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Relinquishing Control in Focus Groups: The use of activities in feminist research with young people to improve moderator performance

Abstract

This article explores the possibility for researchers to embrace the unpredictability of focus groups by using activities as a stimulus for conversation. Reflecting on a recent study with young women in Bristol exploring their perceptions of celebrity feminists, it argues that using writing and drawing activities forces the researcher to relinquish control, and their role as questioner and as expert, to the participants. Furthermore, by analysing the ways in which I frequently became uncomfortable at the consequences of this loss of control, trying to regain it and failing, I argue that the activities forced me to fully commit to the feminist ideals of research that I subscribed to, particularly redressing the hierarchical relationships in research settings. Finally, the article discusses the implications of these findings in feminist research, and the need more broadly to reflect on how methodological decisions impact on researchers' own performances in focus groups.

Keywords

Focus groups, feminist research, children, activities, participation, control, moderator.

Word Count: 7946.

While there is little consensus on what a feminist ‘mode of enquiry’ might consist of, there does seem to be an agreement that it is based around certain principles (Maynard, 1994: 10): an analysis of gender, a heightened concern for research ethics and care for participants, an attempt to address the hierarchical nature of relationships between the researcher and the researched, and an awareness of the potential of research encounters to empower women through consciousness-raising (Montell, 1999: 46-7; Mauthner and Edwards, 2005: 15). In short, ‘Feminist research seeks to respect, understand, and empower women’ (Campbell and Wasco, 2000: 778). Furthermore, some feminist scholars argue that by adopting a collaborative approach to the research process, based on principles of sharing knowledge and dialogue between participants and the researcher, feminist research can reveal new and interesting insights about the subject in question and about women’s lives (e.g. Riaño, 2016). Much has been written about how focus groups, whilst not inherently feminist, make for a research method that ‘corresponds to the ideals of feminist research practice’ (Munday, 2006: 94; Wilkinson, 1999: 64-5). In particular, feminist researchers have claimed that focus groups can redress the power imbalance of the research setting. Whilst a one-to-one interview posits the interviewer as expert and questioner and the interviewee as their ‘informant’, a focus group allows for participants to interact with one another with very little intervention from the moderator (Montell, 1999: 50-51; Överlien, Aronsson and Hydén, 2005: 334). This can help to give participants greater control to frame the conversations they are participating in (Esim, 1997: 139; Allan, 2011: 5.5). Furthermore, bringing a group of women together to discuss issues relating to gender can have a transformative impact through:

the contribution to making visible a social issue, the therapeutic effect of being able to reflect on and re-evaluate their experience as part of the process of being interviewed,

and the generally subversive outcome that these first two consequences may generate (Maynard, 1994: 17).

As a method, focus groups are unpredictable. They frequently stray from the topic in question, become difficult for a researcher to moderate, or descend into silence. They can take unexpected directions and destroy any hypotheses a researcher may have. Researchers disagree over whether this unpredictability represents the method's greatest 'drawback' (Van Staveren, 1997: 132) or its greatest strength (Myers and Mcnaghten, 1999: 175). This article explores the possibility for researchers to use creativity in focus groups to embrace this unpredictability. While some scholars have discussed the potential to use activities in focus groups to stimulate discussion (e.g. Colucci, 2007, Allan, 2011), particularly in relation to working with children, they have tended to focus on the effect such activities may have on participants' willingness to talk. This article argues that activities can improve a moderator's performance, by forcing them to embrace the unpredictability of their participants' talk and open their mind to new findings as a result. Subscribing to the ideals of feminist research listed above, and a belief that a successful moderator performance entails giving the participants as much control and space as possible to discuss their experiences, the analysis below demonstrates how activities force the researcher to fully relinquish the power inherent in her or his role.

The data in this study is drawn from a series of focus groups with young women exploring their perceptions of celebrity feminists. The fieldwork was conducted in 2015 and was aimed at capturing young women's reactions to what had been a prominent year of 'celebrity feminism' in 2014. Actresses including Elisabeth Moss, Cate Blanchett, Megan Fox and Jennifer Garner spoke out about sexism in Hollywood and challenged sexist

practices on the red carpet. In August, Taylor Swift told *The Guardian* that she had recently had a ‘feminist awakening’ (Hoby, 2014), and singer Beyoncé performed at the MTV Video Music Awards (VMAs) in front of lights spelling the word ‘feminist’, whilst sampling a speech by Nigerian feminist author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. September 2014 saw Emma Watson give a speech on feminism to the United Nations, and in December, she featured on the front cover of the ‘feminism edition’ of *ELLE Magazine* in the UK, which also featured a photo shoot with various male celebrities and politicians wearing ‘This is what a feminist looks like’ t-shirts. The word ‘feminism’ was so prevalent in celebrity culture that it even made it onto *TIME* magazine’s annual ‘word banishment poll’ of the most overused words of the year, alongside the likes of ‘OMG’, ‘obvi’ and ‘yaaassss’ (Hamad and Taylor, 2015: 124).

This trend for celebrity feminism came under attack not only from the likes of *TIME* magazine, but also from fellow celebrities and even academics. Beyoncé was frequently the subject of the harshest criticism, with veteran feminist campaigner Annie Lennox labelling her VMA performance ‘feminism lite’ (Weidhase, 2015: 128), and black feminist writer, activist and academic bell hooks calling her a ‘terrorist’, going on to explain: ‘you are not going to destroy this imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy by creating your own image of it’ (The New School, 2014). Much of the criticism of celebrity feminists has centred on the potential impression they will have on their fan base of girls. In discussing the emerging association of feminism with highly sexualised celebrity, there is a danger that even those with a feminist agenda will fall into the trap of panicking about girls and their sexuality, or of portraying them as uncritical observers of the media and unquestioning idolisers of celebrities. One study that did actually ask young feminists about their opinions on the subject found that they negotiated ‘the contradictions presented by celebrity

feminism with a great deal of wit and sensitivity' (Keller and Ringrose, 2015: 134). The data from that study was taken from the authors' research with young feminists on many different themes. By focusing entirely on young women's interpretations of celebrity feminism, and by working with groups of young women that do not all identify as feminists, this study aimed to expand on Keller and Ringrose's interesting findings, as well as piloting the methods described in this article.

The study explored how young women take up, reject, or negotiate celebrity discourses about feminism and gender. Rather than an attempt to uncover participants' 'real views', the focus group was adopted as a 'forum' for exploring public discourses (Smithson, 2000: 114), a 'window' into the 'formation, contestation and negotiation of ideas, understandings and claims' (Jowett and O'Toole, 2008: 464). The interactions between group members can provide the researcher with insights into the ways in which meanings are constructed within a group, how some understandings are privileged whilst others are dismissed or absent, and thus the ways in which some discourses dominate over others. In a successful focus group, participants are able to explore the topic as freely as possible, with the moderator only intervening occasionally to steer the conversation back to the topic in hand or to prompt participation (Överlien, Aronsson and Hydén, 2005: 334).

A great deal of literature explores the possibility of using focus groups with children and young people, arguing that they are 'known to respond well to this research method where the setting is informal and the focus is on their own ideas, attitudes and experiences' (Gray, Amos and Currie, 1996: 217; see also Mauthner, 1997). Furthermore, in exploring participants' perceptions and understandings, focus groups as method acknowledge the participants, whatever their age, as experts (Heary and Hennessy, 2002: 48). The literature

on the use of activities in focus groups with young people, or any group, is more limited and those studies that do exist disagree on researchers' motivations in using them. Gibson describes activities as, 'an excellent strategy to maintain children's concentration and interest as well as enabling participants to work together' (2007: 480), while Harris et al. identify 'child friendly methods' as being 'based on children's preferred methods of communication, for example drawing, photography, stories and song' (2015: 584). Furthermore, Porcellato et al argue that 'interesting and attention grabbing activities' using drawing and theatre techniques can help the researcher to deal with 'children's differing levels of competence and comprehension, their short attention spans, their eagerness to please and their inherent egocentrism' (2002: 311-313). However, Harden et al. (2000) reject the assumption that children require special research methods, which is based on an assumption that they are more difficult to communicate with than adults, while Åkerström and Brunnberg argue that 'Earmarking specific methods as only to be used with young people might serve to exaggerate both the differences between children and adults, and the similarities between different groups of children' (2013: 529). Researchers must also be aware of the risk in using creative techniques of assuming that children find it easier to express themselves through drawing and performance, when for many children the opposite may be true (Allan, 2011: 2.6). Lyon and Carabelli found that their use of 'artistic' activities in their research discouraged some young people from participating altogether, as they classed themselves as either 'artistic' or 'not artistic' based on their experiences of creative subjects at school, and those who felt themselves not to be artistic ruled themselves out of the project (2016: 432). There is a need, therefore, for researchers to reflect on the assumptions that the choice of methodology in working with children and young people might make about participants, their capabilities and preferences. This article

however, makes no such assumptions, but rather argues that a reflexive, feminist approach to the use of activities with children, or with any group, can help to improve the researcher's performance in the role of focus group moderator. In the remainder of the article I outline my research design before discussing three effects of the activities on my performance in more depth and the ways in which they help to redress the hierarchical nature of the research relationship: relinquishing control to participants, relinquishing the role of questioner and relinquishing the role of 'expert'. Finally, I discuss the implications of these findings. While the analysis in this article is drawn from a small, pilot study, it suggests great potential for the use of activities of this kind, and for a more reflexive approach to methodological decisions.

[Research Design](#)

The data in this article is drawn from a study on young women's perceptions of celebrity feminism in Bristol, United Kingdom. This was part of a larger project exploring young women's relationships to feminism, and was intended to pilot the methods described in this article. Contact was initially made with school reception staff, who directed my query to a relevant teacher. Having explained the project to them, and arranged a time and date for the focus group to take place (usually during a lunch break), teachers then advertised the research project amongst students. Some teachers targeted a particular year group they thought might be keen, while others opened it up to multiple year groups. Young women were asked to let their teachers know if they were interested in attending, so that they could be given research information and consent forms for them and their parents or guardians to read and sign in advance. Four focus groups took place, with a total of 28 young women aged between 14 and 18 participating in groups of six to eight. One further focus group was cancelled due to a lack of interest. Much of the literature on focus groups

suggests that groups between around four and eight participants are ideal (Munday, 2006: 96; Gibson, 2007), with some researchers recommending no more than six (Heary and Hennessy, 2002: 51). In practice however, researchers have few ways of predicting how successful their recruitment will be (Barbour, 2008: 75). While the recordings of the larger groups were certainly more challenging to transcribe, with multiple participants speaking at once and a greater difficulty in deciphering which participant was speaking at any given time, the discussions were both lively and interesting.

The focus groups took place in four schools (one independent and three state-funded) in the centre and outskirts of Bristol. These schools take in a diverse student body from across the city, which is the largest city in the South West of England, with a ‘diverse range of communities in terms of ethnicity and socio-economic characteristics’ (Bristol City Council, 2014). The decision to use the school setting for the focus groups was largely one of practicality and access, and is not unproblematic, particularly in research that draws on participatory techniques (Pinter and Zandian, 2015: 237). The school is a site where for many young women, ‘their use of space is curtailed, their embodiment is controlled, their voice is often considered inappropriate and their ability to do and act is circumscribed’ (Gordon, 2006: 2). As explored below, however, this is another instance where the use of activities helped to diffuse the formality of the setting.

I did not ask participants for information about themselves, their ethnicity, socio-economic background, sexuality or any other characteristic. Whilst reflecting on the influence that my own background and characteristics may have on the rapport I build with research participants and their feelings towards participating, I chose not to focus on participants’ characteristics as to do so leaves my own identity as white British, middle class,

female researcher ‘non-problematised’ (Hoong Sin, 2007: 480). Furthermore, whilst it is important in feminist research to reflect on how these characteristics may serve to construct the focus group setting (Caretta and Riaño, 2016: 260), concerns that they may in some way impede me from discovering participants’ real views are contrary to the epistemological assumptions of this study, as they appeal to an objective, knowable ‘truth’ (Gomm, 2008: 322). While my class and ethnicity may have more closely matched some participants than others, the approximately ten-year age gap between me and the participants, and my status as researcher within an academic institution, will have inevitably set me apart from all of them. It is inevitable that some of the participants will initially have seen me as a teacher or authority figure, however once again, this is an area where the activities were key to breaking down the formality of the situation, as discussed below.

I returned to the groups after the analysis stage of the study and whilst writing up my findings. I discussed my findings with the groups, inviting their feedback, and presenting them with extracts of transcriptions that I felt demonstrated these findings. Given that the analysis often involved revealing contradictions within a group’s discussions, I deliberately did not show groups transcripts of their own focus group and yet in every case, the groups mistook the words as their own and began trying to assign the different lines to members of the group. This suggests to me that although the groups came from very different schools, regions of Bristol and in all likelihood, backgrounds, they identified with the other groups and their views (Brockington, 2014: 94).

Given that the focus groups explored young women’s perceptions of feminism and their experiences of sexism within their own lives and schools, I decided that it may be easier for them to do so in an all-female environment (Mauthner, 1997: 23). The

participants themselves discussed the discomfort they feel talking about this subject in front of young men their age. One group told me that they themselves had tried to initiate an all-female group to discuss gender discrimination at school, because they felt that discussing this subject in front of their male counterparts would have negative consequences for them: ‘And then they’ll, every time you ever disagree with them they’ll be sitting there going ‘oh do you feel targeted again?’ and you think actually I quite want to discuss this without you around’.

In recent years, feminists have begun to explore how researchers might embrace a goal of aiming to ‘conduct research *with* rather than *on* the study subjects’ (Riaño, 2016: 268). They have sought a more collaborative approach to research, based on ideals of shared power and shared knowledge between the researcher and the research participants. Yvonne Riaño (2016: 270) suggests six principles for creating partnerships with research participants: reciprocity, mutual learning, mutual recognition, dialogic engagement, personal transformation and access to academic spaces. These principles are based on ideas of sharing knowledge, in which both participants and the researchers are able to learn from the experience, and all parties’ expertise are acknowledged. This in turn can lead to personal transformation for those taking part in the research, as it opens up new insights and possibilities for them. This study was very much limited in terms of collaboration by restraints placed both on the researcher and its participants, and was not, nor could not have been, fully collaborative or participatory. The time pressures of conducting a small, three-month long pilot study of methods, in preparation for a wider PhD project, coupled with the time pressures of the academic year for the research participants, meant that it was only possible to meet with each group once for a focus group, and once to discuss the findings. This did not allow time for the participants to help shape the research, what it was

about and how it would be conducted. Within this context, my use of activities in the focus groups was aimed at redressing the power imbalances inherent in this project. While the young women had no say in what the project was about, they had at least chosen to attend the focus group, presumably because the topic was of interest to them. I designed the activities to allow them as much space as possible – whilst staying on topics relevant to the research – to guide the conversation.

I used a variety of activities in the focus groups (for a useful overview of possible activities, see Colucci 2007). The recruitment poster for the focus groups described them as being about ‘women and celebrity’, and one week before the set focus group in each school, I asked the contact teacher to communicate to participants that they should look out over the following week for a newspaper, magazine or social media article about women and celebrity that interested them. The first activity in the focus group then involved each young women explaining what her article was to the group and why it had interested her. I then used a ‘free listing’ activity, in which participants are given a few minutes to list all of their thoughts about a given topic. In this case, I asked them to list the female celebrities they admired and to describe why. In preparation for the focus group, and in the initial activities, I chose this broader theme of ‘women and celebrity’ as a starting point before introducing the topic of celebrity feminism because I was interested to see if any of the participants chose celebrities because of feminist qualities without prompting. In every group, young women brought articles about women they admired for being ‘strong’ or ‘outspoken’, with many conversations about feminism beginning before I had even introduced the topic. Later, each group was presented with an outline of a person drawn on a large sheet of paper, with the title ‘A Feminist’. Together, the group had to draw and write on this outline to turn the person into a feminist. This was done to elicit participants’

thoughts on feminism in general, without yet linking it to the topic of celebrity. Once discussions around this image came to an end, I introduced a photograph of the singer Beyoncé performing in front of lights spelling the word ‘feminist’, and asked them to compare the new image with the one they had drawn. Doing so allowed the participants space to reflect on how their discussions of feminism more generally, and the decisions they had made in representing a ‘feminist’, related to their perceptions of celebrities and of celebrity feminists. Finally, I introduced many different photographs of celebrities with quotes reflecting their opinions on feminism into the centre of the group, and asked participants for their impressions of these quotes. These included quotes from celebrities discussing the reasons why they did or did not identify as feminists themselves, and elicited some strong reactions from participants.

The sequence of activities was designed to help the participants to feel confident to participate in what may initially seem quite a formal research setting. By asking them to bring an article of interest with them, and by starting with a free listing activity, I hoped to give them time to reflect on their thoughts around the topic and have some time to prepare a contribution, hopefully alleviating some of their nerves about speaking whilst being recorded. The use of a group drawing activity, with one large sheet for participants to gather round and many different coloured pens, allowed the young women the choice to draw or to speak, or both, without being the sole focus of attention. In every focus group, all of the young women participated in some way during this activity. This meant that by the time I introduced photographs and quotes into the centre of the circle as prompts, the participants launched into a discussion of them without hesitation. At all times, I also emphasised that the activities were used as a stimulus for talk, and not as research material in themselves. Each activity was followed with questions to encourage participants to give

more detail and to agree or disagree with one another, but I also made it clear that I would not be analysing what they had written or drawn (Colucci, 2007: 1430).

One of the many strengths of the focus group method is the insight that group interactions can give the researcher into shared understandings and disagreements. However, in practice many studies neglect to analyse these interactions, focusing instead on individual participants' words. There has been much debate between discourse analysts and conversation analysts on this theme (see for example Wooffitt, 2005; Wetherell, 2014). Much has been written on the study of participants' interactions in focus groups (e.g. Wilkinson, 2009: 77; Munday, 2006: 90; Wilkinson, 1998: 112), and it is beyond the scope of this article to take up this debate. In this study, I adopted the approach Wetherell advocates, which combines close analysis of interactions with an awareness of habitual ways of making sense (2014: 109) and the use of activities, in encouraging participants to guide the conversation themselves and to continue talking without my regular intervention, created a much richer source of data in this regard. Whether group participants immediately agree on one particular understanding, talk one another round to a consensus or fail to agree reveals a great deal about shared meanings, about which ones dominate and which are silenced (Montell, 1999: 64). Of particular importance in the analysis in this article were overlapping turns, pauses and laughter, so I drew on the following conventions of focus group transcription outlined in Bloor et al. (2001: 62):

[: indicates the start of overlapping speech

(:) indicates incomprehensible speech

[]: transcriber comments, such as non-verbal communication, laughter and pauses.

It was in reviewing these interactions, and my own role within them, that I came to make the methodological conclusions to which I now turn.

[Relinquishing Control](#)

If one of the strengths of the focus group method is its unpredictability, then researchers must be open to the possibility of losing control of the group. While it would not be desirable for participants to spend the entire conversation discussing irrelevant topics (Morgan et al., 2002: 8), and indeed a total loss of control would not be possible given that the researcher has still brought the group together, framed the questions and will ultimately interpret the data (Caretta and Riaño, 2016: 258), the aim in feminist research is to keep moderation to a minimum and as much as desirable and possible, to relinquish control to the group. While this may feel uncomfortable, it can have surprising results: 'I was left to conclude that, rather than being problematic, it was at the times when I lost control of the group that particularly valuable insights were gained' (Munday, 2006: 98). In order to relinquish control, the researcher needs to create a relaxed, informal atmosphere in which participants feel their discussion can digress from the question they have been asked. Especially in a school setting, it is therefore very important to quickly dispel any impressions of the researcher as teacher or authority figure. On this point, the drawing activity was invaluable. My own poor drawing skills in creating the outline of the person for the group to develop into a feminist may have not only set participants' minds at ease about expectations of their own drawing abilities, but in reviewing the transcripts, I also concluded that my apologies for my own drawing actually opened up a space in which participants felt able to mock me.

P20: She's got very big shoulders hasn't she?

[Laughter]

P18: She's quite broad.

P17: She's a rugby player.

P18: She's got a cauliflower.

P17: She's got cauliflower ear.

[Laughter]

P20: Steals your joke and does it louder!

[Laughter]

P19: [Laughs] Cauliflower ear!

[Pause]

P20: Should have done it a bit more low-cut really.

P21: She should have a word with her stylist. Bloody awful.

P19: Why?

P21: Have you seen her?

[Laughter]

P20: She's so thin.

P17: She's got like chubby arm on that side.

P16: I'll work on this just while you're doing the clothes.

P19: Please cover her ear up. Please cover her ear up. That is so unattractive. She looks
[like Gollum.]

P17: [Why's she got one boob? Oh OK there we go.

The group's gentle mockery of the uneven body shape (including the 'chubby arm' and broad shoulders) that I had drawn, coupled with their mockery of their own additions (adding only one breast for example), created a relaxed atmosphere in which the

participants did not seem to feel intimidated by the task. While it had not been my intention, I found myself dealing with a group who were happy to openly mock me, interrupt me or disrupt my attempts to regain control. For example, after several minutes when the drawing had started to tail off, I attempted to question the young women. The following extract is long, but is worth quoting in full as it demonstrates how successive attempts by me (in bold) to regain control of the group failed.

R: **So what's the thinking behind the red dress?**

P16: Red's a nice colour.

P20: Like write, write in the box you know the [waggles finger].

P17: Yeah, mm hmm.

P20: Like do I look pro- do I look provocative?

P21: It's gonna be upside down. What about upside down?

R: **I dress for me, that's interesting.**

P18: Gonna draw a dress with her tits out.

[Laughter, P17 looks shocked]

R: Like I said, language is fine, don't worry about it.

[Laughter]

P21: What did she just say?

P17: She said the 't' word.

R: It's absolutely fine.

P17: P18's like cursing, like do you mind?

P20: Cursing!?

[Laughter]

P18: Alright, Nan!

P21: What am I writing P20?

[Pause]

P17: Do you like me now? D'you like me now?

P21: How d'you spell provocative?

P20: P, r

P16: Why would they say do I look provocative? They wouldn't.

P20: They wou- like, basically, they think that erm

[Laughter]

P20: They think that men erm see women like purely as like kind of sex symbols, obviously
that's a generalisation but like, erm, so but by her like dressing like that

P17: Like a object.

P20: Yeah.

P17: Sexual object.

P16: It's like when the radical feminists were like all sex is rape.

P20: A, [c

P21: [Provacative?]

P20: O, [c, a, t, i, v, e.

P17: [Do you? Are you feeling ok?

P20: () I think our drawing's pretty good.

[All talk at once]

P21: Why's she got a purple necklace? It doesn't really go with her dress.

P16: She likes to clash with everything!

P20: Oh yeah, cos that's gonna look so good!

P21: It's bloody awful, look at her hair!

P19: Her ear. I'm sorry but her ear is the most () about her.

P17: Who gave her cauliflower ear?

P20: That wasn't me!

[All talk at once]

R: **Ok so, could, could any of you sum up sort of like**

[Laughter]

P17: What the hell happened here?

[Laughter].

The interactions within this conversation are fascinating and reveal a great deal about the very topic I wanted the participants to discuss, their perceptions of feminism. The participants' discussions reveal conflicting shared understandings that see feminists as both dressing only for themselves, and to provoke a reaction from others or make a political statement. The participants discuss their views of feminists' attitudes towards sex and men, and they reveal both consensus and disagreement. Yet, the fast-paced and rapidly changing conversation, which flitted between subject matters and frequently descended into giggles made me feel uncomfortable. I tried repeatedly to regain control and failed. However, it was only when I was reviewing the transcripts later that I realised that there had been no need at all for me to intervene at this point and that I should not have interrupted such an interesting conversation. Thankfully, the participants were too engrossed in their drawing to pay me much attention and so continued with their conversations, which were exactly the kind of conversations I had hoped to elicit. This suggests that they were neither intimidated by the task, nor saw me as an authority figure to be obeyed. It also shows how the use of an activity such as drawing not only gives greater control to a group, but can also

make it harder for a moderator who feels uncomfortable with the consequences of such a move to try to take it back. In future groups, I found myself exaggerating the apologies I made for my own drawing as I introduced the activity, in order to encourage a similar reaction.

[Relinquishing the Role of Questioner](#)

Relinquishing control also entails being prepared to relinquish to some extent the role of questioner. This of course requires the skill and judgement of the facilitator and would not be appropriate in every setting, with the potential for participants to feel under attack as a result of questioning from other participants. However, if the topic is not particularly sensitive and the group seem at ease with one another, the moderator can use activities as a stimulus to encourage participants to discuss the topic and to question each other in more depth than the researcher might feel able to. For example, when one group were discussing what to draw on the 'Feminist', the following interaction took place:

P4: They'd wear a roll-neck. Be completely covered. I just don't imagine them getting any like [laughs] skin out.

P3: No, no the fact you've got so many different types of feminist [because you've got some who

P5: [You're a feminist.

P4: No I'm not.

P5: You are.

P2: [What so you don't think men and women should have equal rights?

P5: [I guarantee, I guarantee that you are.

P4: I don't think men and women are, are equal.

In this instance, the participants are questioning themselves far more directly than I would have dared to, promising they can ‘guarantee’ that one of the group members’ understandings is wrong. This conversation continued for some time and recurred throughout the focus group, yet apart from having set the initial activity, I had no role in it whatsoever. In fact, when rereading the transcript, I once again came across an instance in which I intervened entirely unnecessarily and with little effect, perhaps because I felt I had not spoken in some time. At this point, some of the group members were complaining that the black jumper drawn by one participant had made the ‘Feminist’ look like ‘a serial killer’, or someone who ‘would go and rob a bank’. They decided to make it look a bit less sinister.

P3: I’m gonna draw some [flowers].

P6: [Flowers].

P3: Yeah

P4: [Laughs] [Why? Not flowers!]

P5: [Let’s have a flowery roll-neck.]

P2: Would men wear flowers? No, they wouldn’t.

P3: They might.

P6: They could.

P2: [They can if they want.]

R: [Why, why have we got flowers then?]

[All talk at once].

As before, when reviewing the transcript, I was frustrated at myself for interrupting a conversation that was exactly the kind I had hoped would take place around the activity. In this case, I had even spoken over one of the participants to do so. Being given a group task

on which they did not all agree had led to the group engaging in some interesting debates and to group members questioning and challenging each other on the views they expressed. This revealed tensions and disagreements over the meaning and aims of feminism, and disagreements between the participants who identify as feminists who all agree that the feminist could be a man, but cannot agree over whether he would wear flowers. At this point, I had not spoken for some time and it is quite possible that my interjection came more out of a feeling that as the moderator, I really ought to ask a question, rather than out of a need for me to act as questioner. In fact, in some ways the participants had already answered my question and that might explain why all it achieved was to prompt a few seconds of crosstalk, before the participants moved the conversation on. Thanks to the activity, I had lost the ability to interject in the conversation and yet once again there had been no need to. Rather than attempting to intervene with questioning, I should have embraced the participants' questioning of each other and allowed it to continue uninterrupted.

[Relinquishing the Role of Expert](#)

I asked participants to bring a media article with them and to explain it to the group in order to help establish the participants as experts from the outset. It provided them with an opportunity to prepare some thoughts on a topic and share them, removing the nerves that some participants feel about their first contribution, which often increase the longer a participant does not speak (Barbour, 2008: 82). This also gave them the opportunity to discuss the content between themselves before coming, meaning they could explain these conversations to me.

P3: That one was more interesting the [Mail Online].

P1: [Is that the Femail one?]

P2: Yeah the Femail.

R: OK.

P2: So they had a whole section just for women's [news].

P1: [Daily Mail women.]

P3: Femail women.

[Laughter].

The question, 'Is that the Femail one?', suggests that the group had discussed several different articles together before the focus group itself. They took it in turns to explain the content to me, taking on a collective role of expert, explaining something unfamiliar to an outsider. When I tried to summarise what they had said, they were also quick to point out what I had missed.

R: Ok, so it's kind of supposed to be this section all for women?

P2: Yeah.

R: And the first top item is about clothes.

P2: Yeah but all the headlines as well.

P1: [Sub-categories such as food, children.]

P2: [Yeah, yeah food, fashion, beauty, gardening, erm and baby blog. Like that's

R: Right.

P2: What women are mainly interested in.

R: OK.

P2: Apparently.

The participants seem to have embraced this role of experts and even from the very start of the focus group are interrupting me in order to explain their point.

No matter how greatly a researcher subscribes to the feminist ideals that see participants as experts in their own lives and social contexts, fully relinquishing the role of expert to the group, especially when discussing a topic that the researcher has invested a great deal of time in studying, is not a comfortable move. Later in this same focus group, when we had finished the activities and were having a more general conversation, one of the participants started discussing examples of celebrity feminists, many of whom I had not heard of. In this case, the ten year age gap between myself and the participants made itself apparent. Rather than accepting the participants' expertise, however, I tried to demonstrate that my understanding of the topic matched theirs. As demonstrated in the following extract, my attempts failed:

R: Any other celebrity feminists?

P1: Louise Brealy.

R: Louise Brealy.

P1: She was Molly in Sherlock. You might know.

R: That's Martin Freeman's actual wife?

P1: No, that's Amanda Abbington, she's also lovely and awesome and very nice and a feminist.

R: OK.

P1: They're both lovely.

While feminist researchers must reflect on the way in which they will always to some extent have power within a research setting of this kind, I would argue that in this case, the young woman has taken on the role of expert in celebrity culture and that the phrase, 'You might know', indicates she does not have a great deal of faith in my expertise in the same area.

My reaction was to try to reassert myself as her equal by drawing on the one piece of Sherlock trivia I knew, only to find that it was inaccurate. The participant helpfully corrected me. Once again, putting into practice the ideals that I wholeheartedly subscribe to had become uncomfortable and I tried to reassert the position of authority that I had lost. Yet, thanks to the various activities that had gone before this and the atmosphere that they had created, the young woman did not hesitate to correct me, and I ultimately failed. The data was all the richer as a result and revealed the strong identification these young women felt towards the ‘lovely and awesome and very nice’ celebrities that they saw as furthering the cause of feminism.

[Discussion and Conclusions](#)

The findings in this article support the small number of studies on using activities in focus groups with young people and their claims that doing so can lead to richer data and lively discussions. However, rather than making any claims about the communication abilities of young people, this article has argued that activities are beneficial for the effect they have on the moderator’s performance. Whilst I fully subscribed to the feminist aim of redressing the hierarchical nature of research relationships and of giving control to participants, in reflecting on my own practice I noticed that I frequently felt discomfort when I succeeded in this goal and attempted to intervene or take back control. The use of activities, however, made this very difficult and I was eventually forced to accept that the participants would mock me, correct me or ignore my questions. Far from representing a failure, these moments were the source of the most interesting discussions. I had set out to pay close attention to interactions between participants during the analysis, and came to the conclusion that some of the most interesting interactions took place around the activities. The girls’ consensus or disagreement about everything from the colour of a feminist’s

clothing to a particular celebrity's sincerity in proclaiming themselves to be a feminist revealed a great deal about the complexity of their negotiation of celebrity discourses. Furthermore, they were a source of great enjoyment to participants, whose feedback on the experience was overwhelmingly positive. Many young women commented on the use of activities, which one said, 'got us all thinking and involved all of our ideas'. Another said she felt that the use of activities, 'allows [participants] to think about what they think and not be influenced by questions'.

This study, of course, could never have fully relinquished control to participants, as the research questions, format and analysis were all performed by me. There is a great deal of scope to explore how a similar approach might be applied or extended to a more participatory research methodology. Furthermore, it is important to reflect that it is not always possible, or indeed desirable, to lose control of a research setting, particularly when discussing sensitive or controversial topics with any group, when the researcher has a responsibility to ensure that participants are not exposed to emotional harm. However, these findings demonstrate how, when appropriate to the topic in question, the use of activities in focus groups can be used to help redress the hierarchical relationships within research settings, one of the ideals of feminist research. They do so because they force the researcher to fully embrace this ideal, no matter how uncomfortable the process may be. Indeed, the process of reviewing my own performance in the focus groups and of analysing the ways in which I intervened a great deal more than I had meant to, and more than was necessary for the aims of the research, was equally uncomfortable. However, the findings speak to a need more broadly for feminist researchers to reflect on the possibility that certain methodologies are more advantageous for a given research project not because of some special attributes of their research participants requiring methodological innovation

on the researcher's behalf, but rather because of the impact they will have on the researcher's own performance in facilitating participation.

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