A Reality Check for Rapid Immersion in Development Research

In search of rigour, ethics, and relevance

Springfield Working Paper Series #5

Dr. Rachel Shah
April 2018
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

One of the most damning critiques of the development industry is that it is disconnected from the people it purports to benefit. Ethnographic methods are perhaps uniquely valuable for helping to understand which problems people living in poverty really face, to design interventions to generate sustainable improvements, and to evaluate how and why change occurs. However, their time-intensive and complexity-oriented nature is frequently at odds with the imperative of development programmes to quickly produce scalable results. Consequently, numerous attempts have been made to adapt ethnography to get similar - but more accessible, applicable and cost-effective – results more quickly.

One such attempt that has grown in credibility in development recently is the Reality Check Approach (RCA). RCA is a codified method for rapid qualitative research, built on a combination of immersion-based and listening methods (Reality Check Approach, 2018a). By taking an exploratory rather than pre-determined approach, RCA is intended to uncover counter-intuitive insights and local theories of change, and to expose potential unintended negative consequences of development, thereby enabling development practitioners to design interventions which are more relevant and effective than they would otherwise be.

Despite building on decades of work across numerous academic and applied disciplines, RCA is often acclaimed as innovative. An optimistic perspective on RCA’s own claims of innovation is that the RCA marketing material is geared more towards what sells than to what RCA proponents consider to be good research principles. If so, this is an indictment on the development industry, as RCA hardly represents a radical approach to social science.

In celebrating RCA’s innovation, development has prioritised effective marketing over effective implementation. When evaluated in light of the extensive literature on short-term qualitative research, it becomes evident that RCA, whilst commendably pioneering the use of immersion in development, has missed opportunities to address critical problems with mainstream development practice. Compromises and missed opportunities occur on three levels.

Firstly, rigour. RCA’s advocacy for an ‘atheoretical approach’ which discourages background research, focus, the use of mixed methods and proper research practice in terms of note-taking and iteration, present significant challenges to the validity of findings and its relevance to development problems.

Secondly, ethics. RCA pays insufficient attention to vital ethical considerations. Understanding and addressing issues of consent, power, and positionality should be a vital part of any social research.

RCA has laudably demonstrated the potential of immersion research to generate valuable results for development. They rightly claim that there is a need in development for inductive research which allows theory to emerge from data, that complexity and multiplicity can be researched using appropriate methods, and that immersion and observation can generate new and valuable insights. It is time, however, to demand a higher standard of rigour and ethics in the application of qualitative social science methods to development problems. This can be achieved through applying well-established mitigating tactics to the practice of short-term immersion.

Evaluating RCA raises a wider point about the dangers of development adopting apparently innovative approaches without situating them within existing fields of research. Development would do well to give more credit to those who take an iterative and cumulative approach to learning than to those who rebrand existing approaches.
INTRODUCTION

Ethnographic methods are perhaps uniquely valuable for helping address the development problems of how best to understand which problems people living in poverty really face, to design interventions to generate sustainable improvements for its intended beneficiaries and to evaluate how and why change occurred. However, their time-intensive and complexity-oriented nature is frequently at odds with the imperative of development programmes to quickly produce generalisations that can be translated into scalable, impactful results.

The Reality Check Approach (RCA) is one of several attempts to translate the benefits of ethnographic methods into a development context. It is a codified version of rapid immersion which has gained popularity in recent years. It has attracted significant donor funding and has gained momentum in its application.

This working paper aims to contextualise RCA within existing literature about short-term qualitative research, demonstrate its limitations, and propose an adapted approach to rapid immersion to deliver the benefits of RCA with fewer compromises on rigour and ethics.

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

One of the most damning critiques of the development industry is that it operates in a way that is disconnected from the people it purports to benefit, and that this disconnection leads to a misunderstanding of the challenges, needs and preferences of poor or disadvantaged people, as well as of the solutions that might work for them. The consequences of failing to talk to beneficiaries and understand their perspectives and experiences are serious, and can affect every stage of a development project, from diagnosis and design through to effective monitoring and evaluation of interventions. In diagnosis, development professionals may find themselves identifying and planning to solve problems which are not perceived of as problems by the programmes’ intended beneficiaries. Uninformed design can lead to programmes applying “solutions” which unintentionally perpetuate and embed injustices. Development professionals have also been critiqued for failing to take appropriate account of existing solutions and capacities among people living in poverty in their analysis of problems and design of potential solutions. Assumed incentives and capacities can lead to the design of poor monitoring systems, and when a project or intervention with an apparently sound theory of change does not have the expected impact, evaluators may not be able to accurately understand why it failed. Carr (2018) argues that, “we understand far less about what those in the Global South are doing than we think, and...our assumptions about life in such places are a) mostly incorrect and b) potentially very dangerous to the long-term well-being of everyone on Earth.”

It is a truism to state that there is a clear need to move past assumptions in development. Good development programmes have long insisted that interventions are designed on the basis of evidence, rather than relying on presumptions about their target group’s needs. However, for three reasons, the evidence-base that development draws on has been insufficient for addressing the problem thus far.

The first reason is that there is a tendency in development to favour particular research methods and particular kinds of evidence, with an emphasis on quantitative data, particularly the quantitative data produced by large scale surveys. Whilst such data is certainly valuable, it can only provide answers to certain kinds of questions. For instance, as survey data depends heavily on predetermined question design, it is generally not very good at producing new insights or challenging existing presumptions. Nor is it good at humanising research participants, highlighting their competencies, or creating connection. Sampling strategies can also inadvertently exclude the perspectives of the most
marginalised people in a given community – for instance, it is difficult to get the people in a neighbourhood who are most affected by poverty to participate in focus groups.

The second reason is that all research reflects an existing understanding of the world and unless it is reflexive and open-ended, it often serves primarily to confirm rather than challenge existing assumptions (Carr, 2018). Cultural deficit theory, which Bishop (2003, p. 223) defines as framing “the locus of the problem as either lack of inherent ability, lack of cultural appropriateness or limited resources; in short, some deficiency at best, a ‘pathology’ at worst,” informs much of development’s analysis of poverty and disadvantage and is evident in the design and results of much development research. The research does not solve the problem because it is, itself, affected by the problem.

The third reason the current evidence base does not solve the problem is that even when very insightful evidence is generated, the process of incorporating that knowledge into development programmes in such a way that diagnosis, design, delivery and evaluation are more relevant, meaningful and effective is extremely challenging, and there are not many processes for doing so that have been developed, tested, and proved effective.

Thus, the problem remains.

CAN ETHNOGRAPHY PROVIDE A SOLUTION?

One proposed solution to development’s disconnection from its intended beneficiaries is to introduce ethnographic evidence into development. Ethnography is a well-established approach to research known to be capable of producing exactly the kind of rigorous evidence which is currently lacking in development. Ethnography can enable researchers to

- gain the trust of hard-to-reach populations, thereby counteracting issues of exclusion in sampling
- understand and communicate research participants’ perspectives and interpretations, even when they differ dramatically from those of the researcher or the researcher’s intended audience
- analyse people’s experiences on their own terms, rather than according to predetermined, biased categories or projections
- produce unexpected and counter-intuitive findings, rather than being constrained by predetermined assumptions
- analyse social phenomena – including development interventions and institutions – holistically and in context, thereby addressing issues of self-referencing research
- find out what people do as well as what they say they do in everyday life
- collect data about sensitive topics
- interpret behaviour that has otherwise made little sense to development, health and government practitioners (among others)

Though ethnography is as flawed and vulnerable to misuse as any research method, it is particularly well-suited to generating the kind of understandings, borne of close contact and connection, which are critically absent in development. As Edward Carr (2018) argues:
To correct [the] problem, development research, design, and monitoring and evaluation all need much, much more engagement with qualitative research, including ethnographic work. Such work brings a richness to our understanding of other people, and lives in other places, that is invaluable to the design of progressive programs and projects that meet the actual (as opposed to assumed) needs of the global poor now and in the future.¹

Obstacles to Using Ethnography in Development

Although ethnography appears to offer a solution, it has not been accessible to development professionals as a research method because it conventionally depends on researchers spending substantial amounts of time (often for a year or more) living with her or his research participants, building relationships and using participant observation and other methods to understand everyday life. Such investment has implications, in terms of time and money, which have made ethnography seem impracticable for use in development.

Development projects are usually required to generate the evidence on which they base their diagnosis, design or evaluation in a matter of weeks or months. There simply is not the time to spend months or years gathering data, and another year or more analysing and interpreting it, when results need to be made available quickly. Additionally, although good ethnography need not necessarily require bigger budgets than many of the large-scale quantitative methods commonly commissioned by development projects, it is perceived to be a very expensive method. This is exacerbated by the fact that what ethnography produces is deep, holistic understandings of a small number of people’s heterogenous lives and perspectives, whereas a large-scale randomised survey, for instance, might produce reducible findings which are arguably representative of a far greater number of people. The latter is data that development is more familiar and more comfortable with than the former and thus appears to offer greater value for money and time.

Most ethnographers (who are usually also academics) have also done a poor job of working with development professionals to make their findings applicable to practice. Even when good quality data can be obtained quickly and in cost-effective ways it is not straightforward to translate the nuanced, contextualised findings about complex issues such as poverty that ethnography generates into recommendations for development practice. However, it is policy or programme recommendations which are the end goal of research in development. These obstacles prevent ethnography, powerful though it may indeed be, from seeming like a solution to development’s problem.

The Promise of Short-Term Ethnography

The obstacles long-term ethnography presents have inspired numerous attempts to adapt ethnography to get similar - but more accessible, applicable and cost-effective – results more quickly.² These span a number of disciplines and include Rapid Ethnographic Assessment (REA) (e.g. Taplin, Scheld and Low, 2002), Rapid Ethnography (e.g. Millen, 2000), Rapid Assessment Procedures (RAP) (e.g. Gittelsohn et al., 1998), Focused Ethnographic Study (FES) (e.g. Pelto et al., 2013), Rapid Rural Assessment (RRA) (e.g. Chambers, 1981), Participatory Rural Assessment (PRA) (e.g. Chambers, 1994a, 1994b, 1994c), Quick Ethnography (QE) (Handwerker, 2001), Focused Ethnography (e.g. Knoblauch, 2005), short-term ethnography (Pink and Morgan, 2013), micro-ethnography (Spradley, 1980) and mini-ethnography (Leininger, 1985).

¹ This quote is from the post ‘Should Ethnographies Have an Expiration Date,’ posted on 8th July 2013.
² These span a number of disciplines and include Rapid Ethnographic Assessment (REA) (e.g. Taplin, Scheld and Low, 2002), Rapid Ethnography (e.g. Millen, 2000), Rapid Assessment Procedures (RAP) (e.g. Gittelsohn et al., 1998), Focused Ethnographic Study (FES) (e.g. Pelto et al., 2013), Rapid Rural Assessment (RRA) (e.g. Chambers, 1981), Participatory Rural Assessment (PRA) (e.g. Chambers, 1994a, 1994b, 1994c), Quick Ethnography (QE) (Handwerker, 2001), Focused Ethnography (e.g. Knoblauch, 2005), short-term ethnography (Pink and Morgan, 2013), micro-ethnography (Spradley, 1980) and mini-ethnography (Leininger, 1985).
phenomena. Indeed, some researchers insist that short-term ethnography presents too many risks with respect to rigour (see Appendix 1 for examples) and that ethnography cannot be quick – that the very definition of “ethnography” implicates lengthy fieldwork.

Many others, however, argue that whilst ethnography cannot be done quickly, there is a place for rapid ethnography-like methods, as long as researchers recognise the methods’ limits and mitigate the risks using credible strategies (Cernea, 1992; Bernard, 2011). Over the course of the last half century, these researchers have contributed to an extensive literature across numerous academic and applied disciplines which explores the potentiality and limitations of using short-term ethnography to get actionable insights. Many of them argue that by integrating short-term ethnographic methods into development, practitioners can use ethnography to address development’s problem of disconnection from intended beneficiaries without having to invest unrealistic amounts of time and money into research.

WHAT IS REALITY CHECK APPROACH AND HOW DOES IT SEEK TO ADDRESS DEVELOPMENT PROBLEMS?

The Reality Check Approach (RCA) is a codified method for rapid qualitative research. The premise of RCA is that the development industry needs to incorporate the perspectives of the people that development interventions are designed to serve into its evidence-base – a response to the problems outlined above – and that this is best achieved through a combination of immersion-based and listening methods (Reality Check Approach, 2018a). By taking an exploratory rather than pre-determined approach, RCA is intended to uncover counter-intuitive insights and local theories of change, and to expose potential unintended negative consequences of development, thereby enabling development practitioners to design interventions which are more relevant and effective than they would otherwise be and to triangulate findings from other data collection tools in an evaluation. RCA also claims to enable better access to poor and marginalised populations than development professionals usually have.

RCA uses a short-term immersion-based method to achieve these aims. Researchers live for a minimum of four nights with a host household chosen from among a given development project’s intended beneficiaries, “just listening, hanging out, chatting with them, trying to understand their perspective, giving them the space and the time to talk to us...giving them the chance to just talk in their own time, and explain things, show us things, teach us things, help us to experience things” (Jupp, 2015). RCA proponents claim that this informal, unstructured approach helps researchers to lay aside their biases and agendas, access the perspectives of their hosts, and capture insights which are critical to development projects and policies.

RCA started with Helena Thorfinn, who worked for the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) at the time. She had been told that nobody in the donor consortiums at the time was actually listening to the people that they were set to deliver services to - “there was no link between the money and the people” (Thorfinn, 2017) and decided to do something to address the problem. Working with Dee Jupp and others and drawing on her background as a journalist and anthropologist, Helen and the team she drew together began to develop a method that would give policy makers a better understanding of poor people’s perspectives on development projects.

Methodologically, RCA borrows heavily from qualitative social science methodology in general, and ethnography in particular (Lewis, 2012, 2018). Essentially, RCA constitutes an attempt to condense ethnographic immersion into a dramatically shortened time frame (from a year or more in
conventional ethnography to four nights in RCA), claiming to retain ethnography’s benefits and principles whilst producing results which are more relevant to practice, faster, and cheaper, making it more practicable to the development industry.

**IS RCA INNOVATIVE?**

The RCA materials repetitively use the words “new,” “innovative” and “unconventional” to describe their approach, as do those describing what they do. Robert Chambers, a well-known and long-time proponent of the potential for ethnographic methods to be adapted for application to development, goes so far as to say that “The Reality Check Approach is the participatory innovation of the early 21st century with the greatest promise to transform knowing and action at scale” (Chambers, 2017, p. 134).

These are surprising claims, given that they are mostly made by experienced academics who are presumably aware of the century of work on participant observation and immersion that has gone on in anthropology and other disciplines, including decades of work on the extent to which it is possible to retain the benefits of long-term ethnography through short-term approaches (as cited above). Indeed, some of Malinowski’s most famous work makes similar claims to RCA, though it was published in the 1920s. For example, Malinowski writes:

“...we are obviously demanding a new method of collecting evidence. The anthropologist must relinquish his comfortable position in the long chair on the veranda of the missionary compound, Government station or planter’s bungalow, where, armed with pencil and notebook and at times with a whisky and soda, he has been accustomed to collect statements from informants, write down stories, and fill out sheets of paper with savage texts. He must go out into the villages, and see the natives at work in gardens, on the beach, in the jungle...Information must come to him full-flavoured from his own observations of native life, and not be squeezed out of reluctant informants as a trickle of talk...” (Malinowski, 1954 [1926], pp. 146–7)

“This goal is, briefly, to grasp the native’s point of view, his relation to life, to realise his vision of his world.” (Malinowski 2005 [1922]: p. 19)

“Again, in this type of work, it is good for the Ethnographer sometimes to put aside camera, notebook and pencil, and to join in himself in what is going on.” (Malinowski 2005 [1922]: p. 21-22)

If Malinowski’s outmoded terminology were replaced with (the less racist but perhaps equally patronising) “ordinary people” and the “missionary compound etc” were replaced with the “policy makers’ headquarters” these texts could almost be cut and paste into RCA promotional materials. Lewis (2012, pp. 19–20, see also 2018) gives a good overview of the diverse traditions that RCA draws from in the Reality Check Reflections Report, noting that “The RCA differs in important respects from most other forms of research study or monitoring exercise.” This is accurate but given nearly a century of similar writing on the specific ways immersion and conversation can lead to valuable data, repetitive claims of innovation by RCA seem stretched.

To an extent, the presentation of RCA as radically innovative is more of a reflection on the development industry than it is on the method itself. Helena Thorfinn, one of the RCA founders, admits that whilst she is pleased that RCA has had an impact, she finds it shocking that RCA is considered innovative within development:
I can say that I was a bit shocked of how [RCA] was received by development partners and I’m still a bit shocked about this, because as an anthropologist and journalist I thought that this was what you do in development. This is what you do – you talk to people, who you are working for, but no, that’s not done. ...Deep in my heart, I’m a little bit surprised, I must say, how this has filled such a void in development. To me, this is the way you work, this is what you do, this is the only way forward, the only way to understand how we can design sustainable development components for people that matter. (Thorfinn, 2017)

An optimistic perspective on RCA’s claims to innovation is that the its website is geared more towards what sells than to what RCA proponents consider to be good research principles. If so, this is an indictment on the development industry, as “what sells” apparently includes the vague statements found in RCA promotional material, such as that RCA researchers spend time “living with rather than visiting,” “being experiential” and “interacting in ordinary daily life,” which could equally be made about any immersion method, or that RCA is about “learning rather than finding out” and “having conversations rather than conducting interviews,” which obscures rather than illuminates what RCA researchers actually do to the uninitiated reader. Encouragingly, more recent materials explicate RCA’s approach in more concrete terms, a positive response to the evaluations, reflections and critiques of the last few years of practice. Nonetheless, RCA hardly represents a radical approach to social science; if it is truly a revolution in development, then it is a poor reflection on both the development industry, which has so little understanding of qualitative social science, and on academic disciplines such as anthropology that have failed to communicate effectively how powerful the methods they use are.

Pain, Nycander and Islam’s (2014) evaluation hints at how the political economy of development has affected the development of RCA when it states that, “The RC...was seen to be a way of bringing demand side pressure to the policy table through the EoS [Embassy of Sweden], allowing the EoS to bring something unique to the debate...” Lewis (2012, pp. 9–10) is more explicit:

_Sida, as a relatively small bilateral donor in Bangladesh...saw an opportunity to build on its comparative advantage within the donor consortia based its longstanding work on accountability, voice and rights. The RCA was devised as part of Sida’s contribution to improve programme effectiveness through providing new types of information from peoples’ perspectives at the grassroots. As one former Sida Embassy staff member remarked in the reflection interview: ‘the Reality Check made us more visible, and it gave us something to bring to the table’._

In this context, overstated claims of innovation make more sense. Buried in RCA reports are hints at the expertise which has informed the RCA founders’ decisions about how best to access the perspectives of people who are usually marginalised by development research. Indeed, Lewis’ (2012, pp. 19–20) reflection report on the Bangladesh RCA gives a good (albeit brief) overview of the many methodological influences RCA draws from and carefully articulates the ways in which RCA is similar to and differs from existing approaches.

However, within a political economy that rewards innovation over acknowledgement, there are few incentives for standing, as they say, on the shoulders of giants. This is unfortunate, as it is only through transparency, critique and reference to existing knowledge and experience, that changes are likely to be made. Though improvements to RCA’s approach do appear to have been made, they have been slower than would be expected in an environment of challenge, learning, accountability and
innovation. SIDA had far more to gain in the competitive landscape of development by branding RCA as a revolutionary method, able to access information that impersonal surveys and hastily executed focus have long overlooked, than it had to gain by acknowledging, critiquing, reviewing and adapting the decades of work that precede the development of RCA. Is it any wonder that little credit is given to the extensive literature that underpins RCA’s approach? Is it any surprise that acknowledgements of the well-established limitations of representing people’s perspectives on the basis of short-term qualitative research are hidden by sweeping statements of what RCA is able to achieve? In this context, can we expect anything other than vague generalisations about how exactly primary data is gathered from brief encounters and translated into actionable insights?

Through its growing influence, the RCA team have been relatively successful at convincing development professionals that there is a benefit to bringing qualitative data into the evidence base that informs development policy, and that there is value in paying attention to the kind of insights that immersion-based research produces. RCA have both marketed the method and demonstrated its potential results to good effect, and their efforts in this regard are commendable. RCA should be credited, both for being one of the few short-term applied qualitative data collection methods that insist on making immersion central, and for fruitfully embedding the methodology within development practice. The intervention they have made into the development industry was overdue.

Unfortunately, RCA is innovative within the context of current development practice. In its hybridity it does, as Lewis claims, also differ in important ways from existing approaches. However, it is patently built on well-established research methodologies and it would do well to draw as much on the critiques and mitigations of these approaches as it does on their epistemology. But until the industry gives more credit to those who acknowledge, critique, review and adapt previous learning, we are likely to see far fewer genuine innovations than we are premature claims that such innovation has occurred.

**EVALUATING RCA**

Though RCA has grown in credibility and influence within the development industry, there have been only a handful of evaluations of and reflections on RCA to date, and many of those focus on the first RCA – a longitudinal study undertaken in Bangladesh. These include the RCA team’s own reflection on undertaking RCA in Bangladesh (Lewis, 2012), a few academic articles published by people involved in RCA (Arvidson, 2013; Lewis, 2018) and an evaluation of the RCA in Bangladesh commissioned by the donor (Pain, Nycander and Islam, 2014). Taken together these publications give valid insights into the strengths and weaknesses of RCA, though they are limited in scope.

In this section, I evaluate RCA’s methods, ethics, and the extent to which it is able to generate useful and accurate findings. My analysis is based on materials, including reports, video interviews and promotional materials, that are available both on the RCA website and elsewhere. It is worth noting that the application of RCA principles seems to vary considerably by project and personnel, and that

---

3 Prior to publication, we sent this paper to several members of the RCA Community of Practice for their comments. Following our communication, the RCA website was updated to reflect some of the critiques in this paper. Consequently, not all the previously available materials are now available. Access dates are cited in the bibliography in all cases. We are grateful for the contributions and clarifications, including references, sent to us by members of the RCA Community of Practice, as we are for their engagement with what we hope will be an ongoing conversation.
the available materials do not explore the concepts below in much depth. Nonetheless, common concerns consistently rise to the top.

The Purpose of RCA

There are three primary purposes in development for undertaking an immersion. The first of these is to generate a transformative experience for development professionals, by enabling them to experience what life is really like for the people their interventions are designed to benefit (see, for example, Chambers, 2012). The second is to generate a transformative experience for poor or marginalised people, by “empowering” them. The third is to use immersions as a research technique.

RCA falls primarily into the third category. Although RCA does suggest that it intends to “empower” local people through the immersions, members of RCA teams have openly acknowledged that it largely fails to do so (Lewis, 2012). RCA does occupy a somewhat ambiguous position in the research space, with one of its founders arguing that it is not research at all.4 However, given that one of its stated purposes is to generate knowledge and understanding using techniques borrowed from well-established research methods, most people do conceive of it as research, and some of the RCA promotional materials call it “a qualitative approach to research” (for example, Reality Check Approach, 2018a). It seems unnecessarily confusing to treat RCA as something other than research, as RCA practitioners and evaluators alike agree that it should follow principles of good research practice (Lewis, 2012; for example, Arvidson, 2013; Pain, Nycander and Islam, 2014). It is as a research method that I evaluate it here.

Strengths of RCA

RCA, when properly implemented by skilled professionals, is a powerful method that can result in insightful findings very quickly. Given the short time researchers spend in immersion, it produces impressive results. The quantity and depth of information presented in the RCA reports I read, about both the focal topic and the context, is impressive considering the very limited time researchers spend in immersion. RCA claims to be able to quickly provide insights about everyday life that could not be discovered using methods that are more mainstream within development (such as surveys, structured interviews and focus groups), and to present such findings in a way which is accessible to policy makers and development practitioners. My overall assessment based on reading several RCA reports is that it can indeed do that. The researchers’ findings do contain useful insights into the research topic that could only have been gained through observation, informal conversation and immersion, and the reports themselves are well-written and hard-hitting. Although some policy-makers have complained about the combative style of RCA reports (see Pain, Nycander and Islam, 2014), the fact that the reports do not hold back from challenging the status quo is commendable. Indeed, its ability to challenging existing assumptions is part of the reason RCA is valuable to practitioners; it is in doing so that it begins to address the problem of disconnection from purported beneficiaries.

RCA has had a positive effect on the development industry by demonstrating the worth of investing in qualitative research – particularly immersion – and by advocating for the use of qualitative data as an important part of development professionals’ evidence base. As RCA proponents rightly claim, immersion-based research provides access to types of information which cannot be gained through surveys, focus groups, or one-off interviews. RCA insists on immersion as an essential element of their

---

4 “Reality Checks are certainly not research...” but are rather “primarily a tool to improve development cooperation” (see Pain, Nycander and Islam, 2014, p. 19)
methodology. This is commendable; many attempts to shorten ethnography forgo immersion, but without immersion-based participant observation researchers lose rich opportunities for gaining insights that cannot be accessed through more formal methods.

In many ways, RCA has made an important contribution to development. However, three areas of the Reality Check Approach – rigour and ethics– are concerning, and undermine the potential benefits RCA has to offer.

Issues with Rigour

Any attempt to shortcut the process of ethnography runs the risk of compromising the quality of the findings. Common concerns about the rigour of short-term ethnographic studies include representativeness, accuracy and validity (see Appendix 1). It is difficult to be confident that the findings from short-term qualitative studies can be generalised to a wider population, particularly when such studies are usually focused on a small number of people and there is no opportunity to observe seasonality and changes over time. With little time for iteration and triangulation, short-term studies are also more prone to generating inaccurate results, and whilst reactivity, lack of trust, and ethnocentrism can undermine any ethnographic findings, they present a greater risk to the validity of short-term studies. Appendix 1 lists some of the concerns about representativeness, accuracy and validity that are commonly raised about short-term ethnographic studies.

Although there is considerable variety between different approaches to short-term ethnographic studies, researchers have applied some common tactics in their attempts to reduce the length of time ethnography-like research takes without sacrificing rigour. These issues of rigour are of even greater import for RCA, which is undertaken in less than a week, than they are for many of the alternative approaches to shortcutting ethnography, which usually invest several weeks in data collection. Nonetheless, there is little evidence in RCA of the commitment to address these challenges that other approaches demonstrate. The result is that although the RCA findings are certainly insightful in places, both policy makers and evaluators have expressed concern with their representativeness, accuracy and validity (see Pain, Nycander and Islam, 2014). As the following analysis shows, RCA reports have too frequently rested on assertions of validity, as if the method were intrinsically rigorous, instead of applying widely accepted mitigations to the risks inherent in short-term ethnographic research.

Emphasis on background research

Despite near unanimous insistence across disciplines and approaches that background research is essential to contextualise short-term ethnographic studies and inform study design (for example, see Chambers, 1981; Cernea, 1992; Scrimshaw, 1992; Millen, 2000; Knoblauch, 2005), RCA underemphasises this phase of research. From the available materials, it is difficult to evaluate exactly the extent of background research that is done prior to a piece of RCA research. On the one hand, it appears that when resources permit, RCA researchers do seek wider contextual information before beginning immersion. On the other hand, one of the RCA claims to rigour that RCA makes is on the basis that researchers do not enter the field overly biased by pre-conceived interpretations. In a video titled ‘Rigour in RCA’ on the RCA website (Reality Check Approach, 2018b) includes the claim that “others have project bias or agenda bias – we don’t,” accompanied by a cartoon drawing of a person wearing a t-shirt that says “just curious” with a cloud above his or her head saying, simply, “blank.”

Whilst the desire not to bias researchers in advance of immersion is understandable, such an approach implies that ethnographers are blank slates who will not make assumptions unless primed to do so. In
fact, the opposite is true. All researchers (indeed, all humans) make assumptions, often without realizing they are doing so, and contextual information is important precisely because it is more likely to inform and correct poor assumptions than it is to generate them.

Without access to both high quality background information and good methodological training, researchers tend to make ethnocentric assumptions leading to poor study design, unethical behaviour in the field, and inaccurate interpretations. In long-term ethnography, such assumptions are likely to be challenged and corrected over the course of the research (though even then, background information is useful), but in short-term immersions there is insufficient time for researchers to be exposed to sufficient data, and to build sufficiently close relationships, for this to occur. As one introduction to short-term ethnographic methods states, “without this prior knowledge/touchstone data Rapid Ethnographic Assessment endeavours can fully miss the mark, and even be harmful” (medanth, 2018).

Long-term ethnographers can afford to invest time during fieldwork in gaining an in-depth knowledge of the fields to be studied which in turn informs their ongoing research. Most short-term approaches emphasise the importance of gaining this contextual knowledge in other ways, such as through:

- Using secondary sources
- Gathering existing data and advice from long-term researchers in the area
- Investing in preparatory work with key informants, community members, gatekeepers etc

Furthermore, they advocate using a research team who are already familiar with the language and culture (Scrimshaw, 1992), who are already trained in anthropological research methods (Cernea, 1992) and who include indigenous team members (Harris, Jerome and Fawcett, 1997).

RCA teams are usually made up of local researchers with, as a reflection on the Bangladesh RCA puts it, “a head start over outsiders in understanding local realities, and with good language skills” (Lewis, 2012, p. 19). The RCA training also intentionally trains researchers to consider their biases and potential propensities to interpret data inaccurately. The debriefing process further challenges ethnocentric analyses and triangulates findings. This is all commendable.

Nonetheless, given the unusually short data collection period, RCA would benefit from greater investment in background study, building it into their approach as an integral and essential dimension of the study.

Focus

The vast majority of proponents of short-term ethnography insist on a very narrow, clear, targeted focus for the study as an essential prerequisite for rigorous quick ethnography (for example, see Chambers, 1981; Scrimshaw, 1992; Handwerker, 2001; Knoblauch, 2005; Pelto et al., 2013; Pink and Morgan, 2013; Rapid Ethnographic Assessment, 2018). They require:

- 1-2 clear research questions
- as few variables as possible (no more than five, according to Handwerker), which are tailored to the programme/project and informed by extensive background research
- “optimal ignorance” (Chambers, 1981, p. 99): researchers should sacrifice the theoretical insights that emerge from wide-angle ethnography and focus instead on what the project commissioning research needs to know and can action
“proportionate accuracy” (Chambers, 1981, p. 99): researchers should work towards the degree of accuracy required by the project to make decisions, even if it would be possible to obtain more accurate data with a greater investment of time.

RCA, on the other hand, sets out exceptionally broad areas of interest and expects researchers to explore whichever of them come up. RCA materials also state in places that RCA does not use research questions, though a close reading of the reports shows that it sometimes does, albeit unfocused ones. They argue that the lack of a focused research agenda is to prevent researchers from driving findings by presuming that they already know what is important. This is a valid concern. A long-held principle of good ethnography is that to focus on only one domain of social life to the exclusion of other, seemingly unrelated but potentially interconnected, issues, is to limit the value of one’s findings, and as Muecke (1994, p. 203) puts it, “The greatest risk of focused ethnographies is that the boundaries of their focus unknowingly exclude what is relevant.”

However, the solution is not to be vague in the name of being holistic. RCA’s method of using a thematic checklist (“Areas of Conversation”) to remind researchers of the kinds of areas that might have bearing on the research questions is not a bad one, but the lack of focus evident within these “checklists” is extreme, as a brief perusal of the annexes of recent reports demonstrates. Furthermore, no explanation is given for why a research question, properly and broadly conceived, would introduce more bias than these “Areas of Conversation.”

A better approach would be to focus on a single question, framed it in a sufficiently broad way to allow for unexpected findings. RCA materials justify their lack of a research question by appealing to grounded theory, but as Strauss and Corbin’s (1998, p. 39) seminal work on grounded theory techniques argues, “It is impossible for any investigator to cover all aspects of a problem. The research question helps to narrow the problem down to a workable size...it is necessary to frame a research question in a manner that will provide the flexibility and freedom to explore a phenomenon in depth.”

When a researcher has one question to answer, she can follow answers down the numerous conversational paths her hosts make take her on. For instance, she may find that ambitions for schooling have more to do with supernatural beliefs than livelihoods, or more to do with kinship than economics. If she has numerous, ill-defined questions or themes, she is more likely to have superficial conversations about a wide range of related topics without ever understanding the connections between them. Recruiting well-trained and skilled researchers is also a far more effective strategy for preventing prescriptive research than imprecision is.

RCA does focus primarily on one specific household, drawing on case study approaches. However, they also introduce variables through their approach to sampling households. For example, in the Bangladesh RCA the team focused on twenty-seven host households, located in three types of sites, in three regions of the country, meaning that there were only three host households per ‘site type.’ Focusing on fewer variables would allow for greater depth of understanding, which is core to the value of the RCA approach.

---

5 For a very early articulation of this principle, see Malinowski (1922, p. 11) who states: “An Ethnographer who sets out to study only religion, or only technology, or only social organisation cuts out an artificial field for inquiry, and he will be seriously handicapped in his work.”
**Triangulation**

To counteract the greater risk of bias and distortion in short-term ethnography, most methods advocate triangulating in as many areas of the study as possible. In long-term ethnography, triangulation is hard to avoid, but in short-term ethnography, it must be planned for.

In particular, this means:

- Using mixed method approaches (this is very common in short-term ethnography; see below)
- Using teams instead of individuals for both data collection and analysis
- Recruiting multi-disciplinary teams wherever possible
- Being reflective about biases, and counteracting them where possible
- Being very careful about issues of representation in sampling – for example by using multiple locations, and, where relevant, using randomisation to increase generalisability

In this dimension of rigour, RCA aligns with other approaches. Indeed, a commitment to triangulation is embedded in the RCA approach. The RCA reports frequently point out that using the immersion technique provides numerous opportunities for triangulation as researchers have opportunities to follow up on ambiguous topics, speak to people at different times of day and night, and speak to individuals with different types of roles, from different households, and from different generations. More importantly, RCA is also always carried out in teams and at multiple sites in order to optimise opportunities for triangulation. This certainly adds weight to RCA findings.

When it comes to triangulation, it is the lack of focus (see previous section) and an underemphasis on a mixed method strategy that lets RCA down. To triangulate rigorously, a study design needs to allow for a degree of redundancy and saturation, which – when working with such a small timeframe – requires focus and a mixed methods approach.

**Mixed Methods**

Using mixed methods is an aspect of triangulation which is particularly characteristic of most short-term ethnographic research, as the lack of time ethnographers have to develop reliable intuition and insight through their experience means that they have to ensure the insights they think they have gained through participant observation are validated by other methods.

A range of methods to complement participant observation have been adapted for use in short-term ethnography, drawing from the wide suite of methods conventional ethnography has at its disposal. These include direct observation (including randomised versions of direct observation such as spot observation), interviews, mapping, guided walks, ranking, free listing, shadowing, simulation and role playing, scenario-response elicitation, and many more (see Cernea, 1992).

RCA reports vary in terms of how much they claim a mixed methods approach. The main method advocated by RCA is a form of participant observation that focuses more on informal interviewing (“informal, relaxed and insightful conversations”\(^6\)) than on observation. More recent RCA material is explicit about the importance of mixed methods. This is a considerable improvement on earlier iterations of the RCA method, which relied too heavily on the aforementioned informal conversations. Even in recent material, however, RCA mixed method strategies rely on different elements of

---

\(^6\) A phrase repeated in many reports (for example, Reality Check Approach, 2015a, p. 17, 2015b, p. 6)
participant observation, and would arguably benefit from the incorporation of more formal methods for the sake of triangulation..

Interestingly, Arvidson (2013), an experienced sociologist and part of the RCA Bangladesh team, restricted herself to informal methods at first but eventually resorted to prompting and even staging conversations in order to gather data relevant to the team’s aims. She found that using more formal methods provided equally insightful data, demonstrating the fact that different methods generate different types of data and insights, but none are not inherently “better” than others. Reliance on “insight” through a limited number of informal conversations with people that researchers have only known for a very short time presents a serious risk to the validity of the results. RCA reports would be strengthened by publishing more of the data obtained through other methods (such as observation, visuals and ranking).

RCA has rightly been criticised for over-reaching and over-generalising in its reports (Pain, Nycander and Islam, 2014). When RCA is used as a one-off method rather than longitudinally, the risk of over-reaching is inflated, as participant responses are less valid early on in an immersion. For instance, some people who participated in the Bangladesh RCA admitted to researchers that “I actually lied to you last time we spoke” (Arvidson, 2013, p. 283). To an experienced ethnographer, this is not surprising, but RCA does not seem to engage rigorously with this risk. Instead, it wrongly implies that informality and quickly-built rapport inevitably leads to insight.

Some policy-makers have found RCA most useful as a way to triangulate data from other studies, and the RCA website itself encourages the use of RCA within a wider mixed-methods approach (Reality Check Approach, 2018c). Using RCA in this way, as one part of a mixed method triangulation strategy makes sense. It is encouraging to see that the RCA Community of Practice are moving towards incorporating more of a mixed methods strategy in their methodological proposals for immersions, as this certainly makes it more credible as a stand-alone research approach. Commissioners of RCA immersions should require that a mixed method strategy is embedded into both the design and the reports of future RCA research.

**Intensity and Note-Taking**

All ethnography is intensive, but in long-term ethnography, researchers can afford to learn slowly and to ‘miss’ and even ‘misinterpret’ data as long-term immersion inevitably presents multiple opportunities for correction. This means they can, especially in the early weeks and months, focus more on building rapport and relationships than on recording data. They can ‘hang out’ and learn from whatever naturally arises. Short-term researchers do not have this luxury, as they do not have the time to leave much up to chance.

Some researchers deal with this challenge by inviting performance of rituals or practices which they are particularly interested in (see, for example, Pink and Morgan, 2013). Others, unwilling to sacrifice the quality of data that comes from observing people naturally, resort to an intensity that would be too exhausting for a researcher to sustain in long-term ethnography. This may mean having countless conversations or using multiple methods in one day, using audio-visual technologies to capture data, taking extensive notes in between (or, if appropriate, during) conversations, observations and experiences, and, in analysis, intensely scrutinising the data that has been captured (Knoblauch, 2005). Such intensity allows for the triangulation outlined in the previous section (see Knoblauch, 2005; Bernard, 2011; Higginbottom, Pillay and Boadu, 2013; Pink and Morgan, 2013).

Although it is demanding, both personal and technical note-taking on at least a daily basis is critical to minimise the otherwise inevitable data loss and bias that memory and personal impressions introduce
(Bernard, 2011). This is true in all ethnography but is of particular importance in short-term ethnography when a large amount of data has to be collected in a short amount of time and when researchers have little time to build relationships and adapt to the context. The impressions and memories of researchers experiencing physical and cultural forms of ‘shock’ due to immersion in a new environment are particularly unreliable.

In the name of informality, rapport-building and an attempt to minimise researchers’ influence, RCA mandates no note-taking during activities and conversations. Instead, researchers are encouraged to take notes in private during periods of downtime (Pain, Nycander and Islam, 2014). This is reasonable, as note-taking can indeed be intimidating, especially when research participants are not literate, but it carries the risk that important details are forgotten, recorded inaccurately, not recorded, or that individuals are misquoted, which RCA does not address. Pain, Nycander and Islam (2014, p. 22) raise this as a concern:

*The principle of the field work was that notes would not be taken in front of informants or household members and would be written up later. A central issue here then is the extent to which recording after the event is selective, if even only on grounds of interest to the study, and accurate i.e what is heard or seen (and not seen and heard) and how that is reported. Given the centrality of the use of quotes – what people said – in the annual reports – selectivity and accuracy becomes an important issue. Description and recording by definition is selective and with training and experience a surprising amount can be downloaded from memory at the end of the day. However we have no way of assessing the fidelity of reporting at this stage.*

It is unusual to require that researchers avoid taking take notes in front of research participants, not least because it raises issues of informed consent (if people never see you taking notes on what they say, do they realise and remember that you are recording it?). More commonly, an experienced researcher would make a cost-benefit analysis of note-taking in context, based on the relationship they have with participants and with the way they think note-taking is likely to be interpreted. However, if no note-taking in public is mandate, a minimum of daily (and preferably more frequent) note-taking should also be required. The extent to which RCA researchers engage in intense data collection and private documentation seems to vary by researcher and by project, but as Pain, Nycander and Islam point out, readers have no way of assessing the fidelity of the data RCA researchers collect, calling into question their conclusions.

**Iteration**

All good ethnographic research is characterised by an iterative approach. Analysis is ongoing during the process of data collection, allowing researchers to identify the most significant and relevant areas for investigation, adjust their focus, test and adjust hypotheses, and introduce new methods as needed (Gittelsohn *et al.*, 1998).

In short-term ethnography, the limited time available to adjust and iterate has led to an emphasis among many short-term researchers on strategic, intentional approaches to building cycles of feedback and reflection into the research process (see Crawford, 1997; Harris, Jerome and Fawcett, 1997; Gittelsohn *et al.*, 1998; Higginbottom, Pillay and Boadu, 2013; medanth, 2018). Methods include calling on participants to help with interpretation and engaging in mid-point reviews through collective analysis, supervision or individual reflections on findings thus far.
When RCA is used longitudinally, it is iterative, but there does not seem to be a strategic approach to iteration when the approach is used as a one-off. Debriefing, collective analysis and data reviews are done at the end of the process and could not realistically be done earlier, because – at four nights – RCA is an unusually short immersion. Although technically four nights is a minimum, rather than a mandated, period, the vast majority of RCA immersions are just four or five days long. This inherently limits the opportunity RCA researchers have to iterate.

**Theory**

A common misconception about ethnography is that it presents descriptions of social realities without being intruded upon by theory. In fact, the presentation of descriptive data without interpretation yields no meaningful insights and does not constitute ethnographic insight. It is impossible to make sense of ethnographic data without drawing on theory, whether explicitly or implicitly, and by analysing and interpreting ethnographic data, researchers engage in further theory-building activity. Ethnography is inherently theoretical, but theory used well does not intrude upon ethnographic data. On the contrary, it makes sense of it.

Some of RCA’s lack of rigour in interpretation and analysis comes from attempting to be atheoretical; the ‘Rigour in RCA’ video even claims that “theory, the foundation of quantitative research, inherently contains bias as it requires us to prove or disprove a logical connection. Without a theory, we are free to explore, to uncover new insights and unexpected connections.” The implication that qualitative research does not involve theory is baseless, as is the claim that qualitative research is not biased. RCA seeks to enable emic perspectives to emerge and to limit etic interpretation or validation. “The RC role was seen as providing bottom-up people-centred information to policy makers that was not transformed through theory and complicated analysis” (Pain, Nycander and Islam, 2014, p. 19). However, a collection of narrative does not an analysis make and without accountable and conscious theoretical interpretation, researchers interpret data according to preconceived biases. As Pain, Nycander and Islam (2014, p. 24) state, “Voices cannot just be ‘heard’ and ‘quoted’ as the RC reporting had a tendency to do, without careful consideration of how and why things are being said and the degree to which what is being said is corroborated by other sources. This critical consideration and a more theoretically informed discussion of how interpretations are being made is missing from the RC reporting.”

In recent years, RCA practitioners have responded to such critiques by framing their approach within the context of grounded theory (which they contrast, confusingly, with “theory-based” approaches, see Reality Check Approach, 2018a). The use of grounded theory implies a lengthy process of alternating data collection with analysis in stages, using well-defined techniques. Presumably, the attribution to grounded theory does not refer to use of these techniques, but to an **epistemology and methodology which, similarly to grounded theory, is rooted in inductive approaches in which the theory emerges from the data.**

This is a valid approach and one that should be used more commonly in development. However, whereas grounded theory involves an explicit and transparent process of theory creation from data, that can be rigorously evaluated, RCA interpretations do not.

**Acknowledging limitations**

Perhaps most importantly, short-term qualitative researchers have consistently argued for explicit recognition of the limitations inherent in attempting to shortcut ethnography (see Cernea, 1992; Muecke, 1994). Whilst short-term use of ethnographic methods can provide valuable data, that could not have been obtained in other way, there are some kinds of questions that simply cannot be
answered until a researcher has spent a long period of time building relationships, gaining trust, getting past facades, learning which questions to ask, and occupying an appropriate social role within a given context. Although the need for long-term ethnography should be assessed on a case-by-case basis, generally it is needed for uncovering deep insights about the symbolic meaning of institutions, practices, and relationships, for accessing knowledge about highly sensitive topics, and for working in communities that are secretive or suspicious of researchers, where short-term immersion can be profoundly useful for collecting data on observable phenomena and information which communities are conscious of and willing to share. Consequently, researchers who use short-term immersion maintain that they must both mitigate the limitations inherent in short-term qualitative research to the best of their abilities and must also acknowledge that sometimes short-term ethnography-like research simply cannot achieve what long-term ethnography can.

As Cernea (1992, online) cautions:

> It has to be said explicitly and loudly, that in many cases the design and strategy of development projects cannot be sound without the benefit of long-term, non-shortcut, longitudinal, academic, old-fashioned types of social research.

RCA largely fails to acknowledge the limitations of what can be achieved in a short-term immersion. Instead it claims the method can uncover so-called “reality,” provide “detailed insights” based on “in-depth” interactions (Reality Check Approach, 2018a, see promotional brochure). Pain, Nycander and Islam raise this issue in their evaluation of the Bangladesh RCA (2014, p. 20):

> One deep impression, and this is a judgment that comes from a reading of the documentation, annual reports and interviews, is of a certain almost fundamentalist position [that] what is being represented in the RC annual reports is an unmediated ‘truth’ about those living in poverty which is unquestionable.

The evaluators cite one staff member from the donor organisation, SIDA, who commented that “RC was ‘the Bible’ at SIDA headquarters, as well as immersions - if you criticised it you were completely told off – it was very politically sensitive’ (see Pain, Nycander and Islam, 2014, p. 32).

This “faith” in RCA’s ability to find out “the truth” about people living in poverty undermines RCA’s credibility as a rigorous approach. The promotional materials give the impression of a proprietary, branded method that makes overly ambitious, unsubstantiated claims about what it can achieve. Reassuringly, the reports are more measured; they explicitly articulate at least some of the limits of the study and giving limited details about methods, sample selection and how evidence for claims is generated. However, even in the reports the actual evidence that underpins conclusions is frequently generalised, and the means by which immersion experiences are translated into knowledge about people are obscured (see also Pain, Nycander and Islam, 2014, p. 22). The reports give very little information about the actual processes by which RCA teams recruit and train researchers, partner with host communities, collect, document and analyse data, and perhaps most importantly, engage critically and accountably with the ethics and limitations of qualitative field research.

**Issues with Ethics**

One of the challenges of short-term research is working out how to negotiate consent, manage mistakes, compensate participants and behave appropriately when researchers have so little time to learn what is, in fact, appropriate in a given context. The ethical issues common to all qualitative research, such as informed consent, researcher reflexivity and representation, are particularly difficult
to address well in short-term immersions. The RCA team does not seem to engage with this complexity. Instead of considering how ethical principles might apply differently in different contexts, the reports from different contexts include very similar ethical statements that focus primarily on protecting participants’ anonymity.

**Informed Consent and Negotiating Access**

A necessary (though insufficient) prerequisite of any qualitative social science research is that research participants give informed consent. In any immersion research, it can be difficult to be sure that participants are really “informed” about the research, partly because people tend to get used to having a researcher around and to forget how what they say and do may be recorded and used, and partly because when the research is situated in worlds which are foreign to participants’ experiences, they may have no framework to make sense of it, undermining the extent to which they can be “informed.”

RCA reports generally assert that villagers “soon understood the purpose of the study” (Reality Check Approach, 2015a, p. 18) without giving any evidence to support this claim, or explaining how researchers could be so confident that this was the case. They give little indication of what information they gave participants, and of how informed consent was negotiated.

The reflection report on the Bangladesh RCA show the outcome of this laissez-faire approach, namely that the consent families gave was not informed: “Families were not very clear about the purpose of the study. They knew it was a five year study and they assumed it ‘would bring some benefits’ (Lewis, 2012, p. 42). The challenge of getting genuinely informed consent is not unique to RCA; nonetheless, it is no less critical for being common.

Another issue with RCA is that there seems to be very little adaptation of how access is negotiated and methods are used in light of specific political economies, risks, and cultural considerations. Although few details are given it sounds like, worryingly, in some cases researchers turned up in villages at the start of immersion – in some cases, late at night – without having made any prior arrangements. This could make it difficult (and in some cultural contexts, inconceivable) for villagers to turn the researchers away, thereby undermining any consent they may have given.

RCA claims to be concerned about participants’ “voices” but apparently gives them very little voice in the process of research itself.

**Power and Representation**

The Reality Check Approach explicitly intends to “challenge and ‘reverse’ conventional power relations between outside researchers and research ‘subjects’” (Lewis, 2012, p. 20), citing Robert Chambers’ work, and stating in one report that “a key principle [of RCA] was to draw on ‘participatory’ approaches that seek to avoid one-sided ‘extractive’ forms of research engagement…” (Lewis, 2012, p. 16; Arvidson, 2013, p. 281). Unfortunately, RCA relies on informal conversations, researcher passivity and the occasional use of so-called “participatory tools” such as ranking exercises, storytelling and drawing as their means of reversing power relations (Lewis, 2012), failing to engage with any of the numerous critiques of power relations in research that have emerged in recent decades.

Numerous scholars – particularly researchers from communities that have been the subjects of immersion research – have criticised the idea that using particular methods can rectify unjust power imbalances in research (see Bishop, 1998; Nakata, 1998; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999 among many others). Instead, they highlight the many arenas of research in which power dynamics operate unjustly. Bishop (1998, 2003 see also Tuhiwai Smith, 1999, p. 10), for example, analyses power in five areas: initiation,
benefits, representation, legitimisation and accountability. When analysed through this lens, RCA does not reverse any of the conventional power imbalances found in research. It is the RCA team who initiate the research, they who benefit (through paid consultancies and through building their careers), they who presume to represent others’ so-called “realities,” and they who legitimise findings. They are not even accountable to the research participants, but to those who commissioned and funded the research.

RCA falls into the trap of presuming to represent people on the basis of only brief encounters in a way that gives researched people no chance to represent themselves or to contest the findings. Arvidson’s (2013) article gives a good critique of RCA’s ethics in this respect. As she argues, RCA’s methods serve the interests of the researchers more than they do those of the researched; “...it is difficult to get away from the notion that power remains with the researcher...while the ‘building of rapport’ and ‘intimacy’ are primarily interpreted as ethically informed approaches, they have become commodified and professionalized...what is initially presented as an ethically informed approaches, they have become commodified and professionalized...what is initially presented as an ethically motivated approach can suddenly appear as unethical practice” (Arvidson, 2013, p. 284). Indeed, as Arvidson points out, the assertion that RCA is emically driven is founded on two fallacious assumptions: firstly, that people want to talk to researchers (or be “given voice” by them) and secondly, that researchers can ever be unobtrusive, that fieldwork can be anything but an intervention. RCA would do well to drop the patronising rhetoric about how it “gives” people “voice” and instead engage with the unjust power dynamics that it may well inadvertently perpetuate.

Reflexivity and Positionality

The RCA reports show no evidence of reflection on the RCA team’s part on how their actions, identities and choices may have affected their hosts, or their findings. They do not consider how their own status, ethnicity, age, gender and other identifiers affect the relationships they have with their hosts, and the reports recite the way RCA methods enable researchers to build trust in a matter of days, even when evidence suggests that trust has not been built and sensitive topics are not being discussed with RCA researchers (for example, one RCA Bangladesh participant said “I actually lied to you last time we spoke,” see Arvidson, 2013, p. 283; and the team acknowledged that “Discussions around sensitive issues such as bullying and teasing were difficult,” see Reality Check Approach, 2015, p. 18). The reports cite criteria for sampling but fail to engage with how sampling may have affected findings, and though the researchers claim that their methods led to insight they do not explore how the methods worked in a particular context, nor how they knew what was “insightful.”

Other than in the reflection report from RCA Bangladesh (Lewis, 2012) there is no engagement evident in the reports I reviewed of the RCA team considering how their potentially ethnocentric perceptions, and their own experiences, backgrounds, relationships and preferences in the field, may have affected their hosts or their findings. This kind of reflexivity is important for immersion-based research, as it works to mitigate the dual risks of conducting unethical research that harms participants, and of obtaining inaccurate results due to unaccountable subjectivity.

Making Recommendations

RCA was not originally intended to lead directly to recommendations for development (Lewis, 2012; Pain, Nycander and Islam, 2014). Unfortunately, over the course of the first RCA, the research team were pressured to include a ‘recommendations’ section in their reports, and though they resisted this pressure, they did eventually comply (Pain, Nycander and Islam, 2014). Perhaps the weakest part of the reports are the resulting “recommendations” or “implications” sections. The authors do attempt to frame these as “reflections” rather than “recommendations” but still find themselves in the position of translating the RCA findings, which operate within one knowledge framework into policy
recommendations, which operate in another. In doing so they end up drawing conclusions that they are not qualified to draw. As Pain, Nycander and Islam (2014, p. 23) argue, “Case study evidence that the RC was working with does not lend itself to generalisable recommendations and seeking recommendations compounded the danger of speaking beyond the evidence, thus lacking credibility.”

Making recommendations when you are not qualified to do so has ethical implications: the report frames the authors as experts who can represent indigenous “realities,” and advise policy makers accordingly. If recommendations are acted on, this could have significant implications for people’s lives. RCA findings should be presented as limited, though able to provide considerable insight and triangulation when interpreted within a wider evidence-base. Recommendations on the basis of RCA findings – unless they are immediately apparent from the evidence collected – should be made by people who are experienced in development, knowledgeable about the context, and perhaps most importantly skilled at translating between different forms of knowledge, committed to doing so thoughtfully and ethically, and able to draw on a range of sources.

Conclusions Regarding Ethics

Although RCA draws to an extent on established qualitative research principles, it has failed to engage adequately with the complexities of conducting ethical qualitative field research. The industry has also failed to hold RCA accountable in ethical terms. This may be because RCA has positioned itself as an inherently ethical approach in comparison to non-immersive techniques which are more commonly used in development. However, as Arvidson (2013, pp. 291–292) writes:

\[ \text{The future success of RCA and similar approaches cannot rely on rhetorical presentations that hold them as ethically right, framed as responses to what is seen as previously flawed evaluation techniques, policy makers with a preference for quantifiable data or research that favours objective reporting as opposed to analysis based on empathy and immersion. This implicit comparison inadvertently leads to dilemmas and methodological ambiguities being brushed aside and as a consequence, the meaning and value of the findings cannot be fully understood.} \]

A CASE STUDY: EVALUATING THE RESULTS OF RCA PAPUA

One of the RCA studies (Reality Check Approach, 2015a) was done on education in remote parts of Papua and West Papua, in Indonesia. The aims of the study were to explore the aspirations of people living in poverty in Papua and their perspectives on the value of education, to find out what actual education service provision there is and what people think they are getting from school, to investigate the gaps between the differing perspectives (schools, community-based education etc), and to explore the challenges in education service provision and uptake from multiple perspectives. By coincidence, I have a PhD in education in Papua, based on eighteen months of ethnographic research in a remote part of the Papuan highlands which had very similar research aims. The RCA report, which is available online,\(^7\) gave me the opportunity to use my experience and expertise to evaluate the rigour, ethics and practicalities of a particular RCA study and the impact this had on the study’s findings.

Rigour

The issues raised above, of a lack of background research, a lack of focus, an over-reliance on listening instead of triangulating with mixed methods, a lack of transparency about how (and whether) primary data was recorded and a lack of opportunity for iteration held true in the Papua study.

As with other RCAs, the Papua study was undertaken through a four-day immersion, within which researchers used participant observation, supplemented with a small number of other methods. This was the first study (though the team hoped it would become longitudinal), so the findings are based on one immersion in 17 host households, from 14 villages in 5 districts. For this one immersion, the researchers were given 33 broad “areas of conversation” (Reality Check Approach, 2015a, p. 58).

The team primarily used purposive sampling to choose their field sites. The study distinguished between villages in Papua and those in West Papua, which is a politically judicious way of framing the study. However, these provincial boundaries are arbitrary, defined by the Indonesian government, and change frequently. From an indigenous perspective, there is much more difference between highlands and lowlands than there is between provinces, but none of the study sites were in the highlands. This is a design flaw which could easily have been rectified by appropriate background research. Another issue, which is acknowledged in the report (p. 18) has to do with seasonality. The research about schooling was conducted during a period which affected the results (end of school term, rainy season) with apparently no background planning to accommodate this. The analysis does not take account of the way seasonality might have affected findings.

The team collected a lot of data but the approach to data collection is sometimes dubious. For example, as the report rightly points out, what people say they do is different to what they actually do (p. 44, referencing the hours schools actually open). One of the benefits of the immersion method is the opportunity it presents to observe what people actually do. However, on p. 40 the report presents data on ratios of teachers to students “based on opportunistic conversations with teachers or principals and in many cases triangulated with students...” The ratios they present seem optimistic to me, which is unsurprising given that it is based on reported data which was only sometimes triangulated, and even then only through reports from another source. Such data is best collected through observation, and why the team did not resort to an alternative method to collect this data is unclear. Although the report says the team supplemented immersion and listening with other methods, data from these methods were not reported except in annexes where demographic data on host households is included, presumably garnered from an informal survey and observation, though the information is not attributed. Data from the pile sorting method is not reported at all, and an explanation for this absence is not given in the report.

Rigour is also lacking in the analysis. The report does at any point not give key conceptual terms (such as “getting on” which is frequently cited as a reason for speaking Indonesian and even attending school) in the language they were spoken in, instead translating them and thus imposing an etic interpretation and set of connotations on them. More seriously, the report does not use ethnicity as an analytical lens in its presentation of findings, despite how important cultural differences (particularly between western Indonesians and indigenous Papuans) are to understanding education in Papua. The report fails to even mention the ethnicity of the teachers and parents that findings are attributed to.

The report does improve considerably on the Bangladeshi reports in attributing quotes and findings, though it still generalises more than is necessary for anonymity. For example, in several places, the report puts phrases in quotation marks and then attributes them to “students,” leaving the reader...
asking, “How many students? Did anyone actually say this ‘quote’? Is it an amalgamation? Did gender affect this perspective?” On p. 28 a quote is attributed to “the source” with no indication of the source’s position relative to education systems (is he or she a parent, teacher, student, government official?). Such details are critical to forming an evidence base that makes interpretation of the report’s findings credible, meaningful and applicable. Without them, there is no way of knowing whether a particular quotation or perspective is an outlier, or how to interpret its implications.

Ethics

The concerns I have with the ethics of RCA reports were borne out in RCA Papua. For example, host households were chosen by researchers “in situ through conversations with villager in order to identify poorer families...” (Reality Check Approach, 2015a, p. 56). This raises issues of both consent and power – the researchers chose the villager on account of them being perceived as poor but did not mention whether or how households had the opportunity to say no to hosting researchers. Consent is only explicitly mentioned twice in the report, both times in relation to taking photographs, and never in relation to participation.

Another issue is that some of the RCA research team for this project were Indonesian. Given the politics of Papua and West Papua, especially the tensions and perceived injustices that exist between many indigenous Papuans and the Indonesian government, the ethnic identity of the researchers will have had a significant impact on the findings and may even explain some of the inaccuracies cited above. However, there was no reflection on this dynamic in the report. Similarly, the report states that “local activism” played a part in location selection but does not discuss how site selection may have affected findings. Nonetheless, the report does not refrain from making multiple generalised claims about so-called “tribal affiliation.” These are just three examples among many of how RCA Papua failed to engage effectively with issues of informed consent, representation and reflexivity.

Results

Overall, whilst the team did not answer many of the questions listed as research aims, I was impressed with how much the research team were able to find out in a short space of time. Many of their insights rang true to me, particularly in the focus area of education, where they were able to provide a reasonable summary of Papuans’ ambitions with respect to schooling, understanding (or lack thereof) of how schooling translates into benefits, and overview of the problems facing the school system in rural areas.

I was particularly impressed by the team’s “magic box” insight – which is that many parents do not understand what is supposed to happen in school and expect that graduation will automatically result as a consequence of attendance. Most research into education in Papua and West Papua misses this critical dimension of indigenous families’ understanding of schooling, and the RCA researchers’ ability to discern it in less than a week is an endorsement of their skills, their training, the method, or – most likely - a combination of the three. Other valid findings include the RCA’s findings about what parents value with respect to schooling and what they hope to get out of it, the concerns parents and teachers have about the students, and some of the findings on family organisation and child rearing. The results of this report demonstrate the power of immersion as a technique. Undoubtedly, the researchers found out things they could not have found out through interviews, focus groups or questionnaires.

Despite these strengths, some of the other findings highlight the risks inherent in RCA. As an experienced ethnographer of education in Papua, some of the findings in the report seem to me to be outright inaccurate. Other findings, whilst broadly accurate, are superficial and when presented
without meaningful interpretation, encourage ethnocentric assumptions. Some of the report’s findings even contradict each other. Below I give a few examples of each of these types of errors.

**Findings which are unlikely to be accurate**

The report contains numerous examples of findings which I am highly sceptical about. This does not surprise me, given the short period of time researchers spent in the villages, but it is concerning that the report presents such results as fact. A few examples suffice:

- One of the report’s findings is that high Government investment in the villages has made villagers “become lazy” (p. 7). This is a common – and high pejorative – misapplication of the concepts of work and diligence in a cross-cultural context. I did quantitative, randomised study of adults’ time use in one village in the highlands to investigate this common perception of Papuans, and I found that both men and women spent just over twelve hours of the thirteen available daylight hours in productive activities (Shah, 2016, p. 276). Flexibility, autonomy, the fact that many productive activities are embedded in social relations, and a lack of institutionalisation frequently lead non-Papuans to interpret work activities inaccurately and I suspect this was also the case in this study. Even if Papuans themselves referred to villagers as “lazy” (something they have learned to do from outsiders) it does not make it an accurate representation.

- One of the more surprising claims the report makes is that “tribal interests are declining” (p. 8) and that in one of the villages, there is “little sense of tribal affiliation” (p. 21). This is unlikely. More likely is that these interests and affiliations are being expressed in ways that the researchers did not recognise. In fact, the report identifies a desire to use education to access PNS (civil service) roles, redress power imbalances and negotiate rights – this *is* an expression of so-called “tribal” interests. This is related to another point the report makes about people linking their own cultures and languages only to ‘ceremonial’ use and the need to continue to ‘feel connected with the ancestors’ (p. 24). This is profoundly misleading, firstly because, as I noted above, there are many non-ceremonial ways that people are expressing their culture and using their languages, and secondly because appeasing ancestor spirits is not a marginal interest. It is a critically important and integral part of life to many, if not most, Papuans.

- The report claims that “Differences between ethnic Papuans and incomers are viewed more in terms of livelihoods and economic status than culture, religion and appearance. Little or no prejudice or tensions between ethnic groups were apparent in study villages themselves although outsiders often indicated prejudice” (p. 6). This is a bold claim about the very complex relationships between indigenous Papuans and the incomers which have spanned decades of colonisation and conflict. Culture, religion and appearance generally do play a part in Papuans’ and non-Papuans’ perceptions of one another and invisible tensions often simmer under the surface. It would be remarkable if the RCA villages were an exception.

- The report claims that “formal marriage is rare” (p. 7). I suspect that, in fact, formal marriage was common but not institutionalised legally or religiously and thus did not get categorised as formal marriage.

There are many similar inaccuracies in the report.

**Superficial Findings**

Some of the report findings are technically accurate but show a superficial degree of understanding which leads to inaccurate interpretations. This is important because superficial findings can lead to wrong conclusions about the root cause of development “problems.”
The report talks about the goal of education being to negotiate rights, redress injustices and access good jobs, particularly in the civil service jobs and other positions of power (see p. 7). This is accurate, but the report authors show little understanding of the egalitarian values through which Papuan people frame their understanding of education and their expectations of the future.

Similarly, although getting a PNS (civil service) job is one of the main goals of education, the report shows little understanding of how people get these roles and what they represent to Papuan communities.

The report cites numerous issues with teaching and schooling but is unable to explain why these occur, and why there is so little accountability to prevent them occurring.

Gifts given to incomers were explained as follows: “These gifts are said to be in recognition of the superior status and service provided by the incomers” (p. 23). Taking such explanations at face value shows a lack of understanding of the cultural context of reciprocity; a simplified but more accurate explanation would be that gifts are not given because of status per se, but because of the expectation of reciprocity from these people who seemingly have access to greater power and wealth than the gift-giver.

The report acknowledges that many villagers have phones even though they do not have phone reception. It says, “This is explained by comments such as ‘we’ll use it when we’re in a more connected spot’ or ‘at least we’ll already have one when a new (BTS/transceiver) tower is built near our village.’” But sometime the mobiles are simply used to listen to music (e.g. where there is no reception)” (p. 29). This is another example of researchers taking explanations at face value and failing to understand deeper realities. Mobile phones in Papua are indeed are used for more than just connectivity (for music, yes, but also commonly for pornography and other forms of data sharing, including for sharing sensitive data regarding the independence movement in Papua). But they also play a symbolic role, making them valuable even without any utilitarian value.

**Contradictory Findings**

Some of the findings reported appear to contradict each other. The report makes no attempt to reconcile or interpret these. In each example below, I find the former finding unlikely whereas the latter finding resonates. For instance:

- The report claims that parents cannot “envisage a role of criticising teachers” (p. 50) and also claims that teachers are pressured by parents, quoting one teacher who said it is “challenging to teach the indigenous children who find it difficult to absorb lessons, but parents would come with machetes if I tried to discipline the kids and made them repeat class” (p 36). In fact, parents can envisage a role of criticising teachers, as this quote demonstrates.

- The report claims that religious identity is not strong, despite the existence of places of worship, but one villager is cited as saying, “I would rather not eat than not contribute to the new church” (p. 33). In fact, how religious identity is experienced in Papua is diverse and cannot be simplified as “not strong.” Religion plays a complex, but important, role in many Papuans’ lives.

- The report argues that young people prefer speaking Indonesian than their mother tongues but also talks about low fluency in Indonesian as a reason for problems in school, citing a teacher who says the students are “hard to teach due to their low fluency in Bahasa Indonesia” (pg. 45).
Papua RCA Conclusions

The RCA Papua team articulated well the “magic box” perception that some parents have of schooling. They explain that parents want a better education for their children but do not really know what this means. They argue that “their expectations can be likened to a ‘magic box’ where children merely have to turn up (preferably regularly), progress from year to year, and then graduate with a certificate at the end” (p. 35). Part of this perception is based on the idea that teachers know best about what should happen in schools, and that parents have no knowledge or experience of “what constitutes quality education” (p. 36). Their conclusion is that “The “magic box” expectation that a good school will result in graduation and a good job is not always borne out in reality” (p. 48) and that “The ‘magic box’ of school needs to be demystified...” (p. 10).

The RCA Papua team’s “magic box” argument provides a good analogy for RCA itself. Unfortunately, although many people in development recognise the need for better qualitative research, they do not really know what this means, seeming to think that if researchers simply turn up (preferably regularly...from year to year...) they will be able to produce recommendations at the end of the process. Part of the magic box perception, as with schooling, is that the RCA team know best. It is in RCA’s interests to perpetuate the myth that what goes on in qualitative research is mystical, but in fact it has been practiced for a century in many disciplines, with plenty of opportunity for researchers to learn from others’ mistakes and recommendations. Unfortunately, the expectation that good methodology will result in good practices and good recommendations is not always borne out in reality; it is time for the ‘magic box’ of RCA to be demystified.

AN ALTERNATIVE MODEL?

Given Springfield’s critique of the political economy of development, calling for a “new” (or rebranded) model of rapid immersion for development seems somewhat hypocritical. We find ourselves in the difficult position of wanting, on the one hand, to support the RCA team in their attempts to introduce the insights borne of qualitative data collection through immersion into development, whilst on the other hand, remaining committed to being a voice of caution about the perils of presenting any method as the latest or greatest development “magic box,” particularly when we have serious concerns about both the rigour, ethics and application of RCA.

As with any attempt to balance cost, time and rigour, some compromises are necessary and RCA, properly implemented, has much to offer development. Unfortunately, it is not always implemented well, and there are too few checks in place for what we would consider to be some of the most important learning to emerge from several decades of work on short-term qualitative research. The table in Appendix 2 outlines some of the specific strengths of RCA that we would like to see incorporated into immersion methods in development, whilst also outlining how future qualitative field research in development should move beyond RCA.

We are not saying that no one should carry out RCA studies, but that anyone who uses immersion, listening and ethnography-like methods should be held to a higher standard of rigour, ethics, and contextualisation in research than we have seen demonstrated and required within RCA so far. This is the case whether research is done under the banner of RCA or independently.

What would this look like? What follow is a suggestion for what it might look like in practice to apply these recommendations to immersion-based research in development, retaining the strengths of RCA whilst responding to the critiques we have made. The model we are proposing, whilst similar in many ways to RCA (as it has been practiced thus far), is different in five important ways:
1. It relies more heavily on existing knowledge, both in terms of how to do research and in terms of the research itself
2. It is more focused
3. It relies on a mixed-methods strategy
4. It demands careful documentation of primary data; conclusions may only be drawn when there is a robust evidence base for them
5. It is longer than most RCA immersions, allowing for more iteration

In addition, researchers who use this model should be held accountable to the following principles:

6. Researchers should be transparent about limitations and explicit about what the methods they use can and cannot achieve. These methods should only be used for questions which can appropriately be answered with short-term qualitative research.
7. Researchers should be reflective on how they, their approach, and their sampling could or did affect findings, and should mitigate against these biases wherever possible. They should also be cautious about the presumption of representing other people’s experiences, particularly in etic terms.
8. Researchers should not be allowed to proceed with data collection without rigorous attention to contextualised ethical considerations, including an engagement with how the research itself perpetuates unjust power dynamics.
9. Researchers should be flexible in their application of the model and adapt it to the local context.

To respond adequately to the critiques made above, we have recommended that the immersion phase is longer than 4-5 nights, and is undertaken in two stages. The first of these stages is similar to RCA as it currently stands – an immersion period during which time researchers play a relatively passive role and stay as open-minded as possible about what factors might be influencing the topic they are focused on, only moving towards more directed conversations towards the end of the week. Having completed this first stage, the researchers are then given an opportunity to reflect, discuss, and begin analysis, before re-entering the field for another 4-5 nights of immersion. During this second stage, researchers use more structured methods alongside participant observation to test their hypotheses so far, invite research participants to give their own interpretations, and triangulate (or refute) their emerging findings.

There are numerous benefits to undertaking immersion research in two stages. The act of “returning” to a field site can have a powerful psychological effect on both researcher and researched by generating familiarity. It can minimise the impact of culture shock and overwhelm on researchers’ data collection and interpretation, and it can also build trust among research participants who observe that the researchers do what they say they will – namely, come back again. Carrying out data collection in two stages reduces the impact of reactivity, as people are both less committed to and less able to keep up a “front” for two weeks than for four or five days (though two weeks by no means eliminates the risk of studying façades rather than a norms).

Doing immersion in two stages allows for an iterative approach to data collection which a 4 night immersion cannot accommodate. This is important; as Handwerker (2001, p. 27) argues, “iterative data collection distinguishes good ethnography from bad.” By reflecting and debriefing with colleagues, researchers can identify important areas for following up, and strategize about the best way to use a short period of time to reach their research goals. A particularly important benefit of this is that it gives researchers the opportunity to check their understanding with their hosts in the field.
before the close of the data collection period. It increases the chance that important findings will have a strong, triangulated evidence base underpinning them.

However, if researchers are unable to spend more than a week on primary data collection, they should not attempt to undertake the research in two stages. They should, instead, be realistic about what they can achieve in such a short space of time. They should be ruthless with their focus and invest heavily in background research. They should also use a mixed methods approach to triangulate and should be very careful in their outputs about what they claim to have found out. As always, when seeking to understand other people’s lives, researchers will do well to abide by the principle of erring on the side of humility.

This approach can be used longitudinally. For some research questions, a longitudinal approach would be an appropriate application of the model.

Note, the order of the ‘stages’ proposed below may be adapted according to the needs of the project. Indeed, flexibility should be applied in all aspects of study design. The best place for rigidity in qualitative research is in the requirement that researchers ensure that welfare of all the people involved in the research is paramount.

**Stage 1: Commissioning**

- Establish **purpose** of undertaking Rapid Ethnography in relation to project/s
- Agree **research focus/topic** (e.g. land security/ownership)
- Agree **scale** (how many locations, how many researchers)
- Build **research team**
  - Researchers with prior training and experience in immersion, and in mixed-method social science research
  - Researchers with a commitment to and understanding of undertaking ethical, participatory research
  - Recruit as many team members who are already familiar with local language/s and culture/s as possible; include indigenous team members if possible
  - Team should be multi-disciplinary if possible (for the sake of triangulation, different insights, different biases, strength for design and analysis phases)

**Stage 2: Background and Preparatory Research**

- **Background/secondary research** (including talking to those who have done long-term research in the area, if possible). Goal here is to establish possible variables to focus on in research, as well as to inform design in relation to ethics, methods, etiquette, building rapport etc.

- In-depth **key informant interview/s** to establish possible variables to focus on (this could be combined with finding appropriate gatekeeper and interviewing them, as below – depending on project and context)

- Find **appropriate gatekeepers** and/or **country experts** who can advise on and facilitate:
  - gaining access
  - locations and households to stay with
Stage 3: Immersion Study Design

- Agree focused research question/s – no more than two
- Agree variables to focus on – these should be specific and number no more than five. Some variables, such as regionality, may be embedded into the research design.
- Consider ethics
  - Informed consent (ongoing, not one-time), including:
    - purpose
    - what will be involved
    - specific consent to use recording devices (notes, audio, video, photo)
    - data management
    - what will be done with results
    - what are the participants’ terms?
  - Anonymity
  - Approvals required?
  - Risks to participants
  - Risks to researchers
  - Intrusion; will there be any compensation?
  - Culturally appropriate behaviour – include in briefing?
  - Positionality of researcher and power dynamics in research (non-exploitative)
- Undertake pilot
- Adapt the basic research model to the local context as required
- Training/briefing of team members (extent of training depends on prior experience of researchers)
- Sampling/finalise locations
  - Be careful about whether you are sampling appropriately from the wider population you are interested in
  - If background research suggests that seasonality is important to the topic, plan the immersion stages accordingly
  - If necessary, avoid giving exact dates to residents to lower reactivity, but do given detailed description of purpose of research in advance of researchers showing up

Stage 4: Immersion phase 1

This 4-5 day stage is very similar to a well-implemented RCA and consists of immersion by staying with a household in one of the chosen locations.
• **Methods** for the first week are flexible, open-ended and participant-led. They may include:
  o Listening to the conversations going on around you
  o Careful attention to people’s vocabulary, language, anecdotes, emotions and who they talk to when mentioning or discussing the topic of focus
  o Taking detailed observations (applying explicit awareness, paying attention)
  o Hanging out and getting to know people
  o Shadow method
  o Guided/transect walks
  o Loose, open-ended conversation (not interviewing, but may include sharing what we are interested in, in broad terms, and seeing what conversations arise as a result)
  o Narratives (tell me a story about a time when..., do you know any stories about [topic]...)
  o Participation in everyday tasks, attempting to learn skills

• **Question and variables** should be held lightly
  o In this stage, the research questions and variables should take a backseat to the potential for unexpected insights. It may be that researchers find that the questions the project is asking are not even the right questions.
  o Towards the end of week 1, encourage hosts to reflect on their experiences and situations, and to articulate their problems in their own terms

• **Record primary data**
  o The decision on whether to take notes in front of participants will be left to the researchers. As with RCA, the primary purpose at this point is relational and immersive, so researchers may choose not to take notes during conversations and experiences
  o However, unlike with RCA, researchers are expected to record their observations, conversations and experiences in fieldnotes at least once a day and should allow a minimum of an hour a day for this.
  o Researchers should record the terminology used, writing down or recording direct quotes where possible
  o Notes should include detailed observations, especially around the critical topic/s, but on as a broad a spectrum of observations as possible (the researcher is attempting to take a holistic approach and does not yet know what is and is not relevant).

• **Reflect**: the researcher should also give some time at the beginning or end of every day to writing more personal reflections in a diary.

### Stage 5: Iterate

• **Reflect**: one day to re-read fieldnotes, draw out patterns, begin to interpret, and highlight areas to follow up on

• **Debrief**: one day with team
  o feedback on results so far
  o facilitator ask questions, challenge findings etc
  o **Iterate**: are new ideas, sources, questions and focuses emerging?
    ▪ agree areas of follow up (these may differ by location)
    ▪ identify where each team wants to get by the end of Stage 6
    ▪ discuss the most appropriate methods for getting there
  o Plan mixed methods strategy for Stage 6
Stage 6: Immersion phase 2

- The purpose of week 2 is to **test theory and impressions** developed in week 1 and to **triangulate**
  - Ask people to comment on and interpret your observations and theories
  - Gather structured data to support or disprove the findings so far
- **Methods** for the second week are likely to be more structured and more focused on the specific research questions and variables agreed at the beginning. Immersion and participant observation are still central, but additional methods such as ranking, free listing, life histories, interviews etc. may also be used. Methods toolkits are available to inform the design of this stage.

Stage 7: Analysis

- Analysis should be done on a researcher-by-research basis first (2-3 days following immersion week 2) followed by a structured team debriefing
- As with RCA, structured team debriefing led by a facilitator who challenges the evidence base for assumptions and conclusions, and who leads the group into identifying patterns

Stage 8: Dissemination

- **Report**
  - Results should be summarised in **brief** reports written in accessible language
  - Purpose of report is to inform action, but the reports will not include recommendations per se unless they are clearly evidence-based
- Results will also be disseminated to the research participants (the method will vary according to context)

CONCLUSION

Development needs to get better at understanding the people it’s trying to benefit. Pragmatically, the temporal and financial pressures that development actors face in doing so means that there is a limited amount of time and money that can be used for this purpose, particularly considering all of the other information needed to make judicious intervention decisions.

RCA has laudably achieved some traction amongst donors in pursuit of this goal. However, in order to do so the approach has prioritised marketing a codified approach over rigour and ethics. This presents an unacceptable risk for donors, practitioners and participants as well as a missed opportunity to effectively address some of the issues that result from a failure to effectively understand target groups, behaviours, and mechanisms for change.

What is proposed here, while not an off-the-shelf codification, is an iteration and selective application of decades of thinking and practice in social science and development. What this proposal is, is a quality-driven application of existing knowledge which should be embraced and adapted by development programmes to improve their effectiveness. What it is not is a commissionable, codified, decontextualised approach that can be used in bids and for internal sales purposes. Our proposal aims to address some of the shortcomings of RCA in its approach to rigour and ethics whilst retaining its optimism about the value of ethnographic methods for development.
APPENDIX 1: ISSUES OF RIGOUR IN SHORT-TERM RESEARCH

The following list of questions expands on the issues of representativeness, accuracy and validity which are widely recognised as problematic in short-term qualitative research.

Representativeness:

- Sampling: How do you know the extent to which the people you live with/focus on are representative – or even indicative – of the wider population you are interested in (Taplin, Scheld and Low, 2002; Hammersley, 2006)?
- Generalisability: how do you know that what you observe is representative of what usually happens (Hammersley, 2006)?
- Seasonality: How do you know that what you observe over a short time period is not just one part of a cyclical or seasonal pattern or process?
- Change: How can you assess where your observations fit in longer-term trends, and how quickly change is happening (Hammersley, 2006)?

Accuracy:

- Iteration: How do you choose appropriate variables and ask good questions when you have little time to iterate based on your findings?
- Relevance: How can you avoid unknowingly excluding the most relevant data due to a lack of systemic understanding (Muecke, 1994; Millen, 2000)?
- Depth: How you avoid superficial descriptions instead of ethnographic insights (Muecke, 1994)? “The depth of insight into individual and group behaviour is often a function of the depth of interaction or participation” (Millen, 2000, p. 282)
- Triangulation: How do you know your findings are accurate when you have so little time to triangulate and test? (Muecke, 1994; Harris, Jerome and Fawcett, 1997)?

Validity:

- Ethnocentrism: How can you avoid interpreting the data you gather ethnocentrically (Cernea, 1992), or simply asking poor questions based on your ethnocentric assumptions (Bernard, 2011)?
- Culture-shock: How can you observe and listen well when your senses are overwhelmed and exhausted by new experiences (Bernard, 2011)?
- Reactivity: How, in short-term studies, can you mitigate the problem of reactivity? The longer a researcher lives with people, the more those people go back to their usual ways of behaving, and the less they are affected by the researcher’s presence (Bernard, 2011).
- Rapport: How can you expect individuals to trust you with sensitive topics when they barely know you (Bernard, 2011)?

---

8 “Many project appraisers, planners or supervisors used to patch a smattering of data and fugitive impressions, knitted together with their own ethnocentric assumptions credited as hard facts” (Cernea, 1992, online).
10 See also Raoul Naroll (1962, cited in Bernard, 2011) who found that anthropologists who stayed in field for at least a year were more likely to report on sensitive issues.
APPENDIX 2: RESPONDING TO RCA’S STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

Much of what RCA has advanced within development is valuable. The following table shows what we would recommend doing similarly to and different from RCA in any attempt to undertake rapid immersion research for development.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>With Respect To...</th>
<th>RCA Qualities to Incorporate...</th>
<th>Moving Beyond RCA as it is currently practiced...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Epistemological and Methodological Underpinnings | o phenomenon are social as well as biological and physical  
o holistic view is necessary and possible  
o ethnography, immersion and case study research as a valuable means to generate knowledge and understanding | o transparent about how knowledge is generated, leading to greater rigour, accountability and ultimately validity  
o up-front about limitations – explicit about the trade-offs of doing short-term research  
o learn from – and acknowledge – existing approaches whilst adapting study design to context as needed  
o beware proprietary approaches to well-established methodologies |
| Theoretical and Methodological Approach | o no pre-determined theoretical perspective – ethnographic evidence should take precedence over any ideologies or theories researchers take into the field  
o attempt to minimise researcher bias and ethnocentricism, including project lenses  
o focus on understanding, not judging or pushing agenda  
  ▪ non-directive data collection  
  ▪ data is as participant-driven as possible  
  ▪ suspend research judgement  
o commitment not to homogenise or look for consensus, or as RCA calls it, allow for “multiple realities”  
o inclusive and attentive to wider context, but focused primarily on one household  
o assumes people’s choices are rational; seeks to understand them in their own terms  
o open-ended, flexible, emergent, adapting in situ | o no claim to be “atheoretical” – draw on multiple theories or generate new ones to interpret data if needed, but also acknowledge that all interpretation is, to some extent, “theoretical,” and be explicit about that  
o iterative  
o increase rigour by relying more heavily on background research to inform study design  
o greater emphasis on triangulation in all aspects of study |
### Focus On...
- Experiential, researcher interacts in everyday life – closer to participant as observer than observer as participant
- Build trust, intrude as little as possible
- Attentive to innovation, local TOC, unintended consequences of development, and counter-intuitive insights
  - Interested in
    - Social dynamics, social dimension of a topic
    - ‘taken for granted’ everyday life
    - Wider context – how do larger issues impinge on the everyday (RCA calls this “cross-sectoral”)
    - What people do as well as what they say they do
    - How people interpret/make meaning of their own lives
- Greater degree of focus – fewer, better defined and more specific research questions than RCA

### Methods
- Make immersion central
- Data collection embedded in informality, reliance on trust, relationship and rapport
- Done by teams in multiple locations
- Locations spread out and researchers alone in villages, but three per area for triangulation purposes
- Open, participant-led approach for first week
- Purposive sample selection
- Not attempting to be representative through randomisation
- Make iteration central by planning it into research process
- Highly attentive to context, greater reliance on background research
- Less reliance on “informal, relaxed and insightful conversations” – how do you know what is insightful?
- Instead, use mixed methods approach for triangulation
- For participant observation: be explicit about the difference between strategic participant observation and “just hanging out” – well done PO requires intense observation, listening and memory work by skilled professionals
- Fieldnote-taking required, not discouraged
- Quotes must be written down in local language, word-for-word or recorded on video/audio
- Personal reflections/diary-notes encouraged
| Intention to Impact Development | • findings should inform relevance and effectiveness of development policy and practice  
• helps development professionals ask the right questions  
• seeking to understand “on the ground” perspectives of beneficiaries of development  
• serves a humanising function - able to appeal to policy makers in powerful and persuasive ways  
• expand type of available data for “evidence-based” policy  
• profoundly increase access, especially to more marginalised peoples  
• allows interpretation and triangulation of other data more meaningfully  
• able to track longitudinal change through repetitive use  
• potentially useful from diagnosis right through to evaluation | • recognise that whilst research should inform policy and practice, the translation of findings into recommendations is a particular skill  
• be wary of superficial recommendations, particularly when given by people who are not qualified to advise development policy  
• acknowledge the tensions between development practice, which needs to make scale-able interventions based on generalisations – and immersion-based qualitative research which seeks to avoid homogenising diverse perspectives |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Output | • accessible and engaging reports  
• willingness to challenge status quo  
• inclusion of images and graphs where relevant | • no conclusions without clear evidence-base  
• quotes attributed (anonymously, but clearly) |
| Research team | • training/briefing process similar to RCA  
• structured debriefing with team to aid analysis similar to RCA | • requirement that research is undertaken by experienced social researchers, and that anyone who does not speak language works with skilled translator |
| Ethics | | • more reflective on the nature of informed consent, more upfront about the nature of the research and its purpose  
• no claim to eliminate researcher bias – briefing will emphasise the importance of minimising bias, but will also emphasise reflexivity - explicit biases are more easily dealt with than hidden ones  
• more attentive to power dynamics, consider researcher positionality and reflect on nature of researcher-researched relationships, learn from participatory approaches |
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Pelto, G. H. et al. (2013) ‘The focused ethnographic study “assessing the behavioral and local market environment for improving the diets of infants and young children 6 to 23 months old” and its use in three countries’, Maternal & Child Nutrition, 9[51], pp. 35–46. Available at: http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1740-8709.2012.00451.x/abstract?systemMessage=Please+be+advised+that+we+experienced+an+unexpe+cted+issue+that+occurred+on+Saturday+and+on+Sunday+January+20th+and+on+21st+that+caused+the+site+to+be+down+for+an+extended.


