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Focus groups and the study of violence

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ABSTRACT The article examines the focus group method as a tool to study violence in youth residential care based on an empirical study of 38 young people in two Finnish reform schools. The key issue here is to reflect upon the processes of knowledge production as we trace the ways in which the institutional and situational context and the very form of focus groups affect the ways of talking about violence. Special attention is given to strong and weak themes in the focus group interviews.

KEYWORDS: focus groups, violence, youth residential care, youth violence

Introduction

This article discusses the possibilities of social research to capture the fluid and contextual nature of violence. In particular, we consider the method of focus group interviews in studying the meanings of violence among young people. We concentrate on the processes of knowledge production: we trace the ways in which the institutional and situational context affects the ways of talking about violence and therefore also the knowledge produced on violence. We analyse how, in our study, '[t]he active process of research itself serves to mediate our understanding of violence' (Barter and Renold, 2003: 103). The article is based on the research project 'Young people, reform school and violence' in which our aim was to explore the meanings of violence as expressed by the young people living in two Finnish reform schools.

One of the starting points of our project was that in the context of residential care safe interventions, practices and policies should be informed by the children's and young people's views (Barter and Renold, 2003: 89). The children's and young people's own ways of giving meanings to violence may

contribute to their ways of coping with their difficult experiences (Forsberg, 2002: 23–4). In terms of social and criminal policy and related practices, it is important to note that, as Elisabeth Stanko (2003: 13) suggests, 'if violence "has meaning", then those meanings can be challenged'.

Our aim was to find out what meaning young people attach to violence as based on their everyday experiences. Studying the meanings of violence is, however, enormously challenging. The concept of violence embraces different forms of behaviour and relations with various contextual meanings, even though popular notions tend to represent it as a universal phenomenon including an evil perpetrator and an innocent victim (Stanko, 2003: 4; Stanko and Lee, 2003: 10). Various forms of violence are deeply intertwined with everyday life. Besides murders and killings, the concept of violence refers to a range of everyday infringements of bodily and even mental integrity, which can be regarded as normal behaviour. This fluidity has only recently received serious recognition, but it has not yet been thoroughly investigated in social research, as is maintained by Elisabeth Stanko and Raymond Lee (2003: 1):

> How can something so pervasive remain so elusive to research, and to be allowed to remain so unexplored in a systematic way – by researchers or front line workers – leaving decision makers without evidence on which to base policies that might reduce violence?

Our experience of studying violence through focus groups in residential care challenges us to assess the interconnections between the knowledge produced in the groups and the impact of the methodological arrangements as such. We will, after first describing the study in more detail, analyse the residential setting and the interactional contexts of groups from the point of view of the knowledge production process. At the end, we will construct and then analyse the strong and weak themes in the interviews: what forms of violence dominated the interviews, and why? Which themes, by contrast, remained in the margins, only slightly touched upon – and therefore perhaps represented secret and silenced forms of violence?[1]

Focus groups as method

The study is based on 15 group interviews carried out in two Finnish reform schools in 2002, involving 38 young people between the ages of 12 and 17; 12 girls and 26 boys. All the participants were residents in these institutions, placed there under the Child Welfare Act due to behavioural problems such as alcohol and drug abuse, 'uncontrollable behaviour' and truancy. The reform schools, of which there are six, are the only child protection institutions maintained by the Finnish state. Their profile is to provide specialized services for the most difficult young people between the ages of 12 and 17, including tailored school education, counselling, therapy, an organized everyday life, treatment of substance abuse and even isolation as a form of 'calming down'.

The reform schools in question welcomed the theme of violence as an important topic. According to the staff, violence was a difficult problem among the many problems of the residents. Accordingly, the formal research permissions were granted without difficulty. However, the staff was sceptical as to whether group-based interviews would function successfully. We, in turn, felt that group interviews would be a useful approach in exploring violence, as has been demonstrated by some studies (among adults) (Piispa and Ronkainen, 2005). Jenny Kitzinger (1994: 172) argues that:

> The focus group method is ideal for exploring social and communication issues, and examining the cultural construction of experience. It taps into people's underlying assumptions and theoretical frameworks and draws out how and why they think as they do. The data generated by this method confront the researcher with the multi-levelled and dynamic nature of people's understandings, highlighting their fluidity, deviations and contradictions.

Since violence is social by nature, though we would not want to exclude its personal and embodied aspects, we wanted to deal with the shared social and cultural aspects, definitions and meanings of violence with the young people who, due to their age and experiences of a residential living environment, had knowledge which we did not have and which has not been highlighted much in research (e.g. O'Neill, 2001; Renold and Barter, 2003). Discussing the theme together with the subjects of the research offers an opportunity to learn about such issues as, again making a reference to Kitzinger (1994: 173),

> we are none of us self-contained, isolated, static entities: we are part of complex and overlapping social, familial and collegiate networks. Personal beliefs are not cut off from public discourses and individual behaviour does not happen in a cultural vacuum.

In general, the groups consisted of three young people and two interviewers, one of them being the main interviewer. The groups predominated by boys had a male main interviewer, whereas the girls' group had a female main interviewer. The second interviewer was a woman in all cases. At the time of the interviews she was conducting ethnographic research on residential experiences in these same institutions and was therefore already familiar to the young residents (Pösö, 2004a). She was also the person who introduced this research project to the young people and motivated them to participate. The themes set for the interviews covered issues around the concept and contexts of violence, as well as the relations of gender and youth to violence. Every session was opened by our question 'what do you see as violence?', which was continued by exploring in detail the descriptions given by the participants. The reason for doing so was that we did not wish to present any set definition of violence but wanted to let the participants approach the issue in their own way.

Even though the focus was on the shared meanings of violence, some of the interviewees discussed personal experiences intimately and in great depth. The intended focus of the interviews was in the everyday contexts of youth in general;

nevertheless, the young people gave special attention to residential violence. To our understanding, the shift in the interview themes reflects the possibility of the participants to direct group interviews in their own directions; that is, the power positions between the interviewees and interviewers in group interviews shifted, which has been pointed out as a typical trait for focus group interviews (Kitzinger, 1994; Kvale, 1996: 101–2; Morgan, 2002).

The group interviews turned out to be rich in terms of producing data. They suggest that violence is a common issue in the lives of the young people. We found two analytic approaches to violence in the young people's talk, one viewing violence as an instrument (of membership in different groups in order to belong and share, of social order and of solving social problems), whereas the other sees violence as a means of expression (the emotional and irrational aspects of violence) (Honkatukia et al., 2006). The normative standpoints were quite similar to the average norms shared by the population in general. Violence was mainly only accepted as a part of masculine youth culture – as is often done by young people in general (Salmi, 2004: 101–6) and as an important tool for underprivileged people (e.g. residents in a reform school) who have no other means of solving the difficulties in their lives. Additionally, there were gendered accounts of violence. The young boys' lives were rich in violent encounters with peer groups, whereas only girls spoke about being victims of sexual violence (Honkatukia, 2004; Honkatukia and Pösö, 2004).

These results were born in a certain institutional and interactional context. Every research interview creates a social world of its own. Depending on the methodological tradition, some, especially positivists, view the interview data as 'pure' – a mirror reflection of the reality outside the interview encounter. Others, especially social constructionists, treat the interview data as a construction that merely provides information about the interview encounter (Miller and Glassner, 1997: 99; Silverman, 1993). Not taking an extreme position at either end, we will analyse in the following the specific contexts of the knowledge production and consequently the themes which this particular research constellation seemed to favour as well as the themes which tended to be silenced.

Residential institution as a setting for group interviews

Residential institutions have their own social orders and norm structures (Goffman, 1961; Kelly, 1992; Strömpl, 2002). Even though the Finnish reform schools are perhaps not the purest examples of the total institutions, their location and operation very much separate the residents' lives from their earlier living environments through physical distance and limited social contacts. Residential life is also controlled by the staff. At the same time, the residential life is full of social encounters and dynamics among the residents and with the staff. These dynamics form the context where the group interviews were located in our study.

Emma Renold and Christine Barter (2003) note that violence was common in their study of 14 residential children's homes in the UK, despite having many different meanings and forms. They report that they experienced institutional violence cultures, very similar to our experience, varying from very explicit (noisy, physical) violence to more covert and silent violence. The first institution we visited was, at the time, full of explicit physical violent encounters, apparent also for us as outsiders, whereas the second one lacked explicit signs of violence but was rich in small – almost silent – humiliating episodes and practices. Renold and Barter (2003) argue that violence in residential institutions should be seen as both situational and local. Therefore, a cultural understanding of violence is needed. We agree with them as we realized that the different institutional cultures were reflected in our data to some extent. We do, however, emphasize that the residential life of youth also shares some characteristics (such as the power distinctions between the staff and residents) which are of a relatively stable nature and which have an impact on data as well.

Our experience suggests that residential institutions have an impact on the construction of knowledge at least in the following ways. First, the interviewees were aware that they would share their daily lives with each other after the interview. Therefore, most likely, they exercised some control on what they said in the groups. The relatively small sizes of the groups could have supported the possibility of controlling the group dynamics. Since the issue of violence is a sensitive one, we may only assume that the self-regulation was important for the sake of the residential group dynamics. It functioned in two ways: sensitive issues were either inhibited or explored. We came across the latter function especially in a group of girls where the members used the group interview as an opportunity for sharing with other young people the sort of experiences that they had not managed to discuss before (Honkatukia et al., 2006).

Second, the groups functioned as a means of presenting the issues of youth life and especially residential life to the outsiders. The residential life is full of distinctions (e.g. resident vs staff, newcomer vs old resident, child vs adult) to which the focus groups introduced a new dimension of outsiders and insiders to separate the researchers and the residents. This enabled the residents to present themselves as persons who knew something the outsiders were not familiar with. In that respect their accounts had several meanings: they were reports, highlights of long periods of residential life, extremes; possibly they also carnevalized residential life for us. Additionally, the accounts were tools for getting the experiences heard; it was obvious that the group interviews functioned as a means of advocacy or even therapy to some participants (Honkatukia et al., 2006). Apparently, many participants felt it important to have been given the opportunity to talk about these issues.

Young people talking in groups

Because of their concern about the group interviews, the staff in the institution that we visited first wanted to help us in organizing the groups for us so

that the participants would 'have an easy relationship with each other' as they put it. It turned out that most of the group members knew each other from the same school class and there had learnt to discuss together. In the second institution, we were allowed to let the groups form themselves: the young people chose the persons with whom they wanted to discuss the topic of violence. Thus, some of the groups were purpose-constructed for the interview, whereas others were pre-existing, following the categorization often made in focus group literature (Bloor et al., 2001: 20–6).

From our point of view, the groups in the second institution functioned much better, as the participants appeared willing to share their views and experiences in the groups. In the first institution, some of the participants seemed only to 'be doing their duty'. Participation in the research was, of course, voluntary but in the former case, the voluntary nature of the group interviews must have become affected and regulated by the staff's involvement in forming the groups (Honkatukia et al., 2003). Unfortunately, despite the staff's desire to form functioning groups, one group included two members who belonged to different – opposing – youth cultures. One of them, belonging to a skinhead culture, adopted a confrontational attitude towards another boy with a Roma background due to the views the skinhead had about the latter's ethnic and cultural background. As a matter of fact, the group interview was coloured by verbal threats of violence between those two boys, which we had to deal with even after the group session (Honkatukia et al., 2003).

The formation of the groups demonstrates, on the one hand, the importance of the previously mentioned residential setting on the construction of knowledge and, on the other hand, the high dependence of group interviews on the members. Therefore the coalition of the members matters, as is often stated in the preliminary instructions for focus group interviews (Bloor et al., 2001; Gibbs, 1997). Focus groups are said to be difficult contexts for 'low status' participants, especially if they have to be in contact with the other members after the interview (Barter and Renold, 2003: 98). In our study two boys were not openly invited to any groups, but wished to share their views on violence with us. We interviewed them, and these interviews revealed new forms and conceptualizations of violence, which were useful for us in analysing the contextual meanings of violence.

The estimate is that three-quarters of the residents participated in the study. We managed to include all young people who were interested in participating and who had the opportunity to participate (that is that they were not sick at the time or participating in a school trip, or were not on the run). The selection processes were also affected by the participants' sex.[2] The groups selected by the staff included boys and girls, whereas when the young people were asked to form the groups themselves, the groups turned out to be single-sex. There was a lot of restlessness in the mixed-sex groups, which can be interpreted as a sign of lack of confidence and security in the groups. The single-sex interviews were much calmer.

In the analysis of the data, non-verbal communication and nuances of speech are valuable sources of data on the meanings of violence. Laughter, for example, is common in focus group discussions on sensitive issues (Moran et al., 2003). In our interviews, laughter, or more broadly, humour and irony, often coloured the talk on oppressive practices in the institutions. Girls in particular fantasized in the interviews about how something bad could happen to some of the members or how they could harm the staff. These fantasies were accompanied with laughter, indicating that they were not seriously planning to harm the staff members (Soilevuo-Grønnerød, 2004: 35). This was secret and potentially dangerous fun for the girls, since getting caught at this kind of talk would surely be punished. Besides allowing the sharing of excitement, laughter in this context probably 'enhances mutuality' (Soilevuo-Grønnerød, 2004: 40) and imparts strength for living under the many restrictions in the reform school. In the boys' interviews this imaginary violence presented itself only on a more personal level, in the lyrics of songs that one of the boys told us he used to write.

Violence as a strong theme

The concept of strong theme refers to the dominating themes in the group discussions. Their narrative status was high, as they were obviously easy and agreeable to talk about. The concept of strong theme also emphasizes the intensity of such narration and focuses on the shared aspects of narrating. Therefore, it comes close to the concept of 'collective stories' by Miller and Glassner (1997). The strong themes may present the key views of the young people on violence but they should also be seen as products of the focus group method practised in residential care. In our data the strong themes were (a) the physical nature of violence, (b) condemnation of parental violence and (c) essentiality of staff violence and residential conflicts. They were addressed and spoken about in great detail in the focus groups.

PHYSICAL NATURE OF VIOLENCE

It was almost a rule that at the beginning of the group discussion the young people presented different ways of exerting physical violence, such as beating, punching, kicking and fighting. The importance of physical violence was often underlined with statements such as 'of course' and 'self-evidently'. As the group interviews proceeded, more and more refined forms of violence emerged. As the young people spoke about humiliation and other mental forms of violence, the agreement on whether they were violence was not easy to reach. Even though the interviewees did tell many stories about non-physical violence, physical violence was the most powerful definition of violence, and it was often taken for granted. The importance of physical violence carried a statement that it is a common form of violence but it did not necessitate a personal commitment to it. Sometimes the distinction was made as clearly as in the following:

Girl 1: Well, the blokes punch more, and kick, and other things, do like a bit worse things. The lasses pull hair and claw your mug.

Boy 1: Claw, and scratch and bite.

Girl 1: Yeah, that's it. Not me. I reckon there are quite big differences [between boys and girls]. (H6)

The central position of physical violence does not differ greatly from meanings attached to violence among people in general (Burman et al., 2003; Honkatukia, 1999; Salmi, 2004). Still, the apparent fluency in how the young people used the notions of physical violence as the main form of violence may have been encouraged by the focus groups as an arrangement; the ethos in groups and in youth culture of the reform schools more broadly allowed the young people to present other definitions only occasionally.

CONDEMNATION OF PARENTAL VIOLENCE
Also, violence perpetrated by parents against children was openly and intensively talked about, and personal experiences were shared in the groups without hesitation but mainly only in that respect that they had been witnessing violence in their homes. The ease of this may be due to the specific context of reform schools: the young people knew that they shared difficult experiences of that kind. These disclosures emphasize a strong norm according to which violence against children is highly disapproved of and should not be practised. When discussing parental violence, the young residents often announced that they would not ever hit their child.

ESSENTIALITY OF STAFF VIOLENCE
Similarly, the young people vividly reported episodes of violent encounters in the institution, particularly violence perpetrated by the staff. Some episodes were experienced by the young people themselves while other episodes had been told by the others. Through this talk the residents positioned themselves as an oppressed and powerless group in the hierarchy of the residential institution. At the same time, their own use of violence in the residential setting was legitimated.

The shared understanding of the staff's violent behaviour was reached easily in the groups. In this context, non-physical aspects of violence also received attention. The following extract demonstrates how mental violence was interpreted and especially the communicative fluency, which was typical of discussions on violence by the staff.

Päivi: Yeah, well, what is the mental violence like, then?

Girl 1: Well, it's when you keep calling the other person names and chew out somebody and things like that. It's like well, how can I explain it ...

Girl 2: But here (in the institution) there is more like mental violence.

Girl 1: Yeah.

Girl 3: But that is not violence.

Girl 1: Yes, it is that.

Girl 2: Yes, it is something …

Girl 1: It is violence.

Päivi: About the mental violence, is it like taunting and belittling and so?

[…]

Girl 2: Well, it's like when you belittle the other person all the time, tell her she is of no use and call her names and pick on her and so on …

Girl 1: Just what the staff do here.

Girl 2: Yeah, like repression or so. (H8)

The girls took turns to add some aspects to the previous speaker's sentence. The communication pattern created a joint description of violence in the reform school. In another group, a girl fantasized about blowing up the whole institution. This statement as well as the ensuing discussion reveal how the young people's disappointment in their own life situation as well as in the whole system is projected on their immediate environment, the institution. It seems to represent a repressive system responsible for their gloomy destiny by suppressing and humiliating them in various ways. We may see these episodes as the young people's means of debating and reframing their position in the institution. The following excerpt reveals that in this respect the reasoning of the boys is similar to that of the girls.

Päivi: What do you reckon is worst here? Or rather, where does your anger come from, or why do you want to blow up the institution?

Girl 1: These people have ruined the best time of my life, they have robbed me of my …

Boy 1: Yes, youth.

Boy 2: It is the best time in your life when you are under 15. […]

Girl 2: No, well, just as I got my life back on track, you know what I mean, these people took me to hell from my home. (H4)

The strong position of 'staff violence' in the young people's talk left us pondering whether it reflects their 'real experience' of violence. Can it also be provoked by the possibility of talking about their conditions in the residential setting to researchers who are prepared to listen to them? Or is it rather a result of intense group dynamics that structured the contents of talk? These questions reveal some fundamental dilemmas of the use of focus groups.

Violence as a weak theme

Violence as a weak theme refers to such talk of violence that had a low narrative status. In some situations it was a secret, something that the young people did not want to talk openly about. Sometimes we encountered silences, themes that were not discussed at all or they were silenced. In the next two sections we will describe these two features of violence, secrets and silences, more closely.

SECRET VIOLENCE
Secret violence refers to themes the mentioning of which was regulated by the young people. Two different types of regulation can be discerned: the themes were marked as secret either by limiting the talk in the groups, or by taking the opportunity to talk about something that had previously remained secret. The first strategy was linked particularly with violence among the young residents themselves, and the second with sexual violence.

Violence between the young people in the reform schools was one of the most regulated themes. References to violence between the young residents were rare, in contrast to violence perpetrated by the staff. Presumably the group's cohesiveness and mutual loyalty made the young people cautious when discussing peer violence (Honkatukia et al., 2006). In addition, the dynamics of the focus groups and of residential life in general may have contributed to the non-emergence of these issues. Our questions were met with reluctance, uneasiness and comments on how such things might have occurred in the past but not any more, as can be seen in the following extract.

> Leo: So, what kind of situations do you see here [in the institution] between the children, I mean violent situations?
>
> Girl: Well I haven't seen any here.
>
> Boy 1: I have seen like one or so.
>
> Boy 2: We haven't had any for a long time, we had more of them before.
>
> Leo: What were they like before?
>
> Boy 2: Something like … somebody punched everybody. (H4)

While the young people wanted to represent the staff as violent, they did not want to do the same when discussing the young people's behaviour in institutions. Revealing peer violence could have weakened their message on how suppressed they were in the reform schools. It could also have legitimated staff violence, which was strongly criticized by the young.

However, we became aware of the violence between residents when talking to the youngest of them. In the groups consisting of newcomers or very young residents, the violence of the older boys towards them became a topic. These focus groups with young boys, possibly without stable residential hierarchies, demonstrate that the groups themselves may offer different types of arenas for speaking of violence. Loyalty plays a central role. It is reflected, for example, in

a normative expectation to keep silent about certain forbidden acts perpetrated by the young people. We came across this in one group discussion in which three boys insisted that one should keep absolutely silent about planned burglaries – to do otherwise would be a condemnable betrayal of the mutual trust of the group. This message was vividly unfolded in the tape recording of this interview: during talk about the details of an episode, one of the boys tried discretely to communicate to the others 'this is something we will not talk about to them (researchers)' (H12).

Secret violence also refers to violence that was discussed only in the focus groups. Many young residents commented that it is important to speak about the issues we had raised since they are not usually discussed in the daily life of the institution. These comments may suggest that the focus groups themselves served as arenas for making something secret less so. Some of the girls in particular emphasized this role of the focus groups. For them, the focus groups offered 'the first arena' – as they put it – for speaking about and sharing their experiences of sexual violence. Also the violent fantasies discussed earlier were only talked about in the groups – the young people were cautious not to reveal them to the staff. These examples show that in some groups a confidential atmosphere was created, allowing this kind of confessional talk. The fact that the young people clearly set regulations and boundaries during group talk about violence informs us that other secrets concerning violence may have remained completely untouched in our study.

SILENCES?

What or who remained silent in this study may never be known. In such a complicated field of study as youth, residential life and violence, we may only assume that group interviews and consequently research, by its very nature, overlook important issues which remain absent from the study. Self-evidently, the issue is relevant to any type of social enquiry that deals with people telling stories of their lives – only some stories become told and listened to (Överlien, 2004; Plummer, 2001).

The researchers may have silenced some issues, but the young residents participated in this practice as well. One way of protecting oneself against vulnerability is not to participate in the study (Stanko and Lee, 2003: 6–7). There might exist personality or group dynamics that either support participation or even force it, or exclude someone from participation (Glassner and Loughlin, 1987). As indicated earlier, we spoke to the majority of the young residents in the institutions, but not to everyone available. We may never know what stories the young people remaining outside the study could have contributed.

We became aware of the silences by noticing that the focus group method was insensitive to some issues of violence that were met during the study carried out by one member of our research team in the same institutions just before the focus groups (Pösö, 2004a, 2004b). This ethnographic study focused on the residential experiences in general, but violence turned up there

as well. For example, in the individual interviews conducted with the same young people as a part of the ethnography, girls talked about their own physical violence towards other girls, but in the focus groups these descriptions were missing, as was peer-related violence to some extent as well. Sexual violence, by contrast, was brought up only in the girls' focus groups, not in the individual interviews, indicating that the groups might on some occasions have more supportive (sharing) elements than the individual interviews.

There exists a stereotypical notion that boys are difficult informants. Our experience challenges this: the boys were willing to talk if the setting was right for them; the same has been noted, for example, by Stephen Frosh and his colleagues (2002: 50–3). Still, sexuality was a theme the boys were reluctant to talk about seriously. They only approached it through jokes in the focus groups. However, sexuality was by no means a non-existent topic in the boys' everyday lives. As part of the ethnographic study mentioned before, the young people were asked to take pictures of places and occasions that were important for them in the reform school. In the pictures taken by boys sexuality was visible, in the form of playing with homosexuality, photos of girls' bottoms, breasts, etc. Only the boys' talk on sexuality was absent. Talking about sexuality or sexual violence may pose a threat to their masculinity, particularly when homosexual violence is concerned (Messerschmidt, 1993). Humour is probably one of the only legitimate ways for the boys to deal with the issue in a group. Another theme practically absent in the mixed-sex or boys' interviews was embodied vulnerability, whereas girls discussed intensively occasions which they described as infringements of their bodily integrity, such as drug tests, which were conducted in the presence of a staff member.

Thematically, we could address the silences as taboos. According to Halldis K. Leira (2002: 287), a taboo is 'a cultural imperative' that means a social prohibition against making sexual violence visible or talking about it. Children and young people experiencing intimate violence are often victims of what are called 'tabooed traumas' (Leira, 2002: 288). Because of the taboo the problem does not exist, and therefore it is hard to find a name for it. For example, for the boys, being a victim of sexual violence means simultaneously a shameful experience and a threat to their masculinity, particularly in a strongly heterosexual peer culture (Karlsson, 2003: 58–9). Similarly, for the girls, experiences of sexual violence involve dealing with the so-called rape myths that often blame the victim (Brison, 2003; Cahill, 2001: 48). This could explain why sexual violence was not easily verbalized in boys-only or mixed-sex groups. The silence about sexual violence can therefore be understood as the consequence of a taboo. Our experiences do, however, suggest that certain research methods are more sensitive towards taboos than others.

Furthermore, we as adults, as outsiders and researchers, may not have recognized or understood all the themes introduced by the young people; in other words we may have silenced some views by our behaviour during the group discussions or afterwards during the analysis. Generation and age differences have

often been pointed out as barriers to understanding and causes of silences. However, we disagree with such a totalizing notion. We do not ignore the generational, gendered or other differences in our experiences and status, often related to power relations in interviews (Eder and Fingerson, 2002: 198), but we strongly believe that such issues may be negotiated (to some extent) in a safe interview environment, especially in a group. It does leave us, however, with the concern that we may have silenced some young people and some themes. As to what was silenced remains somewhat unidentified, but we have to have a moral and analytic consciousness about the possibility of silencing having taken place.

Conclusions

We encountered different features of violence talk, which we have analysed as narrative statuses. The talk we have termed 'strong' occupied a lot of space in the interviews, with explicit views on what violence is. Some of the talk can be described as 'weak', with secret and silent notions about violence, characterized by uncertainty over what can be revealed to outsiders. The different narrative statuses of violence in the young people's accounts reveal certain institutional and cultural norms as to what can be verbalized and in which contexts. Therefore they are valuable information when researching the meanings of violence.

These narrative statuses may be due to the group interview mode, which is claimed to encourage two tendencies, namely conformity and polarization (Morgan, 1997: 15). The first tendency towards conformity of opinions may have contributed to the construction of strong themes by excluding speakers and themes that did not meet the legitimate agenda of speaking about violence in a reform school group. The second tendency towards polarization could have supported the rise of the strong themes by expressing the themes in a very straightforward and obvious way. We have claimed that the loyalty among the young residents, their subordinated position within the institutional hierarchy and dependency on their residential social networks as well as the sensitivity and taboo nature of the issue of violence are the characteristics of our particular research context. They could be seen also as elements through which the tendencies towards conformity and polarization functioned.

It is, however, most notable that the themes with a weak narrative status were not totally excluded from the agenda of the focus groups. This suggests that the focus groups as such can work as a multi-voiced forum even in such a difficult area of study as ours. Our experiences suggest that focus group interviews may encourage and help some young people to address the issue of violence in a way that is rich in exploring meanings of different kinds. The group may encourage the verbalization of themes, which can remain silenced in other research contexts (e.g. individual interviews), as those issues can be shared and developed with other people in the same position. This is only possible if the group offers a safe environment for speaking, which, after all, might not always be the case in residential life.

Within the residential context, the formation of the groups for interviews is essential and challenges the guidelines given by literature on focus group methods. When living in a residential institution, one is a member of different pre-existing groups. Based on our study, we argue that it is essential to let the young residents define which pre-existing group, if any, should function as an interview group. It is only the young people who can decide which members form a group safe enough for them. In actual research practice, it might not be easy to do so as the researcher of residential life is often dependent on the staff's decisions on how the study should be carried out. In those situations, the researcher should be aware of the many social relations and dynamics in which the focus groups exist in an institution and of his/her responsibility for the implications the very act of doing research may have on the young residents and their relations.

All in all, we have tried to demonstrate in this article how the method of focus groups itself may be interwoven to the results of the study. Moreover, the group interviews, as experienced in this study, challenge the essentialist nature of violence. They highlight the many different meanings which violence can gain and produce. A realization of the many meanings of violence and the power of groups in constructing knowledge should not, however, exclude violence from the agenda of studies. Instead, methods such as focus groups should be seen as valuable tools for capturing meanings and definitions of violence which otherwise might not be voiced so loudly.

NOTES

1. Our methodological choices are highly intertwined with various ethical aspects of our inquiry which we have already dealt with elsewhere (Honkatukia et al., 2003) and which will therefore remain in the margins in what follows.
2. The biological age of the participants did not, however, seem to have a strong influence on the group formation. This can be due to the fact that the biological age is only one important age factor in the social life of a residential institution. More than the biological age, the age as a resident in the institution (new-comers vs long-time residents) matters. The school classes are a mixture of different age groups as the young people entering the reform school might have not passed their school education in the age-related manner. Therefore, the mixture of participants of different ages in the focus groups should be seen in the particular residential context.

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