Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore
Facoltà di psicologia

THE INFLUENCE OF SETTING ON FINDINGS PRODUCED IN FACE TO FACE AND ONLINE FOCUS GROUPS [°]
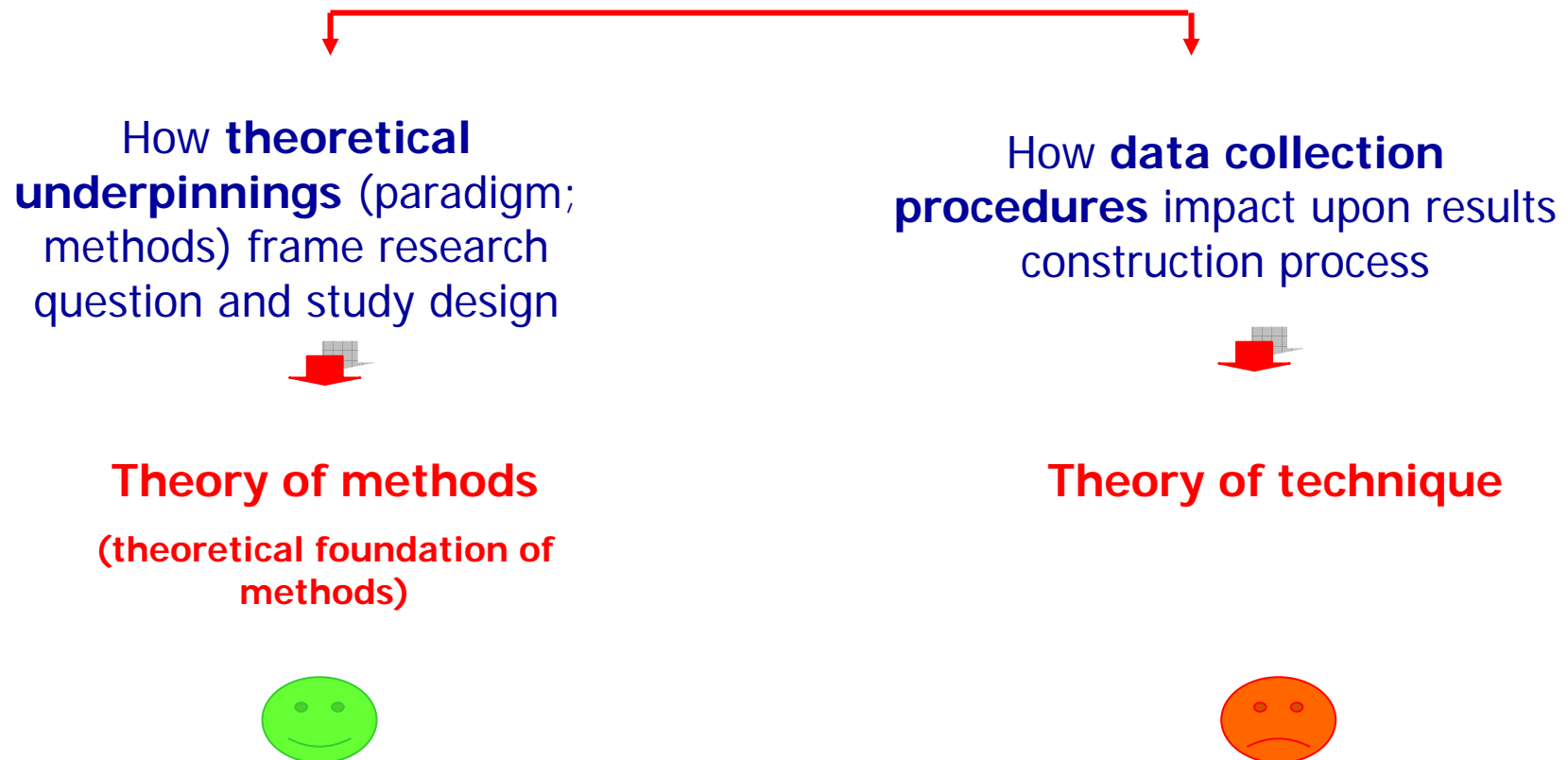
A.C. Bosio; G. Graffigna; E. Lozza

Background

BACKGROUND 1.   Theoretical implications on data collection

Methodological reflection on qualitative research should consider :

How **theoretical underpinnings** (paradigm; methods) frame research question and study design

How **data collection procedures** impact upon results construction process

Theory of methods

(theoretical foundation of methods)

Theory of technique

Online qualitative research is a fascinating opportunity to **study how the data collection medium shapes findings**

Increasing consensus on online qualitative research because of **its practical advantages**

Lack of **consideration of methodological implications** related to Internet introduction in the research design
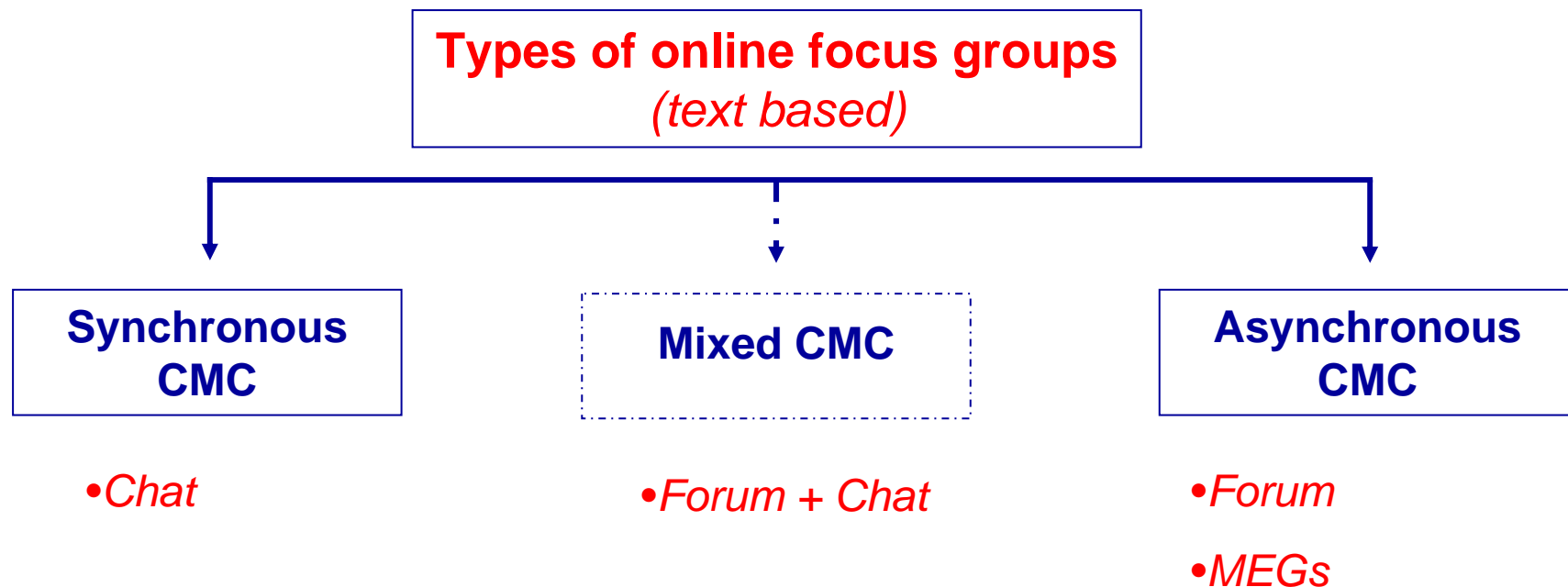
Continuous **technological development** of Internet communication offers **new opportunities** but also a **new challenges**
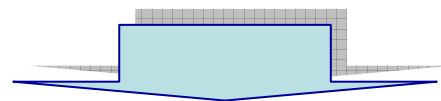
BACKGROUND 2. On-line focus groups: different techniques under one label

Online focus groups are a suitable observatory to study the influence of setting on findings production:

➢ because **online focus groups aim to be a reproduction of the face to face ones** in a different setting (Internet)

➢ because **the same technique** (online focus group) **can be realized by different format of CMC** (different research settings)

Types of online focus groups *(text based)*		
Synchronous CMC	**Mixed CMC**	**Asynchronous CMC**
•*Chat*	•*Forum + Chat*	•*Forum*
		•*MEGs*

BACKGROUND 3. On-line focus groups: the state of the art

Moreover **the debate on online focus groups is still at its infancy**:

- ↳ gap between the **professional field (***enthusiam***) and the academic arena (***scepticism***)**
- ↳ absence of shared guidelines
- ↳ lack of systematic studies on methodological issues
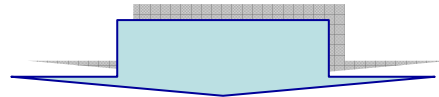
Only **one point of agreement** among researchers:

online focus groups are more suitable than F-t-F ones **to investigate sensitive issues** (such as **health** related ones)

Towards a theory of online focus groups technique: Work hypothesis

These premises suggest the need for a **systematic study** **of methodological implications of online focus groups:**

To compare face to face focus groups …

- ✓ ...not only **vs. online focus** groups
- ✓ ...but also **vs**. **different formats of online** focus groups (forum; chat; forum+chat)
- ✓ ...from both a **thematic** and a **dynamic** point of view

To focus on (sensitive) health related topics:

- ✓ to **magnify differences/specificities** of considered focus groups techniques

Research Design

Objectives

This study aims to achieve the following objectives:

❶ **To identify commonalities and specificities of three online focus group techniques** *(forum; chat; forum+chat):*
- ✓ *among them*
- ✓ *and vs. traditional focus group technique (face to face)*

❷ **To achieve objective ① at two levels of analysis:**
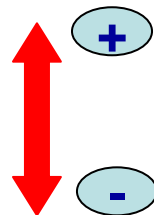- ✓from a thematic point of view *(main themes and disclosure)*
- ✓from a dynamic point of view *(rhetorical strategies; conversational characteristics of the exchange; patterns of interaction; discourse construction)*

❸ **To focus on three health related themes with different levels of social sensitiveness**
- ✓ *AIDS*
- ✓ *ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION*
- ✓ *SMOKING BEHAVIOUR*

+

-

Research design

➢ 24 focus groups with youngsters (18-25 years, both sexes)

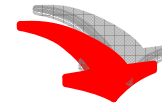➢ 8 for each topic of research

➢ 6 for each focus group technique

	On-line			Face to face	Tot.
AIDS	2 Forums	2 Chats	2 Forums+chat	2 F-t-F	8
ALCHOOL	2 Forums	2 Chats	2 Forums+chat	2 F-t-F	8
SMOKING	2 Forums	2 Chats	2 Forums+chat	2 F-t-F	8
Tot.	6	6	6	6	24

Data Analysis

- Two levels of analysis
- Three data analysis strategies **(triangulation)**

dynamic	**thematic**

computer mediated discourse analysis (Herring, 2004)

software based Content analysis (t-lab)

paper based Conversational analysis (Trognon, 1991)

software based Discourse analysis (Atlas.ti)

Conversational Analysis (Trognon, 1991)

to describe the interpersonal exchange at a linguistic level:

- *Wording*
- *Puntcuation*
- *Periods structure*
- *Linguistics acts*
- *Turn taking*
- *...*

Software based discourse analysis (Atlas.ti)

To perform a systematic analysis of:

- *Processes of discourse construction (negotiation, co-operation...)*
- *Disclosure and emotional connotation of discourse (personal experience and feelings)*
- *Rethoric strategies*
- *Interactive patterns (among participants; with the discussion leader)*

Software based content analysis (T-lab)

to analyze the thematic articulation of different discussions

**T-lab allows a quantitative analysis based on 3 units (and their relations):**

- *Context Units (paragraphs, sentences)*
- *Lexical units (lemmas)*
- *Variables (different focus-group techniques: face-to-face, forum, chat, forum+chat)*

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Main Findings

1. COMMONALITIES

The four focus group techniques (face-to-face focus group, forum, chat, forum+chat) share **some common features**:

(1) all discussion techniques produced rich and articulate discourses

(2) some key themes were common in all discussions
- ⇨ even if their articulation and weight varied according to the discussion setting

(3) main interaction and conversation patterns were present in all discussion
- ⇨ albeit with different characteristics according to the discussion setting
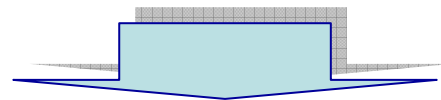
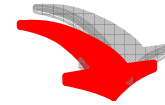**fundamental comparability between face-to-face and online focus groups**

2. SPECIFICITIES

However, each discussion group showed **peculiar characteristics**, both in terms of:

A) **conversational exchange characteristics:**

✓Leaderships

✓Interaction patterns

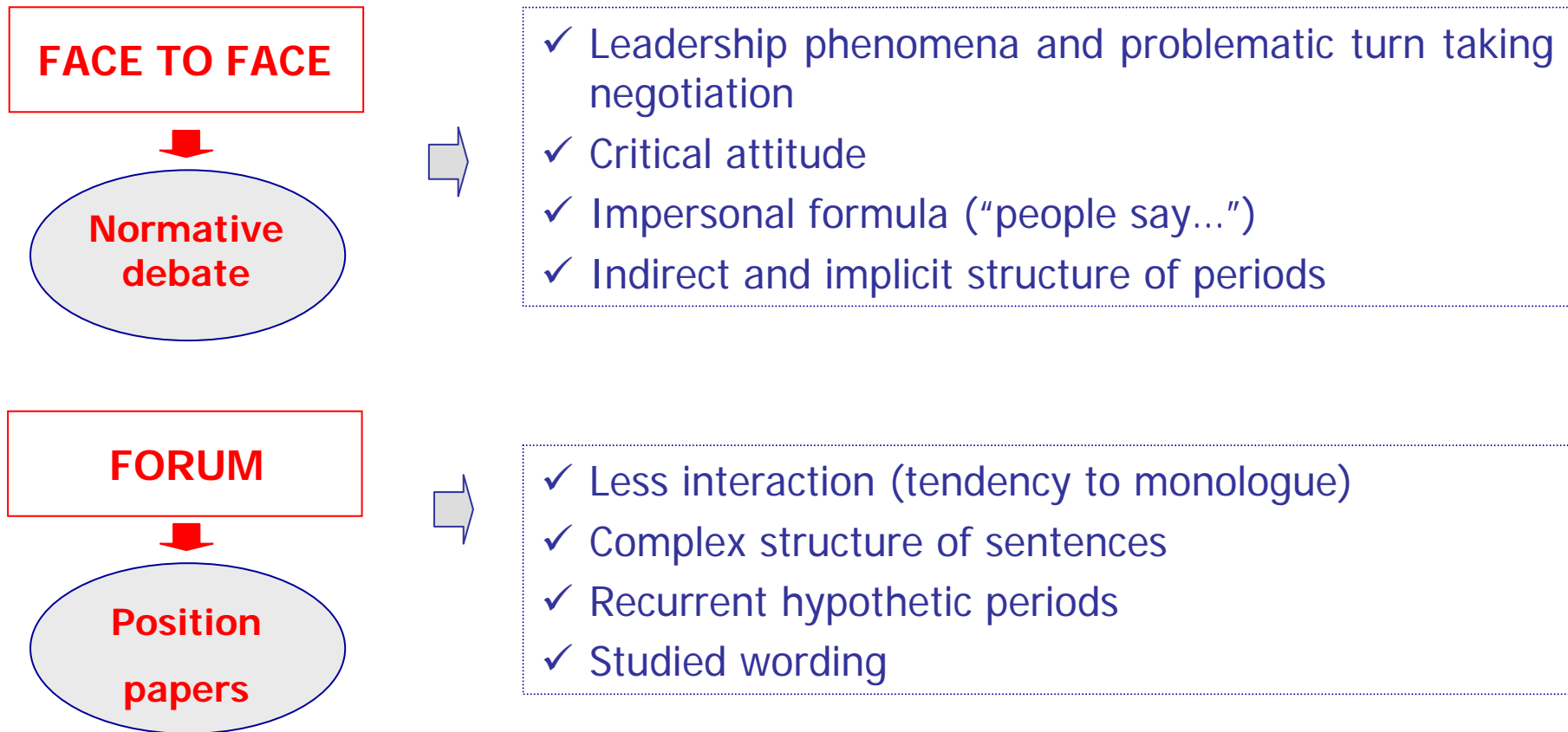✓Attitude to the discussion (critical/polemical vs proactive/creative)

B) **thematic structure of discourse:**

✓Articulations of key themes

✓Level of disclosure

✓Discourse emotional connotation

… not only ascribable to the general distinction face-to-face vs. Internet-mediated focus groups, but also to the different settings of online focus groups

2.A) CONVERSATIONAL EXCHANGE CHARACTERISTICS

Each focus group technique **specifically shapes the conversational exchange**: this is independent from the object of discussion

FACE TO FACE

Normative debate

⇨
- ✓ Leadership phenomena and problematic turn taking negotiation
- ✓ Critical attitude
- ✓ Impersonal formula ("people say…")
- ✓ Indirect and implicit structure of periods

FORUM

Position papers

⇨
- ✓ Less interaction (tendency to monologue)
- ✓ Complex structure of sentences
- ✓ Recurrent hypothetic periods
- ✓ Studied wording

2.A) CONVERSATIONAL EXCHANGE CHARACTERISTICS (continues)

CHAT

Brain storming

⟹

- ✓ Chaotic but democratic interaction
- ✓ Central role of the discussion leader
- ✓ Recurrent "expressive" linguistic acts
- ✓ Poor negotiation
- ✓ Simple and direct structure of sentences
- ✓ Informal wording and slang

FORUM+CHAT

Working group

⟹

- ✓ Combination of the singular forum plus the singular chat conversational characteristics
- ✓ More cooperation
- ✓ Less frequent communicative dysfunctional episodes
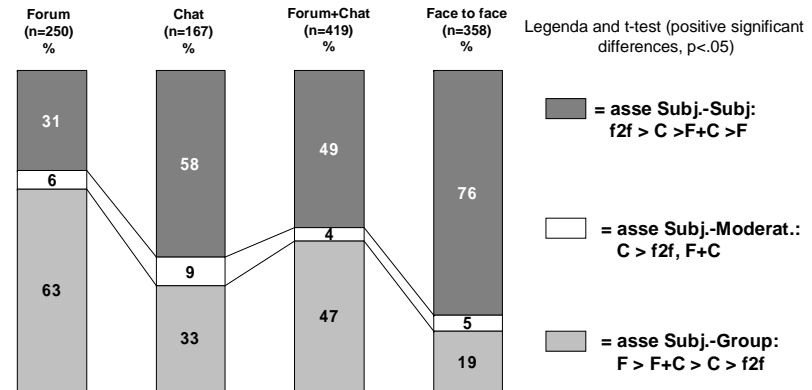- ✓ More negotiation
- ✓ Less tendency to monologue

An example from the software based discourse analysis: **axis of communicative interaction** in the three cases of research

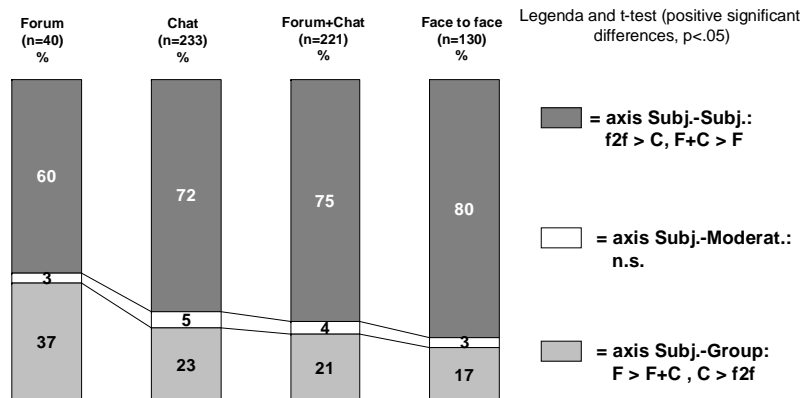⇨ the four techniques elicit **specific patterns of interaction**

⇨ ...that **are confirmed in all three cases** of research

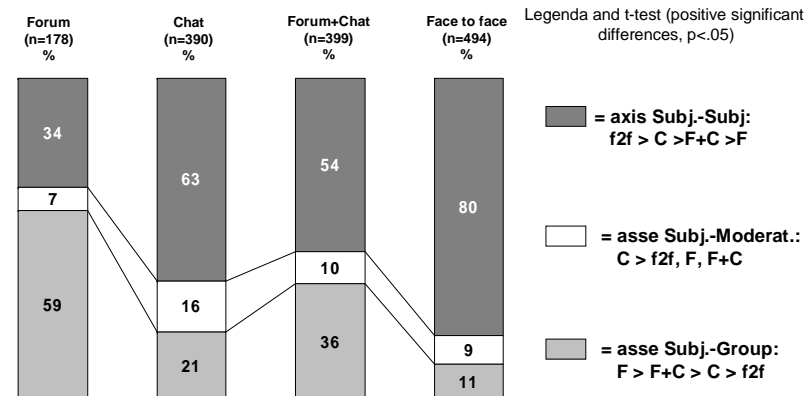⇨ ...albeit with **a different emphasis**

HIV-AIDS

ALCOHOL

SMOKING

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2.B) THEMATIC STRUCTURE OF DISCOURSE

The four techniques of focus groups **enable a different disclosure towards the discussion**

↳ the **online setting** (Forum+chat) allows a **greater narration of personal experiences and feelings**

↳ particularly when the topic is more **sensitive** (i.e. HIV-AIDS) ...

HIV-AIDS

	%	t-test: positive significant (p<.05) differences
Forum + Chat (n=1674)	19,4	C, F, f2f
Chat (n=529)	15,3	f2f
Forum (n=974)	13,8	f2f
Face to face (n=1453)	10,7	-

ALCOHOL

	%	t-test: positive significant (p<.05) differences
Forum (n=269)	20,4	C, F+C, f2f
Face to face (n=1231)	10,6	C
Forum + Chat (n=1043)	10,1	C
Chat (n=964)	5,1	-

SMOKING

|	%	t-test: positive significant (p<.05) differences
Face to face (n=1470)	7	C, F+C
Forum (n=531)	6,6	C, F+C
Forum + Chat (n=1077)	4,4	-
Chat (n=962)	3,4	-

Moreover the **different techniques of focus groups frame the thematic structure of discussion** in a specific way:

↬ the **thematic articulation** of discussion **is specific per each topic of discussion**

↬ however it is possible to catch some **recurrences in the thematic articulation of discussion depending on the specific discussion setting**
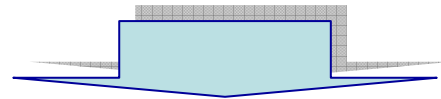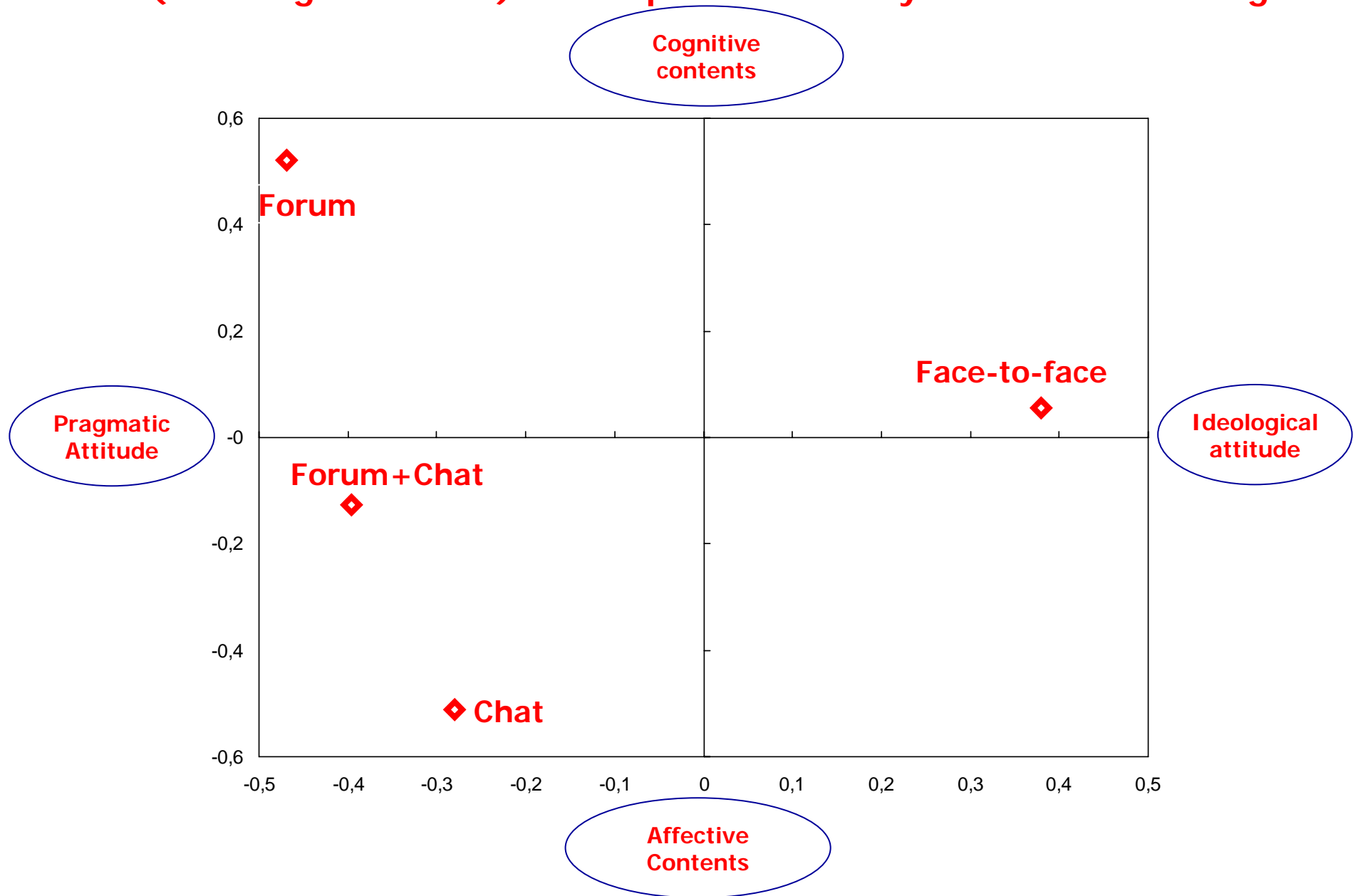
This seems to confirm a **main role** played by the **discussion setting in framing the process of data construction**

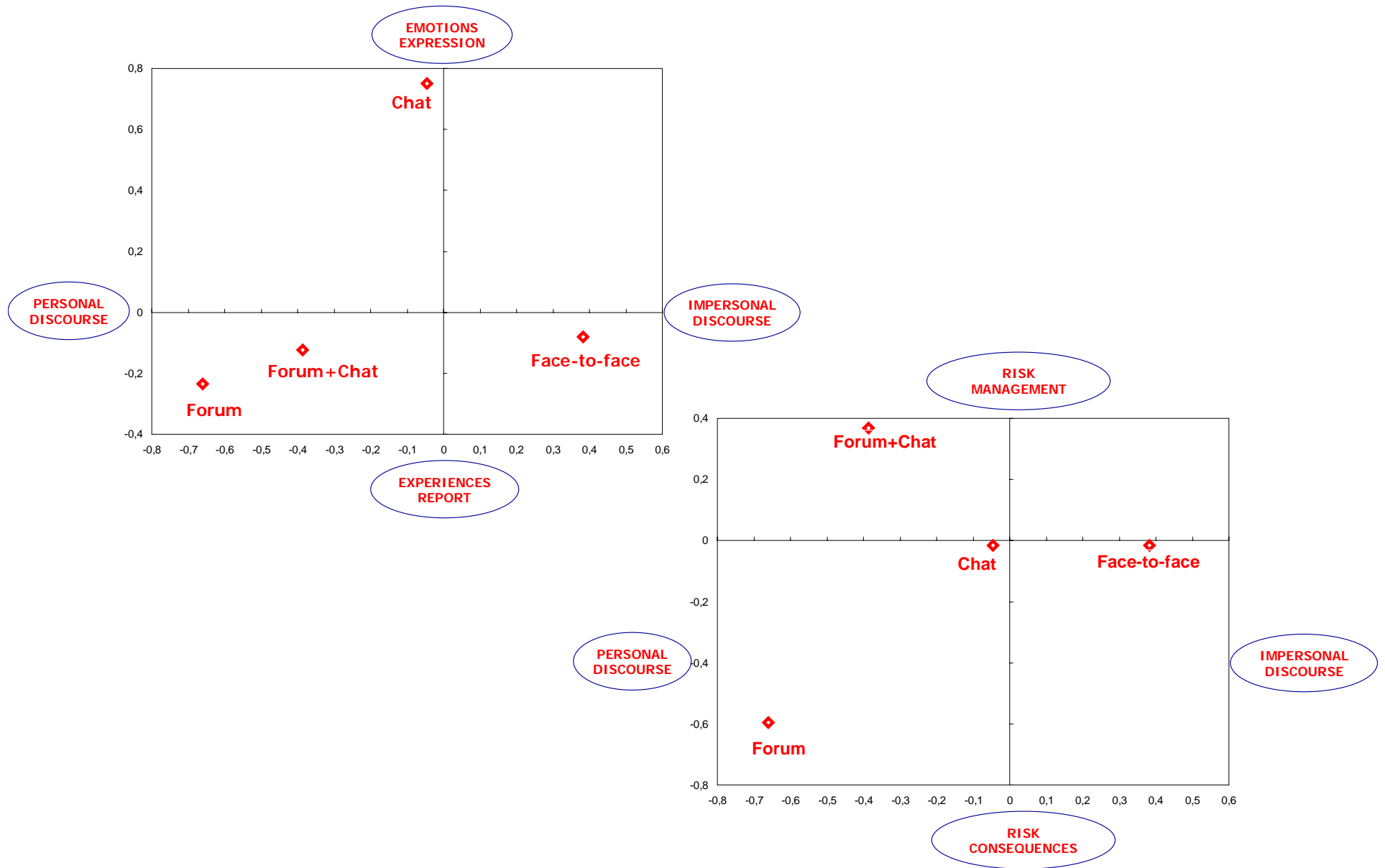# Case 1 (AIDS): Correspondence Analysis lemmas x setting [°]
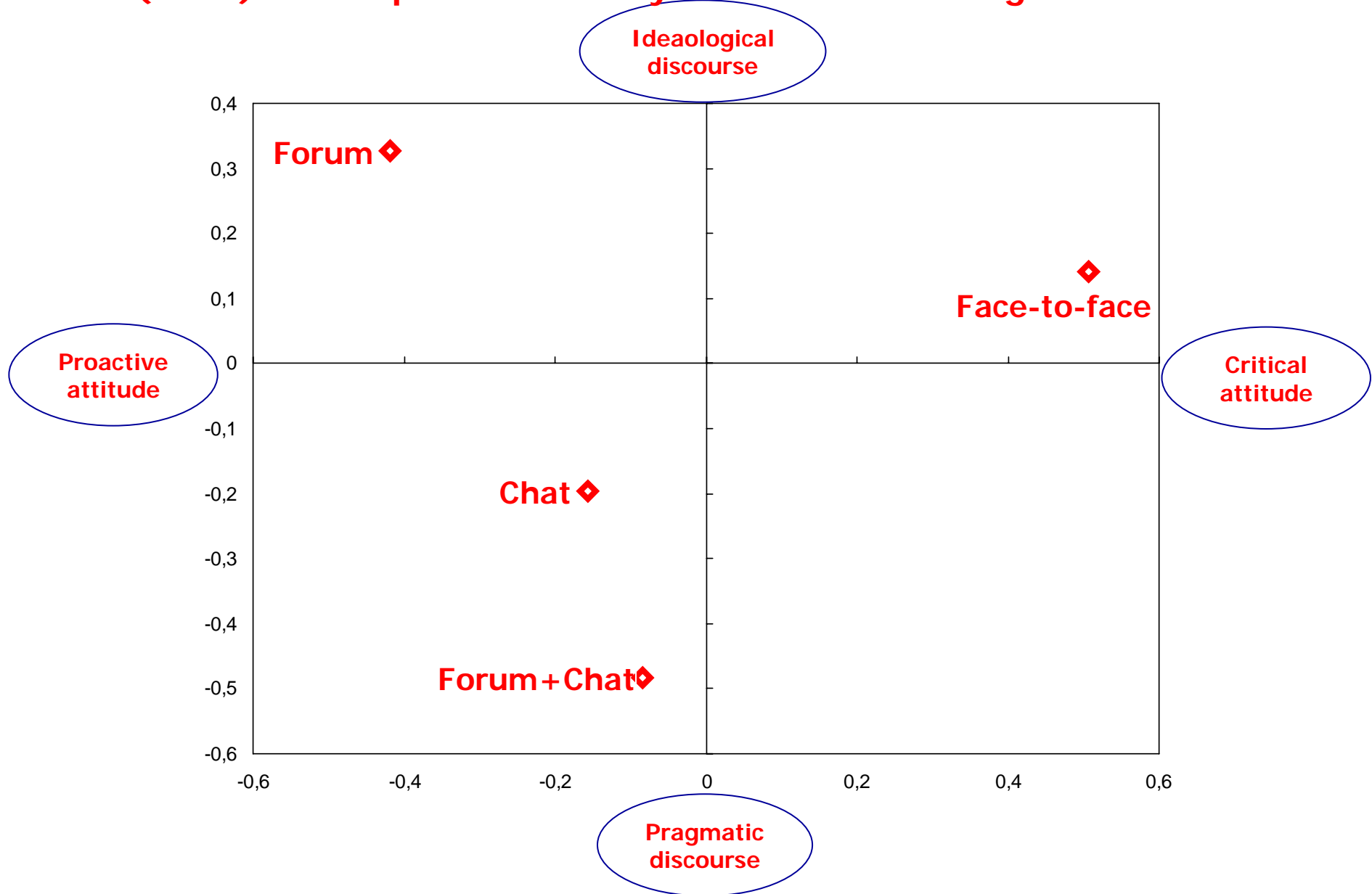
[°] Adapted from a statistical analysis conducted via T-lab (ww.t-lab.it): a correspondence analysis between the lemmas (in rows) and the focus group settings (in column). The map originated by the first two axis (inertia: AXIS 1: 15%; AXIS 2: 9%)

Case 2 (Smoking behaviuor): Correspondence Analysis lemmas x setting [°]

Cognitive contents

Pragmatic Attitude

Ideological attitude

Affective Contents

Forum

Face-to-face

Forum+Chat

Chat

[°] Adapted from a statistical analysis conducted via T-lab (ww.t-lab.it): a correspondence analysis between the lemmas (in rows) and the focus group settings (in column). The map originated by the first two axis (inertia: AXIS 1: 35%; AXIS 2: 32%)

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Case 3 (Alcohol): Correspondence Analysis lemmas x setting [°]

[°] Adapted from a statistical analysis conducted via T-lab (ww.t-lab.it): a correspondence analysis between the lemmas (in rows) and the focus group settings (in column). The map on the left originated by first and the second axis, while the map on the right by the first and the third axis (inertia: AXIS 1: 15% ; AXIS 2: 12% ; AXIS 3: 8%).

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Concluding Remarks

Some concluding remarks

This study confirms **the role of research setting in shaping the data construction process**

⇨ In particular it seems possible **to characterize interpersonal exchange of health related topics** according to the discussion setting

⇨ This is **important to make a "situated choice" of tools and their setting** according to research objectives
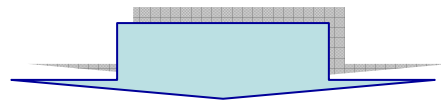
In particular it is possible to identify the following **research implications:**

FACE TO FACE

⇨ to study **"socio-political" discourses** related to a sensitive topic

⇨ to analyze **how individuals polarize their positions/opinions** in group exchange

FORUM

⇨ to study **cognitive and rational attitudes** to health related issues

⇨ to reach a **detailed and well-meditated description of personal experiences**
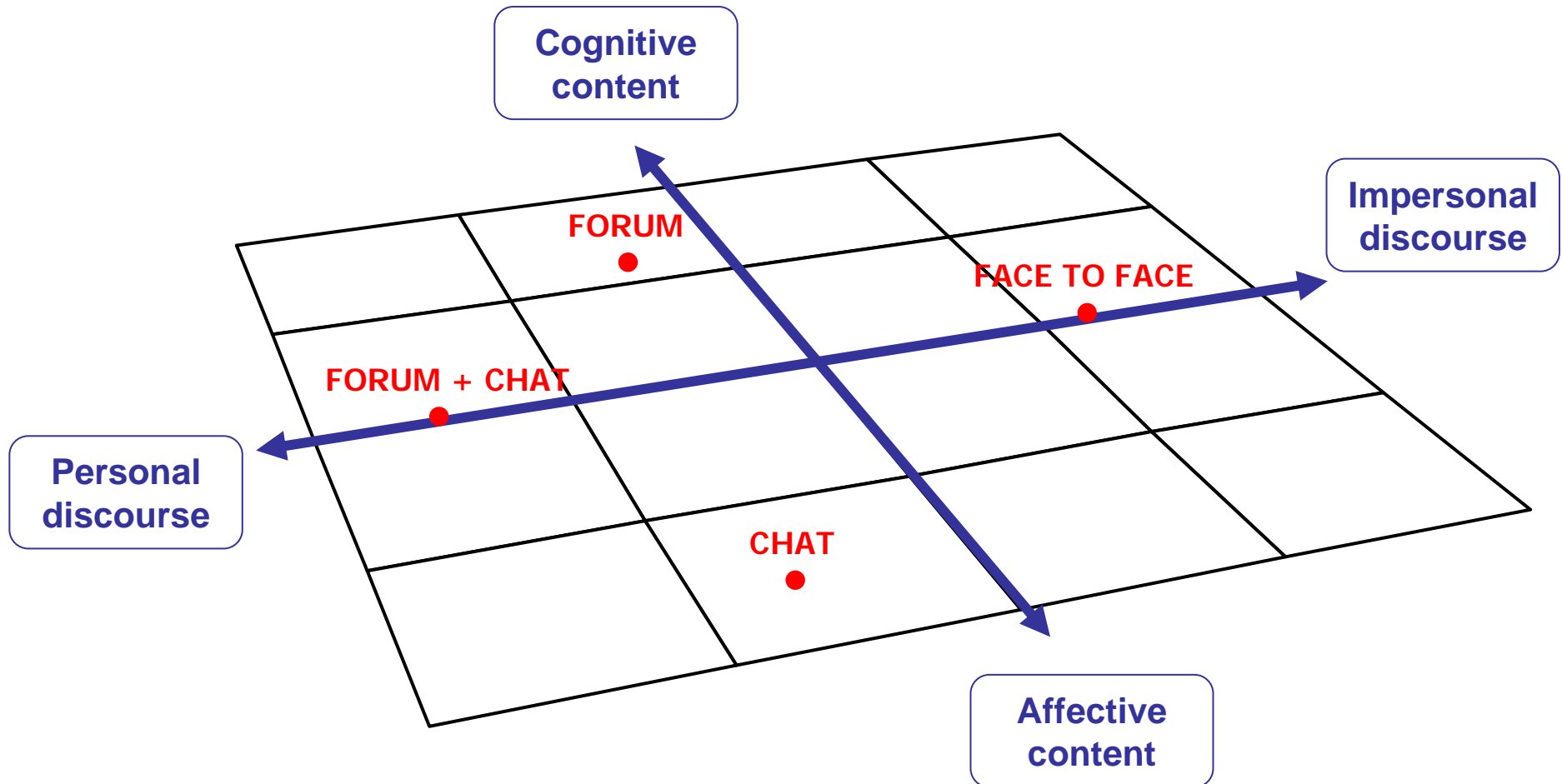
CHAT

⇨ to **elicit affects and emotions** related to the health issues problem

⇨ to overcome a rational attitude and **to generate new ideas or solutions**
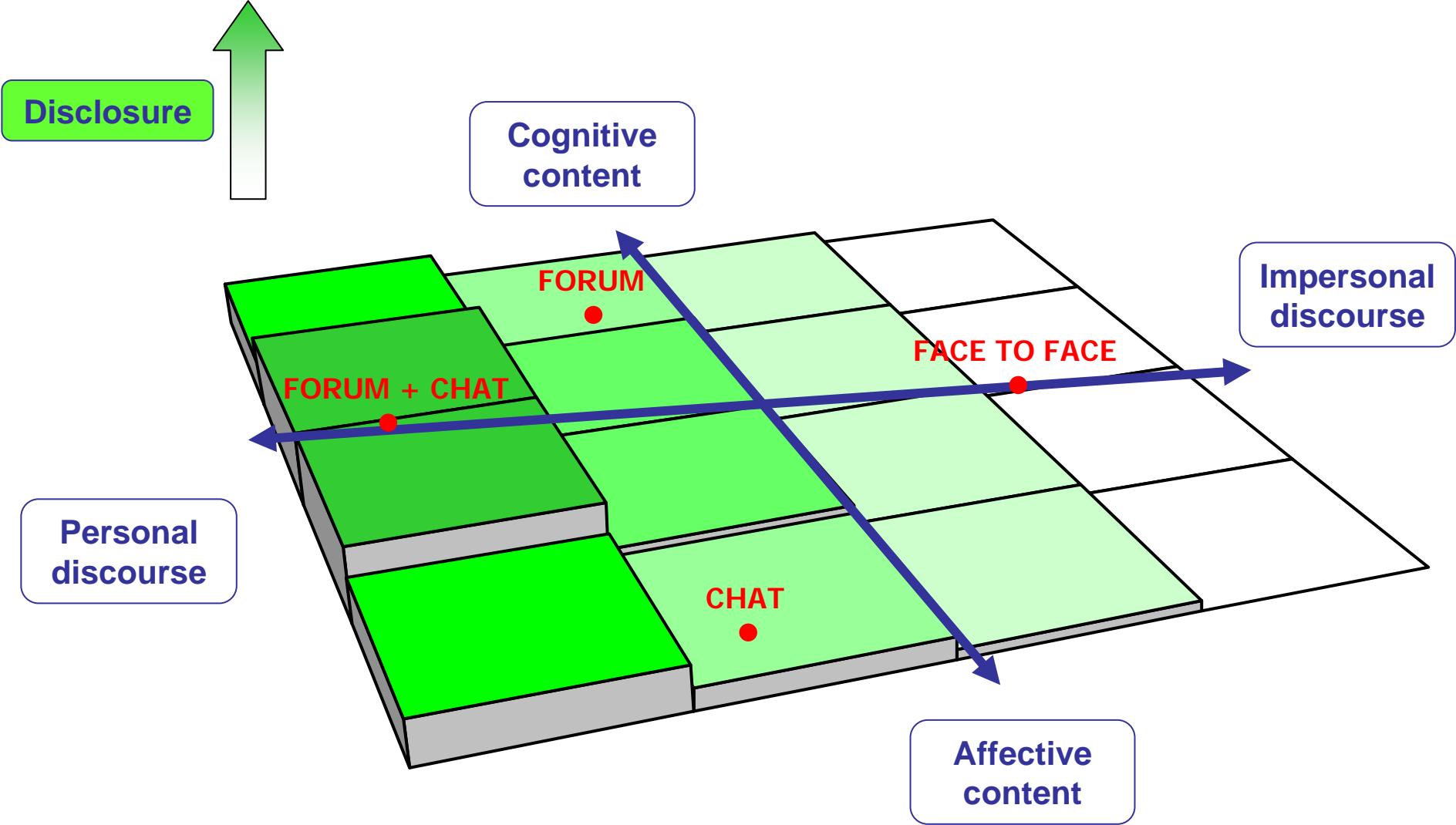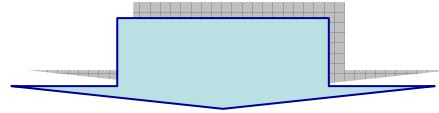
FORUM+CHAT

⇨ to reach an understanding of **participants' concrete strategies** to manage health risks

⇨ to describe the **interpersonal problem-solving process** related to health problems

To summ up: A conceptual map

Disclosure

Cognitive content

Impersonal discourse

FORUM

FACE TO FACE

FORUM + CHAT

Personal discourse

CHAT

Affective content

These results confirm the importance of a **theory of techniques approach** (partially independent from the theory of method) in order to study the implications of data collection procedures on findings production in qualitative research

Contacts

Guendalina Graffigna

Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore

Milan, Italy

guendalina.graffigna@unicatt.it

References

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Herring S.C. (2004). Computer-mediated discourse analysis: an approach to research online behavior. In Barab S.A., Kling R. E Gray J.H. (2004). Designing for virtual communities in the service of learning (pp. 338-376). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.