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

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## ABSTRACT

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

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## Contents

Introduction . . . . .	0
Using rapport in social research . . . . .	0
Negotiating ethical conduct in the field with institutional practice . . . . .	0
Conclusion . . . . .	0
References . . . . .	0

## Introduction

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

increasingly challenging academic landscape, commonly referred to as the neoliberal academy.

The term neoliberalism is contested and dates back to the 1990s, when the Bretton Woods system promoted their development trajectory backed by a rationale to reduce global inequality. It was the Bretton Woods system that established rules for commercial and financial relations among the world's major industrial states by setting up a system of rules, institutions, and procedures to regulate the international monetary system. The neoliberal orthodoxy, includes the deregulation and liberalisation of finance, capital, and labour markets, leading to a reduction in the role of the state. Furthermore, it has been argued that there is a reciprocal merging of neoliberal capitalism and a neo patriarchal order of gender (Campbell, 2014), in other words sexual and patriarchal division of labour is reinforced through dominant constructions of neoliberalism. This article is based on the assertion that higher education institutions are also implicated by this neoliberal rationality. Consequently, this article considers how negotiating complex ethical issues

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in the field is made more difficult by the changing pressures and expectations of a more neoliberal academy. Using my doctoral research, I draw on my experiences from the perspective of a UK funded researcher of Indian descent born and raised in England, conducting fieldwork in Mumbai, India. It is important here to acknowledge my interest in identity politics, with constant negotiation and renegotiation of my positionality, this is the lens in which decisions were made on how field work was conducted which also led to the heightened sensitivity in regards to the involvement of research participants.

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

The study was based on interviews with 40 participants, they included 10 women and 11 adolescent girls from slum communities, 9 women from upper and middleclass backgrounds, 9 practitioners working for grassroots, national and international nongovernment organisations and 1 social researcher. Interviews were conducted between 2012 and 2013. Drawing on participatory action research (PAR), anthropology and participant observation a multi-methodology was developed to explore the complex experiences of gender and poverty. Through the participant narratives, the study showed that experiences of gender and poverty permeate across class divisions, suggesting that access to economic capital does not necessarily result in equitable gender relations. As a result of using this approach, not only did the findings challenge colonial discourses on women in India as docile, subservient and victimised by 'archaic cultural practices' (Brah, 1992; Bhopal, 1997, 2003; Takhar, 2013; Wilson, 2006) but also showed the diverse ways women and adolescent girls constantly negotiate and strategise within time and space to acquire agency, through different forms of resistance or subversion.

Access to participants was gained using a non-random purposive sampling framework. As soon as the doctoral research commenced in late 2011, communication began with friends in senior positions working in NGOs in Mumbai to start the groundwork for conducting field interviews. Although it is common for researchers using a snowballing method to utilise their networks to gain access to participants (Miller & Bell, 2012), there was a great sense of unease to exploit these networks however, as a result of feeling the pressures of time alternative options were not available, and so as a result I 'cashed in on these favours'. Consequently, friends and colleagues in India provided me with important advice and introductions. In particular, an invitation to a symposium led to accessing a variety of NGO practitioners, beneficiaries and academics working in the women's sector.

A lot of time was spent thinking through different ways to conduct fieldwork ethically without reproducing researcher privilege across diverse and complex political, geographical, and intersectional locations; as a result, the research found its theoretical fit within post-colonial and third world feminism (Mohanty, 1988; Minh-ha, 1989; Narayan, 1989). Postcolonial feminist theory recognises power relations and the importance of historical contexts such as the impact of India's colonial relationship with Britain. This is particularly relevant because postcolonial studies contribute anti-colonial perspectives that reject established

agendas and ways of seeing the world, as a result critically disrupting and challenging dominant perspectives, particularly in relation to development (McEwan, 2001). Specifically, postcolonial feminism played an important role during the 1990s in advancing development policy and practice by striving to produce a "truly decolonised, postcolonial knowledge" (McEwan, 2001, p. 94). Consequently, this acute awareness of the impasse in feminist geography related to misrepresenting women in the global south (Nagar, 2002; Sultana, 2007) led me to formulate strategies that would limit the potential to reproduce researcher privilege. Doing so bought up important questions about ethical conduct while I was in the field particularly in relation to whether the intention to protect participants remained central or if somewhere along the line that was abandoned and instead I began implicitly colluding with the academy, this is further discussed in the next section.

#### *Using rapport in social research*

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

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

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

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

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

(Reynolds, 2002, p. 601).

As a result, the research methodology was devised to limit any opportunity to (un)knowingly undermine the research participants and/or reproduce colonial privilege. Instead, the aim was to ensure the participants knew that they were the experts and that the research was about delivering their voice. With this in mind a plan was devised to consolidate and address any cultural differences between the researcher and the research participants by using rapport.

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