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'Eye contact, but not too much ... don't stare into my soul' understanding interviewee beliefs around rapport experiences and behaviours

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Building and maintaining rapport are important elements of investigative interviewing practice. However, there is little qualitative research about how interviewees contextualise rapport and identify behaviours that might indicate good or bad rapport building within an interaction. **Method:** Twenty-three participants took part in one of five focus groups which discussed: (i) individuals' perceptions of rapport building in everyday life, (ii) behaviours they felt would aid or hinder rapport building and (iii) what behaviours they would consider effective in rapport building with a police officer during an investigative interview. **Results:** A thematic analysis identified three main themes: (i) building a relationship with trust and respect, (ii) attentive responsiveness towards the witness and (iii) contextual and situational factors. A content analysis of rapport-affecting behaviours identified body posture, relaxing the witness and eye contact as the most frequently mentioned to enhance rapport. Being dismissive, rude and using intense eye contact were most frequently mentioned as hindering rapport. Overall, rapport was described as dependent on situation, person and environment, and enhancing rapport required contextual awareness. This research emphasises that perceptions of rapport building primarily rely on individual experiences and vary due to personal, situational and contextual factors.

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Rapport; investigative interviewing; focus groups; witnesses; police interviewing

Introduction

Many practitioners and academics identify investigative interviewing as an integral part of police enquiries (Innocence Project, 2021; Loftus, 1996; Milne & Powell, 2010; Walsh & Bull, 2011). Various manuals and protocols to enhance interviewing outcomes have been co-developed between psychologists and investigators to fit a wide range of contexts and situations. For example, the PEACE guidelines (Clarke & Milne, 2001), Guidance for

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Achieving Best Evidence (ABE) in Criminal Proceedings (Home Office, 2022) and the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development protocol for interviewing children (Orbach et al., 2000; Sternberg et al., 1997) These manuals all refer to the importance of good rapport between interviewer and interviewee. This is due to the evidence which shows that good rapport increases information yield and accuracy during forensic interviews (e.g. Alison et al., 2013). Although research into victim (Holmberg, 2004; Langballe & Schultz, 2017; Risan et al., 2018) and suspect (Kelly et al., 2013; May et al., 2021) experience interviews have been investigated, the ways in which rapport is experienced by witnesses specifically remains an area that is under researched. Better understanding perceptions of how rapport is formed and experienced, will allow police officers to effectively deploy techniques which are better suited to witnesses. Definitions of rapport across the current literature range from one model suggesting ‘professional rapport’, emphasising the importance of attention, personalisation and approachableness within interviews (Gabbert et al., 2021) to a different model suggesting the importance of positivity, and coordination within an interaction (Tickle-Degnen & Rosenthal, 1990). Despite these varied definitions, a reoccurring theme is the importance of harmonious communication whilst simultaneously building a strong relationship with another individual (Jorgenson, 1992; St-Yves, 2006; Vallano & Compo, 2015), and the importance of mutual respect and trust (Chenier et al., 2022; Nunan et al., 2022).

A systematic review of the rapport literature highlighted that 89.9% of studies measured rapport using self-report scales (Brouillard et al., 2022). For example, the Rapport Scales for Investigative Interviews and Interrogations (RSI3; Duke et al., 2018) draws upon five sub-traits of rapport including trust and respect, expertise, attentiveness, cultural similarities and connected flow, whereas the interaction questionnaire designed by Vallano and Compo (2011) asks participants to rate 27 different rapport-related characteristics such as ‘Friendly’, ‘Cold’ or ‘Worthwhile’. These measures are useful for trying to study different elements of rapport but there is also phenomenological variability in how participants might interpret scales and their own personalised views on rapport cannot be captured when using these methods. Furthermore, within experimental studies, rapport is often measured using rapport conditions where a control condition of ‘no rapport, low rapport or neutral’ is present characterised by direct and harsh tones, lack of pronoun use or stiff body posture (Collins & Carthy, 2019; Kieckhaefer et al., 2014; Wolfs et al., 2022; Wright et al., 2015). However, studies have found that having a control condition may not be an effective manipulation of rapport (Waterhouse et al., 2023; Wolfs et al., 2022) as evidenced by limited differences in rapport rating between a no rapport and rapport condition. Although there may be multiple ways to measure rapport there remains a lack of consensus within the literature regarding whether rapport is being accurately measured and represented. Hence, little is known about individuals’ perceptions of rapport or how they characterise behaviours that lead to rapport building.

Strong rapport building has been shown to underpin successful investigative interviews (Abbe & Brandon, 2013; Gabbert et al., 2021; Vallano & Compo, 2015) leading to higher information yield and accuracy (Alison et al., 2013) and higher levels of suspect cooperation (Kelly et al., 2016; Kieckhaefer et al., 2014; Roberts et al., 2004). However, current guidelines for practitioners are limited in terms of specific directions that can effectively build rapport. Some police officers report that they are unsure how rapport can be used in their everyday practice (Pounds, 2019). Anecdotally, we are aware of

practitioners who are unclear on what good rapport looks like in practice or how to integrate it fluidly into an investigative context. The UK's College of Policing (2020) resources advises police officers to behave 'naturally', be comfortable and gain trust during an interview. As a result, ambiguous definitions and guidance interviewers have been shown to overestimate their use of rapport and rapport building skills (Richardson & Nash, 2022; Walsh et al., 2017). Additionally, some officers report not feeling well equipped to deploy rapport building skills due to high pressure to conduct a good interview (Dando et al., 2008). The subjective nature of feeling comfortable or how individuals define trust are often compounded by issues with measuring rapport during interviews and experimental studies.

The current study

With current literature focusing on how practitioners can deploy rapport building techniques, or how rapport can be operationalised, little is known about how this reciprocal interaction may be perceived by the interviewee. Specifically, (i) how rapport can be perceived by an audience who is not familiar with the literature or best practice in this area; and (ii) how individuals experience rapport and how definitions of rapport may vary. A recent paper published during the write up of this study explored the perceptions of rapport building within Malaysian culture (Ng et al., 2023). The authors discussed how rapport building is culturally sensitive and is not always perceived in the same light from person to person let alone across cultural bounds, with personalising interactions being key for practitioners when attempting to build rapport. Using focus groups and an inductive methodology, we aimed to capture how personalised rapport building experiences may be. Finally, with limited research investigating non-specialist views, those of ordinary people who the police may have the most interactions with (the general public) it is important to explore how lay individuals may perceive and understand rapport building.

This study aimed to investigate three research questions including:

- (i) How do individuals with no familiarity with the rapport literature perceive the concept of rapport in everyday life?
- (ii) Which behaviours are perceived by witnesses to both build and hinder rapport building?
- (iii) What are the expectations of rapport-building behaviours in a police interview context?

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited through opportunity sampling via the lead researcher's contacts such as peers and other students at [redacted UK university], in addition to snowball sampling methods. These participants were recruited for a larger study examining rapport within investigative interviewing which took place after this focus group. One of the aims of the focus group was to encourage participants to be aware of rapport as a framework for the subsequent study. The findings of that quantitative study are not presented here and do not have an impact on the methods or results of this inductive, qualitative study.

Our target population was any individual 18 years old or older. We recruited some non-psychology students specifically, as these individuals would not have studied investigative interviewing or eye witnesses testimony at university. Additionally, for the latter quantitative study, these participants would not have had contact with psychology lecturers, necessary criteria for participant involvement. We further recruited individuals who had recently graduated and were in full time employment. A total of 23 participants were recruited with the majority of participants identifying as female ($n = 13$), with some ($n = 9$) identifying as male and one identifying as non-binary/third gender. Participants reported a mean age of 21.3 ($SD = 2.5$). Of the sample, 7 participants reported having been interviewed by the police in the past, with the remaining 16 reporting never having been interviewed by the police. This was not a topic brought up in the focus groups and hence did not generate specific discussion in relation to rapport and personal experiences of police interviewing. Participants are referred to by pseudonyms throughout the paper, and these were chosen to reflect participants' gender and cultural identity for context.

Procedure

Five focus groups of four to five people took place over the course of April to June 2023. Participants only attended one focus group each. All focus groups were audio and video recorded so that the footage could be used for context checking with later transcription. After introducing themselves, participants were asked to take part in an ice-breaker activity ('two truths and a lie'), to get to know each other better before the focus group began.

Participants were reminded the purpose of the focus group was to discuss their views on rapport and, as a starting point of discussion, the researcher read aloud to them a definition of rapport: 'a close and harmonious relationship in which the people or groups concerned understand each other's feelings or ideas and communicate well' sourced from Google Dictionary Box (Oxford Languages, 2023). This definition was chosen as it captured a broad but simple definition of rapport without being context dependent. This study aimed to explore how individuals with no familiarity with the rapport literature perceive the concept of rapport in everyday life as well as within a forensic setting. Participants were made aware of Rapport as a framework to overcome any ceiling effects. Recently studies have indicated that within experimental studies, participants sometimes have a difficult time understanding the term 'rapport' (Waterhouse et al., 2023). Hence, by ensuring that during the focus group all participants had at least a starting point, we could ensure that all participants were aware of the phrase before going into further discussions.

Participants were then encouraged to use and explain their own definition. To do this, participants were asked to discuss what the word rapport meant to them with the rest of the group. Then, they were asked to discuss what physical behaviours may contribute to, or hinder, rapport building. Participants were next asked to discuss what behaviours they would expect to observe or experience in a police interviewing context and how these behaviours could facilitate rapport building. Finally, participants were asked to summarise what rapport meant to them in a single sentence and share a positive experience to close the focus group. The full schedule and facilitator script can be found in Appendix A.

Analysis

Audio recordings of the five focus groups were initially transcribed using the open-source transcription tool *whisper.ai*. Next, the transcripts were checked by the research team and, where needed, corrections were made to ensure they accurately reflected the original recordings. Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidance for thematic analysis, the lead researcher began familiarising themselves with the focus group transcripts and re-watched the video recordings of the focus groups. This was done to spot any non-verbal cues such as head nodding that may add value to the analysis. Next, reoccurring comments and phrases of interest directly from the dataset were categorised as codes. For example, repeated mention of 'Using paraphrasing', 'Follow-up questions' or 'Repetition of point' was coded as responsive listening. While reviewing the coded transcripts, key themes were identified such as 'Attentive listening', 'Responsive listening' and 'Paying attention', these were reviewed with the wider researcher team where repetitive or overlapping themes were removed. The research team then reviewed the remaining themes and debated the thematic structure (see Appendices B and C). Direct quotes from the transcripts presented in our analysis and results are identified by the context in which participants discussed them during the three areas of the discussion (i) General Rapport (ii) Rapport behaviours and (iii) Rapport in Police Interviews. This is maintained in the text to best inform the readers if a participant is describing a behaviour in a general or a policing context. It should be noted that quotes used to support the themes were present across all three areas of discussion.

Research has highlighted the benefits of using mixed-methods approaches integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches to analyse data (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Guest et al., 2012). Some examples of mixed method approaches highlight how by using both content analysis alongside thematic analysis, enables better understand both the frequency and perceptions of individuals' experiences (Brough et al., 2009). For the research aim of listing relevant behavioural elements of rapport, we used a summative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Content analysis refers to the systematic identification of specific pieces of information within data sets (Berelson, 1952; Holsti, 1968). To conduct this, the lead researcher identified the types of behaviours which were discussed during the focus groups. Then systematically each behaviour was coded as present when discussed by different participants. To avoid the over representation from specific witnesses, repeat mentions by the same individual was only coded once. This allowed us to more effectively show the frequency and density of certain behaviours being mentioned, rather than a thematic summary.

Results

Themes identified in rapport discussion

Three discrete themes were identified from the focus groups codes: (i) building a relationship with trust and respect, (ii) attentive responsivity towards the witness and (iii) contextual and situational factors. Below the four themes are discussed alongside verbatim quotes from participants discussion and the context within which these conversations were had, for example in response to what they would expect in a police interviewing context.

Theme one: building a relationship with trust and respect

Participants discussed how building a relationship during an interaction would be fundamental to rapport building. Some participants described that this relationship would be 'more like uhm a professional friendship kind of' (Kelsey, General Rapport), whilst others discussed how it requires 'Both people being vulnerable' (Nia, General Rapport). This further strengthens the notion that rapport is constructed differently between individuals. This highlights that the idea of the interaction element of the rapport experience requiring some kind of connection between people.

Despite some differences in defining what kind of relationship rapport entails, many participants discussed that this relationship should be 'intentional' (Jono, General Rapport) and 'productive' (Charlotte, General Rapport), whereby rapport must be actively sought, and this action should also be beneficial and positive for both parties involved, and ultimately the aim is to work towards a common goal. One participant encapsulates this idea by stating that 'Rapport for me is kind of a mutually beneficial relationship between two people to help serve a purpose' (Ellie, General Rapport).

This idea of working towards a mutually beneficial relationship was built upon with some participants discussing how 'you develop those relationships to make those positive connections' (Ellen, Policing Rapport) by ensuring all parties are open to sharing their experiences so that 'Finding common grounding or creating the common grounds' (Jono, General Rapport) is easier and then rapport can be built upon this common foundation. For example, one participant further elaborated on how someone can potentially find common ground stating 'Is there any way that you can relate it back to yourself and make it personal?' (Helena, General Rapport)

Most group discussions (four out of the five focus groups) centred around trust and respect, two elements which appear to be very important for rapport building. This was often spoken about and established as the basis and foundation of feeling rapport 'I'd say trust and respect with an individual' (Alice, General Rapport). Additionally 'It's very important thing to have build up to gain peoples trust and respect and understanding and all of those things if you've got good rapport you can build a relationship with them' (Matt, General Rapport).

Similarly, the feeling of being respected included being recognised as an individual, which can be achieved by opening up to the individual, for example, self disclosure. By having that respect at the start, it opened up the interaction so that rapport could then be built upon, as one participant stated *that* 'basic human decency is important because that's the base message you should be giving anyway and then you can add on to it' (Morgan, Policing Rapport). This represents how a large proportion of participants reported that, without establishing trust and respect, rapport building may not be as effective. Furthermore, participants acknowledged that even after initially establishing trust through transparency and honesty, that this could be lost and therefore rapport hindered:

I'd say in terms of losing the rapport and not building it as much I think it's just making sure that you're not losing that trust element and making sure that you're well you are listening like [pseudonym: Matt] said but also showing respect for that that somebody sharing it to you (Daniel, General Rapport)

Many group discussions exploring rapport centred on respect and trust being mentioned alongside each other, indicating their mutual importance in building rapport and how

individuals associated them together when thinking of rapport. 'It's very important thing to have build up to gain peoples trust and respect' (Matt, General Rapport). 'Yeah I think it's also like uh feeling like they're being open and honest with you as well and they're not trying to deceive you in any way' (Nicki, General Rapport).

Theme two: attentive responsivity towards the witness

Both considering and appropriately reacting to the situation was a theme that was discussed frequently in relation to rapport building amongst different groups. For some participants this meant the ability to adapt such as the interviewer chooses to personalise their behaviour to that individual 'think about all the different things that might affect the person and thinking about how you can best build that rapport with them instead of trying to take uhm one size fits all sort of approach' (Nicki, General Rapport).

In this way, participants captured how rapport should be done differently depending on the circumstances, including the individual you are attempting to build rapport with, why the conversation is happening, where it is happening, and therefore which individual methods would be more appropriate and effective. For example, participants explained how although there are different approaches to building rapport 'none of them are particularly right depending on the situation' (Ellie, Rapport Behaviours) and 'very much depend on whoever you're trying to build rapport with' (Catrina, Rapport Behaviours).

This sentiment of adapting oneself as a 'Social chameleon' (Ellie, Policing Rapport) depending on social cues and context was something deemed very important by the participants across different groups, with most citing the importance of having 'Awareness of the situation' (Kelsey, General Rapport) and 'someone who's emotionally intelligent' (Katie, Policing Rapport) in order to successfully build rapport.

The importance of adaptive rapport building, and responsive interviewing allows for rapport to develop in a way that is flexible and individual to that situation. Ensuring that the rapport building methods being used are suitable for that person. As highlighted during the discussion, awareness of the situation and being able to adapt oneself based on social cues allows for better rapport building.

Theme three: contextual and situational factors

Participants identified the importance of the individual in connection to the environment and therefore being aware of different factors that may influence rapport building beyond just the individual interaction. When discussing what behaviours may be used to build or hinder rapport, the idea that behaviours should be tailored to the individual was a prominent line of discussion. For example, eye contact was identified as one of the behaviours that may both hinder or enable rapport 'Eye contact but not too much ... like don't stare into my soul but also look at my eyes' (Nia, Rapport Behaviours). Additionally, rapport building behaviours such as physical touch were reported by one participant as being more appropriate in some situations but not others, 'Some people might need like a hand on your back or shoulder just so you can feel that comfort but some people they would not react well to that' (Sophie, Policing Rapport).

In this way, some participants discussed how behaviours could be adapted and used appropriately to gain trust in the interaction. For example, the interviewer interpreting the situation and behaviours of the witness and changing their behaviour and 'mirror the other person' (Ellie, General Rapport) in order to gain rapport, 'Changing your

behaviour in order to gain someone's trust' (Katie, General Rapport). 'You sorta have to, I guess, mimic the behaviour of the person you're trying to, like, you're trying to copy them' (Kelsey, Rapport Behaviours).

Additionally, really trying to understand the person you are talking to on an individual level led to conversations about how not all behaviours may be received in the same way depending on who the person is and the situation that arises. For example, one participant mentioned the difference in context between genders and how this could affect interaction dynamic, and the way rapport is built as 'If it was like a female police officer I would like sort of a hand or a hug or something but if it was a male I'd be a bit like of that's strange' (Sophie, Rapport Behaviours).

Similarly, some participants discussed further how contextual factors may influence the interaction and therefore rapport building, with one participant mentioning how 'I'm autistic so I don't like eye contact but other people do' (Morgan, Rapport Behaviours). This demonstrates that consideration of the individual must go beyond the interaction to also include individual characteristics which may impact the investigative interviewing context. For example, individual preferences have an effect on which behaviours may be displayed in order to build rapport. However, how these preferences or individual characteristics of the witness may be known by the interviewer is a genuine concern, highlighting the need for a two-way interaction within investigative interviewing practice.

Content analysis exploring rapport-building behaviours

In line with Hsieh and Shannon (2005) definition of summative content analysis, we wanted to explore how specific rapport building behaviours may be discussed more frequently than others and in which contexts. Therefore, a content analysis was conducted that explored which specific behaviours participants associated with aiding and hindering rapport building, both in a general, everyday context and in an investigative interviewing setting. The lead researcher began by re-familiarising themselves with the transcripts from the five focus groups, and then systematically noted each mention of a behavioural attribute by an individual defined as any behavioural component which could aid or hinder with rapport building. These behaviours were then subsequently counted each time they were mentioned across all focus group transcripts. After initial coding, the behaviours were then reviewed for any overlap in their meaning. For example being 'blunt' and 'rude' were classified under 'rude' due to the conceptual similarity. Any overlapping behaviours were combined to produce a total score for each discrete behaviour. This was done for both behaviours aiding rapport building and those that may hinder it.

We found that the majority of participants' discussions all centred around three main behaviours that were seen to aid rapport building: body posture, relaxing the witness and making them feel comfortable, with other behaviours such as eye contact, tone of voice and active listening also being frequently mentioned. With regard to rapport hindering behaviours participants often referred to things such as being dismissive by not listening, using intense eye contact or being distracted during the interview. This highlights how behaviours which may be used to effectively build rapport can in some instances, where situational awareness or personal characteristics are not considered, being detrimental. See Table 1 for a full analysis.

Table 1. Frequency of behaviours associated with rapport building or hindering, by mention in focus groups.

Behavioural components aiding rapport	Percentage of participants who mentioned	Total mentions	Behavioural components hindering rapport	Percentage of participants who mentioned	Total mentions
Body Posture	60.9	31	Dismissive	26.09	5
Relaxing the witness/ comfortable	43.48	18	Rude	21.81	5
Eye contact	39.13	10	Intense eye contact	17.39	4
Tone of voice	17.39	9	Focusing on notes being taken and concern for what is being recorded	13.04	3
Listening	30.34	8	Distracted	17.39	4
Repetition/Recap	17.39	5	Assault	8.70	3
Follow-up Qs	17.39	5	Hostile	4.35	3
Hand shake	13.04	5	Sarcasm	4.35	2
Small talk	8.70	4	Avoidance	17.39	4
Friendly/sociable/ smiling	30.43	4	Closed Body language	17.39	4
Sitting at the same level	13.04	3	Dishonesty	4.35	1
Nodding	17.39	4	Awkward silences	4.35	1
Humour	4.35	1	Anti-social behaviour	4.35	1
Hand gestures	4.35	1			

Discussion

The term rapport features heavily across the academic literature and investigative interviewing manuals; however, little is known about individuals' expectations of rapport from a witness perspective. Building on existing research with victims and suspects, using a series of focus groups, we were able to identify key concepts and behaviours that lay people associate with rapport building. Notably, we found that there was no difference in participants views regarding what they believe is required to build good rapport within an investigative interviewing context, compared to rapport building in any other situation. Instead, they commonly pointed to the impact of gaining someone's trust and respect, being responsive to the other person, maintaining a clear and purposeful relationship, and being context and situationally sensitive.

The participants' perspectives were in line with much of the theoretical background in the components of rapport building with individuals. For example, researchers have identified building a relationship and connection (Jorgenson, 1992; St-Yves, 2006; Vallano & Compo, 2015) and building mutual respect and trust (Chenier et al., 2022; Nunan et al., 2022) as important parts of building rapport. Similarly, as discussed by the participants and captured in the literature by Hudson et al. (2018) taking into consideration the individual characteristics of the person effects how rapport is built and maintained. Being aware of how someone's personality and background may affect how they perceive rapport building techniques is a crucial part of understanding how rapport can be established and experienced. For example, one participant reported how depending on the gender identity of the interviewer and witness may affect what behaviours they would expect during an interview, such as how physical contact from a female may be more accepted than from a male. Furthermore, when discussing neurodiversity, participants reported that although some people may be comfortable with eye

contact this may not be the case for everyone. Hence taking into account the witness' identity can be a crucial part of understanding how rapport-building behaviours may be experienced.

A vital part of building rapport was using behaviours in an appropriate manner tailored to the individual. For example, individuals may express a desire for eye contact, however, participants warned that too much or too little could be detrimental to rapport building. Additionally, adapting one's behaviour to the individual and personalising methods used to build rapport was something that most participants deemed as crucial for successful rapport building. Likewise, consideration of the situational context, including if the interaction is occurring in a formal setting, who you are trying to build rapport with, and awareness of the case specifics, were all elements identified that may influence rapport building.

In accordance with much of the current literature from behavioural coding studies, individuals identified the importance of eye contact and body language as key elements of rapport building (Chartrand & Bargh, 1999; LaFrance, 1979; Novotny et al., 2021). Furthermore, elements of active listening such as nodding, repetition and follow-up questions were also discussed by participants as previously demonstrated (Vallano & Compo, 2015). When participants were asked to discuss elements that would hinder rapport building, many of the behaviours identified were the opposites to those that would aid rapport building. For example, intense eye contact or closed body language. This insight allowed us to explore how participants identify the same behaviours for both rapport building and hindering rapport building and that they lie on a continuum. As such when it comes to specific behaviours which potentially facilitate rapport building, it may be that too little or too much of any behaviour might have the opposite effect. In addition, it is likely that each individual interviewer will have their own sense of what the 'right amount' of a behaviour is and make this decision also based upon the context that the interview is being conducted in.

Limitations

When individuals were asked about what behaviours they thought would contribute to rapport building, the focus groups often used terms such as 'relax' or 'feel comfortable'. As a result of this (natural) difficulty with people being able to be specific about comfort, there still remains an element of uncertainty around the specific behaviours which may lead to these terms. It may well be the case that there is insufficient English vocabulary to explore the antecedents of comfort and further work might wish to take a multi-modal, multi-language perspective on this topic (cf. Ng et al., 2023). As such the transferability of the research may not be as applicable to a wider context due to the lack of explanation around what individuals specifically mean by terms such as 'relax'. Future research may also wish to pair these difficult to define experiences with behavioural observations, to produce better guidance on how one might make someone relaxed.

Additionally, our focus groups had limited discussion of cultural factors in rapport building. Whilst there was some awareness of behaviours not being the same for all audiences, and discussion from a participant with lived experience of autism, the cultural overlap elements of rapport could have been more strongly represented. Previous studies have found how cultural differences may influence perceptions of rapport for

example politeness and behavioural expectations (Spencer-Oatey, 2005; Wilson et al., 2022). However, this study was unable to capture how cultural differences may have affected perceptions, an area of research crucial for future development. With the participant pool being from the UK, it also brings into question the ecological validity of the findings and hence it should be noted that the findings are only representative of the time and place of this research. Future research should, a more active attempt to diversify sampling to capture the experiences of diverse marginalised people (be it ethnicity, gender, sexuality, socioeconomic status, neurodiversity, religion) could elicit a greater variation culturally inclusive commentary. Within the context of investigative interviewing, it is imperative that research in this area captures the perceptions of a wider participant pool to enable more universally applicable guidance, suitable for cross-cultural groups.

Reflexivity statement

Within qualitative research it is important to think reflectively and about how a researcher's own experience and expectations impact potential outcomes. At the start of the project, the expectation was that participants would have a similar viewpoint on rapport with each other. However; surprisingly when discussing building and maintaining a relationship using rapport the importance of how these relationship are often context and situationally bound, taking into account the nuances of a situation are important within rapport building. It was also expected that participants would focus more on the behavioural elements of rapport, whereas the experience of the groups included discussing the experience of having rapport as well. Therefore, going into data analysis, initial theme identification may have been oriented towards the assumed definition of rapport.

Additionally, focus group facilitation is a challenging skillset, and one that requires continual development. The focus group facilitator has many roles and includes question lists, encouraging all participants to be heard, keeping track of time and administering the session. This can be taxing, and there could have been opportunities to develop some elaborations from some participants. Going forward, it would be useful to arrange follow-up interviews. Many participants in the focus group were familiar with the facilitator due to the recruitment methodology, and it may well be the case that this both encouraged conversation but also constrained some responses from participants.

For practitioners

For a practitioner audience, we would specifically highlight that in the present study, participants indicated three main foundations to aid with rapport building: (i) building a relationship between the interviewer and interviewee with trust and respect, (ii) responsiveness from the interviewer such as nodding, active listening and asking follow-up questions and (iii) contextual and situational factors. Across these themes was the recognition that rapport is a subjective experience, and it is important to tailor rapport-building strategies to the individual where possible. This could include considering, their situation, age and gender. Additionally, participants reported key behaviours they perceived to be important for rapport building such as making the witness feel comfortable (although

the specific behaviours leading to this were not clear) and a welcoming body posture. However, participants all reported what specific behaviours may contribute to when rapport is not established well, such as having a closed body posture, intense eye contact or being dismissive this can actually be detrimental for subjective experiences and might hinder investigative outcomes.

Conclusion

This study investigated how individuals with no familiarity with the rapport literature perceive rapport building. In addition to, what physical behaviours they would attribute to aiding or hindering rapport building. Using focus groups, a thematic analysis and content analysis was conducted to analyse the data. Four main themes were identified: (i) building a relationship with trust and respect, (ii) attentive responsivity towards the witness and (iii) contextual and situational factors. Additionally, participants mention the importance of making an effort to relax the witness, in addition to a relaxed body posture, using responsive listening and following up questions. Participants also discuss the most popular behaviours for hindering rapport building: being dismissive, making intense eye contact and being rude. These findings highlight how although participants may vary in how they experience rapport the building blocks that they feel make up rapport come from four discrete areas. As such highlights key areas that witnesses may expect to be present during a rapport-building interaction. In addition, the type of behaviours being mentioned are often on a continuum and done in an effective way back improve rapport-building techniques. However, too much of something such as eye contact could have a detrimental effect on rapport. This body of works adds to the growing literature where participants perceptions of rapport are being investigated, furthermore, adding key elements and behaviours that practitioners can embed within investigative interviewing practice to aid building a relationship with witnesses.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data availability statement

The data that supports the findings of this study are openly available on the Open Science Framework at: https://osf.io/6n9jk/?view_only=836562adecf74eef8aea61e8fec8bef0.

Ethics statement

All aspects of the current study were approved by the ethical committee University of Winchester. Ethical approval: RKEEC230105_Kiltie.19.

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