

The focus group method: Insights from focus group interviews on sexual health with adolescents

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Abstract

This article concerns the manner in which group interaction during focus groups impacted upon the data generated in a study of adolescent sexual health. Twenty-nine group interviews were conducted with secondary school pupils in Ireland, and data were subjected to a qualitative analysis. In exploring the relationship between method and theory generation, we begin by focusing on the ethnographic potential within group interviews. We propose that at times during the interviews, episodes of acting-out, or presenting a particular image in the presence of others, can be highly revealing in attempting to understand the normative rules embedded in the culture from which participants are drawn. However, we highlight a specific problem with distinguishing which parts of the group interview are a valid representation of group processes and which parts accurately reflect individuals' retrospective experiences of reality. We also note that at various points in the interview, focus groups have the potential to reveal participants' vulnerabilities. In addition, group members themselves can challenge one another on how aspects of their sub-culture are represented within the focus group, in a way that is normally beyond reach within individual interviews. The formation and composition of focus groups, particularly through the clustering of like-minded individuals, can affect the dominant views being expressed within specific groups. While focus groups have been noted to have an educational and transformative potential, we caution that they may also be a source of inaccurate information, placing participants at risk. Finally, the opportunities that focus groups offer in enabling researchers to cross-check the trustworthiness of data using a post-interview questionnaire are considered. We conclude by arguing that although far from flawless, focus groups are a valuable method for gathering data about health issues.

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Introduction

There has been much support in the literature for the view that focus groups are an appropriate method of choice for health research into sensitive issues, and for investigating people's experiences of illness and using

health services (Green & Thorogood, 2004; Kitzinger, 1994, 2000). While group interviewing may be conducted using a variety of styles, our emphasis here is on analysing interviews where adolescents previously known to one another are brought together for the purposes of generating data about a topic—in this case sexual health—in an informal atmosphere.

What distinguishes group interviews from one-to-one in-depth interviews is their capacity to capture the dynamics of group interaction and to exploit this in

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attempting to understand a topic. Thus, rather than simply responding to the interviewer's questions, 'natural' group interviews allow the researcher to experience, albeit in an artificial setting, the jokes, insults, innuendoes, responses, sensitivities and dynamics of the group, as group members interact with one another, which may offer new insights into the substantive topic under investigation. (The extent to which our groups resembled 'natural' groups will be explored a little further on in the methodology section.) Thus, participants are deemed to be performing particular social actions in the course of the interview, and not just merely recalling information or experiences that they already have had (Crossley, 2002). In spite of the fact that group interaction is deemed to be a central feature of focus groups, in a paper published in 1994, Kitzinger observed a virtual absence of any discussion concentrating on the conversation between participants in more than 40 published accounts of focus groups that she had reviewed. More recently, Webb and Kevern (2001) have noted that much of the nursing literature on focus groups has not drawn on direct experience with using the method. Although there has been an increase in the number of articles that exploit the interactive dimension of focus groups in developing interpretations (Crossley, 2002; Green & Hart, 1999; Green, Siddall, & Murdoch, 2002; Pini, 2002; Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2000), in most cases data generated in focus groups tend to be cut and sliced to produce evidence to support a theoretical argument in much the same way as usually happens with individual interviews.

There has also been a growing number of papers published in recent years on using focus groups with children (Heary & Hennessy, 2002; Hennessy & Heary, 2005; Mauthner, 1997). The potential for focus groups to offer children peer support when compared with individual interviews has been noted (Hennessy & Heary, 2005; Mauthner, 1997). Heary and Hennessy (2002) suggest that while focus groups can be variously used with children, further analysis of the group process itself is required. Focus groups have also been used previously in studying sexuality among adolescent groups (Wight, 1994). In his study of sexuality among young males, Wight (1994) noted that during the focus groups, some participants admitted to feeling restrained in discussing sex in the presence of others in the group.

In this article, we concentrate on some issues that emerged in an analysis of the *process of interaction* during focus groups in a study of adolescents on their perceptions of sex and sexuality. We provide empirical support for some notions that have come to be associated with group interviewing and add new theoretical insights, supported with empirical examples, to this body of methodological knowledge.

The study methodology

The aim of the study was to explore post-primary pupils' perspectives on sexuality, sex education and the factors that impact upon their sexual knowledge and behaviour with a view to developing educational programmes that facilitate healthy self-growth and responsible sexual behaviour among young people. Schools were identified using the Irish Department of Education and Science's website. The study was designed to include schools from urban and rural areas, from single-sex boys', single-sex girls' and co-educational schools, and from both middle-class and working-class areas. It was also designed to have participants at both the senior cycle (17–19-year-olds) and junior cycle (14–16-year-olds) levels. Ten schools agreed to facilitate focus groups, with each school (with one exception) organising three focus groups each, amounting to a total of 29 focus groups. Five schools were located in urban areas, and five in rural areas. The sample was drawn from three girls' schools, four boys' schools and three co-educational schools. In all, 226 young people (102 females, and 124 males) participated in the study. An overview of the sample is presented in Table 1.

Participation in the study was voluntary, and in this sense, participants self-selected. Where more pupils were willing to participate than the designed structures allowed, schools were advised to hold a draw in the interest of fairness. With the exception of three focus groups, all pupils were in the same year at school; the three 'mixed year' groups occurred at the convenience of the school. Since schools were voluntarily giving their time to enable the research project to proceed, causing some inconvenience to themselves in the process, the research team was reluctant to ask teachers to monitor exactly how groups selected themselves. As is the case with much field research, getting access to a sample is a delicate process; if the researchers had become too directive and had made too many extra demands on teaching staff, access to the study sites may have been jeopardised. In view of this, the research team had little control over exactly how the focus groups were produced. As will be considered later in this paper, it is likely that some potential participants monitored who else in their year was likely to be in the group and opted in or out on that basis, although we do not know the extent to which this happened. In this sense, it cannot be established to what extent the groups could be described as 'natural' groups. In any case, the notion of 'naturalism' associated with any group is a socially constructed concept and even the most 'natural' groups of close associates that form in the social world may exhibit varying degrees of affective ties among members and even contain some members who do not particularly like or trust some other members. Nonetheless, the fact that all group members were in the same year at the

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