

Young Lives Methods Guide

Piloting: Testing Instruments and Training Field Teams



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The complex, cyclic and evolving research design of the Young Lives study provides the tools and structures needed to collect qualitative and quantitative data at various levels and from various respondents, and to store and maintain it in a format suitable for longitudinal analysis. This is achieved using a diverse set of instruments, which has changed and expanded with each round as the children grow up and research priorities develop and shift. Piloting tests these instruments and begins training staff to use them.

All instruments in Young Lives are piloted, from panel questionnaires to qualitative toolkits. Piloting aims to:

- ensure that research questions work in the field and are consistent with local situations
- ensure that methods are appropriate to the changing capacities of the children as they develop
- train field teams and learn from their practical experience of fieldwork to improve instrument design
- produce accurate instrument manuals and protocols
- identify and begin to strengthen the skills field teams will need to apply the instrument
- initiate, build and maintain positive team dynamics and mutual respect
- ensure that data collection systems are in place.

Piloting forms part of a wider set of training activities for fieldwork teams. Each country has a committed, long-term study team which includes researchers from different disciplines and survey and data managers. Field supervisors and fieldworkers are temporarily employed for particular instruments or sub-studies. Although in many cases fieldworkers have returned to carry out successive rounds of the study, the shifting composition of field teams increases the importance of training and teambuilding as on-going processes. In this way the skills of team members are frequently upgraded through training on each successive instrument or sub-study.

Piloting exercises in Young Lives have varied in scale, format and frequency:

- a year-long pilot stage (2001–02) tested the original research design for the study in South Africa, a country outside the study sample
- the child, household and community survey is piloted in all four countries before each full round of data collection
- electronic data collection was piloted with the Round 3 survey to assess the possibilities for rolling it out across the whole survey in Rounds 3 and 4

- qualitative research methods were developed collaboratively through a piloting and training process, and there have been pilots before each subsequent full round of data collection.

Each of these exercises is an essential part of ensuring that all necessary information will be captured and processed effectively during fieldwork. Each has produced lessons to improve subsequent research rounds. Examining three of them in more detail highlights some of the objectives and challenges of piloting different instruments at various stages in a longitudinal study.

Piloting a longitudinal study of child poverty

Young Lives was originally conceived as a longitudinal, survey-based panel study. In 2001–02, over the course of a year, the entire study design was piloted in South Africa (Seager and de Wet 2003). Research questions were selected and survey instruments developed. A training programme for fieldworkers was designed and delivered, the questionnaire revised and reviewed. A data management system was established, and preliminary analyses carried out. At the end of the year, there was a follow-up round of visits to respondents.

The pilot phase aimed to produce generic research instruments which were intended to form the core of the first round of the child and household survey in the four study countries. The child and household questionnaire was the main instrument developed during this phase, and at this stage its most important objective was to include key measures of outcome variables, such as children's health, nutritional status and cognitive development, and the factors likely to affect them. A multidisciplinary team including epidemiologists, anthropologists, social scientists, statisticians, economists and child rights and welfare specialists worked on formulating questions with a strong theoretical basis that would also be understood in practice. Their aim was to develop the most reliable survey possible, and their challenge was to simultaneously include multiple perspectives on child poverty while also keeping the questionnaire short enough to use effectively in the field.

Full documentation for the pilot questionnaire survey was prepared, including a survey manual, an interviewer manual and justification documents for questions. Even at this early stage, the culture-specific nature of some questions, terms and variables was flagged as an area of potential difficulty in carrying out the study and a potential limitation for comparative data analysis.

The survey was presented to fieldwork teams as work in progress to encourage discussion and feedback. Fieldworker training, which included role-play exercises and practice sessions, generated debates about the precise meaning of

complex questions and translation into local languages. The survey was piloted with children of required ages in rural and urban sites. Learning from the experiences of using the questionnaire and feedback from fieldworkers led to further revisions. Considerable time was spent reordering questions into more logical sequences, redesigning the layout and highlighting the skip patterns more clearly. Many questions that the fieldworkers found confusing or culturally inappropriate were amended.

When the pilot survey sites were revisited one year later, an important lesson was that the much higher mobility of the urban population made tracking in urban areas more difficult, and that having contacts outside the child's household was essential for effective tracking.

Piloting the Round 2 and 3 survey

It was anticipated from the outset of the study that every questionnaire used in Young Lives would consist of core and country-specific elements. In addition to this, in each successive survey round the questionnaire has also contained new questions, and in some cases new sections, partly as a response to the changing circumstances and capacities of the children as they grow older.

After the first round of the survey had established a baseline of core panel data, significant changes and additions were made to the questionnaire for Round 2. For most country teams, this meant splitting the piloting into three or four phases. In Ethiopia, for example, the household questionnaire was piloted first, followed by the community questionnaire, followed by the child development section. This phasing was adopted so that staff from different disciplines could be brought in at each stage, using their expertise to develop and test the validity of each section.

Each team also took different approaches to training fieldworkers in applying the questionnaire during the pilot phase. The Peru team, for example, had identified team leadership as a challenge after Round 1 fieldwork. As a result, in Round 2 they paid particular attention to selecting and training supervisors, working with psychologists to develop training that involved decision-making games and role-playing. Experience also showed that significant time should also be dedicated to training fieldworkers in the challenging areas of applying cognitive skills tests and completing the income and consumption sections of the questionnaire.

Having followed slightly different pathways for testing and adapting the Round 2 survey, all four teams carried out a two-week pilot study with the full questionnaire. These two-week pilots followed a rolling schedule, so that each could be attended by a two-person team from Oxford who travelled from country to country. The aim of having some staff who worked on all four pilots was to ensure continuity of information reported back within and between countries.

Scheduling difficulties meant in some cases the two-week pilot happened while parts of the questionnaire were still under construction and, in two countries, before it had been translated into local languages. Both these factors meant that training sessions often resulted in long discussions of question content rather than being free to focus on survey manuals or interviewing techniques.

While the main aim of the two-week pilot was to test the whole questionnaire with the fieldwork staff, it was also an important opportunity in some teams to ensure that fieldwork

supervisors were provided with adequate information and skills to deliver a similar training to their fieldworkers. In India, for example, supervisors and teams leaders went on to conduct regional trainings for field investigators after the two-week pilot.

The piloting process familiarised supervisors and teams with the study, instrument and manuals before going to the field to practice using the questionnaires. Fieldwork gave the opportunity not only to spot any mistakes and see if questions made sense, but to monitor the skills of supervisors while also giving them practical experience in the kind of challenges fieldworkers encounter. Lessons learned from this include:

- Feedback sessions are essential to maximise learning from pilot studies, but may need to be carefully facilitated to allow all feedback to be presented
- Presence of senior research staff in the field helps both team-building and capacity-building
- Making sure administrative and logistical tasks are carried out in advance means better use can be made of time spent in the field
- A questionnaire which is too long can result in both enumerators and respondents becoming bored, which affects accuracy and attrition
- Being able to clarify the intentions of the study is a very important part of the fieldworker's role
- Managing the changes to the questionnaire that arise from pilot studies needs careful coordination with other processes of translating, editing and formatting, and clear cut-off points beyond which no further changes can be made.

Piloting the Round 3 survey took a slightly different approach, not least because electronic data collection tools were being tested at the same time. Like its Round 2 predecessor, the pilot of the whole Round 3 survey incorporated fieldworker training, but this time there were two periods in the field. As before, it was preceded by a range of testing and training processes as different country teams got to grips with new tools, which included a self-administered questionnaire with its own survey manual, and cognitive tests for siblings.

A significant challenge in this pilot round was that teams had become accustomed to making final changes and corrections to questionnaires right up until they were printed on paper just before the start of the full phase of fieldwork. With electronic data collection, small last-minute changes to questionnaire content created large programming changes which were difficult to accommodate late in the process. Given that the Round 3 pilot took place only six months before Round 3 began in most countries, time constraints were considerable, to the extent that survey manuals were still being revised when training of full fieldwork teams began.

Training and piloting in the qualitative research rounds

Qualitative research with a sub-sample of Young Lives children began in 2007, with a second round in 2009 and a third in 2010–11. Research teams use a range of methods to develop detailed descriptions of the lives of case study children and of the dynamic processes and transitions that underlie their pathways through childhood. Children's own views and understandings are the major source of qualitative data, but information is also gathered from important adults in

their lives. Collecting this kind of data from children requires fieldworkers with very different skills and capacities from those needed by survey enumerators and supervisors, and a research design that balances flexibility and uniformity. Training and piloting reflect these requirements.

Young Lives qualitative research contains much that is new. There is little international experience of carrying out longitudinal qualitative research in developing countries, nor of integrating qualitative and quantitative data in longitudinal studies. The need for reflection and consolidation has been emphasised, and time for it built into piloting and training plans.

The first round of qualitative work was planned to complement the child-focussed aspects of the Round 2 survey (2006–07), so the development of research questions was based on a thorough knowledge of relevant survey sections. Child-focused qualitative methodology and methods were reviewed and data-gathering techniques drawn from several disciplinary approaches to studying childhood were selected and piloted in Peru in 2006. This work led to the selection of a group of potentially useful methods which were fed into a draft research protocol, which formed the basis of a meeting of the full qualitative team in March 2007.

This first full team meeting and a second four months later were significant milestones for both piloting and training. Both were used as opportunities for field research training that focused particularly on using participatory methods, building rapport and conducting fieldwork sensitively and ethically. Lead qualitative researchers and their assistants also received training in using qualitative software and accessing web-based resources.

The first meeting also allowed time for collectively consolidating core research questions and planning a round of pilots in all four countries. These were carried out between the first and second meetings, and teams tested different techniques and adapted them to local contexts and research priorities. Based on the results, each team collaborated with the UK-based qualitative researchers to finalise a country-specific methodology. Comprehensive fieldwork planning was carried out at the second full team meeting, which also generated a Memorandum of Understanding about the guiding ethical principles of the study which went on to be used in all in-country field team training. Country team members subsequently trained their own fieldwork teams, periodically supported by visits from UK-based researchers.

The approach taken to piloting in the qualitative research emphasised collaboration and flexibility. This made piloting an important way of developing shared perspectives about using child-focused and participatory methods and shared plans for using them. This would have been much harder to achieve without meetings that brought together the whole study team.

A lesson from these early pilot studies was that recruiting fieldwork staff could be difficult. Fieldworkers with training in qualitative or participatory research skills and experience of working with children are less numerous than survey enumerators. Gradually, however, most country teams have

recruited a core team of fieldworkers who have participated in successive rounds of qualitative research.

By the third round, piloting and training aimed to review developments in the wider study and update teams on changes as well as to test new methods designed to capture information on youth aspirations and transitions, ensure that similar techniques were still age-appropriate for the sample children, and maintain and strengthen basic field skills. Piloting and training also provided an opportunity to engage teams in discussion of how to make the best possible use of longitudinal qualitative data, and how to effectively manage the growing mass of case-level data.

On-going and future challenges for piloting and training in Young Lives

As the study approaches its fourth rounds of qualitative and quantitative data collection, piloting and training have to both identify and respond to emerging challenges. These include:

- Ensuring that tools, instruments and questions are always age-appropriate for the study children
- Managing increasingly complex survey instruments. The Round 4 survey will be piloted section by section, focusing on new questions and new sections
- Finding a balance between using piloting to revise content and gaining experience using tools and research methods.

On-going processes of piloting highlight the crucial importance of timing and scheduling, and of maintaining strong coordination and liaison between qualitative and quantitative research teams.

Sources and further reading

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