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Using a pilot study to manage ethical problems in qualitative research involving vulnerable populations

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Statement of the Problem: Ethical considerations in research with vulnerable populations take place at all stages of the research process. However, the conduct of qualitative research concerning non-offending partners of female rape victims, often involves multifaceted ethical and practical challenges, which can be managed through the use of pilot studies.

Methodology: The three objectives of the pilot study described were: The first was to pre-test and refine the proposed method for locating, accessing, and recruiting intimate partners of female rape victims, within the first two weeks after the rape, for participation in a six-month longitudinal study. The second objective was to identify and prevent all possible risk factors in the proposed recruitment and data collection methods that could harm the participants' safety during the main study. The third objective was to determine the feasibility of the main study, in terms of the limited financial and human resources available.

Findings: The pilot phase was valuable in identifying ethical and methodological problems during the recruitment of participants and collection of data. It allowed for methodological adjustments prior to the main study and confirmed the feasibility of the overall research design.

Conclusion & Significance: The focal point of this pilot study was to discover and manage potential problems which could interfere with vulnerable participants' ethical and human rights, so that such problems could be addressed before the main study. Methodological shortcomings could also be identified. All three objectives of the pilot study supplied valuable information, which was used in managing the ethical and practical issues that could have arisen during the main qualitative study involving a vulnerable population. The ethics underpinning such a study should reflect, inter alia, the principles of confidentiality and doing no harm. Although a pilot study does not guarantee that ethical and practical problems will not occur at a later stage, a pretesting phase is seen as an essential component of a qualitative study involving a vulnerable population. In fact, it can be viewed as a dress rehearsal for the main inquiry.

Recommendations: Conducting a pilot study should be seen as a fundamental part of the research process, and therefore future researchers should not leave it out and rush into the main investigation without pre-testing its research design.

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