

Exploring Social Workers' Perspectives on Establishing Rapport with Narikuravar
Community: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract: Rapport building is the first step in community development wherein a social worker establishes a rapport with the community so they might open up before the Social worker. If this step is faulty, the repercussions might be seen in the later stages of community development. The primary aim of this study was to explore the Social worker's perspective on such rapport with the Narikuravar community and the skills employed for the same, and to explore the challenges in the process of rapport building. This study used a qualitative method of research, and the research design was a case study wherein a professional Social worker working with the Narikuravar community was interviewed to gain insights from her experience. The interview included open-ended questions. Thematic analysis was done using QDA Miner Lite to analyse different themes, which revealed the importance of skills in establishing rapport and also highlighted the challenges faced by Social workers in such settings.

Key Words: Narikuravar community, rapport building, social worker, skills employed, challenges.

INTRODUCTION

Community work has been an essential aspect of the social work profession since its inception. Over time, philanthropic activities have evolved into systematic community organization and development led by professional social workers. However, working effectively within community settings, particularly among marginalized groups, demands more than technical knowledge—it requires cultural sensitivity, patience, and the ability to build rapport and trust.

Rapport building serves as the foundation for all community-based interventions. To identify the community's felt needs and facilitate participation, social workers must first understand and adapt to the community's cultural context. Establishing this trust is often challenging, especially among groups historically subjected to stigma and exclusion.

The Narikuravar community of Tamil Nadu represents one such marginalized group. Traditionally nomadic and engaged in bead selling, they have long been stigmatized, having been listed under the *Criminal Tribes Act of 1871* (Narikurava - Wikipedia, n.d.). Today, the community comprises about 8,500 families (around 30,000 people), less than one percent of the state's population (Shridevi & Ponni, n.d.). They continue to face issues such as poverty, poor hygiene, inadequate housing, illiteracy, domestic violence, diseases, and social discrimination. Organizations like the Krupa Foundation work toward their upliftment through skill-building, livelihood support, and education for children.

For social workers engaging with such a community, establishing rapport is not a simple or immediate process. It requires time, consistent presence, and effective communication strategies. Studies across various cultural contexts underline the critical importance of rapport building in social work. For instance, Watson (2019) found that Māori social workers in New Zealand view rapport as the cornerstone of effective practice in mental health services, emphasizing culturally grounded approaches and respect for community norms. Similarly, Sanmugeswaran and Pathmanesan (2016), in their ethnographic study among the Malayali tribal community, highlighted that rapport building is a prerequisite for participatory development and effective communication. Although both studies affirm its significance, they offer limited insight into how professional social workers practically establish rapport in diverse or tribal contexts.

Against this backdrop, the present study explores how a social worker builds rapport with the Narikuravar community in Tamil Nadu, documenting her experiences, the strategies adopted, and the challenges encountered. Understanding this process is crucial because rapport building forms the first

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rung of community engagement—if not firmly established, subsequent developmental efforts are unlikely to succeed. This study thus seeks to contribute to the understanding of culturally sensitive

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practice in community organization, particularly within historically neglected and stigmatized tribal settings.

AIM

This study aimed to explore the skills employed and challenges faced by Social workers in building rapport with the Narikuravar community in Tamil Nadu.

OBJECTIVES

- a) To explore the skill sets for effective rapport building with people of the Narikuravar community
- b) To understand the challenges faced by social workers in establishing rapport building while working with the Narikuravar community in Tamil Nadu.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study was conducted using qualitative research design as the study explores Social worker's perspectives of establishing rapport with Gypsy communities. The qualitative approach of the case study is further used in this study.

Study Setting

For this study, the researchers intended to focus on the Narikuravar community in Tamil Nadu as part of the study. Further, the researchers' focus was on how social workers build rapport with such community people.

Sampling Procedure

a) Sample universe

The sample universe for this study included a social worker who had worked with the Narikuravar community in Tamil Nadu.

b) Sample population

The sample population included a social worker who had been working with such communities for 35 years. The inclusion criteria include a social worker working in a community development setting and the exclusion criteria include a social worker working in a clinical setting.

c) Sampling technique

The type of sampling followed was the non-probability type of sampling. This sampling type is generally used for qualitative research to get responses from the participants and to cover a large population to make generalisations. The kind of sampling under non-probability sampling is purposive sampling as the researcher selects a sample based on their knowledge about the study and population.

Ethical considerations

- Consent was obtained from all the participants before conducting the study
- Adequate level of confidentiality of the participant and their data was maintained throughout the study
- Respect for the dignity of research participants was prioritised

Data collection tools

The data collection tool was an interview. The researchers prepared an interview guide for the participant to answer. The interview guide mostly had open-ended questions. The open-ended questions focused on the skills required by social workers while working with such communities and the challenges faced by them.

Data collection methods

The unstructured interview method was used for this study. As the study is qualitative, unstructured interviews generate qualitative data through open-ended questions. The open-ended questions provided the respondent with the freedom and space to answer in as much detail as they

liked to. In this study, it helped the researchers to gain more insights about the study and understand their perspectives, and their challenges while dealing with such communities.

The researchers could dive into deeper discussions with the participant and focus more on a particular topic. The process to conduct the interview was to first prepare a questionnaire guide that included questions to be asked to the participant involved in the study. The interview was conducted for around 20 minutes concerning different questions related to the study. The researchers sought consent from the participant to record the interview. The ethical aspects were also clearly explained to the participant before conducting the interview.

Data Analysis

The audio recording was transcribed into English text. Later, the interview transcripts were imported and coded with QD Miner Lite software. Thus, both authors were involved in conducting interviews, transcribing, coding and data analysis. The texts were read and reread multiple times to get familiar with the data. During the coding process, the text segments which depicted the various perspectives of social workers were critically analysed and codes were created. After finishing the coding for a complete data set, it was reviewed again. Later, the codes were assigned under meaningful themes. The most illustrative and comprehensive quotes were chosen to describe the main themes.

RESULTS

Thematic data analysis was conducted, and four themes were generated: rapport building, characteristics of the community, skills, and challenges faced in rapport building. Figure 1 depicts the frequencies of the themes. The professional social worker emphasised on establishing rapport building before going deeper into the community and affirmed that rapport building was the most significant step in community development. Participant emphasized inter alia, two verticals of rapport building, developing interpersonal relationships (5.0%) with the members and among the members and second is communication (5.0%). Without either of them, community development is nearly impossible. Even if the work is carried forward, that will not stand the test of time.

Figure 1: Frequency and Distribution of Codes from Qualitative Data Analysis

Theme Category	Code	Frequency (Count)	% of Total Codes	% of Cases
Rapport Building	Interpersonal relationships	1	5.0%	100.0%
	Ability to talk/communicate	1	5.0%	100.0%
Characteristics of Community	Open-minded to respond	1	5.0%	100.0%
Challenges in Rapport Building	False Promises	1	5.0%	100.0%
	Mistrust	3	15.0%	100.0%
	Nomads/Migrants	4	20.0%	100.0%
	Empathy	1	5.0%	100.0%
	Observation	2	10.0%	100.0%
	Understanding the needs of the community	1	5.0%	100.0%
	Purposeful planning	3	15.0%	100.0%

Note: This figure presents codes applied during qualitative analysis, grouped by themes. Frequencies and coverage are based on outputs from QDA Miner.

The participant reported that while dealing with the Narikuravar Community, there is a need for a definite skill set without which rapport building is not possible. Figure 1 depicts those skills as empathy (frequency of theme as 5.0), wherein social workers have to go down to the level of community members and shun their preconceived notions. Observation (10.0%) is the primary thing in rapport building, where the social worker should be vigilant enough to keep track of one-to-one relationships in the community, power dynamics, and vested interests. He should be able to observe

the dealings and analyse the environment in and around the community to develop strategies for the future. Participant gives due importance to understanding community needs by absorbing the nuances of the community by adapting to the cultural milieu of the community (5.0%). There is a need for sustained engagement with the community to move ahead in rekindling the rapport-building process, failure of which leads to mistrust (10.0%). Communication (5.0%) with the community is a deal-maker, which lays down the base of the entire community development program and social workers should be able to converse with the community and should also be someone who listens to them. Participant focussed the most on purposeful planning, which qualifies that social workers do not only have to go to communities and describe their programs, instead, they need to sit with the community, define the problem together or identify the needs and through participation of all reach a common consensus (15.0%), quoted by the participant as,

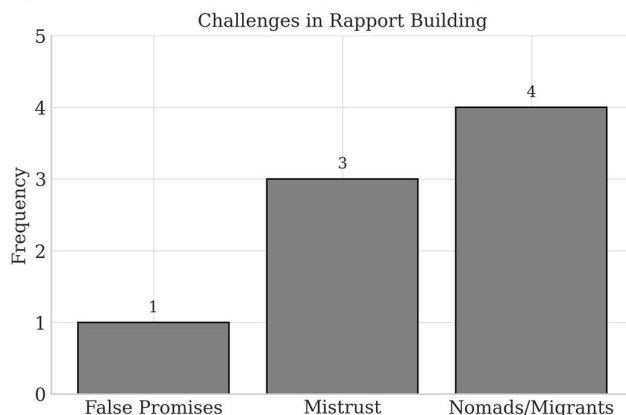
"And then you also need to sit with them and include them in your plan of action, whatever you're planning to do, and then the community's needs should be kept in mind. It's not you taking a program to them. Ask them, and you sit with them, and you can do whatever is needed for them and then bring about projects." (**Professional social worker**)

It is crucial in the sense that through this process, community members see themselves as actors in change rather than just being subjects. Then they can internalise the change rather than just feeling like beneficiaries.

As seen from the figure, the breakthrough for establishing rapport-building for a community worker in the Narikuravar community is the open-mindedness of community members, who are willing to respond and act. Still, there are challenges in the rapport-building process in the community. From the below-given Figure 2, we gather that the first and primary obstacle for social workers working in the Narikuravar community is the nomadic nature of the community (20.0%). The members move from one place to another for their livelihoods and come back after a long time. The rapport established with them goes for a toss as new members keep coming to the community.

The challenge is big, but the same is addressed by continuous and sustained engagement with the community. Social workers also face a problem to gel in with the community, as the community is distrustful towards any outsider coming into the community, either because they think that outsiders come and go without actually benefiting the community or because they have misconceived notions that they may help the community through charity (15.0%). The politicians and third-party interventions that come to the community with an agenda make false promises. When they leave, that generates scepticism amongst the members, who make it difficult for a social worker to work in the community (5.0%). The shattered expectations lead to general mistrust amongst the community members, which makes it difficult for the community to pitch in, but the issue is resolved by constant engagement of the community in every process of community development.

Figure 2: Challenges in Rapport Building – Code Frequency



Note: Bar chart showing the frequency of challenges identified in rapport building based on coded qualitative data.

DISCUSSIONS

The study highlights the skills employed and the challenges of Social workers while dealing with the Narikuravar community in Tamil Nadu. From the qualitative analysis, four themes emerged from the data: (1) Rapport building, (2) Characteristics of community, (3) Challenges in Rapport building, and (4) Skills.

These themes reflect how the social worker goes about establishing rapport with the community and also specify the challenges present and how he manages those challenges. These findings have implications for professional social workers' approach to establish rapport with any tribal community in India and serve as a guide to them in the form of skills required and challenges that might be faced by them.

The current study has some limitations such as the study setting where it was quite difficult for the researchers to conduct the study in the field. The other limitation was with regard to the participant involved in the study as only one participant was on focus and not much data could be collected from the participant in a limited period of time.

CONCLUSION

This study emphasises the essential role of rapport building in social work, particularly when working with marginalised communities such as the Narikuravar in Tamil Nadu. Establishing trust through interpersonal relationships, effective communication, and cultural adaptation is crucial for successful community engagement. The findings highlight that social workers must employ specific skills, including empathy, observation, and a deep understanding of community dynamics, to overcome the challenges posed by the community's nomadic lifestyle and historical distrust of outsiders.

Despite these challenges, the study concludes that sustained engagement, active participation, and purposeful planning are key to overcoming barriers and fostering lasting relationships with the community. Social workers must approach their work with patience, resilience, and a commitment to collaborative problem-solving to build trust and ensure effective intervention. The insights gained from this study provide valuable guidance for social workers working with other tribal and marginalised communities, offering a framework for establishing rapport and facilitating meaningful community development.

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