Managing ethical issues in sexual violence research using a pilot study

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Conducting research in the area of sexual violence has complex ethical and practical challenges for the researcher. Managing ethical issues in sexual violence is important and can be achieved through the use of pilot studies.

The primary purpose of the pilot study was to identify and manage potential ethical and practical problems that could jeopardise the main study or violate the ethical and human rights of participants in the main study on women's journey of recovery from sexual assault. The secondary purpose was to collect preliminary data in order to determine the human, financial and time resources needed for a planned study. The methods and processes used in conducting the pilot study in the study on women's journey of recovery are discussed according to each of the objectives of the pilot study, methods used to achieve the objective, observations or findings made during the pilot study, and implications for the main study.

This article aims to demonstrate how a pilot study was used to manage identified potential ethical and practical research issues during the recruitment of participants and data collection for the research that was conducted by the first author to investigate women's journey of recovery from sexual assault trauma within the first week following sexual assault.

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Introduction

Conducting research in the area of sexual violence has complex ethical and practical challenges for the researcher. These challenges are over and above the ordinary ethical considerations posed by ordinary research, such as issues of confidentiality, informed consent and respect for autonomy and protection of the vulnerable participants (Ellsberg & Heise, 2005: 34). This is due to the fact that a woman participating in sexual violence research is exposed to more risks than anyone participating in any other general research. These risks are related to the woman's vulnerable status as a result of the recent or old sexual violation itself, and the sensitive and intrusive nature of research questions in sexual violence, which may sometimes force the participant to relive the sexual violence situa-

tion in order to be able to answer the researcher's questions accurately. Thus research may pose as a potential secondary victimization threat (Sullivan & Cain, 2004: 603; WHO, 2001: 6; Jewkes, Watts, Abrahams, Penn-Kekana, Garcia-Moreno, 2000: 93). Secondary victimisation often results when the woman is made to wait for longer than she normally would have if she was not participating in the sexual violence research, or if she is coerced to participate in research as part of her treatment or her sexual assault trauma management regimen.

Managing ethical issues in sexual violence is important and can be achieved through the use of pilot studies. This article aims to demonstrate how a pilot study was used to manage identified potential ethical and practical research concerns during the recruitment of participants for research that was conducted to investigate women's journey of recovery from sexual assault trauma within the first week following sexual assault.

Background and rationale for conducting the pilot study

The need for conducting a pilot study prior to the research on women's journey of recovery was identified at proposal development stage. Women's journey of recovery was a longitudinal qualitative study which investigated women's journey of recovery from sexual assault during the first six months following the incident of sexual assault. It was anticipated that the nature of the research questions rendered the research intrusive and sensitive. The participants were bound to be vulnerable especially at that stage following the incident of sexual assault. Some of the proposed recruitment and research procedures were new and had never been used before within the South African context. It was therefore important to conduct a pilot study.

In consultation with the study reference groups (who are co-authors of this article), the decision to conduct a pilot study prior to the main study was made and supported by the research supervisors and the university ethics committee. The purpose was to safeguard

potential participants in the main study in terms of possible violation of their ethical and human rights during the recruitment phase.

Literature review

Review of existing literature on ethical and practical issues of sexual violence research revealed various potential and actual ethical and practical challenges as well as specific recommendations for researchers in handling such potential ethical, legal and practical problems (Ellsberg & Heise, 2005: 35; Cottingham & Jansen, 2005;no pages Sullivan & Cain, 2004: 603).

Further review of the literature on the usefulness of conducting pilot studies in qualitative research, and specifically sexual violence research, revealed varying views and problems cited regarding the use of pilot studies, which are broadly outlined below.

Ethical, legal and practical issues in sexual violence research

No researcher would intentionally set out to revictimise his or her study participants. However, if adequate precautions are not taken to minimise the risks during the research process, both physical safety and psychological well-being can be affected, which may result in some ethical misfortunes. Every sexual violence researcher has an ethical obligation to be vigilant and to prevent violation of human rights during their research (Sullivan & Cain 2004: 603; WHO, 2001: 7).

The common ethical principles for research in human subjects, including respect for persons, protection of vulnerable persons, confidentiality, beneficence and distributive justice, are reported to be the cornerstone for research in sexual violence. Disclosure and participants' safety during research are specific ethical issues for serious consideration in sexual violence research (Ellsberg & Heise, 2005: 35). A researcher would have to provide a thorough description of the research process, associated risks and benefits, and voluntary participation in order to safeguard the participants' safety (Cottngham & Jansen, 2005 no page).

The issue of anonymity in sexual violence research is crucial. This refers to an additional protection of one's identity, even from other participants in the same study, e.g. in focus groups. Careful consideration of the data collection methods should ensure that both confidentiality and anonymity are maintained at all times (Sullivan & Cain, 2004: 603).

Ensuring protection of women's safety

The protection of both participants and the research team or interviewers is of paramount importance in sexual violence research. There is always the threat of potential retaliatory violence from the perpetrator, his friends or family. Participation in sexual violence research may also be misinterpreted by the community, friends or family members as involvement in criminal investigative procedures (Sullivan & Cain, 2004: 603; WHO, 2001: 10). Incidents of physical abuse from controlling partners are also common among women participants who participate in sexual violence research without their partners' knowledge (Ellsberg & Heise, 2005: 35).

Ethical and safety recommendations for recruitment and actual research include the following:

- Obtaining full informed voluntary consent from the participants for both ethical and safety reasons;
- Informing and warning the participants about the sensitive nature of the questions to be asked during the interviews, and the legal implications of what she may or may not report during the interview;
- Training of researchers and research assistants in handling the complexities of violence against women, including maintaining confidentiality;
- Being sensitive to and knowledgeable about the cultural differences that exist between the researcher and the participants
- Precautions in determining how to contact women for research participation without alerting the perpetrators and endanger-

ing the woman's safety;
- Locating women over time in longitudinal studies without compromising their privacy and confidentiality; and
- Conducting interviews in private and safe settings.

The above is identified by various authors including Ellsberg & Heise (2005: 35); Cottingham & Jansen, (2005: no pages); Sullivan & Cain (2004: 603); WHO, 2001: 12); Campbell and Diememann (2001: 95).

Locating the potential participants and using their homes as data collection sites could also pose as a potential hazardous and unsafe environment for the participants in sexual violence research as well as the researcher. Generally, qualitative researchers would select the woman's home as an ideal and the most natural venue for conducting interviews. The woman may have not disclosed to her family that she has been sexually assaulted. The perpetrator may be one of the family members or close neighbours. Sometimes the researcher's visits may be seen as part of a legal investigation to incriminate the perpetrator (Cottingham & Jansen, 2005 no page; Sullivan & Cian, 2004: 603; WHO, 2001: 12). Careful considerations should therefore be taken to ensure the safety of both the research participants and the researcher during the preparatory phase or during the pilot study.

More precautions should be considered when making telephonic contact for the recruitment or other purposes during the study in order to ensure participant's safety. Such precautions include devising protocol with the participant to be used when the perpetrator or anyone other than the participant answers the telephone. Sullivan and Cain (2004:603) recommend pretending that the researcher has dialed a wrong number, pretending that the research is about women's health in general, and asking for the participant by her specific name. The participant should ensure that the persons whose telephone numbers are given as alternatives are aware that they may be contacted by the researcher at some point. Designing and mastering such protocols can be done during pilot study.

Access to participants for recruitment purposes

Researchers in sexual violence research often face challenges when consideration is made of recruitment sites to access participants. The researcher would require measures to beat the bureaucratic system before access to police stations for recruitment purposes can be allowed (Cottingham & Jansen, 2005, no page). Sharing of any of the patients' or clients' information with the researcher contravenes some of the core values for most of the rape crises centers or health services for sexually abused women which include privacy, confidentiality and protection of women. The researcher should be able to convince the authorities that the research will not jeopardise the safety of the participants before he or she is given access to the facility for recruitment purposes (Sullivan & Cain, 2004: 603).

Compensation for research versus coercion

The issue of compensation for research participation, the amount to be compensated and the form of the compensation has received attention among sexual violence researchers because it has both ethical and practical implications. Sullivan and Cain (2004: 603) propose that women should be compensated adequately and in cash (not vouchers or cheques because of the difficulties in exchanging these for cash). However, they warn that the amount of compensation should not be so much that the participants are indirectly 'coerced' to participate in the study because of the money.

This information from literature review formed the basis for the decision to conduct the pilot study. While most of these recommendations from literature made sense, most had never been used by the researcher nor the research reference groups in the proposed study of women's journey of recovery from sexual assault. Hence it was found imperative for the first author to conduct a pilot study prior to the main study in order to put these into practice without jeorpadising the participants' ethical and human rights.

Types and functions of pilot studies

Literature on conducting pilot studies revealed different types and functions of pilot studies, and opposing views and problems regarding the use of pilot studies.

The first type of pilot studies is often referred to as a preliminary exploratory study or feasibility study. This refers to the pilot study as the process of testing the prospective research design. Its purpose is to identify logistical problems which might occur when using the proposed methods. This type of pilot study is also used to collect preliminary data, determining the human, financial and time resources needed for a planned study. It can also assist the researcher in developing the research question and research plan. This is more common in qualitative research where the researcher is allowed to embark on research without a broad research question. It is also useful in training the novice researcher in handling as many elements of research as possible before embarking on the main study (Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001: 295; Strydom, 2001: 180; Polit & Hungler, 1991: 62; Lindquist, 1991: 91).

The second type of pilot study, often referred to as 'pretests', indicates the testing of one or more aspect of the research, such as the data collection instrument or the data analysis procedure. This type is common in quantitative methodology and is used in the development and testing of research instruments and establishing whether the sampling frame and technique are effective (Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001:295; Strydom, 2001: 180; Polit & Hungler, 1991: 62, 91; Lindquist, 1991: 91; Barbie, 1990: 220;).

Pilot studies add value and credibility to the researcher's work. The pilot study results can be used to convince funding bodies and other stakeholders of the researcher's or research team's competency and knowledge regarding the feasibility of the main study (Strydom, 2001: 178; Lindquist, 1991: 91).

Good pilot studies allow for evaluation of success and failures in implementation of proposed research methods, through identification and management

of elements that could jeopardise participants' safety or violate their ethical and human rights before exposing the major study participants to similar problems (Strydom, 2001: 178; Lindquist, 1991: 91).

Both types of pilot studies were used by the researcher to pretest the recruitment methods proposed for the main study; to safeguard the safety of the participants against violation of their ethical and human rights and to add value to the credibility of the researcher's work as well as to collect preliminary data, determining the human, financial and time resources needed for a planned study.

Opposing views on use of pilot studies

The pilot study is a prerequisite step to a successful research process. Yet many novice and prospective researchers still neglect this important research step and rush to embark on the main research project (Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001:295; Strydom, 2001: 178; De Vaus, 1993: 54). This often results in scientifically unsound and therefore unethical research and thus exposing the research participants to risks and/ or unnecessary inconveniences which could be minimized by conducting a pilot study. (Ellsberg & Heise, 2005: 44).

Those against the use of pilot studies view them as frustrating exercises which are a waste of a researcher's time and therefore not worth doing. These complaints are fuelled by the fact that pilot studies are not well received or published by most scientific journals. Most scientific journals only accept manuscripts that have significant findings, at the expense of those reporting methodological problems identified while conducting pilot studies (Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001:295).

Problems associated with pilot studies

Conducting the pilot study does not guarantee that the main research study will be a success. It also does not solve all of the problems that the researcher may wish to rectify before embarking on a major study. The researcher may fail to make accurate predictions based on the pilot study data or findings.

Conducting the pilot study may also require a significant amount of human and financial resources. This may impinge on the funding for the main study (VanTeiljingen & Hundley, 2001:295; Lindquist, 1991: 91).

A common concern among researchers is the inclusion of data from the pilot study or inclusion of pilot study participants in the main study sample. Some state that this could lead to the 'contamination' of the findings of the main study. However, according to VanTeiljingen and Hundley (2001:295) such inclusion has little or no negative effect in qualitative studies.

The major problem associated with pilot studies is the scarcity of published pilot study reports and researchers' experiences in conducting pilot studies. The lack of published literature on researchers' experiences on pilot studies often lead to repetition of avoidable ethical and practical problems and further exposure of potential research participants to potential ethical and human rights violation risks (Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001:295).

The purpose of publishing the first author's experience through this article is to inform future researchers of the ethical and practical pitfalls and management of the ethical issues in sexual violence.

Problem Statement

Based on literature review and some of the experiences from consultants and senior researchers, ethical and practical problems in relation to recruitment of participants for the proposed longitudinal study to investigate women's journey of recovery from sexual assault trauma during the first six months following the incident of sexual assault were anticipated. The main ethical issues of concern were the identification of appropriate and ethically sound method for locating, accessing and recruiting women who have been sexually assaulted within the first week of the assault for participation in a six-month longitudinal study on the journey of recovery.
While literature review provided some of the recommendations, none of these were reported to have been used within the South African context in sexual vio-

lence research, some had been used in domestic violence in general only (Jewkes, Watts, Abrahams, Penn-Kekana, Garcia-Moreno, 2000: 93) and therefore their usefulness in sexual assault could not be guaranteed fully.
It was therefore imperative for the researcher to conduct a pilot study to identify and manage the potential ethical and practical problems that could jeopardise the main study or violate the ethical and human rights of participants in the main study on women's journey of recovery from sexual assault.

Purpose of the pilot study

The primary purpose of the pilot study was to identify and manage potential ethical and practical problems that could jeopardise the main study or violate the ethical and human rights of participants in the main study on women's journey of recovery from sexual assault. The secondary purpose was to collect preliminary data in order to determine the human, financial and time resources needed for a planned study. While ethical considerations were carefully considered and highlighted in the research proposal accepted by the University Ethics Committee, it was also important to put some of the proposed methods to test before embarking on the main study. Some of the proposed methods had never been used before within the South African context.

The objectives of the pilot study were as follows:

*   To identify the most appropriate and ethically sound method for locating, accessing and recruiting women who have been sexually assaulted within the first week of the assault for participation in a six-month longitudinal study on their journey of recovery.
*   To identify all practical problems that could occur when using the proposed recruitment and data collection methods without compromising the participants' safety.
*   To determine the feasibility of the main study in terms of the financial and human resources.

The methods used

This was preliminary exploratory study

or feasibility study that also used pre-testing of the proposed recruitment strategies within a longitudinal qualitative research study design. Participants were selected using the open sampling method which is the selection of participants 'on site'. In open sampling the researcher recruits participants who meet the inclusion criteria, but is not influenced by evidence of any research-related concepts (Strauss & Corbin, 1998: 215). Open sampling is similar to convenience sampling, in which the researcher selects and recruits participants who are readily available (Polit & Hungler, 1991: 642). The problems identified during the sampling, recruitment and retention of participants is discussed further below. Data collection methods for the pilot included intensive interview sessions with participants, series of meetings with "gate keepers' and key informants as well as consultation with the research supervisors and research reference group. The idea of research reference group was also new to the researcher, but it was found to be very useful.

Preliminary data analysis, using qualitative data analysis methods was conducted concurrently with data collection. It also involved extensive discussions with research supervisor and research reference group on all identified potential ethical and practical issues the main focus on the aims of the pilot study.

The methods and processes used during the pilot study are discussed according to each of the objectives of the pilot study, methods used to achieve the objective, observations or findings made during the pilot study, and implications for the main study. Strategies for addressing the potential problems identified are also discussed.

Ethically sound methods for locating, accessing and recruiting participants

The first objective of the pilot study was to identify the most appropriate and ethically sound method for locating, accessing and recruiting women who have been sexually assaulted within the first week of the assault for participation in a six-month longitudinal study on the journey of recovery.

The methods used to achieve that objective included a series of meetings held with the 'gatekeepers' (doctors, nurse managers and professional nurses) to negotiate access to the hospital identified as a recruitment site, and to convince them that the study would not be detrimental to potential participants as patients of the hospital.

From these meetings, a key informant was identified among the registered nurses in the Trauma Unit. Her role was to identify potential participants; those who were interested in participation in the study were told more about the study through completion of a 'consent to be contacted' form designed by the researcher. This was meant to be signed by the potential participant in agreeing to be contacted by the researcher for research purposes. These forms were to be collected by the researcher daily. She would use the information on the form to call the potential participants for recruitment to participate in the study. The researcher then had to obtain informed consent and start data collection within the first week following sexual assault trauma.

The 'consent to be contacted' form is a new concept, which to our knowledge had never been used in South African research before. It was therefore important to pilot test it for usefulness as a recruitment strategy before it was adopted in the main study. It was also important to identify any potential harm related to its use during the pilot phase, so that this could be eliminated in the main study.

Following the agreed upon protocol, the researcher collected the 'consenting to be contacted' forms and contacted all the women who had signed them.

The observations and findings from this objective were many and included the following:
- The first observation was that when women were contacted telephonically, they could not recall anything about having given consent to be contacted by the researcher.
- The women were either surprised or angry that the researcher was calling them for

research purposes. The researcher offered apologies and refrained from asking for voluntary participation if the potential participants were upset.
- This reduced the number of potential participants for recruitment. As a result, only three women were recruited over the pilot period of five months.
- The key informant was always too busy and the unit too short-staffed to participate fully in recruitment of potential participants.

Reflecting on the recruitment process; the above observations and findings resulted in the following possible explanations: *(i)* there was a possibility of potential coercion of participants into signing the 'consent to be contacted' form by the researcher; or *(ii)* of getting their information to the researcher without their permission. Any of these possibilities would have meant that the women's privacy and voluntary participation rights were violated.

Consultation with the reference groups and research supervisors and further literature review resulted in the adoption of the following strategy to resolve the problem:
- The observations were discussed with the key informant. This revealed the difficulties experienced by the staff in participating in recruitment of participants on behalf of the researcher, including staff shortages and separation of clinical from research roles of the nurse.
- A need to review the recruitment protocol for the main study was identified and communicated in writing to and supported by the university ethics committee.

Using proposed recruitment and data collection methods

The second objective of the pilot study was to identify ethical and practical problems that could occur when using the proposed recruitment and data collection methods without compromising the participants' safety.

The methods used to achieve this objective were as follows:
- Those who agreed to participate in the study were asked to

select the most secure and safe venue for conducting the interviews.

- All three pilot study participants selected the researcher's office for safety and convenience. Interviews were held according to the proposed methods, including completion of the demographic questionnaire at the beginning of the first interview session.

- Participants had to be called telephonically to remind them of or to confirm the next visit. It was found that two of the three participants had no reliable/ working telephones or mobile phones. One had to be contacted through the telephone of her mother's employer in order to remind her about the interview dates.

- The second participant relocated twice during the period of the study. Her mobile phone got lost before the second interview was held. She would send the researcher a 'please call me' message from her friends' mobile phones whenever she needed to communicate. However, there was always the potential of losing confidentiality when the researcher responded to these messages. The researcher had to learn new and cautious ways of responding to the 'please call me' messages. She also had to learn how to introduce herself on the phone without divulging the purpose of her call, while being able to identify whether the receiver of the call was a participant or not.

A crucial observation discovered at this point was the need for strategies to retain participants in the study through effective communication. The researcher and each participant agreed on what the researcher could say to other people when she wanted to leave a message for the participant, or when she was responding to a 'please call me' message from an unfamiliar mobile phone number. This was based on the recommendation of designing telephone protocol with participants as proposed by Sullivan and Cain (2004:603).

Another interesting observation at this point was the women's need to participate in sexual violence research. This is often neglected or undermined in literature. The second participant was a very complicated case. Her baby was stolen and killed by the rapist on the same day that he raped her. On hearing about this during the second interview session (at the end of four weeks following the incident), the participant was asked if she would prefer to terminate participation in the study. She insisted on her need for participation in the research, stating that *"even if it does not help me now, as long as it will help others in the future"*. Her insistence to participate in the study is supported by Sullivan and Cain (2004: 603), who stated that if women believe in the purpose of the study, they will go to greater lengths to participate. The challenge for the researcher was to balance the respect for the participant's need and insistence to engage in this type of research without jeorpadising her human rights.

The third participant had an active mobile phone all the time. This made it easy to locate and communicate with her, even when she had moved to another province.

The main implications regarding this objective were the difficulties and expenses incurred in retaining the study participants for the period of 6 months. This assisted the researcher in anticipating and budgeting appropriately for the main study.

The greatest potential ethical issue identified during the pilot study was the potential of divulging information to other people if the phone number or mobile phone did not belong to the participant. The researcher had to learn to deal with it and hence the development of the telephone protocol mentioned above.

Feasibility in terms of resources

The third objective of the pilot was to determine the feasibility of the main study regarding the financial and human resources using the proposed study methods.

The methods used included monitoring and recording the time taken for each interview sessions and comparing that with the proposed sessions of about one and a half hour to two hours

per participant for budgetary purposes. The participants described the difficulties they experienced and sacrifices they made in order to come to the interview sessions, e.g. getting a baby sitter to look after children at home and borrowing money from neighbours or family members in order to be able to get there for the interviews. This was not previously anticipated nor budgeted for in the proposed study.

In recognition of these identified problems and taking into consideration what the literature suggests about compensation of participants (Sullivan & Cain, 2004: 603), the proposed R20.00 per interview for reimbursement of travel expenses was increased to R50.00. Increasing the amount to R50.00 meant a significant change in the budget for the main study. However, the participants were very appreciative of the increased amount. This reassured the researcher that this amount would also be appreciated by the main study participants. The crucial observation was the discovery to the need to increase the R20.00 travel costs to R50.00. The R50.00 compensation was reported by participants to be a good incentive for participating in the study. However it also meant additional expenses to be budgeted for in the main study. Since compensation had to be in cash as per Sullivan and Cain (2004: 603)'s recommendation, the researcher had to ensure that she had enough cash in her office at all times. The researcher's telephone and mobile phone bills also increased dramatically. This highlighted the need for appropriate budgeting for the main study.

In terms of human resource aspects, all data collection and research project management was the responsibility of the researcher. While it could have been easier to train and appoint field workers, it was felt that only the researcher could remain responsible for the data collection and other research-specific roles in order to adhere to the interpretive paradigm of the study.

All three objectives of the pilot study yielded relevant information in management of ethical and practical issues in sexual violence research. These discoveries made during the pilot study and their relevance for the main study were formally communicated to and sup-

ported by the university research ethics committee, the research supervisors and the research reference groups.

Discussions

Conducting the pilot study assisted in identification and management of potential ethical and practical issues where violation of participants' ethical and human rights could have occurred in the main study. That resulted in the elimination of risky methods from the main study and thus safeguarding the participants' safety. These findings highlighted the need and importance for pilot studies especially among novice researchers and postgraduate students who often resent conducting pilot studies (Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001:295; Strydom, 2001: 178; De Vaus, 1993: 54).

The main lesson from the findings of the pilot study was the importance of the identification of all problems with ethical or practical implications for the main study. While this did not guarantee the success of the main study, at least the researcher was confident of the elimination of risks that could have jeopardized not only the safety of the main study participants, but also the credibility of the researcher's work. It could have also impinged on the funding for the main study (Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001:295; Lindquist, 1991: 91). According to Strydom, (2001: 178); and Lindquist, (1991: 91) the pilot study results can be used to convince funding bodies and other stakeholders of the researcher's or research team's competency and knowledge regarding the feasibility of the main study.

The pilot study findings revealed the need for constant review of decisions taken prior to the pilot study, and preparedness to go back to the drawing board if necessary before embarking on a main study. Consultation with the reference group and research supervisors was also found to be useful for the evaluation of success and failures in the implementation of proposed research methods, and thus to manage ethical and practical issues before embarking on the main study. This is also recommended by Strydom (2001: 178) and Lindquist (1991: 91).

Conclusion

We believe that pilot studies are im-

portant in managing ethical issues in sexual violence research and in research in general. We also believe that reporting on pilot study findings and sharing the challenges and difficulties experienced during a pilot study in a specific nursing discipline is an ethical responsibility and an obligation of all researchers.

We conclude by calling upon all scientific nursing journals to give manuscripts that report pilot study findings and researchers' experiences of conducting pilot studies the same consideration given to other research-based manuscripts for publication purposes. In that way, ethical and practical risks can be avoided in similar studies.

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