

Using Focus Group Interviews to Research Adolescents' Beliefs and Perceptions of Sex, Sexuality, HIV and AIDS in Educational Settings: Methodological Successes and Challenges

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Abstract

The paper draws attention to the relationship between the research process and the production of knowledge on adolescent sexual behaviours and HIV and AIDS issues by adolescents in Botswana schools. Within this context the paper addressed the successes and challenges experienced in conducting single and mixed sex semi-structured focus group interviews with adolescents in four junior secondary schools. It also explored adolescents' feelings about participating in focus group interviews that explore issues regarding sex, sexuality, HIV and AIDS. Data drawn from the interviews as well as researchers' reflections suggest that the use of focus groups as a qualitative data collection strategy opened possibilities for adolescents to share diverse knowledge, experiences and perspectives on sex, sexuality, HIV and AIDS. Likewise, it suggests that various factors enhanced and limited adolescents' participation in focus group interviews. Moreover, this data also provides opportunities for researchers to rethink and problematize ways in which they conceptualize and utilize focus group interviews in research-based knowledge with adolescents in particular. Although the intention of this paper is not to make generalizations about the use of focus group interviews within the Botswana context, the findings reported in this paper have implications for developing and promoting culturally sensitive research approaches relevant to this country/society.

Keywords: HIV/AIDS, Focus group interviews, Adolescents, Research methodology, Gender, Sexuality and Education, Reflexivity

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INTRODUCTION

In researching about the experiences of individuals and communities in varied social contexts, qualitative researchers often encounter both methodological successes and challenges. The successes and challenges are important components of the research experience. It is important for researchers to know which processes and data collection strategies worked or did not work in order to inform future research activities. For qualitative researchers, "the process that is occurring as well as the product or outcome" (Creswell, 2003, p. 199) are equally significant in doing research. This paper draws attention to the relationship between the research process and the production of knowledge on adolescent sexual behaviours and Human Immune Virus and Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (HIV and AIDS) issues by adolescents in Botswana schools. More specifically, it presents the reflections of a team of researchers on the successes and challenges experienced in conducting single and mixed sex semi-structured focus group interviews with adolescents focusing on adolescent sexual behaviours and HIV and AIDS issues. Of significance is that the larger study from which this article emerged focused on: (a) examining the influences of socio-cultural, family and school factors on 15-17 year old adolescents' sexual behaviours, (b) identifying mediators of family and school influences on adolescents sexual risk behaviours and (c) designing appropriate and culturally sensitive family and school interventions for 15-17 year old adolescents to facilitate their effectiveness in coping with sexuality and HIV/AIDS issues.

The first case of AIDS in Botswana was discovered in 1985. Since then Botswana joined the rest of the world in keeping a closer look on HIV and AIDS. Botswana is among the countries in Sub-Saharan Africa with the highest HIV prevalence. The most recent results of the Botswana AIDS Impact Survey (BAIS) III of 2008 shows a national prevalence of 17.6% of which 20.4% is for females and 14.2% is for males (Republic of Botswana, 2009). BAIS is a population-based survey involving males and females between 10 and 64 years of age. According to BAIS III of 2008 the age group with the highest prevalence is that of 40 to 44 years at 40.6% followed by the age group 35 to 39 at 40.5%. In addition the gender distribution reflects that in general females have the highest prevalence rate compared to their male counterparts and this was also true in BAIS II of 2005. Of significance too is that a close analysis of the HIV/AIDS situation in Botswana shows that young women and girls are more vulnerable to HIV infection than their male counterparts (Republic of Botswana, 2009). Within this context, trends show that girls aged 15 to 19 are twelve times more likely to be infected than boys in the same age category.

Botswana has responded to the epidemic by putting in place several policies and intervention programmes to prevent HIV transmission and mitigate its impact. While the focus was initially on health aspects, that is initially a medical model of intervention, a shift towards a multi-sectoral and coordinated response emerged in the 1990s. The response to HIV and AIDS in Botswana is guided by the National Strategic Framework for HIV and AIDS which aims to eliminate the new incidences of the pandemic and to reduce its impact through collaborative partnerships between government ministries, local authorities, Non-governmental organizations, the private sector and international development partners. Botswana is also benefiting from responses to HIV and AIDS in the SADC region which are being implemented in the context of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) HIV and AIDS Strategic Framework and Programme of Action for 2003-2007 (Southern African Development Community, 2003). The key features of the responses include the prevention of infection through education and lifestyle changes, treatment, testing (pre and post-test services), People Living with HIV and AIDS (PLWHA) participation and community mobilization, support to individuals who are affected or infected, the provision of information and education to improve understanding of the pandemic and to reduce the stigma associated with it. In addition, the mainstreaming of HIV and AIDS awareness in the activities of all institutions is a key intervention strategy. Within the context of the education system, HIV/AIDS and sexuality issues are viewed as emergent curriculum issues that have to be infused in different school subjects such as Setswana and English.

REVIEW OF RESEARCH LITERATURE

This chapter draws on the research literature that exists on the use of focus group interviews in diverse socio-cultural settings with diverse participants such as on-line with eleven to eighteen year olds (e.g. Fox, Morris, & Rumsey, 2007). This section does not present a detailed review of the research literature on the methodological successes and challenges of focus group interviews since this literature has already been documented by various researchers (Bassett, Beagan, Ristovski-Slijepcevic, & Chapman, 2008; Chilisa, Dube, Tsheko, & Mazile, 2005; Culley, Hudson, & Rapport, 2007; Fox et al., 2007; Hennessy & Heary, 2005; Lewis, 1992; Maynard-Tucker, 2000; Montell, 1999; Morgan, Gibbs, Maxwell, & Britten, 2002). Yet, documenting this knowledge adds significantly to emerging literature on Botswana that explores

research methodology issues (e.g. Chilisa, 2007; Jankie, 2004, 2007; Kolozi, 2007; Ntseane, 2007) especially at a time when researchers world-wide are advocating for the use of culturally sensitive research approaches in specific socio-political contexts (e.g. Bishop, 2005; Chilisa, 2007; Chilisa & Preece, 2005; Jankie, 2007; Kolozi, 2007; Mkabela, 2005; Jankie, 2004; Ntseane, 2007; Ryen, 2007; Smith, 1999, 2005; Tillman, 2002). Moreover, researchers who have used focus groups as a data collection strategy have situated their work in diverse theoretical/conceptual frameworks. As Maynard-Tucker (2000) rightly explains, "overall, there is a multitude of methods for conducting focus group, each one adapted to a particular environment" (p. 397). Embedded in this, is the socially constructed, heterogeneous, complex and contested nature of focus group interviews. Despite this, it is relevant to mention that focus groups as a data collection strategy that has been used successfully in cross-cultural research (Culley et al., 2007) has been used to investigate various facets related to HIV and AIDS epidemic. To illustrate, in Africa focus group interviews have been used to investigate teachers' feelings about participating in HIV/AIDS related programmes in Malawi (e.g. Kachingwe et al., 2005), intersections between sexuality, gender and HIV/AIDS in secondary schools in Botswana (e.g. Chilisa et al., 2005), and issues that contribute to "self-disclosure of a positive HIV diagnosis" in Kenya (e.g. Miller & Rubin, 2007).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The focus group interview data reported in this paper is part of a larger four phased on-going collaborative research project involving teams of researchers from the Universities of Botswana and Pennsylvania. The main objectives of the larger study as indicated in the project proposal include examining "socio-cultural, family and school influences on Botswana 14 – 17 years adolescents' sexual behaviours" as well as to construct family and school-based interventions "that are age and cultural appropriate for the group and to test if the interventions have produced short term and long term effects". The authors of this article are part of the research team that conducted the school-based component of the study in Botswana.

Research methods are social constructions that have to be used appropriately with different groups of participants. Qualitative data collection strategies include the use of focus groups to produce "interesting, rich and complex data" (Culley et al., 2007, p. 102) on diverse, specific issues that researchers are interested in investigating in specific communities. The focus group interviews conducted with adolescents were important for understanding and making sense of their emic perspectives on adolescent sexual behaviours and HIV and AIDS issues. Botswana adolescents as members of their society learn about these issues in the course of social interactions within and outside the classroom. In the process, they develop certain beliefs, values, assumptions, insights and ways of knowing about adolescent sexual behaviours and HIV and AIDS issues. This makes it necessary for adolescents to speak for themselves and to be listened to with regard to what these issues mean in their lives. Within this context, engaging adolescents in focus group interviews opened possibilities for them to rethink, interpret and share feelings about adolescent sexual behaviours and HIV and AIDS issues for purposes of making informed, appropriate choices on these sensitive and often controversial issues.

Eleven focus group interviews with single sex and mixed sex groups of adolescents were conducted in four public junior secondary schools in two districts in Botswana. Each focus group consisted of ten to twelve students. The ages of adolescents in these groups ranged from fourteen to seventeen years. Purposeful sampling was used to identify possible adolescents for the study. Teachers who teach subjects that incorporate topics on sexuality and HIV and AIDS were requested to assist in identifying adolescents who were willing to share their knowledge, beliefs, assumptions and opinions on what adolescents know and think about issues of sexuality and HIV and AIDS. To facilitate dialogue with adolescents on these matters, a pre-focus group questionnaire and semi-structured interview guides were used. The pre-focus questionnaire requested adolescents to share information such as their age, gender, religious affiliation, language spoken at home, sexual activities and experiences on consumption of alcohol and dagga (marijuana). With regard to interview guides, two overlapping protocols based on the theory of planned behaviour were utilized, whose main intention, as stated in the protocols, was to "solicit information from adolescents aged 14 – 17 years in schools and Botswana in general about risks that expose adolescents to STDs and HIV infection" in order to "develop interventions aimed at dissuading Botswana adolescents from engaging in behaviours that increase their risk for sexually transmitted diseases including HIV". Within this context, both protocols invited adolescents who had consented to participate in the study to share knowledge and insights on: adolescents' views about the proposed intervention programme adolescents' lifestyle, as well as their feelings about participating in focus group interviews. However, the two protocols differed in that whereas one explored information on adolescents' sexual behaviours and abstinence, condom use, multiple sex partners as well as gender violence, the other one focused on messages communicated through songs and metaphorical

language/sayings as well as the relationships of adolescents with their parents. Adolescents gave permission for their views on these matters to be recorded through the use of digital voice recorders.

In most cases, focus group interviews were facilitated by at least two members of the research team. This made it possible for one team member to moderate the interview process whilst the other concentrated on writing interview notes and noting any other significant discourses that occurred during the interview process. It is important to note that on a few occasions, focus groups were conducted by individual team members. It is essential for qualitative researchers to conduct research using languages that are accessible to the participants. The importance of this lies in that, "language stores, upholds and legitimises the value systems of society. For research problems to be understood within the value system of the researched people, it is important to incorporate in the research process the language that frames the problem" (Chilisa & Preece, 2005, p. 55). In conducting focus group interviews, adolescents were encouraged to share their knowledge and insights in English and/or Setswana. Both of these languages are core subjects in the junior secondary school curriculum.

Data from focus group interviews was triangulated with data from researchers' reflective questions in order to identify the methodological successes and challenges encountered using focus group interviews. In as much as "keeping and using reflective research journals can make the messiness of the research process visible to the researcher who can then make it visible for those who read the research" (Ortlipp, 2008, p. 704), so can reflective questions based on specific aspects of the overall research process. Possibilities were opened for self-reflections by team members regarding what it means to conduct focus group interviews with adolescents in Botswana schools when they were invited by team members co-authoring this article to share critical, detailed experiences through E-mail of the methodological issues that emerged from the interviews.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data from focus group interviews was transcribed for purposes of analyzing and categorizing the information in order to identify themes on methodological successes and challenges. Likewise, content analysis was applied to researchers' fieldnotes and responses to reflective questions for the same purpose. All the data was read and reread in order to identify methodological successes and challenges emerging from the study. Data from these sources was triangulated to arrive at the themes discussed in this paper.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Methodological Successes

This section focuses on the successes of using focus group interviews with adolescents in four junior secondary schools in Botswana that participated in the study. The successes discussed below are captured by the following themes: (a) "these are dot com kids they just love the use of tape recorders", (b) adolescents' feelings about participating in focus group interviews (c) nature of researchers' interactions/relationships with adolescents and (d) nature of adolescent to adolescent interactions. Of significance is that the successes unfolded differently in the various focus group interviews.

"These are Dot Com kids they Just Love the Use of Tape Recorders"

One factor that contributed to the success of focus group interviews was the use of technological devices. Research indicates that participants react differently to the use of technology in interviews. For example, in discussing the methodological challenges they encountered in interviewing adolescents for their study on "food decision-making" in some parts of Canada, Bassett et.al (2008) state that tape recorders had a "silencing effects" on them. Prior to conducting focus group interviews reported in this article, permission was sought from adolescents to audio-tape their discussions. It was explained to adolescents that audio-taping interviews was essential for transcribing interviews for data analysis purposes as well as for expanding researchers' interview notes and capturing most of the interview interactions. In reflecting on whether the use of technological devices intimidated adolescents or enhanced their participation only two team members explained that digital recorders that were used intimidated some adolescents only at the beginning of the interview. Other team members expressed that adolescents felt free to share their knowledge and insights despite the use of digital recorders and the fact that the topic on sexuality is often considered sensitive and a potentially taboo topic in their society. This is summarized in the following excerpts:

“These are dot com kids, they just loved the use of tape recorders, because this is something close to their regular devices like CD’s, DVD’s, videos. Adolescent yearn to be heard and seen, this was an opportunity for them”.

“Adolescents were intrigued by the use of digital audio tapes. They could hardly wait for their turn and once they got hold of the device they would not let go”.

Adolescents’ Feelings about Participating in Focus Group Interviews

One of the concerns of the researchers was to identify adolescents’ feelings about their participation in focus group interviews. It was the intention of the team members to create an environment in which adolescents would feel free to share their knowledge and insights, and in the process contribute meaningfully to generating research-based knowledge on issues of adolescent sexual behaviours and HIV/AIDS. It was therefore important for team members to reflect on how adolescents felt about participating in focus group interviews. To achieve this, adolescents were invited to share their feelings of being focus group interview participants. Specifically, they were invited to respond to the questions; how do you feel about participating in this focus group session? What was easy? What was hard? The positive feelings of adolescents are illustrated in the following excerpts from an interview with boys in one secondary school:

“I think it’s a good thing to me because you get informed on what you do not know through discussions”

“I learnt a lot of things I didn’t know”

“I feel like the discussion should continue forever”

“I am grateful I collected a lot of information from this discussion”

“It made me feel free to talk about HIV/AIDS”

In a parallel situation, when adolescents were requested to identify what was easy about the interview sessions one responded by saying “the whole thing was easy. I mean they were talking about things we already know.” Likewise when the facilitator thanked them for participating in the focus group interview and sharing valuable information, all the girls in one focus group responded by saying, “we are happy we talked to you about some of our problems.” Probably adolescents felt positive about the interviews because they felt that they were sharing information and knowledge that would be beneficial to them as well as their peers. While acknowledging that the intervention would have disadvantages, most of them however felt that the planned intervention programme was worthwhile and therefore adolescents and their parents would benefit from participating in it. At another level, they might have felt comfortable to share their knowledge and insights due to the fact that at the beginning of the study they were encouraged to share their views freely. This is evident in phrases like: “there is no wrong answer here” – stated at beginning of the interview. In all, the lengthy detailed responses provided by some adolescents indeed suggest that they felt comfortable sharing knowledge and insights on key concerns of the study.

Nature of Researchers’ Interactions/Relationships with Adolescents

Researchers as main instruments for collecting qualitative data cannot divorce themselves from the research process. Hence, the need to interrogate or problematize whether and in what ways their interactions or relationships with adolescents hindered or encouraged their participation in focus group interviews. At the centre of this is the fact that the characteristics of both focus group participants and the researchers’ contribute to specific socially constructed focus group dynamics. For example, in conducting focus group interviews, researchers can encounter what Maynard-Tucker (2000) refers to as “difficult participants”. In her own words, “those participants are characterized as expert, too talkative, rambling, politically inclined, timid, intimidated and confused” (p. 403). It is the role of the facilitator to ensure that all these participants’ voices are heard and listened to during interviews. Similarly, how researchers present themselves in focus groups might hinder or facilitate productive discussions. In all, the study suggests positive relations between researchers and adolescents who participated in focus groups. This will be discussed below with a focus on languages used in the interviews, use of probing techniques, encouraging participation by all adolescents and raising relevant questions.

Many researchers believe that it is essential to open possibilities for participants to be active in the research process through the use of their languages (e.g. Chilisa & Preece, 2005; Culley et al., 2007; Hamza, 2004; Hennessy & Heary, 2005; Smith, 1999). Within this context, it was essential that adolescents communicate their knowledge and

insights with language not being a barrier. Consequently, they were given the opportunity to use either Setswana or English or mix the two languages. The interview transcripts suggest that most adolescents mixed Setswana and English. In addition, as some team members explained in their reflections, some interview questions were explained in Setswana to facilitate active participation by adolescents. Adolescents were conversant on issues of adolescent sexual behaviours and HIV and AIDS and most of them shared them freely in these languages. Of significance too is that one team member who conducted a focus group interview in English only explained that she ensured that “the wording and the vocabulary was developmentally appropriate”. She further explained, “had I done the interview in Setswana it would have been hard to talk about sex and sexuality with kids the age of my grand-children. In my culture it is a taboo.”

Data from interview transcripts indicate that, as part of creating positive group dynamics, team members used various probing techniques. Moreover, the nature of probing used contributed positively to getting emic perspectives and thick descriptive data from adolescents. The probes prompted adolescents to further share their knowledge and insights on adolescent sexual behaviours and HIV and AIDS issues. Likewise the probes encouraged them to consider alternative perspectives to those shared by group members as well as to clarify their viewpoints. Examples of the probes used are: “I want you to elaborate on that”, “what do you mean?”, “can you give us a different thought?”, and “you raised a very good point. Tell us more about it”.

The intention of the facilitators was to make adolescents aware that all of their views were important and appreciated. More than that, it was essential for them to share their opinions and perspectives on issues that touched on their realities and experiences in different ways. Researchers achieved this in part by encouraging all adolescents to participate actively in interviews. To illustrate, when in a mixed focus group interview, the moderator noticed that male students were not as actively engaged as females in the interview, she encouraged them by using phrases such: “guys say something”, “at the back there” and “let’s go back to you”. In a male only focus group, the facilitator encouraged participation by saying “let’s talk my friends, a problem shared is a problem solved”, “I want all of us to talk, please my dear friends. You all have very good ideas that we want”, “you are the only one who hasn’t said anything” and “you are still doing very well. Now you are seriously answering them, you are very serious”. Nonetheless, this is not to suggest that all adolescents responded positively to the probes that were utilized.

The nature of interview questions can contribute to successful interviews or can silence participants. Participants for instance, may decide not to respond to interview questions they view as sensitive. As part of the interview introduction team leaders informed students that they were aware that the issues to be explored were sensitive and adolescents could choose not to respond to some of the questions. To the contrary, evidence from interview transcripts indicated that most adolescents freely shared their knowledge and insights on adolescent sexual behaviours and HIV and AIDS issues. Again, none of the researchers’ indicated that adolescents resisted answering any questions because they felt that they were sensitive. In fact one researcher, in her response to whether she found any interview questions hard or challenging, explained that “the questions on sexual relations were a bit embarrassing at the beginning of the interview”. She attributes that to the following factor: “just the thought that at the same age (as the adolescents), it will have been difficult to respond to such questions. So, I kind of put them in my situation at their age that once you talk about such issues; it is from experience”. In response to the same question, some team members explained that there were no difficult or challenging questions. Instead, they were concerned by the repetitive nature of the questions, a phenomenon that contributed to lengthy interviews. One team member captures this view in her explanation that “I think that for focus group discussions to be successful, the questions should be limited and not be overloaded with such information. I felt that the students were losing interest as time went on since some questions asked were the same though worded differently. This was also frustrating for the researcher.” Of note too is that one team member identified a specific issue that she believed was challenging for some students. She explained that when adolescents were requested to suggest topics to be included in the intervention programme, they seemed to focus on parents rather than on adolescents.

Nature of Adolescent to Adolescent Interactions

At the beginning of the interviews, the researchers informed the adolescents of the process to be followed in each interview in order to encourage honest, free, active participation by everyone. Among other things, they were encouraged to respect the knowledge and opinions of peers even if they disagreed with them. The evidence from interview transcripts and researchers’ reflections suggest that most adolescents respected and appreciated each other’s contributions. One team member summarizes this in her reflection that, “they encouraged others to participate. Some of them will encourage those who spoke with very low voices to speak loud and others would report what others were telling them to the facilitator/researcher”. Therefore, adolescents adhered to the group rules that were established.

Methodological Challenges

In this section, we discuss the challenges team members encountered in conducting focus group interviews with adolescents in junior secondary schools. The following methodological challenges are the focus of this section: (a) silencing or marginalizing peers' knowledge and perspectives, (b) insufficient time to complete interviews in the schedule time and (c) participants' disclosures of personal experiences and experiences of others.

Silencing or Marginalizing Peers' Knowledge and Perspectives

Participants in focus group interviews can interact with one another in different ways. In the process they may support or silence each other's contributions. For example, they can make other participants embarrassed or frustrated by the manner in which they respond to their views. Consequently, they can make focus group interviews environment hostile for some participants to contribute in the production of research-based knowledge. One team member explained that adolescents "would giggle, or hackle as others talk, thus derailing them. ... As these take centre stage the rest became spectators." Another team member expressed that "they did not persuade the quiet ones to speak, actually there were those who dominated the discussions by responding to almost all of the questions."

It is important to note that one team member expressed that unintentional silencing often occurred when adolescents failed to continue to support their perspectives when they were questioned or challenged by their peers. In her own words, "there were instances where they silenced each other but not intentionally. When they disagreed on issues others seem to let go easily". All these examples clearly indicate that while it was essential to hear and listen to the voices of adolescents in the process of doing that, they also silenced each other. They acted against the spirit of respecting the viewpoints of everyone. In a way, this also reflect adolescents' failure to adhere to the interview rules established at the beginning of the interview, which included respecting each others' views. This suggests that there is often a contradiction between what is expected and what actually takes place in the socially constructed environment of focus group interviews. Team members as moderators of focus group interviews aimed at engaging all adolescents actively in interviews. Yet, some of the adolescents were reluctant to have their voices heard. Therefore, another form of silencing emerged when some of the adolescents who appeared 'shy' did not participate actively in the interview sessions despite being encouraged to do so on numerous occasions by team members.

Insufficient Time to Complete Interviews

It is essential that researchers honour the times they negotiate with research participants with regard to the expected length of the focus group interviews. This was not always the case in the focus groups reported in this article. While the research protocols stated that each interview session would last sixty to ninety minutes, some interview sessions took over two and half hours, whereas some resulted in a second session being negotiated and subsequently conducted with the adolescents. Various factors contributed to these circumstances in the four junior secondary schools where focus groups were conducted.

In some schools researchers had to wait for focus group members to be convened and for suitable rooms to be identified for the interviews. In some instances, as one team member explained, researchers "had to go around looking for classrooms" and thereafter arranging them to suit a focus group interview atmosphere. In her words, "we had to arrange desks so that participants may be in a circle. It consumed time and thus we started even more late". At times, there were not enough adolescents to form the required focus group on the basis of gender. Some of the adolescents who had agreed to participate in the study were not readily available and researchers had to wait for lengthy periods of time for them. Closely related to this is that, in some instances, assent forms were signed during the time scheduled for interviews. The forms were explained to adolescents and thereafter they had to read and sign them. Doing this task prior to all focus group interviews' schedule times could save time.

Equally important is that adolescents often left while the interviews were in progress. Some had to attend to school related activities such as sports and cleaning classrooms. Some had to leave for home with parents who had arrived to pick them up or because they did not want to miss public transport to their various destinations. Likewise, team members explained that adolescents left because "their friends were leaving school", "it was just time-up" and "it was late and some of them were going far." These scenarios were complicated by two other factors. Firstly, some students did not turn up for the scheduled interview sessions because of school related commitments. Secondly, participants and team

members were often disturbed by students and teachers who wished to dialogue with participants in particular, during the interviews. All these factors affected focus group interview dynamics negatively. Team members capture this phenomenon in the following manner:

“The researcher felt compelled to finish the interview as soon as possible”.

“The researcher would stop and attend to the needs of those who were leaving and the rest would be derailed and start conversing about other issues not related to the interview. It would take a few minutes to get those remaining settled”.

“We started getting less and less information especially when the talkative or ‘motivators’ left the group”.

While adolescents leaving during interviews was a challenge for researchers it could also be perceived as one way in which adolescents were exercising their right to voluntary participation. To them participation in the interviews was as important as participating in routine activities in their schools. It is also important to note two team members’ observations that the departure of some students contributed positively to focus group dynamics in that “in some cases as the size of the group decreased, the shy ones started talking” and that conducting second sessions of interviews benefitted adolescents and researchers because “students were much freer and communicated well”.

Some of the team members also felt that the interview guide was too long, with some questions being “repetitive and redundant”. This, in their opinion contributed to lengthy interviews which exceeded the time negotiated with the participants prior to conducting the interviews. Moreover, as two team members explained, this also impacted on the use of probing techniques, which in turn affected the depth of the data collected.

Participants’ Disclosures of Personal Experiences and Experiences of Others

Culley, Hudson and Rapport (2007) rightly point out that in focus group interviews it is challenging for confidentiality to be guaranteed because researchers have “limited control over the process of disclosure” (p. 109). This stems from the fact that participants can share personal experiences as well as experiences of people they interact with, in ways that may compromise issues of confidentiality. This often happens even if researchers have informed participants that they should not personalize interview discussions (e.g. Culley et al., 2007). Of significance is that, researchers themselves often create possibilities for this to occur through the nature of interview questions they pursue. This phenomenon is evident from interview transcripts and fieldnotes from the study reported in this article. Although team members emphasized at the beginning of interviews in particular that focus group members should not directly share personal experiences or experiences of friends, classmates, or relatives, by posing the question, “is there anyone among you who has been raped by a relative?”, a team member invited personal responses from adolescents. One adolescent in the all girls group responded by stating that she was abused by a stepfather. In responding to that with the question “what did he do?”, the researcher further invited a personalized response. Consequently, the adolescent elaborated on her response by providing details of how her uncle tried to “sell her” to strange men and how her cousin came to her rescue. In another example from the same interview, an adolescent shared the details of an incident involving their neighbour (a primary school child) who was sexually abused by a relative. The experiences shared are sensitive although participants promised that they will not share them with anyone else, this is not guaranteed. As Lewis (1992) reminds us, “it is clearly more difficult, if not impossible, for the confidentiality of a child’s remarks to be respected if these are made in a group, rather than an individual interview” (p. 416).

DISCUSSION

The previous section highlighted the methodological successes and challenges that emerged from using focus group interviews with adolescents in four junior secondary schools in Botswana. Data from the interviews, fieldnotes and researchers’ reflections suggest that the use of this qualitative data collection strategy opened possibilities for adolescents to share diverse knowledge, experiences and perspectives on sex, sexuality and HIV/AIDS. In all, focus group interviews that were grounded on the principles of the theory of planned behaviour (which informs the overall study) were used successfully to let adolescents share their own knowledge and viewpoints on issues of national concern that affect their lives in diverse ways. As a form of socially constructed research knowledge “in which multiple research participants simultaneously produce data on a specified issue” (Chilisa & Preece, 2005, p. 151), focus group interviews opened

possibilities for adolescents to interrogate and reflect on the knowledge and perceptions of school-going adolescents regarding HIV and AIDS related issues through the framework of the theory of planned behaviour. This theory, among other things suggests that “behavioral, normative, and control beliefs are the sole determinants of an individual’s intention, which directly influence behaviors” (Hutchinson & Wood, 2007, p. 142) although these can be influenced by outside factors such as parents (Hutchinson & Wood, 2007). Indeed, an essential component of HIV and AIDS interventions in Botswana should consider the voices of adolescents such as the ones documented in this article.

Despite the challenges that researchers do encounter when using focus groups, as evident in this study as well as in the research literature (Bassett et al., 2008; Chilisa et al., 2005; Culley et al., 2007; Fox et al., 2007; Hennessy & Heary, 2005; Lewis, 1992; Maynard-Tucker, 2000; Montell, 1999; Morgan et al., 2002) we contend that focus group interviews conducted with adolescents can be used to promote social change. This is important considering that one of the main intentions of the larger four phased on-going study from which the data reported in this data is drawn, is “to design family/school interventions that are age and culturally appropriate for the focus group and to test if the interventions have produced short term and long term effects”. While this paper acknowledges that interventions are complex and multifaceted, the importance of adolescents’ voices on HIV and AIDS related issues is indeed relevant for providing culturally appropriate and acceptable interventions for them. By inviting adolescents to share their knowledge and insights for purposes of developing appropriate interventions, they were being empowered to make decisions about issues that affect them. In turn, adolescents responded by showing commitment to social change by sharing possible intervention strategies that are appropriate for adolescents in Botswana. In our view, the strategies they suggested are worthwhile and should be given the attention they deserve. All this shows, as Smith (1999) rightly points out that, “research is not an innocent or distant academic exercise but an activity that has something at stake that occurs in a set of political and social conditions” (p. 5).

The data from interview transcripts, fieldnotes and researchers’ responses to reflective questions provided opportunities for researchers to rethink and problematize ways in which they conceptualize and utilize focus group interviews in research-based knowledge with adolescents in particular. In this manner it provided possibilities for identifying the challenges and successes of using focus groups with junior secondary school learners. Although the intention is not to generalize the findings of this study, the research reported in this article illustrates that focus group interviews can be used successfully to dialogue with Botswana adolescents on adolescent sexual behaviours and HIV and AIDS issues. In the process, focus group interviews contributed to diverse group dynamics between researchers and participants as well as among the participants. Hence, the researchers’ decisions to use both single sex and mixed gender focus groups such as in the study referred to in this paper. Gender is often an important factor in terms of the nature of participation that emerges from focus groups (e.g. Chilisa et al., 2005). Of significance is that gender did not hinder the participation of adolescents in mixed gender focus groups. Adolescents in these groups freely shared their knowledge and insights without being intimidated by members of the opposite sex.

As Behar (1996) reminds us that researchers as well as individuals they observe or interview are vulnerable. Hence, the need for researchers’ to evaluate their participation in focus group interviews as well as that of the participants. Various factors, including researchers’ multiple identities can contribute to the vulnerability of both the researchers and the participants in interview sessions. This is reminiscent of Bogdan and Bieklen’s (1998) view that for researchers “acknowledging that no matter how much you try you cannot divorce your research and writing from your past experience, who you are, and what you believe” (p. 34) is essential. For example, researchers, such as in the study reported in this article, may be worried that the sensitivity of the topic would hinder responses from participants. Or they may be concerned about asking questions that they deem embarrassing.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Although significant research has been done on HIV/AIDS related issues in educational settings in Botswana, (e.g. Bennell et al., 2001; Chilisa et al., 2005) much has not been done in terms of problematizing the research methodologies used by researchers. Interrogating research methodologies, among other things is about recognizing the ‘messiness’ of research (e.g. Ortlipp, 2008) recognizing research as a site of struggle (e.g. Bishop, 2005; Smith, 1999, 2005) as well as identifying relevant data collection strategies for the targeted participants such as adolescents in this country and in the process challenging processes, practices/actions and ways of knowing and knowledge construction that may be taken for granted. This has implications for developing an informed and educated Botswana nation (Presidential Task Group For a Long Term Vision for Botswana, 1997). It is our hope that this paper will contribute to dialogue on research

methodologies in the area of HIV and AIDS research in Botswana as well as on relevant data collections strategies for use with adolescents in Botswana in particular. Although the intention of this paper is not to make generalizations about the use of focus group interviews within the Botswana context, the findings reported in this paper have implications for developing and promoting culturally sensitive research approaches relevant to this country/society.

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