, the moderator summarizes the previous argument with a banal statement, which would be hard to contradict but, on the other hand, he emphatically asks the focus group members to articulate potential disagreements (lines 127-133). Other participants are quick to say, that there is nothing to disagree with (lines 129+130), and P2 asks for permission to open the window (lines 139-141).

To sum up, then, the complex interaction in this sequence: the moderator asks at the beginning for cigarette brands which the participants would place in a hypothetical shelf next to the Stansted. As P1 does not offer specific brands, but a criterion according to which he would sort the brands in the shelf, the moderator offers this criterion as a prompt and invites via gaze shift other group members to display similar criteria. The prior speaker ignores this cue and displays lengthily his point of view which is contradicted by another participant. As a third participant starts developing his point of view on the same topic, the moderator interrupts him in a hearable effort to end the argument. He provides a formulation which deletes the contentious issue and preserves the smallest common denominator. The
moderator invites the group to disagree with his summarizing formulation which is, however, so commonsensical that it can only be confirmed.

In market research focus groups arguments between participants seem to pose a problem; they occur very rarely and if they occur they are harmonized quickly. With the two extracts provided here in this sub-section we see our idea on the motivation for providing stripped off repeats confirmed. Their main function seems to be to shape the participants' discourse into an accumulation of 'context-free' criteria, features, characteristics, and so on and less into a debate on personal views.

4. Discussion

At the beginning of this chapter we described Heritage's (1985) work on how news interviewers offer receipts for interviewees' reports using formulations. Formulations are responses through which prior talk can be treated as news while, at the same time, the questioner declines the role of a report recipient.

The moderators' receipts which are repeats rather than formulations, are fitted to the focus group context. By (partially) repeating a participant's answer, repeat receipts do a triple duty:

- they signal the 'worthiness' of a given answer
- they do questioning work

and
with the help of their 'stripped off' character they serve as templates to shape future answers.

Which might be the advantages of repeat receipts compared with the kinds of formulations which appear in the news interview context? The moderator runs a group and his or her job is to elicit comments from all present participants. As we have seen, repeat receipts can be used to get the prior speaker to elaborate more on his/her report or to elicit a new report from a next speaker. Using the prior participant's words saves time. Moreover, using the prior participant's words displays the moderator's aim of achieving the production of opinions which are not planted by him/her.

There is another potential role of repeat receipts: they can be seen as a display of attentiveness to the detail of what is said. They value the participants' talk and maybe encourage care and discourage overlapping talk.

Let us end this chapter by adding another advantage. As we have seen in Chapter Four ('Elaborate Questions'), asking questions seems to be a 'delicate business' as the moderator displays his/her interest in spontaneous reactions. When (s)he provides question menus, the participant has the freedom to choose the question component (s)he wants to address. When the moderator uses repeat receipts (s)he displays that it is the recipient's decision, whether (s)he understands it as question or not; the participant can choose whether to elaborate on a prior report or not. Elaborate questions are long and 'maximal' questions; in contrast, repeat receipts are
'minimal'. Both seem to orient, however, to the understanding of focus group talk as spontaneous talk. However, we can see the importance of the moderator's gaze. Participants closely monitor the moderator's gaze and talk or continue talking when nonvocally addressed.
1. Introduction

The goal of a market research focus group is to elicit feelings, opinions, ideas, attitudes and perceptions; an American market researcher (Henderson, 1991) coined the abbreviation 'POBA' (standing for perceptions, opinions, beliefs and attitudes) which we already used in Chapter Three and which we will also use in this chapter. During the course of a focus group there are always sequences when both a participant describes his/her 'POBAs' on the subject under discussion and the moderator asks questions about them and offers his/her reactions to them. Following ten Have we will call these sequences 'display interactions' (1990), because the focus group participants address their accounts as other laypersons to professionals such as doctors, psychotherapists, social workers, judges or journalists for the purpose of 'being dealt with' by them. During the past decade conversation analytic studies have given much attention to how professionals 'deal with' what the laypersons tell them. In general, this work points to the professionals' 'exercise of restraint'. Professionals tend to refrain from utterances which display a certain value judgement, an expression of astonishment or an expression of their own experiences. For example, Heritage's (1985) analysis
Silent Recipiency

of news interviews shows that third-turn receipt objects like news receipts such as 'oh' and assessments such as 'good' or 'how exciting' through which recipiency to a report and affiliation with the speaker are established and maintained in mundane conversation, are massively absent in news interviews (see the previous chapter).

In the transcripts of our corpus most of the display interactions run smoothly despite the moderator's minimal reactions; that is, there are for example no long pauses or abrupt topic changes by the moderator which might signal trouble. Two such 'successful' interactions will be presented shortly. However, it also happens that some display interactions are hearably troubled as the moderator exercises excessive restraint in the sense that (s)he withholds turn initiation and instead displays 'silent recipiency'. Later sections will focus on such exchanges and will consider the functions of silent recipiency. It will be suggested that, although these exchanges often produce little of value, they do occasionally generate the kind of 'POBA talk' moderators require. Furthermore we will compare the participants' reactions to the moderator's silent recipiency with the patients' reactions to the therapist's silence during psychoanalytic interviews and will see similarities between both settings. In contrast to the psychoanalytic theory we will offer a non-cognitive account of the given interactions. Let us start by introducing 'smooth' display interactions between focus group members and the moderator in order to give the reader the opportunity to compare them with the sequences in which the moderator withholds a turn
and where the ensuing silence was so painfully noticeable to me when I watched the video tapes.

2. 'Smooth' display interactions

The following sequence is taken from a focus group after the moderator has introduced the task of describing the typical smoker of the London cigarette brand and after some participants have already offered their 'projections'.

(1) Source: London,723; file: elicit\seq\hm15d; video: 33:50

1. Mod. [Hm mm,] 2. (1.2) 3. Mod. ↑ye:s, 4. (.5) 5. Mod. You, what’s the matter with 6. [you >now?=<] 7. Part. [Well, I ] think, 8. (.) 9. Part. (>necessarily his profession, but I just think,) it’s 10. somebody, who is kind of< 11. cosmopolitan, and who does not 12. just= 13. Mod. >=Hm mm,=< 14. Part. =smoke in a run-of-the-mill 15. way,=not Washington and Cairo 16. which are smoked actually by 17. everybody, .hhh who kind of 18. goes around with his eyes 19. open,= 20. Mod. >=Hm mm,< 21. Part. And also regarding his age not 22. necessarily over thirty,=no 23. ↑younger either 24. (.5) 25. Mod. Hm ↑mm, 26. (1.2) 27. Mod. What (. ) o-=special 28. characteristics are there, 29. (1.7) 30. Part. Yes, he’s kind of ↑cool, andandand who does not only 31. live for his career, but 32. 33. (. )
The participant begins her description of the typical London smoker in overlap with the moderator's question. In the midst of her multi-unit turn-in-progress the moderator interjects a short ">Hm mm,=" (line 14). A second ">Hm mm,=" (line 21) is placed after the participant's description of the projective smoker as "who kind of goes around with his eyes open,=" (lines 18-20). As this is more or less a paraphrase of her introductory description ("cosmopolitan,"; line 12) and as the participant raises her voice at the end of her turn, she sets up the expectation for more to come and continues her talk after the interjected ">Hm mm,=" (line 21) by beginning with an "And" (line 22).

The moderator thus uses ">Hm mm,=" as a continuer in a sequentially incomplete position to elicit more talk (see Gardner, 1997, on the uses of "Mm"). When the participant signals the end of her multi-unit turn by dropping her voice ("=no ↑youn↓ger either"; lines 23+24), the moderator deploys after a short pause another "Hm ↑mm," (line 26) and - as the participant does not offer more talk - asks after another pause a specific question "What (. ) o- =special characteristics are there," (lines 28+29).

After having added another characteristic to the smoker stereotype, the participant drops her voice
and stresses the last word of her turn ("Yes, he's kind of \textsuperscript{cool}, andandand who does not only live for his career, but (.) who just lives his life."; lines 31-35). The moderator acknowledges the end of her description with an "\textsuperscript{Hm mm.}" with a rise-falling contour (line 36) and then asks another participant.

What we have seen in this sequence is a fine-grained interaction between moderator and participant. The participant signals when she might offer something else; and similarly she gives clues when she is come to a definite end. The moderator, on the other hand, supports her talk by providing continuers, asks a specific question, when an unspecified elicitor does not work and accepts the end of the participant's contribution with an acknowledgment.

In the next sequence we see a similar 'successful' interaction between a participant and another moderator.

We enter the scene at the point where the moderator has already asked the question about how the participants got to know the cigarette brand Stansted and after some group members have already described their 'brand history'.

(2) Source: Stansted8,322; file: elicit\seq\hm2d; video: 18:00

1. **Mod.** How have the others the different [brands]  
2. **F1** [Well \ ] Cape Lights  
3. **Mod.** became too strong \textsuperscript{for} \textsuperscript{me}  
4. **(1.1)**  
5. **Mod.** Hm mm,  
6. **F2**

\begin{quote}
1. Wie haben die anderen die einzelnen [Marken]  
2. [Also \ ] mir war die Cape Lights \textsuperscript{zu stark}  
3. geworden  
4. Hm mm,
And I had once, by chance I got hold of the Heathrow years ago, but knew that it [(also,) ] [xxxxxxxxxxxxx] was also strong, then I thought, Heathrow was too strong for me, try once the Stansted, Then I smoked for a while Stansted, but it got then too light for me, And then this, this incredibly blue packet there caught, "Hm mm," =my eye, and I must say, I=I personally found the colour pretty attractive,=and this helped certainly also, that I then once tried the Stansted Forte, Where did you see the packet? In my tobacco shop. Well, and? And then I thought, "No Stansted don't feel like it but you don't know either, what you really want,"=and then suddenly there was this blue Stansted Forte. This interests ("me"), [*presumably not only me,*] ((smiley voice)) ((laughs))
Silent Recipienty

66. Mod. Which colour
67. (.9)
68. Pl Well,
69. (.4)
70. Pl that,
71. (.4)
72. Pl perhaps a matter of taste,
73. (.7)
74. Mod. [Well! (.). Describe it! (.).
75. How (xxxxxx)]
76. Pl [(xxxxxxx)] (xxxxxxx) the
77. colour I find personally
78. rather attractive,=the <blue,>
79. is,=uh,
80. (.6)
81. Pl <catches the eye,>
82. (1.0)
83. Mod. Hm mm,
84. (1.5)
85. Pl I once had tried the
86. Melbourne
87. (.4)
88. Pl the blue ones exactly
89. presumably for this reason,
90. (.6)
91. (.6)
92. Mod. Hm mm,
93. (1.3)
94. Pl And then there was,
95. (.6)
96. Pl well there was,
97. (.4)
98. Pl something, which stimulated
99. me,
100. (1.0)
101. Pl and then there was also the
taste.=that it,
102. (.8)
103. Pl tasted very strong, but wasn’t
104. a strain on my
105. lungs.=subjectively viewed,
106. lungs.
107. (.6)
108. (.6)
109. Mod. Hm mm,
110. Pl That’s what I found very
111. fascinating with this thing,==
112. =Hm mm,
113. (1.0)
114. Pl I had thought, I have a strong
115. one inside,
116. (.6)
117. Pl but I don’t have trouble with
118. the lungs.
119. (1.5)
120. Mod. ↑Hm mm.
121. (.)
122. Mod. hm mm.

Welche Farbe
Tja,
das,
vielleicht Geschmackssache,
[![](xxxxxx)] [!(xxxxxxx)] (xxxxxxx) der
Farbe finde ich persönlich
ziemlich attraktiv,=das
<Blau,> is,=e:h,
<herausstechend,>
Hm mm,
Ich hatte auch schon mal
Melbourne,
versuchte die blauen genau
wahrscheinlich auch aus dem
Grund,
Hm mm,
Und dann kam,
also das war schon nen,
die Sache, die mich angeregt
hat,
und dann kam aber auch der
Geschmack dazu,=dass die,
sehr kräftig schmeckte, aber
meine Lunge nicht
strapazierte.=subjektiv
betrachtet,
Hm mm,
Das fand ich also sehr
fazinierend an dem Teil,==
=Hm mm,
Ich hatte gedacht, ich hab ne
Kräftige drin,
und hab aber keine Beschwerden
in der Lunge.
↑Hm mm.
hm mm.
Like the moderator of the first sequence, this moderator uses "Hm mm," as a continuer when either a turn is not yet completed (line 35) or when the speaker sets up the expectation for more to come (line 6). When the participant indicates a turn completion with a falling voice (line 47), the moderator asks "Well, (. ) and?" (lines 49-51) and, after the group member's description of his thoughts in the tobacco shop, adds a specific question ("Which colour"; line 66), which is preceded by a justification for the question ("This interests ("me"), [presumably not only me,]"; lines 60+61). As the participant offers a disclaimer for his description to come ("perhaps a matter of taste,"; line 72), the moderator displays a strong interest in the participant's point of view (lines 74+75).

When the focus group member describes the significance of the colour blue and the taste of the brand he had discovered, it seems as if he provides space for the moderator's continuers (see Drummond & Hopper, 1993, on the uses of "Yeah"). When he thus describes the blue as "<catches the eye,>" (line 81), he speaks more slowly and pauses. He also pauses, after he has explained, that he might once have tried the Melbourne brand for the same reason (line 91). In both cases, his turns seem to be complete, but by

---

1 The moderator makes notes in the pause; P2 starts talking while the moderator is still writing.
Silent Recipiency

raising his voice, the participant displays his readiness to talk further.

When he comes to the end of an interim summary ("And then there was, ...; lines 94-106) and the moderator deploys another "Hm mm," (line 109), the participant paraphrases his interim summary by making it more definite and conclusive and by ending it with a falling intonation (lines 110-118). The moderator now produces two "Hm mms" with a different prosodic shape: first a "↑Hm mm." (line 120) and then a "hm mm." (line 122). He makes some notes and when he looks up again, another participant continues without having been asked.

What can be clearly seen in this sequence is how a focus group participant creates the sequential conditions for extended talk (by raising his voice and by setting up the expectation for more to come) and how the moderator provides the continuers; how the moderator guides the participant with specific questions and how he accepts the participant's final summary as a final summary by offering first a 'hm mm' with an assessment like character (rise-falling intonational contour) and then one as an acknowledgment token (falling intonational contour) (see Gardner, 1997). In particular we have seen how the moderator gives up his/her initial turn-initiation-withholding. (S)he becomes more active in offering other specific questions, when the participant does not produce further talk. The moderator-participant interaction runs hearably more smoothly when the moderator does not withhold turn-initiation.
In the following sub-sections we will look at sequences where the participant has similarly signalled that there is nothing more to say and where the moderator nevertheless withholds turn-initiation. We will see different options for the participants when they deal with silent recipiency:

- they can come out with 'empty information'
- they can 'back down' and soften their previously given assessment
- they can come up with 'useful information' in the sense of 'POBA talk'
- they can restart a new topic.

The 'empty information' and 'backing down' option seem to be less frequent than the participant's search for useful information.

Before showing this array of participants' options, however, we will introduce some work which analyzes the benefits of silent recipiency in interviews from a psychoanalytic perspective. Later on we will compare a patient's reaction to the therapist's display of silent recipiency in a psychoanalytic interview with the participants' recipiency of the moderator's withholding of turn initiation in focus group data.

3. Interlude: The psychotherapist remains silent

The purpose of the following sections is to explore empirically the interactional use of silent recipiency. Before coming back to our corpus and to sequences where the moderator remains silent, let us
briefly look at another kind of institutional talk, where silence is of major importance: psychoanalytic interviews. We will introduce the psychoanalytic interpretation of the patients' coping with the therapists' silent recipiency and, at the end of this chapter, we will compare the patient's reaction to the therapist's withholding of turn initiation with the participants' ones regarding the moderator's silent recipiency in our corpus. According to Wrobel, (1990) during thirty percent of the time in psychoanalytic interviews nothing is said at all. Wrobel points to the difference between 'ordinary' interviews and psychoanalytic interviews: whereas in the former ones, silences between individual turns are seldom, in the latter ones there are often pauses and often long pauses between the turns, which he calls 'operational silence' ('operatives Schweigen') as the silence has the characteristics of an action. Furthermore, the speakers do not alternate in the order a-b-a-b, but either the therapist or the patient continues after the period of silence. Wrobel gives the following example, where the therapist continues talking after a long silence (see the arrow). Th. is the therapist and P. the patient:

(3) Source: Wrobel (1990:243); file: elicit\seq\wrobel1; German original

1. Th. You have the feeling, it would be like that?
2. P. Well, I realize then too, that he also works for 'Wüstenrot' on the side and everything possible, that I didn't know before and uh which I try to keep a distance from ((coughs))
3. Th. .......................... .......................... .......................... (31 sec. silence) You want
4. P. ................. a Building Society
5. Th. ................. a Building Society
6. P. ................. a Building Society
7. Th. ................. a Building Society
8. P. ................. a Building Society
9. Th. ................. a Building Society
10. P. ................. a Building Society
11. Th. ................. a Building Society

Sie haben das Gefühl, das wär' so?
Ja, dass merk/m ich dann auch, dass er noch meinetwegen so für Wüstenrot nebenher noch was macht und so alles mögliche, was ich eben nicht kannte und äh mich auch fernhalte von da ((hustet))
Wrobel follows Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson (1974) and states that discontinuous talks like psychoanalytic interviews happen as at possible transition relevance places (TRPs) no speaker chooses him/herself as the next speaker and the current speaker neither chooses him/herself as the next speaker (Sacks' et al. rules 1b and 1c). As neither a potential other speaker nor the prior speaker chooses him/herself as the next speaker the operational silence comes about, but as the possibility to select oneself as the next speaker remains both for the prior speaker as for the other potential speaker, the silence cannot be attributed to either of them.

Wrobel adds the following diagram:

\[ \text{Th}_1 \rightarrow \text{P}_1 \rightarrow \text{Th}_0 \leftrightarrow \text{P}_0 \]

\[ \rightarrow \ldots \text{P}_2. \]

\[ \text{Th}_1 = \text{the therapist talks}; \]
\[ \text{P}_1 = \text{the patient talks}; \]
\[ \text{Th}_0 = \text{the therapist is silent}; \]
\[ \text{P}_0 = \text{the patient is silent}; \]

and so on.
What Wrobel wants to show with this diagram is that the silence $T_0 \leftrightarrow P_0$ leads at first to a maximization of the patient's speaking rights ("Maximierung der Äusserungsmöglichkeiten"). He concludes that this is one intention of the operational silence as the aim in the psychoanalytic interview is to make the patient talk. Wrobel concludes that therapists make use of a specific rule of the turn-taking system and dispute the patient’s right to determine when their turn has come to an end. Or, formulated less dramatically, as the therapists do not choose themselves as the next speakers, they give the patients the possibility to 'reflect on' whether their turn should end.

Wrobel's analysis of his corpus has shown, however, that most of the time not the patient, but the therapist talks after the operative silence period; the above fragment is thus a typical fragment. Whereas unsuccessful 'silence operations' ("Schweigeoperationen") often lead into the closing down of the topic or the starting of a new one, successful 'silence operations' where the patient continues his or her turn, lead to topical expansions, as for example in the following extract:

(4) Source: Wrobel (1990:249); file: elicit\seq\wrobel2; German original

1. Th. And you have obviously also acquired your own idea by
2. yourself in much reading on
3. asthma in general and your own
4. in particular .. (xxx) well I
5. have
6. [the impression (xxx)
7. 8.
In saying "I think, that in this thing altogether I'm rather stubborn," (lines 31-33) Wrobel sees kind of a 'reflection process' ('Reflexionsprozess') on part of the patient. Whereas the patient has characterized himself before as being the victim of an incompetent 'medical machinery' with the implied appeal to the therapist to offer him some pity for his situation, the patient now reflects his own role in the whole process, which is, according to

---

[The use of slashes as transcription symbols is not explained]
Wrobel, a therapeutically valuable self-reflection process. Although he comes to the conclusion, that the relevance of operational silence in psychoanalytic interviews should be re-considered as they are mostly unsuccessful, in the sense that the therapist and not the patient continues talking, he sees therapeutic effects in successful silence operations like the one in Extract Four.

Let us go back to our corpus. How do the participants in our corpus handle the moderators' silent recipiency? As indicated above, we find in our corpus four options - two of which might be considered as less helpful and two of which might be considered as being more productive for the moderator.

4. Analysis

4.1. The moderator's silent recipiency and the participants' formulation of 'empty information'

In the interlude of the last section we studied fragments from psychoanalytic interviews along with the author's interpretation.

In contrast to Wrobel's (1990) psychoanalytic data in our corpus, successful silence operations seem to be more frequent than the unsuccessful ones: if a long silence occurs after a participant's answer, it is more likely that the participant and not the moderator comes in. According to Wrobel in the psychoanalytic interview data by Wrobel.
'Reflexionsprozesse' are elicited. What is elicited in our data? What kind of 'stuff' is generated?

As indicated earlier, there seem to be four different options for the participant when they are confronted with passive recipiency: they can either come out with 'empty information'; they can 'back down' and soften their previously given assessment; they can come up with 'useful information', in the sense of 'POBA talk' or they can restart a new topic. The 'empty information' and 'backing down' options are less frequent than the participant's search for useful information or a new topic.

In this section we will deal with the first option, the participant's production of 'empty information'. The run-up to the following Extract Five is the moderator's question on how the participants have chosen their current cigarette brand. We enter the scene at the point where the moderator addresses directly one specific participant with "You haven't said (.) very much at all yet [*today*]" (lines 1+2).

(5) Source: Garstedt8,848; elicit\seq\hm7f; video: 31:10

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mod.</th>
<th>You haven't said (.) very much at all yet [<em>today</em>]</th>
<th>Sie haben noch gar nicht (.) viel gesagt [<em>heute</em>]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>P3</td>
<td>[(xxxxx)] well I've sometimes, (.9) (come across a Vienna) the Forte in fact and,</td>
<td>[(xxxxx)] also ich bin manchmal, (.9) ne (Vienna draufgestossen) auf die Forte halt und,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>Hm mm,</td>
<td>Hm mm, sonst kann ich halt sagen, dass, (.9) Stansted halt so, eh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>The only other thing I can say, is, (.9) well Stansted, uh</td>
<td>eine der letzten Marken ist, die ich (sonst früher &gt;im</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td>is one of the last brands,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td>which I (used &gt;to get from the</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*shortened form for the cigarette brand Stansted Forte*
During my apprenticeship or, so,= =Yes,= =Because, well I found the packet completely repulsive.

The Stansted?= =Yes, Stan[sted so,]

this= this (bit)

red and blue, somehow on a white background, and,

I dunno.

I can't find anything from its appearance,=well, Forte looks pretty good. they're similar to these Melbourne< which was, [Just ] said a moment ago.

Yes, and these,=and I also think >that it's well< what comes first is well, the image.

well, what is smoked and ex a certain kind, of people, a certain kind of classes and so on smoke,

"Stansted now" I'd say so.

Hm mm,= =Well it's what I, kind of,

("feel")

U:::m,

we'll come to this in just a moment.=But well just let's,

let's have a look, well how do these three brands in general Stansted, Stansted Forte,
The participant produces a rather confused speech, which is difficult to understand on the audio- and video-tapes. He is encouraged by the moderator who uses "Hm mm," (line 8) and "=Ye:s,=" (line 15) as continuers and who checks his understanding ("The Stansted?="; line 19). The participant ends by dropping his voice: "I dunno." (line 32), resumes his speech after a pause - as the moderator remains silent - and ends by saying, that what he has said now, has already been said before by other focus group members (line 40). The moderator deploys an "Hm mm," (line 41) which would be called by Jefferson (1984) a passive reciprocity token. Like the continuer-"Hm mm," this "Hm mm," has a rising contour, but is placed in another environment. Whereas a continuer is given to answers which are oriented to further sequential development of the material, the "Hm mm," is a passive reciprocity token in which the prior speaker signals that his/her telling has been completed, as in our case, and the recipient withholds turn-initiation. It is an adequate place for another question or an adequate place for asking another participant.

In her seminal paper 'Notes on a systematic deployment of the acknowledgements tokens "Yeah" and "Mm hm"' Jefferson (1984) introduces the notion of the 'perverse passive'. She states that 'perverse exhibits of passive reciprocity' (1984) can be
effective and can elicit further talk and refers to interviewers who routinely use this technique.

The moderator stays 'perverse passive' for 2.1 seconds (line 42). The participant then produces two statements: that people choose a certain cigarette brand because of its image and that 'it' is smoked by certain smokers. As the moderator still withholds turn initiation, the participant adds softly that he refers to the brand Stansted as if to preempt an understanding check and qualifies his last statement ("I'd say so.""); line 55). After another passive recipiency token by the moderator, the participant adds another softener ("=Well it's what I, kind of, (1.4) ('feel')"; lines 58-60) and ends so quietly, that he is almost inaudible.

We can look at this sequence from two points of view: by withholding turn initiation, the moderator is 'successful' in the sense that the participant produces more talk and the participant is 'successful' as he is finally able to give up speakership. But let us look more closely at the end of the above sequence: after the description of his 'brand history' and the Stansted packet the participant offers a banal statement: that cigarette brands are chosen because of their image and after a pause an even more banal one: that the brand Stansted is smoked by certain people! These statements are hardly debatable and not only because they are very cautiously formulated with many "well's" (see lines 43-51), but because they are also formulated in a very abstract way; it would be hard to deny, that the Stansted is smoked by "er a certain kind, of people, a certain kind of classes" (lines 48-50).
At this point we can ask why does the moderator not treat the participant's description as a 'gloss' which implies something which needs to be spelled out or to put it in Jefferson's (1985) terminology, why does the moderator not 'unpack the gloss' by asking for an example: "And by which people exactly is the brand Stansted smoked?". Let us look more closely at the participant's statement:

well, what is smoked and er a certain kind, of people, a certain kind of classes and so on smoke, (.6) °Stansted now° (lines 48-53).

The upshot is, that certain smokers smoke the brand Stansted. The participant displays, however, a certain meticulousness in describing this 'truism' and deploys a three part list (Jefferson, 1990) in order to signal a certain completeness of his reflections. The moderator is in a dilemmatic situation: he is confronted with a more-than-banal statement; but this more-than-banal statement is offered as a well considered thought, which makes it difficult to treat it as a gloss.

The participant qualifies his statement moreover by saying

=Well it's what I, kind of, (1.4) ("feel") (lines 58-60).

In the opening sequences, moderators stress that focus groups revolve around feelings and not about knowledge\(^5\). When a moderator defines the aim of a focus group as eliciting the participants' gut

---

\(^5\) See for example the following fragment from an opening sequence: "it's just, (.) to find out, (.8) what your gut reactions are, or what you feel or what you think you know," (see Chapter Three).
reactions and when a participant declares a statement as being his/her gut reaction, the moderator then might find it difficult to question the offered statement. And indeed: when participants in our focus groups refer to their gut reactions, they are not asked further by the moderator (see Chapter Three). The participant in the above sequence similarly says that he has kind of a 'feel' and in doing so blocks further moderator questioning. There might be, however, a second thing at work. The participant's "Well it's what I, kind of, (1.4) ('feel')" (lines 58-60) has a rounding off quality and is a further display of completion, after he had already offered "I'd say so." (line 55).

What can be seen in this sequence, then, is that the moderator is successful in the sense that withholding turn initiation elicits more talk by the participant. Yet this talk seems to be exclusively designed to relinquish speakership. As if to stress this, the participant softens his voice in the end so much and speaks so quietly, that he becomes almost unintelligible. He does not only attempt to relinquish speakership, but he gives up speakership and the moderator resumes it after a pause with noticeable reluctance ("U:::m,"; line 62). After another pause he reformulates the participant's answer as a starting point for another question before presenting after another pause "a completely different question" (lines 73+74) - not to the prior speaker, but to the whole group.

The participant's answer thus succeeds not only in relinquishing speakership, but in not being addressed at all. After the participant's
'watertight' statement the moderator hearably searches for how to continue and finally performs a 'cold start' by asking the participants a basic and 'completely different' question on whether they know the brand Stansted Minima. The participant's final banal statement

Yes, and these, -and I also think >that it's well< what comes first is well, the image. (.) well, what is smoked and er a certain kind, of people, a certain kind of classes and so on smoke, (.6) °Stansted now° (lines 43-53)

seems to have a strong termination relevance, which reminds us of the idioms being studied by Drew & Holt:

Idioms have a special robustness which lends them the function of summarizing a complaint in such a way as to enhance its legitimacy, and simultaneously to bring the complaint to a close (1988:501).

The idiomatic expressions studied by Drew & Holt occurred in 'inauspicious environments', when recipients of complaints fail to affiliate with the complaints being made as they have a certain resistance to being tested. The participant's statement above, that 'image' plays an important role in choosing a certain cigarette and that the cigarette brand under discussion is smoked by certain people and certain classes, follows a previous failure by the moderator to acknowledge the information which has been given by the participant in lines 34-37 ("I can't find anything from its >appearance, =well, Forte looks pretty good. they're similar to these Melbourne<". The idioms being analyzed in the Drew & Holt paper give the complaint robustness; the participant's statement is similarly
formulated in such a general way that it is robust regarding potential criticism and simultaneously terminates the topic. There is, however, one difference between idioms and statements with 'empty information' as in our sequence: idioms are familiar commonplaces and while the focus group participant has also offered something banal and self-evident - it is not the kind of thing people generally say.

Let us look at another sequence with a moderator displaying silent recipiency. We enter the scene at the point where the moderator asks the participant, whether according to his gut feeling ads seduce people to smoke more cigarettes.

(6) Source: 17B,898; elicit\seq\hmlld; video: (2)

1. Mod. Do you think, u::h, that
2. more,
3. (.)
4. ? ("unbelievable")
5. Mod. cigarettes are smoked, because
6. of ads=>because there are ads
7. for cigarettes<
8. (1.3)
9. Part? (What,)=
10. Mod. =Your gut fee:ling now, I
11. know,
12. (.)
13. Mod. >of course,< you
14. (.)
15. (.6)
16. Mod. don’t know it strictly
17. speaking, in reality, but,
18. (.5)
19. Mod. what would you a↑ssume
20. (1.0)
21. Part. Well, I can,
22. (.5)
23. Part. partly imagine quite well that
24. some people,=um,
25. (.6)
26. Part. well,
27. (.8)
28. Part. let me put it this way,
29. (.)

Meinst Du dass, e::h, me::hr,

("nicht zu fassen")

Zigaretten geraucht werden, durch Werbung=>weil es Werbung für Zigaretten gibt<

(Was,)=

=Dein Gefühl jetzt, ich weiss,

>es is klar,< dass Du das nicht,

weiss in dem Sinne, faktisch, aber,

was würdest Du ver↑muten

Also, ich kanns mir,

teilweise schon gut vorstellen dass sich einige Leute,=em,

also,

sag ich mal so,
The participant gives a long answer sprinkled with short pauses. He starts by saying cautiously,
that he can imagine that some people might be persuaded to change their brand. Then he gives the example of Washington and now displays more certainty, that quite a few people find this ad appealing. After having said so, he drops his voice (line 55). As the moderator remains silent at this possible termination point, the participant searches for more talk: "A:nd=u:m," (line 58) and ends with a soft, almost inaudible, voice, (lines 70-72) like the participant in Extract Five.

As we have seen before, the moderator achieves more participant talk by withholding turn initiation. The participant's talk is, however, not only designed to relinquish speakership, but he also displays, that he is no longer at the moderator's disposal as the turn is ended very softly.

A:nd=u:m, (1.3) well, (.) in this respect, (1.9) yes (2.7) I think that one, (.9) that here, (1.6) somehow (with some) product(s) you definitely have to consider. o<= (lines 58-72)

The upshot of what is said with many words is banal: some ads cause people to consume more products. As we have seen in Extract Five above, however, the participant describes this meticulously. He formulates his statement as one which he has pondered a lot about, and which is relatively accurate and non-questionable. Again, the moderator is in a dilemmatic situation: he is confronted with a commonsensical statement which is offered as a well considered thought and again he chooses not to concentrate any longer on the prior speaker but on another participant, to whom he turns abruptly.
Again, we can compare this piece of interaction with the Drew & Holt analysis. The teller here has not achieved acknowledgement for the information given previously ("I'm sure quite a few people will, um, identify with it, (1.2) Will say to themselves, (.7) well, (. ) subconsciously, I'd like to be also as great, I must _also_ smoke the cigarette."); lines 45-55) and he now produces a 'watertight' argument. Furthermore, it is interesting how he displays searching for this argument. Let us look at the detail reproduced already above:

A:nd=um, (1.3) well, (. ) in this respect, (.9) _yes (2.7) I think that one, (.9) that here, (.6) _"somehow (with some) product(s) you definitely have to consider."< (lines 58-72)

Jefferson observed that when a recipient sticks to her status as a recipient and the teller accepts the proposal to go on talking,

there may be several discrete rounds of negotiation, the teller attempting to relinquish tellerhip, the recipient by her silence, preserving their statuses. Specifically, such utterances as "And uh" and "Uh" are recurrent locuses of next-speaker-startings (1984:211).

She refers to Sacks' notion of 'interruption invitations' and the participant's talk "A:nd=um, (1.3) well, (. ) in this respect, (.9) yes (2.7)" (line 58-65) also hearably invites interruptions and might be given up if the moderator starts to speak. In the example given by Jefferson the teller of a report does not get a story appreciation, although there is an explicit assertion that the telling has been completed. When the teller finally introduces 'matters tangential to the primary telling' (1984:212) the recipient is encouraged to join in
(see the sub-section 'The moderator's silent recipiency and the participants' offer of new topics'). The participant in Extract Six, however, produces an 'empty formulation', which does not provide a resource for the moderator to enter into. Let us look again at the participant's turn being provided after the moderator's silent recipiency:

A:nd=um, (1.3) well, (.) in this respect, (.9) yes (2.7) I think that one, (.9) that here, (.6) >somehow (with some) product(s) you definitely have to consider."<= (line 58-72).

The form chosen by the participant is one of providing information: he displays his pondering over this topic and his balancing different arguments with coming in the end to a well considered judgement, which is nevertheless 'empty'. Whereas the teller in Jefferson's fragment marked explicitly that the matter has been altogether exhausted ('that's the story'), the participant here does not say something like: 'That's all I know'. A closing statement like this one might, however, not only suggest, that the participant is not a 'good' participant, but also that the moderator does not interact very smoothly. 'Watertight' statements as the ones, which have been produced by the participants in Extracts Five and Six seem to do a lot of interactional business. They handle in a delicate way the moderator's challenging approach of withholding turn initiation as they ...

... make the participant's final statement robust

... signal completion

and
signal that the participant is no longer at the moderator's disposal.

Producing 'empty information' is one option when participants are confronted with passive recipiency. The next sub-section will introduce another option which is equally unproductive from the point of view of the moderator: 'backing down'.

4.2. The moderator's silent recipiency and the participants' 'backing down'

In the last two extracts we have seen how the participants produce commonsensical, open-ended matters displayed in a meticulous way after the moderator's display of silent recipiency, which makes them, in some respects, similar to robust idioms produced in an environment where a recipient's affiliation may be in doubt (Drew & Holt, 1988). Let us introduce here another option for the participants, on how to deal with silent recipiency. We could only find one sequence in the transcribed material which gives evidence of this option. In this fragment the participant backs down after the moderator displays passivity following her assessment.

In her chapter on assessments Pomerantz claims that when a prior speaker proffers an initial assessment that invites agreement and a recipient elects to react with silence, prior speakers ...

may elect to resume talk in the emergent gap. In the resumption, they may orient to their coparticipants as disagreeing or probably disagreeing. That orientation can be seen in the
modifications that they make. They assert new positions that lessen the differences between their own positions and presumed contrary positions. In the following excerpts, ((not included here)) prior speakers resume talk with reversals of and/or backdowns from, prior assessments. (1984:76)

In the following extract we can see how a participant backs down from her prior assessment. We enter the scene at the point where the moderator asks P1 to "Describe it just a bit more precisely." (lines 1+2) what happened at a cigarette promotion event.

(7)~Source: Ohlsted8,269; eliciteq\hm1e; video: 16:40

1. Mod. =Describe it just a bit more precisely.=well how WAS it.=how did they \look=what kind of >a< *direct impression did you have of this brand's image* ((shifts around on his chair; points to the participant who had mentioned 'the image'; moves his hands))
2. [(xxxxxxxxxxxx)]
3. 11. P1 [(xxxxxxxxxxxx)] was also somehow dressed to match=she was dressed all in white,=had also this sign here on,
4. 15. 16. 17. (.)
5. 18. P1 on her jacket \there
6. 19. (.)
7. 20. Mod. Hm mm,
8. 21. (1.1)
9. 22. P1 Yes, and she distributed them and then asked me, whether I,
10. 23. 24. 25. (.)
11. 26. P1 >I think I just hadn't any on me, and so (I said,)< "Yes,
12. 27. 28. 29. (.)
13. 30. P1 OK I'll take one."*6
14. 31. (.9)

*6 free translation
Silent Recipiency

and so I simply smoked it
und da hab ich die getraucht einfach

What did you think then,
Ja, ich dachte erst, die war einfach sehr leicht.

Well, first I thought, it was just very light.
Wie sind Sie drauf gekommen,

How did you get this idea,
Ich hab auf die Werte geguckt.

I looked at the content label.

A:nd, (>but then I thought,<) well it tastes pretty good for

all that well I find, it
doesn't taste as good, if

you've smoked another one
before it, a stronger one,

Then it tastes really very light.

Hm mm,

Then it tastes really very light.

Hm mm,

(Otherwise) I find it good.

("Ansonsten) find ich die gut.

You come from Washington Lights, [yes? ]

Sie kommen von der Washington Light, [ne? ]

(yes? )

[Hmm,]

The >others< well, here it was a street[promotion,]

Die >anderen< als-, hier war ne Strassen[aktion,]

[Hm, ]

How did the others, find out about the different

Wie haben die anderen, die einzelnen [Marken,]

[brands,]

[Also, ] mir war
die Cape Lights zu stark
geworden

The parts of this fragment which are interesting for us appear towards the end, when the moderator asks "How did you get this idea," (line 40) that the cigarette was "ve:ry light." (line 38). P1 answers that she had looked at the label. She drops her voice, but the moderator preserves his status as a recipient as he nods and keeps looking at her. The participant accepts the proposal that she should go
Silent Recipiency

on talking and we see her searching for and eventually coming up with more to tell: "A:nd," (line 44). She finally comes to the conclusion that for having such a low nicotine and tar level, it tastes 'pretty good' (line 45), but when one has smoked a stronger cigarette before,

Then it tastes really very light. (lines 52+53).

Withholding turn initiation seemingly elicits a stronger assessment by P1: at first she reproduces her thoughts (that the cigarette might taste very light; lines 37+38), then she displays her sense of taste (that it definitely tastes very light; lines 52+53), although she qualifies this judgement by referring to the comparison with a strong cigarette, thereby offering a relative rather than absolute statement. After P1 has displayed her opinion the moderator's 'Hm mm,'-receipt (line 55) does not seem to be an appropriate acknowledgement, especially as he is presumably being considered as an expert in this matter. Exactly at a point, were it would be appropriate that the moderator assumes speakership, he remains 'perverse passive' (Jefferson, 1984) and after another pause, P1 offers softly:

"(Otherwise) I find it good." (line 57).

It seems, as if the participant infers from the moderator's passivity his lacking disagreement and softens her previous evaluation. The moderator gets hearably into difficulties after this 'everything is OK' remark. He asks P1 (again) about her former brand and after a pause of more than four seconds redirects

1 In the pause the moderator nods and keeps looking at the participant.
the question of how one got to know one's brand to
the other focus group members. His self-initiated
repair signals trouble and P2 starts his account on
his 'brand history' before the moderator even could
finish his question.

The moderator in the above extract twice
displays silent recipiency (in lines 42 and 56) and
we get a feeling for the moderator's motivation in
withholding turn initiation. If we follow Wrobel's
terminology and differentiate between more and less
successful silence operations, then we might call
both silence operations 'successful' as both times
the participant and not the moderator selects herself
as the next speaker. The material which is produced
after the two silence operations, however, might only
be useful for the moderator in one case. After the
moderator's first silent receipt the participant
offers from line 46 on a precise description of how
the cigarette tastes, after having provided up to
then only her thoughts on what kind of a cigarette
the offered one might be. We might speculate that,
although the moderator had asked P1 before about
thoughts, ("What did you think then," line 35), he
might have considered this question as kind of an
'overall' question in order to 'avoid' a specific
question regarding the taste (for example: 'How did
the cigarette taste?'), which might display a
preference for a 'good' answer rather than for a
'bad' answer. See Houtkoop-Steenstra & Antaki's
(1997) analysis of interviews and their claim that
unmarked yes-no questions such as 'Did you sleep
well?' tend to project a non-problem answer. A
question like 'How did the cigarette taste?' might
similarly project a candidate no-problem answer such
as 'good' and is perhaps because of this not chosen by the moderator.

After the moderator's first withholding of turn initiation in line 42, the participant shifts from a description of her thoughts to the description of the taste and produces thus relatively 'good' material from the point of view of the focus group moderator — but only relatively good material, because the participant's statement is formulated in relative terms (see Chapter Five on the production of free-standing opinions). The second silence operation, however, generates talk, which seems to be difficult to exploit by the moderator and the report he must write ("(Otherwise) I find it good."); line 57). See also Chapter Five for the importance of 'illustrative quotes' for the report (Krueger, 1994). A remark like "(Otherwise) I find it good." (line 57) can because of its vagueness not be considered as such an 'illustrative quote'.

Furthermore, this remark does not only seem to be difficult to utilize, but it also qualifies the trenchant contribution made earlier ("Then it tastes really very light."); lines 52+53) and creates hearably difficulties for the moderator on how to continue the talk. In any case, we might get a sense that the moderator's motivation for 'doing' silent recipiency is to elicit more simple and evaluative talk, although it has not worked in the fragment.

---

* See Schegloff's (1990) comment on Suchman & Jordan's (1990) analysis of survey interviews. When in one striking case the interviewee produced after an interviewer's pause a reverse answer, Schegloff states: 'The interviewer's silence, which might be the vehicle for allowing elaborations, can appear to prefigure rejection or disagreement with a response and prompt backdowns by a respondent in some contexts.' (1990:249)
above, as the participant 'backs down' afterwards ("(Otherwise) I find it good."); line 57). In the next sub-section we will offer extracts which support this view.

4.3. The moderator's silent recipiency and the participants' provision of simple evaluations

As already indicated, we will look in the next two sub-sections at further participant options for dealing with the moderator's silent recipiency. In the previous sub-sections we concentrated on options which, on the one hand, do not seem to be satisfying for the moderator, as (s)he does not get interesting material and which, on the other hand, generate a difficult interactional situation, because of the commonsensical and general character of the participants' statements. We will focus from now on on options which generate useful information for the moderator.

When we started looking at the 'silent recipiency phenomenon' in our corpus, we were at first convinced that the options considered in the previous two sections were more frequent than the ones which provide the moderator with 'good material'. However, when we checked the transcribed sequences it became clear that the 'fruitless' ones are in a minority. The reason for this misleading impression is presumably that the silence in them is so painfully noticeable. In any case, in this sub-section and the next one we will show that silent recipiency can also have a positive outcome from the point of view of utilizable information and from the
point of view of a smooth moderator-participant-interaction. Let us concentrate first on examples in which participants provide simple evaluations after the moderator's silent recipiency.

The following fragment is taken from a discussion of a cigarette's packet. We enter the scene at the point where the moderator keeps asking a participant: "Just elaborate a bit further." (lines 1+2).

(8) Source: Henstedt8,384; elic\seq\hm3b; video: 20:11

1. Mod. Just elaborate a bit further.=Well, 
2. further.=Also, 
3. (.) 
4. Mod. what effect does this packet have on you. 
5. 
6. (.) 
7. P? [(xxxxxxx)] 
8. Mod. [(xxxxxxx)] is it not. 
9. (.) 
10. Mod. It looks light, but, (xx)= 
11. 
12. P1 =Yes, also this, 
13. (.) 
14. P1 [(picture) there, that is somehow,=uh, 
15. 
16. (1.1) 
17. P1 yes, 
18. (.) 
19. P1 like the=like an imitation of a *sanitary item,* (laughing voice) somehow, 
20. 
21. (.) 
22. P1 but which of course, doesn't fit at all *(as was said)* (smiley voice)) somehow, 
23. 
24. (.) 
25. P1 "blue here," 
26. (.) 
27. P1 "which uh," 
28. (.) 
29. Mod. "Hm mm," 
30. (.) 
31. P1 "(Well) I think it is 
32. 
33. (.) 
34. (1.2) 
35. P1 "(Also) das find ich
The participant produces with a displayed delicacy the comparison of the cigarette packet with that of a tampon packet. The moderator might have come in here with an acknowledgment token like a corresponding laughter or smile, or he might have asked her something about the analogy which has been produced with so much delicacy: note how she takes a long run-up to spell out the comparison with a hygiene article ("...Yes, also this, (picture) there, that is somehow, =u:h, (1.1) yes, like the =like an imitation of a *sanitary item* ((laughing voice))") (lines 12-21) and note how she immediately after having spelled out this comparison qualifies it ("somehow,"; line 21). As the moderator withholds turn-initiation, she continues talking. Before her final assessment, however, this talk is difficult to understand (although clearly audible); she refers to the cigarette's name and the blue packet. The moderator keeps her going with an "Hm mm," (line 33) and the participant launches from line 35 on her summarizing statement by starting with a "(Well)" and marking slight trouble in the following manner:

"(Well) I think it is thoroughly unattractive the packet," ((short soft laughing sound)) (lines 35-38).

shortened form for the cigarette brand Stansted Minima
The participant displays slight concern about the negative assessment and softens it moreover by speaking quietly and adding a laughter token at the end of her turn.

It is hard to be sure, but it is a plausible speculation that this troubled negative assessment was elicited by the moderator's silent recipiency and would not have otherwise appeared.

In a similar manner to the 'empty information' formulations we studied two sub-sections ago, the participant's assessment signals clearly that the matter is by now altogether exhausted. According to Jefferson assessments are prototypical telling-ending devices (1978). In contrast to the 'empty formulations', however, the moderator clearly has no difficulty at all in subsequently producing another question, which he starts in overlap with another participant's unintelligible comment.

Let us take another display of silent recipiency to see whether the idea that the moderator's withholding of turns might be a way of generating simple evaluations is sustainable. The discussion revolves again around cigarette packets and the moderator asks an individual participant, whom he has been addressing for a while.

(9) Source: Nordersted8,488; elicit\seq\hm4a; video: 22:00

1. Mod. When you see the packet now, well, wenn Sie die Packung jetzt so sehen, also,
2. (. )
3. (. )
4. Mod. and also, und auch,
5. (. )
6. Mod. bearing in mind what you mit dem was Sie so verbinden,
7. associate with it when you smoke it, what would be, d'you think, a suitable advertising image
8. for one of these Minima.¹⁰
9. 10. 11. (.)
12. Mod. (6.4)
13. Part. I would not have called it that!=(>that is,<) I think >the snag with this thing.=I mean I would've definitely,< .hh if I had done the advertising,=
14. Mod. =Hm mm,=
15. Part. =also introduced something with <su:perlight,>
16. (.6)
17. Part. ↑into it, but,
18. 19. (.)
20. Part. uhem,
21. 22. (2.2)
23. Part. °even just the name,°
24. (.)
25. Part. °(with the,<)°
26. (.)
27. Part. °(this, you know,)°
28. (.)
29. Part. °I would never have chosen it!°
30. 31. (2.1)
32. Part. °rather *repulsive*°= ((smiley voice))
33. 34. (.)
35. Mod. ["Hm mm," ]
36. Part. ["Well it is,"]
37. (.3)
38. Part. °*rather *repulsive*°= ((smiley voice))
39. 40. Mod. °Well have others seen an=another Minima ad.
41. 42. 43.

Note the long silence in line 13 before the participant finally constructs an answer in which she gathers steam and stresses emphatically, that she would not have given the cigarette brand Stansted Minima this name. She adds, becoming slower, that she might also have made a reference to the cigarette being "<su:perlight,>" (line 22). She adds a "but," (line 24), yet produces it in a manner that indicates it is not meant to offer a further fresh argument, as she trails off immediately after it ("uhem,"; line
and then stays silent. The moderator might have come in here, but, as he does not initiate such a move, the participant goes on talking and comes up with almost inaudible talk and ends by repeating the former assessment: "I would never have chosen it!" (lines 34+35). This is another completion where the moderator might have come in. He offers, however, only a passive recipiency token ("Hm mm,"; line 37) in overlap with the participant's

["Well it is,""] (2.1) "rather *repulsive*"
((smiley voice)) (lines 38-41).

As in Extract Eight, in the end the participant produces a simple statement, which is again introduced by a 'well', and which is again accompanied by brief laughter and which is spoken softly. Before that the participant in Extract Nine has been talking about her idea of not calling the Stansted Minima Stansted Minima and the participant in Extract Eight about analogies between the cigarette packet and a tampon packet. Both statements build towards the later explicit assessment - that neither the name nor the packet are attractive. In both cases the final assessment is offered delicately, marking slight trouble.

Of course, even after exploring this second example we cannot be sure that these negative assessments would not have been displayed without the pressure of silent recipiency. However, we can state, that the moderator's display of silent recipiency is, on occasion, able to elicit simple and unambiguous 'POBA statements'.

\[^{10}\] shortened form for the cigarette brand Stansted Minima
As mentioned before, in the last analytic sub-section of this chapter we will introduce another participant option regarding the moderator's silent recipiency. Again, this option is such that it can be treated as a successful outcome by the moderator.

4.4. The moderator's silent recipiency and the participants' offer of new topics

In this sub-section we will describe a final participant's option on handling the moderator's silent recipiency: the offer of a new topic. Like the previous option (the display of simple statements) this one is also an effective one from the point of view of the moderator, as although the participant does not offer 'good' material he provides at least 'new' material. We enter the scene of the following fragment where the moderator asks the participants for negative evaluated ads.

(10) Source: 17A,851; file: elicite\seq\hml10d; video: 29:30

1. Mod. Yes, what else occurs to you. Ja, was fällt Euch sonst ein. 
2. on=on=on, advertising (.) (.) an=an=an, Werbung (.)
3. negative examples Negativ-Beispiele
4. 11 lines omitted 
5. P1 There is also from,=um, Gibts ja auch von,=em, 
6. (.) 
7. P1 Sahara. 11 Sahara.
8. (.) 11 lines omitted
9. P1 Also something like that Auch irgendswie... 
10. (.)
11. P1 well in one of these city quizzes by Hamburg One. 12 halt in einem von City-Quiz da von Hamburg Eines, 
12. (.)
13. (.9) da=da, 
14. P1 there=there, macht er irgendwie ne 
15. (.) Nachrichten-Sendung und, 
16. P1 he's making a kind of a news programme and, 
17. 

11 pseudonym for a beer brand
12 a TV channel in Hamburg
18. (.9)  
19. P1  
20. >they are somehow still on the air,< and then he says, "Well, now a nice ‪bee:r."  
21.  
22.  
23. (1.0)  
24. P1  
25. (1.0)  
26. P1  
27. (.7)  
28. P1  
29. (1.4)  
30. P1  
31.  
32. (.)  
33. P1  
34. (1.5)  
35. P1  
36. (3.0)  
37. P1  
38. (.)  
39. P1  
40.  
41.  
42. (1.2)  
43. P1  
44. Mod.  
45. (.)  
46. P1  
47. (.)  
48. P1  
49. (.)  
50. P1  
51.  
52. (.4)  
53. P1  
54.  
55. (.)  
56. P1  
57.  
58. (.5)  
59. P1  
60. (.)  
61. P1  
62. (.)  
63. P1  
64.  
65.  
66.  
67. (1.1)  
68. P1  
69.  
70. many¹³  
71.  
72.  

¹³ Moderator, P2 and others; P1 also laughs
The moderator might have come in at any of four possible termination points in lines 8, 23, 29 and 36 (see arrows). Having been asked for 'negative examples' of advertisement, P1 offers the ad for the beer brand Sahara and in doing so complies with the requirement of the question. As the moderator remains silent, the participant mentions the advert's imitation of a news programme. He drops his voice again and as the moderator again withholds turn initiation, searches for more to tell: "and somehow, (1.0) don't know, (.7) there's no point in the ad," (lines 24-28). Note the "don't know". As the moderator continues his silence the participant adds a detail: the ad is being dubbed (line 35). This is another potential come-in point for the moderator, but after three seconds silence the participant accepts the continuation of speakership, although with hearable reluctance. He offers an assessment which is called by Jefferson a 'prototypical telling-ending device' (1978), that is:

"Well< (. ) doesn't appeal to me either.° " (lines 37-40)

If the teller had stopped after having made this negative assessment, it would have been a sequence similar to the one we discussed in the last section
under the heading 'simple evaluations'. However, the participant hearably heads off the moderator, coming in himself very strongly: "=Actually there are a lot of negative (1.2) ads I=think." (lines 40-43). Note how he latches this turn component onto the previous assessment, and the way he allows himself only a 'safe' pause after "negative" (line 41), when he can be sure that the recipient expects more to come.

What we see, then, is that after the participant provided an example of a poor ad ('Sahara'), he moves to a more general topic, that is, that there are many negative ads. And he suggests that the film and advertising industry should combine their needs for showing ads with his need of not being too much bothered by showing ads in long sequences. The group including the moderator reacts with roaring laughter. Another participant (P2) comments on P1's idea, P1 offers another assessment ("[This would] appeal to me."); line 78) and a third participant (P3) finally continues by saying which ad she does not like. The moderator does not come forward with a comment; it is not clear, whether the ["Yes, yes,"] (line 76) is said by him; but as he laughs in a distinctive way, he is identifiable as joining the laughter of the other participants.

In any case, P1's statement provokes immediate reactions by the other focus group members. According to Jefferson the re-engagement of turn-by-turn talk

14 In case the English reader wonders why the audience starts laughing: P1 refers to advertising spots on TV and his suggestion not to spread the spots over the whole length of the film but to present them in one block like in cinemas, is obviously considered as naive or as P2 puts it: "No-one would be watching" (line 73).
might be the primary issue upon a story's completion (1978); she writes:

it appears to be a recurrent phenomenon that if recipients do not assume speakership at possible termination points of reportings, storytellings, etc., the speaker does go on, and/but in going on, introduces matters tangential to the primary telling. (1984:212)

Jefferson is not very clear about the character of the 'tangential matters', but states:

Across the series of story components there is an observable progression away from the story, toward tangential and more general, but yet recognizably related, issues. And it is at the point where teller offers a general topic that recipients engage in turn-by-turn talk. (1978:230)

P1 in our Extract Ten above engages turn-by-turn talk with the others participants. We do not find in our corpus either many instances of such participant-participant-talk or other instances where the participant offers a new topic after the moderator's silent recipiency. It should be the task for further studies to find similar instances in focus group material. But for the time being let us state that one of the participants' options of dealing with the moderator's silent recipiency is to introduce new, but related topics and to engage turn-by-turn talk with other participants.

5. Silent recipiency and the Discursive Psychology of Opinion

Before offering some speculations about the moderator's motivation for displaying silent recipiency, we will return to the starting point of
this paper: Wrobel's analysis of psychoanalytic interviews. Although Wrobel does not recommend that psychoanalysts continue the practice of following patients' talk with long periods of silence, he suggests that elicited 'Reflexionsprozesse' can benefit the patient. We reproduced a fragment (Extract Four) where according to the psychoanalytic theory 'slacking' ('Leerlaufenlassen'), which might be in CA terminology the withholding of turn initiation, causes the patient to reflect on his/her established relationship patterns. In Extract Four the proposed pattern was the 'complaining patient' who tries to elicit pity from the therapist. Wrobel notices the 'Reflexionsprozess' in the following turn:

I think, that in this thing altogether I'm r/rather stubborn, ... I should be more receptive (lines 31-45).

Wrobel does not quote enough of the interaction, but it looks as if the patient backs down in a similar way to the participant in Extract Seven. We do not want to argue that the pattern is accounted for by the participant having a 'Reflexionsprozess' as Wrobel suggests: it may have; but we would want to be cautious of the cognitive gloss that Wrobel offers for what is going on. Another way of thinking about these interactions is in line with Pomerantz' (1984) observations that prior speakers resume talk with reversals of and/or backdowns from, prior assessments, when they assume a disagreeing recipient. In this case, then, the patient might assume the silence indicates a disagreeing therapist.
We already introduced the Discursive Psychology of Opinion (Potter, 1998) in Chapter Five. When Potter states that in 'discursive social psychology attitudes are performed rather than preformed' (Potter, 1998:246), the results of focus groups which are treated as capturing in rich detail the 'opinions, ideas or feelings' (Krueger, 1998:7) of participants, should also be seen as a delicate interactional production.

In itself, this is not a startling observation. However, it does raise the issue as to what extent expressions of opinions are not merely facilitated by the focus group apparatus but constituted by it.

By opting for a silence after a patient has offered a description or assessment, the therapist can display the talk as incomplete. The patient's 'Reflexionsprozess' in Wrobel's data can also be considered as a reworking of his former formulation in a psychological language until the doctor comes in. Similarly, the focus group participants' provisions of 'simple evaluations' can be considered as a reworking of their former more cautious formulations into clear-cut statements in a market research language. Far from taking the 'simple evaluations' as a mirror of the participants' underlying real attitude, they can be seen as being constructed in the interaction with the moderator.

Let us move on now to the last section 'Discussion' where we will offer some ideas on the moderator's motivation for displaying silent recipiency.
6. Discussion

At the end of our analysis we introduced with 'silent recipiency' one technique that moderators use to elicit talk. It is important to stress that the extracts collected here are not simply a result of the moderator's non-attentiveness for example when writing. The moderators here display silent recipiency in an attentive way. It would require further study to analyze extracts with non-attentive (especially note-taking) moderators. There is one sequence in the corpus where a participant continues talking while the moderator writes; but in this case her talk becomes increasingly hesitant.

'Silent recipiency' is just the opposite of the approach of asking 'elaborate questions' (see Chapter Four). While describing 'elaborate questions' we quoted a moderator describing his job as both 'pestering the living daylights' out of participants and giving them the permission to 'answer as spontaneously as possible'. We suggested 'elaborate questions' could help manage the dilemma between being simultaneously authoritarian and permissive. Displaying silent recipiency seems to be the other pole of the moderator's approaches of eliciting topic-related talk from the participants. If offering different question components allows the participant to freely choose 'spontaneously' the aspect (s)he would like to focus on, staying silent provides a situation where the moderator neither directs anything, nor provides formulations and/or categories for the participant to pick up, focus on, or whatever. It is an ingenious technique. Silent recipiency offers space for the participant, but it
also generates pressure. In other words: although it seems to be recipient centred, silent recipiency can put pressure on a participant. As we noted in the preceding sub-sections the ensuing silence is often painfully noticeable when the moderator withholds turns. Watching the video tapes suggests that silent recipiency almost 'forces talk out of the participants'. The participants have to generate and generate while all the moderator does is look attentive.

There is a simple motivation for doing silent recipiency: it does generate talk, the trouble is, that it does not always generate what from the focus group moderator's point of view is good material. This might be the reason why silent recipiency is relatively unusual in these materials; a rough estimate of occurrence is three per focus group session. Sometimes it elicits useful 'POBA talk', but often not, which explains why moderators do not do it that much. But one can see why they do it.

When do moderators deploy passive recipiency? Could it be occasioned by the participant displaying that (s)he has more to say? In the small corpus we have available we could not find any evidence for that. It is possibly relevant, however, that in two extracts discussed here the moderator seems to exert pressure on uncooperative participants. This means, then, that 'silent recipiency' could be seen as a strategy to discipline uncooperative participants.

In Extract Five, the moderator addresses explicitly an up to then silent participant in saying: "You haven't said (.) very much at all yet
("today")" (lines 1+2). When the participant signals after some turns that he has nothing more to say ("I dunno."; line 32 and "which was, .) [Just] said a moment ago."; lines 37-40) the moderator stays silent and the participant finally produces some 'empty information'.

The participant in Extract Six is uncooperative in the sense that he produces in a market research focus group critical opinions on advertising like for example that the government should protect under-age citizens against being manipulated by adverts. The moderator has already been querying the same participant for two minutes and he continues asking him. When the participant gives a final statement ("I'd like to be also as great, I must also smoke the cigarette."; lines 53-55) the moderator opts for a silence and the participant continues with hearable reluctance but ends by offering an 'empty formulation'. In both extracts the moderator seems to exert pressure on uncooperative participants by displaying a silent recipiency.

Hutchby & Wooffitt discuss one particular conception of power, that is power as the 'structurally-provided ability to constrain the actions of others' (1998:170). They stress that they do not want to go back to the 'container view' according to which pre-existing hierarchical features cause the participants' actions, as even powerful discursive resources can be resisted by the recipient. However, they conclude that

a high proportion of CA studies of asymmetry in institutional interaction, although they do not put it in these terms, can be described as
showing how the oriented-to structural patterns in talk - such as question-answer sequences or first and second positions in argument - furnish participants with differential resources. And one upshot of these resources is that one participant is often in a more powerful position discursively to constrain the actions of his or her coparticipant. (1998:170)

In the talk-radio interaction analyzed by Ian Hutchby (1996, 1996b), the caller must begin by introducing a topic for discussion, which means that the host is in a stronger position as (s)he is able to 'go second' and can argue with the caller's position (see also Sacks, 1992). Hutchby concludes that in talk radio this asymmetry is 'built into' the overall structure of calls.

The discursive power of a focus group moderator seems to be similarly structurally-provided. (S)he is the one who knows the agenda and has the question guide in front of him/herself and (s)he is the one who displays the irrelevance and inappropriateness of the participants' questions.

Hutchby's (1996) callers are expected to 'go first'; the focus group participants are expected to answer questions. Hosts can challenge the relevance of a caller's argument and can require him/her to take the floor again with the help of a class of utterances such as 'So?' and 'What's that got to do with it?' Moderators can similarly challenge the appropriateness and completeness of a participant's contribution and can require him/her to come in again by displaying a silent recipiency. As Hutchby & Wooffitt emphasize, however, the host's power is rooted in 'oriented-to patterns of action' (1998:170) and the participants could make things different. As
our previous analysis has shown, the focus group participants comply with the moderator's requirement that they take the floor again, but in doing so they may produce poor quality talk such as 'empty information'. It may be relevant that the production of 'empty information' was found precisely at the point where the participants have been hearably uncooperative - either in being a silent or a critical focus group member. The 'empty information' could be a way to continue uncooperativeness. With such a small corpus we cannot provide compelling evidence for the suggestion that 'silent recipiency' is a strategy to discipline uncooperative participants, and that producing 'empty information' is a strategy to resist persistent moderators. A more extensive study will be needed to address that question.
CHAPTER EIGHT

CONCLUSIONS: FOCUS GROUPS: SPONTANEOUS PRODUCTION OF DECONTEXTUALIZED TALK?

1. Chapter-for-chapter-summary

This last chapter will have three main tasks. First, it will provide a summary of the previous chapters. Second, it will review the general themes that became evident in the analytic chapters. Third, and finally, it will consider general conclusions of the detailed analysis - in the form of a 'focus group'.

1.1. Chapter One: Background: Focus groups in social research, market research and feminist research

This chapter has given an overview of the 'mainstream story' of focus groups in social research, market research and feminist research. It has provided a short history of focus groups and the uses of focus groups especially in market research. Furthermore it has reviewed the main characteristics and main advantages/disadvantages of focus groups as seen from the point of view of focus group manuals and focus group users. In particular it has focused on the dilemma between the focus group as being a 'focused discussion' while simultaneously providing 'spontaneous and natural' interaction. We wondered how both were possible.
Feminist focus group researchers seem to solve the dilemma by promoting non-hierarchical focus groups. Or, as Wilkinson puts it:

Simply by the virtue of the number of research participants simultaneously involved in the research interaction, the balance of power shifts away from the researcher. (1999:70)

Yet focus groups without a moderator who focuses the group on a certain topic might stretch the definition of focus groups.

According to other manuals a smooth and nevertheless focused discussion is guaranteed with the help of a good question guide and/or a moderator who is able to be both: participant-centred and participant-controlling. There are, however, no guidelines provided how exactly the moderator manages this tension.

1.2. Chapter Two: Methods: Focus groups as an interactional phenomenon

This chapter focused on the main distinction between evaluative versus descriptive focus group research.

Focus group researchers such as Morgan (1997) and Krueger (1998) promote focus groups as a ‘good’ research instrument and make suggestions to enhance the method’s quality. Similarly, authors such as J. Kitzinger (1994,1995) and Wilkinson (1998) offer suggestions on how to improve the quality of focus group analyses by focus group users and stress in particular the relevance of an interaction-centred
analysis; that is analysis which takes the group interaction into account.

In contrast to this evaluative approach, I analyzed the accomplishment of focus groups per se. Focus groups have been considered as an interactional accomplishment, whereby the notion of 'interaction' is not used in the traditional social psychological sense. The traditional notion of interaction in social psychology - and I would assign both Kitzinger and Wilkinson as using the term in this sense - considers people as having their memories, beliefs and attitudes and interaction as the arena in which those things are 'expressed' and 'communicated'. The transformation of the social psychological notion of interaction by Billig (1988b, 1989) and Potter (1998) considers attitudes as not being 'in the head' of the participants, but assumes that any piece of interaction constitutes opinions and attitudes for the occasion at hand, for a topic or an argument. This interaction is therefore crucial for making the opinions for what they are. Or, in other words, people are producing evaluations by contrasting them to what somebody else just said.

Whereas J. Kitzinger (1994, 1995) and Wilkinson (1998) emphasized the interaction among focus group participants which should be mirrored in a good analysis, my own analysis followed the rhetorical, discourse analytical and conversation analytical understanding of interaction.

A main assumption of conversation analysis is that contributions to interaction are contextually oriented; any speaker's communicative action is
'doubly contextual in being both context-shaped and context-renewing' (Heritage, 1984:242). With this dynamic view of context, which considers context not as given, but as an active accomplishment, conversation analysis shows how institutional talk such as survey interviews (see Suchman & Jordan, 1990 and Schaeffer & Maynard, 1996) are 'brought into being' (Heritage, 1984). Like Myers' (1998) focus group analysis my analysis has also been based on a conversation analytical approach and has asked how focus groups are 'brought into being'. It will, however, also take the Discursive Social Psychology perspective (Potter, 1998) into account.

Discursive Social Psychology shows how the social psychology of attitudes can be respecified. It deals with people's practices of evaluations, discusses 'attitude variability', and considers the notion of neutrality, that is of 'not holding' an attitude. We will come back to the notions of 'inconsistency' and 'evaluative practices' in the last section of this chapter.

Chapter Two ended with a description of the data base and highlighted issues of transcription and translation, analytic procedures and validity.

1.3. Chapter Three: The opening sequences and how moderators nudge the participants into voluntary talk and a non-factual discourse

This first analytic chapter focused both on the expectations of voluntary talk set up by the moderators and on his/her strategies of policing the participants into a certain kind of talk. Moderators promote the focus group as a friendly and relaxed
chat which is not classroom experience. They formulate the attendance at the group as a voluntary matter. They also stress that the contributions during the focus group should be provided on the participants' own initiative. We suggested that while 'doing' a focus group the moderator displays a concern with his/her actions being non-interventionist ones.

While promoting the voluntary character of focus groups, the moderator, however, polices the participants into a certain kind of talk, a 'non-factual discourse' which we could also call following the current focus group literature 'POBA talk', with POBA standing for perceptions, opinions, beliefs and attitudes. We suggested motivations for socializing participants into a discourse on opinions and attitudes. The insistence on a non-factual discourse does not only save him/her from the trouble which may be caused by participants' questions, but it also works as kind of a device for guaranteeing the participants' collaboration in the sense that it preempts 'I don't know-answers' and 'It depends-answers'.

1.4. Chapter Four: Asking elaborate questions and the management of spontaneity

In contrast to recommendations in focus group manuals, in our corpus questions are routinely asked in an 'elaborate way' as they include a range of reformulations and rewordings. Chapter Four highlighted three functions of such questions: (a) they are used to guide participants and head off trouble where the question type is 'non-mundane'; (b)
they help secure participation by providing an array of alternative items to respond to; (c) they guide participants to produce a range of opinion relevant responses. More generally, we suggested that they help manage a dilemma between the requirement that the talk should be both highly focused on predefined topics and issues, and at the same time spontaneous and conversational. Offering a portfolio of question components gives the participants the choice to spontaneously focus on one or more of the presented elements.

1.5. Chapter Five: Manufacturing moderator-centred talk and the production of individual opinions

Whereas Chapter Three focused on the kind of talk required by the moderator (spontaneous and voluntary) and Chapter Four on question formats which might help to provide this kind of talk, Chapter Five considered the way opinion production is achieved in the focus groups. Moderators 'train' the participants to produce opinions as individual and free-standing entities addressed to the moderator and not to other focus group members. We contrasted these free-standing formulated opinions with contributions which make only sense contextually and suggested that they seem to be more easy 'to consume' by both the live audience and the moderator who is going to write a report peppered with quotations.

1.6. Chapter Six: Repeat receipts

Whereas the last chapters dealt with the moderator's requests and questions, the next two focus on the moderator's receipts.
According to Heritage (1985) in another institutional context (news interviews), the professional receipts reports by formulating them. In my focus group corpus, however, 'repeat receipts' appear rather than formulations. The moderator 'strips' the provided report 'off' the rhetorical context. Such repeats seem to be fitted to the focus group context. (Partially) repeating a participant's answer does a triple duty. Repeat receipts:

- signal that a given answer is worthwhile
- do questioning work
- serve as 'templates' for future contributions.

1.7. Chapter Seven: Silent recipiency

Whereas 'repeat receipts' are pervasive in the focus group material, the moderators' withholding of turn initiation is relatively unusual in the corpus. As we had seen, silent recipiency does generate talk, however, it does not always elicit 'good quality' talk from the point of view of the moderator. Four kinds of the participants' reactions to 'silent recipiency' were documented:

- they provide 'empty information'
- they 'back down' and softening of their previous assessment
- they provide 'useful information' in the form of POBA talk
  or
- they restart a new topic.
2. General themes

While the last section reviewed the main results of the thesis in a chronological way, this section tries to bundle up the general themes before we move to the conclusions in the next and last section.

From the very beginning of the thesis; that is, from the review on focus group literature on, we met paradoxical tensions. There is the official focus group story that holds that they provide 'spontaneous and natural interaction', being simultaneously focused on a certain topic. We had seen how focus group manuals attend to this paradox in pointing to the qualities of the question guide and especially to the moderator, who allows both: a spontaneous and focused discussion. In our analysis we see a similar paradox. There is, on the one hand, the moderators’ account of the focus group as being a participant-centred event, something like a friendly and relaxed chat. On the other hand, however, focus groups are a highly controlled event. The moderator polices the participants exactly into what kind of talk is required: spontaneous talk, opinion talk and talk addressed to the moderator.

This paradoxical tension shows in different facets. We had seen, how the moderators promote the focus group as 'having a chat'. 'Having a chat' is, however, also describable as a ninety minutes interview in a special situation of surveillance as it is not only videotaped, but also watched by an audience behind the one-way-mirror. In this context we called 'chatting' a euphemism, as it stands for more specific descriptions such as interviewing
people in exchange for money. Apart from deploying euphemisms, the moderators 'do' hearable informality against the formality expected in research situations. We had seen how in using metaphors and colloquialism, for example, they display a departure from the dry and standard research language. There is much effort in promoting the focus group as a non-social-science-research-situation and a non-classroom-event. This could also be seen in the way how questions are formulated by the moderators. We tried to show that by asking in an elaborate way the questioner orients to the difference between factual questions and opinion eliciting questions in an environment where participants may need to be reminded that the questions being asked are not just classroom questions.

Asking itself seems to be a delicate business. We had seen how moderators orient on the one hand to the requirement that all participants make contributions, but how they also, on the other hand, orient their own role in getting them to do that as something that may be delicate. Moderators construct themselves as the invisible supporters or as non-interventionists who orient to the requirement of achieving non-coached contributions.

Nevertheless, in the course of our analysis we met the long and complicated moderator's questions which we called 'elaborate questions' as they include a range of reformulations and rewordings. We had seen that one of their functions was to help secure participation by providing an array of alternative items to respond to. Although the moderator leaves the participant the choice which question component
to address, s(h)e nevertheless sets with the question portfolio the framework within which the participants should provide contributions. We had also shown that a certain kind of contributions are required (POBA talk, that is non-factual discourse) and a certain way of contributing this talk, that is directly to the moderator and in the form of free-standing entities. The participants are reassured that their reports are not evaluated as 'there's no wrong answer, there's also no right answer'. They are, on the other hand, requested to provide contributions and not 'I-don't-know's'. And just because the moderators insist on a non-factual discourse, participants do not have the option to provide 'not knowing' as an account for not providing contributions.

Having reviewed here the paradox which seems to be at the heart of how groups are put together, one would expect it a painful experience to watch focus groups on a videotape. Focus group talk, however, runs smoothly. There are, for example, hardly ever long pauses or abrupt topic changes by the moderator which might signal trouble. Only rarely is moderator-participant-interaction troubled because, for example, the moderator withholding turn initiation (see the chapter on 'Silent Recipiency'). The talk in focus groups seems to be a very delicately finessed activity.

In the preceding analysis we had shown exactly how delicately talk is produced. Does our analysis end with a statement like this? Is our analysis then comparable with for example Heritage's (1985) analysis of news interviews where he describes 'talk
at work', that is talk in this particular context? Don’t we have to consider implications for the focus group practice as focus groups are in contrast to news interviews a research instrument? If not, wouldn’t we evade the issue whether focus groups are 'good' or 'bad'? Let us listen in the next section to a discussion a pragmatic market researcher, a committed feminist researcher who appreciates focus groups as a research instrument and a discursive social psychologist (let us think of a real hardliner!) could have.

3. Experts discuss the general conclusions of this thesis

Listening in on focus group discussions – or 'structured eavesdropping' (Powney, 1988) – enables the researcher to become familiar with the way research participants habitually talk, the particular idioms, terminology and vocabulary they typically use, the ways in which they joke, tell stories, construct arguments, and so on. (Wilkinson, 1998:189)

Let us imagine a focus group and let us exercise 'structured eavesdropping'! Here are the participants, the Market Researcher, the Feminist Researcher and the Discursive Social Psychologist in the middle of an argument on the value of focus groups. Let us see how they construct their argument and let us check whether they are still able to joke!

But, above all: let us consider: where are the right answers and where are the wrong ans-?
((interrupted by the Market Researcher who stresses emphatically: 'answer as spontaneously as possible, there's no wrong answer, there's also no right answer!'))
What I want to do is to briefly clarify what I understand by the interactive nature of a focus group. Focus group data are typically not being analyzed in this way. People tend to slice up the data and do what is basically content analysis. So they are looking at individual contributions without taking the context into account. What I want to do with focus group data is to look at what might be done if you sliced the data up in a second way. In other words if you look at the interactional episodes. So what the talk is doing in its interactional context.

Would people here like to have an example?

I am working at the moment with Macpherson and Fine’s ‘over-dinner group’. This study is interesting in two different ways. First of all we have the opportunity to observe directly the co-construction of meaning via the interactions of group participants. Secondly we can see how identity is elaborated through group interaction. One of the participants, Shermika, defends and elaborates her identity - as ‘full American’ and as ‘Negro’ - in the context of a challenge from a group member. I am not sure at all whether such insight could have been produced without the interactive nature of such a group.

Hmmm. Interesting of course. But I am bit reluctant in joining happily the ‘focus groups are great’ fan club. Let me step back a bit. Isn’t this view on focus groups a bit tricky. Sounds as if we come back in a nice circular way to the fields of traditional social psychology. It’s a bit strong perhaps, but I can think of social psychologists who would be fascinated by the way how Shermika’s ‘identity’ is developed in the course of the focus group and how we as observers are finally presented with the crystal-clear result which is her real ‘identity’.

Excellent! There is no need to develop your argument further! Once you have started with this trajectory we know how it will go on, don’t we.* (Smiley voice; looks at the Feminist Researcher, but she looks down at her notes). But let me be serious for a moment. Er, let me put it like this. Is there anything that could survive under your critical eyes? Yes, we all know that even focus groups are not just ideal. There are without doubt limitations in the use of them. And I would be the last

---

1 She borrowed some of her arguments from Wilkinson (1999).
2 (1995)
one to advocate focus groups as a universal remedy. But, they are convenient and they are practical. If one took everything you say seriously, no research would make any sense at all and we all could limit ourselves to sitting in front of the telly watching 'Friends'.

((smiles and lets his eyes roam in the distance)) Have you ever seen 'Friends'? Last Friday, for example, when Ross,

I am sorry for interrupting. Unfortunately I have a meeting at three o' clock. Let me start by voicing my disappointment in three different ways: I am disappointed at how gender issues are ignored in market research focus groups and in this thesis too. I am even more disappointed on how focus groups are used to manipulate people to smoke cigarettes. Finally I am very disappointed how a method that might empower underprivileged people is misused in the name of consumerism.

But let me put these ethical concerns for a moment on one side. So em, what I want to do is to look at methodological criticisms of market research focus groups. If we could focus in particular on how people analyze them. As I mentioned before, the data are typically analyzed without taking interaction into account. The 'long table approach' for analyzing focus groups is a recommended approach. This means focus group transcripts are cut in order to collect the so-called illustrative quotes. In my mind a focus group is a focus group because people are interacting with each other. Sifting the transcript corpus for 'illustrative quotes' annuls this interaction. So you manage it indeed to decontextualize a contextual method.

((indicates in taking a deep inbreath a long turn; the Feminist Researcher and the Discursive Social Psychologist lean [resignedly?] back in their chairs)) Now I'm going to beat you at your own game. (the Discursive Social Psychologist yawns softly)) Let me see first of all whether I've got the theory right. You mean, don't you (addresses the Discursive Social Psychologist) that you expect people's attitudes to vary. One well known Discursive Social Psychologist has written that as people perform different actions with their talk such as aligning themselves with friends and differentiating themselves from enemies their evaluative expressions change. (the Discursive Social Psychologist nods slightly)) Variability is now an embarrassment to everybody who hopes to explain behaviour as a product of consistent, underlying evaluative positions. My point is

\[^3\] She seems to have Krueger's recommended analyzing method in mind: 'The long table approach is still quite effective. Quite a number of variations are possible, but the core elements are basically cutting, sorting, and arranging.' (1998:59)

\[^4\] He must have thoroughly read Potter (1998).
now, that in contrast to traditional attitude measurement, focus groups just don’t aim at consistency. Focus group moderators explicitly encourage the participants to produce inconsistent talk.

Box with a fragment of a focus group interaction which supports the market researcher:

**Participant:** But somehow it doesn't go with what, (.) was also said a little while ago, that ((continues))

((12 lines omitted))

**Moderator:** You know <everything, needn't always (.) fit,>

((some participants laugh softly))

**Moderator:** >But it's< okay, if we now come up >with< *quite new ideas,* ((smiley voice)) or whatever, or, (.) completely, (.) different, (.) considerations, (.) that's=that's, no problem,

**Market Researcher**

Market researchers don’t have as a goal 'truth statements', but they try to identify general 'attitudinal dimensions'.

But let me go one step further. ((the Market Researcher gathers so much steam that neither the Discursive Social

---

5. He seems to think of Brotherson: 'Qualitative research does not have as a goal 'truth statements', but rather descriptions of patterns present in the data so that other investigators can make decisions about the 'fit' or match of those patterns to other contexts.' (1994:115)

6. ... although we got to know a market research institute with the name 'General Truth'.

7. He seems to refer to Bers: 'The method is best used to identify attitudinal dimensions and not to quantify the extent to which these are held in any population or subgroup.' (1987:19)

Or he might think of McQuarrie & McIntyre who warn to generalize the incidence of some focus group responses like 'Seven out of ten people in the groups were interested in the product concept, while three out of ten rejected it. Therefore, I may assume that my product will at least enter the evoked set of 70% of the consumers who encounter it' (1987:58). They promote, however, the 'response type generalization': 'The groups will not tell us, with any certainty, which responses are most and which least common; but they will tell the development team the degree to which its own perceptions may be at variance with common perceptions in the target population' (1987:59).
Discursive Social Psychologist

((seems to snap out of his dreams)) There is a lot of food for thought there and there are a number of ways of responding to it. At first, let me see whether I got it right. Are you suggesting that market research moderators orient in a rather sophisticated way to the Discursive Social Psychology's respecification of attitude concepts - consciously or unconsciously?  

Market Researcher

((smiles; psychologists would describe it as a deeply satisfied smile; but let us here restrict in noting 'smiles')) Yeah, kind of.

Discursive Social Psychologist

Hummm, well. You seem to have studied Potter's 'Discursive Social Psychology: From Attitudes to Evaluative Practices' thoroughly indeed. I am getting now a bit brutal, but I think you quote it a bit selectively. There are his comments on this study from Maio and Olson which goes so nicely with the thesis', er, embarrassing focus on cigarettes ((spoken softly)). Maio and Olson's measured the so-called attitude function of so-called thoughts such as 'Smoking is an unhealthy act'. They classified a statement like that as a 'value-expressive thought', whereas Potter did not find it hard to imagine

8 Background information for the naive listener/reader: seems to be a more than ironic allusion to the amazing resurrection of psychoanalysis; see e.g. Mick Billig's talk on 'Conversation and the Unconscious'.

9 (1994)
that the same statement could be used as the account
element in a practical utilitarian request for a
neighbour to stop smoking. Your claim is that market
research focus group moderators are especially
sophisticated. But what they do in the end is the same
like Maio and Olson: they assign decontextualized
materials to categories and use the rich transcripts as a
quarry for the search for nice 'illustrative quotes'
((looks at the Feminist Researcher)).

Market
Researcher

OK - point taken. I don't argue with you. ((Discursive
Social Psychologist: "Oh!")

I'd go even further. I'd go as far to say that moderators
even orient to the requirement of the production of
decontextualized talk.

Back to the rich Chapter Six. Let's use this chapter as a
quarry. We could use this time the transcript revolving
around the task to describe the 'youngest child of a
brand family'. When the participants displayed rhetorical
forms in which their ideas were connected with the
contributions from other participants, the moderator
'stripped' in his receipts the given statements 'off' the
rhetorical context. It was suggested that in providing
repeats as receipts and prompts which are stripped off
the rhetorical or argumentative format, the moderator
organized the focus group not as a debate, but as an
accumulation of separate and discrete descriptions. Or
decontextualized descriptions.

If Discursive Social Psychology is right that attitudes
are performed in certain actions and are not preformed
and carried around ready-made by the participants, then
we can't make general claims about person X' and person
Y' attitudes.

Market research focus groups aren't after general claims
about the participants' attitudes. But they attempt to
find attitudinal dimensions. And: isn't that the only
logical thing to do in this situation?

Discursive
Social
Psychologist

I am sure you are right, your are the specialist here,
but let me clarify this. What do you do with these
attitudinal dimensions? Focus group talk is a peculiar
thing. Participants are intensively trained on a
particular and very peculiar kind of talk which seems to
have a strange relationship with everyday talk. Yes, just
your Chapter Six shows this and also for example Chapter
Five on 'Manufacturing Individual Opinions' how only
certain kinds of contributions are accepted. How can such
an artificial event help making any claims?

Market
Researcher

Yes, I can understand this. However, I can't help it:
market research focus groups are just considered to be
helpful. That's just the way it is. Look at the immense
prices which are paid for them by industry.

Discursive

Oh no! Not that old utilitarian argument again! It must
We let them have their coffee now. We suppose they will continue their talk. Have we learnt anything from their discussion? What is the right way of looking at focus groups? Or is even this question not right, as there are 'no wrong answers and no right answers'?
REFERENCES


Garfield, R. (1982). When focus groups talk, firms listen. USA Today, November 1, 1B.


Kitzinger, J. (1994). The methodology of focus groups: The importance of interaction between research participants. Sociology of Health & Illness, 16(1), 103-121.


