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Ethnography and rapid appraisal in doctoral research on poverty

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• Background

Written from the field, this article presents problems, progress and early observations from doctoral fieldwork on poverty and anti-poverty policy which combines ethnographic, Rapid Appraisal (RA) and other techniques. It discusses some of the practical and ethical dilemmas facing researchers aiming to use RA for doctoral fieldwork and offers some reflections on the basis of my own trial and error.

A central question in this article is methodological complementarity: Can ethnographic research on poverty offer policy-makers any policy-relevant information, which quicker, cheaper methods cannot? Additionally, it addresses whether it is practically feasible and ethically sound to conduct RA in the context of doctoral or other academic fieldwork, which tends to be extractive rather than participatory in nature.

The research problem

A problem in all policy formation is the 'perception gap' which tends to separate the viewpoints of those who make policy from those of people who are 'objects' of policy. In development policy, the perception gap is wide: the social structures of many countries permit only the élite to reach policy-making positions and guarantee great differences in life experiences between them and the poor majority. It is particularly problematic in the case of poverty reduction policy because policy-makers are government officers and the

'objects' are the poorest people in the population. The challenge for poverty research in the 1990s is to bring the realities of the poor into focus, so that they count to the socially distant policy-makers.

The methods

My doctoral fieldwork in a poor community in rural Colombia seeks to explore the 'perception gap', uncovering poor people's perspectives on their condition and to compare this 'bottom view' with the 'top view' embodied in policy responses. To explore methodological approaches for bridging the gap in policy-oriented research, my research spans all levels of the policy process. Different methods lend themselves to different research contacts and actors, so I am using a combination of research techniques (see Table 1). Of particular concern are gender and power dimensions of poverty, rarely perceived from the top level.

RA is a key tool for bringing local perceptions with the policy making arena (see *PLA Notes* 27). However, in the light of recent criticisms of 'extractive' and 'data-mining' use of RA techniques, I had doubts about using a method generally associated with participatory development planning for Ph.D. research which is essentially extractive in nature. The worry about creating false expectations which I could not fulfil, seemed as intractable as the related practical problem of accessing suitable communities when I had no development projects to offer in return.

Table 1. Levels of the policy process and corresponding research approaches

LEVEL	SCALE	RESEARCH APPROACH
TOP <i>macro</i>	GLOBAL	Literature search on poverty and poverty reduction policy
	NATIONAL	Secondary data-gathering - poverty studies, government documents and statistics, international NGO reports, 'grey literature' of international financial institutions, press articles, Formal interviews - national government staff of social safety-net programme, international aid agency staff, Colombian development researchers
MIDDLE <i>meso</i>	REGION	Secondary data gathering - poverty indicators for region and municipalities documentation on social safety-net programme in region literature on and results of municipal survey for identifying beneficiaries of government subsidies Municipal Development Plan, anthropological literature on region Semi-structured interviews - regional safety-net officers, municipal planners, mayor
BOTTOM <i>micro</i>	VILLAGE	ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH: Basic census to meet people and collect demographic and livelihood data Direct observation - community meetings, market, school, health, post etc. Participant observation - farming, in school, coffee harvest, etc. Life histories - of local people (male and female) Thematic semi-structured interviews - teachers on educational and social development status of population, health promoter on social development status of population, Community Action Committee members on their activities, traders on local economy and livelihoods, farmers (male and female) on agricultural year and livelihoods, school children (male and female) on their ambitions and expectations, agricultural wage labourers (male and female) on livelihoods, key informant couples on household economy Seasonal calendars and crop ranking with farmers. RAPID APPRAISAL: RA sessions in two nearby communities on theme of poverty/well-being, social mapping of community, well-being ranking of community members, generating local criteria for poverty assessment, analysis of difference, Chapati diagrams, identifying institutional and individual agents and linkages

Early observations

An ethnographic prelude has contributed substantially to the design and setting up of RA. Responding to my doubts about the practical feasibility of conducting RA as a lone Ph.D. researcher, several important insights gained so far have altered drastically the way I am undertaking RA. Although I have already completed much of the top-level research, it is my ethnographic work in the same area as the proposed RA sites which has offered these insights.

Table 2 summarises the realisations which have overturned some of my prior assumptions or plans, and the implications for designing

my RA sessions. It has taken five months of ethnographic work to find ways round these dilemmas.

I approached local NGOs and research bodies with an outline of my research. I hoped to collaborate with them by using RA in programme planning, rather than working alone and leaving little trace once I had taken my findings away. Far from presenting myself as experienced in RA, I aspired only to publicise the philosophy of the approach and raise some challenges to traditional, top-down, inflexible, burdensome research and planning methods, which seem to dominate in Colombian development circles.

The search for collaborators proved fruitless. No organisation seemed to use RA-type techniques regularly because of various time and work pressures. Neither were any able or interested enough to devote the necessary time or effort to trying out this new approach with me. Yet these very same work pressures made me feel that organisations could better focus their work by adopting RA methods.

Faced with the prospect of having to undertake RA alone, I identified strategic channels for

disseminating my findings in-country. For local NGOs, municipal planners and village committees, whose responsibility for local development planning and co-financing is increasing faster than their capacity to fulfil it, a brief, factual report seems appropriate. After extensive enquiries, I have discovered a regional NGOs network which channels information to and between such entities and is willing to disseminate such a report.

Table 2. Insights gained through ethnographic work and their implications for design of Rapid Appraisal sessions

Insights gained through ethnographic work	Implications for design of RA
Foreign researcher arriving in small community arouses even more stir and suspicion than I'd thought	Conduct RA in communities near my ethnographic site, where I'm known at least by sight and hearsay
Using local administration as a way in has strong political connotations, not necessarily desirable	Use health promoter instead. Not liked by all, but an acceptable contact in everyone's eyes
Some insight into local knowledge and experiences enables me to explain my presence in a way people understand and can relate to and also to appreciate significance of locals of giving full explanation	Give full, tangible and honest explanations when inviting participants and again when commencing RA sessions, encouraging people to ask any questions they have
'Community Space' in which to announce my intentions, request collaboration and invite participation doesn't exist as such - village committee meets frequently and is unrepresentative	Conduct house-to-house visits in RA communities to explain and invite people individually
Some insight into gender relations, roles and interests locally; and main forms of gender bias	Programme visits in evenings or weekends and RA sessions at weekends, to be acceptable to women and men. Extend invitation clearly to both sexes avoiding alienating either, by stressing the role of both. In process and content of RA sessions, look out for clues for gender biases to be identified
Local evangelical church members constitute clique, more organised and vocal than most	Consciously counter their tendency to dominate in attendance and participation in RA sessions
Verbal, written and diagrammatic feedback after RA sessions isn't a substantial or interesting enough incentive to make people attend them	Provide lunch for all, or give each participant a chicken to raise, or a local daily wage, as well as feedback

Reflections on methodological complementarity

Despite its name, I believe that RA for research or development purposes cannot be done rapidly and well in totally unfamiliar territory. I feel I should advise doctoral fieldworkers: don't even think you can walk in alone and conduct RA. Without familiarity with the local context, it is likely to be ill-designed, ethically unsound and will generate local mistrust and spurious findings.

The ideal antidote to such practical and ethical blunders is a sustained presence in the area before commencing RA. If this familiarisation period is unfeasible, as the term RA suggests, other people's familiarity is a second-best option. This may be accessible through development practitioners in the area, published ethnographies available in home or host countries, or through local universities' anthropology or sociology theses. Attempts to enlist local collaborators may fail because their priorities differ from visiting researchers', but it is worth exploring the possibility and devising a good research dissemination strategy in any case.

Mid-way through my research, I am still in the process of addressing my central question: is the additional information generated through time consuming ethnographic research relevant to poverty reduction policy? Several insights gained in my ethnographic work would surely have surfaced in RA. Others would not.

Recent confidences from key informants suggest that more sensitive aspects of gender subordination and political oppression - key factors in the poverty of most people here - do not surface readily or publicly. These confidences reveal women's and children's vulnerability to beating, rape or material deprivation by male partners or relatives; and a poor community's total defencelessness in the face of human rights abuses by guerrilla and state forces. Although representing a small proportion of all I have learnt, shared confidences are highly relevant to policy formation. To succeed, poverty reduction programmes must confront such realities.

In summary, after five months of ethnographic research, I believe I have a better basis for conducting methodologically and ethically sound RA than I had at the outset. This is partly because the ethnographic work has directly oriented the design of the RA and partly because being present for a protracted period has allowed me to explore ways to make the research work. The questions being answered in the remaining months of fieldwork are whether the added complications implicit in complementing policy-oriented poverty research with ethnography are justified, and if so, how to make this proposition acceptable to policy-makers.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This doctoral research was funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

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