Researching Conservative Groups: Rapport and Understanding Across Moral and Political Boundaries

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Abstract

This paper explores whether it is possible to understand the perspectives of people with whom we find it difficult or impossible to empathise, because their moral and political views are very different to our own. Focusing on our dilemmas in carrying out qualitative research with conservative evangelicals and anti-abortion activists, we take issue with the assumption that understanding is connected with the presence of rapport and empathy in research interviews. This paper argues instead that a reflexive approach, which considers researchers’ orientations towards their subject and their respondents, and their emotional journeys through the research process, will enable more comprehensive interpretation of our research material.

Key Words: anti-abortion activists, conservative groups, emotions, evangelicals, rapport, empathy, reflexivity.
Introduction

Nigel Fielding, in his work on the British Nationalist Party, urges that ‘we must know all we can about those we oppose’ (1981:vii). We share the view that research across one’s own moral and political boundaries is essential if we are to understand the power dynamics of the societies we live in. However, this type of research raises a host of methodological issues, on which the literature is relatively silent.

While there is a significant body of work that crosses researchers’ moral and political boundaries (e.g. Blee 2002; Campbell 2003; Ezekiel 1995; Fielding 1981; Fielding 1993; Marcus 1983; Ostrander 1993; Puwar 1997; Shore and Nugent 2002; Smart 1984; Walford 1994; Zuckerman 2003), there is little methodological discussion of relationships with respondents in the field, or personal orientations towards the research topic (e.g. Fielding 1981). Surprisingly, many authors seem to echo standard methodological advice, particularly the idea that rapport is desirable in order to get ‘good’ data (e.g. Ezekiel 2002; Ezekiel 1995).

Drawing on examples from our studies of right wing moral and political groups, namely anti-abortion activists and conservative evangelicals in Ireland, this paper critiques the notion that rapport is necessary and desirable for all research encounters. Instead we underline the importance of reflexivity, not least concerning the emotional dynamics of research, in seeking to understand those encounters.

Rapport, Empathy and Understanding

It has long been a truism, albeit contested, that sociological research cannot be value-free. Sociologists do, consequently, tend to ‘take sides’ (Hammersley 2000), often aligning themselves with relatively powerless groups (Fontana and Frey 2005: 696). We can see this, for example, in the ethnographic tradition of the Chicago School, in anti-racist, feminist and action research. These approaches accept that the values and social identity of researchers shape the questions that are asked, the material that is produced, and the interpretations that are offered, and seek to make these values explicit (e.g. Coffey 1999; Denzin and Lincoln 1998; Glassner and Hertz 2003; Letherby 2003; Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002).

The situatedness of social research, and the processes through which material is generated and interpreted, have consequently become central to methodological discussions. Through these discussions, a preference seems to have emerged for research relationships characterized by rapport. In Campbell’s (2003:90) words, ‘rapport continues to dominate as the ideal in the interviewer-interviewee relationship’. This applies to those who study the ‘enemy’ as well as those who do not (e.g. Duncombe and Jessop 2002; Horowitz 1986; Luff 1999; Ostrander 1993; Puwar 1997). For instance, Blee (2002:12-13), although uneasy about spending time with her racist respondents, nonetheless stresses the need for some rapport, and outlines her strategies for creating this. Likewise, Zuckerman (2003) regrets that she was unable to develop rapport in her interviews with Nobel-Prize winning scientists, because, in her view, it compromised the responses she received.

This preference for rapport seems to be related to two concerns: maximising respondent disclosure, and promoting the researcher’s ability to understand. Before
exploring these concerns in detail, we must firstly define our terms. By rapport we mean the ability to ‘get along with’ a research participant in a friendly manner. We presume that rapport is often, although not always, associated with empathy, namely imaginatively feeling what others are experiencing’ (Bruce and Yearley 2006:84), or ‘being in feeling with’ (Stacey 2006). This is close to, but distinct from, sympathy, which describes a stronger sense of affinity with a perspective or narrative. This paper is concerned with the connections between rapport, empathy, sympathy and understanding, in both the methodological literature and in our own research histories.

Conventional methodological texts emphasize the importance of establishing rapport as a means for getting ‘good’ research material (Hardy and Bryman 2004:119). The presence of rapport would seem to seem to indicate that trust has been established (Ostrander 1993: 950). There has, however, been much ethical debate over this strategy of developing rapport in order to elicit ‘good’ material (e.g. Bourdieu and Accardo 1999; Holstein and Gubrium 1995; Kleinman and Copp 1993:40; Oakley 1981; Pryke 2004). Feminists in particular have expressed ethical discomfort with using rapport as a means of establishing trust and consequently disclosure, arguing that this strategy is a form of manipulation which has no place in ethical research (e.g. Campbell 2003; Duncombe and Jessop 2002; Finch 1984; Oakley 1981).

Rapport and Understanding

The methodological preference for rapport in research relationships seems, along with promising ‘good’ material, also to be based on an assumption that understanding can best be achieved when there is rapport, often characterised in terms of an empathetic relationship between participants and researchers (Fontana and Frey 2005: 708). As Kleinman and Copp note, ‘fieldworkers strongly believe that empathy is a must for analysis’ (1993:33).

For example, Donna Luff’s study of women activists in the ‘moral lobby’ describes how she valued the ‘moments of rapport’ that she experienced with her interviewees:

> ... in the interview situation moments of rapport [original emphasis], as I will term them, can develop, as aspects of each woman’s identity or experience are found to be shared, understood or mirrored. [...] ... [W]here the researcher reflects upon moments of rapport they can contribute important insights into the research.’ (1999:697).

It would seem that Luff values these ‘moments’ because she assumes that they constitute moments of insight, since shared subjectivity (as opposed to objectification) improves the possibilities for understanding (p.695). Although she notes that moments of dissonance and discomfort are also of interest, and that there is no guarantee that these moments of rapport are simultaneously perceived by both interviewer and interviewee1 (p.697), she does, nevertheless, value them, largely because she assumes that their occurrence significantly adds to the soundness of her interpretation.

The idea that rapport will allow shared meanings to be uncovered assumes that the absence of rapport involves prejudice, and understanding is consequently obstructed. However, from a hermeneutic perspective, it is only through our prejudices that we can begin to understand both our own and alternative perspectives, since they provide
a medium through which we can perceive the limits of our own horizons, and consequently expand or shift those limits (Habermas 1988: 147-8; Hekman 1990: 14; Ricoeur and Thompson 1981: 75-6).

It seems to us that the coupling of rapport with empathetic projection signifies a romantic, communitarian account of the production and understanding of meaning (Ricoeur and Thompson 1981: 90). Young points out that the communitarian view of meaning assumes that subjects connected by emotion or sentiment are transparent to one another, as well as to themselves. This involves a denial of difference, and critics argue instead that meanings are produced, not discovered, through a process of listening and conversing (1995: 235-6).

Moreover, placing interpretive value on a ‘moment of rapport’ assumes that understanding occurs in the moment of interaction, rather than in the larger context of the research process. Specific meanings may be not at all clear during a research encounter, but only subsequently, through reflection, and even then only provisionally (Gadd 2004; Kleinman and Copp 1993:21-2).

The assumption that understanding depends on what Luff describes as shared identity or experience, perhaps even a sympathetic relationship, has been rejected, for example, by Weber, who famously remarked that ‘one need not have been Caesar in order to understand Caesar’ (1947: 90). We can, he argued, ‘try to understand the action motivated by [their values] on the basis of whatever opportunities for approximate emotional and intellectual interpretation seem to be available at different points in its course.’ It would seem, then, that rapport, although it may be significant, is not necessary for understanding to be possible, since understanding is achieved through language, conversation, and reflection, not through empathetic encounters.

In fact, a number of contemporary sociological studies do not make these assumptions about rapport, even if they do not explicitly discuss the methodological implications of this (e.g. Skeggs 1997; Walkerdine et al. 2001). In particular, those who advocate ‘active’ or ‘critical’ interviewing for epistemological, as well as ethical or political, purposes have critiqued the value of rapport as a research tool (e.g. Bourdieu and Accardo 1999; Holstein and Gubrium 1995; Kleinman and Copp 1993:40; Pryke 2004). Pryke, in his interviews with British Serbs (2004), found that challenging some of his respondents’ denials of mass rape and genocide in Bosnia sometimes led to revealing exchanges. Peshkin (1984) found a similar dynamic at work when he expressed disagreement with the extreme evangelical views of his respondents, as did Campbell (2003) with male police officers.

Pryke, Peshkin and Campbell provide important evidence that a thin form of rapport, friendliness without empathy, can be established despite disagreement with respondents’ views, and sometimes that rapport can be interrupted or even sacrificed in order to engage in more critical, and possibly more revealing, debate.

Thus, the epistemological as well as ethical assumptions about the value of rapport are problematic. The emotional processes and complex socio-political positionings we encounter through research can offer a route for reflecting on assumptions, interactions, and meanings. With this in mind, we turn to our efforts to understand when identities are not shared, and friendliness, empathy or sympathy is lacking.
Reflections on Emotions

Work which crosses political and moral boundaries involves complex, and sometimes unpleasant and uncomfortable, interactions which may have important emotional dimensions (Esseveld and Eyerman 1992: 219). Although the sociology of emotions is becoming increasingly popular, there is surprisingly little discussion of the role of emotions in the research process and as data (notable exceptions are Cylwik 2001; Hubbard et al. 2001). Our emotions can be understood as containing reasoned responses and orientations to our social contexts, and so offer us a route to understanding those very responses and orientations, and the social world more generally (Barbalet 2002; Kleinman and Copp 1993; Nussbaum 2001; Turner and Stets 2005).

Emotional orientations in research come not only from past personal experiences, but also from present political sensibilities. This includes the political and academic contexts within which research takes place. Where are our respondents positioned in socio-political space? Are they powerful? Do they espouse egalitarian principles? Are they oppressed and suffering? Or do they perpetuate oppression and suffering? How do we feel about this? In other words, our judgements about the social and political situation of our respondents are significant in shaping our emotional orientation towards them. Furthermore, our sense of who our audience is may also be significant in shaping our orientations to our respondents. There are a number of emotional elements to this struggle for professional recognition, not least our critical scholarly dispositions, and, as Blee puts it, our sense of academic pressure to maintain boundaries between researchers and members of intensely ‘unloved’ groups (2003:181). Indeed, this may leave some of us feeling vulnerable to being perceived as either in sympathy with the views of such groups, or as too prejudiced against them to be capable of understanding them. We need to reflect on how these emotional orientations are shaped by a range of social contexts, and in turn shape our research.

The Presence and Absence of Rapport: what have we learned?

As we have argued, we are sceptical about assumptions that are often made about the ways in which a perceived sense of rapport in research interactions, whether a thin form of friendliness, or a more substantial sense of empathy or even sympathy, supports our interpretations of those interactions. Instead, we found that interviewees attempted to create rapport in the face of efforts to engage in a more critical dialogue (Claire), and a distinct lack of rapport in research situations that were nevertheless valuable (Lisa).

For example, I (Lisa) felt I had low levels of rapport with the anti-abortion activists I interviewed as part of a study of the connections between discourses of gender and nationhood in abortion politics in the Republic of Ireland. I interviewed twenty political activists and organisation representatives for this study, of which nine were opposed to abortion access. I was interested in their political motivations, and their sense of what was at stake. I felt it was necessary to talk to those on both sides of the political divide directly in order to get a sense of their commonalities and differences. Only by doing this could I begin to understand the way the issue had been framed, contested and reshaped over time. Given this focus, I was not concerned that a lack of
rapport would mean that I could not understand my interviewees. Political activists are committed to speaking to as wide a range of audiences as possible, and tend to have carefully worked out and frequently repeated political or moral narratives. Thus, establishing a friendly and trusting rapport with them was not necessary in order to be able to engage in discussion with them about their politics, and gain a sense of its internal coherence.

This is not to say that these interviews were easy. Anti-abortion respondents based their politics on a claimed moral national identity which Irish people shared, which made it difficult to question them from the apparently ‘insider’ position of an Irish woman. As ‘James’ argued:

‘I’d say there are very few, [a] very small percentage which would go all the way with pro-choice […] you’d find very few people in Ireland who would […] take the position that is much more common abroad. The majority of people in Ireland are very uneasy with it, and I think even people on the other side to the [anti-abortion] campaign are very […] uneasy with abortion, they don’t like abortion, and even if they think it should be a right, that doesn’t mean they personally support it themselves’.

Categories such as ‘Irish’ and ‘pro-choice’ are contested in social and political contexts, including research contexts. Researchers should, it seems to us, be alert to such efforts to confer meaning, rather than seeking to grasp meanings through developing rapport, regardless of the research question, the context of investigation, or the political and social agendas of respondents.

A similar dynamic was at work in some of my (Claire) interviewees. I interviewed seven conservative evangelical Protestants in Northern Ireland between 2000-2001 for a wider project on religion and politics, and twenty more between 2002-2003, for a different, and again wider, project on religious identity change over time. Most of these participants were supporters of, and/or activists in, Ian Paisley’s Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). All were extremely morally conservative and opposed the peace process. I personally agreed with practically none of their views.

Religiously agnostic, and worse, a backslider, I assumed that my lack of salvation might make interactions with participants difficult. However, doing interviews with conservative Protestants I found that my perceived communal credentials were sometimes more significant than my secular identity (see also Egharevba 2001; Song and Parker 1995). Some participants made assumptions about my views on the basis of, in ‘Sam’s’ words, being ‘born a Protestant’. ‘Arthur’ refused to accept my self-presentation as backslider, or someone who has left their religion, and repeated the theological tenet of ‘once saved always saved’. As a result, despite attempting to disagree with some of my respondents’ views, some seemed to indicate that disagreement was inconceivable and continued to speak as if I was an ‘insider’.

For example, on one occasion I felt obliged to disagree with ‘Sam’s’ anti-Catholic and politically oppositional views and expressed my own opinion that I supported the peace process and did not agree with Protestant hegemony in Northern Ireland. After a short lecture on my erroneous views, Sam continued to construct my identity as
similar to his, remarking, ‘they haven’t got rid of Sam and they haven’t got rid of Claire out of the country […] Their idea was exterminate us and get us to go […] You’re not Irish. We’re British and that’s it’. He then insisted I stay for dinner and requested a follow up visit. The fact that I was born on the ‘right side’ seemed to mediate my attempt to distance myself from his views. Although I was not able to empathise with this respondent, reflecting on his attempt to confer meaning on my identity, as incontrovertibly ‘born Protestant’, enabled a deeper understanding of his narrative.

Indeed, I (Claire) found that interviewees worked quite hard to establish rapport with me. Most of the interviewees were by and large curious about the Republic of Ireland (the traditional enemy, where I lived and studied at the time). Even where participants knew I was not in agreement with their views, this did not appear to be a barrier to them telling me their life histories. ‘Helen’ prefaced her life story with ‘you’ll probably think I’m crazy’, but proceeded to talk for three hours in great detail about her experiences and controversial attitudes, most of which I simply could not empathise with. As Fielding (1981), Ezekiel (1995) and Blee (2002) have all noted, respondents can be enthusiastic about telling their story, perhaps in the hope that it will ‘set the record straight’. On many occasions conservative Protestant interviewees would tell me they hoped I would be able to tell their story, to publish my results and correct society’s negative opinions of them. Reflecting on why respondents seemed so eager to talk with someone who may write unfavourably about them generated important insights into how they perceived their social position. This of course raises questions about publicising the views of extreme groups, which all researchers must balance with the need to create knowledge about, in Fielding’s words, ‘those we oppose’.

In contrast, sharing an identity can lead to an assumption of shared understandings which may inhibit critical analysis. My interview transcript with ‘David’, a fellow ‘backslider’ a is peppered with his assertions that ‘you know what I mean’, ‘I don’t need to tell you this’, and is striking for my seeming acceptance at the time that somehow I did know what he meant, which resulted in less probing than usual. It seemed that I was transferring my experiences and interpretations onto his narrative, and although this was one of the most comfortable interviews I conducted, it may not have been as revealing as some of the other, more awkward, exchanges.

It is difficult to know how our participants really felt about our rapport, or lack of it, and how this impacted on our research. All we are able to do is to note participants’ verbal and non-verbal reactions in our field notes and in our interview transcripts. When researching across our own moral and political boundaries, we found that sometimes rapport is unexpectedly present, sometimes it is absent and often it is perceived differently by each party. We also found it possible to reflect on each of these scenarios to develop our understanding of our data.

**Interpreting Emotional Fieldwork**

Reflecting on the emotional journeys we negotiated through carrying out these research projects has also been valuable in helping us interpret our research material. This has involved reflecting on the extent to which we had gained some emotional distance from our research subject prior to undertaking our projects, as well as
reflecting on the overall emotional dynamics of these projects, and how they informed our understanding of what we found.

For each of us, our own experiences and beliefs partly motivated the research we conducted. I (Claire) was raised in a conservative religious context, leaving both the faith and Northern Ireland by the time I was eighteen. My secular existence in Dublin gave me a breathing space to be able to return to the social scientific study of religion. Had I stayed in Northern Ireland, frequently coming into contact with the same conservative religious networks in which I was raised, I doubt that I would have had the emotional detachment to carry out research in this area. Similarly, for me (Lisa), my ability to begin putting the values that had shaped my early life in Ireland into some perspective was very much helped by my move to London. The emotional and physical distance this gave me were crucial to my efforts to understand the gendered dynamics of the Ireland I had grown up in.

Despite this degree of distance, the question of negative emotions inevitably became important in our research. For me, (Claire) a significant emotion that arose from time to time was annoyance, often in response to attempts at proselytism – when participants tried to ‘save’ me. Especially for conservative evangelicals, proselytism is considered an essential part of faith. Some participants, understandably including some missionaries, tried to steer conversations in the direction of my own lack of salvation. Early in the research, an interviewee told me that if I left the room without making a commitment to Christ I would go to hell, and was encouraged to make an immediate decision. On the first occasion I was told I was going to hell, I became extremely annoyed. My fieldnotes record feeling cornered, distressed and indeed, rather hostile to the interviewee.

The question for the reflexive researcher is what to do with this kind of experience. I gradually came to better understand how others react negatively to evangelicals when they discuss their faith, and how this in turn constructs evangelical identity as oppositional, in battle with a hostile modern world (see Smith and Emerson 1998). I soon began to develop strategies to deal with proselytism such as thanking participants for their concern but saying I did not feel ready to make a decision today.

But whilst critical reflection on my emotions enabled a deeper understanding of my research participants and their context, my emotions held me back in other ways. I felt uncomfortable participating in evangelical events as part of the research. This seriously limited my ability to collect deep ethnographic data. In contrast, Peshkin (1984) lived in an evangelical Protestant community for two years where his behaviour was constantly under scrutiny and adapted to avoid offending his participants. This approach can place huge pressures on the individual, and Peshkin describes himself becoming increasingly paranoid and upset. Because of my strategy of limited contact, annoyance and upset could be minimised and I gradually came to view proselytism as a fair exchange for participants’ time. However, this had an impact on the breadth of data collected and cut off the possibility of conducting a richer ethnographic study.

I (Lisa) also experienced negative emotions, mostly of intimidation and guilt, with the anti-abortion activists I interviewed. Unlike Blee (2003), whose respondents used fear of physical danger to manage her interactions with them, my respondents were often
friendly and helpful, sometimes offering me hospitality. Nevertheless I was intimidsted by them. Having grown up during an era when the political and social agenda of these respondents was hegemonic, it was difficult to appear to be stepping outside the highly religious and authoritarian version of Irishness that they had successfully constructed since the late 1970s. The tone of abortion politics in the 1980s was often referred to as McCarthyist (Smyth 2005). For me, these respondents represented the voice of moral authority that had shaped the habitus of my life in Ireland. To ask explicit questions about their point of view seemed to me already to have stepped too far away from that commonsense, and left me feeling vulnerable to moral criticism.

Another emotion, guilt, has also been important in shaping my interpretation of what these respondents said. I felt, and still do feel, guilty that I was not more explicit with these respondents about my political views on abortion access. Like Back and Solomos, I negotiated access not by lying, but by not telling the whole truth (1993:189). Although I am pro-choice, I portrayed myself to these respondents, not always successfully, as an impartial academic. My rationales for doing this were that they would be very unlikely to talk to me otherwise, and that the subject of research was not the morality of abortion per se, but the terms of the political debate, which I was very open with them about. However, some participants may have picked up cues from me, or were simply suspicious of any outside observers. For example my interview with Paul lasted no more than 10 minutes, which included him asking me to switch off my tape recorder at one point because a colleague was taking a ‘sensitive’ phone call next door which he did not want me to pick up. I did spell out where I stood to one respondent when he asked at the end of the interview. His response was to regret having talked to me, and to ask that I get his agreement before quoting him in any publication. He did continue the conversation we me however, and tried to understand my point of view while at the same time trying to persuade me that his was the right one. This move to a more personal level of discussion provided rich material that helped be understand the perspective of my respondent, in relation to myself, more fully.

The value of reflecting on these emotions is that, like Blee, (2003) it has helped me to understand the dynamics of the anti-abortion lobby. My sense of intimidation reflected the strength of their position during my formative years, and the ways in which they represented a view of Irishness that placed women and girls in very subordinate positions. This might explain why I found it so intimidating to try and interview them about their motivations and perspectives. In addition, reflection on the emotions I experienced during the research has allowed me to think about the ways in which subtle forms of moral intimidation have been an important part of their project. This combined with the friendliness and openness I encountered was a strange mix. However, the general sense of openness to the ‘other’ (liberal/left journalists and researchers such as myself) was also important in their self-characterisation as democrats, particularly in a context where their hegemonic standing had been seriously damaged. Nevertheless the hostility I encountered indicated their sense of insecurity in the face of relatively ‘public’ questioning, at the time of the interviews. Finally, my reflection on the guilt I felt about not being explicit about my moral stance on abortion has taught me to deal with these issues more carefully in future research projects.
It is important to acknowledge how our emotional dispositions and reactions may influence the collection and interpretation of our data. Sometimes we can reflect on our emotions to enable a deeper understanding of the data. At the very least we can reflect on the ways in which our emotions shape our research. This is crucial when studying groups across our personal moral and political boundaries, but also requires that we reflect on positive emotions when studying those with whom we may agree or sympathise with.

Conclusion

We are not arguing that rapport has no value in research. Where we experience rapport, our interactions may be less stressful and we may wish to spend more time in the field. However, rapport is not always possible, or indeed necessary, either for generating ‘good’ material, or for our ability to comprehensively understand that material. We should be careful that when we feel we ‘get along well’ with our respondents that we do not assume we have a special insight into their lives.

Similarly, empathy, and even sympathy, can be a significant factor in research. However, its impact cannot be assumed, but instead should be itself be subject to reflection and analysis. We should be aware that when we empathise, or even sympathise, with our participants, we can sometimes make assumptions that we ‘know what they mean’. In contrast, when researching conservative groups, we have found that sometimes we are simply not able to put ourselves in their shoes. Again, this does not preclude our ability to develop any understanding. There are a wealth of other reflective practices that we can engage in to enable us to understand those we disagree with, including reflecting on the research encounter itself; its broader socio-political context; respondents’ efforts to confer meanings, identities or opinions upon us as researchers; and the much overlooked question of the emotional dynamics of research relationships and orientations.

Notes

1 For an account of an accidentally recorded conversation between participants that indicated they did not trust him, despite the rapport he thought he had built up, see Duneier, M. and Carter, O. 1999. Sidewalk. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

2 I am grateful to Cillian McBride for pointing this out.

3 A backslider is someone who has once been ‘saved’ but who no longer believes or practices the faith. I earn this label as a result of having grown up in a conservative evangelical church, and being ‘saved’ as a child.

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