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## **Telling the difficult things: creating spaces for disclosure, rapport and 'collusion' in qualitative interviews.**

### **Abstract**

Qualitative interviews continue to offer an established way to collect rich data about everyday experiences of the social world. It is also recognised that data collected during face-to-face interviews are the product of a social interaction with co-constructive elements. Reflection on the research process and methodological transparency, have become mainstays of rigorous qualitative research practise, facilitating critical assessment of research findings. But in what ways can and do researchers co-construct interview accounts and what happens once data are collected? This paper focuses on what happens during the interview, for example the creation of spaces and endurance of silences, or supportive comments made in order to invite and allow disclosures, and what happens *around* the interview encounter. Do 'permissions' to voice difficult, challenging experiences amount to collusion or just good, effective interviewing technique? How/do research relationships - including experiences of power – shift within and around the interview and when does 'rapport' cease?

### **Background**

Although there are now multiple 'strategies of data collection', augmented more recently by digital technologies, the face-to-face interview continues to be utilized as a popular mode of qualitative data collection (Atkinson et al, 2001:7). This situation according to Denzin has been the case 'for a full century' during which time 'the interview has been the basic information gathering tool of the social sciences' (2001:23; Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). Over this time, the interview and its recording have usually been taken to be less problematic than other modes of qualitative/ethnographic data gathering and historically was associated with eliciting unbiased (because recorded) and so 'objective' data (Lee, 2004). These associations, and the interview encounter itself, have been subject to both critical consideration and greater scrutiny of the (power) dynamics which can permeate the encounter and so the data collected (Cotterill, 1992; Finch, 1984; Harding, 1991; Letherby, 2004; Oakley, 1981, 2002; Ribbens and Edwards, 1998; Stanley and Wise, 1991, 1993; Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 1996). Yet notwithstanding this the interview continues to provide a familiar and established mode of capturing data in qualitative research in ways which can appear less problematic when set before university research ethics committees (URECS). The interview in

all its guises (from highly structured to unstructured) has come to occupy a ubiquitous position in qualitative data collection, consequently requiring less explanation than other, more recent and innovative, data collection strategies. But is what happens in the interview unproblematic and when exactly does interview-based data collection begin and end and what will eventually constitute 'the data' to be analysed? This paper takes a closer look at the assumptions made and practices used by researchers in interview settings in relation to developing 'rapport', trust and collecting data. It then turns its attention to what happens *around* the interview and asks when rapport-building begins and ends, as well as *what* elements of the data collection process inform the data and our eventual analysis. These areas will be informed by researcher experiences conducting two qualitative longitudinal research (QLR) on transition to first-time motherhood (Miller, 2005, 2007) and transition to first-time fatherhood (Miller, 2010, 2012).

### **The interview**

It is widely acknowledged that the qualitative face-to-face interview is a site of social interaction in which resulting accounts will have co-constructed elements even where individual, biographical accounts are sought (Birch and Miller, 2000; Corradi, 1991; Rapley, 2001). The interview also assumes that individuals have an account or narrative to 'give', which will be (broadly) recognisable in a western context. Thus the premise of the 'modernist subject' underpins most interviewing endeavours in the western world (Alldred and Gillies, 2012). These assumptions are also shared by many University research ethics committees (UREC) who can regard the interview as a familiar and bounded opportunity for data collection, where the *type* of data to be collected can be known in advance and so viewed as (mostly) unproblematic. But all interview encounters involve elements of negotiation involving identity work, power dynamics, emotions and 'emotional risks' regardless of the topic under study, which render this an uncertain and sometimes precarious undertaking too (Renzetti and Lee, 1994; Rapley, 2001; Dickson-Swift et al, 2007, 2009; Sampson et al, 2008; emerald and Carpenter, 2015). Moreover, 'the emotional framing of interviews' according to

Ezzy contributes significantly to 'shaping the content' of the interview encounter too (2010:163; emerald and Carpenter, 2015). These considerations emanate from much earlier feminist concerns with representing the 'Other' and debate about speaking 'for' and 'about' the Other. Yet feeling disempowered to explore the experiences of others, who will almost certainly be different in all sorts of ways, could only result in 'silences' and according to Kitzinger and Wilkinson 'the re inscription of power relations' (1996:12). Significantly, these debates led to a concern and concentration on the reflexive practices experienced and involved in qualitative interview-based research.

The face-to-face interview then involves researcher techniques of listening and prompting aimed at making participants feel comfortable and so more able to share/'disclose' their experiences (Birch and Miller, 2000; Duncombe and Jessop, 2012). Similarly, the techniques and practices we engage as researchers should be reflected upon, even though the flow of an interview can be hard to predict and anticipate as the interview unfolds. But attempting to establish a sense of rapport – or at least respect, in terms of someone giving their time and engaging with our questions – in a qualitative interview may be/should be different to the more commercialised commodification of research skills used in other forms of information gathering (Duncombe and Jessop, 2012; Dickson-Swift et al, 2007). However, regardless of the form of relationship we attempt to establish during an interview, its development can be seen to begin well before the interview takes place, as recruitment, initial contact and interview arrangements are made using different forms of (swiftly changing) digital technologies such as email conversations, Facebook chat, mobile messaging and voicemails.

Increasingly then it is not only what occurs during the interview interaction that researchers need to reflect upon, but also what occurs around it. This prompts the question of when are we actually collecting data – is this only in the face-to-face interview when a recording device has been switched on? Certainly this is a view of the interview shared by many research ethics committees, but the parameters of the (unproblematic) interview are much more porous and

leaky than this conception would allow. Importantly, feminist writing on research methods have continued to engage with debates on interview practice, objectivity, 'informed' consent and claims to authenticity (Miller and Boulton, 2007; Mattingly, 2005; Oakley, 1981, 2016). But recognising the interview as a social interaction in which objectivity, in any positivist sense of the word, is not a guiding principle requires that we pay closer attention to the aspects of the encounter which shape what we take to be the (eventual) data. How/do research relationships - including experiences of power – shift within and around the interview and when/ does 'rapport' (or concern) cease? These questions are reflected upon using experiences and data from two qualitative longitudinal research (QLR) studies outlined below. As these studies involved interviewing mothers (original study) and fathers (the subsequent study) I have been able to reflect on my own assumptions about ideas of any shared gendered understandings in the data collection process. These could equally well be reflected upon in relation to other shared or different attributes/ experiences such as class, 'race', age, being a mother (or not)<sup>1</sup>.

### **The Studies:**

The two qualitative longitudinal research (QLR) studies carried out in the UK focused on women's and men's experiences of transition to first-time Parenthood. The first of these focused on women's experiences of transition to first-time motherhood. In this study 17 women were followed through a year in their lives as they became mothers for the first time. These participants were accessed using snowballing, which involved asking other mothers at a local school to act as potential gate-keepers. The eventual sample consisted of white, heterosexual women with a mean age of 30 years (at the time of the first antenatal interview). This was slightly older than the national average age for first births in the UK at the time, but typical of the trend among professional women to delay decisions about reproduction. The iterative research process involved interviewing the women on three separate occasions, followed by an end-of-study postal questionnaire used to collect demographic data and

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<sup>1</sup> For further details, I have reflected upon aspects of these characteristics in both the concluding chapters of my books; *Making Sense of Motherhood* (2005) and *Making Sense of Fatherhood* (2010)

feedback on their experiences of participating in the study. Prompt-style interview schedules were designed for each of the three interviews covering broad areas around expectations, birth, mothering experiences, information seeking, perceptions of self and others, and work intentions.

The first interview took place before the birth at between seven and eight months into the pregnancy. The second interview took place between six and eight weeks following the birth and the final interview was carried out between eight and nine months postnatally. The first interview began by asking the women to describe how they had felt when they found out they were pregnant. In the subsequent interviews participants were asked to begin by describing what had happened since our last meeting. This approach gave the women the opportunity to produce their accounts of anticipating and later experiencing mothering and motherhood in the ways they wished. Interviews took place in the home of the participant or at a location of their choosing. The longitudinal design of the research mirrored the period of transition giving the data collection period fluidity not achieved in one-off, 'snapshot', interviews. Emerging concepts were explored across the data collection periods. The interviews were all recorded with the participants' permission, and at the end of the study, following verbatim transcription, the tapes were given to those participants who wanted them.

During analysis, the complexity of the narrative enterprise soon became clear as the data revealed the ways in which individuals react to pressures to conform to dominant social narratives (for further details of the process of analysis see Miller, 2005 chapter 1). As the data were analysed over the course of 49 interviews, the most striking contrast was between the anticipatory narratives collected during the antenatal interviews and data from the final interviews, which were carried out between eight and nine months after the birth. For all the women, transition to motherhood was different to how they had envisaged it - often harder and lonelier<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> A current study is returning to some of the participants from this original Transition to Motherhood study in order to collect retrospective accounts now their first-born child has reached 18 years of age.

The companion study on Transition to First-time Fatherhood was carried out after the motherhood study (commenced between 2005 and 2007) and initially followed the same research design of three interviews running across one year. However this timeframe was subsequently revised and later data collection has been undertaken with (some of) the sample as their child have reached their second birthday and more recently started school. The sample consisted of 17 men becoming fathers for the first time, who responded to advertisements and 'opted in' to the research project (a requirement set by the UREC, see Miller, 2012 for further reflection on recruitment). The mean age of the participants was 33.7 years at the time of the first interview; ages ranged from 24 years to 39 years. The men were employed in a wide range of skilled jobs that would mostly position them as middle-class; they were partnered (some married), white (several in ethnically mixed partnerships/marriages), and heterosexual. Their socio-economic location (by occupation) and corresponding choices could be argued to be greater than those than less advantaged groups might enjoy. Both samples were from dual-earner households. The samples from the two studies were not related in any way, but both groups were recruited from across southern England.

### **Reflections on interview practice and data collection**

In the sections below and using data from the studies outlined above, I explore the ways in which researcher practices can help to shape the type of data collected in an interview. For example, through the endurance of silences, or supportive comments made in order to invite and permit (encourage?) disclosures. Do 'permissions' to voice difficult, challenging experiences amount to coercive practise and collusion or just good, effective interviewing technique – the craft of the qualitative researcher - facilitating a 'successful' interview? (Birch and Miller, 2000). How far is promoting rapport an 'inauthentic' or purely 'instrumental' practise (Duncombe and Jessop, 2012). Similarly how/is participant reflexivity prompted by the interview techniques we employ and when does the researcher-participant relationship

– and so rapport/ 'friendship' - begin and end? How/ do gendered researcher practices around the interview influence the research encounter, the data collected and what eventually constitutes 'the data'. These areas have resonance for one-off interviews, but here are illuminated through data collected in qualitative longitudinal research (QLR) involving a series of face-to-face interviews (Miller, 2015).

Establishing rapport in an interview can feel difficult, uncomfortable and sometimes our best attempts may feel unsuccessful. Similarly, we may feel a warmth towards some participants and not others - and they for us (Miller, 2005). In research over time there are more opportunities to build a research relationship which can feel more authentic and friendship-like, especially where the same researcher conducts the interviews. It can certainly prompt participant reflexivity between interviews ('I thought I must remember to tell Tina about this'). In comparing the two QLR studies I have undertaken, I found that at different stages (interview phases) of the longitudinal research it has felt necessary and appropriate to be verbally supportive ('collude') with both the women becoming mothers and men becoming fathers. This has involved reassurance ('other mothers have felt that/said that' 'you're not the only father to feel like that') when difficult experiences are voiced, even if others have not actually said the same things. But in the interview moment the reassurance has felt necessary (to avoid distress/embarrassment/ to collect 'good' data?): but is this acceptable reassurance or (a more ethically dubious activity) - collusion? Silences also become easier to endure as we become more practised as researchers, again an interviewing technique which can encourage participants to add further to something they have said, to fill the space with more detailed explanation.

The following extracts are taken from the Transition to Fatherhood study. The first from a 5<sup>th</sup> interview conducted with a participant in the year his child reaches school age. The interview takes place on a Saturday in my University office (just as the previous interviews with this participant have, a location chosen by him). The interview begins with me going over key



features of our last interview (using his words), then asking Joe<sup>3</sup> to tell me what has happened since we last met (when his daughter was 2 years old). In the following - unanticipated - exchange he begins by telling me of the birth of his second daughter (emphasis added),

Joe: So we found out on the 12 week scan that Sarah had miscarried, so I don't know whether that was..... So anyway had a miscarriage in between Zoe and Isla and then we had Isla. Isla arrived just over three years ago, so Sarah and I have got two daughters. It suits them. *Sarah and I are no longer together.*

Tina: Oh I see.

Joe: That is very, very recent so that was up until about three months ago, so that is quite recent, really recent. So the last few months have been a bit you know, a bit manic really I suppose. But that is really, really recent. *So um... (pauses)*

Tina: I think we'll come back to that and those, *you are not the only couple I can tell you that, even in this small study.*

Joe: Yeah it's a shame. So Sarah and I were together but that was up until three months ago obviously we were. So since I last saw you those are the *two big things* really I guess.

Tina: Yeah they are pretty major.

Joe: Obviously Isla being born and Zoe having a sister and then it was three months ago when Sarah and I were together.

Tina: Can I go back to the miscarriage?

Joe: Yes of course.

This extract helpfully illuminates aspects of the interview which cannot be known in advance and in which rapport underpins the tenor of the interview, but in which dynamics shift as the interview unfolds. The disclosure (an indication of trust in me by the time of this 5<sup>th</sup> interview?) by Joe that he and his wife 'are no longer together' was completely unexpected on my part. Joe's repetition of the word 'recent' underscores the newness of the situation in which he now finds himself. I remember being struck by the bad luck of his situation and realise later I had assumed his wife had left him. My next comments are clear attempts to make sense of what he has disclosed and I

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<sup>3</sup> All names have been changed

leap into a silence he has left ('I think we'll come back to that'), but I also attempt to reassure him that he is not the only one this has happened to ('you are not the only couple I can tell you that'). I confirm his assertion that these events had been 'the two big things' using similar words to his own ('pretty major') and then return us (take control) to the earlier topic and ask if we can return to the miscarriage. The recorded interview, which lasts approximately 75 minutes, returns to the marriage break up some 20 minutes later as I (feel ready to?) tentatively return to the break up, as seen in the following extract,

Tina: Do you want to talk about the break up?

Joe: Yeah that's fine.

Tina: So how did that come about?

Joe: Yes so, um, I guess in terms of what happened really, I think part of it was Sarah and I just got into a rut really I guess and lots of things I guess had happened and we weren't happy and I did a terrible thing and started seeing somebody else, which I told Sarah about three months ago. ....so it's been a hard few months.

Later as Joe talks further of the details of his changed circumstances, the following exchange takes place,

Tina: How have others responded, how have the family responded? I'm asking that only in terms of, you don't have to talk about anything you don't want to,

Joe: No, no it's fine. So my dad, my brother was really supportive, so as soon as I told Sarah, I called my brother up, because nobody knew, no one at all. I was ashamed, yeah nobody knew....

Here it is clear that I am both giving Joe permission to reflect further on his actions as well as saying he doesn't have to share these with me ('you don't have to talk about anything you don't want to'). But he reassures me he is happy to continue ('it's fine') and then discloses he has felt 'ashamed'. What is interesting here is that an (apparently innocuous) follow-up interview on experiences of fathering a school age child has ranged into something (I assume is) close to a therapy session, a 'therapeutic opportunity' (Birch and Miller, 2000). This confirms the unknowable-in-advance aspects of qualitative interviewing and the tenuousness of (ethics committee) ideas of pre-interview

'informed' consent, as well as the level of listening and responding activity and care required by the interviewer. In the following later extract I move to a more instrumental position in my questions as I link my knowledge of my other interview data (where parents have separated) and prompt further in order to explore practices around parenting when residency changes,

Tina: So do you... it's interesting just because you are doing days here and there of fathering activities. Do you always feel like a father, or are you a father on those days where you are doing that?

Joe: Yeah it's a good question. So I think myself, so sometimes like I say I think to myself I'm less of a dad because I'm not there the whole time and I have little conversations with myself I suppose and sort of weigh things up. It's hard for me to say or justify sometimes that I am the same dad to myself when I am not there on a Tuesday night at 7 O'clock when I'd be reading their story or taking them for a bath, it's hard for me to justify that I am the same I guess to what I was before. It's hard for me to say that yeah. Myself I know I am, but it's hard I guess for the girls to understand that at the minute and other people to see that, but yeah it's hard to justify that, really hard to justify that.

My question reflected a genuine interest in exploring paternal subjectivities, 'being there' and residency / non-residency. But what these exchanges show is the dynamic and shifting positions we - the interviewer and the participant - can occupy as an interview unfolds. Looking at the micro-processes of the interview I can be seen to be sympathetic, reassuring *and* instrumental. But am I colluding? Would I behave differently if I was interviewing his wife about her experiences of the break up? Hopefully I would still be sympathetic and reassuring, but I can imagine that might include confirming normative negative feelings about the children's father leaving the family home for another woman and new relationship. It is also interesting to reflect on how this participant's fatherhood journey might have been narrated – and analysed - if the data had been collected in a single interview. Being able to follow an unfolding experience through repeat interviews involves here (emotional?) investment on the part of the participant and researcher, resulting in a greater sense of micro level relationship processes at work. There is also a sense of the interview being a safe, and by the 5<sup>th</sup> interview, a trusted space in which to try to order and make sense of life events ('I did a terrible thing', I was

ashamed'). When Joe optimistically looked forward to becoming a father for the first-time in our first interview, his intentions and plans for his future (including not leaving the family as his own father had done) seemed much more straightforward, but time of course can change everything in unexpected ways. This was an emotional and instrumental encounter for us both. It also raises questions about how successively collected data can change original interpretations (see Miller, 2015; Bornat, 2008)

Personal transitions and life events are of course emotionally rich areas to explore and often best suited to qualitative research interviews. But inviting someone to talk about aspects of their lives/ experiences, however benign the research topic, can involve the telling – and hearing – of difficult things. Again this is an area which ethics boards can try to regulate for, but not reach, even though protection/safety of the participant – and researcher – may be a concern. Unanticipated disclosures can occur in any research encounter (Birch and Miller, 2000; Miller and Bell, 2012). In the following extract from the Transition to Fatherhood Study another father, Gus, talks about his early fathering experiences and feelings when his baby son cries. This is a second interview with Gus which takes place in his home when the baby is approximately 12 weeks old.

Tina OK, this is something we spoke about before (first interview)...how would you describe the sort of father... you said you can imagine yourself, you can envisage yourself with [baby] in the future doing things, and being there was an important thing to you. Has any of that changed? Are there any different, new dimensions to it?

Gus No. I could do with changing his nappy a bit less, that becomes very tiresome I have to say...ehm... and the whole.... like when he cries, and he cries and he cries, and he cries....you know, and these people that flip, you know, and hit their babies... I'm not saying I can see where they are coming from, but .. there's just something in you... it's only because I'm.. you know... a sane, rational person and able to think 'this is just a baby, it's not his fault'... but, there's a little part of me that's going 'Oh, my God, I was just want to punch the wall, or something, you know, I just want you to stop, why are you crying, stop crying, please stop for the love of God, stop crying'..

Tina It's interesting, that, I sometimes ask fathers about ... *who've described very similar things*... to think about the lone mother trying to raise a kid, and it's very easy to see how you cross that line, because there's no-one else to sort of say 'I can't stand it any more...'

Gus Yea... and there are times when [wife] has done that, and I understand why, and you know... again, single parents... phew!... they've got... I mean, a lot of them, you know, a lot of babies are different, we've got friends – swines - who come out with like 'Well, to be honest, he went to bed at 8 o'clock and didn't wake up until about half seven in the morning', and I think 'no, I don't care', and 'Yea, he fed regularly every four hours'.. I don't want to know. So, you know, these babies do exist, but it must be so difficult doing it on your own, because.....so, yea, apart from that I still think I'm going to be a good dad. But yea, I intend to be there and do all the things.....

What is interesting is how much is conveyed in these short extracts, and how Gus constructs/presents himself as a new dad who is 'going to be a good dad', but alongside honesty in his response to the continued cries of his new baby ('please stop for the love of God, stop crying'), and his feelings ('I could punch the wall') as well as his control over his emotions ('it's only because I'm.. you know... a sane, rational person and able to think "this is just a baby, it's not his fault"'). Not everyone would feel as comfortable as Gus talking about their emotional responses being tested in this way, especially in relation to a new baby. Similarly a researcher with a different professional training/agenda may have felt compelled to intervene on hearing such a disclosure (see Bell and Nutt, 2012). In the interview I confirm that Gus is not the only father to have voiced such feelings, even though only one of the father spoke so frankly about feelings of anger, and then turn the interview to an area I am interested in (following emerging findings from my other interviews) to explore the (unexpected for participants) hard and tiring work of caring for a new baby/ becoming a parent. In doing so, am I complicit? I do (personally) recognise the feelings of exhaustion as a new parent and can recall my own responses to the prolonged crying that new babies can excel at. But this is Gus's story of new first-time fathering and irrespective of any researcher techniques on my part, Gus, in a very matter-of-fact way, returns to his vision of himself as 'a good dad....To be there and do all the things'. The tenor of this interview is very different to that with Joe (above). Gus was

straightforward in providing an account of his early fathering experiences in an unemotional way even though aspects of what he was taking about involved emotions/feelings/responses. He didn't need 'permission' from me to talk about these things and spoke freely and at length. Perhaps the things were harder for me to hear? Certainly there is something in this encounter linked to gender and the ways in which masculine voices talking about anger and control may be heard (interpreted?) differently compared to feminine voices (and bodies) talking about similar issues. However, in contrast the dynamics in the interview with Joe were more complicated and I felt I had to do more in the interview – to be supportive, give permission and listen.

In the motherhood study the participants mostly did not talk as freely as either Gus or Joe about their feelings and actions in relation to their new baby: even though from a feminist – 'sisterly' - position this might have been initially naively assumed (Miller, 2005; 2007; Oakley 2016). Aspects of gender and the participants knowledge that I was already a mother will have shaped the interview encounters in the motherhood study (and the fatherhood study) in a number of different ways, including placing me as an 'expert' ('what's birth like?') and possibly leading participants to conceal (difficult) experiences because I was seen as a 'coping' mother who had children and paid work (Miller, 2007). Across the data the overriding sense was that other participants must be doing early mothering in more successful ways than the individual mothers felt they were managing. The isolation and sense of 'failure' emerging from the data in the Motherhood study had a direct effect on how I conducted some of the second interviews with the women (at 6-8 weeks following the birth of their baby). In retrospect my intention was to place any difficulties that the participant's voiced into some kind of perspective, to give the women permission to share their (for me 'normal') feelings with me as the following extract demonstrates,

Tina: I was going to ask what your feelings are on becoming a mother?

Philippa: Well, because I don't really...

Tina: feel like one? [my response relates to an earlier part of the

interview]

Philippa ... it's quite hard to say. I suppose it's ... I sort of feel in terms of my life changing I could answer it I suppose. I feel both... I'm kind of enjoying what's happening now and I'm a bit kind of frustrated by the you know day after day on my ...a bit on my own, I mean even though I do see people it's kind of for an hour or so or whatever, and I do sort of think, 'gosh' you know, this is major decision, a major change, you know I just can't.... I can't turn the clock back or anything now. I mean ... and I felt that very much over the first ...that feeling is getting less and I'm sort of now ... I'm getting more to the stage where I couldn't imagine life without... and I'm enjoying her a lot more, but that's been kind of gradual. But there's a little bit of thinking, gosh, what ...you know, what have I done?

Tina: This is serious?

Philippa: Yes. So a bit of sort of ...a few negative feelings and [pause]....

Tina: Yes, *I think that's perfectly natural, or normal.*

In this extract Philippa speaks more candidly than some other participants did at their second interview<sup>4</sup> and grapples with a range of feelings.

Tentatively these are narrated in a trajectory where things are apparently improving 'I'm getting to a stage where I couldn't imagine life without...I'm enjoying her (baby daughter) a lot more'. But I am clearly keen to reassure Philippa (and other participants) that uneasy feelings of transition, disconnect and only gradually coming to feel practised and like a mother was a normal reaction, rather than abnormal. Was this collusion? It was certainly contrary in a couple of cases to what health visitors were saying to the women at the same time (See Miller, 2005, chapter 6). But I felt my role had to be to reassure, from a position of hearing a range of perspectives on transition experiences through the study – and my own experiences.

Interviewing then cannot be neatly dis-entangled from our own lives and biographies or desires to sometimes help our participants makes sense of experiences and feel better about their selves: and conversely the opposite

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<sup>4</sup> At the third interview or in an end of study questionnaire used to collect demographic data and individual's experiences of participating in the study, most of the women spoke of concealing experiences in the 2<sup>nd</sup> early antenatal interviews which felt 'abnormal' when they compared themselves to other mothers they perceived to be coping (see Miller, 2007 for more details)

could be experienced (emerald and Carpenter, 2015). These are emotional encounters and rather than try to achieve objectivity in any positivist sense, the interview requires transparency and rigour in relation to reflection on our own role in the collection and production of data. For me this encompasses the setting up of the interview and any post-interview exchanges. It is now common place that messages are exchanged as interviews are arranged and even these begin to shape the interview and recorded data collection phase in a research project. In the following email exchanges from the Transition to fatherhood study, discussion ensues around arrangements for the first interview,

[First email]

Dr Tina Miller,

Picked up one of you leaflets in [baby equipment shop] re. your new research paper. Becoming a new father this July I would be happy to take part in your research.

Many thanks

[Second email having received copy of project Information sheet]

Tina,

Thanks for the info.

I work in central London - long hours! So suggest the best time to meet up is going to be the weekend.

11th June is a good date for me. Happy to come over to Oxford.

Many thanks

Even in these two short emails it is possible to discern a willing participant (he has opted in), who is also happy to give up time during a weekend and to travel if necessary to participate in an interview. The tone is convivial and friendly and I already had some sense of the person I would meet before the (recorded) interview took place. Even though interviews unfold in unknowable ways, these very preliminary interactions already begin to set the scene for the face-to-face encounter and suggest conviviality and the potential for building rapport.



Questions of what aspects of our practices during and around data collection help to promote rapport<sup>5</sup> or respect/trust and when rapport ends are also potential matters of consequence for researchers. So too, those interviews where any sense of 'rapport' is felt to be missing, or where interviewing takes place in difficult (unchosen) circumstances<sup>6</sup> all require reflection in terms of data collected and interview interactions. It is also now accepted good practice to provide participants with our contact details as part of interview debriefing strategies. But in all these areas, more disquieting aspects of interview encounters and relationships can also lurk, for example 'emotional risks' and/or 'danger' (Sampson et al, 2008; emerald and Carpenter, 2015). Potential harm to researchers and not only their participants has become a more recent concern for ethics committees. But again interview settings and the process of data collection can evoke/provoke unexpected experiences/ recollections for participants *and* researchers too, which may have 'short- and long-term effects' (emerald and Carpenter, 2015:741; Birch and Miller, 2000). In responding to concerns about researcher well-being, Sampson et al have suggested that 'researchers or students committed to reflexivity and feminist research practices require more support' for example than those engaged in more distant styles of 'objectifying' research (2008:930). Certainly the extending trajectory of qualitative interview research (both before and following the recorded interview) requires researchers to be able to practice reflexively in an increasingly complex terrain.

### **Concluding thoughts:**

The ability and common research practise by the mid 1950's to record an interview, was seen to lead to 'objective' (because recorded by machine) 'unbiased' data (Lee, 2004:878). But as noted above, data collection is in

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<sup>5</sup> Interestingly Ann Oakley has recently observed that 'the distinctions between 'rapport' and 'friendship' in research are unhelpfully blurred' (Oakley, 2016:209).

<sup>6</sup> I recently conducted an interview with a participant from my original Motherhood study in her work office and she sent her work colleague out of the office whilst the interview took place. I rushed through the interview – interrupted a couple of times by the colleague seeing if we'd finished and then collecting his cigarettes. There was no time for letting silences sit, rather I felt pressured to get through the interview as quickly as possible.

practise a much messier, more emotional and less controllable endeavour than is suggested by this. But nevertheless the recorded interview in western sociology has continued to be largely regarded as an unproblematic – ethical - method of data collection and one with which ethics committees are both familiar and comfortable. Even though at the same time we are increasingly compelled by ethics committees to shore up aspects of the face-to-face interview encounter through information sheets and consent forms provided to our participants. However interview encounters can be unpredictable and increasingly we begin to interact and connect with our participants well before the interview, as recruitment and interview arrangements are made via digital technologies - and contact can continue after the interview too. Similarly practices of rapport building begin – and can extend – beyond the interview in more immediate and ‘personable’ ways (e.g. Facebook friends requests, messaging, LinkedIn invitations) as digital technologies have become a feature of everyday interactions and ‘friendships’, as well as research designs. As a result it has become more difficult to say when a project has ended and when researcher responsibilities especially in relation to rapport and friendship (faked or otherwise) cease<sup>7</sup>. Given the changing and more digitally informed and immediate context in which many of us conduct research, there is an increasing need to pay attention to the more elusive elements of the activities we engage in the spaces *around* the recorded interview. The practical documenting and reflecting upon elements of our research practices, usually omitted from sanitised accounts for publication, enables us to take account of facets of data collection (such as the emotional work of rapport and collusion, the tenor of interactions and our responses), and so contribute to more grounded theorisations of the data we collect and conclusions we reach.

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<sup>7</sup> Interestingly I have recently made attempts to reignite research relationships in the process of going back to participants from my original Transition to Motherhood study (see Miller, 2015)

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