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The Use of the Term Rapport in the Investigative Interviewing Literature: A Critical
Examination of Definitions

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Abstract

Researchers typically note that there is much divergence about how rapport is defined in the investigative interviewing literature. We examined the scope of this divergence, the commonalities of extant definitions, and how the current state of affairs impacts the scientific investigation of rapport. We obtained 228 publications that discussed rapport in an investigative interviewing context. Only Thirty-two publications (14%) explicitly defined rapport. Twenty-two of those definitions were unique. All of the definitions implied that rapport centers on the quality of the interviewer-interviewee interaction. However, the definitions ascribed different attributes when describing more specifically how rapport relates to the quality of interpersonal interactions. A thematic analysis revealed six major attributes by which rapport could be characterized. The attributes were communication, mutuality, positivity, respect, successful outcomes, and trust. These attributes were disparately distributed across the definitions. Based on the considerable disparity in its definitions, we question the theoretical and practical value of the term rapport. The current situation creates ambiguity about the meaning of rapport and impedes its objective assessment. To avoid further ambiguity, we believe the field must collectively determine a finite set of attributes to denote the term rapport. Until those attributes are determined, stakeholders should stop indiscriminately using the word rapport to describe any collection of attributes of the interviewer-interviewee interaction.

Keywords: definitions, rapport, investigative interviewing, source, suspect, victim, witness

The Use of the Term Rapport in the Investigative Interviewing Literature: A critical examination of definitions

“Before we inquire into origins and functional relations, it is necessary to know the thing we are trying to explain” (Asch, 1952, reprinted in 1987)

This work examines the use of the term *rapport* in the extant investigative interviewing literature. Here, an investigative interview refers to a social interaction in which human interviewers solicit information from human sources (i.e., interviewees) for security reasons or legal purposes. It is generally accepted that rapport is important for conducting successful—that is, ethical and effective—¹interviews (e.g., Vrij et al., 2017). However, existing literature reviews note that there is much divergence about how rapport is defined (Abbe & Brandon, 2013, 2014; Gabbert et al., 2020; Vallano & Schreiber Compo, 2015; Vanderhallen & Vervaeke, 2014). Our aim is to systematically explore the extent of such variance, the commonalities shared by extant definitions, and how this state of affairs may influence the scientific investigation of rapport.

The Value of Rapport

The extant investigative interviewing literature univocally suggests that rapport is a critical component of successful interviewing. For example, the importance of rapport has been described in the following ways: “a necessary condition for a successful interview” (Abbe & Brandon, 2013, p. 241); “the cornerstone of any attempt to elicit information from an uncooperative source” (Kelly et al., 2013, p.169); and “the heart of a good interview” (St-Yves, 2006, p. 92). Moreover, researchers credit the successful inclusion of rapport in an interview with benefits such as the following: children’s plentiful and accurate disclosures of details

¹ Effective denotes the interviewer achieving the goals of the interview.

about sexual abuse (e.g., Hershkowitz et al., 2015; Sternberg et al., 1997); adult witnesses' improved recall and cooperativeness (e.g., Collins et al., 2002; Kieckhafer et al., 2014; Nash et al., 2016; Duke et al., 2018); and crime suspects' tendency to engage with interviewers and disclose information (e.g., Alison et al., 2014; Alison et al., 2013; Kelly et al., 2016; Walsh & Bull, 2012).

In light of these advantages, the excellence of investigative interviews in the field (as opposed to laboratory experiments) are often judged, in part, by the extent to which interviewers are able to establish rapport in an interview (see, e.g., Clarke & Milne, 2001; Schreiber Compo et al., 2012). Major interviewing regulations recommend that interviewers *build and maintain* rapport with interviewees throughout interviews. These regulations include the PEACE model² (see, e.g., Bull & Milne, 2004; College of policing, 2019), and the Achieving Best Evidence (ABE) guidelines (Home Office, 2011)—commonly implemented in the United Kingdom; The Cognitive Interview (Fisher & Geiselman, 1992); the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development protocol (NICHD; Lamb et al., 2007), and the Army Field Manual (AFM 2-22.3; Department of the Army, 2006)—commonly applied in the United States.

Problems in Defining Rapport

Although stakeholders endorse rapport univocally, there seems to be uncertainty about what rapport entails or should entail. For example, Abbe and Brandon (2014, p. 207) note that the extent to which rapport has a similar meaning across different countries and interviewing contexts is unclear. Vallano and Schreiber Compo (2015, p. 86) mention that the existing work is unable to provide a clear and consistent definition of rapport. Vanderhallen and Vervaeke

² PEACE is an acronym representing the following five interview stages. Planning and preparation; Engaging and explaining; asking an interviewees' Account of events; Closure; and Evaluation. Walsh and Bull (2015) mention that Australia, Canada, and New Zealand also adopt the PEACE model.

(2014, p.77) note that the term rapport is conceptually weak in the literature. Saywitz et al., 2015, p. 383) found that research has not defined the critical elements of rapport clearly. Sauerland and colleagues (2018, p. 269) write that definitions (and operationalizations) of rapport are vague and varying.

Typically, defining a construct is a pre-requisite to its operationalizing and analysis. Inadequate definitions and operationalizations obstruct the measurement of a construct, obscuring the inferences one can draw (Shadish et al., 2002). In any body of work, a reference point that defines the fundamental aspects of a construct is central to measuring the construct coherently and comprehensibly.

Kripke's (1972) work on *reference-fixing* in stipulative definitions further highlights the importance of establishing definitions with a common reference point. Kripke describes a peculiar type of stipulative definition whereby one introduces a term (e.g., a name) using a description that tells the audience what the speaker is referring to by the term. For example, Joanne Rowling (i.e., the term) is the author of the Harry Potter novels (i.e., the description). In the current example, the speaker's description is not synonymous with Joanne Rowling. The description fixes a reference indicating what the speaker means when saying, Joanne Rowling. The reference, in the pertinent aspects, is now univocal and clarifies what the speaker is saying. However, such reference-fixing, according to Kripke, is also contingent, pending further insight that may lead to revising the reference. For example, Joanne Rowling is the author of the Harry Potter and Fantastic Beasts novels.

A term like Joanne Rowling is rigid; the name Joanne Rowling is always the name Joanne Rowling. Conversely, fixing the term's (i.e., the name's) reference can be non-rigid. One can describe Joanne Rowling in many different ways (see also Gupta, 2015 on Kripke, 1972). Problems with reference-fixing arise when users of the same rigid designator, use the term without sufficiently explaining how their use builds on or relates to previous uses. Such

an explanation is required so that Joanne Rowling, author of the Harry Potter and Fantastic Beasts novels, is not confused with another, identically named Joanne Rowling—who happens to work at a chocolate factory. In order for two people to have an unambiguous conversation about Joanne Rowling, they must be referring to the same person.

Applying Kripke's musings to rapport definitions, we can infer that across the investigative interviewing literature, the term rapport is a rigid designator. However, as mentioned, there is great uncertainty about how the reference for the term rapport is fixed. This reference-fixing issue creates ambiguity about the meaning of rapport across the literature. For two people to have an intelligible conversation about Joanne Rowling, they need to know that they are referring to the same person. Similarly, to systematically research the construct rapport, researchers need to know that they are referring to the same construct. Ideally, this would require some univocal baseline description, or reference point, of rapport in investigative interviewing contexts. By reviewing the extant definitions of rapport, we hoped to identify such a reference point.

Method

Search Strategy

We aimed to gather a comprehensive list of definitions of the term rapport within the academic literature (in English) on investigative interviewing. A literature search was carried out on the PsycINFO database. The primary search word was *Rapport*, which was combined with terms specifying the field of investigative interviewing. We searched full texts, not just abstracts or keywords, to allow us flag any literature that fits the scope of the review. That is, literatures that examine rapport as a main and/or secondary investigation within the investigative interviewing context.

The formal search strategy was:

“Rapport” AND “Investigative interview*” OR “Suspect*” OR “Eyewitness*” OR “Police”

OR “Interrogation” OR “Cognitive interview” OR “PEACE model” OR “Intelligence gathering” OR “NICHHD”

We complemented the formal search strategy with an informal search of relevant review articles, official documents, and publication lists of key researchers in the field. We preregistered the parameters of our review here: <https://osf.io/5zha3/>

Identification of Definitions

We reviewed the selected literature to identify the extant unique definitions of rapport by examining each publication’s entire text. The first criterion for determining definitions was the authors’ explicit, or sufficiently clear, indication that by a certain sentence, or parts of the sentence, they are bringing a reader to know the meaning they (i.e., the authors) have assigned to the term rapport. Using this rule, we extracted as definitions the predicates of sentences whose subjects resemble the following forms. Rapport is *defined as*, *refers to*, *indicates*, *regarded as*, *conceptualized as*, *described as* something—and something is the predicate. In some cases, the word rapport was not necessarily the subject of a sentence from which we identified a potential definition. Here, we determined the authors’ intention to provide such a rapport definition from the immediately surrounding discussion. The second criterion for identifying definitions was the possibility to fully decipher the meaning of rapport the authors intend from the text provided. Thus, we disregarded potential definitions whereby authors describe the nature of rapport by referring to anecdotes about a particular investigative interview whose content cannot be verified thoroughly or objectively.

Thematic Analysis

We thematically analyzed the definitions following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) recommendations. We began by familiarizing ourselves with the definitions and followed this with an initial coding phase where codes closely represented the data. Based on these initial codes, we created broader and more interpretative attributes of the definitions. These broader

attributes were then compared to the initial codes for fit and altered accordingly. Figure 1 illustrates the attributes in the specific definitions. For a detailed explanation of how each code relates to each definition, see the supplemental figure. We strongly encourage a reading of the supplemental figure as it demonstrates the intricacies of the thematic analysis.

Overview

The search obtained 228 relevant publications, and we analyzed all the articles; none were excluded. Approximately 86% of these publications did not provide a definition of rapport. That is, authors invoked the term without any clear definition or without explaining in detail how the current invocation is consistent or different from prior uses of rapport. An inevitable consequence of this finding is that this article's reference list does not contain publications that did not define rapport. One can find a comprehensive reference list at the following link: <https://osf.io/5zha3/>

Of the 32 publications that defined rapport, we identified 22 unique definitions. Six of the definitions were proxied by the authors from other sources but met our inclusion criteria. Thematic analysis of the 22 definitions uncovered one overarching reference point and six subordinate attributes of rapport. The overarching reference point was that all definitions referred in some way *to the quality of the interviewer-interviewee interpersonal interaction*. However, the six subordinate attributes showed considerable variance across definitions. No single attribute was common to all the definitions. Table 1 includes a detailed list of all the definitions and a chart of the corresponding attributes. The table provides a quick snapshot of the variance in attributes. The most common attribute was “positivity”—that rapport implies a positive interaction—was mentioned in approximately 68% of definitions. The remaining attributes were mentioned in less than 40% of definitions. This finding suggests that there is considerable variance in how rapport is defined in the investigative interviewing literature, with the caveat that most propose that rapport in part refers to a positively valenced interaction. The

subsequent paragraphs describe each main attribute in turn.

(insert table 1 about here)

Positivity

This attribute captured definitions, which held that rapport implied a positive interpersonal interaction. That is, an interaction, which an interviewer or interviewee might consider desirable. This categorization included definitions that invoked concepts such as a working relationship, warmth, and harmony. Additionally, the positivity attribute captured definitions advocating that to induce rapport an interviewer should display behaviors that would increase an interviewee's positive perceptions of the interaction. These behaviors include expressing sympathy, interest in the interviewee's welfare, and acceptance of the interviewee. Fifteen of the twenty-two definitions included positivity.

Mutuality

This attribute captured definitions containing a focus on the shared characteristics between the interviewer and interviewee. This designation, thus, includes mentions such as shared understanding, shared attention, common ground, and communicative alliance. Mutuality was a component of nine of the twenty-two definitions.

Communication

This attribute captures definitions that emphasize the role of communication in facilitating rapport. Furthermore, we assigned this attribute to definitions, indicating that interviewers should be genuine in their dealings with an interviewee. Seven of the twenty-two definitions included the attribute of communication.

Successful Outcomes

This attribute captures definitions where rapport comprises a successful interview. Such

success stipulations include increasing the interviewee's cooperation, willingness to talk, as well as the productivity or amount of intelligence (viz., information) obtained from the interaction. Successful outcomes were included in seven of twenty-two definitions.

Trust

This attribute captures definitions that explicitly mention that trust is a component of rapport. Additionally, we assigned this attribute to definitions that emphasize that rapport should increase an interviewee's confidence in an interviewer. Trust was a component of five of the twenty-two definitions.

Respect

This attribute captures definitions, which explicitly mention that respect is a component of rapport. Also, we include definitions mentioning that inducing rapport consists of emphasizing an interviewees' autonomy through an unforced interaction. Two of the twenty-two definitions included the attribute of respect.

Figure 1. Overview of attributes inherent in the rapport definitions.

Reliability Analysis

We subjected the thematic analysis to a reliability check. A coder was assigned to

independently replicate our thematic analysis using the descriptions of the six attributes. Specifically, the coder, who was blind to the research question, rated the presence or absence of the six attributes in each of the 22 definitions. We subsequently examined the consistency between the coder's ratings and the results of our thematic analysis. There was a 91.7% agreement between the coder's rating and our own, $\kappa = .81$, $SE = .06$, 95% CI [.70, .92]. The most consistent minor disagreement arose when some attributes of a definition appeared in an adjective qualifying a noun. An example is a definition including the phrase *mutual respect*. Here, the coder designated the attribute denoted by the noun only (i.e., respect). But we assigned the attribute denoted by both the adjective and the noun (i.e., mutuality and respect). The reliability analysis coding can be accessed here: <https://osf.io/5zha3/>

Influential Descriptions of Rapport Without Explicit Definitions

There were some noteworthy descriptions of the meaning of rapport that featured in the literature but did not necessarily fit our inclusion criteria. This section, thus, focuses on describing influential lines of rapport research that do not provide an explicit definition of the term. Unlike the examinations that hardly offered definitions, these expositions explain what rapport means in various ways, but we could not delineate the exact definitions of rapport the authors intended.

The Observing Rapport-Based Interpersonal Techniques (ORBIT) framework is a notable example (see, e.g., Alison et al., 2013; Alison et al., 2014; Christiansen et al., 2018). Here, the researchers suggest that Motivational Interviewing is a useful tool to evoke rapport. Miller and Rollnick (2009), for example, define Motivational Interviewing (MI) as a collaborative, person-centered form of guiding to elicit and strengthen motivation for change. Exponents of the ORBIT framework seem to interpret the MI definition as one suggesting that rapport means 'creating a collaborative atmosphere'. That is, an interaction conducive to open communication between an interviewer and interviewee (see Alison et al., 2013, p. 413; Alison

et al., 2014, p. 2). Nonetheless, it was unclear whether the ORBIT framework implements the interpretation of MI, just described, as a rapport definition. Or the framework adopts the exact MI definition; namely, the definition by Miller and Rollnick (2009).

Other research has implemented the concept—the working alliance³—to proxy rapport. Similar to MI, the concept originates in the counseling and therapy literature (see, e.g., Bordin, 1979; Martin et al., 2000). We could not trace a specified definition of the working alliance in the investigative interviewing literature drawing on the concept (viz., Vanderhallen, Vervaeke, & Holmberg, 2011; Vanderhallen & Vervaeke, 2014). Bordin (1979)—whose work has informed the current adaptations of the notion—describes the nature of the working alliance as including three features: ‘*An agreement on goals, an assignment of a task or a series of tasks, and the development of bonds.*’ Vanderhallen et al. (2011, p. 114) argue that Bordin’s (1979) description emphasizes agreement and an emotional bond between an interviewer and interviewee (i.e., interactants). The authors do not explicate the role *task assignment* plays to evoke rapport in investigative interviewing contexts. Thus, we could not ascertain precisely how Bordin’s (1979) stipulations map onto the meaning of rapport, as advocated by Vanderhallen et al. (2011) and Vanderhallen & Vervaeke (2014). That is, are certain aspects of the working alliance enough to evoke rapport? Or must an interaction include all the three features of the working alliance to sufficiently induce rapport.

Another popularly implemented description of elements that constitute rapport is one offered by Tickle-Degnen and Rosenthal (1990). The work examines the nonverbal correlates of rapport. Here, the authors do not explicitly offer a rapport definition but describe its nature as consisting of three dynamic components—mutual attentiveness, positivity, and coordination (Tickle-Degnen & Rosenthal, 1990). It is noted that the influence of the three components may

³ We have maintained the phrasing—the *working alliance*—throughout this paper because exponents of the concept describe it as such.

vary in evoking an instance of rapport due to rapport's dynamism in interpersonal interaction. Tickle-Degnen and Rosenthal (1990) propose that the temporal stage of interaction significantly contributes to a constituent's import. Specifically, early interactions rely more on positivity and mutual attentiveness. Coordination and mutual attentiveness come to bear on late interactions. It is thus unclear whether—at a minimum—the three elements are required to instantiate rapport. Or the influence of a component entirely depends on the stage of interaction.

Investigative interviewing research drawing on Tickle-Degnen and Rosenthal's (1990) theorizing similarly do not explicitly define rapport (see, e.g., Collins & Carthy, 2018; Driskell et al., 2013; Holmberg & Madsen, 2014). Moreover, such work provides little a priori specifications about whether the three elements are required at a minimum or whether the significance of rapport's elements is solely derived from the temporal stage of an interview.

Duke et al. (2018) have developed scales to measure interviewees' perceptions of rapport (RS3i). The RS3i examines the extent to which an interviewee experiences rapport in an interview by measuring specific perceptions of an interviewer. That is, the interviewer's *attentiveness*, *trustworthiness and respectfulness*, *professional competence*, *cultural similarity* (to the interviewee), and *connected flow*. Here, connected flow indicates the ease with which the interviewee perceived their interaction with the interviewer. These perceptions were drawn from a literature review that sought to identify the components of rapport (see Duke, 2013; Duke et al., 2018, p. 65). In the exposition, Duke et al. (2018) allude to two prior descriptions of rapport (viz, Kleinman, 2006; Neuman & Salinas-Serrano, 2006). However, the authors do not offer a working definition nor explain how the prior descriptions they mentioned, encapsulate the dimensions of the RS3i. For instance, it is not entirely clear whether inducing a single dimension of the RS3i (e.g., attentiveness) is sufficient to create an instance of rapport. Or all the elements must be present to evoke rapport.

Discussion

We examined the existing definitions of rapport in the investigative interviewing literature. A formal search obtained 228 publications that discussed rapport in an investigative interviewing context. Only Thirty-two publications (14%) explicitly defined rapport. Twenty-two of those definitions were unique. A thematic analysis of the definitions revealed six major attributes. The attributes were communication, mutuality, positivity, respect, successful outcomes, and trust. However, these attributes were disparately distributed across definitions, demonstrating considerable differences in how rapport is defined. This pattern has created a literature replete with different definitions of a term univocally seen as a fundamental part of an effective interview.

Consider the following examples. It is not apparent whether the “mutually shared understanding of goals and needs” on which Kelly et al. (2013) base their definition is equivalent to “effective communication” as proposed by Matsumoto and Hwang (2018). Additionally, it is not clear if “the relationship” Vallano and Schreiber Compo (2015) refer to is one where actors can understand each other’s goals (Kelly et al., 2013), communicate effectively (Matsumoto & Hwang, 2018), or both (Kelly et al., 2013; Matsumoto & Hwang, 2018). Moreover, it remains unknown the extent to which “a state of communicative alliance” (Abbe & Brandon, 2013) equals a “smooth, positive interpersonal interaction” (Abbe & Brandon, 2014). And it is unclear whether such a positive interpersonal interaction must include trust (e.g., Vallano et al., 2015), respect (e.g., Vanderhallen et al., 2011), or both (e.g., Russano et al., 2014).

The ambiguity about the meaning of rapport is also evident when considering definitions posited by the major investigative interviewing guidelines. We believe that discussing the variance between those guidelines is warranted for practical reasons. Furthermore, researchers often invoke the importance of rapport by noting that at least one of the major interviewing

guidelines endorses it. Researchers do not necessarily examine whether potential differences in the meanings of rapport impact the generalizability of research across jurisdictions using the different regulations (see, e.g., Meissner et al., 2015; Walsh & Bull, 2012, Vallano & Schreiber Compo, 2015). In our opinion, the reasons outlined suggest that even when research works highlight subtle definitional differences, rapport is still assumed to be identical across the major interviewing guidelines. Significant variations, however, exist.

According to the AFM, rapport is a condition established by an interviewer that is characterized by an interviewee's confidence in the interviewer and willingness to cooperate (AFM 2-22.3; Department of the Army, 2006, p. 141). The definition includes the themes trust and successful outcomes as delineated in this research. This AFM definition is markedly different from the one posited in the PEACE model. PEACE describes rapport as a property of the interviewer being 'genuinely open, interested, and approachable, as well as being interested in the interviewee's feelings or welfare' (College of policing, 2019). The PEACE model definition centers on the themes of positivity and communication. From the AFM perspective, rapport does not necessarily derive from congeniality (viz., positivity) as suggested by the PEACE model. In fact, the AFM indicates that rapport could be based on friendliness, mutual gain, or even fear (p. 141). To our knowledge, the Cognitive Interview, the NICHD Protocol, and the ABE guidelines do not provide specific rapport definitions but recommend behaviors by which interviewers can create rapport. Without specified definitions, it is not possible to examine the meanings and value of rapport for these guidelines. It is not possible to ascertain whether one behavior is sufficient to induce rapport. Or whether an interviewer has to enact several behaviors to induce rapport.

How Did We Get Here?

Definitional issues plague the systematic research of the term rapport. We believe these definitional issues have arisen because researchers have attempted to define rapport at the

wrong level of analysis. The extant definitions have defined rapport by its potential constituent parts—such as trust, friendliness, or respect. In contrast, we argue that rapport is a higher order concept, and as such requires a higher order definition. A proposal for this higher order definition can be gleaned from the common reference point we identified on which all extant rapport definitions build. Specifically, that rapport refers to *the quality of the interviewer-interviewee interaction*. This reference point suggests that the term rapport is axiomatic: since all interviews require interpersonal interaction, rapport refers to a necessary and self-evident aspect of any investigative interview. Confusion on the definition of rapport has arisen because when defining the term researchers have focused on different aspects of the quality of this interaction.

A comparison can be made with the term “personality” within trait psychology. Like rapport, personality is a higher order term: It refers to one’s relatively stable pattern of behaviors, cognitions, and emotions (Cloninger, 2009). How many traits there are and how they relate to each other is an empirical question. Importantly, whether one believes there are three (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1984), five (Goldberg, 1990), or six traits (Ashton et al. 2004), does not change the definition of personality as one’s relatively stable pattern of behaviors, cognitions, and emotions. Similarly, whether one believes the important attributes of rapport are friendliness, trust, or respect, does not change the higher order definition of rapport as *the quality of the interviewer-interviewee interaction*. As with personality, what constitutes the attributes of rapport, is an empirical question. It may be that the attributes of rapport are the six subordinate attributes we identified. It may be that there is only one overarching good-bad dimension of rapport. We do not know. An answer to this question will require rigorous empirical analysis.

This distinction between the higher order axiomatic definition of rapport and the lower order attributes of rapport has important consequences for how we research and discuss the

term. For instance, by defining rapport as the quality of the interviewer-interviewee interaction, many catchall statements invoking the importance of rapport become tautological or vacuous. Consider the statement “rapport is important for the outcome of an interview”. This amounts to little more than saying, “the quality of the interaction between interviewer and interviewee is important for the outcome of an interview”. All things being equal, surely this *must* be the case. Such statements are of little interest to either the researcher or practitioner.

Instead, researchers should focus on the specific attributes of the interviewer-interviewee interaction. Consider for instance the hypothetical finding that a more trustful and respectful interaction increases an interviewee’s disclosure. This finding is of both theoretical and applied value. However, the value of this finding is lost if the terms trust and respect are replaced by the umbrella term rapport. This is because the field has no agreed upon finite set of attributes of what rapport encapsulates. As long as researchers continue to define the attributes of rapport in different ways, claiming that “rapport increases an interviewee’s disclosure” could mean any number of things. Until the field can agree upon such a finite set of attributes, we strongly recommend that stakeholders stop indiscriminately using the word rapport to describe any collection of attributes of the interviewer-interviewee interaction.

Moving Forward

If the field wishes to continue using the term rapport without the ambiguity and associated problems we currently see, the field must collectively determine this finite set of attributes. Here the field can draw inspiration from other areas of inquiry that have dealt with similar concerns. Again, we can draw inspiration from trait psychology. Early assessments of personality traits included scales that all nominally measured personality—but, in fact, measured different attributes of personality (John & Srivastava, 1999). Personality researchers eventually reached a consensus by centering their pursuit on their common ground—the lexical hypothesis. That is, the idea that descriptions of significant entities, such as personality,

eventually become part of people's language (Ashton & Lee, 2005).

In brief, by scouring dictionaries, personality researchers identified comprehensive lists of adjectives describing traits. Insofar as only significant entities will enter our language, they argued that these lists should comprise all meaningful ways in which personality can be described. For over five decades, these lists were subjected to rigorous analysis by the research community (Allport & Odbert, 1936; Goldberg, 1990). In broad strokes, they had people rate themselves and others on these trait adjectives. Goldberg (1990), for example, had people make ratings on a list of over 1400 adjectives. By subjecting these ratings to exploratory factor analyses, the underlying structure of personality could be uncovered. These efforts ultimately yielded the Big Five personality structure (McCrae, 1989).

An adapted lexical approach may also be applicable in investigating the attributes of rapport as defined as the quality of the interaction between an interviewer and interviewee. In this work, we have provided an exhaustive list of the extant rapport definitions. This list can serve as a point of departure. That is, researchers can complement the current list of definitions with additional descriptors of the quality of interpersonal interactions. The ultimate goal of the compilation being to identify all meaningful ways in which such interactions can be described. Similar to research on the structure of personality, these lists can then be used to rate the quality of interpersonal interactions in investigative interviews. Such ratings can be conducted by the interviewer, the interviewee, or even by external observers. Researchers can then use factor analyses to empirically determine the constituent components and underlying structure of what the field wants to call rapport.

A project of this scale will likely require collaboration at the level of the research community—for example, a multi-lab study. The collaboration must involve practitioners and experts in the field. The potential rewards are vast, as the field will take a large stride toward answering the question, “what is rapport in investigative interviewing?”.

Metascientific Discussion: Comments and Responses

Since our first submission, we have received eight independent reviews, from two different journals, on this text. Some were positive of the paper; others were highly critical of its value and conclusions. All of the reviews can be read at <https://osf.io/5zha3/>. In the following sections we summarize and respond to what we see as the most substantive criticisms of the paper.

A Sermon to the Choir?

Several reviewers dismissed this work, arguing that it simply rehashes a well-known issue—namely that rapport is ill defined in the investigative interviewing literature. Consequently, this research is merely convincing the convinced. We partly agree, in that many do acknowledge significant problems in defining rapport (e.g., Vallano & Schreiber Compo, 2015). However, we believe these observations only emphasize the importance of the present research. By systematically reviewing *all* extant rapport definitions in investigative interviewing, we quantify, and clearly highlight, the extent of the issue. We believe this is a necessary first step to initiate a public discussion by the research community on how the term rapport is defined, should be defined, and used as a psychological concept. Making the issue an open discussion will prevent us from glossing over definitional issues, as is typically the case in the literature. Indeed, in 86% of the articles we reviewed, the term rapport was used, but was not explicitly defined at all.

Defining Psychological Concepts is Challenging—Why Pick on Rapport?

Some reviewers highlighted that psychological constructs are generally difficult to define concisely. They argued that our definitional gripe with rapport could be raised with any number of psychological constructs including “anxiety”, “love” or “depression”. We agree that many psychological constructs are difficult to define. We struggle, however, to see why this should prevent us from addressing definitional issues in our own field of inquiry. This argument

amounts to little more than saying, “My backyard is messy, but this is OK because yours is messy too”. Instead, the investigative interviewing research community must attempt to discuss the problem and strive to arrive at a unified working definition of rapport. Other areas of psychology do take definitional issues seriously. Indeed, for each of the constructs “anxiety” (Akiskal, 1998; Nyatanga & de Vocht, 2006; Cambre, & Cook, 1985), “love” (Beall & Sternberg, 1995; Fehr, 1988; Fehr, & Russell, 1991) and “depression” (Blatt et al., 1982; Haaga, et al., 1991), researchers have written extensively about defining these difficult concepts. Others are trying to tidy up their backyards. We must begin tidying too.

Different Strokes for Different Folks?

Other reviewers suggested that rapport must have different definitions, since rapport will vary depending on the interview context. Suppose an interviewer questions an innocent and cooperative eyewitness willing to provide information about a crime under investigation. Rapport in this context, it is argued, may differ from rapport when the same interviewer tries to elicit information from an uncooperative suspect accused of committing a crime. As with problems in the definitions of rapport more generally, we believe this criticism confuses the level of analysis. When researchers argue that rapport will vary from context to context, we believe they in fact mean that the importance of rapport’s lower-level attributes will vary. For example, effective communication may be of utmost importance when interviewing a cooperative witness. In contrast, trust may be more important when interviewing an uncooperative suspect. In both situations, however, the higher order definition of rapport still refers to *the quality of the interviewer-interviewee interaction*. By conflating the higher order definition with its lower-level attributes, we worry that researchers will erroneously draw the conclusion that the term rapport will require context-specific definitions.

Even if one grants the view that different contexts require different rapport definitions, in ways, this argumentation only exacerbates the issue. This is because researchers would then

be required to outline: (1) their specific definition; (2) the specific context in which their definition of rapport refers to, such as ‘cooperative eye witness rapport’ or ‘uncooperative suspect rapport’; and (3) how their definition differs from other definitions of rapport. This may be a viable way of dealing with definitional issues in rapport. However, by our reading of the literature, it is not the typical way in which researchers use the term.

Definitional Issues, So What?

A final critique from some reviewers was that the disparity in rapport definitions in investigative interviewing may be a non-issue. It was questioned whether the disparity is harmful to science if studies consistently find that inducing rapport leads interviewees to disclose more information than no rapport—irrespective of what rapport means. We agree that extant studies may be finding similar results despite definitional disparities. However, if these definitional disparities mean the studies have examined different constructs, any conclusion or understanding one can draw from the studies will be constrained. As an analogy consider the finding that two completely different medications both lead to a reduction in depression. If these different medications were classified, or ‘defined’, as the same drug, conclusions concerning the utility of the two drugs may still stand, but the science and understanding surrounding them would be significantly flawed. We cannot see a world in where definitional issues with rapport would not undermine its scientific inquiry in a similar way.

Additionally, definitional disparities bring methodological concerns. Without a yardstick to flag what constitutes rapport, it becomes challenging, if not impossible, to objectively assess the extent a given investigation has examined something called rapport. One could measure several attributes of the interviewer-interviewee interaction and arbitrarily decide that some of those attributes (or none) concern rapport, depending on the hypothesis one has predetermined to support. As Flake and Fried (2020) note, ambiguity about a concept’s definition presents opportunities for researchers to knowingly or accidentally exploit the ambiguity to engage in

questionable measurement practices like the one just described.

Concluding Remarks

We are not claiming that a construct called rapport does not exist or that it has limited utility in improving investigative interviewing. Rather, we have drawn attention to the commonality and the scope of variance in rapport definitions. All the extant definitions imply that rapport centers on the quality of the interviewer-interviewee interaction. Nonetheless, the definitions vary considerably with what they regard as the underlying attributes of rapport. This disparity creates ambiguity about the meaning of rapport and impedes its objective assessment. In the short term, stakeholders should avoid using the word rapport as a cover term to encapsulate disparate collections of attributes relating to the interviewer-interviewee interaction. In the long term, the field should collectively determine a finite set of attributes to denote what we mean by rapport. We believe these suggestions are tractable pathways to reduce ambiguity about the meaning of the word rapport in investigative interviewing, thereby improving both the theoretical and applied value of the term.

A Visual Depiction of the Thematic Analysis

The highlighted segments indicate the text used as a basis of the codes (in rectangles). We used the codes to create the overarching themes or attributes of each definition.

The different colors of the highlighted text indicate which of the six themes each code is included under:

Positivity

Mutuality

Communication

Successful Outcome

Respect

Trust

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