



Building rapport with research participants



Our Story

BeDo is dedicated to the wellbeing of impact-driven professionals.

Born from first-hand experience of co-founders, our workshops and events address the unique mental health challenges facing researchers, activists, and humanitarians.

We seek to provide more holistic, practical, and accessible resources to help researchers cope with high levels of stress and anxiety during and after fieldwork.



Dailen Culver
MSc, CEO



Megan Douglas
PhD, COO



Objectives

1. Explore the importance of establishing and maintaining rapport with research participants.
2. Consider ways to bond with participants while maintaining appropriate distance and healthy boundaries.
3. Learn practical techniques for building trust and reading verbal and non-verbal cues.



Course Overview

Introduction

What is Rapport?

A Compassion-based Approach

Verbal & Non-Verbal Communication

Reflective Listening

Final Discussion + Conclusion



Course Overview

Introduction

What is Rapport?

A Compassion-Based Approach

Verbal & Non-Verbal Communication

Reflective Listening

Final Thoughts

BUILDING RAPPORT

Exercise

Written reflection

Reflect on your own research, field site, and methodology. Jot down a few sentences to answer each of the following questions.

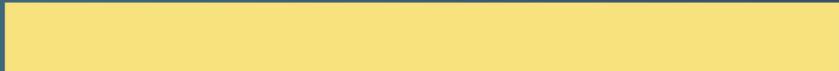
1. What does rapport mean to you?
2. Who are your participants? What might rapport mean to them?
3. How well-established is your rapport at present?



What is 01. Rapport?

“ Rapport is [...] about trust—enabling the participant to feel comfortable in opening up to you.

KING & HORROCKS, 2010



What is rapport?

'Commonly used but ill-defined' ([Oakley, 1981](#))

- Is it a feeling? Is it a relationship?
- Building trust or a means to an end?

Not immune to asymmetries ([Jorgenson, 1992](#))

- The rapport building project is typically undertaken by a 'status superior' ([Heintzman et al, 1993](#))

Facilitates high-quality communication ([Siegman & Reynolds, 1984](#))

- Effective rapport-builders are *perceived* as warm, enthusiastic, interested ([Harrigan et al, 1985](#))

Ethical Considerations

Conflicting perspectives in feminist literature

- Active relationships based on trust and reciprocity? ([Stanley & Wise, 1993](#))
- Or professional detachment and strict role definition? ([Lupton, 1994](#); [Goffman, 1961](#))
- Origins in Freudian psychotherapy (“transference”)
- Manipulative? Extractive? Or rooted in desire for deep understanding?

‘Doing rapport’

Commodification and commercialization ([Duncombe & Jessop, 2002](#))

- Masking ulterior motives?

‘Ethics of empathy’ ([Holland, 2007](#))

- Manipulation and coercion?
- Problems with disclosure and consent ([Birch & Miller, 2000](#); [Cotterill, 1992](#); [Goodrum & Keys, 2007](#))

Rapport-building as historically hierarchical, masculine, non-reciprocal ([Oakley, 1981](#))

Towards new methods of rapport building...



02. A compassion-based approach

“ ..the feeling that arises in witnessing another's suffering and that motivates a subsequent desire to help.

GOETZ ET AL, 2010: 352

Compati: to suffer together

Suffering = any moment in which our experience is *other* than we would like it to be.

- Aversion, 'what you resist persists' ([Jung, 1960](#))

We are wired to avoid suffering.

- Suppression, denial
- Minimization
- Numbing, addiction
- Problem-solving too soon

Action can be big or small, tangible or intangible.



BeDo



J.L. GEROME.

“ Trauma is not what happens *to* you. Trauma is what happens *inside* you, as a result of what happens to you.

GABOR MATÉ

What is trauma?

Lives in the physical body ([van der Kolk, 2015](#))

- Pushes us beyond our ability to self-regulate

Trauma is ubiquitous and has far-reach implications for public health ([ACES study](#))

Key principles of trauma-informed care:

1. Psychological safety
2. Empower with choice

Communicate safety via resources, physicality, and connection.

Attend to **environmental & structural** variations.

- Time/duration
- In-person/online
- In the field/formal setting
- Number of interviewees
- Number of interviews
- Support system in place
- How will you record responses?
- Initial greeting
- Follow-up
- Place and memory



Co-regulation

We are fundamentally social creatures, constantly engaged in processes of co-regulation

Your internal state as a researcher has a profound impact on your participant and your research outcomes.

Consider:

- Cadence, tone, volume, speed
- Body language
- Eye contact
- Screens

Exercise

Breathing technique

Use this technique to find mental clarity and a sense of groundedness prior to an interaction with a research participant.

Elongated exhales stimulate the vagus nerve, signaling to the body that it is safe to relax.

→ 4-8 Breath Pattern

Play with the timing of your intervals, emphasizing the exhale.

Asking sensitive questions

Tendency to overestimate personal costs ([Hart et al, 2021](#))

Opportunity to reinstate agency ([Hart et al, 2016](#))

- Uniting asset- and deficit-based approaches

And a final word about **silence**...

The most important thing we bring to another person is the silence within us. Not the sort of silence that is filled with unspoken criticism or hard withdrawal, but the sort of silence that is a place of refuge, of rest and acceptance for someone as they are. We are all hungry for this silence. It's hard to find. Silence is a place of great power and healing.

Cultural competency

What rapport-building methods or forms of interaction (verbal and non-verbal) might be altered based on cultural context?

Are principles of trauma-informed care cross-culturally applicable?

03. Verbal + non-verbal communication

Verbal or linguistic cues

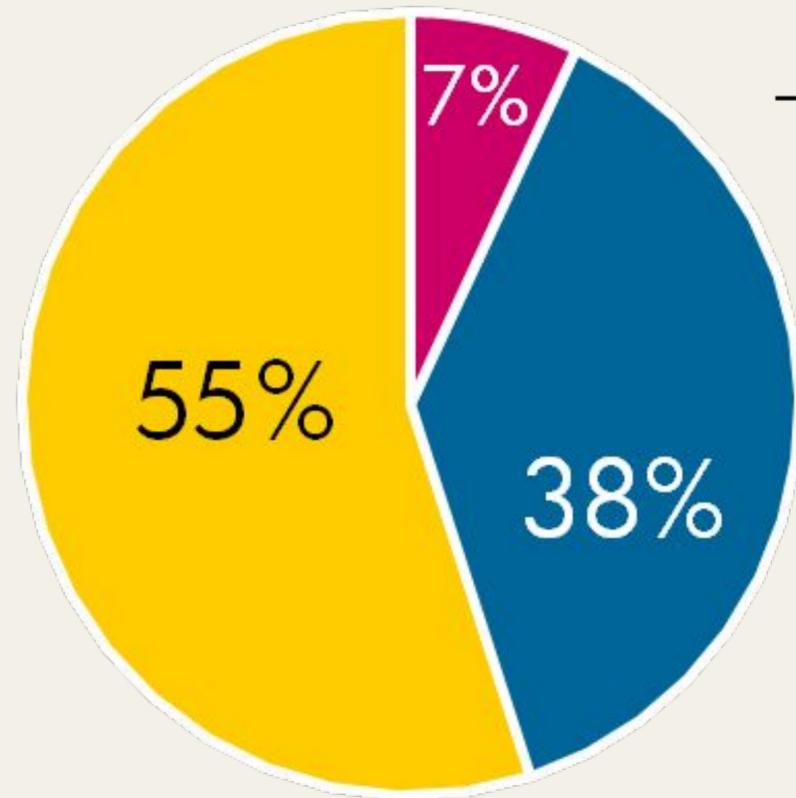
- Find common ground.
- Demonstrate genuine interest.
- Empathetic sharing ([Mitchell & Irvine, 2008](#); [Sainsbury et al, 2008](#))

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To Share, or Not to Share?

“On one occasion, to end the interview on a positive and more empathetic note, one researcher shared the success of someone she had known with a similar mental health condition after the interview had been completed” ([Mitchell & Irvine, 2008](#) p. 37)

- Risks of oversharing (‘vulnerability hangover’)
- Risk of constraining participant contributions (Graham et al. 2006)
- Not necessarily reciprocal (Rubin & Rubin 1995)



Dr. Albert Mehrabian's 7-38-55% Rule

Elements of Personal Communication

- 7% spoken words
- 38% voice, tone
- 55% body language

Paralinguistic cues

Speech, gestures, appearance provide a 'richness' to qualitative data ([Hesse-Biber & Griffin, 2012](#))

- Laughing, nodding ([Heintzman et al., 1993](#))
- Inward leaning ([Burgoon et al., 1984](#))
- Animation and emotional variability ([Slepian & Carr, 2018](#))
- Eye contact ([Heintzman et al., 1993](#))

Virtual settings

More challenging than face-to-face ([Feng, 2022](#); [Cater, 2011](#))

- Still the potential for high-quality conversations! ([Deakin & Wakefield, 2014](#))
- Emotional connection can be difficult to maintain ([Seitz, 2015](#))
- Some advantages include safety of retained personal space ([Hanna, 2012](#))

Camera matters ([Kuzminykh & Rintel, 2020](#))

- Gauging engagement, self- and co-regulation

During a virtual interview

- Neutral background, quality camera
- Look at your participant... not yourself!
- Use hand gestures
- Consider standing
- Get rid of your phone
- Exaggerate movements (not too much...)
- Position yourself and the camera for optimal view

“ Accurate reflecting gives you permission to feel what you feel and know what you know.

BESSEL VAN DER KOLK



BeDo | BE WELL,
DO GOOD.

Reflective Listening

Listening style useful in exploratory interviews ([Katz & McNulty, 1994](#))

- Quality control
- Attentive to content and feelings
- Non-judgemental, curious

We can reflect content, feelings, or meanings.

Potential perils of reflective listening

- Evaluating and judging
- Solving
- Withdrawing

Verbal

Rephrasing
Extrapolating
Synergizing
Summarizing

Eye Contact
Mirroring
Matching
Interested Silence

Non-verbal



‘Two eyes, two ears, one mouth’

Step 1: Taking in cues

Step 2: Sorting

Step 3: Drawing a conclusion

Step 4: Expressing the essence

Reflecting is NOT ‘parroting’

Verifying

- “Is that right?”
- “Help me understand that better.”

‘Door openers’

- “That sounds really frustrating.”
- “You seem really excited about that!”
- “Sounds like it went really well.”

Exercise

Reflective listening

As the speaker, answer the question,
**“What’s the most challenging thing
about being a student/researcher?”**

As the listener, engage in reflective
listening.

05.

Final thoughts

Exercise

The 'difficult' participant

- What challenges have you personally faced in 'building rapport'?
- What happens when things just don't 'click'?
- How did you respond?

You can draw upon past or present research experience... maybe a story from a colleague.

The 'difficult participant'

The 'boundary crosser'



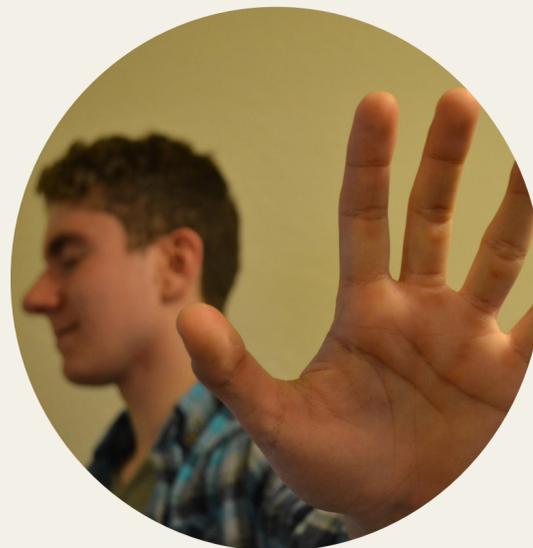
The reticent participant



The 'venter'



The hostile participant





In Summary...

- Many definitions and motivations behind rapport building; extractive by nature with asymmetries in power and benefits
- Compassionate, trauma-informed, and culturally-sensitive approaches can mitigate risk
- Be mindful of how the interview questions and set-up may affect participants
- Practice your paralinguistic cues and reflective listening
- Go easy on yourself- it's an ongoing practice!



Thank you!

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