

In the current climate, Rapid Ethnographic Assessments are the research method we need

This is the third post in a six-week series: **Rapid or Rushed?** exploring rapid response publishing in covid times.

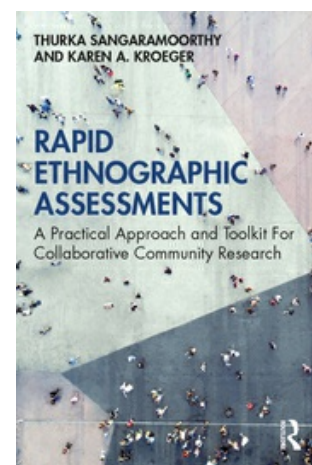
As part of the series, there will be a [virtual roundtable](#) on Friday 6th November, 1.30pm featuring Professor Joshua Gans (Economics in the Age of COVID-19, MIT Press) and Richard Horton (The COVID-19 Catastrophe, Polity Press and Editor of The Lancet). Register [here](#)

*Rapid responses in the social sciences require rapid research methods. In this Q&A, **Thurka Sangaramoorthy** and **Karen Kroeger**, authors of Rapid Ethnographic Assessments: A Practical Approach and Toolkit for Collaborative Community Research (Routledge 2020), discuss the benefits and limitations of rapid ethnographic assessments. Unlike traditional ethnographic research methods which are lengthy and resource intensive, REAs provide timely, low-cost data collection and dissemination that can produce rich understandings of social, economic and policy factors that contribute to the root causes of emerging situations in a variety of contexts.*

Q: Can you tell us about your book and what rapid means in your approach?

Our book provides a guide for understanding, designing, and conducting rapid ethnographic assessments (REAs)—a team-based, multi-method, relatively low-cost approach to data collection that relies on methods like interviews, focus groups, mapping, observations and brief surveys. REAs produce rich understandings of social, economic and policy factors that contribute to the root causes of emerging situations in a variety of contexts.

Rapid means the rapid collection and dissemination of information used for action. Traditional research methods are useful but can take months or years to design and implement, and consume considerable resources before findings are finalized and shared. Program managers and practitioners often need to act quickly to make decisions about how well programs are working and what needs to be changed to help them better reach, serve, and respond to their clients' needs. The need for timely, usable data can be especially critical for programs serving socially marginalized or vulnerable populations that are hidden, hard to reach, or reluctant to use services due to social, political, and environmental factors. In the current climate, we need more practical research and assessment tools and skills that help decision makers obtain timely information on emerging problems, engage local communities in problem solving, foster new collaborations, and inform program and policy adjustments.



Q: In your experience, is rapid ethnographic assessment a new phenomenon?

REA, like other rapid data collection methods, has roots in international health and development, arising in the 1970s from a need to respond quickly to problems in communities where few data were available, local research capacity was often limited, and where the success of interventions required direct engagement and collaboration with local communities. Experts in agriculture, community development, and health sought a middle-ground between “quick and dirty” methods such as cursory observations made during site visits and traditional research methods such as long-term ethnography or surveys that could take years to complete and result in few data that could be applied to planning programs and services.

What might be different today is that REAs have broad applicability for those—including students, researchers, governmental and non-governmental institutions, and community members—interested in research efficiency and productivity as well as action-oriented and translational research. REAs are flexible and serve a variety of programmatic and policy needs including program planning, program evaluation, quantitative survey planning, and community participatory research. They can also create a framework for communities to work together to address a need or problem, and as a means of transferring research skills to local communities.

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Q: What do you think are the benefits of rapid research and responses in ethnography?

REA may help researchers and communities to quickly act on the most pressing challenges affecting communities today by engaging with community members, transferring research skills, and generating timely data and findings. Changing social welfare and development priorities, persistent social, economic, and health disparities, and the need to engage affected communities in new models of care and sustainability are requiring programs to innovate and adapt quickly to new conditions. Many graduate programs provide little guidance in research methods, design, and implementation. Students undertaking traditional ethnographic research are often told to “figure it out” in the field and are left unsure about how to conduct research and transform data into well-organized arguments. They may have limited time and funds to conduct research and need to adapt to the expectations of communities and organizations with whom they work. Although REA is not meant to take the place of long-term ethnography, it provides a framework for using complementary ethnographic methods to investigate problems and collaborate with communities in research. Today, research methodologies need to be accessible and usable by those outside the academy including community leaders, program managers, field staff, and others without formal research training. In our book, we take seriously the theoretical significance of practice that centers communities in the collaboration of both the acquisition of knowledge and its utilization.



Q: What advice do you have for researchers looking to conduct rapid ethnographic assessments?

First, it is important to know when and when not to use REA and to plan and prepare accordingly. REA is very useful in a number of contexts: (1) when more information is needed; (2) when an issue is developing; (3) when hidden or vulnerable populations need to be reached; (4) when a program or policy needs to be developed or adjusted; and (5) when communities need to be involved. REAs are not useful when solely quantitative information is needed. Other factors like time and resources, and the audience for the REA findings, should also be weighed when considering whether a REA is the best approach. REAs may look deceptively easy to execute, but they require technical skills and guidance, and planning can help determine whether REA is a good fit.

Further, whether the REA results in high-quality data that can generate useful and actionable findings depends a great deal on how well planned and implemented the REA is. Planning presents a valuable opportunity for the team to work with funders and community stakeholders to generate ideas, conduct literature reviews, decide on the focus of research, choose appropriate methodological tools, determine site locations and groups to work with, prepare a timeline and budget, and conduct preliminary site visits. Careful planning and organization lead to better preparation for fieldwork, data collection, and analysis.

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Q: Do you think there are any risks to rapid research in ethnography and the social sciences more broadly?

REA requires an understanding of the purpose and value of qualitative methods and ethnography, as well as the strengths and limitations of REAs. There is often a misperception among novices that REA is “just talking to people” and that anyone, regardless of training, can do it. We wrote the book because we feel that both the methods and results of REAs are not being shared widely enough with those who might wish to learn more about how to undertake similar work. Often REA reports are either restricted to a small audience, or circulated internally within an organization, appearing only in the gray literature, which makes them difficult to find and locate. Even when those conducting REAs try to publish their work in peer-reviewed journals, they face considerable challenges because findings based on rapid or qualitative methods are viewed as too narrow or not as trustworthy as those based on quantitative data.

REAs can also face unique publishing challenges in venues where qualitative research is widely published. Critics feel that work utilizing rapid qualitative data collection methods lack rigor or that the findings of such applied work are insufficiently theoretical and of little interest to audiences accustomed to more traditional types of studies. Despite criticism from traditional methodologists and ethnographers (who are often located within the academy) about questions related to reliability and validity due to its relatively rapid nature, we argue that essential ethnographically rich data based on community-driven needs can be collected within the realities of programmatic time and budgetary constraints.

Note: This interview gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics. The interview was conducted by Dr Emily Cousens, Managing Editor of the LSE Impact blog.

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