

1.1. PILOT TESTING

Before delving further into the details of data elicitation techniques, a caveat: Regardless of how carefully researchers have designed their studies, they should never simply assume that their data collection methods will work. A crucial issue that must be kept in mind in the data-gathering process is the importance of pilot testing. A pilot study is generally considered to be a small-scale trial of the proposed procedures, materials, methods, and (sometimes) coding sheets and analytic choices of a research project. The point of carrying out a pilot study is to finalize these essential components, to uncover any problems, and to address them before the main study is carried out. A pilot study is therefore an important means of assessing the feasibility and usefulness of the data sampling and collection methods and revising them before they are used with the research participants. While it might seem that careful prior planning would allow researchers to skip this step, it is in fact critical to allocate additional time to conduct pilot tests, as they can reveal subtle flaws in the design or implementation of the study—flaws that may not be readily apparent in the plan itself, but that could otherwise prove costly and time-consuming, perhaps even leading to the loss of valuable and irreplaceable data.

Since pilot studies sometimes result in data that might be useable for the main study, it is important to note the constraints imposed by human subjects committees or institutional review boards (also referred to as ethics review boards, discussed extensively in Mackey & Gass, 2005), which must approve research conducted in most university or institutional settings. Some researchers choose to seek permission from their institutional review boards to carry out their experiments in such a way that if they do not encounter problems with their pilot-testing, they can use those data for their main study as long as exactly the same procedures are used. However, not all institutions will give blanket permission for this, and many will not consider requests for the retroactive use of data. It is therefore worthwhile to investigate these issues while also keeping in mind that it is a rare pilot study that does not result in some sort of revision of materials or methods.