

# Rapid ethnographies in healthcare: Challenges and ways forward

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Review article

# Rapid qualitative research methods during complex health emergencies: A systematic review of the literature

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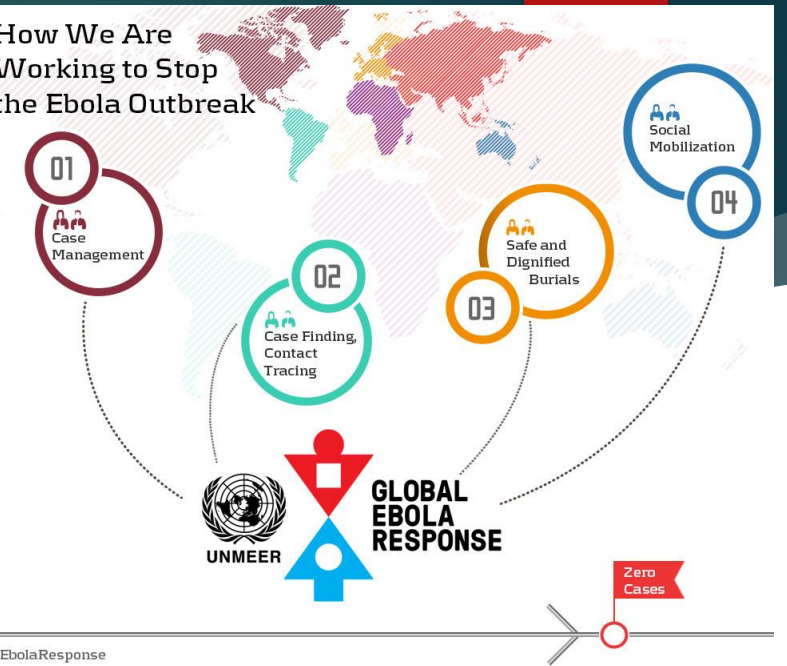
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## How We Are Working to Stop the Ebola Outbreak



#EbolaResponse

## Ebola Response Anthropology Platform

Anthropologists providing advice on how to engage with crucial socio-cultural and political dimensions of the Ebola outbreak and build locally-appropriate interventions. This site closed to new material at the end of the West African Ebola epidemic but much of the material it carries is of general relevance to new Ebola epidemics including the current outbreak in DRC.

Ask a Rapid Response question ?

Search

Search

Identifying and Diagnosing Cases ▾

Management of the Dead ▾

Caring for the Sick ▾

Clinical Trials/Research ▾

Preparedness ▾

Communication and Engagement ▾

## Rapid Response

The Rapid Response service answers queries on the Ebola outbreak with the aim to enhance current efforts to contain the epidemic by providing clear, practical, real-time advice about how to engage with crucial socio-cultural and political dimensions of the outbreak and build locally-appropriate interventions. This service aims to follow up on queries within 72 hours of the initial request. Please email us at [ebola@ids.ac.uk](mailto:ebola@ids.ac.uk)

### RELATED LINKS

- [Cultural Anthropology: Ebola in Perspective](#)
- [Somatosphere: Ebola Fieldnotes](#)
- [Ebola Deeply](#)

### TAGS

“Must one spend a year in the field collecting ethnographic data in order to make useful recommendations for a health program?”

(Scrimshaw and Hurtado 1988)

# Timely research

“The timeliness of information is no less critical than its accuracy.”

(McNall and Foster 2007)

- ▶ Timeliness = utility of research and evaluation findings
- ▶ Timeliness = ability to influence decision-making
- ▶ In some cases, timeliness = speed so findings can be shared at specific time points



# Rapid research

Table 2  
Core Elements of Rapid Research and Evaluation Methods

Methods
Mixed methods:
Quantitative approaches typically include:
Quantitative surveys
Review of existing data sets
Qualitative approaches usually include:
Key informant interviews
Focus groups
Naturalistic observations
Record reviews
Mapping of areas affected by problem
Process
Rapid: Evaluation, assessment, or appraisal lasts from a few weeks to a few months
Participatory: Representatives of local populations and institutions are involved in the planning and implementation of the research
Team based: Members of the research team work collaboratively on all aspects of the research process, from planning and data collection to the interpretation of findings and presentation of results.
Iterative: Data are analyzed while they are being collected, and preliminary findings are used to guide decisions about additional data collection. This process continues until theoretical saturation is achieved.

McNall and Foster (2007)

Recognition that rapid research approaches **will not be suitable for all studies.**

Appraisals and ethnographies	Evaluations
Participatory rural appraisal (PRA)	Real-time evaluations (RTEs)
Rapid ethnographic assessment (REA)	Rapid feedback evaluations (RFEs)
Rapid appraisal	Rapid evaluation methods
Rapid assessment procedures (RAP)	
RARE model	
Rapid rural appraisal (RRA)	
Short-term ethnographies	
Quick ethnographies	
Focused ethnographies	

# Rapid ethnographies in healthcare

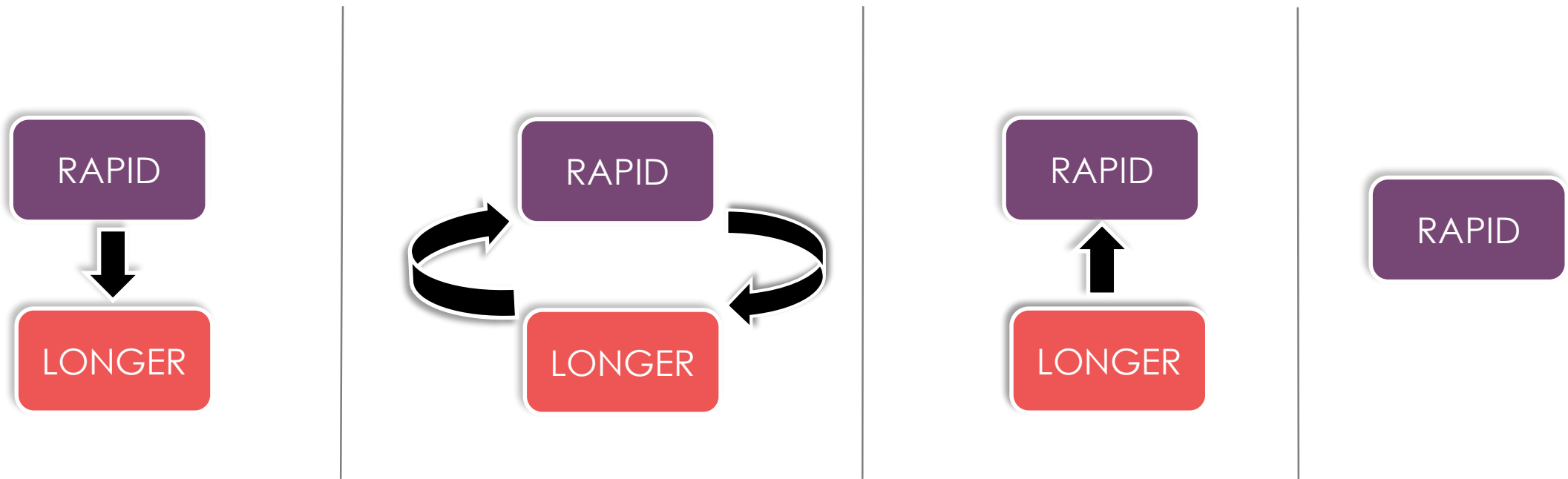
Table 2 Typology of rapid ethnographies		
Term used	Articles using the term	Definitions used in the articles
Rapid ethnography (RE)	9 11 26 28 29 32 37 40 41 43	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Develop a reasonable understanding, in a compressed period of time, of the people and contexts being studied.<sup>26</sup></li> <li>▶ Uses three main sources of data: participant observation, semistructured interviews and document analysis<sup>37</sup></li> <li>▶ Includes brief observations at multiple field sites, in-depth interviews with key informants, engagement with social theory and analysis of archival materials and quantitative data<sup>9</sup></li> <li>▶ Same definition as RAP (see below)<sup>11</sup></li> <li>▶ Ethnographic methods for quickly gathering social, cultural and behavioural information on health-related problems<sup>41</sup></li> </ul>
Quick ethnography (QE)	8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Means for collecting and analysing high-quality ethnographic data in a short time frame (90 days or less)<sup>8</sup></li> <li>▶ Gather rich data without extended period of time in the field.<sup>8</sup></li> <li>▶ Short-duration fieldwork balanced by data collection and analysis<sup>60</sup></li> </ul>
Focused ethnography (FE)*	60	
Rapid ethnographic assessment (REA)	30 31 33 35 39 50 61	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ A phenomenological method for rapid acquisition of data that are rich in life experiences of the subject population<sup>39</sup></li> </ul>
Rapid assessment, response and evaluation (RARE)*	36	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Systematic ethnographic data collection and analysis techniques complemented by survey information and direct observation studies<sup>36</sup></li> <li>▶ Produces data that can be summarised in a way that can be understood by all of the parties<sup>36</sup></li> <li>▶ Allows clear triangulation of findings that provide reliability and validity checks on complementary data for each domain<sup>36</sup></li> <li>▶ Research is normally carried out by field teams.<sup>36</sup></li> </ul>
Rapid assessment process (RAP)	24 25 27 38	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Derived from anthropological methods and theories and is closely related to other expedited methods for capturing critical, social and cultural data surrounding a focused programme topic<sup>24</sup></li> <li>▶ A way of gathering, analysing and interpreting high-quality ethnographic data expeditiously so that action can be taken as quickly as possible<sup>25 27 38</sup></li> <li>▶ Uses a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods<sup>25 27 38</sup></li> <li>▶ Substitutes intensive, team interaction in both the collection and analysis of data, for the prolonged fieldwork formally associated with ethnography<sup>25 27 38</sup></li> </ul>
Focused rapid ethnographic evaluation (FREE)*	62	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Similar to other rapid ethnography approaches, it differs in the sense that in FREE there is extensive use of field notes instead of digital recordings.<sup>62</sup></li> </ul>
Short-term focused video ethnographic case study*	44	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Short-term video ethnography to create an intensive, complex and rich data set<sup>44</sup></li> <li>▶ Permits immersion into experience without being intrusive<sup>44</sup></li> </ul>

\*These terms were not used in the search strategy, but emerged from the reviewed articles.

24 rapid ethnographies in healthcare

# How are rapid ethnographies used?

- ▶ Inform longer research project (preliminary study)
- ▶ Run in parallel with a longer study (strand of mixed-methods study)
- ▶ Explore the findings of a longer study more in-depth
- ▶ Study on its own



# Challenges of using rapid ethnographies

Potential challenges/issues that require more research	Description of the challenges
'Breadth' versus 'depth' in data collection	Inability to capture changes over time, understand all relevant social and cultural factors at stake, or conflict and contradictions
Representativeness and sample size and selection	Dependency on most accessible informants and loss of multiplicity of voices
Use and training of local research assistants (research assistants from the observed field)	Local research assistants are not always available, have the required skills or willingness to take part. Training takes time. Research undertaken by researchers without an anthropological background might limit the quality of the study.
Lone researcher versus multimembered team	Multimembered teams can maximise resources and cover a wider range of expertise. Recruitment might be an issue and clear roles in the field need to be outlined.
'In and out' researcher versus long-term engagement	New researchers might get more attention, but lack familiarity with the study area. Prolonged engagement often increases credibility and internal validity. Prolonged engagement might also lead to stronger relationships between research participants and the field researchers.
Time for reflexivity	The rapid study time frames might not allow researchers to critically analyse the position they play in the field site and their role in the collection and analysis of data.
Research governance, and ethical principles	Time pressures should not deter researchers from undergoing the required governance and informed consent processes.



# Challenges of using rapid ethnographies

- ▶ Definitions

- ▶ Rapid
- ▶ Ethnography

4 to 6 weeks  
(Beebe 1995 2014)

12 weeks  
(Handwerker 2001)

7 weeks  
(Wilson and Kimane 1990)

8-12 weeks  
(Bentley et al. 1988)

1-4 weeks  
(Johnson and Vindrola-Padros 2017)

6 weeks  
(Scrimshaw et al. 1991; Watts et al. 1989)

4 to 8 weeks  
(ERAP 1988)

3 weeks  
(Pearson et al. 1989)

5 days to 6 months  
(Vindrola-Padros and Vindrola-Padros 2017)

# Challenges of using rapid ethnographies

Definition of ethnography and use of the 'ethnography' label

1. 'Quick and dirty' exercise
2. Too instrumental, lack of critical analysis
3. Loss of serendipity
4. Ethnography 'lite'



# Ways forward

Move away from seeing short timeframes as limitations (Pink and Morgan 2013).

“One could do a participant-observer study from now to doomsday and never come up with a sliver of ethnography...We are fast losing sight of the fact that the essential ethnographic contribution is **interpretive** rather than methodological”  
(Wolcott 1980; 56).

**Serendipity** emerges in ethnography due to a disciplinary inclination where sociocultural processes can be studied without needing to decide in advance on the ontology or scale of these processes (Dalakoglou and Harvey 2012).

# Ways forward

- ▶ Learn from the history of rapid research
- ▶ Improvement in reporting
- ▶ Critical analysis of the use of the 'rapid ethnography' label
- ▶ In-depth exploration of how rapid ethnographies (and their findings) are used in healthcare

Avoid missed opportunities



# Rapid Service Evaluation Team (RSET)

- ▶ NIHR HS&DR programme (5 years)
- ▶ Collaboration between multi-disciplinary researchers from UCL Department of Applied Health Research and the Nuffield Trust
- ▶ Conduct rapid evaluations of health and care *service innovations* identified through horizon scanning processes
  - ▶ Theory-driven approach
  - ▶ Innovative evaluation methods (mixed methods)
  - ▶ Sharing lessons for rapid impact
  - ▶ Working in partnership/co-production
- ▶ First evaluation: Interventions delivered within Special Measures regime for Quality
- ▶ More information see: <https://www.nuffieldtrust.org.uk/project/rset-the-rapid-service-evaluation-team>

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*The views and opinions expressed therein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Health Services and Delivery Research Programme, NIHR, NHS or the Department of Health and Social Care.*