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### Reconsidering rapport with urban teachers: negotiating shifting boundaries and legitimizing support

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## Reconsidering rapport with urban teachers: negotiating shifting boundaries and legitimizing support

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This paper addresses Lincoln's [2010. 'What a long, strange trip it's been ...': Twenty-five years of qualitative and new paradigm research. *Qualitative Inquiry* 16, no. 1: 3–9] call for greater attention to the question of rapport in qualitative research through a reflexive examination of researcher–participant relationships in two qualitative studies with urban teachers. In these projects, one a series of case studies and the other an ethnography, we as researchers found ourselves offering various forms of support to struggling teachers in challenging circumstances. These close relationships provided insider data but also raised ethical questions about the boundaries of the Self–Other conjunction. We present three dilemmas from our research in which we struggled to identify the boundaries of support, validation, and friendship in qualitative inquiry. We conclude by re-framing the static notion of rapport as a dynamic and shifting negotiation between a researcher and a participant and expanding the definition of rapport to include legitimate means of support.

**Keywords:** qualitative research; research methodology; rapport; ethics; interpersonal relationship; support

A teacher shares that she recently began taking anti-depressants.  
Another makes a derogatory comment about her low-income urban students.  
And yet another reveals her plans to change careers.  
Yet, in each instance, we remained silent.

In the context of interpersonal relationships, our actions would seem callous, even cowardly at times. But as qualitative researchers, we are expected to engage with others while remaining marginal to the larger community, to act as participant observers (Glesne and Peshkin 1992). Many researchers have struggled over how to situate the ethics of their work along a continuum from traditional utilitarian to feminist (Flinders 1992). This paper expands that debate by exploring the tensions that arise within participant–researcher relationships, with a particular focus on the dilemmas surrounding participants in need of interpersonal support. Through this investigation, we aim to further complicate notions of rapport in qualitative inquiry by highlighting its inherent contradictions and offering some possible forms of remediation.

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This paper emerges out of Lincoln's (2010) call to further develop the notion of rapport in qualitative inquiry. Looking back at 25 years of qualitative research, Lincoln suggests a closer examination of the Self–Other conjunction, offering a more critical look at the 'hyphens' (Fine 1994). Lincoln (2010) writes

We need to find something that does not ignore difference; that takes account of vast deviations, conflicts, and contradictions between individuals and their lifeways, and even within individuals themselves; and that gives rise to new, richer, more complex, more authentic representations of those with whom we work. (5)

She suggests that those involved in a critical form of social science should acknowledge difference, rather than minimize it, in the service of cultural critique. This paper responds to Lincoln's call to complicate the notion of rapport through a closer examination of interpersonal rapport in Self–Other relationships.

We are two former urban teachers who returned to schools to conduct inquiries of teacher learning and development in urban contexts, placing us in partial insider positions. The first project was a series of case studies looking at teacher perspectives and professional participation in an effort to shed light upon career direction (Rinke 2009). The second study was an ethnography of teacher informal interaction as a means to professional knowledge-sharing (Mawhinney 2010). Both studies were longitudinal in nature, taking place over the course of 2 school years, and both were grounded in an interpretive framework that sought to understand the meaning participants constructed of their experiences (Denzin and Lincoln 2005).

In this paper, we turn a lens upon our own practice to reflexively examine the interpersonal relationships constructed over the course of these two studies (Macbeth 2001). We focus in particular on our interactions with three individual teachers, Adele, Shanae, and Claire, and the dilemmas inherent in developing reciprocal relationships with them. In doing so, we echo Moje's (2000) insight that congenial collaborations may conceal underlying power differentials. She writes 'Smooth collaborations are upheld as the ideal, but the quest for smoothness, closeness, and friendliness may be driven or confused by dominant ideologies of "niceness", especially for women engaged in research' (Moje 2000, 25). In this paper, we aim to uncover underlying areas of tension within our apparent rapport with urban teachers by highlighting three dilemmas that arose during the course of fieldwork. In doing so, we offer a confessional tale (Van Maanen 1988) depicting three particularly ambiguous research situations as well as our own internal dialogues as we grapple with the shifting boundaries of support, validation, and friendship.

### **Understanding rapport**

Rapport seems on the surface to be a simple concept. While no formal definition exists in the qualitative research literature, the Oxford English Dictionary defines the usual usage as 'Mutual understanding between persons; sympathy, empathy, connection; a relationship characterized by these' (OED 2011). In the positivist paradigm, rapport was deemphasized as a potential barrier to objectivity. However, in naturalistic inquiry, the umbrella paradigm for qualitative research methods, rapport is embraced as a vehicle to humanizing participants and enhancing rigour (Lincoln and Guba 1985). In this section, we provide an overview of the current conversation around rapport and highlight spaces for further investigation.

### *The importance of rapport*

In the literature on qualitative inquiry, researchers are expected to develop rapport, or friendly interactions with participants, in order to increase access to the field. Agar (1996), for instance, notes that rapport is central to the selection of key informants and Glesne and Peshkin (1992) urge the researcher to become a trusted person in the larger community. Hardly a qualitative research guide exists that does not encourage novice researchers to studiously develop friendly, trusted, and close relationships with their participants in order to gather insider data (e.g. LeCompte and Goetz 1984; Merriam 1998; Stake 1995). In fact, without that rapport, it is difficult to have confidence in the trustworthiness of the project as a whole (Lincoln and Guba 1985), as rapport allows researchers a window into insider perspectives.

Much has also been written about the use of personal symmetries to strengthen Self–Other relationships. Foster (1994) and Johnson-Bailey (1999) both explore their own experiences as insiders sharing a culture and speech patterns within African-American communities. They note that although these connections allow for special insider access, there are still large gulfs that remain with respect to geographic background, gender, age, and class. Vincent and Warren (2001) echo the idea that symmetries of race, culture, gender, and even universally human experiences such as pregnancy can have positive yields in qualitative research, but they also highlight the status and power distinctions that are inherent in these relationships. While discrepancies exist even with insider status, it is generally accepted that qualitative researchers should draw upon their areas of symmetry in order to facilitate the development of rapport with participants.

### *The ethics of rapport*

Despite the fact that rapport is a foundational concept in qualitative research, many have questioned the ethics of this practice. In recent years, it has become generally accepted that procedural ethics, such as those instituted through an Institutional Review Board, are necessary but insufficient for fulfilling researchers' ethical obligations to study participants (Guillemin and Gillam 2004). Alternative frameworks have been suggested, in the form of relational ethics (Slattery and Rapp 2003), which is grounded in a responsibility for one's action, with a goal of doing no harm. Feminist approaches, likewise, promote research as an avenue to positive social change (Christians 2005). Overall, the dialogue around the ethics of qualitative research has moved from the notion of ethics as informed consent and confidentiality to ethics as reciprocity and fairness and ultimately to ethics as improving the lives of marginalized individuals through research (Flinders 1992).

Ethical concerns have been raised around the issue of rapport specifically with respect to power and trust. Wong (1998), in his examination of friendship rapport, reveals the underlying power discrepancies which exist even within seemingly friendly and close researcher–participant interactions. He highlights the power of the researcher to select and remove participants as well as the power to probe into others' lives without exposing our own. Moje (2000) follows this work by examining the enactment of power relationships in a collaborative relationship with a classroom teacher. Magolda (2000), likewise, challenges traditional understandings of trust as an element of rapport, arguing that trust cannot fully mediate potential harm to participants. Overall, reflexive analyses suggest that even a widely accepted practice like rapport is embedded with fundamental and often implicit power dynamics.

Care, or doing what is best for the Other, has been offered as an organizing framework for interpersonal relationships in both theory and practice (Noddings 1988). Recently, this idea was expanded to the notion of ‘caring reflexively’ (Rallis and Rossman 2010), an approach which puts relationships at the centre of research. While these concepts provide some guidance toward developing ethically salient rapport with participants, they do so in broad strokes rather than providing specific guidance for the ‘ethically important moments’ which arise in the context of fieldwork (Guillemin and Gillam 2004). This highlights the need to more clearly define what constitutes ethical rapport in the day-to-day interactions with participants.

### ***Remaining questions about rapport***

We know that rapport is an important practice in qualitative inquiry that is also infused with potentially exploitative and hegemonic power relations. What we do not know is how to locate the boundaries of these relationships. In order to expand our understanding of rapport, greater reflexivity is needed around the boundaries of collaborative and close researcher–participant relationships. Previous examinations of these boundaries have focused on the boundaries between an insider and an outsider (Sherif 2001), the ethics of friendship (Taylor 2011), and the ongoing negotiation of research commitments (Bloom and Sawin 2009). However, clear guidance is still needed on both the quantity and quality of rapport. Grappling with the different images put forward, we question the nature of rapport in our research relationships. Should the nature of rapport in Self–Other relationships resemble rapport between family members? Close friends? Professional colleagues? We also question the quantity of the same rapport. Is there a moment when the conversation should end? When the relationship should cease to exist? It is within this framework that we question the nature of rapport embedded in our own research practices, seeking to identify its appropriate boundaries. In particular, we ask whether we acted in an ethically appropriate manner when dealing with individuals in need of interpersonal support.

### **Building rapport**

Building upon the shoulders of researchers before us, we aimed to develop close researcher–participant relationships that were characterized by strong and ethically grounded practices. In many ways, we prided ourselves on our success in these arenas, as we found it both comfortable and pleasant getting to know our participants through extended lunchtime, coffee, and dinner conversations. However, as the studies entered their second year, nagging questions began to emerge, which forced us to take a reflexive eye on our own practice. In this section, we describe the development of rapport in our research relationships and how it ultimately led us to question those very practices.

We developed these research relationships in the context of two longitudinal studies, which were conducted between 2005 and 2007 in neighbouring cities on the east coast of the USA. Both research studies were situated within large, urban school districts, where the majority of the almost 90,000 students were African-American and came from low-income environments. The first project used eight case studies of secondary teachers across the district to better understand their orientations toward the teaching profession and the development of their career trajectories. The first author met with the eight focus teachers on a monthly basis over the course of 1 year, conducting a total of 76 interviews and 57 classroom and professional

observations. The second study used ethnographic methods and analysed social relationships amongst teachers in a primary school to identify sources of professional knowledge-sharing. The second author spent 2–3 days per week in the school, conducting 312 hours of participant observation over 2 years in her role as a volunteer tutor and a participant observer. She also completed 13 interviews with teachers, two with student teachers, and one interview with the principal.

### ***The importance of rapport***

As novice qualitative researchers, we followed conventional wisdom and attempted to build a strong rapport with our research participants (e.g. Agar 1996). We studiously developed a casual conversational style in interviewing and participant observation in an effort to help the participants feel comfortable with our presence. We brought gifts of appreciation periodically throughout the projects, such as books of interest to our teachers. And we strived to share enough from our own lives to allow for the human experience of ‘bonding’ (Christians 2005), sharing stories of our families and experiences in the schools. As the studies drew to a close, we saw dinner invitations, small tokens of appreciation, and hugs of good-bye as strong signals that we had achieved the intended rapport.

Like other qualitative researchers, we also used various areas of symmetry to build rapport and establish trust with our participants (e.g. Johnson-Bailey 1999). First, we drew upon our own previous experiences as urban teachers to identify with the participants and secure partial insider status. Our participants often acknowledged that connection with comments such as ‘This is a tough job. You know, you taught in the city too’. We also used connections of age as we, like many of our participants, were in our 20s at the time of the research. Finally, we used symmetries of race and culture, as a White educator (C.R.) and an African-American educator (L.M.) working in majority-Black school districts. By building upon these points of symmetry, we were able to get overwhelmed and exhausted urban teachers to open up about their challenges, fears, and even doubts about their work in the classroom.

### ***The ethics of rapport***

In these studies, we sought to pursue relational ethics, in which we were responsible for our own actions and their consequences on others (Ellis 2007). We followed the prescribed protocols of informed consent and confidentiality but saw our social obligation as much larger (Flinders 1992). We attempted to recognize and mediate the underlying power dynamics in our relationships, asking the participants to take active roles in guiding conversations toward their most salient issues (Moje 2000). We tried to operate from a basis of care, inquiring into their personal as well as professional well-being (Noddings 2001). And we sought to offer a measure of reciprocity to our participants (Lincoln 1995). We worked with busy urban teachers who struggled under heavy workloads in challenging environments and they voluntarily spent some of their valuable time talking to us. We felt that we owed them a deep debt and wanted to repay it in some meaningful way.

As each of the studies entered its second year, and we continued our conversations with the participants, a vehicle emerged for us to offer something in return. We found that while we were in the field gathering data for our respective projects, we were also serving a dual role as a support system for struggling educators in challenging circumstances. Teachers, in general, often fight against the isolation of the classroom by



seeking interpersonal interactions (Kardos and Johnson 2007). It appeared that our consistent presence, our interest in their professional and personal lives, and our willingness to simply listen persuaded many of our participants to turn to us for the support they needed as beginning teachers (Gold 1996). It is not clear whether we provided superior support as experienced teachers or whether an alternative simply did not exist in their overstretched and under-resourced urban districts, but regardless of the source, we found ourselves offering many forms of support to our teacher participants. This support ranged from venting frustrations to confirming successes to personal conversations. More than one of the participants began calling our interviews ‘therapy sessions’.

### ***Remaining questions about rapport***

While we were pleased, perhaps even flattered, that our participants turned to us as sources of support, but as time went on, we began to identify problematic aspects of this Self–Other relationship. Questions around the relational ethics of rapport began to emerge. If we served as sources of support for our participants, were we then abandoning them at the conclusion of the project? Were we qualified to serve in this personal and professional support role? Were we influencing the research through these relationships? And perhaps even more importantly, were we influencing lives? We returned to the questions of boundaries which emerged from the literature and applied them to this particular context. If we, inadvertently, became sources of support for our participants, how did that impact the boundaries of our relationships? Were we closer, like professional colleagues? Or more powerful, like supervisors?

We undertook this reflexive analysis in an attempt to make sense of the supportive, but ethically problematic, Self–Other relationships that emerged from our work. In particular, we sought to define ethically appropriate boundaries for rapport between a researcher and a participant. Together, we first identified the common theme of support for the participants, which cut across our two studies and gave a focus to our exploration of rapport. We then identified several ethically important situations (Guillemin and Gillam 2004) that remained unresolved from our research studies and conducted a more in-depth analysis on the most salient of them. For each case, we conducted a reflexive analysis in which we made explicit our underlying questions, concerns, and reflections, focused in particular on the issues of research–participant boundaries. In developing narratives, we highlighted our own thinking, grounded in field notes and analytic memos, from our time in the field, as well as questions which remain part of our thinking today. In this paper, we share personal narratives from three ongoing dilemmas, in addition to the concerns and questions, which remain in an effort to challenge and, ultimately, further develop the notion of rapport.

### **Challenging rapport**

In this section, we offer three narratives from our research, which highlight the particular challenges of building rapport within a context of interpersonal support. We also offer ongoing questions, pointing to the ethical dilemmas inherent in each case, as a vehicle for further understanding the boundaries of rapport.

#### ***Where are the boundaries of support? (C.R.)***

I began working with Adele,<sup>1</sup> a technology teacher at a large and impersonal inner-city high school, during her second year of participation in a national teaching corps. She



was immediately friendly and talkative, so much so that my greatest challenge during our first few interactions was keeping her on track and finding an opportunity to ask my interview questions. Despite her gregarious nature, Adele shared several incidents with me that made me realize that she was feeling isolated and alone. Although she was part of a national teaching corps, she noted that she was not close with others in her cohort. She had trouble finding a roommate in this strange city, and her boyfriend at the time was showing signs of losing interest in the relationship. Because my study focused on the professional as well as personal lives of beginning teachers, I made sure to ask her about these ongoing challenges whenever we met. Not to mention, I was personally concerned with her well-being, as she struggled to make meaningful interpersonal connections in this new city.

In addition to feeling personally isolated, I also noticed that Adele struggled to connect with her students. Although she consistently brought in engaging and relevant projects for them to work on, including many hands-on engineering activities, her students did not seem connected to the classroom. They often came and went as they pleased, talked amongst themselves, and yelled insulting remarks at each other, and at times at her, during class sessions. Adele was understandably distressed at their behaviour but unable to generate effective methods for building a more positive classroom climate. She sought out support from more experienced teachers across her school, but found little help available. Adele and I talked extensively during my monthly visits about these personal and professional challenges, and I served as a sounding board, while she tried to make sense of what they meant for her future.

It was in the context of these ongoing conversations about personal and professional struggles that Adele shared with me that she was fighting depression. First, she told me that she was crying all the time and having trouble making it to school each morning. She said 'I mean I was crying every morning, every single morning. And you can't teach that way'. Then, she mentioned that her department chair had found her on the floor of her classroom wrapped in a foetal position. I made a point of checking in with her regularly about her mental health, and she told me that she had begun taking medication for the depression, which seemed to be working. Adele said 'It brought me from being completely, "I don't want to do anything, I don't want to go to work, I don't want to be on this job" to being me again'. Finally, Adele shared that her therapist was concerned about a family history of bipolar disorder.

As a researcher, I grappled with how to manage this information. On the one hand, I wanted to offer her as much empathy and identification as possible, including the information that I also had a history of mental illness in my own family. On the other hand, I was anything but a trained professional in psychology and, although my interviews may have felt therapeutic, I was hardly prepared to serve as a real therapist for an individual in need. I was torn between offering her the personal support that I know she needed and drawing a line where I was unqualified to go. In the end, I did not offer her much of anything other than a sounding board to listen to her and share in her ups and downs. I still wonder, though, if there is more that I could have done to help another person in need.

My relationship with Adele raises some important questions surrounding rapport in qualitative inquiry. Although conventional wisdom advises researchers to build rapport with participants, there is little guidance around exactly what that rapport should look like. In this situation, I felt as if I had crossed some invisible line in our Self-Other relationship. I had gone far beyond Wong's (1998) notion of 'friendship rapport' to something closer to a 'therapeutic friend'. In this sense, I felt as if our rapport had

gone too far and I was compromising the integrity of my research project. However, this feeling was juxtaposed against a sense of helplessness in the face of her struggle. While I had resources to turn to, including published case examples and colleagues in my field, I would have benefitted from more interdisciplinary guidance that bridged the gap between research ethics and psychological or health care ethics. In this context, I was left with a sense that I had both done too much and done not nearly enough for another human being.

***Where are the boundaries of validation? (L.M.)***

Prior to my ethnography, I was a volunteer reading tutor at my local urban primary school. At the time, I was in graduate school full-time and I missed interacting with students, as I did when I had my own classroom. Volunteering offered me the chance to continue working hands-on in a school and with students. The school where I volunteered was walking distance from my house, and I knew some of the children and parents from the neighbourhood. In one of the classrooms, I worked with a teacher named Candace, and over the course of the year, we developed a friendship. I came to value her as a colleague, and we had even spent time together outside of school hours.

The following year, the opportunity arose for me to conduct my research at the same school where I volunteered my time. My ethnography involved spending informal time with teachers during their lunch hour, and Candace graciously invited me to eat with her lunch group. One of the unstated rules of the lunch space was that this congregational space served as a site of mutual support for the teachers who gathered there. Conversations usually centred on challenges with students, families, or the school system, and teachers always validated each other's viewpoints. Generally, I appreciated this mutually supportive atmosphere. However, there came a point where it proved problematic.

I had previously worked with all of the other teachers in the group except for Shanae, and Shanae and I were the only two African-Americans in the lunch group. Shanae was extremely respected by the other teachers, especially Candace, as Shanae had taught in urban schools throughout her career. Shanae planned to retire at the end of the year and colleagues truly valued her 30 years of service to the profession. Although she was well respected by and close to many other teachers at this school, Shanae was quite guarded around me. She seemed to view my role as a researcher with scepticism, but the other teachers respected Shanae for her wisdom about the profession. No one questioned her word, as it would violate the norms of support in the lunchroom and be a sign of disrespect to her years of service.

Three months into the research, Shanae finally began to let her guard down after Candace continually vouched for my authenticity. Shanae shared a lengthy story about the ills of the school's surrounding neighbourhood, yet I was the only one in the room living in that neighbourhood. The conversation then turned to her perspectives on urban parents 'who are loud and often come to school with rollers in their hair, pajamas, and slippers. You can hear them shuffling down the hallway'. I found these comments offensive to my neighbours and myself, as they seemed to have an underlying tone of cultural disrespect. For me, this was a serious dilemma. My natural instinct would be to challenge Shanae's stance on the surrounding community. There were cultural and racial stereotypes embedded in her comments, even though she was referring to her own culture, and my personality normally would drive me to

address these issues immediately. But challenging Shanae would go against the cultural norms of the lunch space, violate my beginning trust with Shanae, and breach the ethic of friendship with Candace, who had brought me into this community (Tillmann-Healy 2003). Also, as a fellow African-American, I felt uncomfortable challenging Shanae about our cultural norms in front of other White people. Generally speaking, these challenges occur for African-Americans behind closed doors. If I spoke up and challenged Shanae's comments, I would lose the months of building rapport that I, and others who assisted in vouching for me, established in trying to gain Shanae's trust. Moreover, challenging Shanae would hurt my friendship with Candace, as she held Shanae in high esteem.

The others validated Shanae's story by laughing and nodding their heads. With all that was at risk as a researcher and a friend, I decided to nod my head and continue eating my salad. I validated and supported Shanae's story in order to maintain rapport, but I also compromised my own sense of self and integrity in the process. Throughout the year, I found myself doing this often with Shanae. The more rapport that was built between the two of us, the more she felt comfortable sharing her thoughts on urban education with me – the majority of which I found too difficult to stomach. Not once did I challenge Shanae's views in the year I worked with her. Was it wrong to feign my feelings? Ellis (2007, 26) explains that 'listening and engaging in others' stories is a gift'. I gave Shanae the gift of listening to her story and providing validation, but did I give it at the risk of misrepresenting my own values and beliefs? Does building rapport always mean to validate participants in the field, even if it means compromising yourself by presenting a false self (Jackson 2003)?

### ***Where are the boundaries of friendship? (C.R.)***

I liked Claire the first time I met her. Her outspoken demeanour and facial piercings exuded a sense of both confidence and irreverence. Claire was in her first year of teaching physics at a highly troubled alternative school designed for teens who had been removed from their zone schools. She came to teaching because she was unhappy with her graduate programme in physics and decided to explore other options. We shared a background in academia, and I always looked forward to the hours spent talking with her at a local coffee house. When I visited her school site, she introduced me to her students as a 'friend'. And at the conclusion of the study, we exchanged gifts both focused on the love of science. I always had the sense that had the circumstances been different, Claire and I could have been close friends.

Like Adele, Claire also used our meetings as a source of support. While I did not provide her with the direct personal and professional support I gave to Adele, I did offer her an intellectual perspective on teaching. She used our conversations as an outlet to vent frustrations about her troubled school and its closure by the district, her theories about student academic performance, and her aggravation over an ongoing conflict with an unprofessional administrator. We also talked at length about where she was headed professionally, weighing a return to graduate school in either physics or mathematics. I even wrote her a letter of recommendation when she ultimately decided to apply. Finally, Claire shared developments in her personal life, including the initiation and growing pains of a new romantic relationship.

After my year of data collection ended, I continued to keep in touch with Claire and my other participants *via* email, but my regular visits and interviews necessarily dropped off. This distance was a challenge for me and, at times, I felt as if I had lost

important people from my life. So when Claire contacted me a few months later, I was genuinely pleased with her desire to continue our relationships. Her initiative confirmed in my mind that while she had given me a gift, I had given her something in return (Limerick, Burgess-Limerick, and Grace 1996). Claire suggested that we get together for coffee at our old interview site. I gladly accepted and looked forward to our conversation.

However, when I arrived at the coffee shop, it did not feel quite the same. First of all, I did not have my tape recorder and notebook to hide behind. But more importantly, it was simply a conversation rather than an interview. We started talking in the usual way, with Claire telling me about recent events at her school. But after a time she appeared to run out of things to say, seemingly surprised that I was not immediately prepared with follow-up questions to probe more deeply into her experience. Likewise, I tried sharing some of my own experiences of the last few months, including a beginning academic job search as well as my baby growing into a toddler. But these topics were out of the bounds of our typical conversation and she seemed uninterested in my own life, so I stopped sharing. We finished a pleasant, although somewhat awkward, afternoon together. Although we have continued to keep in contact professionally, we have not met socially since that day.

This situation made me question the rapport I had imagined during my study. I had previously believed that the ease of conversation, parting gifts, and social invitations were signals that I had been successful in building rapport with my participants. I had even attributed much of the validity of my insider data to these relationships. But now I began to question that same rapport. Did I view this relationship in a different way than Claire did? Was my image of what friendship entailed so distinct from hers? Or had we simply fallen into a certain pattern that was difficult to change? Could my relationship with Claire evolve over time, given interest from both parties? And should it? While the realization of the contextual boundaries of our relationship troubled me, I also began to wonder if it was distressing for Claire as well. Was she regretting her participation in the study? Did she feel betrayed by my efforts to make the relationship more equitable? I feared that our existing rapport had lost some of its authenticity, and I hoped that Claire did not see me as a negative presence in her life. In the next section, we attempt to address some of the questions raised from our interactions with Adele, Shanae, and Claire.

### **Reconsidering rapport**

Across all three of these ethically important moments (Guillemin and Gillam 2004), we as researchers continually sought to identify the appropriate boundaries of our relationships with the participants. This already-challenging task was made all the more difficult because of our sense of obligation to provide support for our participants as a form of reciprocity, a sense that arose for us, like others (e.g. Ellingson 1998; Jackson 2003), from our recognition of power inequalities and our effort to develop less hierarchical relationships (Finch 1984; Vincent and Warren 2001). We questioned the power dynamics in our relationships, as we were the ones who held the power to either offer or withhold support. And we challenged the degree to which we were truly caring for our participants by providing a necessarily temporary form of support. In each situation, we felt as if we had not done enough to support a person in need while simultaneously living with a nagging sense that we were violating our roles as researchers.

The analysis of these cases points to three ongoing dilemmas in qualitative research. First, the boundaries of rapport in research relationships are not clear. Rather, locating these boundaries necessitates moment-to-moment negotiations between the researcher and the participant, what Walker (1998) has termed non-generic accountability because it must reflect a particular context. Beyond that, boundaries shift in response to moment-to-moment negotiations within researchers ourselves, as we continually re-frame our roles and relationships. Rapport has been previously conceived as a static condition that can be attained with participants in the field. This analysis suggests that, instead, rapport has dynamic and shifting properties. The boundaries of rapport depend on the context of the research, the needs of participants, and the comfort of researchers in adopting various roles. These boundaries, once established, shift continually throughout the research project. This finding necessitates that qualitative researchers re-conceptualize rapport as fluid and continually negotiated between the researcher and the participant.

Second, despite the promises of personal symmetries, insider status, and ethics of care, it is clear that researchers and participants view the nature of rapport in different ways. No matter how close we may come together, there remains a gulf between Self and Other. We define rapport each in our own ways, and these cases illustrate that time and again our definitions are distinct from one another, gulfs that may only become visible in moments of dissonance. This insight puts qualitative researchers in the position of seeking rapport with participants while acknowledging that we will never be able to fully reconcile our perspectives.

Third, we found that there is no ideal way to situate the rapport that develops between a researcher and a participant. Each position on the shifting terrain offers particular affordances and constraints (Figure 1). For instance, locating the boundaries of rapport closer to the objective end of the continuum, with a more detached researcher-participant relationship, offers the affordances of clearer traditional boundaries, but the constraints of greater hierarchy and power inequity in that same relationships. On the other end of the continuum with more egalitarian relationships, researchers and participants are afforded greater reciprocity, but with muddier boundaries. Shifting locations of rapport along this continuum offer partial degrees of clarity and hierarchy. This dilemma leaves qualitative researchers with the responsibility to acknowledge the affordances and constraints of our choices with respect to rapport.

Our struggle with the ethics of building relationships in fluid contexts, with disparate expectations, and amongst shifting boundaries also led us to reconsider the role of support in our practice. While the common understanding of rapport entails 'mutual understanding . . . empathy, connection' (OED 2011), we found that in our experience, rapport goes a step farther to also include a measure of support. In particular, we suggest a re-conceptualization of rapport as a form of collaboration in labour. Zigo (2001) uses the notion of collaboration in labour as a means of reciprocity to meet the immediate needs of participants. She distinguishes between a utilitarian approach to reciprocity and a feminist one, writing

Both a utilitarian and a feminist stance argue that research must contribute to an overall social good. In traditional utilitarian terms, the benefits of the research may not be felt by the immediate participants themselves, as long as the potential exists for systemic change at some point in time. Researchers working from a feminist perspective, however, feel an obligation to seek opportunities for social good and equalization of power differentials as part of their ongoing relationship with their participants. (353)

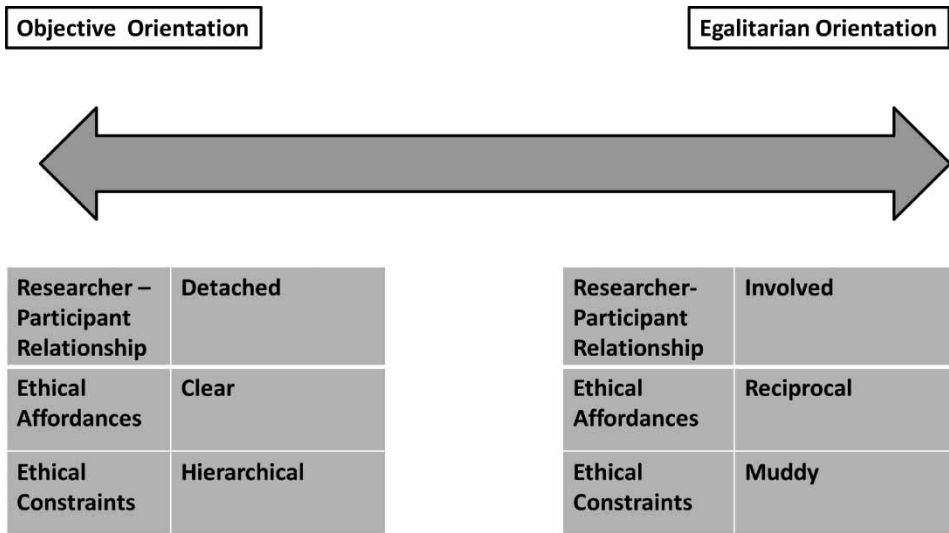


Figure 1. Ethical affordances and constraints in the researcher–participant relationship.

From her perspective, collaboration in labour is an ethical practice which offers an immediate form of reciprocity to participants by providing direct, worthwhile, and satisfying benefits (Zigo 2001). When the rapport we built with the participants is re-framed from this perspective, the support offered becomes legitimized. Rather than something we were doing in spite of our research, it emerges as an accepted part of our practice.

In considering support as an intrinsic element of rapport, we can begin to respond to many of our earlier questions. Although the boundaries of researcher–participant relationships may shift and never fully reconcile, we as researchers carry with us a unique and valuable resource in the form of support. From this perspective, we play an active, rather than static, interpersonal role in our relationships. For someone like Adele, we are permitted to facilitate more support, with Shanae, we may insert our opinions at the right time, and with Claire, we can allow the relationship to evolve from research to friendship. In short, as Lincoln (2010) suggests, we are encouraged to embrace the dilemmas inherent in our relationships and respond to them by bringing our own resources to the table. While this framework does not resolve our ethical questions, it does legitimize the tensions that arose over the course of our time in the field. These tensions arose because of a willingness to engage in a messy but vital collaboration of labour with our teachers. While the boundaries of rapport remain fluid and the ideal elusive, we can resolve that there is much to be gained, for the participant and the researcher alike, from engaging in this challenging but worthwhile negotiation of rapport.

Finally, we can begin to embed this notion of rapport within the broader context of ethical practice in qualitative research. Returning to Lincoln’s (2010) call for acknowledging difference, this legitimized form of rapport offers the researchers’ collaboration in labour in an effort to redress power differentials and social inequalities. However, as researchers, we are responsible to multiple parties, including ourselves and our participants, but also students, parents, and larger society. From this standpoint, we



reconsider our initial choices to remain silent and instead argue for greater involvement across the three cases, but particularly in the interaction with Shanae, where our actions could do much to foster social justice. In this way, rapport can be theorized not as an isolated entity consisting of congenial interactions, but instead as a central element in the broader quest to use qualitative research to capture, acknowledge, and ultimately enhance the lifeways of the individuals who engage with it.

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### Note

1. All names have been changed to ensure anonymity.

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