

The Un-Hailed Pilot Study – A Case for Publication

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The problem exists that with the high demand in universities and other settings that one must produce publishable research and do so at a reasonable rate of success. Those involved with ongoing research know that it takes a significant amount of time and effort to establish these lines of research and even more so effort towards getting presentations and publications submitted and accepted. One of those steps along the way is the process of developing sound and feasible studies that will produce the data needed for those publications. This feasibility study is most often referred to as a Pilot Study. The question presented here in, is should we be seemingly ignoring these results or bringing them forward as a reasonable acceptable part of the research publication process?

In the editorial comments for the Journal of Clinical Nursing 2007 the case is made for them not to be published [1]. Great lengths are taken to define what the pilot study does and in doing so identifies what roles it should serve, and within that context should remain. It also identifies that within journal submissions the rightful place for submission of work identified a Pilot Studies are submitted as “Research in Brief” [1], which implies a lower status of accepted works. Friedman [2] in his Commentary sites Thebane, Ma, Chu, et al. argues in their discussion of the conduct of pilot studies, that they should be published [3].

Even with all the technologies found today research begins through the formulation of a research question. This develops into a research concept that is developed and still goes through a labored process where we find ourselves determining the level of significance to one's body of knowledge, that then must be answered [4]. If the possibility exists, this question is refined and moves into developing a method of how this can be answered, identifying subjects, measurement tools and procedures. Many researchers are confronted with the challenges of “can this be done, what it will take etc.?” Essentially they are faced with a feasibility challenge. In an ideal world, one would be able to easily justify the use of resources and times to the development of a “pilot study”. This paper discusses the significance of the use of pilot studies, but also supports the publications of those learned facts gained from the pilot study.

The use of pilot studies and validation of ones methodology and procedures has long been a process and ‘right of passage’ into well formulated research and a required demonstration of rigor towards publication and acceptance of publication by others. In some academic settings ones Master's Degree thesis serves as the pilot study for one's terminal degree dissertation. In a sense the preliminary study that determines one's ability to progress further into “real” research.

Arnold et al, [5] discuss the use of pilot studies as a feasibility study and surmises that most every major clinical trial had to start with some piloting or small scale investigation before moving on the a larger scale study. The vast majority of published works discuss one or more element of conducting a pilot study before proceeding. Even survey studies discuss the piloting of their through validation steps. Thus, the pilot study is conducted and the methods used in the larger study are a result of those things learned from the pilot, we accept them as validated truths. While accepting these “newly accepted truths” at this level, reviewers will deny the acceptance of pilot work as acceptable research. Yet, the results of the pilot study structurally, are the foundation on which the rest of their research process was built. We predicate acceptance of rigorous research with the expectation of using pilot studies, yet fail to

recognize them and their true significant role on the final larger study. It is time to give credence to what is being stated and acknowledge; that pilot studies should be part of the publication process and viewed as part of the ongoing learned research towards building the knowledge base from which we conduct our work.

Leon, Davis, and Kraemer state that pilot studies are a must and as such a fundamental phase of the research process. They argue that pilot studies “can be used to evaluate the feasibility of recruitment, randomization, retention, assessment procedures, new methods, and implementation of the novel intervention [6]” p629. In the allied health professions, as opposed to pharmaceutical trials, professionals take a novel intervention concept or trend and explore its outcome measures as a feasibility to determine its continued use. These types of studies are a must for publication in delivering innovative therapies in a quick and timely manner.

Prescott and Soeken state that pilot studies are likely to be “under discussed, underused and underreported [7]” p60. Full reports of pilot studies are rare in the research literature [8,9]. When reported, they often only justify the research methods or particular research tool used. There is a reasonable difference between pilot studies used in clinical pharmaceutical trials and clinical therapeutic interventions used in rehabilitation settings. Many therapists have a notion and see a tendency or trend and need to identify whether they should continue to use to protocols in treating clients or abandon them in favor of other methods. Pilot studies and the publication of these investigations are essential in bringing new innovative care to the forefront.

This commentary stands in favor of publishing pilot work in areas as described early. The authors of such work should identify the parameters and limitations of their works and reviews /readers should make decisions of the value as it brings forth new approaches to rehabilitation and remediation [9] Friedman states in his conclusions: “... we need to have confidence that those who read, interpret, and use the reports are smart enough to understand the limitations. [2]” Pilot studies are progressive feeds on studies conducted that can lead to greater findings and have the foundation for further study as most larger studies will repeatedly state in their conclusions.

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