Abstract Recent commentators have advocated the greater use of qualitative methods in sex research. Drawing on the growing body of sex-related focus group research (including the author’s own research on sexual refusals), this article highlights some key benefits of the focus group method. In particular, the collective discussion and interaction between research participants enables the exploration of under-researched topics, insight into the language commonly used by respondents to describe sexual activities, and provides the conditions under which people feel comfortable discussing sexual experiences.

Keywords focus groups, group interaction, qualitative research

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Focusing on Sex: Using Focus Groups in Sex Research

Over the last 10 years there has been a boom in research into sexual behaviour and attitudes (Bancroft, 1997). Much of the surge in sexuality research has been in the form of large-scale surveys (for example, the National AIDS Behavioural Survey, Dolcini, 1993; the British National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles, Johnson et al., 1994; and the Janus Report on Sexual Behaviour, Janus and Janus, 1993), and has been problem-driven, fuelled by the perceived ‘epidemics’ in AIDS and teenage pregnancy (Di Mauro, 1997; Johnson and Wellings, 1994). However, there is increasing interest in developing qualitative approaches to the study of sexuality. The recent Sexuality Research in the United States report produced by the Sexuality Research Assessment Project (Di Mauro, 1995), advocates greater use of qualitative methods for examining the experiential and/or subjective aspects of sexuality and for illuminating the social and cultural context which informs this experience. This article considers the advantages for sex researchers of one particular qualitative method: focus groups.

Focus groups, also sometimes referred to as ‘group interviews’ or ‘group discussions’, may take many forms but their defining feature is that...
a small group of people engage in collective discussion of a topic pre-selected by the researcher. The aim of the group discussion is to gain insight into the personal experiences, beliefs, attitudes and feelings that underlie behaviour. Typically, the topic of the discussion is introduced in the form of a set of questions, although sometimes some kind of stimulus material – such as a film, vignette or game – may be used. Unlike one-to-one interviews, in which the researcher asks questions of and elicits responses from each individual in turn, focus groups are characterised by collective discussion in which group members interact with each other as well as with the researcher. Discussions are usually tape-recorded (sometimes video-recorded) and transcribed. Like other qualitative methods, data collected through focus groups can be analysed in many different ways (see Bertrand et al., 1992a for an overview), including narrative analysis (Espin, 1995) or discourse analysis (Agar and MacDonald, 1995; Edley and Wetherell, 1997; Myers and Macnaghten, 1999), although usually some kind of content or thematic analysis is performed, sometimes with the aid of computer programs such as NUD. IST or The Ethnograph (see Fielding and Lee, 1998). This flexibility is also reflected in the varying degree of structure in focus group discussions, diverse moderator styles, and the many purposes to which focus groups can be put. Focus groups are currently being used to study a wide variety of issues relating to sexuality, including sexual decision making (Gilmore et al., 1996; Kline et al., 1992), sexual communication (Motley and Reeder, 1995; Nolin and Petersen, 1992; Wingood et al., 1993), sexual aggression (Norris et al., 1996), sexual risk taking (Hammer et al., 1996; Vera et al., 1996), evaluation of sex education (Cairns et al., 1994; Kitzinger, 1990; Lupton and Tulloch, 1996; Taylor and Ward, 1991), attitudes to contraception (Folch-Lyon et al., 1981; Kisker, 1985; Shervington, 1993), feelings about HIV testing and condom use (Sobo, 1994), and the attitudes of professionals to sexual contact with their clients (White et al., 1994; White and Thomson, 1995), or between clients (Civic et al., 1993). There is now an established and growing selection of books and articles which advise researchers on how to plan and implement focus group research. These ‘how to’ books include details about the size and composition of groups, the construction of discussion guides, and the appropriate demeanour of the group moderator (see, for example, Krueger, 1988; Morgan, 1988; Morgan and Krueger, 1998; Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990; Vaughn et al., 1996), but it is the method of data collection and the interactive nature of the data acquired which distinguishes focus groups from other qualitative methods.

This article reviews the literature on sex research and focus groups and uses it (and examples from my own focus group research, see Frith, 1997; Frith and Kitzinger, 1997, 1998; and Kitzinger and Frith, 1999 for more
information) to highlight some of the key advantages of focus groups for sexuality researchers. These are:

1. focus groups are useful for exploratory research into under-researched topics and for speedy policy analysis,
2. focus groups can enable the researcher to learn the language and vocabulary typically used by respondents in talking about their sexual activities, and
3. focus groups provide conditions under which people feel comfortable discussing sexual experiences and which encourage people to talk about sex.

Exploratory research into under-researched topics

In recent years sex research has been dominated by large-scale surveys. When using such highly structured research tools, it is possible to obtain information only in relation to the questions asked. The respondent replies only to those questions on the form and is usually required to provide information by choosing from a series of set answers. For example, a national survey of sexuality in Britain included the following question and set responses:

Which of these statements is closest to how that first time of having sexual intercourse came about?
  It just happened on the spur of the moment
  I expected it would happen soon, but wasn’t sure when
  I expected it to happen at that time
  I planned it to happen at that time
  We planned it together beforehand
  Can’t remember
(Wellings et al., 1994: 398)

The key to most survey research, then, is knowing what questions to ask and how to ask them. In order to formulate appropriate questions, a detailed knowledge of the area and a clear understanding of the information required is needed. When a topic is under-explored, detailed knowledge of this kind is not available. In such situations, focus groups can provide a useful alternative. Advocates point out that focus groups are an effective method of generating hypotheses or investigating topics about which little is known (Bertrand et al., 1992b; Stanton et al., 1993). Exploring women’s perceptions of the threat of sexual aggression, Norris et al. (1996: 129) found that focus groups provided a useful way of ‘understanding these respondents’ experiences and for developing hypotheses which could be tested in the future’. Similarly, focus groups were used to ‘provide better, more detailed information’ on the experiences of women
who had undergone tubal ligation (a form of sterilization) – a subject not previously investigated in Zaire (Chibalonza et al., 1989, cited in Ward et al., 1991: 271). Focus groups prove useful in these situations because they allow researchers to gather together diverse opinions, experiences and attitudes at the same time, and because their often relatively unstructured format allows for the discovery of unanticipated issues.

Focus groups can tap previously unrecognised areas of interest because participants often have the opportunity to steer discussions in directions of greatest personal concern. Despite the use of carefully prepared focus group schedules, the lively discussions which result often throw up unanticipated areas of interest which can dramatically change the course of the research. In their focus groups on sexual risk taking, Vera et al. (1996) anticipated that issues of HIV infection and teenage pregnancy would be of key importance to participants, but when their eight to twelve-year-old respondents talked about women using sex in exchange for drugs and gang protection, it took the researchers by surprise. This unexpected information proved invaluable in attempting to build up a rounded picture of factors affecting sexual risk taking. Although these kinds of participant ‘diversions’ are possible in other types of qualitative research (such as one-to-one interviews), they are more frequent in focus group research because the moderator’s ability to direct the conversation is ‘diffused by the very fact of being in a group rather than in a one-to-one situation’ (Frey and Fontana, 1993: 26). The researcher’s control is limited by the greater number of participants who, through argument and persuasion, are able to influence each other and the course of the discussion (Krueger, 1988). Consequently, focus groups are a useful way of ‘inviting participants to introduce their own themes and concerns’ (Espin, 1995: 228), because they allow participants to ‘determine their own agendas’ (Schlesinger et al., 1992: 28–9). When adopting a relatively unstructured format, focus groups are an ideal way of identifying needs which are not currently being met. Focus groups have, for example, been used to identify gaps in existing sexual health service provision including: the need for face-to-face, gender-specific HIV/AIDS preventative education (Monodawafa et al., 1995); the need for culturally diverse staff to deliver sex education courses (Ward and Taylor, 1992); and the need for alternative HIV-prevention strategies which are under women’s control and which are not dependent on negotiations with male partners (Ehrhardt et al., 1992).

Focus groups provide a fast and efficient way of obtaining a wide variety of information in a relatively short period of time (Morgan, 1988); this speed can prove invaluable to researchers keen to assess the effectiveness of newly designed questionnaires and sexual health interventions. The immediate views of target groups towards a particular form of intervention can be accessed, allowing any necessary alterations or modifications to be
made before large amounts of time and other resources are invested. Focus groups have successfully been used in this way to evaluate school-based provision of HIV/AIDS and sexuality education (Lupton and Tulloch, 1996), to study the value of a theatre production on HIV knowledge, attitudes and risk behaviour (Elliott et al., 1996), and to identify barriers to the uptake of sexual health services including cervical screening (Naish et al., 1994) and community HIV/AIDS services (Seals et al., 1995).

In sum, focus groups are a useful tool for exploring previously under-investigated areas because they allow the researcher to canvass the opinions and experiences of a range of people simultaneously, to discover the issues which are of importance to the participants, and to hear these issues discussed relatively quickly.

Learning participants’ language and vocabulary

The language used in sex research, and the ways in which questionnaire items are phrased, can have a huge impact on the information which participants disclose. The authors of the Ms. survey on date and acquaintance rape, for example, did not include the word ‘rape’ anywhere in its 71 pages because they believed that many women would not label their experiences as rape. According to Warshaw (1988), to ask ‘Have you ever been raped?’ would have greatly reduced the number of affirmative responses. Indeed, only 27 percent of women whose sexual assault met the legal definition of rape thought of themselves as rape victims. Similarly, West used the words ‘contact’ and ‘experience’ rather than ‘child sexual abuse’ or ‘victimization’ because the former were seen as being ‘more neutral and not anticipating what attitudes might be expressed’ (West, 1985: 11). Clearly, knowledge of participants’ language can be crucial when attempting to devise survey items which effectively tap knowledge about specific sexual acts and which will be understood to mean the same thing by all participants (Laumann et al., 1994). One of the key benefits of using focus group discussions to investigate sex-related behaviour and attitudes is that they allow access to the language and vocabulary which participants commonly use and this information can be used to develop effective questionnaire items.

Investigating participants’ vocabularies is sometimes an explicit aim of the research (e.g. Braun and Kitzinger, 1999; Mays et al., 1992; Suyono et al., 1981); although this interest can arise during the course of the research itself. Focus groups provide a useful way of canvassing target groups to gain an understanding of the terms commonly used and the ways in which different terms are understood before they are adopted in large-scale surveys study. The first focus groups which ran as part of the Portland Men’s Study referred to the human immunodeficiency virus as
HIV – the term commonly used by health researchers – whereas participants were more likely to refer to HIV as ‘the AIDS virus’. Had the term HIV been used in the subsequent questionnaire, some participants may have been confused and had difficulty responding to the questions (O’Brien, 1993: 110). Similarly, focus groups with Black gay men to explore their use of sexual language (Mays et al., 1992), revealed that although several of the words commonly used by White gay men mapped on to those used by Black gay men, there were also some differences in their vernacular. According to Mays et al. (1992: 432), ‘[k]nowledge of language and the way it functions in the communication system of Black gay men will aid us in designing instruments to tap meaningfully into their world of sexuality’.

In addition to providing information crucial to the design of questionnaire items and giving access to the language and vocabulary of participants, focus groups allow researchers to gain a better understanding of participants’ social worlds. As well as illustrating the types of words which participants use to describe sexual activities, the interactive nature of group discussions allows the researcher to observe the ways in which terms and phrases, such as ‘slag’ or ‘on the pull’, operate within a social context. The banter between participants can explicate the meaning of unfamiliar phrases and highlight the ambiguity of these common terms. In the following extract, Jan responds to an interjection from Rose by attempting to clarify what exactly is meant by the phrase ‘on the pull’:

*Interviewer:* So are girls your age not on the pull?  
*Jan:* Not really  
*Rose:* I’m not so sure – they are! Girls are always on the pull  
*Jan:* Well, what do you mean – on the pull just getting off with someone or do you mean shagging [intercourse]? Because they’re not all on the pull just for sex. Some, but not all

Group discussions with teenage boys from Glasgow show how the meaning of the term ‘slag’ is explicated through the group interaction, with each participant adding a new aspect to the understanding of this term:

*R1:* . . . doesnae like it [sex] but she still does it anyway . . .  
*R2:* She’s a slag.  
*R3:* She’s no thinkin’ of herself . . . tryin’ ta fit in with everybody.  
(Wight, 1994: 725)

In sum, focus groups can allow researchers to access the vocabulary of different social groups, a vocabulary which may not be so readily apparent in a one-to-one interview, and the interaction between group members can serve to ensure that aspects of language and vocabulary are explored
in more detail, offering insights into the ways in which they perceive their social and sexual worlds. The value of focus groups in highlighting any mismatch between the language used by the target audience, by researchers, by policy makers and by service providers means that the use of focus groups to clarify terms for use in quantitative measures is perhaps one of the most common ways in which focus groups are currently being used in sex research.

Encouraging talk about sex

While researchers have investigated sexual behaviour using a range of different methods including observation (for example, Humphreys, 1974; Masters and Johnson, 1966) and experimentation (Abel, et al., 1978; Malamuth, 1983), most researchers rely on self-report techniques. Most sex research relies upon volunteer or self-selected participants who choose to reveal sensitive information about their sexual activities and disclose details about some of the most intimate aspects of their lives. Talking openly about sex is not something with which people feel comfortable or at ease – ‘anything having to do with sex causes a great many people to feel embarrassed’ (Kelley and Byrne, 1992: xiii). Open communication is further inhibited by inadequate sexual vocabulary in which people struggle between slang terms which double as obscenities, and ‘polite’ terms which are too ‘technical’ for everyday use (Holland et al., 1998). When the discussion of sex is difficult and taboo, even between sexual intimates (Baxter and Wilmot, 1985), talking about such matters with a complete stranger (such as a sex researcher) may be excruciating. One of the biggest challenges for sex research, then, is to be able to create a comfortable environment in which participants feel relaxed enough to provide full and frank accounts of their sexual activities. Doubts about researchers’ ability to provide such environments and to ensure the accuracy and reliability of self-report accounts plague sex research:

Were the respondents telling the truth about their sex lives? Why should we believe that anyone, sitting in a face-to-face interview with a stranger, would answer honestly when being questioned about his or her most intimate personal behaviour, including behaviour that might be embarrassing to admit? (Micheal et al., 1994: 34)

Sex researchers have typically focused their energies on ensuring that issues of privacy, anonymity and confidentiality are communicated effectively to respondents, and have adopted a number of practices to reassure participants. One example is the recent use of Computer Assisted Self-Interviewing (CASI) which, by removing the need for face-to-face contact between researcher and participant, has been seen as a useful way of
ensuring privacy and encouraging disclosure (Catania et al., 1990a; Turner et al., 1997).

At first glance, the focus group method in which participants talk about their sexual behaviour and attitudes face to face, not only with the group moderator but also in front of a group of strangers, does not seem to address the concerns raised. Ensuring confidentiality is also difficult – the researcher has little control over what participants may reveal to others after they leave the group (Smith, 1995), although respondents can be asked to ‘honor an agreement of privacy and confidentiality’ (Norris et al., 1996: 129). Consequently, some researchers have expected people to be reticent about discussing sexual matters in groups. Suyono et al. (1981: 436) ‘feared that men and women who would readily talk about newspapers, cigarettes, and other consumer goods would bridle at discussing matters as intimate as contraception and sexual relations’. However, there is now a considerable body of work suggesting that focus groups actually enhance the disclosure of sex-related material in three ways:

1. awareness of shared experiences between group members may encourage discussion of difficult and sensitive issues,
2. agreement between group members can help build an elaborated and fuller picture of their views,
3. disagreement between group members may lead participants to defend their views and provide further explanation.

I discuss each of these in turn, focusing in each case on the ways in which the interaction between participants which characterises focus group research provides unique benefits for the sex researcher.

Shared experience
Groups of young women meet and share their experiences of refusing sex. From stories of date rape and scorn at the coercive ‘lines’ men use, to debates about the relative merits of ‘I’m on my period’ and ‘I don’t know you well enough’ as excuses for sexual avoidance, the lively conversations are punctuated by offers of sympathy, contested claims and howls of laughter (see Frith, 1997; Frith and Kitzinger, 1997, 1998). Focus groups can provide an opportunity for participants to talk about their own experiences and to hear the experiences of others. In order to encourage this reciprocal sharing of information, commentators recommend that groups should consist of people who have something in common – in the example above they are all of the same age, occupation, gender and sexual orientation (Morgan, 1988). Researchers often attempt to ‘match’ group members on a relevant dimension to allow for ‘uninhibited discussion’ on sensitive topics (Cooper et al., 1993: 328). Focus groups have successfully been conducted with common interest groups including: physicians (White
et al., 1994; White and Thomson, 1995); factory workers and their wives (Irwin et al., 1991); representatives of community organisations (Freudenberg and Trinidad, 1992); teachers and students of sex education programmes (Gold and Kelly, 1991); adolescents (Munodawafa et al., 1995; Rosenthal et al., 1996); parents and children (Nolin and Petersen, 1992; Taylor and Ward, 1991); heterosexual men and women (Crawford et al., 1994; Frith and Kitzinger, 1997); gay men (Mays et al., 1992; O’Brien, 1993); lesbians (Lampon, 1995); and sex workers (Wawer et al., 1996).

In contrast to one-to-one interviews with neutral researchers, focus groups encourage participants to feel ‘more comfortable or secure’ in the company of others who have shared the same experiences, and ‘less on guard against personal disclosures’ (Folch-Lyon and Trost, 1981: 445). Participants may feel able to discuss their homosexual experiences, infidelities, fetishes, unsafe sexual practices or any other socially sanctioned aspect of sexuality if they know others in the group have similar experiences. Shared experiences may make participants more courageous in expressing ‘fears, ignorances and prejudices which do not seem strange when they discover that other people experience the same feelings’ (Cooper et al., 1993: 327). Consequently, it is not unusual to find focus group participants discussing highly intimate aspects of their sexual behaviour. For example, Zairean women have discussed vaginal secretions and the methods they use to ‘dry out’ the vagina and make it ‘tight’ (Brown et al., 1993); American incest survivors have recounted the harrowing details of their abuse (Barringer, 1992); groups of Australian women have described their experience of faking orgasms (Roberts et al., 1995); Guatemalan men have revealed information about their use of prostitutes, extra-marital relations and violence against women (Bertrand et al., 1992b); Latino and non-Latino serodiscordant male couples have identified the barriers to sexual and emotional intimacy which they face (Remien et al., 1995); and female Thai commercial sex workers have talked about their entry into sex work, their living conditions and income, and their use of condoms with clients (Wawer et al., 1996).

Disclosure from one member of the group may encourage others to follow suit, and it is common for more confident members of the group to ‘break the ice’ for shyer participants. In the following extract, Jane’s admission about faking orgasms prompts a similar revelation from Alison:

Alison: That’s why I think girls fake it, so that they can sort of get it over with.
Jane: I fake it sometimes. Just . . . ’cause my boyfriend gets really worried . . . because . . . he wants to know that he’s giving me pleasure too. And so sometimes I’ll just fake it, if I’m not really in the mood . . .
Alison: Yeah, I used to do that a lot.
(Roberts et al., 1995: 529–30)
Alison initially talks about faking orgasms as something which ‘girls’ (in general) do, but perhaps feeling less inhibited after Jane’s comment, she admits that she too fakes orgasms safe in the knowledge that she is not alone. In my own research, Linda describes how she was date raped: ‘I said no and I said no and I said no, but I was forced’. In response, Kate reveals that she ‘went through the same thing’ at university, and proceeds to describe her own experience of acquaintance rape. One by one other group members describe the ‘terrible situations’ they have faced, including being harassed at work, being pressured for sex by a boyfriend, and being in an ‘awkward’ situation with a drunk man in a locked bedroom. In each case, the woman characterises her experience in relation to previous comments: ‘I went through the same thing’, ‘on one occasion I did [get into a terrible situation], and that was a slightly different situation’, ‘The only time it’s ever come close for me . . .’. Clearly, then, the shared experience of each having been in ‘terrible situations’ may have made it easier for these women to share their (unsolicited) accounts of sexual abuse and harassment (see also Fielding, 1993). It is this sharing of experience in focus group research which has led some feminists to draw parallels with consciousness raising (for example, Mies, 1983; Wilkinson, 1999).

In sum, researchers can encourage people to talk about highly personal and potentially embarrassing sexual experiences in a group setting if the group has some degree of similarity. However, as a note of caution, the dynamic and often intimate discussions which take place in focus groups can lead participants to reveal more information than they intended and to say things they later regret. Such over-disclosure may be particularly problematic if members of the group are not strangers but have a continued relationship outside of the group. One way to help guard against this is to raise these issues with the group and to involve participants in drawing up their own guidelines for privacy. Nonetheless, knowing that other group members may have encountered similar situations may lead individuals to feel less inhibited about revealing information about their own lives.

Agreement and elaboration
Consensus, agreement and shared experience within the group can lead not only to the increased likelihood of disclosure, but also to more elaborated and detailed information than is common in one-to-one interviews. The following extracts illustrate how participants expand upon comments made by others. In the first extract, girls express concerns about asking parents for information about sex and HIV/AIDS, and in particular their fears that such questions may lead parents to assume that they are sexually active:
You don’t want them to see you as that sort of person.
Little tart.
Sort of sex fiend or anything

(Lupton and Tulloch, 1996: 261)

Here, one participant’s comment is picked up and elaborated by two other group members, so providing the researcher with a fuller understanding of the girls’ fears and concerns. Supportive feedback from other focus group members can prompt the initial speaker to further elaborate his or her views:

**Interviewer:** Why is that? Why is saying ‘no I don’t want to’ so embarrassing?

**Wendy:** I don’t know, it’s just like this stigmata [sic] round it where people have been taught . . . it’s like you’ve been brought up to know that with your peers it’s like, it’s sad but people do that

**Rachel:** You’d never be able to go in the common room again

**Wendy:** You’d feel people turning round and looking at you like, and you’d be like ‘oh no’

Wendy initially responds to the interviewer’s question by suggesting that refusing sex is embarrassing because it is stigmatised among her peers, but the rest of her utterance is rather ambiguous or incoherent. In a one-to-one interview the interviewer would need to elicit clarification, but as this example shows in focus groups it is often other participants who adopt this role. Rachel elaborates on the kind of social isolation one might face – ‘You’d never be able to go in the common room again’, which is, in turn, further expanded by Wendy who describes how people would be ‘turning round and looking at you’. Together, then, these young women provide illustration and clarification of issues so that the researcher has a deeper, more clearly articulated account of the social embarrassment which follows a sexual refusal. In addition, Wendy is supported in her view that refusing sex is embarrassing or stigmatised by the example provided by Rachel.

A common concern in self-report research is that participants may be led into giving particular responses by direct or indirect cues from the researcher or by an overly directive interviewing style. Support and agreement between group members provide a means by which participants can challenge the assumptions/comments of the researcher. In the following extract, for example, the interviewer’s suggestion that men might fake orgasms is met with disbelief from the group:

**Interviewer:** Well, you know, guys get tired too, and–

**Karen:** Well, they’re more active

**Jill:** They’ve got a higher libido

**Deb:** Say that again

**Jill:** More sex drive than women and that’s like scientifically – or it could just be me talking crap – but I have heard reports of it’s a mental thing that guys have a higher sex drive than women
Here participants disagree with the researcher (something more likely to occur in focus groups than in one-to-one interviews because the power of the moderator is devolved to group members – see Morgan, 1988; Frey and Fontana, 1993), and support each other in so doing. In addition, the strength of agreement and consensus within the group may also provide the researcher with an indication of the strength with which a particular point of view is held. For example, young women responded to Kitzinger’s inquiry about whether they had ever heard the advice to ‘try sex without penetration’ with outraged protest – ‘If you really wanted to prevent it everyone would end up locked in their house’; ‘It’s sort of saying don’t bother having sex, don’t bother going out in the first place’. She took this unanimous agreement to be an indication of the extent to which they ‘experience safer sex recommendations in terms of prohibitions’ (Kitzinger, 1994: 110). While in one-to-one interviews the researcher may gain a cumulative sense of this opposition, this immediate sense of collective outrage would not be available.

Agreement between group members can, then, lead to more elaborated accounts of sexual behaviour, attitudes or beliefs. By providing illustrative examples and by building upon prior remarks, groups give ever more detailed descriptions of sexual events and construct increasingly complex pictures of their sexual worlds.

Disagreement and explanation

Most sex researchers, from Kinsey on, consider it essential to adopt a non-judgemental, non-evaluative approach to interviewing in order to ensure maximum disclosure from participants. Interviewers are advised to maintain a neutral, professional manner and are reminded that an ‘essential goal in survey interviewing, especially on sensitive topics like sex, is to create a neutral, non-judgmental, and confiding atmosphere and to maintain a certain professional distance between the interviewer and the respondent’ (Laumann et al., 1994: 62 and 67). Similarly, the focus group moderator ‘encourages responses, does not endorse or agree with comments, and remains neutral to the content by monitoring his or her nonverbal, as well as verbal, behaviour’ (Carey, 1994: 231). To ensure the appropriate behaviour from participants, ground rules emphasising the importance of a non-threatening and non-evaluative environment in which each participant feels that their views are respected, are established (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990). Nonetheless, despite efforts to create a conducive atmosphere, participants may (depending on the nature of the discussion) challenge, disagree with, contradict or censure the views of their peers.
While this may seem alarming to those unfamiliar with the focus group method, it is part and parcel of the dynamic atmosphere of group discussions. Indeed, rather than inhibiting disclosure, such argument and contention can result in the provision of more detailed information, and is not necessarily experienced as hostile or unpleasant.

In the following extract, Liz and Sara disagree about the pressures on young women to acquiesce to unwanted sex. Liz begins to suggest that peer pressure and ‘what your mates will say’ may influence young women’s ability to refuse unwanted sex, but Sara disagrees:

*Sara:* Oh I don’t know because all our mates wouldn’t say a thing would they. They don’t care either way
*Liz:* Well they would because they’d go ‘Why? Why? Blah de blah’, and then it would be like
*Sara:* Yeah, but they wouldn’t mind
*Liz:* Yeah, but it’s not that they wouldn’t mind, it’s just the initial questions and badgering about it all. All the ‘what happened’ sort of thing, all the gossip

As a result of Sara’s challenge, Liz is forced to elaborate and explain exactly what she means by ‘what your mates will say’. Rather than continuing to argue that her friends would disapprove of her behaviour, Liz amends her responses, focusing instead on the anxiety that the accompanying stream of questions and prying would provoke. Disagreements between participants can also be useful in highlighting tensions within a particular issue:

*Karen:* Because it would be ‘Oh, they’re frigid’, they’re this, they’re that
*Deb:* I don’t, I don’t find that personally do you?
*Karen:* But I think there’s a lot
*Jill:* No, I haven’t personally
*Karen:* Not personally, but I think there’s a lot of schools and a lot of places
*Deb:* I don’t think that. There’s not like ‘Oh, you’re a virgin’ real stigma attached to it at all
*Jill:* No, there’s not. Well, maybe in really lower second year

Here, Jill, Karen and Deb are struggling with the tension between what they know from their own personal experience and the generalised knowledge they have about the policing of sexual reputations.

Sometimes group members may challenge each other in a way which would be inappropriate from a researcher, especially in groups in which participants are known to one another. For example, Kitzinger (1994: 105) recounts how group members in her research would challenge one another about contradictions between what they say they do in HIV prevention and how they are known to behave outside of the group (for example, ‘How about that time when you didn’t use a glove while taking blood from a patient?’ or ‘What about the other night when you went off with that boy at the disco?’). One-to-one interviewers rarely have this kind
of knowledge, nor would it be acceptable for them to challenge participants in this way. In the following extract, Lucy dismisses Sam’s suggestion that women might engage in unwanted sex:

Sam: Yeah, if you’re in a relationship where you really like the guy and you don’t want to split up with him, then you might [have unwanted sex]
Lucy: But what are you doing really liking the guy if he’s going to behave like that

This blunt disagreement, which the interviewer would have been unlikely to express, is common between group members and may not inhibit their views: rather by challenging each others’ views, participants may be forced to say more about a particular issue or to defend their position. In Schlesinger et al.’s (1992: 146) research, for example, one participant is so outraged by the views of another (who had described a hitchhiker portrayed in a televised reconstruction of a rape and murder as ‘leading them [her attackers] on . . . the way she was dancing, and her clothes as well’), that she feels compelled to expound her own views at length despite being initially reluctant to do so (‘I didn’t want to say anything . . ’). Such disagreements can also give an indication of the contentiousness of a particular issue. Clearly, then, although researchers may attempt to adopt a non-judgemental stance, research participants are able to contradict, disagree and challenge one another. This process of argument, persuasion and dissent can be of value to the researcher when it prompts individuals to explain, defend or rationalise the views they espouse.

In discussing the interactive and dynamic nature of focus group discussions I have highlighted the considerable advantages for sex researchers of using this method, but it is not without problems. The sensitive nature of sex research has meant that researchers have been continually taxed by the problem of social desirability in responses to questions (Catania et al., 1990a). In focus groups, the presence of other group members may pressure participants into manipulating their responses in order to present themselves as they would like to be seen, as opposed to how they really are (Krueger, 1988). In focus groups exploring the attitudes of Black and Hispanic women to sexual decision making, Kline et al. (1992: 455) were concerned that participants might ‘emphasise more socially acceptable responses in a group situation’, and noted that their respondents’ attitudes to condom use were more positive than reported in most qualitative studies at that time. There is no doubt that the views of other participants can influence and even inhibit the responses of individuals within the group, but observing this group pressure in operation may be interesting data in its own right. Kitzinger (1994) describes how the participants in her study who gave detailed information about how AIDS is transmitted were challenged to explain ‘How come you know so much about this?’
However, although this process may inhibit certain comments, as Kitzinger points out, such censorship does reveal the existence of group norms which stigmatise ‘knowing too much’ about AIDS. Even group pressures which prohibit the voicing of some opinions can reveal something of the social and cultural aspects of sexuality. Although group dynamics allow the possibility that potentially subversive views may be quashed resulting in more socially desirable responses, it is equally possible that some group discussions will generate more ‘socially undesirable’ comments and opinions (like admitting to faking orgasms, unsafe sexual practices or being a victim of date rape). The lovers of people with AIDS, for example, made more angry and emotional comments about their treatment by the medical profession than is generally the case in individual interviews (Geis et al., 1986; see also DiMatteo et al., 1993). The supportive environment of the group can help facilitate the disclosure of challenging, threatening or potentially discrediting information which might otherwise remain unspoken.

The dynamic nature of focus group discussions makes it difficult to track the views of any one individual within the group for the purposes of analysis. The interactive nature of focus group discussions often means that participants will be influenced by the views of others and may change their minds about an issue several times over the course of one session. For example, the following extract shows a discussion between four teenage girls:

*Treena*: But if a bloke asks you for sex, what do you do?
*Brid*: I’d tell him to go off and have a wank!
*Stella*: You dirty thing!
*Kate*: It’s wrong, you ought to get married in a white dress.
*Stella*: But I don’t think it is – if you like the bloke why not? Why wait until you’re married?
*Kate*: You ought to sleep with a bloke if you love him and he asked you to.
*Stella*: But you just said that you have to get married in white!

(Griffin, 1986: 182–3)

The teasing, rebuking and disagreement within this short extract can be seen as problematic for sex researchers trying to get at the ‘truth’ of these individual girls’ experiences. Kate – perhaps in the face of opposing views from Stella – changes her views from being against sex before marriage (‘It’s wrong, you ought to get married in a white dress’), to being in favour of sex before marriage ‘if you loved him and he asked you to’. It is impossible for the researcher to assess what Kate ‘really’ thinks about sex before marriage, and this example highlights the difficulty of using the individual as the unit of analysis when looking at focus group data.

Overall, then, although interaction between group members may have the potential to decrease the quality of disclosure obtained from group
members, group discussions do not inevitably give rise to these problems, and (as I have demonstrated above) the interactive nature of focus group research may serve to enhance the quality of data obtained. A group setting may provide the ideal conditions under which individuals feel comfortable discussing some of the most intimate and personal details of their lives. Interaction between participants can actively encourage enhanced disclosure and facilitate the collection of more elaborated accounts of sexual activities. By sharing experiences, finding areas of agreement, and by disagreeing and challenging each other, focus group participants can encourage each other to reveal information and to discuss this information in greater detail. Contrary to the popular assumption that privacy is key to ensuring the collection of information on sensitive matters, research using focus groups has shown that the presence of others can actively encourage individuals to talk about their experiences.

Conclusion

The strengths of focus groups in sex research are beginning to be recognised, but it would be unfortunate if this recognition were limited (as seems common) only to supporting large-scale survey research (i.e. clarifying item comprehension and familiarity). Focus groups have much more than this to offer. This does not, of course, mean that focus groups can contribute to every research project, or that the focus group method should replace other methods of investigation (see Morgan, 1998 for a detailed discussion of when the use of focus groups is both appropriate and inappropriate). Rather, as I have demonstrated in this article, the unique features of focus group research – in particular, the collective discussion of topics and interaction between participants – give specific advantages to sex researchers. It is a shame, then, that the dynamic interplay between respondents is often ignored by those using the focus group method. Researchers seldom cite data extracts in which participants talk to each other (Kitzinger, 1994; Wilkinson, 1998a), and on the rare occasions such extracts are provided, the interactive nature of these data remains unanalysed as interaction (but see Frith and Kitzinger, 1998 and Wilkinson 1998b for rare exceptions). In writing this paper I have actively sought out those rare extracts from the focus group literature which present examples of interaction between group members. Most researchers cite isolated extracts from one individual (for example, Norris et al., 1996; Rosenthal et al., 1996; Seals et al., 1995; Ward and Taylor, 1992), or present extracts where one participant is talking to the moderator (for example, Zeller, 1993). In some cases it is not clear whether the data presented come from one group interacting together, from a series of individuals talking in different groups, or even who exactly is saying what.
Of course, in some cases, the particular aims of the research mean that the presentation and analysis of interactive data is simply not appropriate, but given that interaction between participants is one of the unique features of this method and is something which is heralded as a key strength, one would perhaps expect this to have greater prominence.

This article has demonstrated that focus groups are ideal for exploratory research in areas where little is known, not simply because they allow for the generation of ideas and the development of hypotheses to be tested, but because through the interplay between participants researchers are able to get a sense of the contested nature of particular issues, the strength with which particular views are held, and to observe the ways in which these views are rationalised and defended. The laughing, joking, arguing, persuading, negotiating and telling of stories that typify focus group discussions make them an ideal method for gaining insight into the sexual language commonly used by participants and the ways in which this language operates. Consequently, focus groups can provide rich data for researchers working within a variety of analytical frameworks: from those attempting to develop clearly worded and appropriately phrased survey instruments, to those who wish to investigate the social construction of sexuality through talk. Most crucially, the interactive nature of focus group discussions in which participants jog each other’s memory, provide examples to illustrate each other’s views, argue and debate their opinions, and share similar experiences, can provide researchers with detailed information not only about sexual activities but about the way these activities are understood by participants themselves. As focus groups continue to grow in popularity within sex research, it is hoped that researchers can capitalise on the strengths of the method to shed new light on the meaning of sexuality and on the ways in which individuals understand and make sense of their sexual experiences.

Notes
1. All data extracts are taken from the author's own research unless otherwise stated.
2. The term ‘on the pull’, can be understood as going out with the intention of meeting, or ‘picking up’, men. ‘Slag’ is a slang term (akin to ‘tart’ or ‘slut’) for a sexually active woman or a woman with ‘loose’ sexual morals.

References


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**Biographical Note**

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