

## EXPLORATION OF THE STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUP IN QUALITATIVE CRIMINOLOGICAL RESEARCH

**John Ikeyi**

Department of Social Sciences and Humanities  
Institute of Management and Technology, Enugu  
ikeyijohn@gmail.com

### **Abstract**

*This paper explores the strengths and weaknesses of semi-structured interview and focus group as methods of data collection in qualitative criminological research. It began with descriptions of both, and then goes ahead to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses as well as the measures to mitigate some of these weaknesses. It sometimes discusses the strengths, the weaknesses as well as the mitigating measures of the weaknesses of these methods collectively since they share many features. Interviews is used in this paper to refer to semi-structured and unstructured interviews. In conclusion it submits that semi-structured interviews and focus group would serve as veritable research methods for carrying out qualitative criminological research. This submission is because interviews and focus group as qualitative methods develop understating of criminal offending by laying emphasis on comprehending the different ways through which criminal offending occurs and how the respective agents, structures, and methods of responding to crime operate through the acquisition of accurate information about the phenomenon in culturally grounded contexts. Furthermore, the understanding of crime, criminals and justice system operations and handling offered by statistical studies applied in quantitative methods cannot give the type of insight offered by the in-depth, holistic, authentic, exploratory, and descriptive data provide by both interviews and focus group based criminological research.*

**Key words:** Qualitative, Interviews, Focus Group, Research, Ontology, Epistemology

### **Introduction**

Qualitative methods refer to approaches which apply systematic procedures in collecting holistic, authentic, mainly exploratory, and descriptive data in the study of social phenomena (Astalin, 2013). "They provide in-depth understanding of the social basis of human experiences and actions, how these experiences and actions are lived, and how such lived experiences can

differ according to social context” (Rhodes and Coomber, 2010. p. 59), hence, they are based on interpretivism. These methods denote procedures which aim to study the empirical world from the perspective of the people being studied, and considers both the psychological, physical, and socio-cultural situations which constitute the basis of any realistic study as well as that the idiosyncratic connotations and insights of the subject as essential (Schmid, 1981).

Qualitative methods use procedures that are exhaustive, supple, intricate, and sensible to social milieu to understand how social phenomena are interpreted, understood, experienced, and constructed (Mason, 2002). These methods facilitate the understanding of the social basis of criminal behaviour and delinquency because crime and offending behaviours are social in nature, varying according to space and time dimensions and are context-based (Rhodes and Coomber 2010). They also enable researchers to gain direct access to people who are caught in the web of criminal justice system as well as operators of the system to be able to understand the way social realities of crime and criminal justice system operate (Clarke, 1997). The understanding of crime, criminals and justice system operations offered by statistical studies applied in quantitative methods cannot compare with the in-depth, holistic, authentic, exploratory, and descriptive data provided by qualitative methods (Tewksbury, 2009).

Interviews refer to one of the methods applied in collection of in-depth data about social phenomena (Pierre and Roulston, 2006), and are applied to inductively gather data in a natural setting by asking interviewees open-ended questions (Davis and Francis, 2018). Interviews are committed to “seeing the social world from the actor’s point of view, expressing preference for a contextual understanding so that human actions are understood in the context of meaning applied by a particular group or society” (Bryman, 1984: p.

77). They can be conducted with one interviewee at a time, or with a group on a face-to-face basis or through Skype, telephone, or internet chat rooms (Chamberlain, 2013).

Focus group refers to group interview which depends on questions asked by the moderator and interaction among group members to offer insight into specific topics, characteristically made up of between five to twelve persons (Jackson, *et al.*, 2007). It consists of groups of equally placed persons (Tewksbury, 2009) who are formally arranged to deliberate on a range of perspectives on an open-ended topic (Rhodes and Coomber, 2010). It is conducted using open-ended questions (Bachman and Schutt, 2017), while allowing discussants to interact among themselves by asking one another questions (Davis and Francis, 2018). It is used to capture and clarify the extent to which behaviours, meanings, events, and norms are socially accepted, and in revealing group language which helps to expose group dynamics, thus showing how hierarchies, characteristics and interpretations are negotiated (Rhodes and Coomber, 2010).

Interviews and focus group as “qualitative methods are about gaining true understandings of the social aspects of how crime occurs and how the agents, structures, and processes of responding to crime operate in culturally grounded contexts” (Tewksbury, 2009, p. 39). These two methods align with ontological philosophy of social constructivism and epistemological paradigm of interpretivism (Davis and Francis, 2018). Constructivism refers to the ontological conception that “meaning is constructed not discovered, so subjects construct their own meaning in different ways, even in relation to the same phenomenon. Hence, multiple, contradictory but equally valid accounts of the world can exist” (Gray, 2004, p. 20). It contends that truth and meaning are fashioned out of interactions between the subject’s and the world and

therefore, they do not exist in some outside world (Gray, 2004). On the other hand, interpretivism refers to epistemological and theoretical paradigm which “looks for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social lifeworld” (Crotty, 1998, quoted in Gray, 2004, p. 23). Therefore, it argues that natural reality and social reality are different, thus, any effort to study them would require different kinds of method (Gray, 2004).

Hence, they acknowledge the essence of subjective construction of meaning in human society (Baxter and Jack, 2008), by recognising that the entire research enterprise, ranging from choice of topic to data analysis, and the subjectivity of the researcher are interwoven (Ratner, 2002). Thus, allowing both the researcher and other participants to affect the interpretations of the study (Ormston *et. al.*, 2014). However, the constitutive function of the researcher in the construction of in-depth, qualitative accounts of social life is mitigated with the application of the concept of reflexivity (Chamberlain, 2012). “Reflexivity refers to the recognition that the involvement of the researcher as an active participant in the research process shapes the nature of the process and the knowledge produced through it” (Nigel, 2004, p. 20). Therefore, researchers are expected to consider the scope of their involvement in the same manner that they reflect on the significance of the contributions of other research participants (Nigel, 2004).

Although interviews and focus group share several features, for ethical reasons they are used for different purposes; some studies are typically conducted with interviews, while others are often accomplished with focus group (Adams, and Cox, 2008). Focus group is suitable for exploring how knowledge, ideas and opinions are constituted and function within a social framework (Kitzinger, 1995). They are appropriate for understanding the degree of harmony, and commonplace usages of ethos and etymology of a

group (Morgan and Kreuger, 1993), while interviews are appropriate for studies on sensitive topics, personal histories, perspectives, and experiences (Mack, 2005). Collection of data for studies involving topics in which different levels of meaning need to be explored is preferably carried out with interviews (Nigel, 2004).

Interviews enhance data richness and authenticity by using open-ended questions which stimulate answers that are unexpected, evocative, relevant, revealing and of inestimable value (Mack, 2005), and gives the researcher access to the nuances of interviewees' facial and body expressions (McCrady, *et al.*, 2010). By accessing facial and body clues, the quality of data is boosted because it permits the interviewer to account for important human aspects and link such data with appraisal peculiarities (Brown, 2006). Interviews offer evidence about commonly contradictory actions, views, sentiments, relationships of individuals, and intangible factors, such as social norms, socioeconomic status, gender roles, ethnicity, religion and provide complex rich accounts of how individuals experience different issues (Mack, 2005). They are one of the most flexible methods of data collection and can be used to tackle different types of research questions in qualitative criminological research (Nigel, 2004), and are useful in yielding authentic data from respondents who are unenthusiastic about completing questionnaires around matters affecting their workplace because of anonymity but would be willing to discuss such matters with someone they have a rapport (Gray, 2004).

Due to familiarity with interviews in general and because many people who would like but could hardly hold conversations with concerned outsiders about their work either to share passion or to raise grievance, would willingly accept interviews (Nigel, 2004). Interviews usually involve one interviewer and one interviewee and offer the later opportunity to express themselves in a

way everyday life hardly ever allows and many people find it gratifying and redeeming to have someone listen with interest as they share their lived experiences and discuss their views on social issues , while the former are given the honour of having individuals who are unfamiliar allowing them to have a glimpse into their private lives(Mack, 2005).Yet, since actions and concepts are expressed in language whose nuances may not be shared between interviewer and interviewee, understanding perspectives fully during interviews could be hampered (Becker, and Geer, 1957). However, interviews afford researchers the flexibility to use probes to inspire interviewees to create the nexus between several themes and to elucidate their previous answers and explain questions and undertones (Queirós, *et al.*, 2017). Focus group explores data beyond the reach of other methods by accessing the variety of forms of communication among group members, such as tales and jokes which unravel dimensions of understanding usually untapped and reveal much more about people`s experiences, because the nuances of attitudes and knowledge base of a people cannot be completely explored in a question-andanswer session (Kitzinger, 1995).In focus group emotional processes and views are activated which facilitate the articulation of numerous clarifications of the behaviours and attitudes of the group, since the various understandings and meanings are explained by the participants (Gibbs, 1997). The interactional process reveals both the prominent issues among a group and the reason for the relevance accorded such issues, allows participants to review their perceptions of certain experiences (Morgan 1988), and helps explain the contradictions existing between actions, statements and thoughts of the group (Lankshear 1993).

Focus group “interview allows data to be collected that might not otherwise be available: less confident individuals may feel more secure in their group, contributing more freely than in individual interviews” (Rhodes and

Coomber, 2010, p. 67). It is very effective for retrieving a wide variety of opinions and interpretations on a specific topic and have the capacity to generate an enormous quantity of data within a comparatively short period of time. The richness of data that emerges from focus group originates from the group dynamic as well as the diversity of the group and the fact that through the presence of others and the reactions to what other people say, participants critically influence each other (Mack, 2005). Focus group interview can be used for different purposes during criminological research such as an element of mixed-method, or a primary or an additional source of data collection (Jackson *et. al.*, 2007). Nonetheless, a problem with focus group is the possibility that groupthink may threaten the dependability of the data, particularly where nonexperts, and experts; actual and perceived, make-up the focus group. However, focus group participants should consists of equally placed persons (Tewksbury, 2009) and the advantage of being able within a limited amount of time to observe a large amount of interaction among several participants baring their minds on one or more topics outweighs the risk of groupthink (Jackson *et. al.*, 2007).

Interviews and focus group encourage varied forms of input from the interviewees and allow interviewer freedom and reflexivity (Noaks and Wincup, 2004). Focus group reflects a non-hierarchical power relationship (Rhodes and Coomber, 2010) while interviews are characterised by a hierarchical power relationship (Kvale, 1996). However, regarding interviews, Oakley (2013) contends that“ in most cases the goal of finding out about people through interviewing is best achieved when the relationship of interviewer and interviewee is non-hierarchical, and the interviewer is prepared to invest his or her own personal identity in the relationship”(p. 41).Additionally, interviewees being oblivious, of what the information so collected would be used for may be reluctant to give full information to a

stranger (Gray, 2004). However, this can be mitigated, by the interviewer creating a rapport or establishing a relationship based on mutual trust with interviewees by first, rejecting the tradition of “hygienic” research and the associated mystification of both interviewer and interviewee as objective tools of data creation and secondly, by appreciating the role of personal involvement - the technique through which people get to know each other and admit them into their lives, - in the achievement of the overall objective of the interview (Oakley, 2013).

“The quality of this relationship likely affects participants’ self-disclosure, including the depth of information they may share about their experience of a particular phenomenon” (Knox, and Burkard, 2009, p. 569). Additionally, as a dynamic component of interviews and research procedures, location remains a veritable tool for comprehending and situating the vitality of relationship between interviewer and interviewee, therefore, it should be scrutinised with respect to social background of the research and its analysis, not as a procedural matter of suitability and ease (Simpson and Carroll, 2008), consequently, interviewees should be granted the right to choose locations for interviews (Herzog, 2005) since it is an important factor in the creation of reality (Simpson and Carroll, 2008).

The main weaknesses of interviews and focus group are probable systematic prejudices in interviewees’ or interviewers’ actions which may lead interviewees not to give complete information or interviewer to tamper with answers (McCrary, *et al.*, 2010). In addition, they are fraught with problems associated with reliability and validity of self-reported information (Harrison, 1995). However, to confirm that interviewer’s interpretations reflect the substance of interviewee’s accounts and not his subjective iterations, qualitative research trustworthiness testing criteria, such as credibility, transferability, confirm ability and dependability, which are achieved through

audit trails, member-checking and stepwise replications should be applied since each of them aim to confirm the substance of interviewees' account during the interview, rather than applying procedures of reliability and validity tests that are central to quantitative research, such as objectivity, reliability, internal and external validity tests (Jackson, *et al.*, 2007). Furthermore, to improve the correctness of information from interviewees individuals who are not well known to interviewees should be used to administer interviews in certain cases (Ehrman and Robbins, 1994). Moreover, to raise interviewees' enthusiasm to answer questions truthfully and to check self-report data, verification reports are used (Babor *et al.*, 2000). This entails verification of interviewee's descriptions of human experience by other interviewees who share the same experience (Sandelowski, 1986).

Another weakness of interviews and focus group is that no matter the size of the study they yield enormous volume of rich data, which generally leads to data overload (Nigel, 2004). Nevertheless, this can be handled by sticking to the professed objectives of the study or turning to existing body of knowledge to explore how such problems were resolved by previous qualitative methods researchers or resorting to the academic network in the researcher's own work environment (Nigel, 2004). There is also problem with the generalisability of findings of studies conducted with both interviews and focus group (Greener, 2011). However, these kind of studies because of their contextual nature, may not need to be generalised, since their main goal is to develop insight rather than theories (Davis and Francis, 2018). Interviews and focus group aim to explore issues and their context, clarifying what, how, when, where, by and among whom actions and processes operate while expressing in unambiguous detail the delineations and subtleties of people, places, actions, and interactions, without aiming to be widely generalisable (Tewksbury, 2009). Interviews and focus group are highly time-consuming and are tiring,

because they require considerable concentration from the interviewer in developing interview guide, carrying out interviews and transcribing interviews (Nigel, 2004). They also require extensive training, monitoring and standardisation to guarantee that they are managed and scored in a reliable manner, thus, they can be time consuming and resource intensive (McCrary, *et al.*, 2010). Nevertheless, the value of learning about social phenomena in a complete context and deeply justifies all the time and resource to be spent (Tewksbury, 2009).

The processes of interviews and focus group, even though they promote comprehensive descriptions and holistic understanding, invariably present ethical issues of confidentiality and anonymity (Miller and Rollnick, 2012). This is because in both methods the interviewer and the interviewees interact closely (Kajornboon, 2005). In addition, confidentiality and anonymity are further compromised due to the participation of others in focus group (Gibbs, 1997). Besides, since detailed information or knowledge about certain issues may be available only to certain persons or groups, the elucidation of texts, concepts or processes could make participants susceptible to recognition by their colleagues (Van Manen, 2016), and although verbatim quotations of some of interviewees' statements are usually rendered in an anonymous manner, their colleagues may through such features as speech mannerisms, word choice and content recognise these participants (Shapiro, 2017).

However, to curtail the possibility of endangering the confidentiality of data, access to the data so collected should be restricted in such a manner that it can be available to the researcher alone (National Research Council, 2007), while the interviewer should adhere strictly to their avowed commitment on confidentiality (Mack, 2005). Furthermore, to ensure that ethical integrity of the research is not jeopardised, the anonymity of participants and

confidentiality of information can be preserved by meticulously selecting, organising, and rendering verbatim quotations in a professional manner (Wiles *et al.*, 2006). Researchers conducting focus group should always remind the participants that the issues discussed during their interaction should be treated as confidential and due to the additional threat, it poses to confidentiality, the participants should be cautioned to preserve the confidentiality of the personal data of other participants. But since focus group members are not strictly bound by the confidentiality rules, the protocol should as of necessity provide a discrete way for the participants to provide such confidential data during the research (Ranney, *et. al.*, 2015). In addition, the data so collected should be handled in line with existing legislations/policies on Information Security of the country and institution or agency where the research is to be conducted and as well as country and the institution or agency that is commissioning the research (Boehm, 2011).

Due to lack of autonomy; the inability to make considered choices among one's options and acting in accordance with one's own beliefs and values, arising from value conflicts and potential role, there could be problems for the interviewees as some of them will be discussing in their official capacity (Oakley 2013). Nonetheless, the fear of such interviewees could be assuaged by the application of iterative models of consent which helps to establish processes of consensus that provide for the creation of ethical relationships, which are conscious of the concerns, needs, and values of such interviewees, and works towards developing a negotiated and shared understanding of what is involved at all stages of the research process (Mackenzie, *et. al.*, 2007). Other ethical issues which are usually associated with interviews include pushing interviewees beyond data collection boundaries, the choice of venue for the interview, the safety of all participants and getting informed consent (Mack, 2005). However, in the conduct of interviews, care should

always be taken by the interviewer not to push interviewees beyond normal boundaries of data collection, secondly, interviewers should avoid making any effort to affect the character or opinion of interviewees, and thirdly, the unwillingness by any interviewee to address any issue raised during the interview should not be challenged by the interviewer in any way (Gray, 2004). Although it is important to allow interviewees to make the choice of location for the interviews, the safety of all the participants should always be given priority consideration (Gray, 2019). In the same manner the informed consent of the interviewees must always be sought and obtained before proceeding with interviews or focus group (Kvale, 2008). "In addition to informing participants about the voluntary nature of the study, a key purpose of informed consent is to ensure that interviewees understand the risks and benefits entailed in participation" (Mack, 2005, p. 32).

## **Conclusion**

These two methods are founded on the ontological philosophy of constructivism and epistemological paradigms of interpretivism. They are exploratory and help to collect rich and authentic data which provide descriptions of social phenomena within a naturalistic milieu. Although they share several features, however, they are used for different purposes. Focus group is more suitable for exploring how knowledge, ideas and opinions are constituted and function within a social framework, while interview is better used for studies on sensitive topics, personal histories, perspectives, and experiences. In the use of these two methods researchers should endeavour to apply reflexivity. They afford researchers flexibility in carrying out research, while audit trails, member-checking and stepwise replications which engender objectivity, ethical diligence, and rigor, are applied to enhance the trustworthiness of the data so collected. Nonetheless they present problems of generalisability and some ethical issues, such as anonymity of interviewers

and confidentiality of data collected. They are also time consuming and resource intensive.

However, research based on both methods do not need to be generalised because of their purpose, and the problem of confidentiality and anonymity can be resolved by restriction of access to data, as well as meticulous selection and rendition of verbatim quotes in a professional manner. Researchers using focus group should take further steps to preserve the confidentiality of interviewees' personal data due to the additional threat it presents, while the issue of time and resources can be justified by the authenticity and depth of the data so collected. Additionally, getting informed consent is important and necessary before the commencement of the research. While it is important to allow the interviewees to choose the location for either interviews or focus group because it is a major determinant of power relationships between the interviewer and the interviewees, safety of participants should be considered.

The understanding of crime, criminals, justice system operations offered by the detached, statistical analyses applied in quantitative methods cannot compare with the in-depth, holistic, authentic, exploratory, and descriptive data provide by qualitative methods. Therefore, these two methods of data collection which derive from qualitative research methodology would serve as veritable research methods for carrying out qualitative criminological research.

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