Reviewer's report

Title: Using consecutive Rapid Participatory Appraisal studies to assess, facilitate and evaluate health and social change in community settings

Version: 1 Date: 21 November 2005

Reviewer: Steve Iliffe

Reviewer's report:

General
Thank you for asking me to review this interesting and well-written paper on the re-use of Rapid Participatory Appraisal methods in a deprived urban area.

The findings are somewhat depressing, since some changes promoted after the first round of RPA had not survived, or even started. The local social environment appears to have stagnated, largely because of external economic factors, and community development appears to be limited in its impact. The key finding is that little thrives without 'outside' support, from more distant government agencies.

The paper is well argued but there are questions left unanswered, that in my view should be dealt with in the discussion so that this work can be contextualised within the debates around community development.

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Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

Is RPA a robust and effective developmental method within which health professionals can play a useful part? Although one case study cannot answer this definitively, this report suggests that RPA can only be effective as a catalyst during upturns, when investment in areas is expanding and local interventions help to tailor its application to diverse communities.

Is RPA equivalent to community-oriented primary care (COPC)? There are similarities, but COPC requires a continuous commitment of resources, not an episodic one, and is typically primary care-led in situations where primary care is relatively underdeveloped and populations are relatively deprived. Its successes are mostly in the USA, and there are few if any examples of its successful application in the UK (The UK experiences cited barely involved the public). The references to COPC are highly selective, and a fuller review of COPC can be found in: Iliffe S & Lenihan P Integrating primary care & public health: learning from the community oriented primary care model. Int J Health Services 2003:33(1):85-98

Is RPA a method for increasing 'social capital'? This depends on what is meant by 'social capital', which needs to be defined in operational terms so that the possible gains from RPA can be evaluated against clear criteria. Although it is not inconceivable that a catalyst can set in train processes that increase 'social capital', it is not necessarily intuitively sound to believe this either, and plausible mechanisms need to be discussed once empirical evidence of effect is assembled.

I hope these comments are helpful to the editor and to the authors.

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Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

**What next?:** Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions

**Level of interest:** An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests