

Rapport in a Non-WEIRD Multicultural Society:

A Qualitative Analysis in Southeast Asia



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ABSTRACT

“When you enter a cow’s barn, moo, and when you enter a goat’s shed, bleat.”

Malay proverb

A body of research suggests that taking steps to build rapport facilitates cooperation in several contexts, including investigative interviewing. However, most of the available research exploring rapport and its antecedents in investigative contexts has relied on Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) samples. Cultural nuances, if not understood or acknowledged, can cause rapid deterioration of rapport in interpersonal interactions. Our research, conducted with $N = 32$, used a qualitative methodology to investigate the Malaysian culture as a framework for understanding rapport-building in a non-WEIRD sample. Analysis inferred that while Malaysians conceptualise rapport

very similarly to what we know in the Western literature, there are important differences in how they exhibit rapport and how rapport materialises. Four themes are discussed, reflecting idiosyncrasies in the themes. We find that rapport in Malaysia is culturally sensitive and culturally bound, in that the ‘usual’ pace of rapport exhibited in Western countries is not indigenised in Malaysia. We provide recommendations that can help personalise the way interactions such as investigative interviews and negotiations can be steered with suspects, victims, eyewitnesses, and hostage takers from this culture.

Keywords; rapport; investigative interviewing; non-WEIRD; forensic interviewing; qualitative.

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of rapport has been widely studied, with definitions including a working or constructive relationship (Abbe & Brandon, 2014), including mutual trust, cooperation, and a shared understanding of priorities (Kelly et al., 2013), and with the goal of fostering self-disclosure of information (Abbe & Brandon, 2014) and cooperation. Components of rapport include personalising the communication, paying attention, and mutual connection (Abbe & Brandon, 2014). Perhaps one of the most discussed models of rapport in psychological research is Tickle-Degnen and Rosenthal (1990)'s tripartite conceptualisation of rapport, with three components including mutual attentiveness, positivity, and coordination. Rapport is often built through certain behaviours that serve to build a relationship (e.g., showing a personal interest, use of self-disclosure), present oneself as being open and approachable (e.g., smiling, conversational tone of voice), and demonstrating attention (e.g., active listening, head nodding) (Gabbert et al., 2021).

Rapport is a critical element across many contexts and impacts codes of practice – for example, in criminal justice (Collins et al., 2018; Holmberg & Madsen, 2014; Nash et al., 2016; Vallano et al., 2011), human-computer interaction (Kang & Gratch, 2012) and medical and health settings (Aruguete & Roberts, 2000). A body of findings in this context suggests that when rapport is implemented, this largely results in more success in information gathering between personnel.

The importance of rapport is especially relevant within applied contexts such as police interviewing (Abbe & Brandon, 2013; Alison et al., 2013; Joinson et al., 2010; Leahy-Harland & Bull, 2017; Oxburgh et al., 2014; Rotenberg et al., 2003; Vallano et al., 2015). This is supported by a wider body of research, finding that if interactions break down

due to a lack of rapport, then the amount of information disclosed by the interviewee is reduced in the investigative interviewing context (Abbe & Brandon, 2013; Brett, 2000; Walsh & Bull, 2012). For example, practitioners Holmberg and Madsen (2014) studied strategies to build rapport to gain information and cooperation from suspects, victims, and witnesses outside of the laboratory. Their study showed that a dominant-style of interviewing, characterised by aggressiveness and impatience – as opposed to a humanitarian rapport approach – led to a decreased amount of reported information.

The body of research available to date is valuable, however, it is limited in that most of what is currently known of rapport-building are based upon Western, educated, industrialised, rich, and democratic (WEIRD; Henrich et al., 2010) samples. This poses a problem because literature from cultural psychology suggests that culture is a key factor for how behaviours are expressed and appraised (Shweder, 1999; Beune et al., 2010; Chen et al., 2006; Fu & Yukl, 2000). Take for example rapport in a professional counselling setting; it can therefore be expected that an interviewer and interviewee with different cultural backgrounds may expect and enact different behaviours (Adair & Brett, 2005). For example, preferred amount of eye contact is culture-dependent; Japanese people in general tend to show less eye contact as a sign of respect compared to people from certain parts of Western Europe and North America (Akechi et al., 2013). The Japanese also practice silence as an indicator of respect and politeness, whereas this gesture is not observed in other cultures (Hei, 2009). Research suggests that cultural-sensitive differences in behavioural expectations and enactment can lead to breakdown in communication (Adair & Brett, 2005; Gelfand & Christakopoulou, 1999) and invariably cause setbacks in eliciting information (Brett, 2000). For

example, the interviewee may themselves be deterred from divulging information to an interviewer who they find 'hostile' and 'disrespectful' (Leung & Tong, 2004). There exists a small body of literature examining rapport beyond WEIRD populations in an investigative interviewing setting (see Alison et al., 2008, Beune et al., 2011; Goodman-Delahunty & Howes, 2016; Hope et al., 2022; Matsumoto & Hwang, 2021). Duke et al. (2018) developed a scale to measure experiences of rapport, where culture similarity was identified as an important facet of rapport. Furthermore, a synthesis of concurrent works by Chien et al. (2016), Hall (1976), Hofstede (1991), Schwartz (1994) and Triandis (1996) highlights key cultural differences between the East and West in communication patterns, which can influence the dynamics of an interview process. In general, there is agreement that Western cultures are generally individualistic, egalitarian, dignity-based, and low-context. Eastern cultures, on the other hand, can be described as collectivistic, hierarchical, face-based and high-context (Hofstede, 1991; Schwartz, 1994; Triandis, 1996). High-context cultures prefer less direct communication to maintain group harmony and well-being in communities that are typically close-knit (e.g., Japan, China), whereas low-context cultures (e.g., North America, Germany) prefer direct, explicit verbal communication over subtle relational cues given that individuals are not expected to have knowledge of each other's background (Hall, 1976).

Taken together, the available work suggests that information-gathering in non-WEIRD populations would appear to require different tactics compared to WEIRD countries. This can be attributed to high-context and low-context cultures favouring very different communication styles (Adair & Brett, 2005), such as a preference for direct or indirect communication. As another example, Hall (1976) argued that there is a need to build relationships before ultimately getting to the heart of the matter in a high-context culture, such as engaging in ice breakers. Additionally, an interviewer may misconstrue an interviewee's lack of eye contact as rudeness or lack of interest (Iwata et al., 2011). Similarly, if silence is misread as

a lack in response, this can be detrimental to the interview outcome (Graham & Sano, 1984; Hei, 2009). The important point is that researchers and practitioners alike must be careful in assuming that the current conclusions on rapport from a Western perspective will apply to all cultures, especially when cultural differences and communication patterns are linked with trust (Thomson et al., 2018; Triandis, 1996) and information elicitation (Brett, 2000; Thomson et al., 2018).

PRESENT STUDY

The rationale for the current study is to take Malaysia as an example multicultural country that differs from Western countries in some important ways. Malaysia is a multicultural society with a predominantly Muslim population and comprises of three major ethnic and cultural groups, namely the Malays and Indigenous peoples (69.9%), Chinese (22.8%) and Indians (6.6%) (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2022). The impacts of Western colonialism on Malaya are still evident such as in the languages spoken in the modern, multilingualism and its vernacular school systems (Embong, 2002; Guan, 2019). It is common for some Malaysians to not speak fluently in the national language (Malay) or any of the commonly spoken languages in Malaysia (i.e., Malay, English, Mandarin, Indian Tamil), with natives frequently inter-mixing languages (Ariffin & Husin, 2011). Of note, Malaysia has the lowest relational mobility in the world, tied with Japan (Thomson et al., 2018). Societal contexts that have low relational mobility have relationships that are less fluid and hard to form, but do not break down easily. Those within such societies also self-disclose less personal information compared to societies with higher relational mobility (Schug et al., 2010).

The present study examines what factors are important in a collectivistic, multicultural non-WEIRD society and what factors are important to rapport formation here. The aims of the current study are to examine (1) how people conceptualise rapport, in other words, how people perceive the building blocks of rapport to be in a multicultural society such as Malaysia, and (2) how these

perceptions differ from Western-centric cultures, and if so, how they manifest. Throughout, we discuss how the outcomes from the current study compare and contrast with the available body of research with Western samples.

METHOD

We acknowledge that cultural influences shape subjective experiences (Beune et al., 2010; Chen et al., 2006; Fu & Yukl, 2000). We therefore conducted five focus groups to qualitatively explore the subjective experiences of our participants in more depth. An advantage of focus group research is that it elicits rich interactions between participants and emulates natural conversations on their experiences. A focus group setting also allows for the development of ideas, enabling participants to share and compare their experiences on how the Malaysian culture has shaped their experiences with each other. This design enables us to examine the complex process of rapport development, its reception and exhibition as influenced by culture.

A. Participants

To maintain a homogeneous sample, we recruited Malaysian citizens between the ages of 18 and 30, either of Malay, Chinese, Indian, or mixed Malay/Chinese/Indian ethnicities, using convenience sampling via a university portal. Thirty-two University undergraduate students took part (23 female participants and 9 males). The average age was 21.90 years of age. Ethnicity-wise, 11 of our participants were Chinese, five were Malay, 10 were Indian, two were Eurasian and four were of other mixed Malaysian races. All spoke English as one of their primary languages. All participants received research credits in exchange for their participation.

B. Materials and Procedure

On arrival, participants were given an informed consent form. Five focus groups were conducted in total, with each group comprising six to seven participants, with a minimum of two Malays, two Chinese, two Indians. The interviews took an average of 1 hour 36 minutes to complete, and there were no time constraints imposed. All

sessions were held in a quiet board meeting room in university grounds. Dictaphones and microphones were set up to record the sessions. Prior to the session, participants were aware of the topic of the focus group discussion but were specifically asked not to research this topic. Each session began with a welcome and introduction of the topic. The sessions then progressed using a semi-structured interview style as a topic guide. We began by asking participants about the ways in which they relate to rapport (e.g., “Think about the last time you felt a rapport with someone”, “What is rapport to you?”, “What do you think rapport is? No right or wrong answers”). They were then encouraged to reflect on how they felt about rapport (e.g., “Maybe what can help you is to think about the last time you had rapport with someone. If you can think of a specific incident or even better a specific person, tell us about it.”), of what rapport-building tactics or techniques they considered to work, to what extent these techniques were important to them, what results they anticipated as well as the conditions behind their perception. We deliberately did not provide a pre-existing definition or explanation of rapport prior to the focus group discussions to avoid response biases. At the end of the session, participants completed a demographic sheet. This study received ethics approval from the university where participants were sampled from. All considerations were taken in line with BPS recommendations, ESRC Research Ethics Framework, and the Data Protection Act.

ANALYSIS

We analysed the data following the qualitative content analysis framework, where themes were identified and are interpretations of the researchers (Mayring, 2020; Vaismoraidi et al., 2016). After the transcription process, we started the descriptive coding process. To achieve this, we read through each transcript independently and coded the manuscript. Two research assistants and the first author were involved in this process of coding at this stage. After coding one transcript, we examined the codes with the first and third authors present. We discussed code names, code definitions and coded text segments, continually

reviewing this study's aims and purpose. We classified these codes by looking for categories of information. In other words, we open-coded recurring regularities of information units or looked for any data segments that might be useful. This can include particular words that participants used to describe something they felt, or a longer description of the phenomenon. After discussing the codes for the first focus group, we repeated this process with the second focus group. As a first step towards achieving interrater reliability, the coding process was recursive and reiterative. This was also to avoid researcher bias and to establish quality in coding.

We then developed a preliminary coding framework. This coding framework contained a definition of each code, text segments where appropriate and was developed to ensure consistency among research team members. We later made this list of codes more exhaustive, as we carried on the analysis process through all transcripts – the coding framework continuously revised. Next, we combined these codes and recoded them into overarching themes where these can be defined as patterns of meaning. We then described and interpreted these themes.

Reliability Assessment

We conducted a reliability assessment to ensure comprehensibility of the coding system and the repeatability of study results (Mayring, 2020; Vaismoraidi et al., 2016). Inter-coder agreement here meant agreement on a code word assigned to a passage based on the definitions in our coding framework (Creswell, 2014). The decision of agreement or disagreement was either a dichotomous 'yes' or a 'no'. We then calculated the number of agreed codes over the total number of codes in the transcripts (i.e., the first and second coder agreed 55 times and disagreed 12 times). Our percentage agreement was 82.95%, indicating sufficient inter-coder reliability was achieved (Creswell, 2014; Miles & Huberman, 1994). In cases of disagreements, differences were reconciled through a discussion process among coders.

FINDINGS

Key themes were identified from the qualitative analysis. The themes provide insight into what drives the Malaysian culture in how they build rapport, relative to other cultures, including perspectives on collective cultural conditioning, values, and opinions regarding rapport. Four themes are identified, with two subthemes for Theme one: (i) Rapport is displayed via similar but unique variations of cues; (ii) Perception of similarities enhance rapport, with subthemes of *Rapport is associated with connection and positive feelings* and *Trust is fundamental to building rapport*; (iii) Intracultural and intercultural variations can be barriers to rapport; and (iv) Rapport is a process that is slow to build but hard to break. Each theme is outlined below, with quotes from participants provided for illustrative purposes.

Theme one: Rapport is displayed via similar but unique variations of cues

As expounded in our introduction, existing literature shows that rapport building is typically displayed via certain behavioural cues such as maintaining eye contact and open body language (Aruguete & Roberts, 2000; Collins et al., 2002), smiling, active listening, and personalisation (Collins et al., 2002; Moraes, 2013). In our sample, we find that behavioural cues mentioned by participants when displaying rapport are mostly typical and consistent with the Western literature. However, there are unique variations in which we want to highlight, for example, how much sustained and direct eye contact Malaysians are comfortable with.

Consistent with past literature, Participant SL from FG3 mentioned head-nodding at or after the right word as a cue of active listening which led to perceived rapport. Participants also believe active listening to be a cue of verbal rapport, similar to past research (Aruguete & Roberts, 2000; Gabbert et al., 2021; Vallano & Schreiber-Compo, 2011). Active listening involves a process of clarification, paraphrasing, and not interrupting. All these demonstrate attentiveness. The effect of active listening is that participants feel understood and positively affirmed (“That just by what he was

trying to clarify, I could understand that he was trying to comprehend my situation, what I was going through,” BL from FG5). Lastly, we also see accounts of non-verbal mimicry as a cue (or a combination of cues) that can build rapport. Participants SL (FG3) and BL (FG5) give accounts of this behavioural mimicry (Chartrand & Bargh, 1999), as exhibited by the mirroring of him sitting down.

“He was standing up earlier but he sat down to listen to what I had to say. That action even though it’s very surface level but it has a lot of meaning towards it, someone that’s in power coming down to your level.” (SL, FG3)

“Synchronisation of non-verbal cues, body language. I remember this term the chameleon effect. It’s as if the person just leans in at the same time or they have very similar movements.” (BL, FG5)

However, while being comfortable exhibiting open body language (such as, facing forwards towards the other person), Participant GR from FG5 recognises that some of the cues used to build rapport amongst Malaysians may not work in building rapport with someone from another culture.

“There are people from other countries, other cultures, the way they build rapport may be different from how us Asian (sic) build rapport. Culture comes in many forms, the way you speak, body language, how you present yourself.” (GR, FG5)

For example, our Malaysian participants describe a preference for indirect (i.e., looking at nose, mouth, attire), non-sustained and non-intense eye contact. Participant HT from FG3 mentions “scanning around” as a tactic to not be too direct and intimidating, but still giving the perception of looking at the other person. In other words, direct eye contact does not necessarily enhance rapport.

“If I speak to a person, my body would always be facing that person but my eyes

would look at you but not directly into your eyes.” (CH, FG3)

“I need to look away from the eyes, so I can gather my thought process, so I can think, what else I wanna say. I kinda compromise, I will just look at you, just not in your eyes, it would be somewhere close to their eyes but never towards the eyes.” (CH, FG3)

“Like nose or mouth or just other than the eyes part, yeah. People will perceive you’re looking at them but it’s not too intimidating that you make eye contact directly.” (HT, FG3)

“Sustained eye contact is perceived as intimidating and then I would have to move away from their eyes.” (OI, FG3)

“I would just swing my eyesight to avoid eye contact. From time to time, I will look at you and then turn to some point to stare at.” (HT, FG3)

The use of distinct localised English and discourse particles is also a unique verbal cue in building rapport in this sample. A pervasive feature of Malaysian English that is widely used is discourse particles such as ‘lah’, ‘ah’, ‘meh’, ‘lor’, ‘hor’, ‘wei’, and ‘leh’ (Tay et al., 2016). These informal utterances stemmed from being a multi-ethnic society and are often attached to sentences which serve a social function. These range from affirming a statement, expressing disappointment, stressing the obvious, and explaining uncertainty.

“You can start off with being really formal, I’m fine with that but once you start saying things like uhm, ‘Don’t know leh’, ‘Ya meh’ things just suddenly get so much more comfortable.” (MB, FG4)

Taken together, an application of building rapport in Malaysian culture in the context of investigative interviewing may be using open body language, head nodding, with indirect eye contact, and with the use of localised particles with interviewees, while paying attention to the intention behind these behaviours (Gabbert & Hope, 2022).

Theme two: Perception of similarities enhance rapport

A recurring theme throughout all focus groups is that perceived similarity breeds rapport. Participants shared their opinions of how similar they are with the person they are interacting with, with this perceived similarity appearing to spur rapport formation and increase personal engagement, not unlike what we already know from existing literature (Abbe & Brandon, 2014): “Rapport is when you have something in common with the other person.” (XY, FG2)

“The gel is you having the same personality or hobbies or something that interested in.” (PI, FG3)

“When I go to new places, everyone doesn’t know each other and then suddenly you see there are little cliques formed and you realise it’s because they all play badminton or they all like K-pop.” (RD, FG5)

Similar senses of humour also enhance rapport: “When I met someone that we have the same kind of like humour, I feel comfortable with them in the instance.” (DM, FG4)

“Some people you can just tell dark humour and they’re fine with it.” (HP, FG4)

“What kicked off our rapport basically was we had a pretty similar sense of humour.” (AD, FG1)

“Humour is always a good thing to build rapport.” (YL, FG2)

Similar negative experiences such as having relatable problems, issues and suffering together can also bolster rapport. As one participant from FG1 explains, “Besides having good experiences to build rapport, I think suffering together can also build rapport.”

“What makes it easy for me to bond with someone as well is if we’ve gone through the same types of problems.” (RD, FG5)

“We’ve gone through similar mental health problems. So I feel like with her, I probably have the strongest rapport.” (YL, FG2)

What highlights the uniqueness of Malaysian culture is that this perception of similarity extends to a distinctive Islamic doctrine. The perception of a *haram-halal* ratio, as reported by our participants, seems to be an important initial perception that makes or breaks rapport in the early stages. This informal metric refers to how seriously a Muslim lives out the Islamic lifestyle as prescribed in the Quran and other teachings (Jallad, 2008) from a scale of 1 to 100% (with 100 being Islamic but very progressive), which forbids certain behaviours (*‘haram’*) such as smoking, drinking alcohol, getting tattoos, and wearing certain attires. One participant describes that this initial perception of the *haram-halal* ratio while another explains that dissimilarities in this ratio prevents rapport from being built:

“What makes me click with a person is the level of *haramness*.” (SG, FG3)

“You can kind of assume who has that really high *halal* ratio.” (TS, FG2)

“You don’t wear that, you don’t drink and you don’t smoke. They are Malays that do that and are open about it but you’re not fine with it so it can be hard to build rapport with.” (YL, FG2)

This perception of similarity may also stem from interracial differences and ethnic polarisations within Malaysia, perhaps even ingrained by upbringing and embedded in societal norms such as the account that the following participant provides.

“Building rapport was based on your race. Back in high school, like, the Chinese will stick together, the Malays will stick together and the Indians will stick together.” (WT, FG5)

Subtheme one: Rapport is associated with connection and positive feelings

While we know from previous literature that rapport is associated with feeling connected (Abbe & Brandon, 2014), we find that in our focus groups positive discrete feeling states appear to be evident when participants experienced rapport.

For BL from FG5, rapport is an experience of connection, enthusiasm, mutual understanding, and resonance combined.

“It’s something you feel that sense of connection with someone. When you talk to that person you get so enthusiastic you get so into it that time just flies even though that person may not know you a long a time but you feel that the person really understands you.” (BL, FG5)

Participants report feeling “comfortable” (FL, FG3; LV, FG4), and this comfort as well as connection seems to be manifested by positive feelings such as feeling “happy” (OI, FG3), “excited” (HT, FG3) to “soothed” (SL, FG3), and even curiosity.

“It makes me curious about them, I wanna (sic) talk to them, I wanna (sic) get to know them.” (LV, FG4)

Rapport is also described as a gut feeling about the other person, where YL (FG2) reports “I have this lump right here like in my chest, it’s like a gut feeling, I just have that vibe something with people.” When rapport is not felt, certain negative feelings are described by participants in this state. These include being “offended” (DM, FG4), “awkward” (DM, FG4), “uncomfortable” (HP, FG4), “feels hard, weighed down, heavy, and exhausting” (SR, FG1), “low” (DM, FG4), and “tiring” (BL, FG5). Participant LV from FG4 describes feeling “intimidated” and being “cautious” of what to say when feeling a lack of rapport with someone at the initial stages.

Subtheme two: Trust is fundamental to building rapport

A favourable first impression is nurtured and strengthened by a positive quality of interaction brought about by trust. Participants report a need for “feeling safe” before engaging in self-disclosure, where trust denotes a decreased uncertainty and perceived risk. This appears to be linked with the “atmosphere” of this interaction. “Without trust, it’s kind of hard for you to open up to a person and build that connection.” (YL, FG2)

“I think that when you start sharing about your personal things with your friend and that’s when you’re telling that friend that, ‘I’ve trusted you enough’. Like this relationship or this friendship that has now moved on to another stage where I can trust you, where I can start sharing my personal stuff, my personal goals, my personal worries to you.” (PT, FG3)

“Trust has a part of building rapport. Cause I mean when you have a sense of trust with someone you’re able to kind break the barrier of formality and be more casual with the person you’re building rapport with.” (BK, FG5)

Similar to recent reports (Hillner, 2022), we find that rapport and trust are related but have distinct, independent qualities. Our study gives an insight into how rapport and trust develop and interplays under relational circumstances (Hillner, 2022). Self-disclosure is also reported by participants to aid the rapport process, similar to past research (Duke et al., 2018a; Vallano & Schreiber Compo, 2011). In this study, participants report self-disclosure to take a *progressive* nature (“from shallow to deep”, ZE from FG2), where its quality and content increases over time. Some participants feel it could be intimidating if self-disclosure goes straight into the deep end. Usually beginning with small talk, it is described to be the point of getting a feel of what this person is thinking or feeling, not just their superficial likes and dislikes.

“After you start talking about little things, like small talks and then you’ll start the personal.” (XY, FG2)

“Rapport is not straight into deep stuff, it’s a progress of sharing different levels of information of both of you.” (HT, FG3)

Self-disclosure has another side to its coin, where it can break rapport. The inability to self-disclose or express opinions on sensitive issues within families in Southeast Asian culture may prevent development of rapport, highlighting differences in strictness of cultural boundaries and reservations.

“To some extent you can’t really build your rapport with your own family members. (With Asian parents, you can’t talk (about) certain topic(s). You can’t really open up to them, let’s say the topic of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender).” (OG, FG5)

Theme three: Interracial and intercultural variations can be barriers to rapport

A recurring theme is that interracial differences can present as a barrier to rapport building. As introduced at the beginning of this paper, an interesting function of being a multi-ethnic society is hosting rich and diverse cultural backgrounds. This is a double-edged sword, where the amalgamation of several cultures and yet maintaining them individually naturally creates boundaries to begin with. Participants express that rapport within and between ethnic groups in Malaysia is complex, given the socio-political undercurrent. Participants inform how Malaysian politicians highlight differences in race in order to garner support from one’s in-group, but a trade-off from this is that it decreases interracial rapport within the three main ethnic groups. On one hand there is pressure to be united as a nation with three different main races (Malay, Chinese, Indian), but there exists clear interracial divide.

“They play two card (sic), the race card and the Malaysian card. They will play the race card more often where let’s say, this party is predominantly one race, for example, Malay, to gain the votes like the Malay people. They will play the Malaysian card when they feel like, ‘Oh our speech is getting a bit too racist.’” (CH, FG3)

Underlying issues such as interracial conflicts would also seem to play a role in preventing interracial rapport in Malaysia. Participants report how the nature of within-culture rapport mechanises here.

“It’s almost harder for you to build rapport with other races from Malaysia compared to Westerners.” (SL, FG3)

“Because of history like the past in Malaysia, the different ethnicities, the differences between ethnicities, sometimes there are issues of trust not just between the ethnicities, it’s also within the ethnicities, because every ethnicity has also got their own subcultures.” (ZE, FG2)

“Say, when you’re looking for a job. I saw a lot of Malay complaining in JobStreet saying that a lot of jobs are for Chinese or only want a Chinese speaking person, or for rental there (sic) areas where this is a- areas looking for Malay, but this one is looking for Indian, and this one is looking for Chinese. They will say no to you if you’re a different race.” (OI, FG3)

Participant CH from FG3, who grew up in East Malaysia, provides an account of racial biasness in Eastern Malaysia.

“On one hand, it is more integrated in East Malaysia, but still – inhabitants are prejudiced against certain races like Indians.” (CH, FG3)

Participant TS in FG2 give details of how trans-language ability (i.e., bilingualism and multilingualism) can help form rapport within ethnicities in Malaysia. Equally, the lack of this ability can instead hinder rapport.

“You can mix a lot of languages ‘cause we are either bilingual or multilingual. I can speak Malay, English and sometimes Mandarin.” (TS, FG2).

They offer an example of a dirty joke, *kucing basah*, in which the literal translation from Bahasa Malaysia to English is ‘wet cat’—a sexual innuendo for *wet pussy*. This is a slang phrase whereby only members of particular groups are familiar with. “When you say *kucing basah*, a Chinese-educated not really good in Bahasa Malaysia – they probably won’t be able to understand what *kucing basah* is whereas of course all of us here understand. We understand because we are English-educated and proficient in English.” (MD, FG1)

From the accounts above, it appears that interactions between individuals from different racial and ethnic groups within a culture can either

help or hinder rapport formation, depending on the level rapport is being built. Further to this, intercultural variations can be barriers to rapport. Participants share their experiences and thoughts on rapport at the intercultural level, acknowledging that differences in cultural wavelengths (Western versus Southeast Asian) may affect the way they *believe* they need to build intercultural rapport – sometimes even engaging in a form of *pseudorapport*.

“In the Western culture they are brought up to be more expressive even when they communicate like (Participant) BK has mentioned, like ‘How are you love?’, or like ‘*bella*’ to call the females. In Malaysia you don’t hear people in the shops ‘How are you *sayang*?’ This doesn’t feel right, but overseas it’s very natural when you walk into shops, the cashier tries to build some sort of rapport. They try to get to know you where else in Malaysia or Asia in general, more conservative.” (GR, FG5)

“Sometimes you feel like there’s no choice. In order to build rapport, you just have to compromise. I would have to sacrifice how I would normally interact with people just to be able to establish that basic rapport with them. Not my usual wavelength of how I converse. It is very short lived.” (BL, FG5)

The localised English vernacular in Malaysia can be also a barrier to building intercultural rapport. While the usage of Malaysian English can build rapport between Malaysians, it can be difficult for someone who is unfamiliar with the localised English to understand certain sentences. Because Malaysian English is also spoken with unique intonation, colloquialism, and syntax, this creates a gap in rapport-building between Malays and those from another culture.

“Malaysian memes, like just Malaysian jokes that is very localised, like you would only get it if you’re a Malaysian, sometimes if we share it among our friend group and she wouldn’t understand.” (DM, FG4)

“When you translate, the energy already like drops down. Some things in your mother tongue, it

makes more sense. When we repeat in English, she’s like, ‘Huh?’ When we repeat again, the joke’s dead.” (LV, FG4)

Theme four: Rapport is a process that is slow to build but hard to break

The last recurring theme in our sample is that participants give a rich account of rapport as a process. This process has been described as elastic, flux, and emergent with unfixed boundaries – depending on the quality of interaction of those involved. This interaction is a mechanistic process of discovery, where rapport incited by initial impressions that can either be clarified, affirmed, or reversed depending on and in response to the quality of this interaction. The rapport process is dynamic enough to accommodate actions and behaviours that build or diminish it. The elements contributing to the formation of rapport are different from those contributing to its maintenance. While first impressions invite the formation of rapport, much of the dynamicity of rapport emerges once the interactions and interpersonal exchanges begin. This is similar to previous findings in literature where rapport is understood as a dynamic concept that exists between individuals (Gabbert et al., 2021) and dependent on the quality of the dyadic interaction (Neequaye & Mac Giolla, 2022).

“It’s not straightforward even if you establish a certain pattern, when it comes to meeting the new person you would still start from zero. In many ways the boundaries are not fixed. It can only go both ways; it pales in significance when you meet someone better or you just, it remains stagnant or it becomes more progressive.” (BL, FG5)

Interviewees’ accounts also suggest that rapport can be lost. For example, a lack of consistency ensuing initial impressions, the presence of conflict, or the end of a purpose for a relationship to continue – all can lead to a break in rapport. Participant FB in FG4 explains a break in the “wavelength”, the inability to relate to each other anymore, is one of the causes of rapport to terminate.

“If you have positive vibes in the first impression that doesn’t necessarily mean that the level of positive vibes that you get will be consistent throughout years, decades, even if you get there to that person, so consistency is very, it’s something that you have to take into consideration when you’re building or maintaining your rapport.” (MD, FG1)

“During the moment I felt it but once that moment has passed, nothing.” (BL, FG5)

“The most obvious one is conflict. If you have conflict and you don’t wanna resolve it like adults, gone. Second of all, purpose. If there’s no purpose for the relationship, then it would drift away.” (HP, FG4)

Disruption in rapport can be merely temporary, as shown by an account below given by a participant. This verbalises how rapport can shift, depending on the actions of the interacting parties. This suggests that rapport is not a straight or static progression, nor is it exponential.

“After getting positive vibes, sometimes you will get negative vibes but the thing is it must be a balance. You can still feel it’s more positive but sometimes I do have friendships that like sometimes the vibes are a bit more negative but in the end because I’m more willing to, I can sort of take if they’re being like rude or a bit negative just because I know it’s only temporary, I do believe in maintaining the rapport.” (AD, FG1)

Rapport can also stagnate. Feelings in this state include “comfortable and familiar with level of emotional closeness but lonely” (BB, FG1), fear and reservation in exploring different sides of the relationship (fear of “uncharted territory between the two of you in the friendship” by YL from FG2). Having restraint in conversational boundaries seems to be valued in the Malaysian culture, where participants hold the belief that Malaysians are slower to build rapport relative to Western culture – again denoting that rapport is a process. “It’s more gradual, we’re not as bold.” (BL, FG5)

“It may take longer to build rapport because our first encounters with someone we’re walking on thin ice. We don’t want to be intrusive. For us Asians, we are always wanting to show that you’re a good person.” (GR, FG5)

“We have this shell that takes time to peel all the layers before you can get to the person to be more comfortable with you.” (BK, FG5)

While slow to build rapport, once established, seems to be long-lasting, fostering continued stable, social interactions between individuals in the Malaysian culture. Our participants give accounts of adapting themselves to maintain existing dynamics, to maintain social harmony, and to avoid conflict. One participant describes it as a “bad comfort zone”, being “emotionally close but not good vibes”, citing feelings of being “comfortable but lonely” and yet a preference to tolerate. This coincides with the concept of ‘relational mobility’ as introduced earlier in our paper (Thomson et al., 2018). This finding that rapport takes longer to build but tends to be maintained and stronger once it has been built suggests that perhaps rapport in Malaysian culture requires more than what investigative interviewers can build in a single, short interview.

“For us Asians, we try our best to salvage or to save that rapport.” (GR, FG5)

“Social harmony is very important in influencing rapport.” (MD, FG1)

“Don’t click but don’t voice this out so as to not be selfish.” (CH, FG3)

“Rather than this being conformity it’s more like refusal to make an issue ‘cause we don’t really want to make an issue out of it.” (BB, FG1)

“We try to salvage rapport ‘cause we are a collective society.” (RD, FG5)

“We are also risk avoidant – won’t want to risk doing anything wrong that will somehow hurt the relationship especially if we valued the rapport with somebody.” (MD, FG1)

One participant reasons that this tolerance and accommodating nature is partly due to living in a multi-ethnic country. “I have Muslim friends, I shouldn’t break this rapport just because I wanna go Korean BBQ, and there’s pork and they can’t. So in a way we have to learn to be a lot accommodative. I guess like being in our culture, personally we have to take time to understand the other person.” (GR, FG5)

DISCUSSION

Rapport is a topic that has been widely discussed in an investigative interviewing setting. However, the understanding of how rapport is perceived, and its building blocks are very much limited now to the West. Rapport by its definition is built within a social interaction; a broader understanding of how it is built in different cultures given various social norms and expectations is an important first step, key in understanding rapport in an investigative interviewing context. As shown through our analysis of a group of Malaysians and their understanding of rapport, our findings highlight that at the outset rapport is conceptualised very much similarly to people from the West. However, we also highlight some important distinctions in how Malaysians exhibit and receive rapport, and how this can be applied to investigative interviewing in practical ways. The elasticity of rapport is evident in our sample, as are the layers of rapport in operation (i.e., interracial rapport). With a unique set of localised English vocabulary due to the amalgamation of the three main racial groups, the underlying socio-political climate reveal differences between the Malaysian culture and those from the West. Our findings suggest rapport-building in Malaysian culture would involve the use of open body language, head nodding, indirect and unsustained eye contact, as well using localised particles with interviewees, whereas emphasising self-disclosure may be detrimental to the relationship.

It was also observed in this study that aspects mentioned by participants – such as bonding over shared suffering and managing interpersonal conflict – are easier to observe in a social context of rapport in friendships and family relationships,

and this is arguably different from rapport in a formal investigative interview (Gabbert et al., 2021; Gabbert & Hope, 2022). That said, the findings here highlight the importance of having a wider understanding of how rapport is understood and built in a particular culture. For instance, cultural and religious identities as well as language play crucial roles in social interactions but are under-researched in the context of investigative interviewing (Wilson et al., 2022). Evidently, these factors affect the quality of interaction between interviewee and interviewer, and therefore the quantity of information that can be gathered. The implications of this conceptualisation can influence police decision surrounding investigative interviewing practice, including the police’s ethical and professional responsibility to assign interviewers that will result in the most comfortable interviewees (e.g., considering language choice when conducting interviews), and thereby potentially more efficient interviews.

An application to minimise resistance and to maximise the impact of rapport in investigative interviews while improving the overall quality of interactions in a multicultural country such as Malaysia starts from effective pre-interview preparation and knowing the setting, which can include finding out what languages the interviewee speaks, paying attention to the race and religion of the interviewee and interviewer, what localised vernaculars they are familiar with, familiarising with the politics and practice of post-colonial interracial and intercultural complexities at hand, while paying attention to nuanced characteristics of intercultural communications such as displaying appropriate rapport behaviours. Evidently, what is recommended to build rapport in the West cannot be generalised to non-WEIRD countries, or at the very least requires adjustments. The consequence of not taking heed of the contextual variations of rapport is immense, resulting in misinterpretations – especially in a country where rapidly establishing rapport is challenging and may require several longer interviews as opposed a single, short interview. This obviously has financial implications, as it necessitates more time and resources.

Investigative interviewing guidance, such as the United Kingdom's 'Achieving Best Evidence' (ABE; Home Office, 2022) acknowledges the potential impact of cultural differences on the success of the interview. In this guide, investigative interviewing teams are encouraged to consider the interviewee's "race, culture, ethnicity and first language" and "specific minority groups" (Home Office, 2022, p. 21). Interviewers are further directed to seek advice about customs and beliefs of the witness they are unfamiliar with, including how the culture responds to authority, shame, and expectations of respect. The ABE acknowledges that rapport broken due to cultural misinterpretations can be avoided by taking measures to understand the relevant culture at hand. While this guidance is sensible in the general sense, it is limited in being able to offer specific advice. At present, there are no guidelines available about the use of rapport in Malaysia in police interviewing. As shown by Chung and colleagues (2021), investigative interviewers in this part of the world critically need more training, help, and guidance in rapport building with suspects and witnesses. This study hopes to fill some of these gaps, and to also offer a comparison for future research of rapport in hyperdiverse communities, and to expand the evidence-base of studies examining cultural differences in police interviewing. More research is needed to build an evidence-base and inform guidance.

LIMITATIONS

Our sample was drawn from a private university in the heart of Kuala Lumpur, the capital city of Malaysia. The sample was also made up of students who might hold higher levels of education and world experience compared to the whole Malaysian population. Inevitably, our sample may represent a portion of individuals who already feel comfortable conversing in English. This may have implications for the extent to which their perceptions reflect others in the population. However, we made provisions for these possibilities by recruiting students from the three major ethnicities of the country in each of our focus groups to stimulate and generate a comparison of experiences. While we mentioned

to participants prior to arriving to the interview not to research the word 'rapport' to not bias their responses, we did not ask a follow-up to confirm this. Lastly, we conducted this study in the context of social rapport, and not in an investigative interviewing setting where the latter setting would feature a power imbalance between the interviewer and interviewee. This paper also highlights that rapport is conceptually and operationally more challenging than laboratory studies can show, nonetheless, future studies warrant quantitative investigations into the effects of the elements proposed in this study. The findings of this study also offer a comparison for future research of rapport in other cultures and multicultural societies, and to expand the base of studies examining cultural differences.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

To enforce equity and equality within investigative interviewing, it is essential to better understand the impact of rapport within various cultures toward developing training that is sensitive to the needs of these groups. Understanding how rapport is shaped within different cultures goes in some way to break the ethnic divide in the investigative interviewing space, while mitigating inequalities and disadvantages that these groups may currently experience with more tailored approaches. We hope that the results of this study might supplement some of the current limitations and be able to give relevant advice to practitioners on how to build rapport with interviewees from a Southeast Asian culture. This is an important consideration because practitioners should be equipped with relevant training to maximise the impact of the techniques they employ during an interview and for the tactics to be at their most effective. In parallel, it is also important because interviewers can reasonably expect to interview individuals from a range of diverse cultures, especially in the context of Malaysia, but also given that we are increasingly becoming a culturally diverse society, even *superdiverse* in some cases (Office for National Statistics, 2021).

CONCLUSION

Rapport is an interesting and much researched topic, both within and outside the field of investigative interviewing. It is also recognised as an important component of police interviewing. Currently, much of the research about rapport-based interviewing has been undertaken in Western countries, and very little is understood outside this context. By contrast, this paper reports a qualitative study of rapport in Malaysia, using a focus group methodology that allows an investigation of the lower channel richness and the nuances of rapport. Focus groups of university students from the main cultural groups present in Malaysia (Malay, Chinese, and Indian) participated in this study, with results suggesting that many aspects of rapport development and its maintenance are similar across cultures. However, that there are some nuanced differences that are valuable to understand, especially for police investigators, negotiators and practitioners who are working in Southeast Asian contexts.

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