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To cite this article: Carolina Överlien, Karin Aronsson & Margareta Hydén (2005) The Focus Group Interview as an In-depth Method? Young Women Talking About Sexuality, International Journal of Social Research Methodology, 8:4, 331-344, DOI: 10.1080/1364557042000119607

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1364557042000119607

Published online: 24 Feb 2007.

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The Focus Group Interview as an In-depth Method? Young Women Talking About Sexuality

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Received 10 September 2002; Accepted 11 March 2003

This article discusses whether the focus group method can be employed with troubled groups and for the discussion of high-involvement topics. It analyses focus groups’ discourse of high-involvement topics, such as ‘the body’, ‘relationships’, and ‘sexuality’, conducted with female adolescents aged 15–20 years at a detention home. Contrary to the traditional belief that the focus group method is designed for low-involvement topics and mainstream groups, our analyses of the discursive devices employed suggest that the method can indeed be used for high-involvement topics. We also argue that other methods would not have given us ‘deeper’ insights and that the focus group method can be seen as a less intrusive method to be used in this setting.

Focus Group Interviews and High-involvement Topics

The aim of the present investigation was to discuss the use of the focus group method when talking to troubled young women about high-involvement issues. Historically, the focus group method has often been employed for market research and for what can be called low-involvement topics (e.g. preferred cigarette brand) in contrast to high-involvement topics (e.g. promotion of safe sex). The present focus group study is concerned with something that would be seen a priori as a high-involvement topic, that is, the explicit views of young people on the body and on sexual politics. It is part of a larger study devoted to the understanding of the dilemmas and problems staff at a youth detention home encounter when working with young women (15–20 years old).
who have been victims of sexual abuse. In order to gain an understanding of the young women’s own understanding of sexuality, the researchers initiated a series of focus group interviews, mapping their ideas about the body, gender, and self-identity. Drawing on analyses of the group talk in this study, we discuss whether the method can indeed be employed with troubled groups and for the discussion of high-involvement issues.

It is quite common to think that the focus group method is primarily designed for low-involvement topics and mainstream groups, such as gathering a group of women on parental leave talking about a certain brand of nappies. Yet, a number of researchers have recently shown that the method is indeed useful when investigating sensitive or high-involvement topics, such as child bearing and welfare (Jarrett, 1993), or drug use (Agar and MacDonald, 1995). Moreover, the focus group method has been employed in research on troubled or marginalized groups: e.g. work on low-income minority groups (Jarrett, 1993), and adolescent drug users (Agar & MacDonald, 1995; cf. also Morgan & Kreuger, 1993). Using these arrangements, gay and bisexual men have been studied when talking about HIV and AIDS (Joseph, Emmons, Kessler, Wortman, & O’Brian, 1984), drug dependent women infected with HIV when discussing social service concerns (Seals et al., 1995), women talking about their breast cancer (Wilkinson, 1998a), difficult-to-reach, high-risk families talking about alcohol and drugs (Lengua et al., 1992), and women with chronic pain talking about their experiences of the health system (Grace, 1995). Instead of using the more traditional dyadic interview when talking about sensitive topics, these investigations have all drawn on multiparty focus groups and high-involvement issues.

What is considered a high-involvement issue is of course dependent on whom we ask. A discussion about sexuality may be a high-involvement issue to a group of teenagers and a low-involvement issue to staff members at a gynaecological clinic. In the present study, we partly relied on the interactional data when deciding if a topic was a high-involvement topic. Co-participants’ uptake was part of the so-called proof procedure (cf. Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974). In comparison with other researchers using the focus group method when talking about high-involvement issues, such as Smithson (2000), the group participants in this study were not gathered as a result of, for example, an add in the paper. Young women at detention homes in Sweden constitute a marginalized group without a voice, thought of as deviant and non-verbal, we would argue. They live together in compulsory care institutions, and all have in common that they are placed at the institution against their will. At the institution, daily conversations are the primary means for providing treatment. Micro-level conversational data are therefore highly relevant.

Although other researchers have conducted focus groups talking about high-involvement issues, using the method in the described context makes our study, to our knowledge, unique, and adds new knowledge about the use of focus groups. The material we gathered was rich and allowed for discursive micro-analyses, rather than a general analysis of themes. Few studies have examined the conversation in great detail, analysing the type of discursive devices that have been employed or the moderator’s role as gate-keeper in relation to pre-disclosures or disclosures on the participants’
part. Our detailed analysis of discursive devices using the focus group method will hopefully increase our understanding of how it is methodologically possible to conduct research with marginalized and traditionally unheard groups.

On ‘Depth’ in ‘In-depth’ Interviewing

In a classical discussion of spatial metaphors of surface versus depth, the anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) has convincingly challenged the concept of multi-layered thinking (e.g. ‘deep understanding’), demonstrating that ‘depth’ is often a highly ideological notion that needs to be proven rather than taken for granted.

At a first glance, the focus group method seems an incongruent method for high-involvement topics or in-depth interviewing, since our intuitive notions of in-depth interviewing are often linked to intimate dialogues or intensive contacts over time, which are in stark contrast to the multiparty encounters, involving 

\textit{ad hoc} constellations of participants that characterize focus groups.

The incongruence between focus groups and high-involvement topics is also presumably linked to simplistic ideas of ‘depth’ in interviews. Initially, focus group interviews were, in fact, called \textit{group depth interviews} (Goldman and MacDonald, 1987). Yet, the focus group as a contemporary research method is normally not associated with ‘deep’ investigations into attitudes or thinking.²

If anything, focus groups are commonly associated with ‘shallow’ analyses. Partly, such associations may have to do with the links to market research. Moreover, such associations are related to commonsense notions of ‘depth’ and intimate knowledge. The analyst–analysand relationship in psychoanalytic treatment (a ‘talking cure’) has implicitly often been seen as the prototype for ‘in-depth’ interviewing (on qualitative interviews, see also Kvale, 1995). Accordingly, ‘depth’ has been discussed in terms of long-term work on the interviewer’s (analyst’s) part. Similarly, the commonsense idea of ‘in-depth’ interviewing is linked to close dialogic relationships and to extended contacts over time, for instance, interactions that last for many hours, or recurrent informal ethnographic interviews that gradually grow into ‘deep’ understanding.

The Focus Group Method as a Research Method

In the early 1940s, the sociologist Robert K. Merton developed the focus group method as a way of evaluating wartime propaganda (Merton, Fiske, & Kendall, 1956). Recently, the focus group method has been ‘rediscovered’ by Morgan (1992, 1996), and it has increasingly been used by researchers from a variety of disciplines such as sociology, political science, and pedagogy.

The prototypical contemporary focus group involves a group of people who discuss a given topic during a limited period of time (Morgan, 1992; Smith, 1995). This may be an already existing group or a group of people who have never met before. As far as possible, the group interaction should resemble natural conversation focused on a specific topic or theme, hence the name ‘focus’ groups.³ The topic is introduced by the
moderator and can also be initiated by some form of stimulus material (i.e. an article, film clips, etc.). The group members are to discuss the topic or theme as freely as possible without much intervention by the moderator (Morgan, 1996).

The focus group research method can be used to study the content in the dialogue (participants’ attitudes, dreams or fears) as well as the interaction among the group members. Several researchers emphasize that the distinguishing feature of focus groups and the strength of the method is indeed the interaction among group participants, and that this interaction should be the main focus of study (Kitzinger, 1994; Morgan, 1992, 1996; Smith, 1995; Smithson, 2000; Wilkinson, 1998b, 1999). The interaction gives the moderator the opportunity to study the process of collective sense making and to learn the language and vocabulary used by the participants (Frith, 2000).

A pioneering study in terms of investigating the interaction in great detail is that of Myers and Macnaughten (1999). In another study of focus group interaction, Puchta and Potter (2002) have shown how moderators co-construe meaning in focus group interaction. They also showed how focus groups often involve a basic dilemma in that the moderator tries to create informality. Yet, the discussion as such often involves quite focused and structured discussions within prespecified formats. Informality and spontaneity are thus highly staged in terms of time limits and the type of spontaneity that is encouraged. To date, not many studies of focus group interaction have been published, and data extracts which offer the reader the opportunity to study such interaction are seldom presented (Frith, 2000; Wilkinson, 1998a).

Method

Setting and Group Participants

The data presented here were transcribed from audio recordings of focus group sessions conducted with young women at an all-female youth detention home. The young women were between the ages of 15 and 20 years. According to the staff, they displayed a broad rage of psychosocial problems, often with elements of substance abuse, criminal and/or self-destructive behaviour.

One of the authors (MH) had been asked by the staff to act as a consultant to the detention home, to assist them in finding ways of talking with the young women about sexual abuse, and this invitation eventually developed into a research enterprise. The staff claimed that most of the young women had, in fact, been sexually abused, and that this played a role in their present problems. As part of this overall project, the first author (CÖ) conducted an ethnographic study of the detention home as a way of trying to understand the role of sexual abuse and talking about sexual abuse in the daily treatment of the young women. During her stay at the detention home (in all eight weeks over four periods of two weeks each), she spent all her time together with the young women, during school hours, meals, and after school activities. The focus group interviews were originally initiated as a way of exploring the young women’s own thinking about the body and sexuality. The focus group discussions took place around a kitchen table at the detention home.
Recordings and Transcriptions

The focus group sessions were recorded with an audio tape recorder. All the tapes were thereafter transcribed, followed by a more detailed transcription of selected parts of the recordings.

Transcription notations

( . ) pause of less than a second
[ ] encloses overlapping turns
two circles encloses comments in sotto vocce
> < encloses talk at rapid speed
< > encloses talk at slow speed
* * encloses speech in a laughing voice
- self-editing marker
( ) encloses transcriber’s comments (e.g. on non-verbal communication, tone of voice, etc.)

Procedure

Five hour-long focus group sessions were conducted over a period of two weeks with a total of 11 young women taking part in the sessions. The number of participants in each group varied between two and five, and was led by a moderator (CÖ). At the beginning of each session, the moderator explained to the young women that we were interested in what they thought and felt about a number of issues related to being young women today. The participants were also told about the procedure of the study, that they were allowed to discontinue their participation at any time during the group session, and that their participation was voluntary. They were also told that the data would be confidential and that it was important that the group participants did not reveal the content of the discussion to others outside of the group.

The moderator particularly emphasized that she was not there to evaluate them, test or judge anyone and that there were no right or wrong answers. All the participants also received a letter a few days before the focus group sessions stating our intentions with the sessions and that their participation was voluntary. Informed consent was obtained from each participant and her parents.

Discussion Material and the Role of the Moderator

Articles from popular magazines for young women were presented as discussion material at the beginning of each focus group session (in line with the focus group tradition of presenting material to stimulate discussions). A semi-structured interview guide was used. The topics of the session included themes such as ‘romantic relationships’, ‘femininity/masculinity’, ‘beauty ideals and body image’, and ‘sexuality’. The articles presented reflected these topics and could therefore be used as a starting point for the
discussion. Also, the articles were employed as a means of eliciting and structuring discussions. Each session started with less sensitive topics such as ‘female role models’ and continued with high-involvement topics such as ‘when to say no to sex’.

At the beginning of each session, the moderator explained the aims of the study as well as the procedure of the sessions and introduced the magazine material. During the discussions, she tried to be active, attentive and focused at all times. The role of the moderator was first and foremost to be in control of the group in order to avoid outbursts, over-disclosure and behaviour that could have led to the session becoming chaotic or overly intimate. During the discussions she directed and encouraged the discussion, introducing new topics when necessary and appropriate.

Ethical Considerations

The printed material (magazines) played an important role in eliciting talk and discussion, but also in steering it away from overly personal or intimate issues. The more sensitive the topic became for the focus group participants, the closer the moderator stayed to the material, thereby offering the participants the option of orienting toward the material or speaking from a more personal standpoint. Consequently, the material allowed for anonymity. Also, it was expected that the young females should feel relatively comfortable in that they outnumbered the moderator.

- At each session, the focus group participants were informed that they could discontinue their participation in the group at any time.
- The staff were involved in discussions about the design of the focus groups. The participants were informed that the moderator would not share information about the content of the sessions with the staff and that the staff would not have access to the audiotapes and/or transcribed material from the group interviews. Also, they were assured that the material would be anonymized in future research presentations.
- The moderator, who collected the data, has had extensive experience with troubled people (from working at a women’s shelter). Also, all sessions were supervised by one of the senior authors (MH), an experienced therapist.

Data Analyses

Impersonalization

In the present setting, the focus group method was non-intrusive in several ways. First, the young women who had chosen to take part in the discussions could choose whether to participate actively or not. In fact, some participants chose to say very little during one or two of the discussions or during part of the discussions. Smithson (2000) discusses the problem of dominant voices in focus groups, and the fact that some group members may remain silent. She argues, ‘it need not be viewed as a problem if some of the focus group remain silent throughout the time’ (Smithson, 2000, p. 108). We would
in fact argue that having the choice of remaining silent, in particular when discussing high-involvement topics, may make the focus group method less intrusive, in comparison with a traditional interview. It allows the participant to avoid talking about personal issues that may be too sensitive to him/her. The participant does not explicitly have to refuse to answer a question, but may, by being silent, let others continue the discussion without actively taking part in it. Second, the present method was also non-intrusive in that the participants could choose to talk about quite impersonal topics.

Third, the participants had the option of employing linguistic impersonal constructions and other devices for distancing themselves from what was said by speaking from a third person perspective (about ‘he/him’ or ‘it’) and about anonymous agents (‘someone’, ‘one’) rather than from a first person perspective, talking about ‘I’ or ‘we’. In a well-known model of face work, drawing on speech act theories and earlier work on face by Goffman, such impersonal constructions are discussed as a type of device for creating distance, that is, negative politeness (strategy § 7; Brown & Levinson, 1987). This strategy involves impersonalizations of the speaker and/or hearer in a conversation. By talking about ‘one’ or ‘someone’, the participants may raise sensitive issues without becoming overly intimate. In this way, it can be said that impersonalizations are oriented toward the speaker’s negative face, or her need to be respected. In the recorded sessions, such impersonalizations were indeed very common. It was, in fact, more common for the participants to talk about anonymous third personas than about themselves. Also, the participants employed ‘evidentials’, e.g. ‘I think’, ‘I mean’, ‘kind of’ (Swedish: ‘liksom’), and ‘like’ as hedges, suggesting that they did not fully endorse what they said. In examples 1 and 2, it can be seen that the participants often employed both hedges and impersonal pronouns in the same utterance.

Just before the episode in our first example, the moderator had shown the participants an article positing the idea that young males of today are acting in traditionally female ways and that young women have taken over behaviour that has traditionally been seen as typically masculine. The participants claimed that they accept both males acting feminine and females acting masculine. Helen (of immigrant background) then brought up the topic of young immigrant females acting in ways that may not be acceptable.

(1) Participants: Helen (H), Katrin (K), Cecilia (C), young women living at the detention home, and the moderator, Carolina Överlien (CÖ):

```
1  H  Some people have a really hard time too (. ) if they’re like a girl who’s having trouble (. ) and (. ) she isn’t allowed to do like (. ) stuff (. )
2  CÖ  Mm
3  H  You know, I mean in Sweden that is (. ) it’s like: I don’t know (. ) it’s like you have to do what guys say (. ) like
4  CÖ  Mm
5  H  If you are a foreign girl
6  CÖ  Mm
7  H  You have to put up with a lot
```
As can be seen, Helen employs impersonal constructions in that she talks about ‘some people’ (Swedish: vissa) and ‘you’ (Swedish: man) in her first turn (turns 1, 4). In the last case, she, in fact, starts out talking about ‘I’ but changes to the impersonal form ‘you’. In Swedish, the third person pronoun ‘man’ (‘you’) is highly productive. It is employed both in contexts where English speakers would employ the second person pronoun and where the anonymous third person might be used. In Helen’s subsequent contributions, she similarly talks about ‘if you are a foreign girl’ (turn 5).

Collaborative Narration

Traditionally, interviews have been seen as ways of eliciting information from informants, and the interviewer’s role has been seen as relatively passive. Increasingly, researchers have realized the dialogic nature of interviewing. Interview narratives are basically dialogic rather than monologic affairs (Kvale, 1995; Mishler, 1986; Potter, 1996). Responses can partly be seen as the collaborative product of two participants, the interviewee and the interviewer.

In the present interviews, such co-construction was obviously not only a possible building block between the interviewee and the interviewer, but also between the different interviewees themselves. Co-construction of meaning is not only a possibility of the focus method but indeed an integral part of the method as such.

As will be seen, the participants exploited the collaborative potential of the method. For instance, Cecilia, Magdalena and Katrin co-construed a scenario about inviting sexual assault.

(2) Participants: Magdalena (M), Katrin (K), Cecilia (C), Anette (A), young women living at the detention home, and the moderator, Carolina Överlien (CÖ):

1 CÖ But you said something about alcohol here (.) that it is important=
2 C Yeah sure (.) if you can’t like get just a bit drunk (.) like a bit happy
3 CÖ Mm
4 C (.) but you have to get like: disgustingly drunk you know I think it just looks horrible it just looks sickening [I think anyway]
5 K [Yeah it’s not exactly nice to see a girl staggering about with a bottle of wine]
6 M No
7 K With it like in her hand
8 C Falling into a bush or something
9 K Yeah (.) mm
10 C And her skirt like slides up to here
11 K Yeah: (laugh) (.) with her bra straps falling down
12 C And then she doesn’t know when to stop and starts making out with someone in there
13 CÖ Mm
14 C And then she wants to say no and it doesn’t work
Again, it can be seen how the participants talk about ‘you’ (e.g. turn 2) or ‘a girl’ (turn 5), not about ‘I’ or about a familiar person. The focus group method allows for such an anonymization. It is perfectly accepted to employ impersonal constructions. Yet, it can be seen that the two participants have shared experiences that make it easy to co-construe scenarios where it is not possible ‘to say no’.

When Cecilia talks about a girl becoming ‘disgustingly drunk’ (turn 4), Katrin exemplifies by creating a scenario, ‘falling into some bush with her skirt sliding up to here’ (turn 8–10). In this episode, it can also be seen how the moderator formulates a leading question (turn 15). Thereby she can be seen to achieve a type of opinion packaging, which is used in focus groups (and other multiparty contexts) as a way of clarifying or contrasting different opinions (Puchta & Potter, 2002).

Apparently, the co-construed scenario is quite in line with what Cecilia had in mind when talking about ‘disgustingly drunk’, and she elaborates about how her bra straps slide down, and about how the girl at this point might wish to say ‘no’ but doesn’t succeed in doing so. The ultimate ‘drunken sex narrative’ is a collaborative product, involving both participants’ co-produced imaginings and thoughts.

According to Wilkinson (1998b), one of the key features of the focus group method is that the interaction among participants creates more fully articulated accounts. In this excerpt, we can see one of the advantages of the method—a rich co-constructed narrative about sexual assault.

**Arguments as Co-construction of Meaning**

Argumentative discourse is a rich arena for exploring the local construction of meaning (Antaki, 1994). In disputes, focus group participants may explore areas where they disagree. By the same token, two or more participants may align in seeing matters in a way that opposes the opinions of one or more other co-participant(s). This offers the researcher unique possibility of understanding how views are expressed, constructed and defended in the focus groups of the present study (Wilkinson, 1998b).

The focus group method can be seen to invite disagreement in that it evokes competing ideas about the phenomena at issue. In the present discussions, the participants were quite involved, and one of the areas that evoked strong opinions and disputes was ideas about how to bring up children.

(3) Participants: Camilla (C), Mimmi (M), Lena (L), Anna (A), young women living at the detention home, and the moderator, Carolina Överlien (CÖ):

1 C And I mean (.) I have to be able to leave the child the child needs to learn how to be (.) alone too (.) because that is when they become strong (pause) that’s when they get the chance to look after themselves
Camilla discusses how she will have to leave her child to others in order that it should learn things and become strong. Mimmi latches on to her statement by talking about being honest with one’s children. Yet, Lena protests, starting with an adversive ‘but’: ‘but it’s also about bringing up kids’. Apparently, she sees day-care or other child-care arrangements as ways of escaping parental responsibility. Mimmi and Camilla protest, collaboratively stating that almost everyone today does so (turns 8 and 10): ‘practically everyone does that today’. Mimmi’s acknowledgement of Camilla is an elaborate acknowledgement ‘yeah exactly’ not just a minimal ‘yes’.

Lena provides a minimal acknowledgement in turn 9, but evidently she does not quite agree, as she continues to talk about possible negative consequences of early care outside of the family: ‘yeah and how many of them are just 11-year-olds who go around smoking and think they are so fucking cool’.

Group Self-censorship

In the group discussions, the participants themselves did seem to be aware of potentially threatening aspects of saying too much in a group context.

In the next episode, the participants had been discussing gender roles and disagreed about how a woman ‘should’ behave to be considered a ‘real’ woman. They agreed to disagree and that you have to respect each other in spite of differences of opinion. Lena then brought up the topic of not being respected for one’s somewhat deviant opinions.

(4) Participants: Camilla (C), Mimmi (M), Lena (L), Anna (A), young women living at the detention home, and the moderator, Carolina Överlien (CÖ):

1 L But lots of people are against me because I don’t like (. ) certain immigrants (. ) well I have a problem with nearly all of them (. ) and then I get called a racist just because of that (. ) but I don’t think I am being racist (. )
2 CÖ No
3 L It’s just freedom of expression
On several occasions in this group, Lena positions herself as someone who has different opinions from the other participants. In this episode, Camilla reminds her that she has indeed been ‘one’, that is, a racist. Mimmi immediately comes to Lena’s rescue, saying quietly and quickly, almost off the record as it were, that ‘yeah but we don’t need to go into that now’ (turn 6). She thereby positions herself as a co-moderator, who assists the moderator in keeping overly sensitive issues at bay.

_Provision of Empathy and Support_

At times, the participants actively offered each other emotional support.

In the next episode, one of the participants was Katrin, quite a big 17-year-old, who normally dressed in loose outfits, at a time when the local fashion favoured tight pants, bare tummies and low-cut, tight t-shirts.

(5) Participants: Helen (H), Katrin (K), Cecilia (C), young women living at the detention home, and the moderator, Carolina Överlien (CÖ):

1 K I can’t really say that I am feminine either
2 C I think you are feminine
3 H Yeah me too
   ... Three turns not included
5 K How can you think of me as feminine
6 C I just think you are
7 H Yeah (.)
8 C You know
9 H You speak (. ) in a mature way and things and
10 C But that isn’t the point anyway (. ) I don’t know (. ) you are (. ) feminine (laugh)
11 K That’s cool to hear (smile) I kind of think that (. ) I’m a bit of a tomboy going around in hip hop clothes and stuff
12 C Yeah but it doesn’t make any difference if you try to hide it somehow you are anyway: (. ) you’re feminine anyway
13 K That’s actually quite fun to hear
14 CÖ Sure (. ) you can feel proud now can’t you
15 K I suppose (laugh)
16 CÖ Yeah (. ) it’s a positive feeling
17 K Yeah (laugh)

As can be seen, the other two participants support Katrin in portraying her as a feminine (Swedish: ‘kvinnlig’) person. Together they co-construe her as a person who
speaks in a mature way’ (turn 9) and who seems feminine even if she tries to hide it (turn 12). Apparently, she is pleased and somewhat surprised at the type of empathetic support that she receives from her two peers. In return, she does acknowledge her pleasure: ‘that’s actually quite fun to hear’ (turn 13).

Doing femininity is one of the main life projects undertaken by the young women at the detention home. Consequently, to be called ‘feminine’ by Cecilia and Helen is a positive remark that makes Katrin proud.

**Beyond Confession—Concluding Discussion**

In this article we have discussed how the focus group method can indeed be used for talking about high-involvement issues, such as ‘the body’ and ‘sexuality’, with troubled, traditionally unheard groups. In the present focus groups, it could be seen how the group participants provided discursive support to each other in various ways. Much of the narration that was going on was co-construed by the young participants (e.g. excerpt 3). Disputes were important arenas for displaying and revising strong opinions about high-involvement topics such as child rearing. Thereby, we could also see how the group shared specific ideas about autonomy and sexuality. Also, the group participants offered each other support and self-censorship if the discussion became overly intrusive. On other matters, group participants, in fact, displayed empathy (excerpt 7) in ways that provided support to other participants who had revealed feelings of insecurity about themselves. While we are not claiming that the present descriptions are ‘deeper’ or more accurate than other descriptions of the everyday life of the troubled young women at the detention home, we do not think we would have achieved ‘deeper insights by conducting individual interviews. If anything, we would therefore paradoxically claim that the focus group probably provided us with a more natural and less intrusive format than individual interviews. They simultaneously yielded a rich and varied set of data, in which individual opinions were formed in dialogue with others.

However, one of the drawbacks of the present method though is that it puts great demands on the moderator. The discussion may generate highly sensitive issues and s/he has to be qualified to deal with this. It is therefore not a ‘quick and easy’ research method. If misused, the present types of interviews with high-involvement topics could, at worst, lead to intimidating questions from the co-participants, during and after the interviews. It is therefore important that the moderator closely monitors the discussion.

One remaining question is: what implications do our focus group findings have for the young women in custody at the detention home? We were initially invited by the staff members in order to assist them rethink the situation of the young women, and it is now our hope that our analyses may perhaps, at least, to some extent help the young women in becoming heard and seen in a somewhat new way, and the staff to discuss therapeutic goals from a slightly different perspective. It is our belief that a continuous dialogue on communication and treatment is badly needed in a situation where troubled young women are held in detention for unspecified lengths of time, and where daily conversations are the primary means for providing both treatment and assessment.
Notes


[2] However, in Cunningham-Burley, Kerr, and Pavis (1999), the traditional belief that the focus group method is ‘shallow’ as opposed to ‘deep’ is being questioned.

[3] To argue for the ‘naturalness’ of focus groups is controversial and discipline dependent. Focus groups may be regarded as a natural method within psychology if compared with the more traditional methods within psychology such as controlled experiments conducted in laboratories (see Wilkinson, 1999), while within anthropology and ethnography, the method may be regarded as less natural. Agar and MacDonald (1995) argue that a situation which is controlled, carefully planned, artificially set up and where interaction is explicitly encouraged can never be seen as natural. For social constructionists all interaction is constructed and thereby non-natural. The focus group method then becomes just as constructed as all other interaction.

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