

The language of research (part 18): research methodologies: rapid appraisals 2

KEY WORDS

- ▶ Evaluation
- ▶ Rapid appraisal
- ▶ Research methodology

The last paper in this series explored what rapid appraisal is, what it is not, what it can achieve and what it cannot. We also examined some of the pros and cons of Rapid appraisal as a research methodology. We discovered that Rapid appraisal is a methodology used to explore issues at the community level, to gain an understanding of the perceptions of a group of people about an issue or a service provision, for example.

In this paper, we will look at some of the methods (data collecting tools) used in rapid appraisal as well as how the quality of the research findings can be managed.

METHODS USED IN RAPID APPRAISAL

There are very many data collection methods used in rapid appraisal, these include semi-structured interviews, postal surveys, workshops, reviews of existing records and sometimes profiling of an area or a team. The choice of method depends on what is being appraised, the type of question being asked and the data available. The focus of rapid appraisal is understanding a phenomenon and then undertaking action, therefore, the tools used need to be applied at a community level (where there may be many stakeholders).

Interviews

These take place with key informants: these may be people who have been involved in a project of interest, they may be experts in the field or they may be users of a service that is under appraisal. Whatever their designation, these are people who understand the topic of interest either professionally or experientially.

The interviews are by nature qualitative and, therefore, usually semi-structured in nature — this allows the interviewer to focus on what they need to know while the interviewee is allowed to say what they think and feel about the topic under discussion (Ellis, 2018).

Since the focus of the data collection is essentially qualitative, the sampling for any of the methods need not be probability based (it does not matter who is involved) but the sample must be purposive

in that it uses people who have experience of the topic under investigation (Murray, 1999).

Workshops/community interviews

This is a more loose method of data collection that engineers a situation from which opinions, understandings and beliefs will emerge from participants in a less research formal way (Bamberger et al, 2006). Typically when investigating a topic at community level, the interviews will be held at a public meeting where questions are asked and answers given. In this way, it differs from a focus group where the topic of discussion emerges in a more controlled and qualitative way. It is also potentially a much larger event and could be less manageable! Some researchers use a more workshop-type approach to this form of data collection, setting participants tasks to do and questions to answer as smaller groups and then drawing the themes together towards the end.

Focus groups

As with all focus groups, these will usually include 6–12 people who are broadly similar in their experience of the topic being investigated. The constitution of the group must be such that no individual members dominate the group and the researcher will facilitate and generally steer the group discussion.

Mini surveys

These surveys need to be short and given to as many of the people of interest as possible. Depending on the nature of the community of interest these can be delivered either face to face, on paper or online.

Direct observations

These may be undertaken in the area under investigation, such as the clinic, people's homes or within a neighbourhood — the environment of observation depends on the nature of the issue under investigation. Things which are observed may include people and behaviours, or objects or structures. As with all qualitative research this is an inductive undertaking during which the observer

KEY POINTS

- ▶ Rapid appraisal uses multiple methods for data collection
- ▶ The choice of method depends on the question and the resources available
- ▶ The findings of the various methods of enquiry are compared in order to increase the validity of the study
- ▶ All researchers undertaking a study need to be trained to ensure consistency and reliability in data collection.

puts their preconceptions to one side.

ENSURING QUALITY IN RAPID APPRAISAL

Triangulation/methodological pluralism

The fact that rapid appraisal methodologies use multiple methods allows for the same question/idea/hypothesis to be looked at and answered in more than one way. This is fundamental to the quality of rapid appraisal as a methodology.

Murray (1999) describes how “Data collected from one source are validated or rejected by checking with data from at least two other sources or methods of collection”. Validation adds credibility to the process as it suggests that if the same answer to a question or assumption is arrived at by two or more means, the answer has a high chance of being correct (Bowling, 2014) — the question under study has been answered. The best rapid appraisal processes apply this stratagem, rigorously ensuring that all potential findings are cross checked using other methods to ensure good methodological rigour (Bowling, 2014).

Training and supervision

One of the keys to ensuring the quality of rapid appraisal is training and supervision of the researchers. Experienced researchers who are well trained will be conversant not only with the limitations of rapid appraisal as a methodology, but also the pros and cons of the methods they use for data collection, such as interviews or focus groups. Well-trained researchers will understand issues like inter-rater reliability, which requires that researchers applying a questionnaire, for example, do so following the same technique to ensure an individual researcher is not influencing the answers given (Ellis, 2015).

Team working

Rapid appraisal is not a solitary pursuit, it requires teamwork. This team works in defined blocks of time to collect data, as described, and then to analyse the data together (Beebe, 2004). Analysis is undertaken as a distinct task, and while there is

no set way to undertake data analysis in AR, some authors recommend the approach first described in detail by Miles and Huberman (1994) which involves: data coding (with additional remarks and observations in the margins); displaying the data clearly so any connections between elements can be observed and drawing conclusions, negotiating the meaning of the data (data analysis will be the subject of later papers in this series).

Being careful to write up the detail of this essentially iterative process adds to the quality of the rapid appraisal. Once the conclusions begin to be written up, the write up can be returned to the participants to check that the real meaning of what they said, or what they think about the topic under assessment, has been correctly represented in the data — a process often termed member checking (Beebe, 2004).

As with all research, there are ethical considerations that add to the complexity of rapid appraisal as a methodology. For example, it might be seen by participants as a tool for empowerment when in reality this is not within the gift of the researchers.

CONCLUSION

In this and the preceding paper in this series, we have briefly explored some of what rapid appraisal is about, what it is and what it is not. We have identified some of the research questions rapid appraisal can be used to answer and what it cannot be used to research. We have identified some of the pros and cons of the using rapid appraisal to research given phenomenon. We have also examined some of the research methods (study tools) used in rapid appraisal research and how the quality of rapid appraisals can be enhanced.

What emerges from this exploration of rapid appraisal is that it is a methodology that has great value in quickly assessing process and organisations, which would otherwise be hard to evaluate. As with all research methodologies, rapid appraisal requires a degree of rigour to ensure that there can be some faith placed in the findings.



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