

Rapid Assessment Process in Qualitative Inquiry

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Review Essay:

James Beebe (2001). Rapid Assessment Process: An Introduction.

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Abstract: James BEEBE presents a model for doing what he labels the *Rapid Assessment Process* (RAP). This review essay provides a critical review of and commentary on BEEBE's text for qualitative researchers to use for applied evaluation projects. The RAP model is a systematic approach based upon collaborative inclusion of insider and outsider perspectives in building a research team that collectively conducts the research process from beginning steps to final report. BEEBE's text on how to use the RAP model is rich with descriptive illustrations from actual research projects he has done in various cultural settings.

Key words:

- [1. Overview of the RAP Model](#)
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1. Overview of the RAP Model

BEEBE notes that qualitative research with extensive fieldwork is expensive and time consuming, yet essential for many studies. He, however, advocates time-limited fieldwork. BEEBE notes that *Rapid Assessment Process* (RAP) teams can accomplish a great deal more in briefer time periods than can many traditional ethnographic projects that rely on a single researcher. BEEBE contends that RAP designed projects can be productive and answer a number of research questions very effectively. BEEBE's background and training as an anthropologist, educator, and ethnographer outside the U.S.A. have led him to seek applied evaluative methods to help stakeholders solve societal conflicts. Such stakeholders include, among others, local residents of a small village who want to improve their quality of life and governmental agency policy makers who wish to improve group functioning. [1]

The *Rapid Assessment Process (RAP) model* is described by BEEBE as an "... intensive, team-based ethnographic inquiry using triangulation, iterative data

analysis, and additional data collection to quickly develop a preliminary understanding of a situation from the insider's perspective" (p.1). Throughout the text he elaborates on each phase of the RAP model process. BEEBE believes that the insider's perspective is essential for the team to understand how the local inhabitants of the culture being studied experience a problem. I agree with this premise. The lens of the local voice, what ethnographers frequently label the "*emic*" viewpoint, is crucial to the research process in evaluative studies and is all too often ignored. [2]

BEEBE devotes a large portion of the book describing the team process. In the RAP model selection of team members is based upon several factors that uniquely determine the needs for each project. For instance, BEEBE cites examples of having team members with expertise in various areas (e.g., finances or photography) that may contribute to the research objectives. This need for expertise means that the membership of the RAP teams will change for each project. Each member of the team must be trained in the skills central to the interviewing process, including how to conduct systematic observation and conduct ethnographic interviewing since telling the story is the critical task of all RAP model projects. An intangible quality essential for all team members is an attitude that conveys a comfort with ambiguous situations so that the persons interviewed will feel comfortable sharing multiple views of reality. [3]

RAP teams need a good leader who has the administrative skills to select, train, coordinate and supervise the integration of all aspects of the RAP process. Membership on a RAP team requires an intense commitment to engage fully in the process from the conceptualization and initial phases of inquiry to the drafting of the final report. Writing a RAP project report is a collaborative effort with both insider and outsider voices being expressed. [4]

As with other qualitative methodologies (e.g., CRESWELL, 1998; DENZIN & LINCOLN, 2000; MARSHALL & ROSSMAN, 1999; MILES & HUBERMAN, 1994; SPRADLEY, 1979; WOLCOTT, 1994) the data collection, processing, and analysis phases of the research are blended together. The RAP research process is recursive, with each step and stage of the process informing other components of the model. For example, the grand touring questions and probes are modified and extended based upon experiences from previous interviews. Iterative analysis is a process that extends data collection by sharpening questions to explore emergent descriptions that provide richer and fuller accounts of the phenomena being studied. Data are collected and refined as long as new data continue to emerge from the interviews and observations. No set number of interviews is predetermined by seeking a specified number of respondents; instead the number of interviews is determined from the data in the analysis process by examining when points of redundancy are repeated demonstrating that saturation has been established. [5]

A feature of the RAP model not always present in qualitative research methodologies is the attention to feedback, clarification, and verification that comes throughout the research process. Although member checking is a

technique of verification that other qualitative methodologies have proposed (c.f., LINCOLN & GUBA, 1985), rarely have I seen a methodology that utilized as many check backs with the informants as those proposed by the RAP model. In the RAP model each draft of a tentative report, not only the final report, is shared with all stakeholders. This attention to detail gives the RAP credibility, that the report accurately portrays a picture of the phenomena being studied from the vantage point of not only the dominant voices but also the less often heard voices of marginalized stakeholders. [6]

2. Context for Application

BEEBE's background in international development work with the Peace Corps and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) brings a cross-cultural, multidisciplinary application to his text. Throughout the book rich examples from areas ranging from the Sudan to the Philippines are interspersed with examples from Europe and North America to illustrate how varied the settings and contexts are in which the RAP model may be applied. The executive reports from a RAP study of Polish State Farms and community colleges in North America provide examples of the shape and form a report might take when reporting research using the RAP model. [7]

Contextual factors shape the application of research using the RAP model and make each application unique. Yet there are commonalities that characterize research that follows the RAP model and distinguish it from many other approaches to qualitative inquiry. The characteristics of the locale, the needs of the inhabitants, the phenomena of interest for the researcher and for the stakeholders who sponsor and fund the research provide contextual implications regarding the resources required to conduct the research. Ethical questions regarding how, by whom, and for what purpose the information will be used are mediating factors that filter how the study will be conducted and what information is to be featured in the report. Ethical decision making in qualitative research sometimes means that information is purposely withheld to protect the respondents and community being described in the report. For example, BEEBE points out that the RAP follows the canons of ethics and standards of practice of the Society for Applied Anthropology. Such ethical considerations dictating strict adherence to protecting the rights of human subjects also are contextual factors that govern the conduct of all research conducted by the members of other scientific and professional societies such as the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy, the American Psychological Association, the American Sociological Association, and the International Family Therapy Association. [8]

3. Evaluative Commentary

There are a number of features of the text that make it useful to researchers, policy makers, community leaders, and students of qualitative inquiry. For instance, the book is practical and useful as a quick reference on how to do RAP. I found the summary of main points at the beginning of each chapter helpful in orienting me to the content of the work. Similar shorthand references are provided as boxes of key ideas that BEEBE wants the reader to note and remember. These are interspersed throughout most chapters in ways similar to how a journalist might use them to pique the interest of readers and provide emphasis to important points. [9]

The highlighted sections and summaries of ideas provide a roadmap that makes it easy to follow BEEBE's progression of ideas. This book probably would have been boring and too technical for non-academic persons to find useful without the abbreviated summaries and highlighted materials that serve as a type of executive summary for readers who do not have the time to digest a lengthy treatise. I read the book from cover to cover and had a hard time putting it down. Rarely does a technical report or technique for doing research have the richness of story that unfolds in this volume. [10]

Perhaps the feature of the book and of the RAP model that I found most intriguing was the respectful manner in which the research is carried out. BEEBE makes a point of taking into account the needs of the research respondents who serve as informants throughout the process. For example, BEEBE notes that the number of duties and responsibilities normally carried out by the person representing the local voice as a member of the research team would need to be reduced so that the person could carry out research tasks during the research process. Although he does not specifically state so, BEEBE implies that the researcher pays for the work not being done by that person. This would certainly help in gaining the insider team member's full attention to the needs of the research project and not place undue burdens on the individual, family, and/or the community. BEEBE also frequently emphasizes the importance of respect being shown to the people being studied. This becomes quite clear when BEEBE underscores the need to be sure that the marginalized members of the community are not overlooked, because their presence is important and deserves to be included in the portrait of the phenomena being studied. BEEBE notes that RAP teams seek out "troublemakers" and other persons marginalized in the community who provide "valuable cross-checks and insights not available from other interviews" (p.45). To deny their voice in the report is a disservice to them and denies the stakeholders who commissioned or sponsored the report the opportunity to learn the full story. [11]

I think that it is important in evaluating BEEBE's work to note the major point of divergence between his work and that of many other ethnographers and anthropologists. Classical anthropology emphasizes the critical importance of conducting fieldwork over an extended period of time, with the researcher becoming immersed in the culture for a year or more. WALCOTT (1995) is a

good example of a proponent of this position of prolonged fieldwork. The argument from classical anthropology is based upon principles that research requires holistic and comparative methodologies to understand culture. BEEBE takes the position that briefer, more focused fieldwork provides a pragmatic alternative for projects in which the culture is at least partially known before beginning the research. His use of RAP teams is intended to provide multiple lenses that take both the insider and outsider perspectives into account in gathering the data and formulating conclusions. I believe that all of us who advocate using qualitative methodologies in our research need to continue this debate. [12]

4. Extensions and Further Applications

As I read the book I thought of several applications of the RAP model that could be done in my own work as a marriage and family therapist. I also could see how community organizations designed to improve the community where I live might find RAP evaluations useful. I will briefly share only three examples. [13]

In my work as a marriage and family therapist and supervisor of other therapists I currently use similar approaches to evaluate progress, process, and outcomes. For many years I have incorporated ethnographic interviews in therapy to provide me as a therapist or supervisor feedback from the clients' perspective on how the process is working and what they would find most useful. This type of informed therapy has many benefits as it allows the clients to serve as member checks on what the therapist assumes to be happening in the therapy process. It also provides an overt means of helping communicate to clients that they are equal partners in the treatment process with co-responsibilities for the process, progress, and outcomes. These ethnographic interviews help me become more focused and clear by gaining information directly from clients that my interpretation or what I imagine their stories might be portraying is correct. This partnership and collaborative feature of my work is very much in keeping with BEEBE's approach to the RAP model that guides his research. [14]

A second feature of my work as a marriage and family therapist trainer that is highly collaborative and consistent with the RAP model is my use of reflecting teams. ANDERSEN (1987) describes the process of using a reflecting team in therapy. He states that in this approach:

"A team behind a one-way screen watches and listens to an interviewer's conversation with the family members. The interviewer, with the permission of the family, then asks the team members about their perceptions of what went on in the interview. The family and the interviewer watch and listen to the team discussion. The interviewer then asks the family to comment on what they have heard." (p.415). [15]

ANDERSEN introduced the concept of reflecting teams to family therapy as a technique to open up the therapeutic conversation to new alternatives and ideas about the problems and stories the client family presents. He notes that this technique helps clients and therapists to become aware of new ways of looking at

the clients' situation by accenting portions of the clients' stories and asking questions to help clients see their problem from a different perspective. Reflecting teams are a technique where multiple voices are heard, which opens the spaces in the therapeutic conversation to move beyond moments of impasse where the progress of the therapy is stalled. Multiple voices help both clients and therapists see the problem and situation from new perspectives that often create a climate for change and movement away from the points that hinder progress in therapy. One particular application of reflecting teams that I developed with my colleague Barry WINGFIELD (WINGFIELD & COLE, 2000) uses two client couples and therapists who serve simultaneously as reflecting teams for each other throughout the therapy sessions. Our approach is similar to the RAP model feature of both insider and outsider perspectives. Composing reflecting teams is much like composing the RAP teams. Both insider and outsider vantage points need to be represented in collecting and interpreting the stories being told by the respondents who serve as informants about the problem. [16]

A final example that illustrates how the RAP model could be extended and used comes from my work as a teacher and trainer of students in learning to use a variety of qualitative methodologies. I have discovered over the years that using teams to teach ethnographic interviewing skills is useful in helping my students learn how to attend to the contextual factors that imbue the interview while simultaneously conducting the interview. My students have taught me that having another set of eyes and ears present in the interview helps to attend to detail of content at the same time they are observing and participating in the interview process. The point I am making from this illustration is that the interviewer is part of the process and is concurrently and reciprocally influencing and being influenced by the process. Having another team member present helps to avoid the unintended shaping of the informant's story that may distort the respondents' intended message. [17]

As I think about my examples on how to extend and apply elements of the RAP model for doing qualitative research I am left with haunting questions that go to the core of most qualitative methodologies. Is it possible or even desirable to have the story co-created by the research process rather than simply reporting the story that the informant shares? If we follow the logic of interactions being recursive, it is clear that the researcher is an active agent in the shaping of the conversation. The researcher assumes an active role that is subjectively molded through interactions that emerge in the interview process. I believe that this active role is the reason that BEEBE came to the conclusion that the RAP teams needed to have an insider perspective actively present in the research process. It is unclear from my reading whether BEEBE adds the insider perspective in an attempt to provide a balance with the outsider perspective that the researcher brings to the process or to overtly acknowledge that the story is co-created and represents multiple subjective realities present in the "story being told". [18]

5. Summary

In this review essay I have provided a commentary and evaluation of BEEBE's text *Rapid Assessment Process*. I have provided examples of how the RAP model can be extended to other areas of inquiry such as mental health issues. This book is easy to read and provides pragmatic suggestions for engaging in rapid assessment process research. As a university professor and researcher as well as a practitioner I find BEEBE's text to be a welcome addition to the growing number of useful resources for qualitative researchers. [19]

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