



Title	The focus group method: insights from focus group interviews on sexual health with adolescents
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Publication date	2005-12
Publication information	Hyde, Abbey, Etaoine Howlett, Dympna Brady, and Jonathan Drennan. "The Focus Group Method: Insights from Focus Group Interviews on Sexual Health with Adolescents." Elsevier, December 2005. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2005.04.040 .
Publisher	Elsevier
Item record/more information	http://hdl.handle.net/10197/4181
Publisher's statement	This is the author's version of a work that was accepted for publication in Social Science & Medicine. Changes resulting from the publishing process, such as peer review, editing, corrections, structural formatting, and other quality control mechanisms may not be reflected in this document. Changes may have been made to this work since it was submitted for publication. A definitive version was subsequently published in Social Science & Medicine (Volume 61, Issue 12, December 2005) DOI:10.1016/j.socscimed.2005.04.040 Elsevier Ltd.
Publisher's version (DOI)	10.1016/j.socscimed.2005.04.040

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This is the pre-proof accepted article that was subsequently published as:

Hyde, A., Howlett, E., Drennan, J. & Brady, D. (2005) 'The focus group method: Insights from focus group interviews on sexual health with adolescents'. *Social Science and Medicine*, 61 (12):2588-2599.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2005.04.040>

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THE FOCUS GROUP METHOD: INSIGHTS FROM FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS ON SEXUAL HEALTH WITH ADOLESCENTS

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.

Key terms: Focus groups; methodology; adolescents, sexuality, masculinity; group processes.

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 in using the health services (Kitzinger, 1994, 2000; Green & Thorogood, 2004). 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 depth interviews is their capacity to capture the dynamics of group interaction, and to exploit this in 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 (Green & Hart, 1999; Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2000; Crossley, 2002; Pini, 2002; Green *et al* 2002), 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 (Mauthner, 1997; Heary and Hennessy, 2002; Hennessy and Heary, 2005). The potential for focus groups to offer children peer support when compared with individual interviews has been noted (Mauthner, 1997; Hennessy and Heary, 1995). 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 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 5 in rural areas. The sample was drawn from 3 girls' schools, 4 boys' schools and 3 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, and to become too directive and make too many extra demands on teaching staff might have jeopardised access to the study sites. 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 same school meant that group participants were at least known to one another.

There is no way of establishing whether those who opted to participate were different in terms of their sexual attitudes and experiences from those who did not. However,

the diversity that later emerged in data, both within and across groups, suggests that young people with a variety of sexual attitudes and experiences were represented, and participation was not confined to any particular type of adolescent.

The interviews were conducted from October-December 2003, and January 2004, by fieldworkers working in pairs. All groups, apart from one, were single sex interviews.

Focus group literature usually proposes no more than 8 participants in groups with children (Charlesworth & Rodwell, 1997; Vaughn et al 1996). However, we were keen that as many children who wanted to participate would be given the opportunity to do so. In view this, and the fact that our participants were older children (all were 14 years or more), we decided to see how larger groups worked. We allowed up to a maximum group size of 12, which just one of the 29 groups reached. We observed and subjectively monitored the comfort and participation levels of participants in the groups and found that larger groups tended to be more relaxed than smaller ones, and no more likely to have a small number of 'quiet' participants. However, in the larger groups, participants did tend to talk together to a greater extent, which made the work of transcribing the tapes more challenging.

At each interview, a moderator facilitated the interview, while an assistant moderator was primarily responsible for the audio-recording and noted the order in which participants spoke. Moderators were carefully chosen for their appropriateness at interviewing young people and their ease in discussing the sensitive topic of sex and sexuality; all were graduates in a social science subject with training and/or previous experience at interviewing. Moderators and assistant moderators were given additional information specific to focus group interviewing, including written guidelines. This included details about the role of the moderator in establishing ground rules and making the environment a safe place for group members, making the group feel at ease, and the importance of a non-judgmental stance, and the need to moderate dominant group members.

In addition, to ensure consistency in the issues covered across interviews, all moderators were furnished with an interview guide. The interview guide reflected the study's objectives. It was designed to provide triggers for discussion rather than be used as a prescriptive structure for the interviews.

There are particular issues around focus groups with children on a sensitive topic that needed to be considered. The first concerns the issue of confidentiality: a focus group leader can take all feasible measures to ensure that issues revealed during the focus group remain confidential, but cannot control the actions of group participants in this regard (Smith, 1995). While this applies to focus groups involving both children and adults, it is of greater concern with children, who may not fully appreciate the concept of confidentiality in a culture that is increasingly at variance with the notion of children keeping secrets. In addition, the intensity of the interaction may create stress or distress among participants (Hill, 1998). Prior to the focus groups, participants in this study were informed in writing of the voluntary nature of participation, and of their prerogative to leave the group interview at any time should they so wish, without being asked for their reasons. At the start of each focus group, ground rules were set regarding confidentiality, respect for the views of others, the importance of honesty and so forth. The researchers also indicated to participants their complete independence from the school, and assured participants that the taped interview would not be heard by anyone within the school. Written informed consent was obtained from both participants themselves and at least one parent/guardian.

Data analysis drew upon a strategy of theoretical sampling associated with grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1992), and involved two members of the research team. The initial interview guide was revised during the data gathering phase to reflect emerging theoretical insights. Data were organised into clusters using the constant comparative method, whereupon data were compared and categorised. This aspect of the analysis occurred parallel to data gathering, and fed into the agenda of topics in later interviews. By the time 29 interviews had been conducted, saturation had been achieved on the most central issues, that is, incoming data ceased to add anything new, but rather reflected the diversity already identified.

Issues in focus group interviewing

Specifically, we explore methodological issues relating to focus groups in the study in relation to six themes, namely:

- (i) The ethnographic potential within group interviews;
- (ii) The potential of focus groups to capture group members' vulnerabilities;
- (iii) Challenging dominant group views through group member invigilation;
- (iv) The formation and composition of focus groups;
- (v) The potential and pitfalls of information exchange in focus groups;
- (vi) The possibility of triangulating qualitative focus group data with a post-interview quantitative check on the validity of the data gathered.

(i) The ethnographic potential within group interviews

Green and Thorogood (2004) note how a natural group interview has the potential to capture some aspects of ethnographic research, that is, the enactment of the kinds of things that normally occur in a cultural setting, such as joking, arguing and so forth. However, they elucidate that the natural group interview falls short of being a 'natural' setting by virtue of bringing people together for the specific purpose of an interview. Although we have already noted that the extent to which we can make claims about our groups being 'natural' is limited, nonetheless, we found that some aspects of participants' sub-culture of intimacy were acted out 'live' in the interview process. This acting out of sub-cultural processes corroborated the kind of social dynamics that the young people described in other parts of the interview as normative practices within their culture.

One example of the manner in which the ethnographic context of focus groups was captured in interviews occurred in relation to the issue of establishing sexual boundaries during intimate encounters. In the example below, during the course of the group interaction, male sexual pushiness was reinforced, accepted and even encouraged. In the exchanges among the boys themselves, sex is constructed as something that they seek and get.

P: She'd probably drop some hints, say, 'No I don't want to do that, so just leave it.'

. . . It's up to you to respect them or keep trying.

P2: Keep trying.

P3: [To participant number 2] Good man [name]! Did you get it in the end?

P2: No.

(Male, Urban, Senior Cycle, School 9/Focus Group 2)

The notion of young men trying to extend sexual boundaries as a normative practice within their sub-culture was affirmed in the accounts of the young women in their group interviews. Thus, the social interaction in the group interview setting can serve to substantiate (or equally cast doubts upon) what participants describe as part of their sub-culture. It does this by mimicking to some extent, at certain junctures during the interview, parts of the normal everyday interaction that permeate the subculture in settings beyond the interview.

Take for example an emerging theme that young men monitor the extent to which they and their peers measure up to the yardstick of normative masculinity. The young men described how they would be slagged and jeered if, for example, they were seen to be let down by a woman, if previous sex partners expressed negative opinions about their sexual prowess, or if it became public knowledge that their sexual experience was limited. The version of masculinity that they were expected to manifest resembled closely the central features of traditional dominant masculinity, namely, success in sexual conquest (Giddens, 1992), a sense of mastery in sexual performance and sexual prowess, expressions of a strong interest in matters of sex, and homophobia (Measor *et al*, 2000). However, in addition to their own accounts as a source of data, this facet of their sub-culture was sometimes acted out in the focus groups. Note how, in the extract below, the interview rolls out to reveal the way in which masculinity is regulated within peer groups:

P¹: [Indicating to another] He's a living sex machine.

P: Oral sex.

[P7 pointing at P6]: He practises on his pillow.

[Laughing.]

P: You use a magnifying glass and a tweezers you told me.

P: He had to get a magnifying glass and tweezers.

P: See him there [points at another participant], he has one of them blow-up dolls.

¹ P denotes that a participant is speaking, and where the identity of the participant was established in the course of transcribing, the participant is identified by a number. However, at times during the interviews, especially in the heat of an interaction among group members, it was impossible to identify who the speaker was. This problem was compounded by virtue of the fact that the young people within particular groups tended to speak with the same accents and the same level of maturity in their voices.

Int: He has a blow up doll? Tweezers?

P: Tweezers - he cannot find it [his penis].

P: He can't find it.

P: He has a telescope.

P: He's the hairiest I'd say.

P: You're thinking about that [insinuating that the participant might be homosexual].

P: Your brother told me.

(Male, Urban, Junior Cycle, School 7 (Co-ed)/Focus Group 1)

Data here raise the issue of considering the status of aspects of data in terms of validity, a fiercely debated concept (Hammersley, 1987; Sparkes, 2001; Whittemore et al, 2001; Aguinaldo, 2004). Amid the myriad of definitions of validity proposed by various scholars over the years (see Sparkes, 2001), *accuracy* appears to sum up the common thread throughout them all (Winter, 2000). However, here a distinction may be made between validity with regard to face value representations of the realities of participants' experiences, and alternatively, validity with regard to the reproduction of sub-cultural processes during the interview. In other words, in relation to episodes of acting out, there is a distinction between understanding exaggerated claims as inaccurate information, and understanding exaggerated claims as evidence of sub-cultural processes. This is an important distinction since it represents different ways of understanding the validity and utility of data collected. However, even if we accept that both ways of considering data are potentially accurate portrayals of different things, one of actual beliefs or behaviour, and the other of subcultural processes, we are still left with the problem of identifying when claims are exaggerated or evidence of sub-cultural processes, and when comments can be taken at face value and as accurate reports of beliefs and behaviours as participants actually experienced them. Thus, although focus groups offer, on the one hand, opportunities to witness group dynamics of the subculture at work, they frustrate the analyst trying to distinguish when reports should be taken as truthful or untruthful. A 'true' representation of group processes may not portray a 'true' representation of what these young people are really thinking or doing at an individual level. By contrast, while individual interviews cannot guarantee an accurate representation of reality as experienced by a participant, at least individual interviewees will not be playing to the audience, but rather are presenting themselves solely to an individual interviewer.

Let us consider a second extract from data where validity as a marker of accurate information is called into question by exaggerated or fabricated behaviour to some degree, that would, nonetheless, seem to offer insights into the subtleties of the sub-culture.

P5: Boys do be more into it [sex].

P7: It's the girls.

P5: It depends now - if it is [name's a girl] now . . .

P2: They take your clothes off and leave you for dead.

P5: Tie you up and just leave you.

P2: They could have been with every single fella that lives round your area like and everyone knows.

Int: If she is from town what [earlier reference to girls from the city centre]? So if she is from the city centre what is the deal?

P3: Rough rough.

P5: You are sorted.

P: You are in all right.

P: They are gaggin' [begging] for it.

P: They would not think twice about it.

P: They're well broke in.

(Male, Urban, Junior Cycle, School 7 (Co-ed)/Focus Group 1)

When the interviewer pressed further as to whether or not the above information was based on the young men's direct experiences, some admitted that their knowledge about 'girls from town' actually came from hearsay within the male grapevine. These sorts of dramatic utterances might be written off as invalid accounts, if validity is constructed as an accurate representation of individual participants' experiences, insofar as the young men are not presenting an accurate picture of their actual experiences, or possibly (and most probably) even those of their mates. Rather they appear to be caught up in a roll of showing off and exaggerating in front of each other, presenting a front stage version of their identity (see Goffman, [1959] 2002) that enables them to sustain a place in the hierarchy of masculinity. Yet, this front or image that they projected at times within the interviews, laden with drama and success at conquests, much of which are 'untruths', most likely closely resembled the performances that they enacted in their

everyday culture within the peer group. What emerged strongly from data overall was that peer-based rules of conduct propel young men to demonstrate a strong interest in sex and sexual conquest, sometimes forcing them to cover up or fabricate aspects of their sex lives to avoid getting slagged off in the peer group. As Goffman noted, interaction is a ritual, with social meaning stretching well beyond the individuals in a given encounter; likewise, the social dynamics in the interview situation are mediated by cultural norms. However, the extent to which the young men identified with dominant cultural constructions of masculinity varied. (Details of the manner in which the male peer group operated to sustain cultural norms of masculinity will be reported in a separate publication).

In exploring the use of focus groups in health research, Robinson (1999) noted that reports of sexual activity imparted by young people in some studies were untruthful. We suggest that this 'untruthfulness', or more accurately, a set of masks and situated performances in which self is presented in front of observers (Goffman, [1959] 2002), appears to be a central feature of male youth culture and capturing it in focus groups is to exploit the ethnographic potential of group interviews. This impression management by the young men may at times have been deliberate, while at other times unintentional. Either way, as indicated above, validity at one level (namely, how faithfully actual experiences of individual focus group members were described) would appear to compromise validity at another (how faithfully group processes were being enacted). Even if we accept that the different phenomena at play (group processes on the one hand and actual experiences on the other) are equally valid when they present themselves, the researcher is still left with a dilemma. There is nothing other than the researcher's own hunches about what is being presented to enable him or her to distinguish which version of reality is being presented at any particular point in the interview. We do not offer any solutions to this dilemma; rather it may provoke further debate about the status of validity in focus group interviewing.

(ii) The potential of focus groups to reveal vulnerabilities

There are examples of interactions whereupon young people admitted their vulnerabilities even within male groups, and when vulnerabilities were revealed they were often shared by others.

In the following extract, the young men express their insecurity about their sexual physique relative to other men, yet the last speaker does this while at the same time asserting his masculinity in an attempt to sustain his position in the hierarchy of masculinity.

Int: So there are a few things to worry about. What would be the biggest fears around having sex?

P: That you have a small willie.

P: Yeah like fellas think more about that than getting the girl pregnant. That when you're actually doing it than getting a disease.

P6: Yeah, you do think more of, "Oh crap what if I have a small willie?"

P4: But you can't help it can you, *not saying I have or anything!*

(Male, Urban, Junior Cycle, School 4/Focus Group 2)

Focus groups thus have the potential to allow fears, vulnerabilities and uncertainties to come to the surface, and to become a dominant perspective at times within the focus group. It is highly unlikely that in regular discussions among young men themselves, their fears and vulnerabilities about their penis size would be shared, or that they would be aware that performance anxiety is a common source of disquiet for boys of their age. (Indeed, there was evidence elsewhere in the young men's accounts to suggest that revealing vulnerabilities like this would result in the boys being slagged or 'crucified' by others in the peer group.)

In the extract that follows, the young women share their sense of outsider status in a culture where having a boyfriend brings status within the group, and where in certain situations, they experienced isolation, disconnectedness, and a sense of being inferior.

P4: I think it's put on by yourself really – pressure on yourself – because you know, all your friends have boyfriends and you know when you hear that, you feel like left out and [Lots of 'yeahs' and someone says, 'Exactly'] You want to have one too then.

Several: Yeah, yeah.

Int: You wouldn't want to be left out or something?

Several: Yeah, yeah.

P4: You feel like a gooseberry as well, like.

P2: Because they are all talking about it or else they are ringing them and you're going, 'Oh no.'

P4: Or else you're at the cinema and there's them two, and them two, and them two, and you're sitting all on your own.

(Female, Rural, Mixed Junior and Senior Cycles, School 5/Focus Group 2)

While young women's accounts, in comparison with the young men, suggested a greater openness about sex with their close friends, whether they would express their sense of isolation as indicated above beyond the focus group is open to question. Although the need did not arise in the present study, we propose post-interview debriefing in situations where focus group participants are upset in revealing vulnerabilities that arise in the course of the interviewing.

(iii) Challenging dominant group views through group member invigilation

Green and Thorogood (2004) suggest as a demerit of group interviews their limited ability to capture in depth peripheral viewpoints that become silenced under the swell of group dynamics. In this way, opinions are hierarchically ordered reflecting the cultural norms from which they emanate. However, our data suggested that mavericks going against the grain may also succeed in having their voices heard with the consequence of casting doubts about the trustworthiness of the dominant view being presented. Consider the following extract from a group of young women:

P10: A fella will chance his arm and if you're good-looking he'll say, 'I'll give it a shot and see can I get her', and if he doesn't, he doesn't care, he just goes on to the next one like.

P12: It doesn't bother him.

P: *I think we're branding them very bad like. They're not all like that.*

(Female, Rural, Senior Cycle, School 8/Focus Group 2)

Brave individuals with strong oppositional views can, in the course of the interview, not simply contest the views of their fellow interviewees, but actually suggest that the dominant *view* being expressed misrepresents the dominant *experiences* in the sub-culture. In both of the examples that follow, the dominant perspectives being presented were moderated somewhat when one individual within each group strongly challenged the socially approving line of the others:

Int: So how long would you be with a girlfriend [before having sex]? Is that different from girl to girl do you think?

P5: It depends if she is easy.

[Some members of the group gasp or make faces as though they are surprised/disapproving.]

P5: *The lads act shocked but they know it's true.*

Several: Yeah yeah.

P3: If they were a slut before, they're going to be slut but if they are not a slut you would wait a couple of months.

(Male, Urban, Senior Cycle, School 7 (Co-ed)/Focus Group 3)

P1: Well to a certain extent because loads of birds [women (derogatory)] get slagged for being, like, very bad at things [in intimate encounters].

Int: Do they? Would you talk about it amongst yourselves?

P4: No you wouldn't say it to them because you'd just get killed. To say whether, no this is incriminating. Yeah, you've got to think really hard about this.

Int: But would you say that to your friends if someone was useless?

P1: Yeah.

Several: No. No.

Int: Some of you would?

P1: *When I say 'Yeah!' everybody else says 'No!'. You've all lied.*

Int: You'd tell other people if you were with a girl and it was just awful?

P6: But girls would do it as well.

Int: Do you think so yeah?

P4: But you wouldn't say something that would completely destroy the other person's life. If it was that bad, you'd say that it wasn't that good, you wouldn't say it was terrible because it's going to put a lot of people off her.

(Male, Urban, Senior Cycle, School 9/Focus Group 2)

That group members can challenge one another to validate or invalidate positions in such a direct manner is a real strength of the group interviews. Interviewers, whether in group or individual interviews, would never be in a position to challenge the authenticity of accounts in the way that fellow member can challenge one another. Accusing interviewees of lying is, for good reason, simply not encouraged in methodology texts, and in any case, interviewers would not normally have the insider knowledge to know the extent to which narratives reflect the realities of the sub-group. Thus, the capacity of group members to monitor and invigilate the authenticity of what is being revealed has the potential to buttress the trustworthiness of focus groups. While part of the moderator's role is to intervene to ensure that dominant views do not take over, this has to be balanced against allowing members of the group to challenge one another's position in an atmosphere of safety.

(iv) The formation and composition of focus groups

Notwithstanding Kitzinger's (1994:113) point that research participants in any particular group 'are never entirely homogenous' we found that the formation and composition of groups sometimes appeared to influence the dominant perspective being presented by the group. Although in most of the groups a mixture of opinions was forthcoming, there was a small number of groups where group views emerged strongly, with few individual dissenters. We will take as an example two contrasting groups with the young women. The dominant perspective emerging from one group of girls was that most of them were very sexually experienced since their early teens, some with multiple partners. A different group of girls, by contrast, tended to be very strong in their perceptions that one should be, at the very least, in late adolescence and in a very stable relationship before becoming sexually active. In addition, the latter group tended to share a blatant disapproval of permissive sexual behaviour, associating it with the label of 'slut'.²

P3: We'd know who were the sluts were in our year [at school].

(Female, Urban, Junior Cycle, School 3/Focus Group 2)

On the basis of the above exert, it is unlikely that this focus group contained any young women who were identified as 'sluts' by the focus group members; however, girls to whom the label applied appeared to be present in the wider school group. By contrast, based on the exert that follows, the more 'liberal' group of sexually experienced young women (according to their own accounts) was unlikely to have contained girls known to make judgements about permissive sexual behaviour, but these were believed to be among the wider peer group.

P7: It's the girls making the other girls like, they call them sluts.

P8: They're jealous.

Several: Yeah. Yeah.

(Female, Rural, Leaving Cycle, School 8/Focus Group 2)

In attempting to explain the differences across groups we noted that a theme to emerge in data was that young people's sexual experiences tend to be influenced by those in their immediate peer group, that is, their closest friends. (This finding supports existing research in the area (Burtney, 2000).) Thus, there are clusters of sexually experienced young people within larger groups of youths, and likewise clusters of those who are inexperienced. The variations from one focus group to the next in terms of participants' levels of sexual experience may be related to the fact that, in our study, the young people had to volunteer to participate; it is quite likely that these young women had worked out who else was talking part in the group interview before agreeing to participate, and that friends were congregated or clustered within groups. Since the initiation of sex appears to be related to peer influence, this would account for this kind of clustering. That the data produced about a topic is contingent upon the formation and composition of groups suggests that the number of focus groups conducted should be sufficient to see the bigger picture. 'Forcing' diverse individuals together during the selection process to counteract the tendency towards clustering would have been inadvisable for the purposes of our research, since it was important that group members were as relaxed as possible with one another to facilitate rapport. (The prevailing wisdom in

² For an account of the 'double standard' in sexuality and the way in which both boys and girls monitored and invigilated each other's sexual behaviour, see Hyde and Howlett (2004).

focus group research it to achieve homogeneity within a group (Kitzinger, 2000) although the benefits of diversity are also acknowledged). In addition, that some groups at least appear to have been constructed through the delicate mechanisms of the adolescents themselves meant that these groups had a high degree of naturalism, almost representing close friendship networks. This was clear from the way in which the young people interacted with one another in some groups; for example, when recounting stories about their social lives, it would emerge that some group members socialised together. This allowed a particular perspective to dominate in one focus group and a contrasting one to become dominant in another.

Another factor that might be considered in interpreting the differences noted in the dominant group view in the examples given immediately above is the rural/urban difference between the groups. What was surprising, however, was that the rural group was the more liberal in relation to sexuality. One might expect girls in rural areas to be more conservative in their views of sexuality than those in urban areas, since the liberalisation of sexuality is a feature of modernisation, industrialization and urbanisation. Empirical evidence suggests that until the early 1990s at least, young people in rural areas were less sexually experienced than their urban counterparts (Lalor et al, 2003), although with postmodernist influences permeating more and more social locations, these differences are becoming more diminished (see Inglis, 1998). However, not all of the rural groups of girls were as liberal as those depicted in the example above. When the focus groups were considered overall, there were few consistent differences between rural and urban girls in their perspectives on sex and sexuality. We have used this example merely to highlight the notion of clustering of people with similar perspectives in self-selected focus groups, and the need for future researchers to be aware of how this might influence data.

(v) The potential and pitfalls of information exchange in focus groups

While focus group data is often cut, sliced and presented in academic papers as evidence to support a particular phenomenon, more recently, the interactive component of group interviews has been the subject of analysis for its educational and transformative potential (Crossley 2002; Pini, 2002; Green and Thorogood, 2004). Perceptions, attitudes and viewpoints can become modified, constructed and

redefined in the experience of the interaction. We noted that in the course of some focus groups, young people exchanged information amongst themselves that modified their existing knowledge base. Consider the following extracts:

P: You can always try and have a practice [to put on a condom]

P8: Are you not afraid that it will rip it no?

P: Double up and triple up.

P: You are not supposed to do that.

P: Is that not supposed to be really bad? Using two?

P: That's what I heard - double friction and they rip easier.

(Male, Urban, Senior Cycle, School 7 (Co-ed)/Focus Group 3)

P2: Like you can get pregnant without having sex.

P1: I didn't know that.

P4: What did she say?

P1: That you can get pregnant without having sex.

P3: How do you get it?

P1: Like by doing oral with the guy and he touches you afterwards. It is not really the actual sex part.

P5: There was this lady she said you can get pregnant without having sex. Like if you just, like, orally, whatever and then the guy comes or whatever and then like it . . .

P: It gets on his hands and he fingers you or something?

P2: No, no, no, if it just goes onto your kind of, in your area, you can get pregnant.

(Female, Urban, Junior Cycle, School 6 (Co-ed)/Focus Group 2)

The potential for individuals in group interviews to learn new things from others in the course of the interview, and for this knowledge to impact upon their future thinking or behaviour is a possibility of focus groups. Although mediated with a degree of lightheartedness, there is some sense of this occurring in the following extract.

P2: Could you get AIDS from oral sex?

P3: Yeah.

P1: Really, I'm going to cry. Well, I'd expect them to tell you.

P2: 'And, by the way, I have AIDS'.

P1: This [discussion] is ruining my sex life.

(Male, Urban, Senior Cycle, School 9/Focus Group 2)

Focus groups also have the potential to be counter-educational, in circumstances where inaccurate or incorrect information is spread in a group, that, if acted upon, could put the health and wellbeing of participants at risk. While the validity of all knowledge, including knowledge presented in health education programmes, is culturally and historically specific and open to question, there is established evidence-based knowledge that is designed to promote health (such as the proper use of condoms to prevent the transmission of the HIV virus). If the focus group interaction itself is in danger of facilitating the dissemination of incorrect information, then moderators have a responsibility to correct such information immediately, at the time of the focus group. This is an essential feature of the principle of nonmaleficence (first do no harm) underpinning virtually all codes of ethics in research. In our study, gaps in knowledge were frequently noted, something that young people brought to the interview rather were produced there. Since addressing these would demand a well-planned programme of sex education rather than a once-off debriefing session, we highlighted these as an issue in the research report and made specific recommendations for addressing them³.

(vi) The possibility of triangulating qualitative focus group data with a post-interview check on the validity

Focus groups provide opportunities for researchers to use quantitative techniques to measure the validity of data through the use of a post-interview questionnaire. In our study, for example, we disseminated a brief questionnaire (primarily designed to capture biographical details) to each participant at the end of each interview. One of the questions posed related to the extent to which participants deemed that the information imparted by co-participants to the interviewer was true, using a Likert scale. The question posed was as follows: 'In my view, what the boys/girls in this focus group told the researchers during this focus group was (please circle): mostly true, true to some extent, not true at all.' Since secondary school children are likely to be oblivious to the finer arguments about how the issue of truth is debated within the social sciences, it may be assumed that they would interpret truth here to refer

to the realities of the (actual) behaviour of themselves and their peers as each constructed it. Interestingly, the results indicated that females were more likely to indicate that the information given was mostly true (96%) relative to males (85.6%) (see Figure 2). Other writers on the topic of sex have noted that boys tend to exaggerate their sexual activities and attitudes (Lalor et al, 2003; Schubotz et al, 2003) in line with dominant versions of masculinity and the greater doubts that the young men revealed relative to the young women about the veracity of interview data in this study may reflect this. However, post-interview questionnaires may be no more valid a representation of the realities of participants than questionnaires in general, and should not be taken as somehow more valid than other data. However, they do provide another means for corroborating evidence.

We fully acknowledge that using a post-interview questionnaire to check the validity of interview data does nothing to address the burning issue about establishing the validity of qualitative data in their own right. Indeed, critics might well argue that it exacerbates the problem by circumventing it and reverting to positivistic strategies instead. Much of the debate about trying to establish validity in qualitative research has centred on the argument that no matter what alternative measures have been proposed specifically for qualitative research, they tend to fall back on neo-realist paradigms of binary opposites namely trustworthy/untrustworthy; valid/invalid based on some core notion of truth (Aguinaldo, 2004). As indicated earlier, the difficulty of establishing validity in qualitative data in focus groups is further complicated by the possibility of oscillating between the reproduction of normative groups processes on the one hand, and honest accounts of how reality is experienced by individuals in the interview on the other. Nonetheless, focus groups do offer opportunities to get a sense of how trustworthy focus groups data are through a post-interview questionnaire.

Summary and conclusion

In this paper, we have attempted to contribute to the existing knowledge base on

³ The first educational audiovisual resource arising from the broader findings of this and other

focus groups by analyzing the social interaction that occurred during group interviews with adolescents on the topic of sexual health. We have analysed how group interaction impacted upon the kind of knowledge produced in the study. Our data suggested that at times during the interview, the performance of the group lent support to the very phenomena that participants were recalling retrospectively as a dimension of their culture. While we argue that exaggerated or fabricated aspects of data gleaned during focus groups may be a valid representation of sub-cultural group processes, we also highlighted the dilemma that analysts face in attempting to determine which components of the interview mimic normative group dynamics of the culture, and which can be taken at face value. In addition to capturing group processes, we noted that vulnerabilities and anxieties of participants were revealed in the interviews. Furthermore, marginal voices within focus groups may problematise the trustworthiness of the dominant group view emerging, and even serve to moderate it. We also considered how the formation and composition of groups may be important in understanding variations in dominant themes across a range of focus groups on the same topic, although there may be other factors that also explain variation. Our data provide further empirical support for the view that focus groups can be educational and transformative (Green and Thorogood, 2004); however, we caution that information exchange among group members may also place participants at risk, if the focus groups itself is the source of inaccurate information. Finally, an opportunity to cross-check the trustworthiness of focus group data, as participants interpret the notion of truth, arises through the administration of a post-interview questionnaire that presents a realist version of validity. Overall, we argue that the course of the focus group is varied and unstable - at various points in the focus group different possibilities emerge. There are possibilities for acting out of performances and managing impressions, for exchanging information, and for exposing vulnerabilities and wittingly or unwittingly going against the tide of opinion.

Our data elucidate the close association between methodology and theory, that is, the link between how data are gathered and the philosophical assumptions underpinning this, and the emerging interpretations that explain data. However, we reiterate Measor *et al.*'s (2000) assertion that even qualitative methodologies may not overcome the manner in which adolescents are sensitive to the subject of

parallel studies will be launched on March 7th 2005 by the Crisis Pregnancy Agency.

sexuality, although focus groups may capture the delicacies of this sensitivity, and break the ice to allow shy individuals to participate (Kitzinger, 1994). Nonetheless, though mechanisms for accessing the realities of human beings are never perfect, our experience suggests that the focus group offers health researchers a valuable tool for generating knowledge in the substantive field of health and illness.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank the Crisis Pregnancy Agency for funding this research. The opinions expressed in this publication are of the researchers and are not necessarily those of the sponsor.

Word count: 7,417

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Figure 1. Profile of the sample

Overview	
Total number of participants	226

Number of female participants	102
Number of male participants	124
Number of focus groups	29
Number of leaving certificate (senior cycle) groups	12
Number of junior certificate (junior cycle) groups	11
Number of transition year (senior cycle) groups	3
Number of mixed groups (senior and junior cycle mixed)	3

Rural (5 schools)														
Co-ed			Male			Male			Female			Female		
School Number 1			School Number 2			School Number 10			School Number 5			School Number 8		
SC (m)	SC (f)	JC (f)	SC	JC	JC	JC	SC	SC	Mxd	Mxd	Mxd	JC	SC	
8	7	8	9	7	5	8	8	6	8	7	7	11	12	---

Urban (5 schools)														
Co-ed			Co-ed			Male			Male			Female		
School Number 6			School Number 7			School Number 4			School Number 9			School Number 3		
SC (m/f)	JC (f)	JC (m)	JC (m)	SC (f)	SC (m)	JC	JC	SC	T	T	T	SC	JC	SC
5	6	6	10	8	8	8	7	8	9	8	8	8	8	8

Notes

1. The school number refers to the order in which the interviews were undertaken.
2. In the case of co-educational schools, female focus groups are identified as '(f)' and male as '(m)'. In the case of one group (at Sch 6), a group was a mixed sex group '(m/f)'.
3. 'Mxd' denotes that the focus group was drawn from a mix of junior and senior cycle pupils.
4. 'T' denotes that students were in their transition year.
5. The last row indicates the number of participants in each group.

Figure 2. Validity of the information imparted by group members

Sample Overall

In my view, what the boys/girls in this focus group told the researchers during this focus group was:		
	Frequency	Valid Percent
Mostly true	198	90.4%
True to some extent	20	9.1
Not true at all	1	0.5
Total (completed and returned)	219	100
TOTAL	226	

Girls Only

In my view, what the girls in this focus group told the researchers during this focus group was:		
	Frequency	Valid Percent
Mostly true	95	96
True to some extent	4	4
Not true at all	0	-
Total (completed and returned)	99	100
TOTAL	101	

Boys Only

In my view, what the boys in this focus group told the researchers during this focus group was:		
	Frequency	Valid Percent
Mostly true	103	85.8
True to some extent	16	13.3
Not true at all	1	0.8
Total (completed and returned)	120	100
TOTAL	124	

