

Reintegrating Rapid Appraisal Methodology in Social Science Research

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Abstract

Social sciences research methodology is of great importance in disciplines and for interested people on searching various knowledge or solution to a phenomenon. This is due to the fact that, human activities and environmental changes created complexity in life as well as challenges. But, these challenges require answers from fundamental questions such as what, where, who and how. Therefore, interested groups such as researchers, academician and practitioners need to explore the use of rapid appraisal through which they can find answers for the given fundamental questions. Thus, the need for an 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 cannot be relegated from the more general context of advances in social science research today. This paper looks into the need for the reintegration of rapid appraisal method in social science research. The conclusion is that rapid appraisal and social science methods are indeed complimentary, hence the need for the integration of both methods in social science research.

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Background to the Study

Social science is a branch of science that deals with human behaviour in its social and cultural aspects. The social sciences cover the field of anthropology, sociology, social psychology, political science, and economics. Also frequently considered in the realm are social and economic geography and those areas of education that deal with the social contexts. In the social sciences, like the physical sciences, are intellectual subjects, concerned primarily with understanding, rather than a course of action. It would of course be a curious kind of "understanding" that had no implications for action, and this is perhaps especially true for the social sciences. Nevertheless, there is a difference between enlarging one's understanding of human behavior and society on the one hand and trying to solve a social problem on the other.

The social sciences developed as a field of study during the nineteenth century to help people research and understand the consequences and application of the frontiers of social life (Osler, 2015). As a field of inquiry, it provides for critical appreciation of society and social issues based on a sound foundation of social theory and research methodology or group of methods. Researchers in social science need a critical understanding of a range of social research methods and styles. Thus, research design in social science encompasses not only theoretical and methodological but also ethical considerations relating to respect for the rights and welfare of all parties involved in the research.

The diversity of social science research and the complexity of the methods and the means by which research findings may come into use make understanding and assessing research impacts a challenging task today. Moreover different stakeholders (government; funding and assessment agencies; user communities etc.) may want information on impacts for different purposes and a consideration of these purposes should inform choices over what and how data is collected and presented. This array of requirements brings to the fore, the need for the reintegration of the rapid appraisal method in social science research today. Given the continuous use of qualitative methods in most studies today, rapid appraisal provides a basis for gaining insight into the perspective of research subject's needs in order to translate these findings into action. In other words, though powerful, social science methods do not often meet the pressing information needs of decision-makers especially in development related areas. This has resulted in increasing interest in an array of less structured data collection methods called the 'rapid appraisal,' which aim to supply needed information in a timely and cost-effective manner (Murray, 1999).

Conceptual Clarification

Rapid Appraisal

The most important understanding regarding rapid appraisal (RA) is that it is not just a methodology of information gathering, per se, but a creative, structured use of a particular set of investigative tools for assessing a situation, topic, problem, or sector. It can be described as a rapid learning process by creatively packaging social science tools for gathering and analyzing information, teams using such tools are able to assess

practices and the issues regarding their improvement in a more accurate and cost-effective manner than with conventional investigative methods (Grandstaff and Grandstaff, 1985). For them, No RA exercise is the same. Different combinations of tools are used to appraise the topics of concern, and particular tools are used to disseminate a team's findings in a more digestible form for use by planners, project staff, local people, and government officials. RA was developed initially by social scientists to allow planners to get timely information about the social and cultural dimension of natural resource management problems; it has become a multi-disciplinary approach, which helps in gathering and analyzing information on a variety of technical subjects.

The Rapid Appraisal (RA) method according to Rifkin (2001) has gained popularity in research concerns. It is a systematic data gathering activity designed to draw inferences, conclusions, hypothesis, or assessments, including acquisition of new information, in a limited time. In the last few years, the desire for collecting data in a speedy and reliable manner has been growing with this advancement. Evidently, RA is predominantly used as a complimentary data collection process and it is seen as valuable in targeting conditions and contexts that are more highly concentrated for all-round information gathering.

Background to the Emergence of Rapid Assessment

As a social science approach, Rapid Appraisal Technique emerged in the late 1970s. The basic idea of the Rapid Appraisal Technique is to quickly collect, analyze, and evaluate information on rural conditions and local knowledge. Rapid appraisal relies on systematic ethnographic data collection and analysis techniques, whereby qualitative methods are complimented and reinforced by survey information and direct observation studies. The method according to Trotter, Needle and Singer (2001) was first formally described in the mid-1980s along with other rapid assessment and evaluation models developed about the same time. These other approaches include rural rapid appraisal and participatory action research. Rapid ethnographic appraisal fits into the general model of other RA paradigms, including those used for rapid environmental appraisal. The evolution of rapid assessment has been informed by many methodological discussions that have led to consistent improvement in design and analytical procedures by identifying critical areas of strength and weakness for conducting scientifically sound rapid appraisals. The primary methodological issues include the need for; appropriate qualitative and quantitative sampling frames and sample sizes to provide valid and reliable data, the use of an integrated collection of methods to provide appropriate triangulation of data (confirmation from multiple methods, and multiple informants that identify all critical cultural viewpoints), sound and systematic qualitative data analysis, significant community participation, and an evaluation component to determine the impact of a research.

In line with the position above, Kumar (1987) opined that the exponents of rapid appraisal methodology have come from two entirely different intellectual traditions with differing perspectives on the nature and style of social and economic research. The

first paradigm, which has been developed by social phenomenologists or symbolic interactionists, questions the premise that objective reality can be captured by social science methodology. Its proponents view social or economic phenomena as constituting not one, but a set of over-arching multiple realities. He stated that “the usual simile given is that of peeling an onion: as one layer is peeled, another comes to surface”. In this regard therefore, various investigators researching a phenomenon encounter multiple layers of realities, which are largely, though not totally, exclusive.

According to this paradigm, the premises, preferences, and interests of various investigators largely condition their construction of the reality. For instance, a development intervention is likely to be construed differently by its various stakeholders-the donor agency, the host government, the bureaucracy that manages it, the clients for whom it is designed and implemented, and finally, the other actors who constitute its wider environment. Each of these stakeholders, the exponents of this paradigm argue, is likely to perceive the role of the intervention differently, to emphasize different sets of issues, to highlight different achievements and failures, and invariably, to make different recommendations. Thus, there is no single reality that can be obtained by a researcher. Within the context of this paradigm, many experts view rapid appraisal as a tool to articulate the opinions, concerns, judgments, and perspectives of those who are often ignored by the social scientists researching development interventions. Thus, they stress the use of rapid appraisal methods for discovering such "indigenous knowledge" as the views of small farmers-particularly women and the landless, and the perspectives of deprived groups, and not as a pursuit of objective reality by an objective researcher.

In sharp contrast, the logical positivist paradigm is based on the premise that a social or economic phenomenon exists not only in the minds of individuals, but also as an objective social reality. The fact that it may be viewed differently by individuals does not negate its existence, nor does it imply that it cannot be objectively described by investigators. Consider, for example, the case of an initiative designed to reform the macroeconomic policies of a developing country. The various actors involved may have varying conceptions of it and may stress different effects. In fact, often the people who may be most affected may not understand the initiative or its impacts on their lives. However, this does not mean that economists cannot examine the initiative and its intended and unintended effects on the concerned people.

Logical positivists believe that the primary, task of social and economic research is to go beyond the superficial, partial reconstructions and arrive at the objective reality as physical scientists do by using established procedures for gathering and analyzing information. Its purpose is to discover and describe social phenomena and processes, systematically explain their causes, and identify contingencies; under which they occur. Rapid appraisal is construed here as one of many sets of data gathering methods to achieve this objective.

There has been a steady improvement in rapid appraisal resulting from the methodological progress summarized in the general ethnographic literature as

demonstrated by Bernard (1998) and Schensul and LeCompte (1999). The RA core methods are designed to either stand alone or to be supplemented by other qualitative and quantitative methods. The core set of methods used by RA field teams include focus group interviews, key informant interviews, direct observations, mapping and decoding, and rapid assessment interviews containing both qualitative and quantitative questions. Others include systematic cognitive data collection technique, life history analysis, advanced elicitation and audiovisual methods, and social network data collection (Trotter, 1999). Other techniques can be included as needed to increase triangulation or quantitative confirmation of RA data sets. The need for this array of methods cannot be exempted from the more general context of social science research today.

Methods in Rapid Appraisal

It is quite easy for social scientists to think of many topics about which rather little is known, social problems which we would like to solve, and explanations for social phenomena which are less than satisfactory. Thus, any attempt to embark on research is likely for the researcher to have an adequate knowledge of the literature and the necessary intellectual curiosity about the social world around them to be able to do this. However, issues in methodological drive and design occupy an important position to be relegated. Rapid appraisal methods offer a useful set of research and appraisal tools to obtain quick and relevant information from study populations about the research concern. RA methods also enable for proper planning for appropriate interventions and evaluate the impact of the interventions after it has been carried out ().

Further to above, the use of rapid appraisal methods can be an effective means of broadly delineating issues and of understanding and the implications of potential service developments. It offers a rapid, reliable, and collaborative method of accessing perspectives of research subjects without having to resort to large, more costly surveys especially in studies aimed at identifying themes and issues, rather than to produce generalisable results (). More so, RA is never the same in different circumstances and never follows a predetermined pattern; its usefulness as a means to data generation lies in this fact. Rapid appraisal methods are often used in formative studies. Findings are strengthened when researchers use triangulation (employing more than one data collection method) as a check on the validity of findings from any one method. The data from rapid appraisal methods and techniques complement the use of quantitative methods such as surveys based on representative sampling. For example, a randomized survey of group of healthcare seekers in a hospital may tell you that healthcare seekers have a difficult time accessing services in the hospital, but may not have provide you with the details of why this is happening. A researcher could then use interviews with farmers to determine the details necessary to construct a more complete picture and understanding of why it is difficult for healthcare seekers to access the required medical services. Kumar (2006) outlined the various methods used in RA as follows;

a) **Interviews:** This method involves one-on-one interviews with individuals or key informants selected for their knowledge or diverse views. Interviews are qualitative, in-depth and semi-structured. Interview guides are usually used and questions may be further framed during the interview, using subtle probing techniques. Individual interviews may be used to gain information on a general topic but cannot provide the in-depth inside knowledge on evaluation topics that key informants may provide.

b) **Minisurveys:** A minisurvey consists of interviews with between five to fifty individuals, usually selected using no probability sampling (sampling in which respondents are chosen based on their understanding of issues related to a purpose or specific questions, usually used when sample sizes are small and time or access to areas is limited). Structured questionnaires are used with a limited number of close-ended questions. Minisurveys generate quantitative data that can often be collected and analysed easily and within a reasonable time.

c) **Focus Group:** The focus group is a gathering of a homogeneous body of five to twelve participants to discuss issues and experiences among themselves. These are used to test an idea or to get a reaction on specific topics. A moderator introduces the topic, stimulates and focuses the discussion, and prevents domination of discussion by a few, while another evaluator captures the discussion.

d) **Group Discussion:** This method involves the selection of approximately five participants who are knowledgeable about a given topic and are comfortable enough with one another to freely discuss the issue as a group. The moderator introduces the topic and keeps the discussion going while another evaluator records the discussion. Participants talk among each other rather than respond directly to the moderator.

e) **Community Discussion:** This method takes place at a public meeting that is open to all community members; it can be successfully moderated with as many as 100 or more people. The primary interaction is between the participants while the moderator leads the discussion and asks questions following a carefully prepared interview guide.

f) **Community Mapping:** Community mapping is a tech that requires the participation of residents on a program site. It can be used to help locate natural resources, routes, service delivery points, regional markets, trouble spots, etc., on a map of the area, or to use residents' feedback to drive the development of a map that includes such information.

g) **Transect Walk:** The transect walk is a participatory approach in which the evaluator asks a selected community member to walk with him or her, for example, through the center of town, from one end of a village to the other, or through a market. The evaluator asks the individual, usually a key informant, to point out and discuss important sites, neighborhoods, businesses, etc., and to discuss related issues.

A cursory look at the various methods outlined above brought to light their relevance in the realm of social science research today, especially as it affects issues associated with researcher bias. These methods provide for less bias and strengthen the validity of findings from rapid appraisal driven studies. Impliedly, it is imperative to use multiple methods. In this way, data collected using one method can be compared to that collected using other methods, thus giving a researcher the ability to generate valid and reliable findings. If, for example, data collected using Key Informant Interviews reveal the same findings as data collected from Direct Observation and Focus Group Interviews, there is less chance that the findings from the first method were due to researcher bias or due to the findings being outliers.

Guidelines for the Utilisation of Rapid Appraisal Methods

Rapid Appraisal is an approach that derives from multiple research methods and techniques to adequately, yet systematically, elicit data when time in the field is limited. These methods are also relevant in the event of budget constraints or dearth of reliable secondary data. For instance, time and budget limitations may preclude the option of using representative sample surveys. However, it has been emphasized that a number of basic issues must be considered in order to ensure the quality of final results. These considerations as outlined by Bergeron (2006) include;

a) Selection and Training of Skilled Personnel: The skill of fieldworkers is critical to the success of RA methods. These skills are quite different from those required by formal surveys. First is the emphasis on social skills: controlling dominant personalities in group settings while seeking the participation of silent participants. All of these, without imposing one's opinions require superior communication abilities. Another distinctive attribute is that, unlike survey researchers who collect data for analysis by other researchers, RA fieldworkers have to collect, analyze, and validate the data themselves. They are the real researchers. Hence they need a sound understanding of the aim of the research so they can, for instance, change the instrumentation used, if need be, without losing sight of the final objectives. The relevance of selection and training of field personnel is of utmost importance.

b) Contact Definition and Establishment: Communal life is complex in nature, and care must be taken from the start not to unwillingly alienate groups or individuals by associating too closely with the "wrong" subject(s). It is useful to make unannounced visits to a research location before the first official visit, in order to learn the basic "political language" of that community. This can be done by sending one fieldworker to the location, who establishes informal contact with anyone he/she meets. Avoiding local authorities is preferable, although not always possible. Free-flowing discussions are initiated with the people encountered, leading to questions such as: Who are the official representatives? How are they perceived? Are there factions, rivalries (political, religious, and economic) in the location? Such background information is necessary when making the first official visit, and helps avoid early mistakes. Then an official visit can be scheduled. In contrast to the first informal visit, this one is well announced and involves local authorities as well as high-ranking officials of the project. This visit is

preferably not used for working sessions. Rather, the aim is to explain the project goals and the type of work to be done. Permission is sought from local authorities, dates for workshops are established, and an understanding is established on who will be invited to attend.

c) Workshop Timing and Instrument Sequencing: The research project personnel must look for ways to minimize the disruption of people's life. If possible, the meeting is held in periods or moments of low activity; otherwise, field personnel must look for a time of day when people are back from their daily activities. Besides showing basic respect, this increases the likelihood that people will actually respond to the invitation and attend the meeting. The sequencing of instruments during the workshop should normally follow the logical flow. Some exercises can be undertaken at different moments without affecting the final results.

d) Selection/Choice of Informants: At first, all community residents are viewed as potential informants. However, exercises such as mapping, concept definition can all be done without being selective about informants insofar as they know the research location well and are honest in their responses. Rapidly though, and as the groups most relevant are identified, individuals from these groups must play the central role in the discussions. Besides, within identified target groups, subgroups usually need to be considered. Typical subgroups are stratified by gender, age group, ethnic affiliation, etc. It may be necessary to obtain contributions separately from each group, in order to capture all the relevant information. Separating groups may also be necessary if putting them together creates social tensions. Finally, just as informants are selectively identified for specific exercises, conversely, the choice of method must take into account informants' profile. For instance, if literacy level is low, the method should not require reading skills.

e) Triangulation: Triangulation refers to the comparison of data between sources to improve its validity and reliability. This is particularly critical with RA related data. Many refer to RAs as “quick and dirty” methods, for it is easily manipulated by informants, although group meetings tend to reduce this problem to a significant extent. Implicit here is that no data should ever go unchecked, especially if it is used for making important decisions. The quality of RA information may be verified in several ways: replicating the exercise with other groups, exploiting alternative sources of information especially from prior surveys, comparing results against predicted values from mathematical models and so on.

f) The strength of rapid appraisal as a method is in its flexibility and its propensity to facilitate change. This has been emphasized by findings of studies conducted using the RA approach. Specifically, in a study directed at approach to service delivery in primary healthcare, Dale et al., (2005) reported that rapid appraisal methods provide timely, relevant information to researchers for decision-making on pressing issues they face in the project and program setting thereby contributing to the generation and verification of social or economic theory, and facilitate a more rational decision-making process in real-life circumstances.

Conclusion and Recommendation

One of the key principles of the Rapid Appraisal Method is the visualization of questions and results by using locally understandable symbols. The main reason for creating the Rapid Appraisal Technique was to save money by avoiding costly and time-consuming research procedures as it obtains in mainstream social science research. Many of the RA techniques produce mainly qualitative information and their value to date has been to identify how communities look at different aspects of their daily lives. The techniques have not been designed to ask how many people have such views and beliefs.

Further to above, RA has developed in the data collection methods, a mandate both to develop skills and attitudes which make professionals better listeners and which support lay people to be partners in the provision of information and decisions about how the information is used. As such, Rapid Appraisal is of utmost relevance to researchers in the social sciences, both because of its focus on rapid information gathering and on community participation. In addition, as a training process, it facilitates the promotion of attitudes and skills which researchers need to do solid and productive studies. Its value in the field will depend on whether the data it generates is seen to be of use to planners for purposes of decision making. At worst, it has the potential to be a misused tool to collect poor information for supporting poor decisions and planning outcomes. At best however, it has the potential to give substance to the rhetoric of robust data demand by providing tools, techniques and information useful to planners for better and informed decision.

In essence it is the concern of this paper that the future of social science research cannot be divorced from the more general context of rapid appraisal especially considering the complex nature of research concerns today. Impliedly, formal social science research and rapid appraisal are complementary. For example, rapid appraisal methods have often been used to design complex socioeconomic surveys as well as to interpret their findings and conclusions. In many instances, both methods are used sequentially. In situations where a choice is made, it is dictated by such factors as the nature, purpose, and ultimate use of the information, available resources and time constraints.

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