
TECHNIQUE:

-  **Rapid Assessment Procedures**

Traditional anthropological research requires at least one year in the field and one year to write up. The usual survey requires one to three months to conduct, and one year or longer to process, analyze and write up.

Because health program planners don't have the luxury of a year in the field, using the methods described in the Rapid Assessment Procedures (RAP) takes only four to six weeks per community studied to wrap up data collection. You can accomplish this using one to two field workers, preferably from the community, and six additional weeks to analyze and write up the basic findings. Faster results are possible when your emphasis is on only a few questions.

RAP, also known as Rapid Ethnographic Assessment (REA), adapts standard anthropological techniques for use in evaluating health programs. It systematizes the data-gathering process, tapping into feelings, ideas and behavior. RAP can be used to develop a new program, but it also is useful in determining what about an existing program is working or not working and what program improvements can be made. Including individuals who know the language and culture of a community at risk, whenever possible, is an integral part of the data-gathering process, thereby facilitating entry into difficult-to-access communities.

The RAP method can incorporate the following anthropological research techniques that are common to other processes outlined in this guide:

- ❖ **Formal interviewing** that involves asking a fixed written set of questions on specific topics that are recorded in detail;
- ❖ **Informal interviews** where open-ended questions are asked around a specific topic or topics but in a flexible enough manner so as to allow other issues to be addressed;
- ❖ **Conversations** that are very informal discussions with one individual or a group of individuals where information is provided that is added to data gathered in a more formal way;
- ❖ **Observations** of what goes on in a community that are carefully recorded in detail;
- ❖ **Participant observations** by interviewers who participate in and observe the daily activities of a community in order to gather information about the community;
- ❖ **Personal diaries** that are used to record the daily activities and behaviors of the community being studied;
- ❖ **Focus groups** of community members who share characteristics in order to gain an understanding of how attitudes and behaviors work in a group; and
- ❖ **Collection of data from secondary sources** that are either published or unpublished, such as information from government agencies, community agencies operating in the area, and health service organizations.

Each of these techniques is discussed in more detail in Parts II and III of this guide. RAP can be used alone or with other methods for gaining initial access and understanding of a new community. This information can then be used for the following:

- ❖ **Intervention design**--information about the community's attitudes, beliefs, shared norms and behaviors can be developed.

- ❖ **Survey design**--preliminary studies can develop research themes and obtain information on subjects that are difficult to discuss in a brief, formal interview.
- ❖ **During a survey**--a sub-sample can be studied more intensively to validate the survey response and develop its underlying meanings.
- ❖ **Survey interpretation**--the anthropological data from both the RAP and survey can then help with survey interpretation.

Training & Resources for RAP

Ideally, fieldwork is carried out under the supervision of an anthropologist or someone with expertise in qualitative research methods. Having field workers from the community is the goal. Those who are part of the community supply preliminary contacts and facilitate the gathering of information. Whether they are from the community or not, there are several skills field workers must have or develop:

1. The ability to speak the language of the community;
2. The ability to listen carefully in interviews;
3. A respect for people and the capability to see and understand things from their perspective;
4. The ability to step away from the role of telling people what to do;
5. The ability to inspire confidence and trust; and
6. The skills to convey accurately what they have observed and learned.

In their data-gathering work, field interviewers maintain three types of records:

- ▶ a **diary** listing what happened each day;
- ▶ **brief field notes** to keep account of the questions and answers in every interview;
- ▶ **expanded field notes** written shortly after they interview an individual which contain comments and impressions about events that occurred. Interviewers should be discouraged from writing detailed field notes in front of a respondent, but should instead rely on very brief notes or key words as reminders.

Training of interview staff should last at least one week and should be provided in both a classroom and field setting. Scrimshaw (1987) suggested role-playing and participation exercises to demonstrate ethnographic methods. Interviewers then observe how field investigations are carried out; e.g., how to establish rapport and how to introduce oneself to the community.

Strengths & Weaknesses of RAP

Strengths

Qualitative inquiry provides an opportunity to uncover information not available through a formal questionnaire. How individuals in a community perceive problems is often ascertained through the use of the qualitative methods. In RAP, qualitative methods provide a framework to develop conceptualizations about health problems that can be shared

between health care providers and the community in a short period of time, far less than in traditional ethnography.

Weaknesses

Good listening skills by field interviewers are essential in order to elicit the proper information and to “hear” correctly what’s being said. A related concern is bias of the field interviewer that may emerge through what and how they choose to record or not record. RAP depends upon information that is not biased by inaccuracy due to the sloppy recording of information or the failure to acknowledge the limits of data collection. Failure to cross check information through triangulation (assessing information using several methods, see p. 53) may also be a concern.

Because RAP is a “rapid” method of using qualitative research methods, it does not offer as complete a picture as a full-blown ethnographic study would, where a great deal more time is spent on studying the community and developing relationships (Rist, 1980).

Following are the instructions that may help you utilize Rapid Assessment Procedures for your assessment:

IMPLEMENTATION OF RAP

The first step in using RAP is the selection of major objectives. The focus is on a specific goal; for example, the attitudes of people in a community towards HIV prevention efforts.

A strategy for carrying out the assessment should be made ahead of time; i.e., determining what methods will be done and planning for how they will be carried out. (See the **Exploring What’s Out There** section, Part II, for ideas on methods and recruitment.) Planners should be flexible, altering the strategy as more information is gathered and attempts are made to implement it. In developing the strategy, planners can choose among the following:

- ❖ *Informal interviews*
- ❖ *Formal interview*
- ❖ *Conversations*
- ❖ *Focus Groups*
- ❖ *Participant observation*

See Part II of the guide for detailed information on each of these methods.

In all of these efforts it is important for field workers to promptly write up notes.

In analysis, staff looks for patterns of responses (see page 51, “Organizing your Data”). A final report is then developed with recommendations. When results vary across communities, RAP procedures should be repeated.