Capitalising on rapport, emotional labour and colluding with the neoliberal academy

# Abstract

This paper raises questions about how ethics in principle are played out in practice when conducting field research. Drawing on my feminist doctoral research I discuss the challenges experienced conducting field research to explore everyday experiences of gender and poverty in Mumbai, India. The paper aims to provide a reflective account of methodological practice from the perspective of an early career social researcher in the context of negotiating power inequalities within the academy. In particular, showcasing the turmoil experienced in seemingly colluding with the neoliberal academy by capitalising on rapport to gain data efficiently and produce research at the expense of the research participants. The paper suggests that by engaging with difficult questions about rapport and collusion, it presents an opportunity for an early career feminist researcher to test the limits of productive collusion and/or engineered rapport. While raising more questions than answers, this paper revisits questions about ethics in the field concerning rapport and collusion and discusses the tensions between authentic rapport building with strategic or manufactured rapport building in social research while differentiating between the professional and the personal especially as friendships develop with research participants.

# Introduction

This paper aims to explore pertinent issues in feminist research about the commodification and capitalisation of rapport, the tensions when negotiating ethical conduct in the field against institutional practice and showcasing the power dynamics in colluding with the neoliberal academy. As a result, the paper aims to offer a conceptual analysis framed around the researchers’ experiences to add to an already wide and impressive body of feminist literature on the nature of conducting fieldwork. The personal nature of field work is acknowledged in literature however as Coffey’s (1999, p.1) argues “(..) the self in the field is not something to which methods texts give substantial attention. Issues of identity, selfhood and emotionality are often referred to, and thereby understood, in tangential and semi-detached ways”.

Embedded within this, the paper aims to uncover these complex and complicated personal and emotional experiences when writing about fieldwork particularly from an outsider – insider perspective, contextualised within an increasingly challenging academic landscape, commonly referred to as the neoliberal academy.

The term neoliberalism is contested and dates back to the 1990s, when the Bretton Woods system promoted their development trajectory backed by a rationale to reduce global inequality. It was the Bretton Woods system that established rules for commercial and financial relations among the world's major industrial states by setting up a system of rules, institutions, and procedures to regulate the international monetary system. The neoliberal orthodoxy, includes the deregulation and liberalisation of finance, capital, and labour markets, leading to a reduction in the role of the state. Furthermore, it has been argued that there is a reciprocal merging of neoliberal capitalism and a neo patriarchal order of gender (Campbell, 2014), in other words sexual and patriarchal division of labour is reinforced through dominant constructions of neoliberalism. This article is based on the assertion that higher education institutions are also implicated by this neoliberal rationality. Consequently, this article considers how negotiating complex ethical issues in the field is made more difficult by the changing pressures and expectations of a more neoliberal academy. Using my doctoral research, I draw on my experiences from the perspective of a UK funded researcher of Indian descent born and raised in England, conducting fieldwork in Mumbai, India. It is important here to acknowledge my interest in identity politics, with constant negotiation and renegotiation of my positionality, this is the lens in which decisions were made on how field work was conducted which also led to the heightened sensitivity in regards to the involvement of research participants.

Historically in India and across many nation states women and girls are known to have less access to economic and social capital than men and boys as a result of complex intersections of marginalisation. Progress on poverty alleviation and the advancement of women’s and girls’ development continues to be slow and has even been described as ‘regressive’ (UNWomen, 2015), this is despite the many strategies used and resources allocated to development. To put forward an explanation for the slow progress made, the doctoral study identifies the disjuncture between macro-level framings and micro-level everyday experiences of gendered poverty. The main aim of the doctoral research was to examine how women and adolescent girls living in slum communities in Mumbai experience and perceive gendered poverty. The research study also explored two additional dimensions, the first examined the relationship upper and middle class women of Mumbai had with the lower socio-economic classes, while the second explored the role and intervention strategies of grassroots, national and international NGOs in responding to gendered poverty.

The study was based on interviews with 40 participants, they included 10 women and 11 adolescent girls from slum communities, 9 women from upper and middleclass backgrounds, 9 practitioners working for grassroots, national and international nongovernment organisations and 1 social researcher. Interviews were conducted between 2012 and 2013.

Drawing on participatory action research (PAR), anthropology and participant observation a multi-methodology was developed to explore the complex experiences of gender and poverty. Through the participant narratives, the study showed that experiences of gender and poverty permeate across class divisions, suggesting that access to economic capital does not necessarily result in equitable gender relations. As a result of using this approach, not only did the findings challenge colonial discourses on women in India as docile, subservient and victimised by ‘*archaic cultural practices’* (Brah, 1992; Bhopal, 1997, 2003; Wilson, 2006; Takhar, 2013) but also showed the diverse women and adolescent girls constantly negotiate and strategise within time and space to acquire agency, through different forms of resistance or subversion.

Access to participants was gained using a non-random purposive sampling framework. As soon as the doctoral research commenced in late 2011, communication began with friends in senior positions working in NGOs in Mumbai to start the groundwork for conducting field interviews. Although it is common for researchers using a snowballing method to utilise their networks to gain access to participants (Miller and Bell, 2012), there was a great sense of unease to exploit these networks however, as a result of feeling the pressures of time alternative options were not available, and so as a result I ‘cashed in on these favours’.

Consequently, friends and colleagues in India provided me with important advice and introductions. In particular, an invitation to a symposium led to accessing a variety of NGO practitioners, beneficiaries and academics working in the women’s sector.

A lot of time was spent thinking through different ways to conduct fieldwork ethically without reproducing researcher privilege across diverse and complex political, geographical, and intersectional locations; as a result, the research found its theoretical fit within post- colonial and third world feminism (Mohanty, 1988; Minh-ha, 1989; Narayan, 1989).

Postcolonial feminist theory recognises power relations and the importance of historical contexts such as the impact of India’s colonial relationship with Britain. This is particularly relevant because postcolonial studies contribute anti-colonial perspectives that reject established agendas and ways of seeing the world, as a result critically disrupting and challenging dominant perspectives, particularly in relation to development (McEwen, 2001). Specifically, postcolonial feminism played an important role during the 1990s in advancing development policy and practice by striving to produce a “truly decolonised, postcolonial knowledge” (McEwan, 2001, p. 94). Consequently, this acute awareness of the impasse in feminist geography related to misrepresenting women in the global south (Nagar 2002; Sultana, 2007) led me to formulate strategies that would limit the potential to reproduce researcher privilege. Doing so bought up important questions about ethical conduct while I was in the field particularly in relation to whether the intention to protect participants remained central or if somewhere along the line that was abandoned and instead I began implicitly colluding with the academy, this is further discussed in the next section.

# Using rapport in social research

A central ethical issue during the doctoral training was the concern related to the level of control and power over knowledge production. This was associated to the research being funded and based in the UK yet the fieldwork conducted in Mumbai. As a result, I felt it imperative that all possible efforts should be made to ensure that the voices of the participants in the research were not displaced. However, the process of taking participants words and physically taking them to a different space and place and then transferring their verbal contributions onto the written page was a deeply concerning issue that I struggled to consolidate. This concern was further compounded by the fact that the native languages (Hindi, Marathi and or Gujarati) the research participants used in the interviews were then translated into English. Even though a mixed methodology was designed to democratise the research process, questions about the authenticity of knowledge production presented cause for concern throughout the field research.

As such, reflexivity, a central concept in feminism, enabled me to situate these concerns by understanding my positionality in relation to the research participants. This is supported by Nagar and Geiger (2007) who contend,

[i]n feminist conversations about fieldwork, reflexivity has often implied analyses of how the production of ethnographic knowledge is shaped by the shifting, contextual, and relational contours of the researcher's social identity and her social situatedness or positionality, (in terms of gender, race, class, sexuality and other axes of social difference), with respect to her subjects (p.267).

Being *spoken for* is a central challenge to the political project of feminist research, particularly relevant for women who live in India because historically they have been *spoken for* by the colonial masters. Therefore, I was determined not to fall into this category of researcher, i.e. being a diasporic researcher creating knowledge and speaking on behalf of women in India. These concerns are reflected in the following statement:

Black women writing from the perspective of women outside western societies, the so-called ‘third world’, have ignored the geographical and historical specificity that underpins black women’s experiences, and this had resulted in an implicit (and unquestioned) assumption that ‘first world’ black women are speaking on behalf of black women globally (Reynolds, 2002, p. 601).

As a result, the research methodology was devised to limit any opportunity to unknowingly undermine the research participants and/or reproduce colonial privilege. Instead, the aim was to ensure the participants knew that they were the experts and that the research was about delivering their voice. With this in mind a plan was devised to consolidate and address any cultural differences between the researcher and the research participants by using rapport. It is argued that to achieve good rapport some interviewers adopt a certain level of “ethical naivety” whereby the interviewer consciously dresses and behaves in a manner that induces the interviewees to disclose intimate information about themselves (Duncombe and Jessop, 2012, p. 110). However, the problem here lies in the interviewees’ informed consent, for instance;

If interviewees are persuaded to participate in the interview by the researcher’s show of empathy and the rapport achieved in conversation, how far can they be said to have given their ‘informed consent’ to make the disclosures that emerge during the interview? (Duncombe and Jessop, 2012, p.111)

Engaging in the process of applying to the university’s ethics board to gain approval to conduct primary research encouraged me to think about researchers’ ethical conduct in the field. I found that different strategies to increase rapport were often presented in unproblematic ways in methods texts. Even though ethical governance has evolved over the last twenty years, little has been offered to lessen the complexity of ethical dilemmas (Mauthner et al., 2012). Building rapport is acknowledged in social research as a method to gain trust with the participants and access sites through gate keepers, two fundamental components that ensure success in conducting research in the field with interviewees (Adler and Adler, 1987; Jorgensen, 1989; Lofland and Lofland, 1995; Coy, 2001; Mazzei and O’Brien, 2009) and a common approach used by feminist researchers. Feminists like Duncombe and Jessop (2012) offer an interesting distinction between doing rapport to participants as opposed to creating rapport with participants while discussing the ethics of faking friendships. Doing rapport entails that the researcher sets the agenda and uses a plethora of skills to encourage interviewees to disclose information leaving little or no opportunity for interviewees to challenge the researcher regarding consent (ibid). As a result, doing rapport becomes commercialised and professionalised as captured in the term ‘commodification of rapport’, a process that lacks broader concerns on ethics and one that provides the researcher with a way to avoid the awkward issue of gaining and renegotiating consent (Duncombe and Jessop, 2012).

Although my intention was to think sensitively about how best to conduct research, limiting any negative effects of ‘creating rapport’ with research participants, I was unprepared when emotions of unease arose as a result of utilising rapport in a manufactured way. This was further compounded by the fact that the need for data was based on the primary objective to pursue ones’ career and research goals. It was the first instance where I realised that my personal and ethical goals clashed with the expectations of the academy. This is particularly relevant in the context of an inexperienced, ethnic minority feminist researcher navigating the uncharted waters of the neoliberal academy which is considered to be predominately white, middleclass and male centred (Bhopal and Jackson, 2013). In considering this with the research design, particularly in terms of building, creating or doing rapport, the emotions evoked related to ethical conduct along with the stresses of meeting deadlines, the term ‘capitalising on rapport’ appropriately captures these dynamics.

The term capitalising on rapport aims to capture the emotions of unease, discomfort and guilt in engaging, even colluding with neoliberal values of profiting at any cost to complete (doctoral) research projects with the pressures of time and limited or no funding. Therefore, the concept within the context of neoliberalism, encourages researchers to question how we think about rapport and how we use it as a means to an end with little regard for who we might be colluding with so to attain research objectives.

In addition to considering the conceptual purchase of terms such as the commodification or capitalisation of rapport, questions have arisen on whether it is possible to engineer rapport ‘ethically’. Informed by a paper on reflexivity and positionality, Sultana (2007) draws on her nuanced experiences of conducting field research in Bangladesh. Through her experiences she found she was accepted as the outsider doing research for the common good despite some obvious differences between herself and her female research participants’. However, with the male research participants, she experienced reverse power relations where she was not taken seriously and was subsequently patronised. It is argued that researcher’s racial identity particularly the shared experiences between the researched and the researcher can have a positive impact on the research process (Bhopal, 2001). This is particularly relevant for researchers entering communities in developing countries who are often advised to find ways to relate to individuals and groups while showing respect for local customs (Binns, 2006).

Informed by this, it seemed it would be beneficial to consciously expose my Indian Gujarati heritage as a way to illustrate my familiarity with Indian culture while revealing shared experiences and commonalities with the research participants. This was described in an application for ethical consideration which detailed my rationale for situating my Gujarati heritage to engineer and build rapport with research participants. An excerpt from my ethics application below describes this in detail;

I will dress in traditional Salwar Kameez, wearing Indian ‘chapal’ (flip flops), tying my hair in a braid and wearing my mangal-sutar (a gold necklace worn by all Indian married women) and kumkum on my hair line and forehead signify my marital status. I will employ these strategies to show that I am familiar and accustomed to Indian culture (Mandel, 2003 p.202). (…) Showing an appreciation for local culture – i.e. language, can also help me to build trust and rapport (ibid), as a result, I am taking Hindi language lessons, to improve my proficiency (Ethics Application, 2012).

It is unclear whether western institutional ethical guidelines should extend beyond the organisation, into the field, as Sultana (2007, p375) argues, they should “permeate the entire process of the research, from conceptualisation to dissemination, and that researchers are especially mindful of negotiated ethics in the field”. Or, on the other hand perhaps the role of institutional ethics, is simply to offer guidelines and encourage researchers to think critically about ethics as opposed to monitor ethical conduct throughout the field research. In relation to my research, it is unclear whether the motive to manufacture rapport was solely based on the intention to protect research participants or (and) perhaps whether the vulnerability and the pressures felt from the neoliberal academy (to produce data efficiently and draw closer to completing the doctoral training) also influenced this decision. As higher education institutions globally respond to neoliberal rationalities by becoming “increasingly more performative, competitive and corporatized”, it is argued less and less women are taking up leadership roles within higher education as these positions are valorised within a macho- patriarchal value system of “competitiveness, aggression, impropriety, stress and anxiety” (Morley and Crossouard, 2016, p. 149). As a result, women are structurally and systematically constrained within academia evidenced by the lack of women in senior management positions

(ibid). The impact of this for any female doctoral student can be one of disdain and even regret but more importantly the student must decide whether to sink or swim, in other words compete on those terms or withdraw. Consequently, for those who decide to ‘compete’ this could mean colluding with a system that structurally discriminates women.

# Negotiating ethical conduct in the field with institutional practice

Strategising to manufacture rapport in theory is very different to what actually happens in the field in practice. Albeit being of Indian decent taking solace in my position as a diasporic researcher with knowledge of both eastern and western cultures, I experienced many difficulties managing the insider / outsider status. Potter (2005) captures some of these tensions in a research project exploring the impact on people born in foreign countries returning to their parent’s place of birth. Here he discovers that the newly repatriated participants find themselves negotiating insider outsider spaces, especially in relation to accent, wealth and notions of privilege and power associated with a British identity. This enabled me to understand some tensions concerning my positionality of simultaneous experiences of the insider outsider status. Upon reflection, it has become clear that institutional ethical processes are limited and on the ground experiences are far from those outlined naively within an application for ethical approval to conduct research. Creating rapport with participants has come with some difficulties, as emotions of unease and guilt have led to continued questions on whether I had presented a false version of myself consequently exploiting the experiences of the research participants. As a result, the term capitalising of rapport is important here, as it aims to capture these emotions and describes the pressures and stresses induced by the neoliberal academy with the demands to produce research efficiently.

As field research commenced, the strategies to build rapport and trust outlined in my application for ethical consideration did not come to fruition. As having never worn kumkum, mangal sutar or salwar kameez as a daily dress, this strategy to use my body as a means of achieving rapport failed. The pre-planned strategies were abandoned because they felt unethical and deceitful, as though I was complicit with the ethics committee while colluding against the research participants (many of who were multiply marginalised) so that I could gain data and complete my doctoral training. On the one hand the strategy to manufacture rapport had been based on protecting the participants by being sensitive to cultural and geographical differences yet on the other hand, the strategy ensured that empirical data collected was ‘good’ and attained efficiently.

Having invested so much time and energy strategising to bridge commonalities with the research participants before arriving in Mumbai, it was surprising to then find that those obvious differences that I was trying to conceal between myself and some of the research participants actually enabled me to gain trust very quickly. This was nowhere more evident than when engaging in casual discussions on topics such as food, marriage and age (related to my appearance). For instance, when engaging with a group of beneficiaries at a women’s refuge, upon finding out that I was a vegetarian some of the women were surprised that an Indian born and raised outside of India had maintained a vegetarian diet when they themselves had not.

After abandoning the strategies to manufacture rapport, without giving it much thought, communication with the research participants occurred more organically, answering personal or research related questions with honesty and sincerity. For instance, personal inquiries were made about my age and marital status, to which I answered honestly, this caused friendly

hysteria amongst one particular group at a women's shelter. This was followed by a request to see photographs of my family. What may seem insignificant interactions enabled me to establish trust and build rapport effortlessly, which I believe reduced power differentials (Bhopal, 2009). Yet, I am dubious that I could have convinced the ethics board for ethical approval had I proposed that I would go into the field with no ‘game plan’. Related to ethical conduct, there remains an uncertainty about how open a researcher should be with participants and whether I had perhaps crossed the line. These questions began surfacing as I drew closer to the end of my time in Mumbai, particularly evident when I began preparing farewells with research participants with whom I had developed friendships. It has been argued that there is *“*a fine balance between building sufficient trust to be able to probe participants for potential rich data, while at the same time maintaining sufficient distance in respect for the participant” (Guillemin and Heggen, 2009, p. 292). In practical terms identifying where this *fine* line is located can be challenging.

According to the online Cambridge Dictionary, the definition of a friend is “someone who knows and likes a person very well” while friendship refers to *the state* of being friends. Having met many of the interviewees several times across multiple locations throughout the study, friendships appeared to have blossomed. However, being reminded that these ‘friendships’ had arisen out of the research process, led me to question what constitutes an authentic friendship compared to one that is contrived. Although I had utilised rapport without manufacturing it, my relationships with the research participants had nonetheless been elevated from a professional relationship to what seemed like an authentic friendship. This is where the fine line between friendship and professional relationships became blurred, and led to a reconsideration of my own ethical practice, in terms of whether I had been implicitly complicit, by gaining the trust of the participants and duping them into thinking ‘real’ friendships had been formed so that rich data could be gathered. So, even though we hugged, shared information, exchanged friendly banter, cried together, drank tea and ate street food, there loomed unexpected feelings of sadness. On paper they were research participants in a doctoral research project, however upon returning to the UK an unexpected sense of loss was deeply felt. Even though friendships were formed in unconventional socially inauthentic contexts, with the burden of gathering data quickly and efficiently by capitalising on rapport, the bonds of friendships felt were very real but would remain frozen in time.

There came the realisation that even in a research context, ‘real’ and authentic (authentic being defined through a mutual feeling between one or more people) relationships can be forged, and in fact it is a reflection of complex human emotions. There is a wide range of literature on the role of emotions when conducting research (Holland, 2007; Takhar, 2015), some have argued that a researcher’s feelings of affection or antipathy towards a respondent can influence the research (Nencel, 2005). However, outside of emotions influencing the quality of the research, the researcher’s emotional labour can be surprisingly unexpected. The impact of ‘emotional encounters’ has gained some academic currency (Takhar, 2015) as locating the significance of the researcher’s emotions are now being unsilenced. As Holland (2007) notes, it is only until the 1990s that the sociology of emotions in the U.K. emerged, she contends “[i]n sociology, emotions have historically been associated with the irrational and so quite opposed to the objective scientific search for knowledge. What sociologists of emotions have argued is that understanding emotions is essential to the pursuit of knowledge (…)” (p.196). Additionally, it is also argued that emotions are a lens through which we make sense of the world and therefore emotions have epistemological significance (Game, 1997).

Additionally, emotions also play an important role in research and as a result cannot be planned for. So, if emotions are central to how research is conducted and analysed then how can researchers ensure that they are adhering to ethical guidelines and conducting professional business without getting ‘too’ emotionally invested with the participants and exploiting them for data? When there is a professional transaction taking place, where the participants are offering information to the researcher, this then poses questions about how much is too much emotional involvement with the participants when there is the potential to exploit them knowingly or unknowingly (Cotterill, 1992).

More specifically when participants start to feel like the researcher is a friend, there are many opportunities for conflict of interest to occur in which the participants are directly or indirectly duped into thinking the relationship is more than a ‘research transaction’. In this case the researcher could be seen as being complicit. On the flip side, the researchers’ emotional investments might mask the real intent of her actions which in the end is to gain data. Emotional encounters might also result in the researcher privileging the contributions made by the participants she considers as ‘friends’ or with those she had established an emotional connection rather than those she did not.

For my doctoral research, emotional encounters with participants and gatekeepers evolved on many different levels. On a few occasions I deliberately performed the researcher role, in other words, ‘doing rapport’ on the participants, particularly pertinent when interviewing upper class women and some senior NGO practitioners. Upon reflection, this was probably a reaction to needing to assert my professional authority alongside an ‘imagined’ status accorded to the research participants especially in light of my ongoing experiences of the ‘imposter syndrome’ in academia. Additionally, the awareness to acquire much needed data led me to believe these particular research participants would respond more favourably to what would seem a more 'serious' researcher as opposed to someone with a more nonchalant and informal approach. This was also compounded with fears of being perceived as a young undergraduate based on my appearance, as I had frequently been mistaken for being an 18- year-old. As a result, I was acutely aware and perhaps paranoid about how I would be perceived. In contrast interviewing women and adolescent girls from the slum communities, I felt more relaxed and invested in terms of empathy. More time and effort was afforded to them and I felt I was more emotionally invested and determined to ensure that their stories were heard sincerely and with full attention. In doing so, it is unclear exactly what impact these emotional encounters have had on my research analysis. Looking back, questioning whether my actions in the field were deemed (un)acceptable and or (un)ethical has helped me to conclude that the doctoral training was probably a success in that lessons learned will influence the design and conduct of future research projects.

# Conclusion

In conclusion, by reflecting on my first-hand experiences in and out of the field, I have tried to show the level of complexity involved in considering ethics and the result of having to negotiate between institutional ethics and ethics in practice. In relation to this, I suggest that the term capitalising on rapport captures some of the uncertainties and pressures that early career researcher experience as a result of the neoliberal academy where there is an oversupply of PhD holders in Europe and not enough tenure (Else, 2015). It may be that such pressure creates an opportunity for researchers to become distracted by the outcomes of conducting primary research quickly, by capitalising on rapport without considering the negotiated ethical dilemmas of rapport and collusion on and off the field. Fittingly, Gillies and

Lucey (2007) remind us in their edited collection using Bourdieu’s (2001) work*,* power operates at many different levels within the academy.

Coming into academia to cultivate a career in research and teaching, the implications for ethnic minority women in any department can be intimidating as pressure to prove one’s worth is compounded with grave experiences of isolation and self-questioning maintained by gendered power relations found in everyday practices referred to as the micropolitics in academic life (Morley, 1999). Morley (2000) uses the conceptual framework of micropolitics to expose the “subtle” and “sophisticated’’ ways in which patriarchal power is exercised within higher education institutions (p. 232). As a result, the micropolitics of gender and race can be experienced in higher education in overt ways such as bullying and harassment or in more ‘‘subtle, elusive, volatile’’ ways making it more difficult to apprehend (p.233).

Operating from within this context there is also the growing saturation of neoliberal ideas within the academy such as viewing students as customers (performative and competitive) and profitmaking (corporatisation). (Post) doctoral researchers, like myself with an acute awareness of this, are perhaps more compelled to utilise manufactured and strategic ways to develop rapport with their participants and collude with explicitly (or/and implicitly) with the ethics board as pressures mount to complete doctoral research within a time frame that is deemed acceptable and worthy of securing academic positions. Reflecting on experiences in and out of the field has enabled me to uncover some complexities when negotiating between institutional ethics and ethics in practice.

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