



a0005 Rapid Assessment Process

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Glossary

- g0005 bogus empowerment** Letting people think they have control over outcomes and the power to act on their own judgments when they actually do not have this control or power; can be the unintended consequence of hyperbole about the democratic nature of a situation.
- g0010 ethnography** A descriptive study of an intact cultural or social group or an individual or individuals within the group, based primarily on participant observation and open-ended interviews; based on learning from people as opposed to studying people.
- g0015 iterative process** A process in which replications of a cycle produce results that approximate the desired result more and more closely. For rapid assessment, the process describes the cycle of data analysis and data collection, designed to produce a preliminary understanding of a situation from an insider's perspective.
- g0020 participants** Persons interviewed as part of the rapid assessment process. The term can be used interchangeably with "informants" or "respondents" when these terms are not modified with the words "individual" or "key." The term "subjects" is generally avoided.
- g0025 rapid appraisal, rapid rural assessment, rapid rural appraisal (RRA), participatory rural appraisal (PRA)** Different types of rapid qualitative research based on small multidisciplinary teams using semistructured interviews and direct observations to collect information in processes that can be completed in less than 6 weeks. As usually implemented, these approaches lack the methodological rigor of rapid assessment.
- g0030 rapid assessment process (RAP), rapid assessment** Intensive, team-based qualitative inquiry using triangulation, iterative data analysis, and additional data collection to quickly develop a preliminary understanding of a situation from the insider's perspective.
- g0035 triangulation** A term from navigation and physical surveying that describes an operation for determining a position by use of bearings from two known fixed points. Triangulation is used as a metaphor by social scientists for the use of data

from different sources, the use of several different researchers, the use of multiple perspectives to interpret a single set of data, and the use of multiple methods to study a single problem.

The rapid assessment process allows a team of at least two p0005 researchers to develop a preliminary understanding of a complicated situation in which issues are not yet well defined, an insider's perspective is needed, and there is not sufficient time or other resources for long-term, traditional qualitative research. Rapid assessment is a type of participatory action research and shares many of the characteristics of ethnographic research. Rapid assessment, however, uses intensive, team interaction and multiple cycles of data collection followed by data review/analysis, instead of the prolonged fieldwork normally associated with traditional qualitative research. Results can be used for planning, monitoring, and evaluating activities and for the design of additional research. Rapid assessment will almost always produce results in a fraction of the time and at less cost than is required by traditional qualitative research.

Introduction

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Rapid assessment is defined as intensive, team-based qua- p0010 litative inquiry using triangulation, iterative data analysis, and additional data collection to quickly develop a preliminary understanding of a situation from the insider's perspective. Data are collected by talking with people and getting them to tell their stories. The acronym for the rapid assessment process, "RAP," expresses well the need to communicate with participants using their vocabulary and rhythm, in that one definition of "rap" is "to talk

freely and frankly.” “Rapid” means a minimum of 4 days and, in most situations, a maximum of 6 weeks. Responding to the need for almost immediate results involves compromises and requires special attention to methodological rigor. “Process” means a series of actions or operations conducive to an end. A process approach suggests that at least as much attention is given to the way results are obtained as to the results. References to rapid appraisal, rapid rural assessment, rapid rural appraisal, participatory rural appraisal, and the acronym RAP have been widely used in the literature to identify different rapid qualitative research methods. Although the rapid assessment process can also be referred to as simply rapid assessment, not everything labeled “rapid assessment” meets the methodological rigor of the rapid assessment process.

s0010 **Evolution, Current Status, and Relationship to Other Approaches to Rapid Qualitative Research**

p0015 The rapid assessment process has its roots in farming systems research of the late 1970s. Farming systems research was based on a holistic consideration of people along with their plants and livestock and started with the assumption that local systems consisted of mutually related elements that constitute a whole. A systems approach initially considers all aspects of a local situation, but quickly moves toward the definition of a model that focuses on only the most important elements and their relationship to each other from the perspective of the local participants. In the initial research on local farming systems, solid and timely results did not seem feasible using research tourism or questionnaire survey research. A 1979 paper by Peter Hildebrand describing farming systems research was based on teamwork called “sondeo.” This paper, along with others, had been presented at the 1979 Rapid Rural Appraisal conference at the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex. Because of the title of the conference, “rapid rural appraisal,” along with variants, including “rapid appraisal” and “rapid assessment,” became associated with rapid qualitative team-based research. The publication of the *Proceeding of the 1985 International Conference on Rapid Rural Appraisals* by the Khon Kean University in 1987 made information available to a wider audience. Robert Chambers and his colleagues at the Institute of Development Studies have been at the forefront of formulating and disseminating information on rapid research methods for the past two decades. Significant publications have included Chamber’s *Shortcut and Participatory Methods for Gaining Social Information for Projects*, Krishna Kumar’s *Rapid Appraisal Methods*, Nevin Scrimshaw

and Gary Gleason’s *Rapid Assessment Procedure: Qualitative Methodologies for Planning and Evaluation of Health Related Programmes*, John Van Willigen and Timothy Finan’s *Sounding: Rapid and Reliable Research Methods for Practicing Anthropologists*, and James Beebe’s *Basic Concepts and Techniques of Rapid Appraisal* and *Rapid Assessment Process: An Introduction*. Despite differences in details, all of the different rapid qualitative research methods are based on small multidisciplinary teams using semistructured interviews, direct observation, and other techniques to collect information, with the entire process being completed in less than 6 weeks.

There is increasing use of rapid qualitative research p0020 methods as a planning and evaluation tool in a variety of fields. More than 50 examples in areas as diverse as agriculture, community and rural development, conservation and natural resources, health and family planning, and marketing illustrate the range of topics that have been investigated using rapid research methods, the different groups and organizations that have used these methods, and the extent to which the methods have been adapted to meet different needs. Increased recognition of a need for qualitative research while resources available for traditional long-term qualitative research have declined has encouraged the use of rapid research methods. A growing consensus on the need for participatory approaches to research activities has also contributed to expansion of rapid research methods. Participatory language has become obligatory “donor-speak.” There are issues concerning the extent to which rapid qualitative methods should be participatory as well as issues about how well they are implemented. The contrast of rapid assessment with participatory action research, and especially participatory rural appraisal (PRA) associated with Robert Chambers, illustrates these issues. In response to different needs, these approaches have evolved in different ways, with participatory action research focusing more on the empowerment of local participants who do research to satisfy local needs, and rapid assessment focusing more on methodological rigor and the involvement of decision makers at different levels. The two approaches complement each other and share methodological techniques. Rapid assessment differs from numerous forms of participatory action research by explicitly recognizing that in many situations local participants do not have control over the resources necessary for change. Rapid assessment intentionally involves decision makers in the research process and attempts to ensure sufficient rigor for credibility with decision makers.

The lack of methodological rigor has been one factor in p0025 the limited use of rapid qualitative research methods for research published in peer-reviewed journals. Publication in peer-reviewed journals continues to be viewed as validating research that contributes to the body of

knowledge. Chambers has lamented that calling research methods rapid has “been used to justify and legitimize sloppy, biased, rushed, and unself-critical work.” Rapid assessment explicitly deals with methodological rigor.

p0030 Another factor that continues to limit the use of rapid qualitative research methods resides in questions about the legitimacy of the methods, raised by some anthropologists. Almost all descriptions of ethnography refer to a requirement for prolonged periods in the field. There has been an unfortunate tendency to equate time with quality and to dismiss rapid results with pejorative phrases such as “quick and dirty.” The case for prolonged fieldwork advanced by anthropologists such as H. Russell Bernard and Harry F. Wolcott is based on tradition and the argument that it takes times to develop intellectualized competence in another culture, to be accepted, to develop rapport, to be included in gossip, and to get information about social change.

s0015 **Basic Characteristics**

p0035 “Rapid” means producing results in 1 to 6 weeks. There is growing consensus among practitioners that it is extremely difficult to complete the process of data collection, data analysis, additional data collection and the preparation of a report in only 4 days. “Rapid” does not mean “rushed.” Schedules must be flexible to allow the team to take advantage of the unanticipated. Rapid assessment uses the techniques and shares many of the characteristics of ethnography, but differs in two important ways: (1) more than one researcher is always involved in data collection, with data triangulation based on teamwork, and (2) more than one researcher is involved in an iterative approach to data analysis and additional data collection. The intensive teamwork is necessary because of the shortened fieldwork.

s0020 **Data Collection: Triangulation and Intensive Teamwork**

s0025 *The Team and Teamwork*

p0040 Between two and six individuals are usually on the RAP team, and teams need to be multidisciplinary, diverse, and include at least one “insider” as well as “outsiders.” The assumption is that two sets of eyes and ears are better than one and that the use of different techniques can help make the best use of the extra eyes and ears as part of intensive teamwork. The assumption is also that two heads are better than one in figuring out what has been seen and heard and for deciding on the next steps. Sensitivity to cultural differences is essential and team diversity improves cultural sensitivity and helps establish credibility with local communities. Whereas traditional research

methodology has focused on helping the outsiders better understand the insiders’ knowledge, there is a growing appreciation of the role the insiders should play in the design, implementation, and publication of research. The ability of the RAP team quickly to begin the process of arriving at a preliminary understanding of a situation, from the perspective of the local participants, is facilitated by having an insider on the team. The insider needs to be a full team member and must be involved in planning, data collection, data analysis, and the preparation of the report.

Rapid assessment depends on teamwork and cannot be p0045 done by one person. All team members should be involved in data collection and data analysis, including the preparation of the report. Teamwork by a multidisciplinary team increases sensitivity to the insiders’ categories and definitions. Because of the importance of team interaction, the RAP team should be together most of the time.

Directed Conversation (Semistructured Interviews)

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The most important way of learning about local conditions is to get local people to tell what they know. The goal is to get people to talk on a subject and not simply answer questions. This process is often identified as a “semistructured interview,” but it is better thought of as directed conversation. Directed group discussions involve the entire team interacting with each other as well as with the respondent. This is not sequential interviewing by individual team members. Relaxed, semistructured interviewing that provides respondents with time to think helps elicit stories.

Experience has shown the value of opening the con- p0055 versation with a carefully articulated “grand tour” question. All RAP team members need to be active listeners. The grunts and noises the team members make as active listeners, such as the “umms,” “uh-huhs,” and “mmmmms,” improve rapport and encourage people to speak longer. The conversation is kept moving and on-track with probes that do not inject the views of the team. Nondirective probes are culture specific and need to be identified prior to conducting the first interview. Examples of nondirective probes that work in a United States cultural setting might include “Give me a description of . . . Tell me what goes on when you . . . Describe what it’s like to . . . Say more, keep talking.” The RAP team will likely want to develop short guidelines based on a few big issues. Guidelines are used instead of a list of questions prepared in advance of the conversation. Despite the guidelines, the direction of the study should emerge as information is collection. Guidelines should be viewed as a reminder of issues that should not be missed, rather than as an agenda to be diligently worked through.

p0060 Individuals with whom the RAP team talks are purposefully selected. Consistent with qualitative research, they are identified as “participants” or “respondents” and not as “subjects.” They are not a sample. They are selected not because they are believed to be average, but because they are believed to represent the diversity found in the local situation. The RAP team should seek out the poorer, less articulate, more upset, and those least like the members of the RAP team.

s0035 **Other Techniques for Data Triangulation**

p0065 The specific research techniques in addition to semistructured interviewing for use in a given rapid assessment are chosen from among a wide range of techniques, based on the specific topic being investigated and the resources available. Observations and team interaction with the respondent, based on what is seen as well as heard, are necessary. All interviews should be conducted in a relevant setting where listening can be combined with observing. Anthropologists note that participant observation can range from actually living and working in the field as a member of group over an extended period of time, to simply being an observer. The essential requirements for participant observation are that people must feel comfortable with the presence of the team. Even during a rapid assessment, there are opportunities for observing. Team members can try to learn to do things and actually “try it” themselves. Team members should try to be present at relevant times outside of normal business hours, including early morning and late evenings and weekends. Sharing of meals with respondents provides opportunities for combining observations with informal discussions and follow-up.

p0070 Groups of respondents as well as individual respondents can be interviewed using techniques associated with focus group research. Folktales, myths, songs, proverbs, riddles, and jokes can provide insights to local situations. Drawing diagrams and “rich pictures” allows respondents to express themselves in ways that are often more valid than talk. Maps drawn by respondents can be used for collecting data and planning action.

s0040 **Field Notes, Transcripts, and Logs**

p0075 Among social scientists, there is considerable disagreement on what constitutes field notes and how they should be organized. Because more than one person is involved in collecting and processing field notes, all parties need to agree on the format. The term “field notes” probably should be reserved for the usually handwritten notes that are prepared as the data are being collected. Field notes must be readable by the person who wrote them and should clearly differentiate between (1) what has actually been said by the respondents and observed by the team and (2) comments by the researchers, including reflections, thoughts about conclusions, and other notes. Field

notes need to include detailed observations and direct quotations, as opposed to summaries. Carefully done field notes can help the team avoid imputing false meaning. Field notes should include information about the interview process and should identify things that need to change during subsequent interviews. All team members should take notes, including the team member who is directing the conversation at any given moment. Note taking becomes a way to control the speed of the conversation and gives both the team members and the respondent time to think. Field notes should also include descriptions of the settings, who else was present, the overall demeanor of the respondent, and nonverbal communications such as a smile or yawn.

Interviews should be taped in all cases unless the p0080 respondents specifically object to the use of a tape recorder. The written version of what has been recorded is usually identified as a “transcript.” Ideally, transcripts should be made available to the team within 24 hours. Transcripts are not field notes. Even when there are not plans to transcribe interviews, tapes can be used to fill in missing information. Tape recorders should be expected to fail and should never be used in place of note taking. The term “log” is reserved for the repository of information from the field notes and, when available, the transcripts, in a format ready for analysis. When transcripts are not available, the first step is creating a log based on the different field notes of the team. The preparation of the composite log allows the team to begin carefully to consider what has been heard, and is an opportunity to consider explicitly the insider’s perspective. This review also provides an opportunity to consider changes that need to be made in the next round of data collection, including changes in the way the interview was implemented. Logs are most useful if they are typed (double-spaced), with every sentence beginning on a new line and with very wide margins on both sides. Many researchers place codes in the left margin and comments in the right margin. Anything in the log that is not a direct observation should be clearly identified. Logs should be prepared within 24 hours of the interview.

Iterative Analysis and Additional Data Collection

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Rapid assessment explicitly divides research time p0085 between blocks used for collecting information and blocks when the RAP team does data analysis and considers changes in the next round of data collection. Beginning on day 1, time is scheduled for team interaction. Usually more time is spent on team interaction than on data collection. An iterative process is defined as a process in which replications of a cycle produce results that approximate the desired result more and more closely.

The constant shifting between data analysis and additional data collection is an iterative, or recursive, process. For rapid assessment, the replication of the process of data collection, followed by analysis and additional data collection, contributes to the goal of understanding the situation under investigation from the perspective of the local participants.

p0090 Just as there is no one best way for data collection, there is no one best way for analysis. An approach that has worked for many rapid assessments and that can serve as a beginning point for modification is based on Matthew Miles and A. Michael Huberman's model. This model involves (1) coding the data and adding marginal remarks, (2) displaying the data, and (3) drawing conclusions. For rapid assessment, as for qualitative research in general, analysis is an ongoing process that begins with, or even before, the first round of data collection and continues through the preparation of the report.

s0050 **Coding**

p0095 The logs, combining the field notes of all members of the RAP team and, when available, the transcripts of the directed conversations, are the source of the data for understanding the situation from the perspective of the respondents. The first step in the analysis process is to read the logs several times. The next step is dividing the log into thought units and applying codes to these units. A unit of thought may be a sentence, paragraph, several paragraphs, or even an individual word. Coding can be thought of as cutting the logs into strips and placing the strips into piles. The codes are the labels that the RAP team gives to the individual piles. Developing a coding system is based on trial and error, and the coding system must remain flexible. The RAP team looks for threads that tie together bits of data and seeks to identify recurring words or phrases. These words often become the labels for the codes. Not everything in the log is coded and a single unit of thought will often have multiple codes. The team can always change the codes. Experience suggests it is better to start with only five or six codes and to then subdivide these when necessary.

p0100 After codes have been assigned, the next step is to consolidate everything relating to each code. Materials from all interviews, as well as other observations relating to codes, can then be considered together. Cut-and-paste functions of word-processing programs facilitate this process, but should be done with care to ensure that thought units are associated with specific interviews. Adding margin remarks is closely related to the coding process and occurs both before and after materials have been rearranged according to their codes. Margin remarks are usually written into the margin of the log after it has been typed and can include almost anything in addition to reactions, questions about the meaning of statements, and notes about connections between parts of the data.

Data Display

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The second aspect of analysis is data display. Development of data displays should begin during the coding and continued throughout the research process. Data displays are often drawn on large sheets of paper such as flip charts, and include matrices, graphs, words, and drawings of objects linked by lines, suggesting relationships. "Rich pictures" can be used as data displays.

Drawing Conclusions

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The third element in the data analysis process is conclusion drawing and verification. Miles and Huberman suggest that people can make sense of the most chaotic events, but that the critical question is whether the meanings they find in qualitative data are valid. They identify 13 tactics for generating meaning. The first six of these are descriptive and provide a good beginning point for rapid assessment. The first three focus on helping to identify what goes with what and are concerned with (1) patterns and themes, (2) seeking plausibility, and (3) clustering. The next three help sharpen understanding and include (4) metaphor making, (5) counting, and (6) making contrasts and comparisons.

Member Checking

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Before the conclusions are final, the RAP team should share them with the people who have provided the information and check for agreement. This can be done either formally or informally. The local people can provide corrections to facts and their own interpretation of the situation. This process is often called "member checking."

Preparation of the Report by the Entire RAP Team

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The joint preparation of the rapid assessment report by the entire team continues the intensive team interaction. The preparation of the report should start while there is still time for additional data collection. The involvement of the entire team, including the local members, provides the report with more depth than is often found in reports prepared by a single individual.

The RAP Sheet

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One of the major challenges for rapid assessment is promoting flexibility and creativity without diminishing rigor. Rigor can be enhanced by agreement on basic principles, and then documentation, as part of the rapid assessment report, of the specific techniques used. The documentation on what was actually done can be summarized in a checklist, called a "RAP sheet." The RAP sheet is attached to the report and can include information about team members, hours of data collecting, hours of team interaction discussing the data, types of information collected by direct observations, the number of

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individuals interviewed, methods of selection of respondents, places of interviews, and specific information about the diversity of the respondents interviewed. The RAP sheet allows the reader of the report to judge the quality of the work.

s0080 **How Much is Enough?**

p0130 Every RAP team will face the question of how much data is needed, how much time should be spent in the field, and what number of interviews is sufficient. The data are sufficient when themes begin to repeat. Experience shows that when interviews have been relaxed and sufficient time has been spent by the team making sense out of the data that are collected, themes began to repeat after 8 or 10 interviews. The actual number of interviews needed can be significantly more than this, but is usually not less. It is usually easier for the team to recognize when there is data insufficiency than it is to recognize that enough data have been collected.

s0085 **Ethics, Participation, and Bogus Empowerment**

p0135 There is widespread consensus on the value of participation. As discussed earlier, rapid assessment is a participatory research approach. However, ethical issues related to participation are often ignored. These issues are almost always aggravated by an inappropriate belief that problems must be identified and solved at the local level, without the involvement of outsiders. Unlike some forms of participatory action research, RAP does not assume that the study population can completely solve their own problems. Decision makers and authorities higher in the system who control resources often need to be member of the RAP team in order to feel committed to the outcome of the research; stakeholders are more inclined to take action. Even when outside decision makers are not part of the research effort, it is critical that the research effort be designed with sufficient rigor to allow outsiders to have confidence in the results.

p0140 The most serious negative consequence of an excessive focus on participation is shifting of the burden onto the poor and the relinquishing by outsiders of their responsibilities. Even when such a shift does not occur, participation can raise unrealistic expectations in local communities. Closely related to raising unrealistic expectations is what Joanne Ciulla has called “bogus empowerment.” Several aspects of bogus empowerment are especially relevant to rapid assessment. Both the RAP team and others responsible for bringing in the RAP team must keep their promises. The best way to do this is to make promises that can be kept. Everyone involved in rapid assessment needs to be clear about the extent of the

power of the local community and must avoid the temptation of engaging in hyperbole about the democratic nature of the situation. Rapid assessment also can be an accessory to bogus empowerment by encouraging people to believe falsely that actions will be taken in response to their input.

Learning to RAP

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For individuals who have had limited experience with p0145 qualitative techniques, there is a need to provide a strong rationale for, and an introduction to, qualitative research. For individuals with a background in qualitative research, there is a need to enhance their understanding of ways in which rapid assessment differs from traditional approaches. There is general consensus among practitioners that rapid assessment is best learned while participating as a team member with someone with experience. However, because rapid research methods are “organized common sense,” they can be self-taught. From reading reports by others, it is possible to learn about the methodology and to acquire realistic expectations. Copies of reports, information on the availability of workshops about rapid assessment, additional references, and useful tools are available on the rapid assessment website (www.rapidassessment.net). Rapid assessment uses many of the techniques of traditional qualitative research, and reference books on qualitative research can be very useful. To begin experimenting with rapid assessment, all that the RAP team needs to remember is that the goal is to talk with people and to get them to tell their stories, as opposed to answering the questions of the team.

A combination of brief introductions to qualitative p0150 research techniques and a willingness to listen intently and genuine respect for others can help a RAP team get started. Everyone on the RAP team needs to recognize (1) that they do not know enough in advance to even know what questions to ask and (2) that they do not know enough to provide the answers, but (3) that they do know enough to want to empower others to solve their own problems.

Plausible Directions for the Future

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The accelerating rate of change in the world and p0155 a lessening of financial support for long-term research have driven the increasing interest in rapid assessment. There is growing recognition of the relationship between leadership and the creation of organizations based on participation. Rapid assessment can be an important tool for leaders because of its ability to promote participation

and to help create learning organizations. Rapid assessment has tremendous potential. The major challenges to rapid assessment include overselling it, confusing “rapid” with “rushed,” and failing to implement it rigorously. If these challenges can be met, rapid assessment may be an idea whose time has come.

See Also the Following Articles

Further Reading

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