Thurka Sangaramoorthy and Karen A. Kroeger, *Rapid Ethnographic Assessments: A Practical Approach and Toolkit for Collaborative Community Research*, Routledge: London, 2020; 178 pp., ISBN 978-0-367-25228-1, €120 (hbk)

Reviewed by: Richard Milner, University College Cork

The COVID-19 pandemic – while introducing an array of profound challenges to once stable social institutions – highlights the urgent need for the development of rapid forms of social research techniques to comprehend such events and, most critically, to guide effective intervention. Thurka Sangaramoorthy and Karen Kroeger’s *Rapid Ethnographic Assessments: A Practical Approach and Toolkit for Collaborative Community Research* goes some way in responding to this need.

This book is a practical toolkit, an essential guide through a novel direction in social research methods, and the true value of its contribution is reflected in the expertise brought by its authors. Sangaramoorthy and Kroeger are both highly experienced ethnographic researchers at the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), who have worked with communities and governments in a variety of public health contexts, primarily concerning the differential impacts of disease and effective interventions aimed at health equity. Although their research has predominantly engaged with sexually transmitted disease (STD) outbreaks and prevention, working within the CDC’s Global Aids Program in Asia and Africa, their wider academic interests, which have focused on addressing the challenges between traditional ethnography and its applied dimension, have resulted in the development of this rapid ethnographic assessments (REAs) framework.

Ethnography has over time expanded beyond its origins in anthropological research to become incorporated as a key feature in sociology’s broader methodological repertoire. Hughes et al.’s (2018) edited four volume series, *Contemporary Approaches to Ethnographic Research*, provides a definitive overview of this vibrant field. The first volume of the series opens with Norbert Elias’ renowned paper, *The Retreat of Sociologists into the Present* (originally published in 1987), which contemplates the
reorientation of sociological inquiry that would open the way for the incorporation of anthropological methods. While Hughes et al.’s authoritative account of the ‘theory’ and ‘practice’ of contemporary ethnography charts this bridging of disciplines throughout the series, it is designed primarily as a general teaching and learning resource, in comparison to Sangaramothy and Kroeger’s work, which presents a concise guide to conducting a specific form of ethnographic research and targeted at the researcher themselves.

The REA approach has developed within a distinctive social research tradition grown out of a long and complex history of collaboration with agencies of the United States federal government – for example, the US Agency for International Development, the Environmental Protection Agency and the Department of Health and Human Services, have all deployed ethnographic methods to better understand and practically address issues at the community level. Sangaramothy and Kroeger, as part of their respective roles in the CDC, have worked together in developing, planning and carrying out several important REAs. They have also delivered trainings on REA to CDC staff, state and local health department personnel, and practitioners in non-governmental and community-based organisations, which has culminated in the practical focus of the book and its core community-engagement dimension.

REA represents the application of qualitative research methods that are focused on the collection and analysis of locally relevant data in a short period of time. The essential goal of this approach is the rapid turnover of results that are then aimed at informing and guiding intervention and policy. Drawing on the core principles of ethnography, it is a team-based approach that combines traditional methods, such as interviews and focus groups, with structured observations, mapping and surveys. Its broader objective, as reflected in most anthropological research, is to learn about the social and cultural conditions of the individuals and communities themselves, thus understanding a problem or crisis from the perspective of the ‘insider’ – it is a research method designed to ‘learn from’ rather than ‘study’ people.

Following an overview of the defining characteristics and theoretical premises of REA in Chapter 1, the book proceeds through the key steps in planning and carrying out this type of research. Chapter 2 deals with the preliminary considerations which the researcher must take into account before formulating research questions and outlining the design and scope of the REA. Given the community-engagement emphasis of the approach, there is also a focus here on integrating the roles of local, community stakeholders with researchers in identifying project objectives and accessing funding for those both inside and outside of the academy. From Chapter 3 onwards the book walks the reader through the practical steps in conducting REAs. This begins with an outline of the specific research designs and methods appropriate for the format, such as ethnographic observation, geospatial mapping, in-depth interviews, focus groups and surveys. The next step illustrates the fundamental elements of team-based fieldwork; crucially, this deals with issues associated with both interdisciplinary cooperation and community collaboration, which comprises elements of participatory research methods. The remaining steps pertain to data analysis and report writing, the latter being of particular importance to research students and non-academic researchers; this focuses on specific instructions for writing clear and concrete recommendations for a variety of audiences, with an
emphasis on programme administrators and policy makers. The book concludes with accounts of three case studies of REA, which were planned and carried out by the authors themselves. In addition to this, the appendices section of the book provides some essential tools, including a glossary of terms, sample budget and links to project planning software, for the prospective REA researcher.

The book, aside from contributing to the development of an emergent strand of ethnography, stands out in the general context of social research methods literature. All major publishers have large, multiple edition handbooks in this field, which provide extensive accounts of social research methods and methodologies; most notably, *The Sage Handbook of Social Research Methods*, Springer’s *Handbooks of Sociology and Social Research*, and Alan Bryman’s fifth edition of *Social Research Methods* with Oxford University Press to name just a few. While there is indeed no shortage of these handbooks in providing an overview of the established methods available to the researcher, Sangaramoothy and Kroeger have succeeded in producing a unique book on one specific research method that moves beyond this conventional format. Their expertise and enthusiasm in developing and promoting the REA approach clearly comes through in the text, inspiring its reader to take up this toolkit in exploring a range of other research areas. The COVID-19 pandemic, of course, has provided a highly relevant context for the application of this framework, particularly given its emergence in the domain of public health. With its community-engagement and collaborative, team-based interdisciplinary focus, REA may prove to be an indispensable methodological tool for the social researcher in analysing and informing responses to this and future pandemics.

**ORCID iD**

Richard Milner [https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4970-9577](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4970-9577)