

# RAPPORT BUILDING IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

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## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

Qualitative researches aim to gather an in-depth understanding of a central phenomenon. In order to have an in-depth understanding researchers go to the location of the study and have a direct contact with participants. It is important for qualitative researchers to get as close as possible to the participant's perspective (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). They gain insights from participants that are complete strangers and study on an issue that is unfamiliar to the researchers. As the main source of data, research participants play a vital role in qualitative studies.

Data collection in qualitative studies involves a lot of researchers – participant's interaction and communication. Hence good communication is important in qualitative studies (Bartkowiak, 2012). It will create a relationship or state of having trust and mutual responsiveness with others (Churches & Terry, 2007). Productive communication starts with trust and understanding. Without understanding and trust, people can be sceptical and suspicious (Molden, 2011). Thus it may risk the information that the researcher collected. Participants might create stories or keep the significant information and probably will behave unnaturally. This could jeopardize and invalidate the research data.

Therefore it is crucial for researchers to have a good relationship with their participants. Building good interpersonal relations between researcher and participant is an important aspect that needs to be considered especially when a researcher engages in interviews and observations in order to generate rich data (Guillemin & Heggen, 2009).

In order to have a good relationship with participants, the researcher needs to establish a good rapport with them. The purpose of establishing rapport between researcher and participant is to both generate rich data while at the same time ensuring respect is maintained between researcher and participant (Guillemin & Heggen, 2009). By having a good rapport with participant, it may give better information and data access for the researcher due to the trust and understanding built as a result from the good relationship between both of them.

## **2.1 RAPPORT BUILDING**

Rapport is an essential basis for successful communication. Once rapport is built successfully, trust and mutual respect will increase and communication will be more effective (Youell & Youell, 2011). Both researcher and participant will have better understanding and trust with each other. When two people are having trust and understanding, communication will become more open and in-depth which will yield rich and meaningful data. And this will definitely benefit the study.

### **2.1.1 What is rapport?**

Rapport is the ability to connect with others in a way that creates a climate of trust and understanding. It is also the ability to appreciate other's opinion, to understand and accept other's feelings (Knight, 2009). Meanwhile Youell and Youell (2011) equated rapport with being 'in sync' or being on the same 'wavelength' as the person whom we are talking to. It is the quality of harmony, recognition and mutual acceptance that exists between people when they are at ease with one another. In other words rapport is feeling at ease with someone or a group of people by having traits or things in common which make communication easier. It is a relationship marked by mutual understanding and trust.

Tannen (1991) described rapport as a way of establishing connections and negotiating relationships by displaying similarities and matching experiences. Meanwhile Reiman (2007) defined rapport as the sense of 'in tune' or 'click' with each other. However it does not mean that we need to agree with someone but it does mean that you respond to them and give them the experience of feeling understood (Churches & Terry, 2007). There are also other terms used that incorporate similar underlying themes, including collaboration, reciprocity, parity, growth and therapeutic alliance as known in the health science and they are considered interchangeable (Leach, 2005).

Rapport can actually be recognized. There are signs of growing rapport when there is an increase in flow of conversation, disclosure of sensitive information, relaxed body language, increased eye contact and improvements in listening and responding (Leach, 2005). Having rapport makes everything much easier. Communication also occurs easily and becomes more effective and smooth. However if there is sign of resistance such as a long periods of silence, sudden withdrawal of conversation, lack of eye contact, brief responses and defensive body language; these are signs of lack of rapport (Leach, 2005). Personal relationships are easier to build when there is a closer connection and understanding between the persons involved. Rapport can be developed and nurtured in a certain ways.

### **2.1.2 How to build and maintain rapport?**

Sometimes rapport happens naturally without having to try. However rapport can also be built and developed by finding common ground, developing a bond and being emphatic. Below are several ways on how rapport can be built and maintained, especially when meeting new people like research participants. There are several tips that will facilitate in reducing the tension between both parties. Start with small talk about light topics for ice breaking. Avoid asking direct questions during this phase. Inject some elements of humour in the conversation. It tends to reduce the tense.

Researchers supposed to have or at least nurtured a certain quality for themselves as a preparation in rapport building. Leach (2005) had listed qualities such as to be open minded, flexible, reassuring and supportive, friendly, genuine, warm, sincere, empowering, respectful, sensitive and empathetic in encouraging rapport. Researchers need to be in these states as prerequisites for rapport building. He also listed things to avoid like passing judgement, jargon and technical language and an authoritarian demeanour if researchers want to promote rapport in building a relationship with participants.

Besides that, Hull (2007) suggested active listening through verbal cues (hm-mm..yah..right..) and non-verbal encouragers like eye contact, nodding and leaning forward as vital in order to boost rapport building. These can be done during the ice breaking session or during the interview or when having communication with the participants. Being attentive shows that the researcher has an interest on what the participants are trying to say or do and at the same time gives courage to them.

Researchers are also encouraged to anticipate the participant's needs and maintain consistent contact (Elliott & Martin, 2013). Do stay visible. They find that visibility is critical to make and maintain successful connection. Finding opportunities to talk and take time to listen to their concerns are also essential part of rapport building.

In general, people are gravitated towards other people that they consider similar to them. According to Molden (2011), rapport is based on a principle of successful influences - people like people who are like them. People having a rapport typically adopt the same posture, move and gesture in similar ways, adopt the same style and rhythm in movement, speech, sense of identity, values and even breathing pace (Knight, 2009). She recommends to pay attention on how the person communicates. Identify any significance about his or her behaviour, language and body language. Identify one significant behaviour or style and concentrate on it before you try to match the elements.

Thus, simply by being like them and showing sincere interest in them as a person encourage a good rapport. Excellent communicator are sensitive to the patterns of people they

are communicating with (Churches & Terry, 2007). To be in the same wavelength, researchers must be sensitive with the participant's appearance, language they use and the way he or she talk. If possible, try to match with them. If participants like to dress casually hence researcher also needs to align his or her dress code. Researchers can match participants' appearance by dressing much like them rather than arriving in a business suit. Researchers can also match their body language by sitting like them and trying to harmonise with the participant's verbal pace and tone. Make sure use words and body language that are aligned and both are non-threatening. Effective ways of creating rapport are by subtly matching both verbal and non-verbal communication pattern especially voice patterns, body language and eye contact by developing the genuine interest in the participant (Youell & Youell, 2011).

According to Churches and Terry (2007), there are three output channels that a person could pick up information from the other person which are body, voice and words. By paying attention to the output of these three channels, researchers can adapt to the behaviours and become more like the participants. Rapport that is created with this process is called matching and mirroring (Bartkowiak, 2012; Churches & Terry, 2007). It builds trust and is the basis of effective communication.

Ädel (2011) suggested bonding in maintaining a good relationship with participants. This bonding strategy includes agreeing, aligning within-group, commiserating, complimenting, seeking agreement, make offering, encouragement, thanking, responding to thanks and chatting. Bonding is a mutual process and involves an interactive process. These strategies can be applied by researchers in the fieldwork too, to get attachment from the participants.

Eye contact is also crucial in demonstrating sincerity and establishing trust (Reiman, 2007). When a person can maintain an appropriate eye contact, it shows that the person is attentive, competent and powerful. When someone speaks, it is vital to listen to the person, always look at the person in the face, maintain eye contact, occasionally tilt the head to the side to indicate interest and nod at appropriate times. These are what Reiman (2007) referred to as listening with the whole body.

While researchers strive to build trust with the participants, it is important to note the research ethics too. Gordon (1987) points out that 'getting close' to research participants has to be balanced with 'maintaining distance' or establishing rapport while ensuring respect as suggested by Guillemain and Heggen (2009). Paramount within qualitative research is a need to balance establishing rapport and developing rich relationships with participants while maintaining distance out of respect for participants' privacy or sensitive issues.

In any interaction, whenever the researcher encounters resistance, it is a sign of lack of rapport. Researchers need to make effort in establishing and maintaining rapport with

participants to gain trust and understanding. Once trust and understanding is built, the research process will be in smooth conduct.

### **3.1 MY RESEARCH EXPERIENCES IN RAPPORT BUILDING**

Researcher's studies required the researcher to follow and observe participant's designing process while they are engaged in sketching activities. Participants consist of Industrial Design students from two local technical higher education institutions. All participants' sketching activities were video recorded and observed by the researcher. The researcher has been following a total of four research participants. The researcher followed one participant's designing process at a time. Besides observation and video recording, the researcher also interviewed and documented participants' sketches too. A sketching journal has also been provided for participants to record their sketching sessions which was done without the presence of the researcher.

The duration of their sketching phase depends on the individual - between three to eight weeks. The researcher observed the participants for two to three hours each session, twice a week. Since the nature of a research requires a lot of effort and time to be spent in the fieldwork, the researcher has decided and learnt to have a very good rapport with the participants. In establishing rapport with a research participant, the researcher had strived to build trust to establish relationship that leads to the sharing of rich and insightful data.

The researcher met P1 during her pilot study. He was chosen by his course lecturer to be involved in the study. P1 is very quiet, obedient and a decent student. After some quick self-introduction and research objective briefing to the whole class, the researcher immediately started the observation and video recording when P1 started his sketching, without having any personal interaction with the participant. The researcher still remembered how P1 was very stiff in his very first sketching session and even the whole class was very quiet for the whole three hours of sketching session with the presence of the researcher. At times the researcher saw him having a sidelong look at the researcher and the video camera. The researcher believed he cannot concentrate on his sketching at that moment. The researcher guessed that the lack of personal interaction and communication had caused the difficulty in establishing a good relationship between the researcher and P1 during this first visit and the reaction from participant was so unnatural.

But after the second and third meetings, with more interactions and communications between the researcher and participant, the situation was getting less tensed day by day and P1 could finally sketch at ease. He was getting familiar with the research settings and the researcher had also gradually changed her roles and instead, approached the participant as a friend (or more precise, as a sister) rather than acting as a researcher. Then only after that P1 became more comfortable with the presence of the researcher and got used to it. The researcher also gave some snacks like sweets and chocolates to the participant to break the ice and he can even share them with the whole class.

From this pilot test, the researcher had learnt that breaking the ice is essential for initial meetings; do make some simple conversation with the participant. Let them know and familiarize with the researcher and clarify on how the data collection process will be conducted on the participant. This is to give participants a general idea on what he or she will be going through later. It is also to avoid the participant from becoming clueless and nervous during the sketching session due to improper guidelines given earlier. These are important because lack of rapport could jeopardize the data as there is a potential for participant to fake his or her behaviour. When this happens, the validity of the collected data could be doubted.

Researcher's second experience in qualitative data collection was with P2. P2 was a very confident student, friendly and helpful. Same as P1, P2 had also been randomly selected by his lecturer. With the experience that the researcher gained from the prior data collection, the researcher was more prepared with this trip. The researcher and participant both had an ice-breaking and briefing session during the first visit. The researcher had introduced herself to P2 and got to know him better. Both of them had a small informal conversation about P2 background and at the same time the researcher also studied about his behaviour and interest. The researcher addressed herself as 'sis' and called P1 with his nickname to maintain the casual atmosphere. The researcher tried to adjust her language equivalent with the participant's talking style. During this ice breaking session, the researcher and participant can get along very well. The researcher also brought P2 sweets and chocolates to show that this research setting is not too formal. This is because a person will only react normal or becomes himself when he feels comfortable.

The researcher conducted a simple and precise briefing with the participant. P2 was very well informed that day and understood what he will be going through later. He also has a general idea on how the research data will be collected too. On this first meeting, the researcher had decided not to start any data collection yet except trying to blend and mingle around not only with the participant but also with the rest of the class. Participants will not only familiarize with the research setting, the researcher also tried to get used to the surroundings and learn how the design class will be conducted.

The researcher often reminded P2 to act naturally as if there is no one observing and no recording has been done. With the rapport that has been established since the first visit and the participant is also understood on the research expectation, the first observation and video recording session went very well. Even though at the initial stage, the researcher had sensed the participant's uneasy and discomfort feeling with the recording session but towards the later part, he looked more relaxed and at ease with presence of the video camera and got used to it. This situation became very convincing day after day until he totally ignored the presence of the researcher and the video camera.

Even though the researcher acted as a non-participant observer, in some cases the researcher would interrupt the participants by asking about what is going on or if any problem arise during the design process. This is to show interest or empathy towards the

participant and at the same time the researcher can keep track and understand what is happening. Of course the researcher will not suggest or comment about it to ensure that the researcher is not involved in the participants' project. With well-prepared planning and high sensitivity on the surroundings, the researcher managed to build a good rapport with P2 faster compared to P1.

The researcher followed P2 for about a month, at times the researcher can see he was exhausted due to the course workloads. He can no longer concentrate on his sketching and seem to have no interest to sketch. At that time the researcher will let P2 doing his other things or just relax during the class. Instead of forcing him to sketch, the researcher sat down together chatting with participant or just do the researcher's own work. This is just to give him some space after so many sketching and recordings that he had gone through. Such tolerance from the researcher could motivate him to keep continue being the research participant in this study.

As the nature of design which cannot run from creativity, the researcher does not want to obstruct P2's creative process while sketching. The researcher encouraged P2 to let loose during the recording sessions. He was allowed to have a conversation with his friends and he also had all control on his own sketching session where he can start and stop at any time he wants. There is no any restriction on the sketching sessions. The researcher followed P2's own time.

Besides, in between the sessions, the researcher always had a small chat with the participant every time before he started his sketching session. This is one the ways to establish the bond between a researcher and a participant (Ädel, 2011).

Of course a good rapport could benefit the researcher in some way, but the researcher also needs to bear in mind that rapport building also requires a win-win situation. The reciprocity relation needs to be developed in order to maintain the rapport between the researcher and the participant. In this case, the researcher understood well the life of a student especially a final year design student. The cost of drawing materials is not cheap. Thus the researcher decided to give P2 support in terms of providing his design materials. The researcher bought him rendering markers which he lacked of. The researcher also had brought him interior deco magazines for his references in his design project. Every time the researcher visits P2 for data collection, the researcher never forgot to bring some snacks for him like sweets and chocolates. He can even share these snacks with the entire class. This could motivate him to continue participating in the study and make him excited to meet the researcher.

And these practices were continued and have been applied too in P3 and P4 data collections. The ice breaking, sensitivity on the participant's behaviour, matching with the participant style, maintaining the mutual respect, being flexible and tolerate and giving moral and material support will always be my practises in data collection. It is to ensure that the

researcher can build rapport with participants faster in order to gain rich and meaningful data. These are among the important elements that qualitative researchers need to keep in mind before stepping into the fieldwork for data collection.

#### **4.1 CONCLUSION**

Building a relationship between the researcher and the participant is integral to all qualitative studies. The purpose of this paper is to enlighten readers of the importance of establishing a strong relationship with their participants, and to provide them with useful strategies to improve participant rapport in data collection. Rapport once secured must continuously maintain (Turgo, 2012) to established relationship that will lead to the sharing of rich and insightful data and at the same time could reduce the Hawthorne Effect (Schwartz, Fischhoff, Krishnamurti, and Sowell (2013); (Yunker, 1993). Good rapport will foster respect and trust, and together, a mutual understanding can be achieved to provide quality research findings.



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