

# The SAGE Encyclopedia of Social Science Research Methods

## Focused Interviews

Contributors: Lynne Millward

Editors: Michael S. Lewis-Beck & Alan Bryman & Tim Futing Liao

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Most commonly known as the focus group method, this form of interview was originally formulated for use with both individuals and groups (Merton, 1987; Merton & Kendall, 1946). The explicit objective of the focused interview is to test, appraise, or produce hypotheses about a particular concrete situation in which the respondent(s) have been involved (e.g., a shared event or salient experience). The *focus* of the interview is circumscribed by relevant theory and evidence and involves skilled facilitation of the process (in a one-on-one or group forum) using an interview guide, allowing for unanticipated views to also be uncovered and explored. Optimal use of the method involves an appreciation of the paradox involved in balancing the quest for authentic subjective information through free-flowing discussion with the need for methodological rigor.

The purpose of the focused interview is to go beyond the summary judgments made by respondents about their experiences (e.g., unpleasant, stimulating) to “discover precisely what further feelings were called into play” (Merton & Kendall, 1946, p. 541). Hence, a key to the technique is the skilled use of verbal prompts to activate a concrete response to questions rather than vague generalizations, coupled with an ability to continually monitor and adjust the interview process to maximize the likelihood of self-disclosure. Applied to groups, the process facilitation challenge includes harnessing the synergy potential of multiple respondents to ensure that both a [p. 396 ↓ ] breadth and depth of evidence is derived (Millward, 2000). Important design considerations in this instance include group size (e.g., large enough to elicit a broad range of views while not producing inhibitions), group composition (e.g., educational homogeneity), and spatial arrangements (e.g., circular seating) (Merton, 1987).

The focused one-on-one interview is now an important part of the methodological repertoire, especially in clinical and health research contexts. It was not until the late 1980s, however, that the research potential of the focused group interview was formally acknowledged by social scientists, beyond its use in marketing quarters (Morgan, 1988). Both types of focused interview can be used either as a primary means of qualitative data collection (e.g., for hypothesis formulation) or as an adjunct to other methods (e.g., to aid interpretation of findings). Theory can also be used as a focusing vehicle affording constructs around which to anchor either one-on-one or group

dialogue (e.g., protection motivation theory), particularly in association with complex or sensitive issues (e.g., examination of risky adolescent sexual behavior).

Depending on respondent consent, interview responses are audiotaped or videotaped and then transcribed in preparation for some form of qualitative data analysis. At its most basic level, content analysis involves inducing categories of content. Other, more specialized forms of analysis applicable to focused interview data include, for example, interpretative phenomenological analysis and discourse analysis. The latter examines both the process and the content of discussion. Ultimately, choice of analytic strategy will depend on a combination of both epistemological and theoretical factors, including precisely what question is being asked (Millward, 2000).

Lynne Millward

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