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This study's goal was to identify how to increase National Guard and Reserve military family participation in research. Compared to Active Duty, families of National Guard and Reserve members are more geographically dispersed and less connected to a military base which can prove problematic for research recruitment and participation. We conducted a focus group study with Service Members and spouses (N = 14) to ascertain their perspectives on (a) whether National Guard and Reserve families would be interested in participating in research studies, (b) potential effective strategies for recruitment, (c) ideal data collection procedures, and (d) how to retain these families in longitudinal studies. Information provided in the focus groups was assessed using open and axial coding for themes. The majority of participants indicated that National Guard and Reserve families would be interested and willing to participate in research. Participants delineated several perceived participation barriers, however. The most-cited obstacles were time constraints and limited proximity to research study locations. Service Members and spouses were unanimous in their noted preference for internet surveys and indicated that researchers need to build relationships with potential participants, particularly if they intend to retain military families in longitudinal studies.

Keywords: Military families, research participation, focus groups, recruitment, retention, National Guard and Reserve

Since 2001, more than two million U.S. military members have been deployed to fight the Global War on Terror (Institute of Medicine, 2013) which has impacted over one million spouses and children (McFarlane, 2009). To better understand military families, help them navigate challenges, and build on their strengths, there has been a surge of research with this population (Meadows, 2012). Despite the recent increase in research, there are still unanswered questions

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regarding risk and resilience in military families, mostly due to a lack of longitudinal studies (Meadows, 2012; Segal & Kleykamp, 2011). Many studies are also limited to small, non-representative samples. Furthermore, compared to their Active Duty counterparts, much less is known about the experiences of Service Members and family members in the reserve component as they are geographically dispersed (Lamberg, 2004).

In general, little is known about how best to engage military families in research. Because military families face multiple, unique stressors, especially during deployment (Segal & Kleykamp, 2011), researchers need to understand how to best accommodate them vis-à-vis research participation. This study used a focus group format to speak with Service Members and military spouses/partners with the intent of better understanding how to improve the recruitment, participation, and retention of military families in research studies. To our knowledge, this was the first study documenting military families' perspectives on research participation.

Method

Participants

Participants ($N = 14$; 57% female) were Veterans, current Service Members, and military spouses who attended a military-sponsored family fair in 2012. Seven were spouses of Service Members or Veterans. Seven were Service Members or Veterans, three of whom had spouses who were also Service Members or Veterans. Sixty-four percent of participants were connected to the Army Reserve or National Guard, 14% to the Marine Corps, 14% to the Army, and 7% to the Navy. The majority of Service Member or Veteran participants were officers. The majority of spouses were married to enlisted Service Members. Eleven participants reported deployments (i.e., of themselves or their spouse). Of those who reported deployments, five had one deployment, five had two deployments, and one had 10 deployments between herself and her spouse. All participants were married. On average, participants were 37.71 ($SD = 9.54$) years old and had an average of 2.57 children ($SD = 1.16$).

Procedure

Participants were recruited in two ways: (1) through an email sent to military families in a Northeastern state by the event organizer in advance of the event and (2) through a table at the event's entrance staffed by research team members. Three focus groups ($n = 2$ to 8 participants per group) were held throughout the event to allow participants to choose a convenient participation time. Participants completed a brief demographic survey before participating in audiorecorded semistructured interviews. The interview questions (see Table 1), as with the general approach, were informed by the broader participant research engagement literature (e.g., Basch, 1987; Colucci, 2007), as well as research on the challenges faced by National Guard and

Reserve families (e.g., Lamberg, 2004). Sessions ranged from 25 to 31 minutes ($M = 27.05$, $SD = 3.82$). Each participant received a \$25 gift card for gas.

Table 1. Semistructured Interview Questions by Category

Participant Interest
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Do you think military families would be interested in participating in a study about the experiences of military families during the deployment cycle? Why or why not? What would their reaction be when asked to participate? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. What would keep military families from being willing to participate? b. What might make military families more willing to participate? Or more comfortable participating?
Data Collection Procedure
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What do you think would be the most appealing method of participating—doing interviews face-to-face, over the phone, or on the Internet? Why? 2. Sometimes people who participate in a survey or interview are offered an incentive such as a gift certificate or money. What would be a reasonable incentive for family members who participate in a half-hour interview? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. How many times do you think military families would be willing to participate over a two-year period across a deployment cycle?
Recruitment Strategies
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What do you suggest are the best ways to recruit military families to participate? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. What information do you think military families would want to know before they would agree to participate? Are there any things we should be sure to say during recruitment to ensure their trust in our study and encourage their participation? b. What are things to avoid that would turn military families away or make them question the study? c. What do you think about the use of social media, like Facebook, Twitter, blogs, to recruit military families?

Analysis

Each focus group was transcribed verbatim. Two research team members conducted a line-by-line analysis and used open coding for each statement, noting themes that emerged frequently (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The next step involved axial coding where each coder independently created lists of codes and made connections between codes. The coders then met to merge the two lists that resulted in a single list of codes, eliminating overlap and using agreed upon terminology and definitions for each code. The majority of the codes included participant interest, recruitment strategies, data collection procedures, and retention. Next, each researcher assigned codes to each statement made by a participant using NVivo 9.2 (QSR International, 2012). The two researchers maintained a 92% agreement and a Kappa of 0.68.

Results

Military Family Interest in Research Participation

Overall, participants thought that most military families would be willing to participate in research studies regarding the challenges and strengths of military families across the deployment cycle. Some participants indicated that family members would be likely to participate in studies; however, researchers would have very low participation rates from Service Members. Two participants stressed that to get the whole family to participate, researchers must target the Service Member in their recruitment efforts: “If the soldier is not interested, the family is not interested.”

All participants noted that a clear benefit to other military families would be an important inducement for participation. One participant articulated this by saying:

Yeah because if it would help somebody down the line...It might not help me right now, but that new family that just got in, if it helps them, five years down the road, great. Because then they don't have to struggle, they don't have to sit on the internet for hours, or try to make phone calls to invisible people that never return your phone calls, or if you have questions, if that information is already available in ten years for a new family that's coming in, it's less stress.

Barriers to Research Participation

Most barriers to research participation were associated with time demands and distance. High demands on Service Members' time from the military, particularly during times of preparation for a deployment, were cited as potential reasons for low participation. One Service Member was adamant that without unit commander support for the study, Service Members' participation would be unlikely. However, participants agreed that command coercion to participate in research would not help as it could bias results. Wives noted that parenting responsibilities could hinder their participation unless the mode of data collection was flexible and/or researchers provided childcare during data collection. As one mother firmly stated, [my kids are] “first and whatever it takes, they come first. So I'll skip that survey very quickly.”

Distance presents another barrier to participation. On-site interviews may be difficult because Reserve and National Guard families are dispersed throughout the country and frequently do not live near a military installation. If data collection requires in-person visits, some participants indicated that researchers would need to make the trip worthwhile by having fun and engaging activities for the whole family.

Recruitment

Participants indicated that recruitment materials had to effectively highlight the benefits of the research. Participants indicated they would be willing to engage in research that was related to the well-being of their peers. A number of participants indicated that they would feel gratified if they felt that their participation would make a difference.

Participants suggested including in recruitment materials how participation in research could facilitate making connections with other military families. One wife of a Service Member said:

Keep us connected to him and other people to connect with that, understand what you're going through. 'Cause when he was gone, we were pretty much, the kids and I, by ourselves. We were pretty much alone... Let's put bows around and then people forget very quickly. They don't know who you are, 'cause they forget.

Participants listed several types of benefits they may personally experience while participating in research: being able to share experiences, feeling a sense of support, and increasing self-awareness. If participants are willing to relinquish their anonymity in the research study, it may be an opportunity to connect with others.

Several participants emphasized that recruitment materials need to be eye-catching to stand out from the copious amounts of military mail they receive, yet not look too much like an advertisement or sound like telemarketing. Participants also specified that recruitment would be greater if studies were open to all Service Branches. Furthermore, participants requested that sensitive information be avoided and stressed that researchers should be mindful of questions about location, job description, and other items that might breach confidentiality, create a security risk, or leave soldiers and their families feeling uneasy about responding.

Participants also had specific strategies to bolster recruitment. The most commonly mentioned idea was the use of electronic communication (e.g., social media, email, and text messaging). Face-to-face recruitment, especially at drill times or during family functions, was the next most discussed. Military OneSource, Family Readiness Groups, support groups, and places of worship were also mentioned as good resources for participant recruitment. Participants indicated contacting units, allowing participant referrals (i.e., snowball recruitment), and using university affiliations with alumni and ROTC may be promising tactics in research recruitment. Finally, some participants advised against using signs posted in community locations or on base and suggested that electronic communication would be easier and yield better results.

Data Collection

Virtually all participants supported the idea of internet surveys for data collection. Unlike paper-and-pencil surveys and telephone interviews, internet surveys address multiple barriers discussed above as demonstrated by the following quote:

I think they would be willing to do an internet one, because if they do it, they can do it at their convenience. If you have one site that they can go to, especially, a lot of them have kids and because of the travel I think they would be much more receptive to do an internet survey...It's so much easier than getting another piece of paper, I mean, which the military's notorious for, you know, just something else to file or keep on hand and worry about getting it back. I do think if you were going to go a different way, an internet survey would be the easiest.

Participants expressed a preference for shorter surveys (i.e., approximately 20 minutes) with Likert-type response format instead of written short answers. Participants also suggested they be allowed to save the survey and complete it in multiple sessions. One participant stated, "Knowing it's going to benefit us as a military family, I'd be more willing to take the time, and especially if I can do it periodically, session by session." However, participants were quick to point out the complexities associated with the transient nature of military units. In particular, they indicated that longitudinal studies would be difficult to conduct because "you may not be able to locate them." With this in mind, they suggested that interviews be more frequent and follow a specific and agreed upon schedule, as much as possible, with one participant stating:

I schedule everything. Yeah because then I know, like it's gonna be every Friday, I know it's gonna be coming on Friday so I'm gonna kind of like make that time to fill that out quick...It helps with the chaos of everything else that happens outside of home.

Retention

As mentioned, participants made it clear that frequent relocations make retention difficult. They recommended that building researcher-participant relationships and researcher follow-up from wave to wave would be beneficial in retaining participants. One participant said the following would be enough to build that researcher-participant relationship:

If you prove to them, we do follow through, you're getting your gift card... You could just call and ask, "Did you get that?" Just a courtesy follow-up, and they see, "Yes, you did," and you wanted to make sure they did.

Finally, contributors unanimously agreed that increasing incentives over time would *not* be necessary for retention, as long as good researcher–participant relationships were established.

Discussion and Implications

The purpose of this study was to understand military family perspectives on what steps can be taken to promote their participation in research. Understanding these perspectives are critical for researchers who want to collaborate with military families in research studies and address unanswered questions in the field, as well as obtain access to a hard to reach population.

Despite the distress associated with deployment for Service Members and family members (Drummet, Coleman, & Cable, 2003; Lester et al., 2010), focus group participants indicated they would be willing to participate across the deployment cycle if the research agenda is worthwhile to military families, barriers are minimized, and inducements are maximized. This encouraging finding demonstrates promise as the demand for prospective longitudinal research increases in an effort to better understand the implications of deployments on the health and well-being of military families (Segal & Kleykamp, 2011). Military families appear motivated to participate in research if they believe their participation will aid other military families and/or have a positive impact on military life in general. The military is a service-oriented, close-knit population, and the desire to benefit peers is important and should be highlighted in recruitment materials.

The participants unanimously stated that an internet survey is the data collection method most likely to yield high participation rates. Internet surveys can provide military families with the convenience and flexibility they desire. This is critical given the multiple daily demands of life: caring for children, working, and contending with the unique demands associated with military life (e.g., prolonged separation and relocation). This mode of data collection is particularly useful for reserve families who are geographically dispersed. As it requires less time and fewer financial resources compared to face-to-face data collection, this method is also beneficial for investigators (Kraut, Olson, Banaji, Bruckman, Cohen, & Couper, 2004; Lyons, Cude, Lawrence, & Gutter, 2005).

Some focus group participants stressed the importance of having unit commander support behind the study in order to recruit Service Member participants. By encouraging participation in a study about military families, leaders can demonstrate their support for unit members and family members and the programs that could be strengthened by new research. Although it can be a difficult process, gaining unit command support can be achieved by some “give and take,” that is, providing some needed service (e.g., offering a free fun event for families) rather than just approaching the commander to collect data. If possible, researchers should involve unit commanders early in the planning of research so that efforts are more likely to yield translational outcomes that are germane to the military.

Limitations

The results of this study should be considered preliminary. The sample composition, sample size, and the short duration of the focus groups limit the generalizability of the results to the larger population of military families. The participants were overrepresentative of Army families, and all participants were married. Most Service Members were officers. Focus groups that better represent other Service Branches and other family situations, such as single parents, would benefit this field of research and may clarify if these other groups identify unique or overlapping barriers to participation. Second, the sample size of this study is relatively small ($N = 14$) due to the study design. Third, the focus group sessions were also short in duration due to the venue from which participants were recruited. Interviews were constrained to approximately 20 to 25 minutes, and as a result, the depth of the inquiry with these families was, by necessity, more shallow than would be ideal.

Conclusions

The strength of the present study resides in hearing directly from military families about their perceptions of research studies, including their concerns, barriers to their involvement, and benefits that are important to them. Military families are an understudied, at-risk population that can be difficult to access, and therefore, engage in research. The more researchers understand how to accommodate military families, the better poised we are in establishing a good working relationship with mutual benefit.

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