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A Tripartite Model for Recruiting African Americans into Fatherhood Intervention Research

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Abstract

Many studies have examined factors influencing African American (AA) participation in research studies. But none inform the recruitment of AA men into fatherhood intervention research. Our purpose is to describe the recruitment and enrollment framework of the Dedicated African American Dad (DAAD) Study, a randomized controlled trial (RCT) designed to test a fatherhood intervention against a financial literacy comparison condition. AA non-resident (AANR) fathers are fathers who do not reside with their child on a full-time basis. Fathers attended 10 group-based sessions; and father and mother informants completed research interviews at baseline, post-intervention, and 12 weeks post-intervention. The DAAD Study tripartite model is a system of strategies that address three factors that individually and cooperatively affect recruitment of AANR fathers into research: community partnerships; study infrastructure; recruitment personnel. The intersection of these three components forms a recruitment nexus that can be used to guide community-based research. The DAAD study serves as an exemplar of recruitment challenges, strategies, and lessons learned.

Keywords

recruitment; theoretical frameworks; African American; fatherhood

Introduction

Over 50% of African American (AA) children live apart from their biological fathers (Gonzales, Jones & Parent, 2014). Indeed, the numbers of children living in homes without their biological father has remained intractable for several decades (Stewart, 2010; Pew Research Center, December 17, 2015). Non-resident fathers do not live with their children on a full-time basis; and this separation can contribute to sub-optimal engagement leaving

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children, fathers and families dissatisfied (McLanahan, Tach, & Schneider, 2013; Solomon-Fears, Falk, & Fernandes-Alcantara, 2013). Dissatisfaction is apparent through the psychological distress of non-resident fathers (Yuan, 2016) that can emerge as a result of co-parenting conflict, limited engagement with their child, and in some instances, a tenuous relationship with their own father while growing up (Fleck, Hudson, Abbott, Reisbig, 2013). Similarly, children can be distressed or disadvantaged, with limited father engagement (Cabrera, Fitzgerald, Bradley & Roggman, 2014).

Fathers and their children benefit from fathers' participation in parenting programs, yet it can be logistically challenging recruiting AANR fathers into fatherhood programs (Stahlschmidt, Threlfall, Seay, Lewis, & Kohl, 2013). For example, recruiting an AANR father by engaging with the child's mother is more difficult when parents live in separate households (Pruett, Pruett, Cowan & Cowan, 2017) and co-parental communication may be constrained by distance or dissonance (Gonzalez, Jones & Parent, 2014; Waller, 2012).

Effective recruitment is vital to the success of RCTs (Nwaru, Soyiri, Simpson, Griffiths, & Sheikh, 2016) and suboptimal participation of AA men in RCTs makes it difficult to demonstrate effectiveness of individual programs (Jones, Steeves & Williams, 2009). Several factors, such as mistrust of the research community (Scharff et al., 2010; Ejiogu et al., 2011), culturally incongruent recruitment strategies (Otado, et al., 2015) and interventions that have not been endorsed by the intended participants can reduce recruitment of AAs into RCTs (Aronson, et al., 2013), particularly for AANR fathers who may be marginalized by mainstream societal perspectives that they are not interested in their children's well-being (Fleck, Hudson, Abbott & Reisbig, 2013).

Recruitment frameworks have been developed and implemented to encourage recruitment and enrollment of underrepresented populations in intervention research (Bal & Trainor, 2016). However, no recruitment framework has been published that explicitly guides recruitment of AANR fathers into intervention research. Our goal is to describe the recruitment and enrollment framework of the DAAD Study, which was guided by lessons-learned during the first three years of data collection.

Review of the Literature

Active and passive approaches have been used when recruiting non-resident fathers (Hofferth, 2011). Active strategies include direct interaction with potential participants (e.g., outreach telephone calls, presentations at locations where the target population lives or gather) and passive recruitment strategies include indirect interaction through distributing flyers, placing ads in newspapers, targeted mailings and email (Estabrooks et al., 2017). Referral sampling, targeted advertisements, transportation reimbursement, and incentives have previously been used to recruit AA men into research (Stahlschmidt, Threlfall, Seay, Lewis, & Kohl, 2013). Beyond typical recruitment sites for AA men such as churches and barbershops, successful recruitment sites vary depending upon targeted participant age (Murphy et al., 2017). Younger men are more likely to be recruited from city parks, recreational centers, gyms, bars or the street (Murphy et al., 2017); older men from home-improvement stores, malls, fast-food stores and their homes. Nevertheless, AANR fathers

have been under-represented in intervention research to promote positive family relationships (Panter-Brick et al., 2014). This under-representation exists despite the importance of affirmative father involvement for positive child outcomes (Sethna et al., 2017).

Several reasons have been cited for the under-representation: mothers are typically targeted for parenting interventions to support positive family interactions, often leaving the father out (Helfenbaum-Kun & Ortiz, 2007); father recruitment efforts are directed towards settings frequented by mothers of young children or that provide services to mothers and children (day-care, school and home-visiting programs (Kohl & Seay, 2015; Lee, Yelick, Brisebois & Banks, 2011). There may be few fathers readily visible in these settings; non-resident fathers are sometimes seen as marginal to the well-being of the family (Lee, Yelick, Brisebois & Banaks, 2011) and perceived as difficult to engage when they reside in households apart from their children (Panter-Brick et al., 2014). Thus, engagement of non-resident fathers in interventions is rarely as zealous as engagement of mothers and children.

Community-based recruitment of diverse populations has typically focused on specific locations such as barbershops, churches and hair salons (Bonevski, et al., 2014; Murphy et al., 2017). However, location-based recruitment can constrain participant heterogeneity. Further, repeated recruitment from defined locations can result in oversaturation of recruitment venues and community partner fatigue (DeBlaere, Brewster, Sarkees & Moradi, 2010). Expansion of recruitment locations can engender greater trust in research and research institutions (Greiner et al., 2014).

The DAAD Study

The DAAD Study is a NIH-funded, IRB-approved RCT to test the impact of the Building Bridges to Fatherhood (BBTF) intervention against a Financial Literacy comparison condition on father, child, and co-parent outcomes. BBTF is a nine-session manualized intervention, plus booster session to reinforce content learned in the first nine sessions that was developed with a Fathers Advisory Council (FAC) to insure cultural and contextual relevance (Author, 2012). The FAC was comprised of 12 AANR fathers (Author, 2012) who participated in a series of 13 focus groups. BBTF program content includes: the importance of AA fathers to children and families, communication and problem-solving, and parenting strategies for raising preschool-aged children. BBTF groups are facilitated by two trained AA group leaders who employ short video scenes to jumpstart discussions. The videos depict AANR fathers interacting with children, mothers and other fathers in common situations AANR fathers are likely to encounter. The financial literacy condition is based upon the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) Money Smart financial education program (Lyons & Scherpf, 2004).

We aimed to enroll 180 fathers and mothers from Chicago neighborhoods, and follow them for 6 months, collecting interview data at baseline and 6 and 12 weeks post intervention. Inclusion criteria were: 1) AA fathers over age 18; 2) biological father of a 2-6 year-old child; 3) child resides with the father 48 hours per week (i.e. weekends); 4) father has the opportunity to engage with his child. Father outcomes include psychological well-being,

parenting competence, communication and problem-solving, and paternal involvement. Fathers and mothers report on child outcomes that include measures of behavioral and emotional/social development and mothers complete measures related to co-parent communication and problem-solving, and paternal-involvement. Mothers do not participate in the intervention.

This study is still in progress and retention strategies include multiple means of remaining in contact with fathers including: work, home, and cell phone numbers; noting whether they accept text messages; home and e-mail addresses; and the contact information of three friends, relatives, or coworkers who will know how to contact them should their phone service be terminated or mailing address change. Fathers received reminder telephone calls, text messages, or e-mails prior to, and the day of each group session and data collection time point and were given the opportunity to have data collected at a location of their choosing.

Our team included two co-project directors who oversaw all aspects of recruitment, data collection, and the intervention. Recruitment and data collection were conducted by part-time recruiters who employed active and passive recruitment strategies (Estabrooks et al., 2017; Ibrahim, Chung, & Bernstein, 2014). The full study protocol is detailed elsewhere (Author et al., 2016). To address challenges to recruiting AANR fathers from community settings, our team developed a tripartite model of recruitment that integrates strong community partnerships, study infrastructure, and recruitment personnel (Figure 1). The DAAD Study tripartite model represents a common sense system of strategies (Hooven, 2014). Each model component and strategies to address recruitment challenges are discussed below.

Strong Community Partnerships

The DAAD Study tripartite model is built on reciprocated respect and trust, shared power and mutual gain, (Jagosh et al., 2015). The DAAD Study team sought relationships within the auspices of the “community-at-large” and specific locations such as medical clinics, churches, schools, hair salons, and barbershops. The establishment of partnerships with community stakeholders, such as community college representatives began during grant-writing and was ongoing. This collaboration afforded us access to valuable partnerships (e.g., a community college, community-development corporation and vocational training program) and in turn helped sites meet their own program participation goals. Once community stakeholders were convinced of the merit of the research and the benefit to the community, a strong alliance was forged. Involving stakeholders from the very beginning, helped them to buy-in to the research and facilitated mutual regard between the research team and community partners.

Challenges

To blanket Chicago’s large area we rotated implementation sites between west and southside Chicago communities which are heavily populated by AAs. This structure posed challenges. In order to maintain relationships with community partners on both sides of Chicago we had to nurture relationships on one side of Chicago while ramping up recruitment efforts on the

other side. Our limited recruitment staff, however, tended to focus on one side of the city at a time.

Community organizations and community members acknowledged that the DAAD Study was an important nursing research study offering valuable programs to AA fathers and families. However, verbal buy-in by some community partners, while good, was insufficient when partners only used passive recruitment strategies such as passing out flyers. Recruitment was more successful when community partners encouraged fathers to immediately call the study line or a recruitment-team member.

Staff turnover, commonplace in community-based RCTs, also disrupted relationship-building with community partners (Chang et al., 2017) because training new research assistants and re-establishing working relationships took time (Bonevski, et al., 2014). Reasons for turnover included inability to follow the recruitment-protocol, challenges with computer-based data collection, and hesitancy approaching potential participants. Other recruiters left for full-time employment or returned to school (Chang et al., 2017).

Strategies

To ensure we were conducting relevant research that resonated with community gatekeepers (Yancey, Ortega, & Kumanyika, 2006), we highlighted the mutual benefits of our research to the AA community. We stressed the life-long beneficial impact of positive father involvement on children and fathers themselves. We informed prospective participants and stakeholders of father-specific behaviors and parenting skills that complement the parenting of maternal caregivers (Meuwissen & Carlson, 2015); and that children benefit from both paternal and maternal parenting.

We gave back to the community in tangible ways while conducting the intervention by hiring community members as recruiters and contracting with local businesses to supply space and food for group meetings. We provided support to community organizations by organizing a cadre of interested student volunteers to support community events. For example, we recruited student volunteers to assist in a neighborhood school's father-daughter dance. We used active recruitment strategies by requesting direct introductions to fathers via text or telephone. Recruiters were then able to immediately describe the study to fathers in detail at the point of contact.

Finally, we tapped into the expertise of a community advisory board that offered recommendations on engaging potential participants and the community at large (Dancy, Wilbur, Talashek, Bonner, & Barnes-Boyd, 2004). The community advisory board, which consisted of 21 members who either lived in the community or worked with residents of the community, shared a commitment to eliminating health disparities in African Americans. Recommendations included: (1) developing a father resource guide with content detailing inexpensive things to do in the city with their children and describing the benefits of exploring libraries and museums; (2) detailing to prospective participants trust-building undertakings (e.g. conducting the study in a safe environment, and providing privacy & confidentiality in the intervention groups; and (3) having a ceremony and certificate-of-completion at the end of the program.

Study Infrastructure

Study infrastructure, a foundational concept for recruiting research participants, was informed by the concepts of project management which are often used within business, engineering, construction and technology disciplines. Theory for project management remains nascent (Leybourne, 2007), yet theoretical principles of project management were helpful in underpinning study infrastructure for the DAAD Study. Project management included the interlinking of relationships, tasks, activities, and project structure (Leybourne, 2007); and the project life cycle framework (phase-1 conceptual, phase-2 planning, phase-3 execution, and phase-4 closure) informed research development and implementation. Phase 1 was completed during the process of grant-writing and funding procurement. The study infrastructure was situated within both planning and execution phases of the project life cycle. For the DAAD Study, the project director, project coordinator, and research assistants were the front-line workers connected to phase-3. The project director and coordinator were responsible for overseeing participant recruitment and enrollment by several part-time recruiters. The project director also tracked recruiters' schedules, and coordinated recruitment and interviewing. Other stakeholders (PI, Co-Is, co-project director) also guided project management planning and execution.

Challenges

Study infrastructure can be particularly challenging at the onset of a new research study because researchers must anticipate all aspects of tracking and monitoring. Accordingly, adjustments were continually made. For instance, there were several renditions and platforms for the DAAD Study tracking system. Our initial tracking system began with an Access database that allowed the research team to track study personnel's contact with participants, participant eligibility, scheduling, and longitudinal data collection. This system evolved to include tracking and documenting changes in participant contact information over time.

Another challenge was associated with the costs/benefits of employing a human resource model that relied primarily on multiple part-time recruiters. The investigators determined this model to be more cost-effective than hiring full-time recruiters, and to align more seamlessly with the ebb-and-flow of intermittent episodes of data collection. However, part-time recruiters had competing demands, as they were likely to be working more than one job, or in school part or full-time. Recruiters also resigned to take full-time jobs. Overall recruiter attrition was fifty percent annually.

It was often necessary to reschedule appointments before successfully conducting an interview (Fouad et al., 2014); participants had varying work and school schedules, no-showed for appointments, and had intermittent or interrupted access to working cell phones. Therefore the DAAD Study infrastructure included monitoring weekly recruitment and enrollment targets, tracking data collection interviews, maintaining data integrity and adjusting for recruiter turn-over.

Strategies

An electronic password-protected study tracker was created in Access, which proved to be an effective platform to host participant information, and monitor recruitment, eligibility, and data collection. We created an additional Access database tracker to monitor participant contact attempts and community-based recruitment efforts. This database helped our study-team monitor community events and commitments to community organizations that helped to maintain trust and strong community partnerships.

The tracker also helped us stay abreast of fruitful recruitment venues, individuals, and organizations. For example recruitment efforts directed towards individuals included approaching AA males. If the men we approached were ineligible, we used referral sampling with AA men and women with young children to reach potentially eligible fathers. Prospective participants were directed to the telephone study line or website or given a recruiter's telephone number. A member of the research team then reached out to contact them. Our study recruitment flyers included a Quick Response code so individuals could use their mobile devices to link directly to an online interest form. That form was also available on our institution's clinical trials page via hyperlink.

Detailed recruitment information was documented in the recruitment tracker. We recorded the name and location of the recruitment site, contact person, and whether a live presentation was given. We also left flyers and noted when the site should be visited again. This information was monitored by the project director and research team. Reports were generated that depicted recruitment activities. The recruitment tracker was also used to monitor email and phone calls to the personnel at community recruitment sites.

This database, in conjunction with no-cost Google search engine tools (i.e. Gmail, Google Voice and Google Docs), was used to track recruitment efforts, monitor recruiter productivity, and gauge progress in meeting weekly targets. Google tools were used to keep recruiters' personal account information separate from the study, and yet take advantage of readily available technology. Google Voice allowed team members to create a separate phone number that could be given to potential research participants and community liaisons that would ring on each recruiter's personal phone.

Recruiters used Google Docs to record scheduled appointments and outline their future availability, which allowed our team of multiple part-time recruiters to track upcoming events; kept study personnel abreast of recruiter availability; allowed recruiters to confirm appointments scheduled by a team member on their behalf; and allowed recruiters to document hours worked.

The complexity of overseeing multiple moving parts while recruiting led us to hire a full-time research coordinator who assisted the project director with human resource management of recruitment personnel, maintaining strong community partnerships, and addressing infrastructure-related concerns.

Recruitment Personnel

It was important to have well-trained recruitment personnel who fully understood the study and the community (Szabo, Whitlatch, Orsulic-Jeras, & Johnson, 2016). Thus employing well-trained, recruiters who embraced a strengths-based perspective of AA fathers and families was the third component of the DAAD Study recruitment model.

Challenges

Mandatory universal training (CITI; Collaborative Institutional Training Initiatives and other study specific training (i.e. Mandated Reported Training) were conducted; however study specific training and retraining to address turnover was the most time consuming. This is because all research assistants needed time to fully understand their job including using technology (i.e. Research Electronic Data Capture (REDCap), Microsoft Access, Google Voice and Docs) navigating the community, mastering the art of developing and maintaining relationships in the community, and developing skills such as consenting and interviewing participants. Even recruitment personnel with previous research experience needed to learn the nuances of study procedures and tools. Recruitment training time was individualized despite the pressure to address the recruitment needs of the study. For instance, it was considered imprudent to allow new personnel to recruit in the community prior to them being comfortable with the technology and tools needed for the ethical conduct of research and proper documentation of their efforts. Consequently, as a function of the flexible part-time hiring model, when recruiters turned over, recruitment and data collection stalled.

Strategies

The literature supports the importance of cultural congruency for recruiting AA fathers (Dancy, Wilbur, Talashek, Bonner, & Barnes-Boyd, 2004; Luebbert, 2016). We hired culturally and gender-congruent recruiters because it improves trust, comfort and willingness to participate in research (Luebbert, 2016). Since we enrolled both AA fathers and mothers, we also hired AA female recruiters. This was particularly important when there were contentious relationships between unmarried parents because mothers were often unenthusiastic about being contacted by male recruiters. To address this challenge we developed explicit messages to handle initial reluctance and garner mother participation. We first validated the mother's expressed concerns about the father's likelihood to follow through, and then highlighted the potential value of their child's father participating in the study before encouraging participation.

Strong interpersonal skills and an existing connection to and knowledge of the community were key characteristics we looked for when hiring recruiters. We informed potential recruiters that the study was headed by an AA principal investigator who worked with an advisory board of AA fathers to develop the intervention. We also highlighted the potential benefits of this study to the AA community. Recruiter retention strategies included providing opportunities for personnel to present at conferences, co-author manuscripts, and take advantage of educational opportunities available through our institution to advance their career goals.

The comprehensive training manual for recruiters included a detailed study description, recruiter roles and responsibilities, and pictorial depictions of the technology used to collect data, track participants, and report time and attendance. Trainees had to pass periodic test-outs to demonstrate their expertise in recruiting, obtaining informed consent, and data collection. The test-outs were done via paper and through mock-recruitment opportunities. Recruiter-trainees benefited from practice-recruitment sessions with trusted community partners. These opportunities to demonstrate comfort and competence with their role as recruiters ensured readiness to independently work in the community, and boosted confidence in their ability to recruit and interview participants. Trainees were only allowed to fulfill roles after they demonstrated competency. For example, we allowed personnel to recruit but not interview or to interview but not complete the consenting process. Other members of the team stepped in to complete aspects of the recruiters' roles until they were fully competent. This process maintained study integrity while allowing recruiters time to master all facets of their role. Recruiters were considered to be fully trained and independent once they mastered all aspects of recruitment and data collection. The length of time to achieve this level of competence varied from 1-3 months.

Conclusions/Lessons Learned

Models for recruiting AA participants into research studies have rarely been used with AANR fathers. Dilworth-Anderson (2011) describes the intersection between culture and recruitment strategies, noting that researchers who understand cultural and contextual considerations for their population of interest may be more likely to surmount recruitment challenges. The DAAD Study tripartite model of recruitment facilitated strong community partnerships and connections with intended participants, sound study infrastructure, and hiring and training of recruitment personnel who imbued the cultural sensitivity and commitment of the research investigators. At the end of the third year of our 4-year study we had randomized 157 of our targeted enrollment number ($n = 180$). All fathers reported being satisfied or highly satisfied with the study and reported that they would recommend or highly recommend the study to other fathers.

The lessons learned in this study (Table 1) highlight the importance of aligning effective research practices for conducting research into a recruitment nexus that captures all three components of the tripartite model. The intersection of the components of the model will likely vary based upon the individual needs of the study. Nevertheless, the key lessons-learned can be translated beyond the DAAD Study and can engender successful recruitment that builds trust and addresses disparities in underserved communities.

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Figure 1.

Table 1**Lessons Learned**

Strong Community Partnerships	
Plan to give back to the community in tangible ways as a component of conducting community-based research such as by using community vendors. When giving back, remember that community partners are the best decision makers when it comes to informing the types of programs, services and resources that are needed, so listen to them. When conducting a research study across a large geographical or urban landscape it takes time to build and maintain community relationships that facilitate participant recruitment. Therefore, it would be prudent to begin establishing relationships during grant writing. Maintaining an extended presence in one location (e.g. one side of town) prior to switching to an alternative location is also helpful.	
Study Infrastructure	
Explore the project management literature as a mechanism for guiding the study infrastructure. The project management process, which can be individualized to meet the needs of distinct research studies, can inform research from its inception to conclusion. Investigate recruitment frameworks and research team member scheduling systems during the planning stage of the study, rather than after the study has been funded. Advanced planning will allow the research team to get a jump-start on delineating study process and procedures.	
Recruitment Personnel	
Recruitment is a time consuming endeavor and the individual responsible for overseeing members of the recruitment team and all recruitment activities is likely to be more effective if recruiters have consistent schedules. For example, if part-time time recruiters are used, their schedule must be consistent (e.g. working Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday from 8:00 am to 12:00 pm). The knowledge and abilities of recruiters must be respected and supported. Provide opportunities for recruitment personnel to advance their education and skills. These opportunities in consort with full-time benefitted positions can optimize recruiter retention and decrease the costs associated with high recruiter turnover.	
The Intersection of the Tripartite Model	
The recruitment nexus is where all three parts of the tripartite model intersect. The intersection will vary based upon the research investigators, the community and the type of study. All parts of the model may not be weighted equally, but all three should be thoughtfully considered.	