

# Depth Interviews and Focus Groups

Micael-Lee Johnstone

**Abstract** Interviews are still one of the most widely used methods today because they enable us to document multiple perspectives of reality; they extend our understanding of people’s motivations, perceptions, and experiences; and they enable us to study ordinary and extraordinary events that happen in ‘real life settings’. This chapter will be looking at two qualitative methods, the focus group interview, and the depth interview. The purpose is to provide an overview of the process that a researcher undertakes when using these research methods, from identifying the problem to analysing the data. While each method can be used on its own, they can also be used to complement each other in order to gain a greater understanding of the research problem, and they can be used to support other methods (e.g. survey based research). Two case studies are referred to throughout the chapter to illustrate how these methods can be used.

## Introduction

Interviews are still one of the most widely used methods today because they enable us to document multiple perspectives of reality; they extend our understanding of people’s motivations, perceptions, and experiences; and they enable us to study ordinary and extraordinary events that happen in ‘real life settings’—with an emphasis on the ‘lived experience’ (Miles and Huberman 1994). In this chapter, I will be looking at two types of interviews: the focus group interview, and the depth interview. The purpose is to provide an overview of the process that researchers go through when using these research methods, from identifying the problem to analysing the data. While each method can be used on its own, they can also be used together to gain a greater understanding of a phenomenon or research problem, and

---

M.-L. Johnstone (✉)  
Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington, New Zealand  
e-mail: Micael-Lee.Johnstone@vuw.ac.nz

they can be used to support other methods (e.g. survey based research). At times, issues pertaining to both methods will be discussed jointly. Two case studies will be referred to throughout this chapter to illustrate how these methods can be used.

## Focus Groups

Focus groups are an ideal method to use when you want to gain insights about a research problem that has been underexplored, or when you are investigating attitudes, motivations and behaviours that are complex. They are also useful when there is a gap between professionals' perceptions of an issue and their target audience's perceptions of the same issue (e.g. social marketers and the public), and when you want to understand the degree of consensus on an issue (Morgan and Krueger 1993); when you want to test new ideas and product concepts; and when you want to explore a phenomenon before developing a quantitative study (e.g. survey design).

What makes focus group interviews unique from depth interviews are the ideas that are generated from group interactions. As Lederman (1990, p. 119) contends, focus groups 'generate more than the sum of individual inputs'. While there are many benefits to using this method, one must also be aware of its limitations. One should not use focus groups if the objective of the study is to make generalisations, as this is not the purpose of a focus group. Another criticism of focus groups is that participants might make up answers if they have limited knowledge (Krueger and Casey 2009), or be less honest due to intimidating or 'pushy' group members. Both of these problems can be managed and minimised with a skilful moderator. Lastly, some sensitive topics may not be suitable for group discussions, e.g. it may be difficult for individuals to talk about certain issues in front of other people.

## What Are the Steps in Designing and Conducting Focus Groups?

Good planning is the key to conducting successful focus groups (refer to Table 1). Throughout this section a small case study will be used to illustrate some of the steps.

**Problem identification** Before you begin any study, you need to identify what the research problem is, what the purpose of the study is, what the research questions are, what type of information is needed, and what methods should be used. Once you have established that the focus group interview is the best method to use, you need to think about your sample, i.e. who you want to talk to, as this will also help you to identify the scope of your study. Throughout this chapter, examples based on existing research will be referred to.

**Table 1** Steps in designing and conducting focus group and depth interviews

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <i>Problem identification for focus groups and depth interviews</i>   |  |
| <p>What is the purpose of your study? Key research questions?<br/>                 What method/s will you use? Why is this an appropriate method?<br/>                 Who will your participants be?</p>   |  |
| <i>Developing the moderator's guide/depth interview guide</i>   |  |
| <i>Moderator's guide</i>  | <i>Depth interview guide</i>   |
| <p>You need to identify the topics and develop the questions.<br/>                 Will you include activities?<br/>                 How long should you spend on each topic? Each activity? Are you being realistic?<br/>                 How long should your focus group interview be?<br/>                 Pre-test the moderator's guide.<br/>                 Conduct a pilot focus group interview.</p>  | <p>Will the interview be structured, semi-structured or unstructured?<br/>                 Identify what interview topics will be covered.<br/>                 Develop questions. Consider different techniques.<br/>                 How long should the interview be? Will there be follow up interviews?<br/>                 Pre-test the interview guide.<br/>                 Do the participants need to perform an activity before the interview takes place or during the interview?</p> |
| <i>Data collection decisions for focus groups and depth interviews</i>  |  |
| <p>What are the participant selection criteria?<br/>                 Where will the interviews take place?<br/>                 Will there be incentives for the participants?<br/>                 How will you recruit your participants? (e.g. online, newspaper advertisements, public notice boards, snowballing strategy, etc.)</p>   |  |
| <i>Focus groups</i>   | <i>Depth interviews</i>  |
| <p>How many focus groups are needed?<br/>                 How many participants are needed in each focus group?<br/>                 What will the group composition be?</p>  | <p>How many participants are needed?<br/>                 What is the sampling strategy?</p>   |
| <i>Conducting focus group and depth interviews</i>  |  |
| <p>Make sure you are organised before the interview begins, e.g. recording equipment, spare batteries, information sheets, consent forms, pens and paper, refreshments, activity packs (if required), incentives, name tags for focus groups.<br/>                 Brief the participants before you begin the interview. Let them know what your expectations are. Informed consent is required.<br/>                 Things to consider from a transcription perspective: for a clear sound recording there needs to be minimal background noise; pre-test the recording to hear how clear the recording is, position the microphone in the direction of the participant, ask the participant to speak louder if their voice becomes too soft; in a focus group situation, ask people to speak one at a time; provide key words to the transcriber if unique or unfamiliar terms are frequently used.</p> |  |
| <i>Focus groups</i>   | <i>Depth interviews</i>  |
| <p>Have strategies in place to cater for different types of people (e.g. ramblers, shy individuals, etc.).<br/>                 How you end the interview is just as important as how you start it.</p>   | <p>Establish what interviewing style you will use.</p>   |
| <i>Analysing the data</i>   |  |
| <p>Before you begin the data collection phase, establish what analytical methods you will use.<br/>                 Are your analytical methods consistent with your methodology?<br/>                 When analysing your data, do not forget what the purpose of the study is, or what your research questions are.<br/>                 How will you ensure your interpretations are trustworthy and credible?</p>   |  |

**Case Study One: The Purpose and Context** (Johnstone and Tan 2015a, pp. 311–312)

Concern for the environment is unquestionably an important issue for both marketers and policy makers today. Not only are there concerns about the impact that consumers' consumption habits are having on the environment, businesses are also facing increased pressure to include sustainable marketing practices into their business models. However, the adoption of green practices has not kept pace with consumers' rising concerns about the environment. Despite consumers' pro-environmental attitudes (e.g. Eurobarometer 2011), research has revealed inconsistencies between green attitudes and green behaviours. As research has shown, many consumers are not walking their talk (Carrington et al. 2010). So the purpose of our study was to gain further insights into why there is a green attitude-behaviour gap. (1) Why do consumers who claim they are concerned about the environment choose not to participate in greener consumption practices? (2) What are consumers' perceptions of green consumption behaviours, and what shapes these perceptions?

**Developing the Moderator's Guide** The next step is to develop a moderator's guide (refer to Table 2) which outlines what topics and/or questions will be discussed in the focus groups. Researchers need to establish what the key interview questions will be before they develop the moderator's guide because more time needs to be allocated to these questions during the focus group interview. Often a funnel approach is used when developing the guide. General questions are asked at the start of the discussion to introduce the participants to the topic. So the questions are very broad at the start, before narrowing down to more specific questions. This approach eases the participants into the topic, and also provides opportunities for focus group members to identify key points before being prompted by the moderator. You also need to think about the question order, and how you phrase your questions, as this can influence a participant's response, i.e. it might bias the answer or prime participants to respond in a particular way.

The moderator's guide is often quite structured but since the benefit of using focus groups is its ability to generate new insights, it should not be too rigid. So it is advisable to allow for some flexibility, i.e. ask different questions if the opportunity presents itself. The moderator guide should also be pre-tested during the development phase (e.g. with colleagues, and individuals who reflect the selection criteria). Likewise, it is good practice to treat the first focus group as a pilot interview, since this will enable you to fine-tune the moderator's guide for subsequent interviews.

Often, researchers will ask *how many topics or questions should be included in the moderator's guide*. As Stewart et al. (2007) state, this is difficult to determine because different groups may spend more time on a particular topic compared to other topics, e.g. depending on how homogeneous the groups are, the group's level of knowledge, and how experienced the moderator is. However, most moderator guides tend to have less than six key questions as 10–20 minutes is needed for

**Table 2** Developing an interview guide and tips

---

*Open-ended questions*

---

These include “when”, “what”, “who”, “where”, “how” type questions  
 Be cautious of using the word “why” because participants may try to rationalise their experiences or views in order to meet the interviewer’s expectations. Examples of alternative why-related questions include:  
 “What made you choose...?”  
 “What factors/features influence...?”  
 “What caused you to...?”  
 “What makes you say that?”

---

*Probing type questions*

---

“Could you elaborate on that?”  
 “What do you mean by that?”  
 “How does that make you feel?”  
 “Tell me more”  
 “Can you explain what you mean?”  
 “Do you have any examples?”  
 “Does anyone share the same view? Have a different view?”

---

*Projective techniques*

---

“Who do you think uses this product?”  
 “What type of person might agree with this statement?”  
 “If this [object] was a person, what type of person would they be?”  
 “If you were a manager, how would you encourage other people to...?”

---

*Closed-ended questions*

---

These are direct questions that can be used to obtain specific information about a participant, and they tend to generate short answers. For example:  
 How long have you worked there?  
 Do you have children?  
 Are you in favour of ...?  
 They are useful when you want to collect specific information but they can also provide a starting point for a topic. For example, “are you in favour of...” can be followed up with an open-ended question.

---

*Other tips*

---

Avoid asking several questions at once as this may cause confusion, and dilute the answer.  
 Throughout the interview, you might ask the same question in different ways to check for consistency and understanding.  
 Think about the question order. Is it logical? Does it flow well?  
 Will it influence how people will answer the next question (priming effect)?  
 Think about how the questions are worded. Would the phrasing bias or influence the answer?

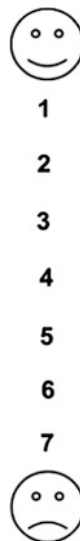
---

each key question (Krueger and Casey 2009). Depending on how many focus groups you choose to run, a *rolling interview* approach is another option whereby the moderator makes modifications to the guide after each focus group. The main problem with this approach is that it can be very difficult to make comparisons between focus groups if each group is asked a different set of questions. However, this might be suitable if the purpose of the focus group is to provide more depth about the topic (Stewart et al. 2007).

The time frame for each focus group will depend on the number of topics you want to address. 60 minutes to 2 hours is the norm. In my experience, 90 minutes to 2 hours is ideal as it provides time for introductions and time to wrap up the focus group. Allocating a time limit for each topic to ensure you cover everything within the allocated time frame is also good practice. Lastly, how you end the focus group is just as important as how you begin it, e.g. the final question could be used to summarise the key points.

**Writing activities** Including writing activities in a focus group can be an effective technique for uncovering individuals' opinions on a particular issue. Plus, it minimises the influence of others. For example, you might ask the participants to circle the number that best reflects their views on an issue, using a seven-point smiley-face scale (refer to Fig. 1) before discussing a topic. You would then go around the room and ask each individual to share what they have written; people will generally read what they have written rather than state what is popular (Greenbaum 2000).

Rating activities (e.g. Fig. 1) are useful because they can help you to identify issues that should be discussed in more depth (Krueger and Casey 2009). Other



**Fig. 1** Smiley-face Scale activity (Adapted from Greenbaum 2000, p.136 )

activities that a moderator might use include having the participants write down key words or a short paragraph that sums up their views on an issue, asking members to put together a collage using images from magazines, or using projective techniques, e.g. ‘if this product were a person, what would their characteristics be?’ Projective techniques are useful because they enable participants to project their thoughts onto another person or object, which can make answering the question easier, and it enables participants to articulate thoughts which may have been difficult to express. A variety of activities were used in case study one (refer to Example One). The main purpose of an activity is to generate discussion, so if you choose to use one, you must ensure it does not take up too much time.

|  |                        |
|--|------------------------|
| <i>Example One</i> (Johnstone and Tan 2015a)   |                        |
| Our study used a structured moderator’s guide which included discussion-based questions, writing activities, and exercises (see below). The aims of the activities were to investigate consumers’ perceptions of environmentally-friendly (EF) products and green consumption behaviours. The focus group was scheduled for 2 hours. |                        |
| <b>Case Study One: The Moderator’s Guide</b> (Johnstone and Tan 2015a, p. 325)   |                        |
| <b>Introduction (10 min)</b>   | <i>(120 min to go)</i> |
| Welcome participants   |                        |
| Brief the participants   |                        |
| Ask the participants to read the information sheet, sign the consent form & confidentiality form if they are happy to participate in the interview.  |                        |
| Ground rules, e.g. switch off mobile phones, participants need to talk one at a time   |                        |
| <b>Introduction/Warm-Up/Ice-Breaker Exercise (10 min)</b>  | <i>(110 min)</i>       |
| <b>Activity #1</b>   |                        |
| ‘Provide product samples of environmentally-friendly (EF) and conventional (non-EF) laundry detergents, and stacks of cards with brand names   |                        |
| Group introductions  |                        |
| Which of these products do you <u>usually</u> purchase?’   |                        |
| <b>Part 1: What encourages or discourages consumers from purchasing environmentally-friendly household products? (25 min)</b>  | <i>(100 min)</i>       |
| What factors influenced you to purchase these brands (Activity #1)?  |                        |
| Probe: experiences, perceptions.   |                        |
| Why do you think other people use/do not use these products? [ <i>projective technique</i> ]   |                        |
| What would encourage you/other people to buy environmentally-friendly household products? [ <i>projective technique</i> ]  |                        |
| <b>Part 2: What are consumers’ perceptions of being green/of the terms “green”/environmentally-friendly? (35 min)</b>  | <i>(75 min)</i>        |
| <b>Activity #2</b> [ <i>writing activity and projective technique</i> ]  |                        |
| Hand out soap samples (EF and non-EF) and answer sheets. If this brand was a person, what type of person would he/she be?  |                        |
| (continued)  |                        |

|  |                 |
|--|-----------------|
| (continued)  |                 |
| What type of characteristics would they have?  |                 |
| Probe: What makes you think this?  |                 |
| Focus on EF products:  |                 |
| Explore current perceptions, and why. Their experiences.   |                 |
| Explore how EF products are currently promoted/package?  |                 |
| What does being “environmentally-friendly” mean?   |                 |
| Does it mean the same thing as “green”?  |                 |
| Being environmentally-friendly/green   |                 |
| How easy/difficult?  |                 |
| What makes it easy/difficult?  |                 |
| Probe: Look at past experiences/perceptions  |                 |
| <b>Green consumers: [draw person on whiteboard] [whiteboard activity]</b>  |                 |
| Describe characteristics, traits, consumption behaviour  |                 |
| What would encourage people/you to become more environmentally-friendly? [ <i>projective technique</i> ]                               |                 |
| <b>Part 3: Perceptions of product packaging? (25 min)</b>  | <b>(40 min)</b> |
| <b>Activity #3</b>   |                 |
| Pass around the table a variety of household dishwashing detergents.   |                 |
| On answer sheets: Write some key factors alongside each product. [ <i>writing activity</i> ]   |                 |
| Which ones do you consider to be environmentally-friendly?   |                 |
| What factors helped you to decide this?  |                 |
| Why do you think these are more/less environmentally friendly?   |                 |
| Probe: What factors make these more/less EF?   |                 |
| What are your impressions of these products?   |                 |
| What factors make household products environmentally-friendly?   |                 |
| <b>Debriefing &amp; Closing (15 min)</b>   | <b>(15 min)</b> |
| Final question: To encourage people to adopt greener consumption practices, what advice would you give to marketers and policy makers? |                 |
| Wrap up  | <b>(0 min)</b>  |

## Data Collection Decisions

**How Many Focus Groups Should You Have?** When it comes to deciding how many focus groups you should have, there is no hard rule because this will depend on the purpose of the study. Some researchers may need only two to four focus groups because the purpose of the focus group interview is to provide some initial insights before developing a quantitative study. For others, depending on how complex the research problem is, or how diverse the participants are, more may be needed, so a researcher might run six to ten-plus focus groups (Stewart et al. 2007). Another accepted rule of thumb is to keep adding more focus groups until you reach saturation, i.e. no new ideas emerge (Krueger and Casey 2009).



The number of participants in each focus group is also important. Although having between six and twelve participants per group is generally acceptable, in my experience, six to eight participants is the ideal range because problems can occur if you have too few or too many participants. For instance, if a focus group has less than six participants, it can generate fewer insights, especially if the group includes shy and quiet individuals. Conversely, when there are more than ten people in a group, the discussion can become more challenging to manage. However, it is always advisable to recruit more people than you need in case you experience one or two ‘no-shows’. For example, you should aim to recruit nine to ten participants for each focus group on the basis that one or two people may not turn up.

**Selection Criteria and Group Composition** During the planning phase, it is important to decide on your selection criteria at the start of your study as this will shape your moderator’s guide, and will be used to screen potential participants during the recruitment phase.

To encourage group rapport, similar people should be grouped together because participants are more likely to open up among individuals they identify with. So the more homogeneous the group, the more comfortable people will be. But while, for example, you might group people together based on age, education, values, or lifestyle, this does not mean that participants cannot be heterogeneous in terms of their opinions because the purpose of a focus group is to generate new insights. At the same time, you must be mindful of the nature of the topic—is it a contentious topic that would generate too much disharmony in a group of individuals whose values are too different from each other?

Lastly, you need to consider when and where the focus groups will take place, and whether there will be incentives for the participants. Example Two illustrates the selection criteria used in case study one.

*Example Two*

**Case Study One: Selection Criteria and Group Characteristics** (Johnstone and Tan 2015a, p. 315)

We had one main selection criterion; we were interested in recruiting consumers who were not overly “green” in terms of their consumption practices but they also needed to be concerned about the environment. Potential participants were screened over the telephone using established behavioural and attitudinal-based questions which measured ecological concern (Bohlen et al. 1993). Some of the screening questions we used included: “The media focuses too much on the environment” and “Personally, I cannot help to slow down environmental deterioration”, as well as “Do you recycle?”, “What types of household cleaning brands do you purchase/use?”, “What kinds of environmentally-friendly products do you buy?”, and “How often do you take your own reusable bags to the store when you shop?”. Since participants also needed to be household shoppers, a qualifying question, “Do you participate in the household shopping activities?” was asked. Demographic information was collected because respondent homogeneity was important to us. So we used age and occupation as a starting point when forming our groups

**Recruitment process** Recruitment is another important task. This involves scouting for participants, screening potential participants, and scheduling interview times. When screening participants, it is important to know what type of person you are looking for, and how to find them. Examples Two and Three highlight the approach we used when recruiting people for case study one.

*Example Three*

**Case Study One: Recruitment Process** (Johnstone and Tan 2015a, p. 314)

We placed advertisements in the local newspaper, and distributed posters around a university for the seventh focus group. We clearly communicated at the beginning of the screening process that we were seeking consumers who purchased eco-friendly household products as well as those who *did not*. This was to minimise self-reporting bias because previous research has revealed that ‘consumers may over report their attitudinal preferences and purchase intentions (i.e. towards more socially responsible behaviour) when responding to environmental issues’. Seven focus groups were conducted, and a total of 57 individuals were recruited.

**Conducting Focus Group Interviews** Refer to Table 1 for a list of planning steps and details that need to be considered prior to conducting a focus group.

The moderator needs to set the right tone at the outset to encourage good group participation. At the start of the interview, the moderator should assure everyone that their names will remain anonymous and hand out name tags (so people can refer to each other by name); and set the ground rules, for example, by stating the purpose of the focus group and that everyone’s views are of interest, explaining why it is important for individuals to speak one at a time, and reiterating that everyone will have a chance to contribute. Most importantly, the moderator needs to emphasise the equal value of everyone’s views and that participants should not worry about what others might think. It is also useful at this stage to ask everyone to briefly introduce themselves, by answering a simple ice-breaker question—this will get everyone used to speaking in the group.

**Interviewing Techniques for Focus Groups and Depth Interviews** When discussing issues and probing for further insights, open-ended questions are critical to the success of an interview. Probing questions should be used to help tease out ideas. Refer to Table 2 for additional tips.

As an interviewer, it is important to allow your participants to voice their opinions without any judgement from you, so comments like “that’s interesting”, “great”, “good”, “really?” should be avoided when you respond to an individual’s answer. Pausing for up to five seconds before moving on to the next question or asking a follow-up question will also help to elicit further insights.

From time to time, moderators may find themselves faced with a group of people who are shy, or domineering, or overly talkative. Greenbaum (2000), Krueger and Casey (2009), and Stewart et al. (2007) provide some useful strategies to help new

and inexperienced moderators overcome these particular challenges. Refer to the reading list.

**Analysing the Data for Focus Group and Depth Interviews** Transcribing each interview is an important part of the research process. You should know in advance what analytical methods you will use to analyse the data, which will be guided by the purpose of the study and resources available. For example, if time and money are limited, analysing 50 interviews, each 2 hours long, post-transcription may not be realistic, particularly if you are looking for deep and meaningful insights (Kvale 1996). If you have decided to use discourse analysis, a large sample is, likewise, not feasible. Since the purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the focus group and interview process, a discussion of the different types of analytical tools available to researchers is beyond its scope (refer to the key readings list); instead, a commonly used approach to analysis is discussed.

When analysing your data, it is important to do this in relation to the research problem, objectives, and research questions. It is always a good idea to have your objectives and research questions at hand to avoid spending too much time identifying (and interpreting at depth) any themes that may be interesting but unrelated to your study. You can always return to these themes at a later time, but your present objectives must remain the focus. However, as Kvale (1996, p. 187) notes, ‘a continuum exists between description and interpretation,’ so your analysis will also be influenced by the study’s methodology.

When dealing with a large data set, using a qualitative computer-based program such as NVivo to store your transcripts is strongly recommended. NVivo can be used in a number of ways but I prefer to use it—because of my methodological preferences—as a means to store and access the data rather than for analysis; for example, I do not use the key word function to identify themes. Key words are meaningless without context. For example, identical words used by two or more participants may have different meanings, whereas different words may be used by participants to express similar meanings.

A commonly used method is thematic analysis, whereby the text is systematically analysed, coded and re-coded, to discover patterns and commonalities within the text. This is an iterative approach which involves changing and moving texts in relation to others during the analysis phase as concepts and interpretations become more refined (Spiggle 1994). Using ‘theoretical thematic analysis’ means the analysis is driven by an existing theoretical framework, or uses an ‘inductive approach’ whereby the themes are driven by the data itself (Braun and Clarke 2006; Thomas 2006). Alternatively, a ‘deductive-inductive’ approach may be adopted to generate new insights (Johnstone and Tan 2015b).

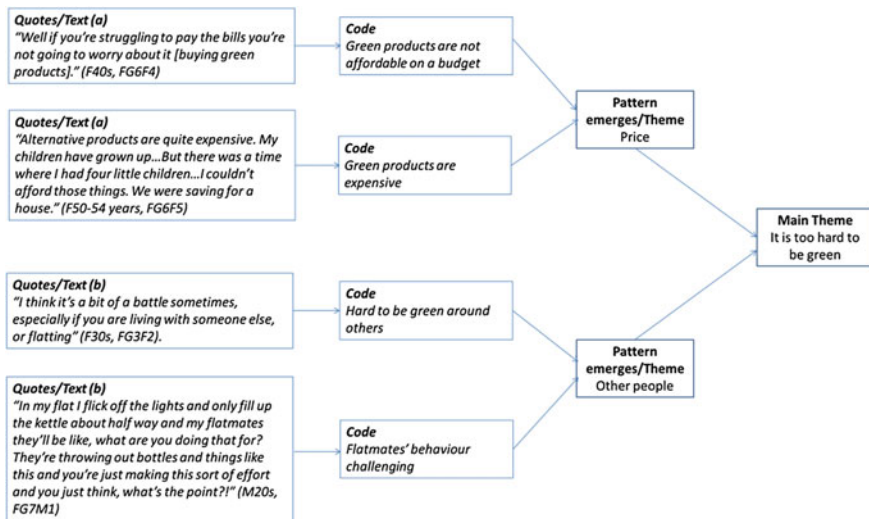
Depending on the scope of the study, several steps may be required in the coding and re-coding process. Stage one involves reading each individual transcript and identifying themes within each interview. The second stage compares each interview and looks for commonalities and differences between the interviews, and categorising each theme accordingly. Similar themes from different interviews, for example, might be categorised as one theme and renamed. After these themes have been established, in the third stage

further similarities and/or differences are sought, themes are re-coded as necessary, and the number of categories reduced. When you write up your study, it is important to check that your analysis consistently addresses the purpose of the study and your research questions. Refer to Example Four.

*Example Four*

**Case Study One: Coding and Analysis** (Johnstone and Tan 2015a, p. 321)

In this example (Fig. 2), we can see how two patterns emerge (e.g. “Price” and “Other people”) based on participants’ quotes (initial codes). (For the purpose of this case study, only four quotes were used for this exercise). Sub-themes are identified before being categorised under the main theme, “It is too hard to be green”. The findings from the study were divided into three main themes (Fig. 3): (1) “It is too hard to be green”, i.e. consumers’ perceptions of external factors make it difficult for some consumers to adopt greener consumption practices; (2) “Green stigma”, i.e. some consumers have less than favourable perceptions of “green” consumers and “green” messages, which shapes their green perceptions; and (3) “Green reservations” revealed that some consumers are uncertain or ambivalent that greener consumption practices will make a difference to the environment, which shapes their perceptions.



**Fig. 2** Coding example **a** Johnstone and Tan (2015a, p. 317); **b** Johnstone and Tan (2015a, p. 318)

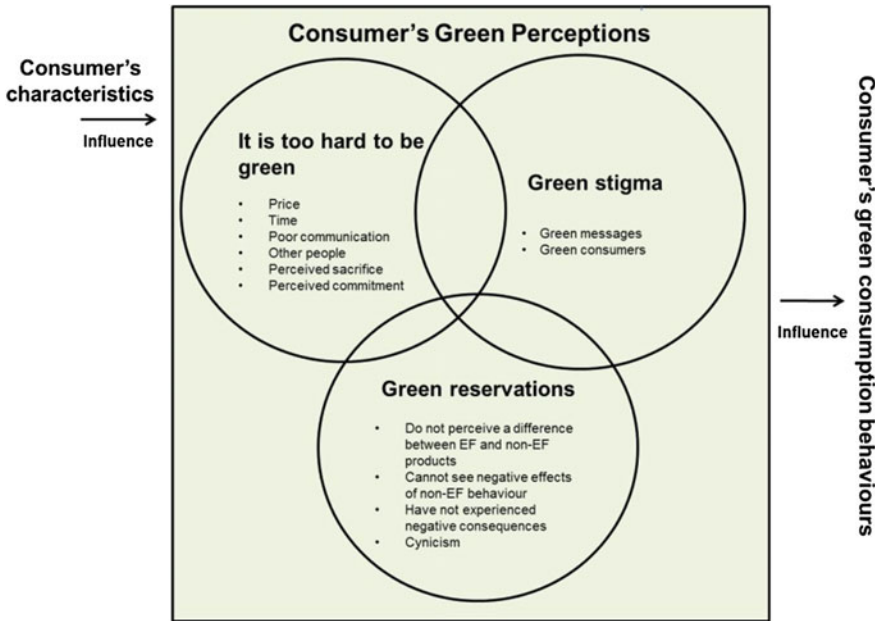


Fig. 3 Summary of key findings (Johnstone and Tan 2015a, p. 322)

### Depth Interviews

The depth interview continues to play an important role in qualitative research because it allows researchers to document multiple perspectives of reality and obtain 'thick descriptions'. Essentially, a depth interview is a conversation between two people, which can be conducted face-to-face, online, or on the phone. It is a flexible, dynamic method that enables researchers to learn about the social world through individuals' spoken accounts (Taylor and Bogdan 1998, p. 87). The terms 'depth interview' and 'in-depth interview' are encountered often. Depth interviews tend to be one-off interviews with individuals, typically between 45 minutes and 2 hours in length whereas the in-depth interview suggests that the individual was either interviewed more than once, or the interview was several hours long.

Depth interviews enable us to gain a greater understanding of what motivates people, and helps us to identify individuals' perceptions, attitudes, feelings, and experiences. However, researchers need to remember that each interview reflects only one person's experiences and perceptions. Thus the depth interview cannot be

used to draw generalisations—but this is not the purpose of the method. Rather, the depth interview is about gaining rich insights into the participant’s ‘lived experience’.

## Different Methodological Approaches to Interviews

The different approaches to interviewing are not discussed in detail in this chapter, except to point out that researchers must be aware that different research paradigms will influence how they use and conduct interviews because this will determine *how* they seek knowledge. Within the marketing discipline, the dominant paradigms have been *interpretivism* and *positivism* (Carson et al. 2001; Hudson and Ozanne 1988). Accordingly, a study’s epistemological perspective will have a huge bearing on how one views knowledge and what one deems to be true (Morgan and Smircich 1980). So a researcher adopting an interpretivist perspective will reject the notion of an objective truth, believing it is via our engagement with the world that meaning is made, i.e. ‘meaning is not discovered, but constructed’ (Crotty 1998, p. 9). In other words, meaning is socially constructed within the boundaries of the social, cultural, economic, and political norms and rules of society. Within the interpretivist paradigm there are different perspectives that will determine which methods should be used to collect and analyse data. Two interpretivist perspectives that are often used in qualitative research are phenomenology and hermeneutics (refer to Table 3).

## What are the Steps When Conducting Depth Interviews?

**Problem Identification** Once again, before beginning any research project you need to determine the purpose and importance of the study, i.e. why is this worth exploring? This step is the same regardless of what method you use. Case study

**Table 3** Two interpretivist perspectives

| Phenomenology  | Hermeneutics  |
|--|---|
| Phenomenology ‘seeks the meaning of events, not their causes’ (Seamon 1982, p. 123). Subsequently, the overall objective of phenomenology is to understand the lived experience (Sanders 1982). However, while one acknowledges that individuals construct their own meanings, these meanings are not created entirely autonomously, due to one’s social interactions with the world | A fundamental assumption of hermeneutics is that texts ‘are a means of transmitting meaning—experience, beliefs, values—from one person or community to another’ (Crotty 1998, p. 91). The objective of a hermeneutical framework is to explore the cultural viewpoints which underlie the meanings as expressed by the consumer (Arnold and Fischer 1994). It is through language that we experience the world |

two highlights how depth interviews can follow on from focus group interviews. Although focus group interviews can generate many insights, they do not provide the depth that depth interviews can yield. Refer to Case Study Two.

**Case Study Two** (Johnstone and Hooper 2016)

As highlighted by previous studies (e.g. Case Study One), many factors influence consumers' green consumption behaviours. However, as noted by other authors, very little research has looked at the role of social influence on green consumption behaviours (e.g. Peattie 2010). The main objective of this study was to advance our understanding of how consumers' green consumption practices are influenced by the social environment, and whether this encouraged people to adopt greener consumption practices. In the focus group study (Case study one), other people were identified as one of the factors that influenced consumers' green perceptions and behaviour.

Twenty participants from ten households (two from each household) were recruited using a purposeful sampling strategy. We were interested in individuals who were not overly "green" in their consumption practices. Each participant was interviewed once individually, which was immediately followed by a joint interview. There were 20 individual interviews and 10 joint interviews in total. The length of interviews ranged from 1 to 2 hours.

**Developing the Interview Guide** There are three main approaches to developing an interview guide. The *structured interview* involves asking identical questions in each interview, i.e. there is no deviation from the script. This is useful when conducting very short interviews with a very large sample size, where obtaining depth is not the objective but rather making generalisations is (although this is not usually the goal of most qualitative research). Then there is the *unstructured interview* (also known as the informal conversation interview), which has no set questions. In this approach, the interview flow is based on the participant's answer—the interviewee guides the interview. This can be a useful method if you plan on having multiple interviews with the same person (Patton 2002). While the unstructured interview may appear to lack focus, it is nonetheless guided by the purpose of the study. Lastly, in the *semi-structured* approach, a combination of the first two approaches, there are set questions but also room for deviation in order to glean new insights as directed by the interviewee. All three approaches, though, benefit from using open-ended questions to gain rich insights. Once again, a funnel approach is useful when developing your interview guide, i.e. start with broad questions and narrow down to specific questions.

It is important to realise that the depth interview will be guided by methodological and philosophical assumptions. This has important implications given that an ethnographic interview, for example, will be quite different from either a therapist's interview or an investigative journalist's interview (van Manen 1997). Likewise, the interviewing techniques used in a study will be influenced by the methodological perspective and research discipline—the techniques used by a psychologist to interview a subject will differ from a marketer's.

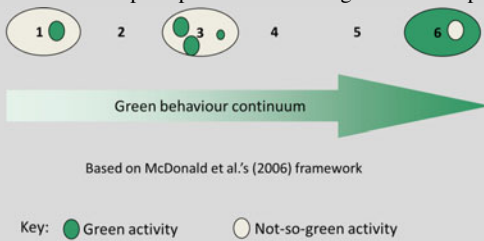
Depending on the purpose of the interview, you may require the participant to do something before they attend the interview. For example, you may want them to

bring certain items to the interview. In one study I conducted, I asked participants in advance of the interview to take photographs of retail locations that they regularly patronised, because my interest was in exploring issues around place attachment and place identity. Using photo-elicitation techniques, I referred to these photographs throughout the interview. This is a useful tool because deeper meanings can often emerge when participants are prompted by photographs and other images as they are able to more easily articulate their thoughts (Heisley and Levy 1991). Example Five demonstrates how other activities can also be incorporated into a depth interview.

**Example Five**

**Case study two: Interview Activity** (Johnstone and Hooper 2016)

Participants were asked to rate their level of “greenness” using the “Green Behaviour Continuum” below (adapted from McDonald et al. 2006). This was based on their perceptions of what it means to be environmentally-responsible/green. The participants were asked to provide an “actual” score (e.g. how they currently behave) and an “ideal” score (e.g. whether they would like to change). This ranged from one (not-so-green) to six (very green). This ice-breaker exercise helped us to identify what green consumption activities the interviewees participated in, as well as their perceptions of various green consumption practices.



**Data Collection Decisions** There are many things that one needs to consider when planning a depth interview, one being deciding on the length of the interview—will it be a 45 minute or a 2 hour interview? Similarly, how many times will you interview a person? It is very common to interview a person only once, but this will again depend on your study’s purpose, your methodology, and your time constraints. In reality, time may allow only one interview per participant; or perhaps your participants may only be willing to be interviewed once. Another consideration is the number of people required for your study.

**Sample Size: How Many Interviews are Enough?** There are no set rules in qualitative research for determining sample size—the purpose of the study is your guide. More important considerations are whether the data will be useful in terms of achieving the study’s objectives, and its credibility, i.e. are the number of participants sufficient to draw conclusions about the phenomenon in question (Patton 2002). The methodology you adopt will also play a role in this decision. For example, in phenomenology the sample size can vary from one to ten individuals



(e.g. Thompson et al. 1989), and in grounded theory it can vary from 20 to 30 individuals (Cresswell 2013). It may also depend on the sampling strategy you adopt. For example, one might continue to interview people until the ‘point of redundancy’ is reached, i.e. no new information emerges from the sample pool (Patton 2002). However, as Patton (2002, p. 246) points out, ‘sampling to the point of redundancy is an ideal, one that works best for basic research, unlimited time-lines, and unconstrained resources’—not the case for many studies. Ultimately, the decision of sample size should be based on what is adequate, whether meaningful and useful data will result, and also on peer affirmation. Academics need to take into account the journals they are targeting for publication—some editors are very explicit in their expectations whereas in other journals, expectations are implicitly demonstrated in the types of qualitative articles they publish.

**Sampling Strategy** There are different sampling strategies available to researchers. A common one is purposeful sampling, whereby the sample is selected according to purpose, and information-rich cases are selected (Patton 2002). In this approach, one strategy is *theoretical sampling*, a ‘method of data collection based on concepts derived from the data’ (Corbin and Strauss 2008, p. 145). The researcher keeps collecting data until the point of saturation, at which no new insights about the concepts are obtained. Another strategy is *extreme or deviant case sampling* wherein unusual cases are selected in order to learn from phenomena such as crises and success stories/failures, etc. (Patton 2002). Refer to Creswell (2013) and Patton (2002) for a detailed list of sampling strategies. Following sampling strategy, selection criteria need to be decided as these will be required during the recruitment phase.

**Conducting the Interview** Logistical decisions, such as the location and its suitability, i.e. will there be any interruptions, is it a noisy environment that will affect the quality of the recording, will the participants be comfortable (as this may have an impact on how open and relaxed they are) need to be made in advance of the interviews.

As for interview style, the adapted phenomenological interview is commonly used (although, again, this will depend on your methodology). This technique places the participant, rather than the researcher’s expectations, at the heart of the study (Stern 1995). While phenomenological interviews are by nature unstructured, which allows the participant to guide the interview (Thompson et al. 1989), an adapted phenomenological interview is frequently preferred because it enables a semi-structured approach to explore the ‘lived experience’. Table 2 provides additional detail. There are also some excellent resources for novice interviewers (refer to the key readings list). The last phase of the interview process is analysing the data, as discussed earlier.

## Quality Issues with Depth Interviews and Focus Groups

In seeking to establish the trustworthiness of a qualitative study, a number of techniques can be used. For example, *descriptive validity* ensures the researcher accurately records what is seen or heard before they begin their analysis (Wolcott 1990). *Interpretive validity* is concerned with whether the researcher has interpreted the transcripts accurately (Maxwell 2005). Likewise, *confirmability* ensures the findings and conclusions drawn from the study support the texts, i.e. are they logical, reasonable, and lacking prejudice? (Hirschman 1986). One way to address this is to employ an auditor. The role of an auditor is to review the documentation and to decide if the researcher is justified in making the conclusions. Applying the hermeneutic circle principle is another approach—interpretation occurring via an iterative back-and-forth process whereby parts of the text are related back to the whole text (Arnold and Fischer 1994). *Dependability* questions whether the study itself and the research process were stable over time and consistent (Miles and Huberman 1994, p. 278). This is important because people's perceptions and experiences can be influenced by occurrences in the socio-cultural environment, and it is desirable to eliminate any potential historical effects. Approaching each interview in the same manner when there are multiple focus groups, participants, and interviewers is also important, hence the need for moderator and interview guides. *Transferability* tests whether the conclusions from this study can be transferred to other contexts, or more appropriately, has the researcher provided the thickness of description 'necessary to enable someone interested in making a transfer to reach a conclusion about whether transfer can be contemplated as a possibility' (Lincoln and Guba 1985, p. 316)? Patton (2002) also refers to *credibility*, that the integrity of the study's findings depends on three elements—rigorous methods, the credibility of the researcher, and the researcher's understanding of qualitative research.

## Ethical Issues to Consider When Conducting Depth Interviews and Focus Group Interviews

When conducting research, there are always ethical issues that need to be countenanced to protect participants and researchers, as well as the integrity of the study. Issues of privacy, confidentiality and informed consent need to be dealt with before a study begins. Participants need to know how the data will be used and stored; they also need assurance that their names and any identifying characteristics will remain confidential, and that pseudonyms will be used to protect their identity. In focus groups, confidentiality can be problematic, but participants can be asked to sign confidentiality forms before the interviews commence (it is also good practice to ask the transcriber to sign a confidentiality form). *Consent Forms* should be signed

before the interviews begin, but only after the participants have been fully informed about the study and given the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered.

**Acknowledgments** I would like to acknowledge Dr. Lay Peng Tan from Macquarie University (Sydney, Australia) and Stephanie Hooper (Wellington, New Zealand). Case study one is based on the research I conducted with Lay Peng Tan. The material I used for case study two is based on my collaborative work with Stephanie Hooper.

## Key Internet Sources

Michigan State University Ph.D. Digital advisor: Provides useful tips on interviewing. <https://msu.edu/user/mkennedy/digitaladvisor/Research/interviewing.htm>.

Richard Krueger's Moderating a Focus Group, published on July 28 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xjHZsEcSqwo>.

The Qualitative Report provides useful links to other qualitative research sites. <http://tqr.nova.edu/websites/>.

## Key Readings

There are some excellent resources available for those who want to extend their understanding of these methods. Listed below are some examples.

## Focus Groups

Krueger, R. A., & Casey, M. A. (2009). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Morgan, D. L. (1997). *Focus groups as qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Stewart, D. W., Shamdasani, P. N., & Rook, D. W. (2007a). *Focus groups: Theory and practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

## Interviews

Cresswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Kvale, S. (1996a). *Interviews: An introduction to qualitative research writing*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Patton, M. Q. (2002a). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

## References

- Arnold, S. J., & Fischer, E. (1994). Hermeneutics and consumer research. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 21(1), 55–71. doi:10.1086/209382.
- Bohlen, G., Schlegelmilch, B. B., & Diamantopoulos, A. (1993). Measuring ecological concern: A multi-construct perspective. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 9(4), 415–430.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. doi:10.1191/1478088706qp0630a.
- Carrington, M., Neville, B., & Whitwell, G. (2010). Why ethical consumers don't walk their talk: Towards a framework for understanding the gap between the ethical purchase intentions and actual buying behaviour of ethically minded consumers. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 97(1), 139–158. doi:10.1007/s10551-010-0501-6.
- Carson, D., Gilmore, A., Perry, C., & Gronhaug, K. (2001). *Qualitative marketing research*. London: Sage Publications.
- Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2008). *Basics of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Crotty, M. (1998). *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process*. London: Sage Publications.
- Eurobarometer. (2011). Attitudes of European Citizens towards the environment. [http://ec.europa.eu/environment/pdf/ebs\\_365\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/environment/pdf/ebs_365_en.pdf). Accessed on March 12, 2012.
- Greenbaum, T. L. (2000). *Moderating focus groups: A practical guide for group facilitation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Heisley, D. D., & Levy, S. J. (1991). Autodriving: A photoelicitation technique. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 18(3), 257–272.
- Hirschman, E. C. (1986). Humanistic inquiry in marketing research: Philosophy, method, and criteria. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 23(3), 237–249.
- Hudson, L. A., & Ozanne, J. L. (1988). Alternative ways of seeking knowledge in consumer research. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 14(4), 508–521. doi:10.1086/209132.
- Johnstone, M. L., & Hooper, S. (2016). Social influence and green consumption behaviour: A need for greater government involvement. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 32(9/10), 827–855. doi:10.1080/0267257X.2016.1189955.
- Johnstone, M. L., & Tan, L. (2015a). Exploring the gap between consumers' green rhetoric and purchasing behaviour. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 132(2), 311–328. doi:10.1007/s10551-014-2316-3.
- Johnstone, M. L., & Tan, L. P. (2015b). An exploration of environmentally-conscious consumers and the reasons why they do not buy green products. *Marketing Intelligence and Planning*, 33(5), 804–825. doi:10.1108/MIP-09-2013-0159.
- Kvale, S. (1996b). *Interviews: An introduction to qualitative research writing*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Lederman, L. C. (1990). Assessing educational effectiveness: The focus group interview as a technique for data collection? *Communication Education*, 39(2), 117–127.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.
- Maxwell, J. A. (2005). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Mcdonald, S., Oates, C., Alevizou, P., Young, W., & Hwang, K. (2006). Communication strategies for sustainable technologies: Identifying patterns of behaviour. *Greening of Industry Network Conference*. University of Cardiff.
- Miles, M., & Huberman, A. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

- Morgan, D. L., & Krueger, R. A. (1993). When to use focus groups and why. In D. L. Morgan (Ed.), *Successful focus groups: Advancing the state of the art* (pp. 3–20). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Inc.
- Morgan, G., & Smircich, L. (1980). The case for qualitative research. *Academy of Management Review*, 5(4), 491–500.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002b). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Peattie, K. (2010). Green consumption: Behavior and norms. *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, 35, 195–228. doi:[10.1146/annurev-environ-032609-094328](https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-environ-032609-094328).
- Sanders, P. (1982). Phenomenology: A new way of viewing organizational research. *Academy of Management Review*, 7(3), 353–360.
- Seamon, D. (1982). The phenomenological contribution to environmental psychology. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 2(2), 119–140. doi:[10.1016/S0272-4944\(05\)80161-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0272-4944(05)80161-6).
- Spiggle, S. (1994). Analysis and interpretation of qualitative data in consumer research. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 21(3), 491–503.
- Stern, B. B. (1995). Consumer myths: Frye's taxonomy and the structural analysis of consumption text. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 22(September), 165–185.
- Stewart, D. W., Shamdasani, P. N., & Rook, D. W. (2007b). *Focus groups: Theory and practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Taylor, S., & Bogdan, R. (1998). *Introduction to qualitative research methods: A guidebook and resource*. New York: Wiley.
- Thomas, D. R. (2006). A general inductive approach for analyzing qualitative evaluation data. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 27(2), 237–246.
- Thompson, C. J., Locander, W. B., & Pollio, H. R. (1989). Putting consumer experience back into consumer research: The philosophy and method of existential-phenomenology. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 16(2), 133–146. doi:[10.1086/209203](https://doi.org/10.1086/209203).
- Van Manen, M. (1997). *Researching lived experience*. Ontario, Canada: The Althouse Press.
- Wolcott, H. F. (1990). On seeking-and rejecting-validity in qualitative research. In E. W. Eisner & A. Peshkin (Eds.), *Qualitative inquiry in education: The continuing debate* (pp. 121–152). New York: Teachers College Press.