Peer-led recruitment of ‘hard to reach’ older limbless veterans: A case-study discussion

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Abstract. Military veterans in the UK are considered a group at risk of experiencing health inequalities and a vulnerable population, particularly older veterans and those who have lost limbs. Recruiting so-called ‘hard to reach’ populations has been a key focus of much health-related research. A key reason for this is the fundamental importance of selecting an appropriate sample from a population which, at times, can be very difficult to find and engage. This study aimed to explore peer-recruiters’ experiences of being involved in a research study in which they had engaged in peer-led recruitment to successfully engage older, limbless veterans into a study. A case-study methodology was utilized in which two peer-recruiters took part in semi-structured interviews. Three themes were generated: importance of the insider perspective; involvement in the wider project; personal and professional gain.

Keywords: Hard to reach, peer-led approach, peer-driven recruitment, veteran

1 Introduction

There are notable challenges in recruiting and retaining certain groups or communities to take part in health research. One challenge is the social and/or geographical isolation which can often impact groups such as immigrant communities or minority ethnic groups, people with disabilities, older people, and certain groups of ‘hard to reach’ men, such as those with low educational attainment, poor income, or unemployment (Brach et al., 2013; Carroll, Kirwan, & Lambe, 2014; Lamb et al., 2015; Newall & Menec, 2015; Shaghaghi, Bhopal, & Sheikh, 2011; Thompson & Phillips, 2007). Members of the military are considered to be a ‘hard to reach’ population (Coll, Weiss, & Yarvis, 2012) and such groups are frequently stigmatised, socially oppressed or marginalised, and occupy vulnerable positions of low power. Concerns about anonymity and confidentiality are paramount among this population, often leading to a general reluctance to be contacted or to share information and participate in research. As several authors have suggested (e.g. Mirick, 2016; Mohammadi, Jones, & Evans, 2008; Thompson & Phillips, 2007) unexpected obstacles in the recruitment process can occur when participants are motivated to avoid potential stigma arising from their participation.

The term ‘hard-to-reach’ has attracted criticism in some corners of the literature (Pringle, Hargreaves, Lozano, McKenna, & Zwolinsky, 2014; Sinclair & Alexander, 2012). Criticisms have focused on definitional ambiguities of this term and the potential for perpetuating stereotypes in relation to the groups to whom this term is attributed. For example, Sinclair and Alexander (2012) argued that the terminology ‘hard-to-reach’ “still lacks definition, has negative connotations regarding the individuals it describes, and has been used inconsistently” (p. 88). Within literature on health
promotion interventions, critics have suggested that the term implies some deficiency on the part of those ‘hard-to-reach’ people; that they are unwilling to be reached, evasive or elusive, or are disinterested in their health (Pringle et al., 2014). Reversing this mindset, some authors have suggested that both services and/or research may be ‘hard-to-access’ rather than communities being ‘hard-to-reach’, and have called for more creative approaches to reaching those who remain (to use a preferable term) ‘unreached’ or ‘not yet reached’ (Pringle et al., 2014; Riggs et al., 2014; Riper, Bolier, & Elling, 2005; Shaghaghi et al., 2011; Sinclair & Alexander, 2012). In keeping with the literature reviewed in this section, we will retain the term ‘hard-to-reach’, but with the caveat that this term may apply equally to the efforts of researchers and recruiters as to the supposed characteristics of the target groups.

Some of the more traditional or straightforward recruitment practices, such as the use of flyers and other types of advertising, may not be effective for reaching ‘hard-to-reach’ populations. Such methods require respondents to actively volunteer for a study, which according to Mirick (2016) requires “a level of initiative that is rare for multi-stressed clients” (p. 485). Not only will the recruitment process be – in all likelihood – very time consuming, but also there is a strong possibility of sampling bias because participants with the initiative to volunteer for a study may differ in important ways from non-responders. Alternative, culturally sensitive approaches must therefore be utilised. ‘Peer-led’ or ‘respondent driven’ sampling techniques have been heavily used and researched as a way of recruiting from ‘hard-to-reach’ populations. Evidence demonstrates that peer-led recruitment is successful in improving response rates, and also for improving the quality of data collected due to personal connection and rapport. However, much of this research has focused on recruiting participants for large scale quantitative research studies such as clinical trials and intervention research (e.g. Kimani et al., 2014). Within the literature on recruitment in health research, qualitative methods appear under-utilised in comparison with quantitative and statistical methods.

Participatory approaches such as community-based participatory research (CBPR) and participatory action research (PAR) provide an exception to this trend. CBPR and PAR have been utilised within qualitative research studies as a means of recruiting but also working with participants from ‘hard-to-reach’ groups (e.g. Holt et al., 2013). In CBPR and PAR approaches, participants are centrally involved in the research from design to completion, often helping to decide what questions to ask and what topics are important to study (Smith, Sparkes, & Caddick, 2014). Most of the methods employed in this body of research rely on some form of snowball sampling, whereby recruitment is based on referrals from subjects initially known to the researchers (Shaghaghi et al., 2011). As Shaghaghi et al. (2011) explain, “the basic assumption in snowball sampling is that a link exists between the initial known subjects and others in the same target population” (p. 88). Recruitment therefore depends on the trust and inter-relationships already existing among the group of interest. However, critics have argued that snowball sampling excludes participants not connected to the social networks that are assumed to exist in the population (e.g. Sadler, Lee, Lim, & Fullerton, 2010). Whilst there is literature surrounding the benefits of participatory recruitment strategies for recruitment, there is limited evidence examining the experiences of peer-recruiters themselves.

1.1 Aim and research question

There is a lack of research examining the experiences of peer recruiters, and their involvement throughout the research project, specifically examining the nature of truly peer-led research as opposed to solely peer-involvement. The aim of this study was to explore the peer-recruiters’ experience of being involved in peer-led recruitment. Specifically, this study asked:

1. What were the experiences of peer-recruiters involved in this study?
2. How did they perceive their involvement as impacting the recruitment process?

2 Method

2.1 Design

A case-study methodology was employed to support an in-depth investigation into the experience of the peer-recruiters themselves, and to provide insight into aspects that extend beyond participant recruitment alone. Case-study methodology is a ‘bridge across paradigms’ (Luck, Jackson, & Usher, 2006, p. 103) and aims to carry out in-depth research for an issue within its context (Yin, 2014). The case-study methodology was employed to analyze two specific cases, and to explore the setting, in order to understand the area under investigation. Including two cases, enabled the analysis data within one case, and across both cases, to understand commonalities and differences.

This case-study was part of a larger study which aimed to explore the physical, psychological and social wellbeing of older, limbless veterans across the life-course. One of the dilemmas with any in-depth qualitative research such as this, is the emotional investment required by the participant to recall and tell their story. The data collection for the wider study consisted of three in-depth interviews. The extent of data collection presented its own challenges as not only finding and engaging participants from this community was difficult, but also, keeping them engaged over a period of time to facilitate complete data collection proved challenging. In order to address this potential issue, the research team recruited two BLESMA members during the planning stage of the wider study to help develop the research questions and also prepare the recruitment material. Following this planning phase the two veterans (BLESMA members) were appointed as peer recruiters and as members of the wider study steering Group. It was important that peer recruits were empowered to have a voice within the Steering Group together with support provided by the research team throughout the duration of the study. The role of the peer recruiters was to support identification of eligible participants and to help them make an informed decision about participation. In addition, the peer recruiters engaged early in the study to feedback on data collection and analysis. This approach had the potential to empower participants by giving them a voice and minimize the potential for a power imbalance between the researcher and participant which may reduce bias and enhance the quality of the data collected. Mutual understanding of the research topic and shared language also helped to build rapport and support effective communication.

The case-study methodology was selected to maximize learning and understanding of peer-driven recruitment within its real-life context within this study. Ethical approval was granted from Northumbria University’s Faculty of Health and Life Sciences ethics committee to carry out this study.

2.2 Participants

Two peer-recruiters were involved in this case-study (one male; one female). The peer-recruiters were members of the research Steering Group set up to monitor progress and support collaborative working between the academic institutions and member organisations. Both of the peer-recruiters were involved in participant recruitment and offered ongoing support to the participants once data collection was complete. Therefore a purposive sampling strategy was utilized to gain further understanding into the role of the peer-recruiters involved in this study.
Peer-recruiter role in the larger research project. The peer-recruiters began to invite older, limbless veterans to take part in the main study in July 2016 via the BLESMA Bulletin, a newsletter which is distributed to all BLESMA members. The bulletin featured an article highlighting the study and requesting participants to contact the peer-led recruiters who provided the main point of contact for participants during the recruitment phase of the wider study. Participants were asked to consider informing other members about the wider study to generate more participants. To further generate interest, the peer-recruiters contacted all regional BLESMA Support Officers to request their support in identifying potential participants. A purposive, snowball sample of 32 participants were recruited from BLESMA to achieve a maximum variance sample. The sample included veterans who suffered limb-loss as part of their service, sustained either in combat or in training. Veterans were also included in the sample whose limb-loss was non-attributable to service and occurred post-service either following an accident or disease related. Participants were recruited who served across the three services (Royal Navy, Army and Royal Air Force) with a wide age-spectrum and including non-commissioned and commissioned ranks. This strategy was used to narrow the range of variation and focus on the key selection criteria for the study. It was necessary to identify participants with first-hand experience of limb-loss and identify individuals who were able to communicate experiences and opinions.

2.3 Procedure

Both of the peer-recruiters took part in telephone interviews. Both peer-recruiters were sent information sheets pertinent to this study and informed consent was obtained at least one week before the telephone interviews took place. Once the peer-recruiters had been given the chance to read the information sheet, had seen the interview questions, had the opportunity to ask any questions they had about the study, and had signed informed consent, a time was scheduled for the semi-structured interview. At the beginning of the telephone interview, the researcher revisited the aims of this study, referenced information sheet, and the interview began only when the participant felt happy to proceed. Both interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

2.4 Data Analysis

The analysis was aimed at characterizing the experiences of the peer-recruiters, identifying areas that could inform understanding of the fundamental aspects of the recruitment, ongoing support process, and being part of the academic research team. Given the contextual nature of the case-study methodology and its strengths in addressing contemporary research ‘trends’ in a real-life context, using two case studies allowed for comparison and contrast between both as well as providing a deep examination of each. An inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was independently conducted on each transcript by two members of the research team, for the purpose of rigor. The six stages of Thematic Analysis were followed: familiarising yourself with the data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006).
3 Results

Researchers highlighted three main themes from the data. Peer-recruiters described their own experiences of being involved in the wider study: importance of the insider perspective; involvement in the wider project; personal and professional gain.

3.1 Importance of the insider perspective

The two peer-recruiters already had an existing relationship with some of the potential participants through their work with BLESMA. This enabled them to quickly and easily establish a rapport, gauge the level of interest, and support the veterans - who agreed to participate - throughout the life of the project. For the duration of the study, the peer-recruiters were involved in the wider study steering group and worked alongside the academic research team developing the participant recruitment strategy. Their role overlapped each phase, and collaboration between researchers and the peer-recruiters were viewed as essential for the identification of eligible participants and the facilitation of ongoing support for those involved. The integration of the peer-recruiters into the research team was considered highly influential in the success of engaging and recruiting ‘hard-to-reach’ participants. The peer-researchers held an ‘insider perspective’ of the intended cohort, deeming them to be in the best position to approach, and provide further details to, individuals most suited to the research project.

To effectively engage participants in the recruitment process, the peer-recruiters used their own personal understanding of the veterans’ unique needs and also the potential barriers that prevent engagement in research.

“I think possibly in terms of having ... being a veteran full stop possibly helped to engage with them to start with... if they know somebody who has served is talked to somebody who has served, the barriers will not go up... and it think that does make a difference” (Case-study B)

“Knowing I was a volunteer ... made it a bit more personal” (Case-study B)

“... it helped reassure them that what they were doing was for a very good... a good reason if you like” (Case-study B)

The shared experiences and shared understanding between peer-recruiters and participants was considered to have influenced participant recruitment, in reassuring potential participants and reducing, or removing, barriers.

In addition to recruiting participants, peer-recruiters also re-visited participants after data collection in order to ensure they had not suffered negative consequences from discussing emotional events.

“I've followed up with... with [ummm] several people just making sure that the interview went alright, that they're not upset. You know just the welfare of the participants really” (Case-study A)

There were a couple obviously who went [ummm] you know because they were doing all the recalls, it sort of knocked them off ... off track a little bit” (Case-study B)

It was also felt that shared experience helped in offering participant welfare.
“I do think it had a little impact because obviously it’s... it’s ok talking to people about amputations, about BLESMA, about this and that and... but not unless you’ve actually physically experienced it, you might not quite get the grasp of things”

(Case-study A)

The benefits of this follow-up were viewed as a way of ensuring the participant felt “part of the project” (Case-study A), and not just “used and chucked away” (Case-study A). As Tiffany (2006) described, “the involvement of participants in the sampling process opens up opportunities for dialogue and education regarding issues like data integrity, informed consent, and the overall aims of the research” (p. 115). Other examples of qualitative participatory-based projects with marginalized, ‘hard-to-reach’ groups evidence participant involvement in recruitment as helping to build trust between the researchers and participant communities and helped to increase response rates (Benoit, Jansson, Millar, & Phillips, 2005; Riggs et al., 2014).

3.2 Involvement in the wider project

Participatory approaches provide opportunities for participants’ involvement beyond the recruitment phase, for example by utilising their local knowledge and expertise as part of data analysis and interpretation. By helping to generate an increased sense of ownership over the research, participatory approaches can also help to ensure the dissemination and utilisation of research findings (Tiffany, 2006). In addition to their direct role in participant recruitment and debriefing, the peer-recruiters described their wider role in the project. Being part of a team was evidently important.

“... being part of the bigger team to help drive the study forward was very worthwhile for me”

(Case-study B)

“I think [the peer-recruiters] tag-teamed together quite well”

(Case-study A)

However, working remotely was difficult, and one downfall to their involvement in this project was lack of communication between the peer-recruiter and the research team, due to geographical location and lack of contact at times of low uptake.

“Because the study lasted...has lasted quite a while and there has been a quiet time from my perspective, there’s perhaps not been as much contact as would have been nice ...”

(Case-study B)

Case-study A described the experience being “an eye-opener” as he describes himself as a “manual worker from the factory shop floor, hands on things”. One benefit from participation in the project was an emerging understanding of research.

“It’s certainly an eye-opener, something different from the norm (laugh) from what I normally do...[I]... think a lot of it is more the academic side of it that I’m... I was on the working side because obviously I haven’t done education for many years!”

(Case-study A)

Participatory research involving peers is most successful when peers are involved throughout, with a clear role in the project (Brett, et al., 2012), and although both of these occurred in this study, one barrier was the use of academic language, which influenced Case-study A’s understanding and contribution at the wider project level.
There’s a couple of times (umm) when the academics are talking to you and the steering group and what have you, you know this stuff that’s right over my head anyways”
(Case-study A)

Although the academic researchers had relevant research experience and access to ethics training, the peer-recruiters did not receive specific training in recruitment. It was felt that specific training was unnecessary as the study involved ‘on the job’ experience that was believed to be more important than generic recruitment training. It was also felt that the individual’s own knowledge and personal perspective was central to their recruitment success, an aspect that is difficult to teach. However, training for the wider research project was neglected and negatively impacted the individuals’ experiences. In hindsight, the development of a “common language and common standards of practice” was required (Tiffany, 2006) and would have been beneficial to the peer-recruiters, participants, and the research generated in this project.

3.3 Personal and professional gain

It was evident from the peer-recruiters that they not only felt their participation affected the project itself, but they also reported feeling their own gains, both personally and professionally. The peer-researchers’ involvement in research is akin to the findings of research participants’ own individuals’ involvement in research; for self-interest, altruism, personal satisfaction, and enjoyment (Fry & Dwyer, 2001; McCann, Campbell, & Entwistle, 2010).

“It's the fulfilment in helping others”
(Case-study A)

“It has been absolutely fantastic. Obviously being...being involved in it and I think actually for me just...[...] if there is an opportunity to move onto supporting another study or something like that I would be interested”
(Case-study B)

However, unlike the research participants themselves, the peer-recruiters gained insight into others and felt as though they were able to help and support others. Case-study A also described the benefits of his involvement in the study on his day-to-day work.

“Certainly going back to [my workplace], it makes me think a little bit more”
(Case-study A)

Involvement in the study led to further understanding of the individuals Case-study A works with, and this has had led to important knowledge exchange, impacting on how he works and considers his role on an individual level.

4 Conclusion

Using a case-study methodology, this study aimed to understand the experiences of peer-recruiters involved in this research study. Previous research has addressed the benefits of peer-driven recruitment strategies for the success of the project, but limited studies have examined the experiences of peer-recruiters themselves.
Participatory recruitment strategies are becoming more recognised, specifically with the notion of ‘patient and public involvement’ now being central to funding success and it is understood that peer-involvement leads to better quality research, that is more relevant to the target population.

Peer-recruitment was a successful method of recruiting a ‘hard-to-reach’ sample of older veterans with limb loss in this study. Within policy-oriented health research, it is paramount that research findings should represent the full range of views, perspectives and needs of the target population (Thompson & Phillips, 2007). Moreover, where underserved communities exist with particular healthcare needs, effective sampling is necessary in order to avoid bias, to recruit a large enough sample, and to ensure the needs of the most vulnerable members of a population are taken into consideration (Sadler et al., 2010). This research is based on the importance of selecting an appropriate sample from a community which, at times, can be very difficult to find and engage. Rather than relying solely on a voluntary or convenience sample, peer-recruiters used their insider perspective to successfully use a purposive-snowball method which recruited a maximum variance sample of ‘hard-to-reach’ participants for the wider study. To effectively engage participants in the recruitment process, the peer-recruiters utilised their own personal understanding of the veterans’ unique needs and also the potential barriers that prevent engagement in research. It is noted by Coll et al. (2012) that it is important to understand the “military mind-set” in order to engage and develop a relationship of trust with the participants. Importantly, both peer-recruiters were involved in the charity used to recruit participants and have similar experiences and a shared culture with potential participants. This insider perspective was beneficial in the recruitment process itself.

Participant-driven recruitment for studies that explore potentially sensitive issues also poses ethical challenges. For instance, it is unclear whether some participants might have consented to take part in the research out of a felt sense of obligation to the peer-recruiter, particularly when there were pre-existing relationships between peer-recruiters and potential participants. Understanding the participants’ perspective on the consent process during interactions with peer recruiters, as well as more formal research ethics training procedures for recruiters, would therefore seem an important element of future research and practice in this area.

If there is to be success in peer-involvement it is also imperative to consider the experiences of the peers themselves. Peer-recruiters in this study were vital to its success, however, the experiences of the peer-recruiters were also of importance. It is evident that participation in the study was driven by the want of helping others, and that their own involvement had an impact personally, as well as professionally. Interestingly, their involvement in the wider project also had an impact on their experiences. Specifically, training of peer-recruiters is necessary, not solely for their part in the research project, but in wider research processes, and academic working.

4.1 Limitations

There were some limitations to this study. Firstly, this is a case-study of two peer-recruiters, and is also a study with a specific population, therefore it is difficult to generalize the results further than this. This study involved interviews which were conducted at the end of the research project, and therefore
all data was gathered in hindsight, approximately two years after initial recruitment of participants to the study.

4.2 Future recommendations

It is important to take these findings into consideration for future work with peer-recruiters. First, involving peer-recruiters in research can be extremely beneficial in recruiting participants, especially those considered as being ‘hard to reach’. However, it is also important to consider the experiences of the peer-recruiters themselves, ensuring that they are benefitting from their participation, either professionally or personally, and making sure that they are getting all that they want out of it. Including them as individuals, and understanding what they want out of the process is important.

The findings of this case-study also bring to light questions for further research. Specifically, further research would be welcomed collecting data throughout the duration of the research project, in order to gather experiences at from the initial participation, through to the end of the project. This would capture further insight from the participants in real-time, rather than all being in hindsight. The perspective of participants themselves would also be welcomed to provide insight into their experiences and perspectives of peer-recruitment.

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References


