Ethical Encounters – Rapport in Sensitive Settings

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Abstract

This paper discusses the issue of rapport in sensitive settings, particularly looking at distance, personal stories, and questioning the data. The examples are taken from a mixed methods, partly ethnographic, study of naturally occurring learning environments among adults experiencing homelessness in Bucharest, Romania.

Author Keywords

Ethics; Homelessness; Rapport

Introduction

Ethical questions in any study go beyond the signing of consent forms and the ticking of boxes in the formal ethics procedure. Particularly in sensitive settings, it is important to begin to understand the intricacies of beliefs, codes of conduct, as well as approaches to life (only to name a few things) of the participants involved in the study [8] to be able to establish empathy and start building rapport. It is also of use to understand the axiological assumption that underlies transformative research as described by [7] to ensure ethical accountability for the researcher: *"the community to redress inequalities by giving precedence, or at least equal weight, to the voices of the least advantaged groups in society [by] basing practice and policies of a social justice theory of ethics"*. This is particularly necessary in sensitive settings, as it

is important for the researcher to be accountable to gatekeepers, as well as the respondents, to ensure ethical soundness of the study. Furthermore, [9] describes four key points to be taken into consideration at the conception of a study design (See sidebar); these are particularly important when working with vulnerable groups in sensitive settings to ensure the research is ethically sound.

Throughout the paper, we will be writing in first person, as many of the reflections were sparked by a study conducted by the first author [10].

The study that many of the ethical questions that this paper will address comes from reflections on a project conducted in Bucharest, Romania. This research involved adults experiencing homelessness, many of which, at the time of study, or previous to the study, were also drug dependent, making them a disadvantaged and sensitive population. The study aimed to uncover potentials in digital learning technologies for this population. We positioned the work within a context of radical change in approaches to education, particularly for excluded or marginalized groups to reconfigure the institutional and societal structures of learning. A variety of methods including semi-structured interviews, focus groups, diamond ranking exercises, and personal learning timelines were used to find out what learning occurred on the streets. Throughout the study, 20 participants contributed to discussions and helped the researcher understand what life on the streets was like, what they enjoyed about it, what they did not enjoy about it, and most importantly for the research, what they had learnt.

To start, we will define Rapport and Vulnerability using examples from the study to understand their implications for ethical considerations. Afterwards, we explain the setting this study was placed in, discussing the effects of this on ethical considerations. Through personal reflections of rapport during the research process, the following themes emerged: distance, personal stories, and questioning the data.

Rapport and Vulnerability
For this study, I felt that building rapport was one of the largest ethical conundrums. A reason for building rapport in this study was to allow respondents to *"gauge how far the ethnographer can be trusted"* [3]. We attempted to create a positive and safe environment for both the participants and researcher as we were striving to understand the lived experiences, and their meanings of participants. Also, the management of what Goffman called a 'personal front' in 1955 (cited in [3]) was incredibly important in this study. Hammersley and Atkinson also state that: *"impressions that pose an obstacle to access must be avoided or countered as far as possible, while those which facilitate it must be encouraged, within the limits set by ethical considerations."* This was a difficult concept for me to grasp, as I wanted to be as authentic as possible, not leading the respondents to believe something about me that was not true; I did not want put up a front. It seems that this tactic was a success, as this allowed me to learn and begin to follow *"public rules, regulations and local cultural convention*s" [8].

I did not only want to rely on my existing social skills, common sense, or assuming a particular role [4] to build rapport. The building of this 'relationship akin to friendship' left both the respondents and the researcher emotionally exposed, which could have resulted in difficulties; and particularly led to exposure of both the

[9]'s key points to be taken into consideration when designing a study:

- Voluntary participation from respondents;

- Protection for the participants and the researcher;

- Assessment of potential benefits and risks to participants for taking part in the study; and

- Obtaining informed consent from participants and/or gatekeepers

respondents and the researcher, resulting in reciprocal vulnerability.

[6] sees vulnerability as an identifier of *"groups or individuals who are susceptible to or at an increased risk of physiologic or psychosocial harm for a myriad of reasons"*. According to this definition, the respondents in this study could be seen as vulnerable due to their status of homelessness and potential for physical and psychological health issues. Furthermore, participants may be considered vulnerable due to a plethora of reasons; [6] states that they *"may be considered vulnerable as a result of the group they belong to, the nature of the situation they are in, or the research itself."* The rapport that was built up with respondents, allowed me to establish *"strategies that are guided by caring behaviors enable the researcher to convey empathy and warmth, which allow[ed me] to establish a positive environment for participants"* [6] and myself. For this to occur however, I had to open myself up to the respondents as well. This personal involvement in the study resulted in reciprocal vulnerability of researcher and respondent. In this way it was not only the respondents who gauged the trust they would place in the researcher [3], but also the other way around.

Homelessness in Romania

Currently, Romania does not recognize homelessness, neither does it have an established policy of combatting it, or assisting those experiencing it. Due to this, there are no recognized estimations of people experiencing homelessness and few social service providers that cater directly to the needs of this population. As of 2009, 40% of Romania's population was living either in a household with zero or very low work intensity, in severe material deprivation, or at risk of poverty [2].

This has led to the country having the second highest percentage of population living in severe deprivation and at-risk-of poverty in the European Union (EU). Despite this, it is also the country with the second lowest gross expenditure on social protection benefits [2]. Regarding homelessness directly, 14% of respondents of a 2001 study had experienced homelessness themselves, while 43% had known someone who had experienced homelessness. It is often argued that the prevalence of homelessness in the country can be traced back to an effective ban on contraception by the Romanian dictator Ceausescu in 1966 that left an estimated (up to) 20,000 children in orphanages. After the fall of the dictatorship, many ran away from the abysmal situation in these orphanages, and were left to fend for themselves on the streets.

I, the lead author, lived in Romania for several years and was able to observe the change in visible homelessness since Romania joined the EU in 2007. My interests in natural and peer learning, combined with the knowledge of Romania's continued problem with homelessness led me to explore the intersection of these two issues. I wanted to find out what life on the streets had to offer for those who choose to live there, to find out what they learn, and to explore the ways in which homelessness was experienced differed from the dominant portrayals seen in the media and academia. It is possible that due to the unique nature of the problem of homelessness in Romania, that this issue was more prominent than it would have been in a different country's context. The societal rejection that was felt by many of the respondents may have helped the building of rapport as I, as the researcher, but also as a person, did not reject them solely due to the fact that they were homeless. However, this could have also

given them false hopes for future relationships with me, and other people.

Contrastingly, the special case of Romanian homelessness could also lead them to be easy targets for research. Surely I was not the first person to recognize the importance of learning what life is like on the streets in Romania. This problem was made clear to me on my visit to the living hub in the city centre, where one of the inhabitants of the canal had told me that this was Europe's *most illuminated canal* as so many journalists and photographers had been there to take a look and write stories (see [5] for an example). I like to think that my research was more than that, an illumination of the lives, a description of what is happening; I took care to ensure that the research outcomes would be reciprocal, and that the respondents would benefit from the study as well by involving them not only as respondents, but as designers of the study. For example, I had planned to conduct a diamond ranking exercise with the respondents to determine what they valued the most on the streets, but did not create the terms to be sorted myself. I took information from interviews and discussions I had with the participants and fed this back into the study to be ranked according to relevance by the respondents. This in turn again led to reciprocal vulnerability due to the interactive and discursive nature of the study. This resulted in my questioning of how far I wanted to distance myself from the research and participants.

Distance
I tried to find a balance between building rapport through activities such as daily café time, making music, and having informal conversations with people at the centre so all parties would have a comfortable research experience, and distancing myself enough to make sure I did not get too invested personally in the lives of respondents. These were all very revealing about the realities of life at the centre and further informed my understanding of life on the streets through snippets and caveats of a variety of peoples' experiences.

Methodologically speaking, I was aware that this kind of study would not allow me to completely distance myself from the respondents, as building rapport would be important for the respondents and myself, and ultimately the success of the study [3,8].

This challenge was made particularly clear through the blurring of my role as a researcher and volunteer at the centre. It is commonplace at the centre, that volunteers are introduced at one of the meal times (as I was) and then supported by staff, but left to create their own projects and communicate, build rapport, with participants (much like I did). It is also commonplace for inhabitants and volunteers to have close relationships as volunteers are part of therapy sessions, instigate activities, and stay at the centre in 6 or 12 month placements. It is this role-changing, as well as the transient nature of homelessness, the need to adapt quickly, and the usual disinterest from wider publics may also have an effect on respondents opening up to strangers quite quickly, particularly if they are being taken seriously. It was difficult to find a balance of the shifting multiple identities (researcher, volunteer) [1], which resulted in blurry boundaries of distancing myself from respondents and data.

I explained to respondents that their work would be used as part of a publication. While I am sure they heard, thought about, and agreed to this, I am unsure that they understood all implications that come along with this. One respondent made this particularly clear, as he wanted me to promise to not give any personal information to Romanian media outlets as he was afraid his mother would find out about his health status. It was difficult to ensure that respondents understood all implications

Furthermore, I did not give this detailed explanation to inhabitants of the centre that did not directly take part in my study through interviews and focus groups, but without whom the success of this study would have been impossible as they helped me understand life at the centre, and life of the streets through informal conversations. Distancing myself enough from the centre to allow for reflections on the occurrences on the day and the many personal stories I had heard.

Personal Stories
I spent three weeks at the centre for people from economically and socially unstable homes and those experiencing homelessness to build relationships with people, and to spend time with them outside the interviews and other research methods to build rapport and start to understand the intricacies of life on the street in Bucharest, Romania.

I was able to build rapport with a small number of inhabitants of the centre, who turned into co-researchers and respondents. Respondents began sharing deeply personal stories about their lives on the street with me that the tick-box style formal procedures had not prepared me for. Topics included drug use,

personal health, sexual histories, etc. and I was very glad I had previously thought about the potential of these issues arising during research.

This challenge was made particularly clear as one respondent gave me a detailed description of the situation he lived in at home before running away to live on the streets at age 5. He continued his thick description to describe his life on the streets, and the way the public, and his family treated him. Much of this included stories of violence, abuse, drug use, etc.

On one hand I was very proud to have been someone that this respondent felt comfortable sharing experiences of violence, drug dependence, and family breakdowns with, but on the other hand many of the issues that were addressed were not directly relevant to my research, although very revealing about life on the streets. Information on drug use and sale, as well as the informal hierarchy of groups of people experiencing homelessness and life in the canals of Bucharest were very interesting, and allowed me to take a glimpse into life on the streets and ultimately informed the implications of design that developed through the study. Despite not being directly relevant to learning, the sharing of personal stories was an important element of the study as it allowed me to understand life of the streets. It allowed me to see the life from the eyes of a person experiencing homelessness, to see the positive and negatives sides to events that have previously mostly been looked at from an outsiders' perspective. While this allowed me to learn many things about the lives the respondents lead, this was also a major ethical consideration for the study.

It was difficult to deal with this personal information, and led me to continuously question the data I was receiving.

Questioning the Data

I had a particularly intimate experience one afternoon when I had the privilege of joining the local social worker, who has been working as the outreach worker at the centre since 1991, on his weekly visit to the notorious canal close to the train station in Bucharest. I joined him in handing out tea and biscuits to anyone who wanted it around the square at the station before moving on to the canal. We were also joined by a man experiencing homelessness from the centre, whom I had interviewed the day before. He had told me about the many tricks of thieves he had learnt about during his time on the street, and had explained to me the intricacies of life in the canal he had lived in since he was a child; the one I visited with the social worker. I was glad he was there, as he had promised me (and a volunteer who joined us as well) to take care of us down there and to introduce us to the leader—or father as he called him. He ensured to tell us several times to be careful, to not take any valuables, not to touch anything, etc.—he seemed to be equally concerned about our wellbeing and proudly excited about showing us where he grew up.

This visit, and the information that was shared with me regarding personal physical and mental health, lead me to thoroughly reflect on and question the importance of this information. How was I to personally deal with this information? Should I include it in the final research report? How do I ensure that if I do include it, the information is used in a respectful, meaningful, and noninvasive way?

Conclusions

By taking a study on naturally occurring peer learning among adults experiencing homelessness as an example, this paper discussed the ethical considerations that were taken in regards to rapport when researching with vulnerable groups in sensitive settings. It was made clear that it is important to consider the importance of rapport, but also to question its ethical implications in sensitive settings. It was important for me to continuously reflect on my position at the centre, and how far I would distance myself from respondents and their personal stories. Subsequently how to deal with these stories, and questioning this data was a major concern for me, and the success of the study. These three areas have various points of intersection that all need to be taken into consideration at all stages of concluding a study. It is important to take into consideration the possibility of having multiple personas that attract a variety of data. Throughout the process it is important to add to the internal debate that should be continuously questioning the data, the role of the researcher, and the way in which to deal with personal stories.

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