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The Value of Groupwork Knowledge and Skills in Focus Group Research: A Focus Group Approach With Marginalized Teens Regarding Access to Third-Level Education

Hilary Jenkinson[1], Pat Leahy[1], Margaret Scanlon[1], Fred Powell[1], and Olive Byrne[2]

Abstract

This article explores the value of applying groupwork expertise and skills in conducting focus group research. It identifies and provides an analysis of comparisons between the arenas of focus group moderation and social groupwork facilitation drawing from literature from both fields. In addition, the article discusses key skills needed by focus group moderators highlighting how these are also foundational social groupwork competencies. The article draws from the authors' experiences of designing and facilitating focus groups with teenagers as part of a 2-year research study examining the perceptions and experiences of young people from marginalized communities in relation to accessing third-level education. In light of this analysis, the authors assert that some developments in focus group research methodology have resulted in a greater degree of alignment between these two spheres and that focus group moderation is enhanced and rendered increasingly effective when groupwork skills, knowledge, and insights are employed.

Keywords

methods in qualitative inquiry, focus groups, community-based research, social justice, mixed methods

Introduction

This article will examine the dynamics involved in facilitating research focus groups with a view to exploring the value and importance of groupwork skills, understanding, and experience within this process. A study with marginalized young people as part of a 2-year-funded wider research project entitled "Increasing Participation: An Exploration of the Factors That Impact on Progression to Higher Education From Under-Represented Socio-Economic Groups in Ireland" will provide the context for the discussion. As part of the research team, the authors were struck by the level of skill and groupwork experience required to effectively conduct these focus groups in order to enable meaningful participation on the part of the teenagers and gain rich data in respect of our research questions. This prompted reflection in relation to the utilization of groupwork skills and a comparison of literature in respect of focus group moderation and effective social groupwork facilitation, identifying significant correlations and overlaps between these two fields.

The article commences by defining groupwork and outlines what a groupwork approach entails. The primary principles of theory and practice of social groupwork are discussed, particularly those that are relevant to our exploration of focus groups and their facilitation.

The article proceeds with an overview of the wider research project, providing a background to the study, identifying research aims and outlining the methodologies utilized. Within these methodologies, the authors concentrate on exploring focus groups that were carried out with 16- to 18-year-old students in six schools around Ireland. The nature, planning, format, and process of these groups are discussed and the decision to use a creative, participatory approach explored.

This leads to discussion and analysis regarding the commonalities and interactions between social groupwork facilitation and focus group moderation. The article discusses how

[1] School of Applied Social Studies, University College Cork, Ireland
[2] UCC Plus+ Programme, University College Cork, Ireland

Corresponding Author:
Hilary Jenkinson, School of Applied Social Studies, University College Cork, Cork, Ireland.
Email: hj@ucc.ie

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developments within the domain of focus group literature and practice have brought a greater alignment between the two spheres in terms of both approach and practice. In particular, developments in relation to feminist and interactive approaches to focus group facilitation coupled with the contribution of communication theory and increased consideration and discussion of focus groups with vulnerable populations are explored. The article discusses this move from purely traditional approaches to focus groups, reflects on how emerging perspectives contribute to greater similarities between the two areas, and asserts that focus group research methodology is enhanced and rendered more effective when groupwork skills, knowledge, and insights are employed.

The article proceeds to provide an analysis of key skills required by focus group moderators highlighting how these are also foundational skills brought to practice by social groupwork practitioners.

Groupwork—What Does It Involve?

Groupwork is a practice methodology employed within the social professions, particularly within contexts of social work, youth work, counseling, and other therapeutic settings. According to Garvin, Tolman, and Macgowan (2016) "it remains one of the principal methods that social workers use to create change" (p. 1). It can be a challenge to define groupwork succinctly as it is a broad activity and can present in the forms of group therapy, social action, personal development, consciousness raising, self-help, support, or education groups—depending on the overall focus, context in which the group is run, and aim of the particular group. Lindsay and Orton (2014) define groupwork as "a method . . . that aims, in an informed way, through purposeful group experiences, to help individuals and groups to meet individual and group need, and to influence and change personal, group, organisational and community problems" (p. 7). In the main, social groupwork is carried out for the benefit of participants who are clients of social services, thus their primary focus is working with people experiencing difficulties in their lives and who are marginalized.

Groups tend to have between 5 and 15 members, depending on the nature of the group's purpose. More personally focused (e.g., therapeutic) groups would have smaller numbers than groups that would be less personal in nature (e.g., community education groups; Healy, 2012). Groups can meet on a one off basis, but more commonly groups would meet over a number of sessions, often weekly. Some groups would have a defined number of meetings (e.g., a parenting program may have 10 sessions), and other groups meet on an indefinite basis (e.g., a support group). Normally, group sessions would be scheduled for between 1 and 2 hr. A central skill for the practitioner is group facilitation. This encompasses taking responsibility for the preparation, planning, selection of members, setting up, and facilitating or leading group sessions. The groupworker would also plan the structure and content of each group session, ensuring it meets the group's goals. Group facilitation is sometimes carried out by one person but often groupwork would be co-facilitated by at least two people. Within the context of social groupwork, workers take a proactive and involved role in facilitating group processes and the development of the group dynamic with a view to the group moving toward its goals. The facilitator is seen as having significant responsibility in generating a constructive group environment, albeit in collaboration with group participants. Some examples of groups commonly featuring within the context of social work include mental health support groups (for service users or carers); bereavement groups within hospital settings; parenting programs; advocacy groups for clients—for example, young people in care or people with a disability; offender groups either in prisons or community focused on rehabilitation and changing offending behavior; and therapeutic groups with children and young people who have experienced trauma and significant challenges in their lives.

As a method of intervention, groupwork can have many benefits for both members and practitioners. Healy (2012) identifies a number of advantages of using groupwork with clients. It can provide a forum for people facing similar challenges to gain support, understanding and learn from other group members. In addition to this, group membership can also lead to addressing the problems faced by individuals, through the medium of collective action or lobbying, or even simply sharing resources. The group process can be a means for members to develop confidence and skills, both at a general level but also in relation to the presenting issue—a wellness and recovery mental health group for example. For the practitioner, groupwork provides the opportunity to work with a number of individuals at the same time, whereas getting to work with each one individually would often not be feasible.

Key Principles of Groupwork

Some core principles that inform the theory and practice of social groupwork are respect and empathy for group members, a focus on relationships and interpersonal connectedness, empowerment, and employing participatory methodologies (Healy, 2012; Preston-Shoot, 2007; Sharry, 2001).

Respect and empathy for group members. Social groupwork aims to generate a constructive, safe environment where each member of the group is valued and respected. Positive regard and empathy underpin the group process and facilitators endeavor to engender an understanding and nonjudgmental dynamic within the group.

A focus on relationships and interconnectedness. Central to the groupwork process are the developing relationships within the group and the connections between group members and also with facilitators. Groupwork practice places a lot of emphasis on building trust within the group and enabling members to get to know each other. The effectiveness of groupwork is clearly reflected in the degree to which these relationships and interpersonal connectedness occur.

Empowerment. Social groupwork reduces the power differential between worker and client, facilitating a more empowering and equalizing dynamic within the group as each group member is seen as a potential helper and having a valuable contribution within the group process.

Employing participatory methodologies. A key skill in groupwork facilitation is the ability to devise exercises and methods that allow and help all group members to find their voices and feel comfortable participating and contributing to the group. Groupworkers employ a variety of methods in order to achieve this. This is particularly important at the beginning or forming stages of a group when the members are usually not known to each other and are finding their feet in the group. Typical approaches would include round robin exercises where each member says something in turn, discussing issues in pairs or small groups, participatory exercises, reflective exercises where participants reflect and write down their thoughts in relation to a question or topic, and using creative methods other than talking such as drawing or collage.

As a process, the groupwork method has a lot in common with focus group moderation. Most notably, the goal of focus groups is to facilitate communication with and between research participants in relation to the research topic, eliciting their views, opinions, and experiences in this regard. A central task of the researcher is to facilitate the group in such a way that helps put people at ease and builds rapport and trust, thus enabling participants to contribute to the group/research process in an honest and forthcoming manner (Davis, 2017). Indeed, the skills and experience required of focus group facilitators should not be underestimated, particularly when the research is considered to be sensitive.

Background to Research

The data presented in this article derive from a 2-year project that explored the underrepresentation of young people from lower socioeconomic groups in higher education. The project is based primarily on in-depth qualitative research that incorporates the views of young people and of key stakeholders including parents, teachers, and youth and community groups. In this way, we set out to examine the complex issue of educational disadvantage from a triumvirate of research sites: home, school, and community.

There is a strong geographic and community basis to underrepresentation in higher education, with some areas far below the national participation rate (Higher Education Authority [HEA], 2014). In recognition of this, we took a case study approach to explore access to higher education in three areas of social disadvantage: two urban (Dublin and Cork) and one rural (Kerry). These areas were selected on the basis of existing data sources on (a) socioeconomic disadvantage and (b) areas with low participation rates in higher education (HEA, 2014). Within each case study location, we invited two DEIS[1] (expanded as Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) schools to participate in the research, providing a total of six schools. The research study was carried out by the School of Applied Social Studies and the Access Office (UCC Plus+) at University College Cork, jointly funded by the Irish Research Council and the Department of Education. It investigated (a) the aspirations of senior cycle students in DEIS schools toward participating in higher education and (b) the structural and cultural barriers that constrained the realization of DEIS students' hopes and dreams.

The research takes a mixed methods approach, involving an initial survey of fifth- and sixth-year students. In summary, the research into schools and local communities included:

- a survey of 303 senior cycle students (fifth and sixth years),
- interviews with 13 teachers/head teachers,
- focus groups with over 70 students,
- interviews with 27 parents,
- interviews with representatives from six youth and community organizations, and
- interviews with six current third-level-access students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Although our research was primarily qualitative, an initial survey of fifth- and sixth-year students in the six schools was conducted in order to provide an overview of students' plans for the future and orientations toward higher education. The survey also provided a means of collecting demographic data and recruiting volunteers for focus groups. It was made clear to students in advance that taking part in the survey and volunteering for the focus groups was entirely optional.

Focus Groups—A Qualitative Research Methodology

The focus group method has long been recognized as a key qualitative research methodology that first originated in the 1950s within the field of marketing. Over subsequent decades, it has gradually migrated and developed within the disciplines and research spheres of health and social sciences. The approach involves research being conducted in a group setting (5–12 people), using a sequential number of open-ended questions that are explored and expanded on through group discussion and interaction. Krueger and Casey (2009) identify a number of essential characteristics of focus groups: They must involve people who possess certain characteristics (e.g., of the research target group), the group process produces qualitative data in relation to the research topic, and these data are generated through focused discussion that is facilitated by a moderator. Focus groups should also be held a number of times in order to ask the same questions of several groups of similar participants in order to identify common themes and trends in the data gained. According to Linhorst (2002), focus groups are a particularly effective way to collect in-depth data relating to beliefs, opinions, and motivations of participants that do not easily convert into quantitative/statistical data. They are often used in conjunction with other research methods (as in our

study) as part of a mixed method approach. This can lead to richer, more insightful data as topics are explored from a variety of perspectives using a number of processes (Barbour & Morgan, 2017).

Facilitating Focus Groups With Marginalized Teens—A Vulnerable Population

In recent years, there has been greater attention within the focus group literature on carrying out research with vulnerable populations (Davis, 2017; Owen, 2001). Davis (2017) identifies focus groups as being particularly suited to exploring the experiences of marginalized people where the goal is to give voice to participants from marginalized and vulnerable populations (p. 120). According to Owen (2001), "Research is considered to be sensitive when the people being studied are powerless or disadvantaged . . . and where the subject matter relates to personal experiences" (p. 656). Certainly, by virtue of their age (16–18), and the fact they come from communities categorized as significantly disadvantaged in social and economic terms, the young people in our focus groups would be considered a vulnerable population, and therefore, a lot of consideration was given to conducting the groups in a safe, supportive, and empowering manner. In addition to this, Owen (2001) highlights the importance of researchers having the necessary expertise and support in order to run focus groups of a sensitive nature with vulnerable populations. Social groupwork, as we have seen, is practiced within the context of vulnerable and marginalized groups, so the overlaps and commonalities are significant. In each sphere, providing a safe space for participation and self-disclosure is paramount. In addition, social groupworkers take a proactive approach to facilitation, actively interacting with and drawing in group members to encourage and enable participation. This is particularly helpful when moderating groups of young people who can often need extra encouragement and input to feel at ease in becoming involved with group and research processes.

According to Stuart, Maynard, and Rouncefield (2015), in order to be effective in carrying out research with young people, it is important to consider creative methods of doing so. Traditional research methodologies can be alienating to young people as they can have negative, formal associations, for example, written questionnaire—school exam, interview—police questioning (Stuart et al., 2015). Conversely, using creative approaches engender a sense of fun and energy and promotes meaningful participation as it harnesses media natural to young people's culture and stage of development (Geldard & Geldard, 2009). "The use of creative and multiple methods has become increasingly common in research with children and teenagers providing scope for tapping into popular cultures of communication and proving fruitful in offering alternative insights" (Weller, 2012, p. 126).

For the purposes of this research project, we used creative focus groups with young people as a key element of our research methodology. Again working in a group format harnesses a way of being natural to young people—being with their peers (Bagnoli & Clarke, 2010). Designing these focus groups to utilize creative and varied methodologies aimed to optimize the level of participant engagement and ultimately the quality and depth of data gathered (Stuart et al., 2015).

In our research, creative focus group methods were employed with groups of senior cycle students (fifth and sixth years) in six separate DEIS school settings. In total, we ran seven focus groups.

The format for each focus group was as follows. We began by introducing ourselves (two researchers) and explaining what the research project involved. Permission was sought (and given in all cases) to audio record the group, so we would have a record of the discussion and the points made. We then divided the group in two and had a true or false icebreaker quiz about higher education (e.g., in college, you can call the lecturers by their first names; you have to have points/high grades to go to college). This helped break the ice and generate interest and discussion about the nature of higher education. The next section aimed to explore young peoples' perceptions of higher education and involved them writing on large sheets of paper what they thought were the similarities and differences between school and college. This led to a facilitated discussion around which of those factors identified they liked the sound of, or disliked and why. The final section of the focus group entailed dividing the group into pairs and asking them to consider the following questions in turn:

- Why would you want to go to college?
- Why would you *not* want to go to college?
- What are the things that would help you go to college?
- What are the things that would make it difficult for you to go to college?

Each of these questions was written on separate large sheets of paper placed around the room. Each pair wrote on colored post-it notes their response to each statement in turn. They were encouraged to write as many responses as they could think of, giving 2 min for each question. After each 2 min, they stuck their post-its to the relevant sheet and the exercise continued until each question had been responded to. Each question had its own colored post-it associated with it (e.g., Q1 = green, Q2 = orange, Q3 = pink, and Q4 = yellow). The facilitators summarized the points made on each poster in turn, exploring the issues raised by the young people and encouraging further discussion on the points they had made in writing. The focus group concluded by thanking the group for their participation and giving them our contact details if they had any further queries.

Typically, each group consisted of 8–12 young people and took place in a room in the school—an office, library, or other neutral, uninterrupted space. Most groups of young people participated enthusiastically and were eager to share their views and experiences, others were less forthcoming and more careful about what they said in front of us and their peers. It is difficult to ascertain the reasons for this, but it is the

researchers' view that this variation seemed to correspond with the atmosphere present in different schools and the warmth or sternness of the relationship the students seemed to have with teachers.

Both of the researchers who carried out the focus group element of the research project had strong practice backgrounds in the areas of youth work and social work and specifically groupwork within these spheres. We commented to each other many times how these skills and experiences stood to us and were an asset in conducting the focus groups and eliciting relevant data through participative exercises and discussion. Starting each session with a fun true or false quiz broke the ice and helped the participants (and ourselves!) feel more relaxed and willing to participate in the discussions that followed. Making a creative exercise out of the exploration of motivations, barriers and enablers regarding participation in higher education further facilitated their involvement in responding to these questions. As groupworkers, we knew that it would be easier for young people to discuss their views and experiences in relation to these topics if they had an opportunity to write down their ideas first, then discuss it in pairs before venturing to honestly share their views with the whole group. It is a well-established principle in social groupwork that group participants generally find it easier to find their voices and place in the group process if they can be facilitated to do this in gradual steps rather than be plunged into the deep end of open group discussion (Crawford, Price, & Price, 2015; Lindsay & Orton, 2014; Preston-Shoot, 2007). These experiences and reflections over the course of the research study prompted us to delve deeper into examining the parallels and crossovers between the worlds of focus group moderation and groupwork facilitation.

Developments in Focus Group Moderation and Groupwork Facilitation

Early focus group moderation guidelines were inclined to be mechanistic in their instruction, particularly as they were originally developed and implemented in marketing and early social science research (Linhorst, 2002). Traditionally, focus groups were formulated to ask a series of sequential research questions and generate discussion between group members in relation to their views and opinions regarding relevant research topics. The moderator was neutral and took a detached stance in the process, and the sole focus was on eliciting responses from participants in respect of the information the researcher wants to obtain (Casstevens & Cohen, 2011; Cohen & Garrett, 1999). Gradually, particularly in the context of social research, there has been a move toward recognizing the value of incorporating a more flexible, sensitive, and emotionally engaged approach on the part of the moderator. This has been influenced in part by the experiences of social practitioners and groupworkers in engaging in focus group research, with vulnerable populations exploring sensitive and personal social issues (Davis, 2017). It has also been influenced by developments within research and practice in relation to focus groups, particularly the emergence of interactive focus groups, feminist methods, and the application of communication theory to focus group practice. Interactive focus groups are a particular model that departs from traditional focus methodology in the following ways. Instead of participants being strangers to each other, interactive focus group members would be known to each other. In addition, this type of group would endeavor to reduce the power differential between moderator and participants, with researchers also contributing their views and experiences to the process of the group. Typically, interactive focus groups would meet a number of times and the content of discussion would be at a personal and deep level (Davis & Ellis, 2010). Feminist approaches to focus groups also have an emphasis on a more reciprocal relationship between researcher and participants that encourages an equalizing of power and sharing of information rather than just a data transfer between participants and researcher (Wilkinson, 1998). Davis, in her application of communication theory to the focus group process, emphasizes the necessity of balanced communication patterns between participants with each other and between participants and facilitator. Davis (2017) also emphasizes the importance of bringing creativity and a multiplicity of methods to focus group practice.

These developments within focus groups reflect strongly principles valued within social groupwork—values of empowering group members and equalizing power between facilitator and participants, facilitators being emotionally present, connected and available to group members, sharing information about themselves, and contributing personally to the group process where appropriate (Healy, 2012). It also reflects the importance of responding empathically to the needs of group members, especially in the context of our ethical responsibility to vulnerable clients. Let us explore some of these themes further.

From a Neutral, Nonresponsive Approach to Connected Empathic Responses

Traditionally, those conducting focus groups were to be neutral in their engagement with group members so as not to influence people's responses in relation to the research topic. Even nodding or body language that could communicate nonverbal leading was discouraged. The moderator was seen as a catalyst in the process, not influencing it in any way apart from generating research data. Karger (1987) describes the moderator as having "unobtrusive chameleon-like qualities" who "lets the intercourse flow naturally with a minimum of intervention" (cited in Redmond & Curtis, 2009, p. 65). However, within social research, where the topics discussed are often sensitive and sometimes deeply personal to the participants, Cohen and Garrett (1999) argue that this nonresponsive approach is inappropriate when people are sharing personal, moving information. They advocate, as social groupworkers and researchers, for a sensitive and empathic response based on humanity and professionalism:

> Social groupworkers pride themselves on their ability to be sensitive to the needs of clients and to handle unanticipated group situations. It would be inappropriate for a worker to remain in strict data-gathering role and to ignore the issues, feelings and needs of participants. (Cohen and Garrett, 1999, p. 370)

Casstevens and Cohen (2011), in their research with mental health patients, also favor an empathic approach and assert that focus group facilitators should be encouraging toward participants, sensitive to their needs and emphasize their strengths. They state that the ideal is an integration of groupwork and research skills that results in focus groups being "personal and responsive, being sensitive to the needs of group members, focusing on socio-emotional content, building on relationships and commonalities among group members, empathising, and reaching for feelings" (p. 56). This approach clearly reflects the core groupwork principle of respect and empathy outlined earlier in the article.

This concurs with parallel developments in focus group perspectives outlined above in terms of interactive and feminist perspectives where relationships between researchers and group members are central in the research process. It also echoes Davis's (2017) focus on the importance of building rapport with focus group members, rapport being "the sense of comfort, trust, and familiarity between you and another person" (p. 17). Being empathetic and emotionally connected is vital to this process.

The building of rapport between group participants is important; however, it is also beneficial to the research and group processes to build rapport with group moderators as it helps participants feel relaxed and more minded to contribute. This was especially true in our experience of being two adult figures engaging with young people in a school setting, where the tone already set was of a teacher/student dynamic. We introduced ourselves by our first names, were friendly, and used informality and humor as appropriate. We also gave the group our contact details and said we would be delighted to hear from them if they had any further queries or questions.

Bringing a groupwork approach and values to focus group research also feeds into research ethics around our duty of care for participants especially relating to the possibility that the research process could cause distress and our responsibilities to be sensitive and responsive to participants in this regard. Owen emphasizes the importance of this in her research with women who experience enduring mental health difficulties and asserts that it is vital we create an environment that ensures the safety and security of focus group members (Owen, 2001). Wilkinson, writing from a feminist perspective, also notes the ethical benefits of using a group approach to research in that it ameliorates the power imbalance between researcher and researched and contributes to group members feeling "their views and experiences are valued" (Wilkinson, 1998, p. 115).

In our experience of conducting focus groups with marginalized young people, we feel it would have been inappropriate, and counterproductive in terms of the research process, to take a detached, neutral response to facilitating these sessions. It was important, in our view, to connect with the young people and demonstrate our appreciation of their contributions, affirming the value of each person's input. Given that we were asking them to share their views of higher education including the barriers they encountered in this regard, many personal issues were raised such as family difficulties (illness, addiction, child-minding responsibilities), mental health challenges (especially anxiety, stress, depression), and their relationships with their families. Creating an environment where young people felt they could raise these issues would only have been possible, in our view, if we approached the process in an empathetic and warm manner. In practice, we often found ourselves thanking a young person for their contribution, acknowledging the challenges of their situation, and perhaps asking them or others to say more about the issue. For example, one young woman spoke about serious illness in her family, which meant that she couldn't move away from home to go to college due to being needed to provide care. We thanked her for bringing that example and commented that was a challenging situation for her and her family. She seemed to value the opportunity to speak a little more about it. We then asked the group if there were other family situations that would impact on their ability to attend higher education to which a couple of students responded. It is important to be able to provide a supportive space, and even a pause, for research participants to speak about personal issues if they choose to do so and not rush on to the next question. This highlights the value of drawing from a groupwork repertoire in exploring sensitive material in the context of research. We concur with Cohen and Garrett (1999) who state, "The potential for obtaining rich and meaningful data through the medium of group process is increased when groupwork and research skills are integrated" (p. 371).

From Detached Nondisclosure to Responsive Sharing Approach

Related to this discussion is the issue of the manner in which the researcher engages with the group in terms of how much of themselves they bring to it. Original focus group guidelines would instruct the researcher to be detached in this regard, not disclosing any personal information about themselves (Cohen & Garrett, 1999). However, a groupwork approach would deviate from this as facilitators are encouraged to find a balance between self-disclosure and maintaining appropriate boundaries. Self-disclosure can be helpful in humanizing the group facilitator and promoting a responsive, collaborative approach (Healy, 2012; Jenkinson, 2015; Preston-Shoot, 2007; Sharry, 2001). According to Doel and Best (2008), in the context of what service users value in social work practice, having a sense of the worker as a real person is important, with self-disclosure being a significant part of that. This resonates with the core groupwork principle of a focus on relationships and interconnectedness discussed earlier, as the group process is more effective when there is a sense of connection between members and with the facilitator. This perspective concurs strongly with evolving debates within the focus group literature that

advocates a more flexible and equalizing approach to moderation. This is true, in particular within feminist and interactive frameworks of practice where "all group members—participants and researchers alike—share and reflect from their own personal experiences" (Davis, 2017, p. 121). Krueger and Casey (2009) urge caution in this regard, however, highlighting the importance of focus group moderators keeping their personal views to themselves and not getting drawn in to defending a particular stance so as not to influence the freedom of participants to share their honest views, experiences, and opinions. This is important when conducting research; however, we believe there is scope and benefit to be gained from giving the group members a sense of who you are without biasing the data gathered.

In this research study, we felt it was important to briefly introduce ourselves to the participants, for example, where we worked, our practice backgrounds (in youth work) and also our pathways into higher education. This was particularly relevant as we both accessed third-level education in different ways. One of us had left school at the age of 15 and returned to education to study social science as a mature student in our 30s. The other had taken a more traditional route, accessing third level on completion of second-level education at the age of 18. We felt this helped demonstrate the diversity that is possible in accessing third-level education. It also generated interest among the young people in relation to different pathways to higher education, sometimes resulting in questions that we were happy, and felt it was important, to respond to.

From a Sole Focus on Research Information to Flexibility in Terms of Members' Needs

Traditionally, focus group moderation guidelines required the discussion to relate fully to what the researcher needs to know rather than deviate in any way, even as a response to the needs of participants (Morgan, 1988, cited in Cohen & Garrett, 1999). Developments within focus group methodologies have moved away somewhat from this "clinical" approach to embrace a more responsive, flexible approach to moderation, particularly when researching with vulnerable groups and sensitive topics. Indeed, Wilkinson (1998), in a discussion of the ethics of focus group research, emphasizes that participants can benefit from consciousness raising in relation to the research topic. She also highlights the ethical importance of participants having greater control over the topic of conversation in a group setting. Taking a traditional view would have seemed a somewhat clinical approach to our focus groups where the nature of the discussion concerning the participants' perceptions, motivations, and views regarding accessing third level naturally generated interest and prompted questions about the process. In particular, the warm-up true/false quiz at the outset of the session provoked discussion around the nature of third level and at times entailed clarifying misconceptions some of the young people had. For example, some thought that it was essential to achieve high grades in state examinations in order to access college. This is not true as there are other access routes to third-level education in Ireland. Further along the session, in discussions about the challenges they might face in third level, some young people expressed a concern about stress and the effects on their mental health. This prompted discussions regarding supports available to students in college including counseling services and additional mentoring for young people coming through access routes. Often, this clarifying information was provided by the young people to each other. However, we felt it was appropriate to confirm correct facts, clarify misinformation, and provide additional relevant information where necessary. Facilitating awareness around this factual information promoted a more reciprocal and empowering dynamic to the focus groups where the young people felt they were gaining something from the session as well as contributing significantly to it, thus adding to the consciousness-raising element of focus groups highlighted by Wilkinson (1998). In her discussion of focus group research in a social work context, Walton identifies empowerment as a key social work value and claims that the research group process should be an empowering experience for focus group members (Walton, 2009). This is also highlighted by Linhorst (2002), in his review of 33 qualitative social work research studies, he identifies empowerment and raising the level of consciousness of participants about the research topic as important positive consequences of focus group participation. As discussed previously, empowerment is a central principle of social groupwork practice, and in our view, employing this approach has beneficial effects in focus group moderation also.

Certainly, the task of the focus group moderator is to keep the discussion primarily focused on the research topic, this should not in our view be to the exclusion of responding to questions, information requests, and clarifications that have relevance and potential benefit for group members.

Moving From a One-Dimensional Methodology to Creative Methodologies Using a Variety of Techniques

Focus groups, when originally developed, were designed to use a straightforward question/answer/discussion format, using a sequential set of questions, and to a significant degree, focus group research still adheres to this format (Krueger & Casey, 2009; Redmond & Curtis, 2009). However, the use of focus groups in social research with a diverse range of participants, particularly with vulnerable populations, including young people, has resulted in more creative and innovative techniques being employed. Davis (2017) advocates drawing from a variety of methodologies when conducting focus groups in order to elicit information and opinions, including getting participants to move around the room, using creative exercises such as collage, role-play, and sentence completion. In particular, she identifies creativity as being a key way of engaging young people in focus group research (Davis, 2017). As identified earlier in this article, employing participatory methods is a core tenet of the groupwork approach. Social groupwork practice has long recognized the importance of using a variety of techniques and methodologies in order to maximize meaningful

participation in the group process (Benson, 2010; Brown, 1994; Crawford et al., 2015). In particular, when facilitating social groupwork with children or young people, creativity would be considered essential (Gelgard & Gelgard, 2001; Sharry, 2003). Linhorst (2002) highlights the contribution social work research can make to developing new creative approaches to focus groups and urges a move away from the more one-dimensional methodology traditionally used. In their recent publication exploring a new era of focus group research, Barbour and Morgan (2017) hail the developing diversity and creativity in relation to focus group methods and make a "plea for further innovations" (p. 12).

According to Krueger and Casey (2009), focus groups with young people require particular moderation skills and encourage the use of creative, fun, and engaging methods. In their study, Bagnoli and Clarke (2010) used focus groups to consult with young people in formulating their research design in respect of a 10-year longitudinal study of young people's lives they were planning. These young people made strong recommendations around the importance of using a variety of methods in order to connect with different needs and personalities. They also felt research shouldn't just constitute a chat/interview as that was boring, but be done in a creative engaging way with groups of peers (Bagnoli & Clarke, 2010).

As outlined earlier in this article, our research endeavored to implement our focus groups using creative and engaging methods aimed at building rapport with young people, facilitating their engagement with the process in as a relaxed and enjoyable way as possible, while ensuring a clear focus on gathering rich research data in-line with our research aims. Our methodologies ranged from having a quiz, to brainstorming, working in pairs, using different colored post-it notes in an exercise that necessitated them completing sentences and moving around the room. By using a staged process whereby participants were asked to write down their responses before discussing them in the larger group, we aimed to gather data that reflected each person's ideas rather than perhaps capturing just the views of the most vocal which could have happened if the questions were asked in the open group in the first instance.

Key Skills Needed by Focus Group Moderators

In addition to our exploration of how traditional focus group guidelines have evolved within social research practice and, through the development of feminist and interactive perspectives, have adopted more flexible, empathic, creative, and less hierarchical approaches, which have become more closely aligned with the values and principles of social groupwork, we will also examine the considerable overlap between key skills needed by focus group moderators and foundational groupwork facilitation skills. This might seem like a natural connection, but according to Cohen and Garrett (1999), "The literature on focus group research rarely utilizes social work knowledge of group dynamics or group facilitation skills" (p. 359). More recently within focus group literature, Davis (2017) has highlighted the importance of focus group moderators being skilled in facilitating the optimum participation of group members through her application of communication theory to focus group moderation. This closely mirrors the skills considered key in groupwork facilitation. A number of authors, who themselves are social workers and/or groupwork practitioners, have articulated the strong links between the two spheres in terms of a mirroring of skills but assert that these discussions have been slow in migrating to mainstream focus group and qualitative research discourse (see Casstevens & Cohen, 2011; Gaizauskaite, 2012; Garvin, Tolman, & Macgowan, 2016; Home, 2009; Linhorst, 2002; Walton, 2009).

Home (2009) asserts that social practitioners are ideally equipped to carry out qualitative research using a focus group approach as they use skills and methods familiar to groupworkers. Walton (2009) refers to social work training as being key in preparing her to carry out research and, in particular, cites groupwork training as central in enabling her to carry out focus group research effectively. Indeed, this was our experience of planning and facilitating focus groups with teenagers. Both of us felt well equipped for the task, drawing hugely on our professional training (in social work and youth and community work) and many years' experience of groupwork practice. Others on the wider team of researchers felt comfortable and brought significant research skills to other research methods employed in the study such as questionnaire design and implementation, in addition to carrying out interviews with teachers, parents, and relevant community professionals. However, they expressed that they did not feel they had the necessary experience or knowledge of groupwork, particularly with teenagers, which this element of the research required. In this way, the diversity of expertise and experience on the research team contributed to the effective implementation of our mixed methods approach.

Two of the core skills required for focus group moderation are the ability to plan the group session effectively and facilitate in a manner that ensures the balanced participation of all group members. In addition, the moderator needs to be able to manage some of the more challenging group dynamics that are common in groups such as monopolizing, conflict, or passivity.

Ability to Plan Group Process So Resultant Data Are Directly Relevant to Research Questions

Groupwork literature is replete with exhortations around the importance of planning and preparation when facilitating groups. Benson (2010) states that this aspect of groupwork "cannot be emphasised enough" (p. 9). It is vital to be clear what the aims and objectives of the group are, as well as each individual session (Crawford et al., 2015). The amount of time needed to be invested in order to adequately plan for groupwork is often underestimated (Sharry, 2001) as experienced groupworkers will be well aware. Similarly, in preparing a focus group, moderators need to be crystal clear about the aims and objectives of their research and in particular what research questions they aim to address with participants. Groundwork

put in at this stage of the research will significantly influence the quality of the focus group process and the clarity and relevance of the research data generated. There is a strong correlation between the skill of planning groups, which is very familiar territory for social groupworkers, and the necessity to prepare clear, logical, and sequential sessions for focus group moderators. Home (2009) articulates this well when she states, "Groupworkers know that successful intervention requires careful planning and solid facilitating skills. Similarly, the time invested in systematic planning pays off in higher quality, more relevant focus group data" (p. 89).

As we prepared our focus group sessions, we kept our research objectives to the fore and spent many meetings planning and fine-tuning how best to structure the session, what specific questions to ask the students, what facilitation methods were best suited to exploring these questions, how they would be sequenced, and effective formats for recording our findings.

Enabling and Encouraging Balanced Participation by all Group Members

The word "facilitator" derives from the French word *facile*, meaning "easy," thus highlighting that one of the key roles for a facilitator is to make it as easy as possible for group members to participate. As we have seen, employing participatory methodologies are a core aspect of the groupwork approach and a central task for groupworkers is to structure group sessions in a way that allows everyone find their voice, not just the most vocal or confident. Classic and contemporary groupwork literature offers plentiful wisdom in this regard, highlighting the importance of building an environment of trust in groups and the role icebreakers, nonthreatening round-robin exercises, discussions in pairs/small groups, and experiential exercises play in enabling all group members to develop ease with the group process (see Brown, 1994; Johnson & Johnson, 2009; Lindsay & Orton, 2014; Sharry, 2001). Focus group research aims to ascertain the views, opinions, and experiences of participants and in order do this representatively requires the input of all group members. This, according to Walton (2009), demands excellent communication and group facilitation skills on the part of a focus group moderator. Krueger and Casey (2009) concur with this view and add, "Focus groups work when participants feel comfortable, respected and free to give their opinion without being judged" (p. 4). Davis (2017) has made a valuable contribution in this regard when she applies communication theory to focus groups in which she explores group dynamics through the lenses of systems theory and social network theory. Essentially, she highlights how a group is an interdependent, connected, relational phenomenon, each part is dependent and affected by the others. Drawing from social network theory, she makes explicit the patterns of interaction aimed for within the focus group process—ideally, there should be a mixture of communication between members and facilitator where members interact with each other as well as with the facilitator. She outlines the importance of having a balance in the communication patterns, whereby the communication is neither one dimensional from participant to facilitator, or just between participants, but is most effective when there is a mixture of communication between participants and input from facilitator to ensure the information discussed is dynamic and focused (p. 10).

In our study, we put considerable thought into this aspect of the focus group process. From our experience of working with teenagers, we appreciated the daunting prospect it can be for some to give your opinions in front of your peers. We were constrained by the time allocated for each focus group (45–60 min) from dedicating time to many icebreakers or trust-building exercises. Hence, we decided on a light-hearted quiz about third-level education in order to generate fun and energy in the group. This seemed to have the desired effect, and for the most part, all students participated in the exercises and discussions that followed. In both of the subsequent exercises regarding their perceptions of third level and the motivations and factors that would enable/obstruct them from accessing it, we got students to write down their ideas before sharing and discussing them in the larger group. In this way, we were able to capture a full representation of ideas as even the quieter ones had their views recorded in written form.

Managing Group Dynamics, Especially if Monopolizing, Passivity, or Conflict Arise

Probably one of the most daunting aspects of groupwork practice is managing and addressing difficult group dynamics when they occur. The most common difficulties to arise are the domination of the group process by one or a few participants, silence in the group (on the part of the whole group or individuals), and conflict arising within the group. These are topics typically covered in groupwork education and most groupwork textbooks dedicate at least one chapter offering insight and guidance in addressing these issues (see Brown, 1994; Kottler & Englar-Carson, 2010; Lindsay & Orton, 2014; Preston-Shoot, 2007; Sharry, 2001). Lindsay and Orton (2014) strike a reassuring tone emphasizing that while these issues can strike fear in the heart of facilitators, especially at the beginning, they are common and normal features of groupwork. With experience and practice, facilitators develop skills in managing them and in time they become "part and parcel of the ebb and flow of groupwork process" (Sharry, 2001, p. 119).

Within the arena of focus group research managing, these dynamics are identified as important skills required by moderators (Gaizauskaite, 2012; Krueger & Casey, 2009; Linhorst, 2002). In this regard, Gaizauskaite (2012) states, "A moderator must be prepared to efficiently deal with a variety of participants' reactions, dominance or passivity, potential conflicts or other unexpected outcomes" (p. 22). This brings into focus how skills that focus group moderators must be equipped with are "skills which are already part and parcel of a groupworkers' repertoire" (Home, 2009, p. 86). This underscores again the significant overlap between these spheres and how well placed groupworkers are to carry out this work.

Being equipped with groupwork training and expertise was invaluable to us in conducting our focus groups. We were able to facilitate using methods that equalized participants' input, thus preventing more vocal/confident students from dominating (e.g., requiring participants to discuss issues in pairs and then feedback to the large group). These methods also ensure quieter members participated without feeling put on the spot. In addition, we were diligent during sessions to ensure all views were heard, proactively, yet sensitively bringing in quieter students. Thankfully serious conflict did not arise, but where differences of opinion developed, we were able to validate each person's contribution highlighting that it was important for the study to hear all views and experiences.

Conclusion

This article has explored the importance of groupwork skills and knowledge in conducting focus group research. Using our study into young people's views and motivations regarding accessing third-level education as a backdrop to the discussion, we have identified and provided an analysis of how developments in focus group moderation have resulted in approaches adopted in these two arenas becoming much more aligned. We have also identified commonalities in terms of essential skills and knowledge required in both spheres. Throughout our article, we have attempted to provide bridging discourse between these two related areas of practice, perhaps prompting further discussion and continuing crosspollination, which we believe can be immensely beneficial for both sectors.

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ORCID iD

Hilary Jenkinson https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0929-9507

Note

1. DEIS schools are located in disadvantaged areas and generally have a significantly lower rate of student progression to higher education. Analysis by the Department of Education and Skills indicates that 24% of students completing the second year of senior cycle in DEIS schools progress on to higher education, compared to 50% for all schools (Higher Education Authority, 2015, p. 37).

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