



Clinical Method

Challenges and strategies for conducting sensitive research with an Arab American population



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ABSTRACT

Recruiting minority groups such as Arab Americans (Ar-Am) for research studies has been challenging. To date no studies were found that explicitly addressed challenges to recruit Ar-Am for sensitive research. The purpose of this article is to present the challenges across three pilot studies that involved Ar-Am samples and the strategies that were implemented to overcome these challenges. The challenges faced with conducting studies with Ar-Am included difficulty for participants to express emotions, influence of male/female authority to consent for the study, lack of trust to disclose sensitive information, language barrier, and slow recruitment. Having bilingual female recruiters of Arabic descent, engaging the women's family members in the consent process, and addressing the sensitive topics in culturally appropriate language were effective strategies to overcome these challenges. These strategies might be helpful for other researchers who recruit Ar-Am for sensitive research.

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1. Introduction

Successful recruitment and retention of the general population for health research is often challenging and costly, and more difficult when the target population is from minority groups, such as African Americans and Latinos (Ibrahim & Sidani, 2014). Some of the recruitment challenges that are common among minority groups are mistrust, language barrier, lack of access to transportation and childcare, lack of time, fear of disclosing legal status, stigma of participating in research, and lack of knowledge about the research process (George, Duran, & Norris, 2014; Ibrahim & Sidani, 2014; Jaber, 2003; Knobf et al., 2007; Richards & Thyer, 2004). Recruiting minority groups for socially sensitive topics, research that is threatening to any individuals involved in it (Lee, 1993), is an additional barrier that may prolong and complicate the recruitment process (Kavanaugh, Moro, Savage, & Mehendale, 2006).

The number of Arab Americans (Ar-Am), one of the fastest growing minority groups in the U.S., has increased dramatically in the past 20 years (Kahan & Al-Tamimi, 2009), reaching 3.6 million Ar-Ams living in the U.S. (Arab American Institute, 2015). In general, "Arab" and "Arab

American" refers to anyone with family ties to any of the 22 countries that belong to the Arab State League such as Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Palestine, and Yemen (Nassar-McMillan, Ajrouch, & Hakim-Larson, 2014).

Despite this growing population of Ar-Am, the majority of published articles have focused on recruitment challenges among African Americans and Latinos (Ibrahim & Sidani, 2014; George et al., 2014). To our knowledge, a few studies conducted with Ar-Am reported that challenges of recruiting Ar-Am included the gatekeepers' (family member, Imam, and Priest) concern of using the research that negatively portrays Arabs; the preference of women to obtain their husbands' permission prior to consenting for the study; unsuccessful recruitment through flyer advertisement; lack of knowledge about the research process; willingness to discuss the study with their healthcare provider prior to consent; and the concern of confidentiality and revealing medical problems (Aroian, Katz, & Kulwicki, 2006; Jaber, 2003; Kahan & Al-Tamimi, 2009). No published articles addressed recruitment challenges for sensitive research with Ar-Am.

Although the Arabic population living in the U.S. is diverse, they are unified by speaking the same language and sharing the same culture (Haboush & Alyan, 2013). Collectivism, family honor, and respect of male authority are some cultural norms that are shared by all Arabs regardless of their religious affiliation (Nydell, 2012). Collectivism reflects the solidarity of the family ties. Family honor is the name and reputation of the family (Beitin & Aprahamian, 2014) and is represented by a female's virginity, modesty, behavior, and reputation (Haboush &

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Alyan, 2013). Filial piety is the respect, obedience, and care of an individual's parent and elderly (Haboush & Alyan, 2013). Patriarchy reflects males' domination, power, and influence over females and can vary among regions (Beitin & Aprahamian, 2014; Haboush & Alyan, 2013; Nydell, 2012).

These cultural norms and values may impact recruitment of Ar-Am especially for sensitive topics that might not be acceptable socially. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to present the recruitment challenges and successful strategies for three pilot studies conducted with Ar-Am which involved sensitive research (Child sexual abuse, Postpartum depression, Bullying) (see Table 1).

2. Challenges and strategies

Conducting research among minorities is challenging and requires proper planning, preparation, and understanding of the targeted population. A summary of the challenges that we encountered and the strategies we implemented are presented in Table 2.

2.1. Challenge 1: difficulty expressing emotion

One of the issues that has emerged among the child sexual abuse (CSA) and post-partum depression (PPD) studies was the difficulty for the participants to talk about deeply personal experiences that may require reliving the trauma of abuse or revealing mental health issues. Acknowledging mental health issues or discussing anything sexual is uncommon among Arabs. Thus, strategies were implemented to encourage participation by women in the studies to minimize having the burden of expressing their experiences with PPD or CSA. One strategy was providing absolute privacy and building rapport by approaching each woman separately to explain the purpose of the study in a non-judgmental manner. The principal investigator (PI) approached and treated all women equally with respect regardless of their age and literacy level. It was very important to describe PPD and CSA in a lay language that was not biased or stigmatizing to the culture. For example, we found it helpful to address PPD as a mood swing rather than a mental health problem, and to identify CSA as a prevalent social problem that did not pertain only to Arabs. One of the factors that facilitated building trust was that the PIs were of the same cultural background and gender as the targeted population. During the recruitment, the PIs also allowed ample time during the recruitment process for women to ask questions. For example, in the CSA study some women contacted the PI several times to ask questions before they were willing to provide their consent.

2.2. Challenge 2: influence of male/female authority to consent for the study

Approaching women for the PPD and CSA studies was sometimes challenging when women were accompanied by a family member. During the CSA study recruitment, the PI faced some situations where the woman's companion, who was a male or senior female family member, refused to take the study flyer or even listen to the PI. For the PPD study, the husbands expressed concern about the well-being of their wives to take part in the study. Of utmost importance was the inclusion of family member in the decision to participate in the study and assurance that the woman's well-being was the priority of the PI. The PIs established a relationship to build trust with the women and their family members by explaining privately and in lay language: the purpose of the study, how the data would be handled confidentially and results disseminated, and the benefit to the community. We showed our genuine appreciation to the women and their family members for taking the flyer even when their participation was uncertain.

2.3. Challenge 3: lack of trust to disclose sensitive information

A lack of trust was a common challenge among the CSA and bullying studies. CSA is a highly sensitive issue and a large number of Ar-Am female survivors have never disclosed their abuse previously, which made them reluctant to participate in the study. Moreover, a few women contacted the PI prior to their consent with specific concerns about their privacy and questions about who would have access to the information. In such cases, the PI assured the women of their privacy and described in much detail how the data would be protected. Women were assured that the interviews would be conducted in a very private setting. In addition, the PI offered a variety of data collection methods including email and phone interview for those who preferred to maintain their anonymity. In the bullying study, the adolescents expressed their concern about revealing sensitive information that might be shared with their parents. The parents also had concerns about confidentiality and were afraid that the information might threaten their child's safety at school or their immigrant status in the U.S. The PI assured the parents and adolescents of their privacy and confidentiality and was explicit in describing how the study results would be disseminated and its benefit to the community. Gaining the adolescents' trust was also facilitated by explaining the role of the adolescents and their parents in the study and ensuring that the parents understood their rights to withdraw their child from the study without any obligations or cost. To further build trust, the interviews were conducted at the participants' place of residence.

Table 1
Description of studies.

Study	Purpose	Measures/data collection	Sample/setting and recruitment
Coping with Childhood Sexual Abuse of Arab American Females (CSA Study)	Explore the coping processes and long-term outcomes of CSA among Ar-Am women.	One individual semi-structured, open-ended interview conducted over the telephone or in person; sociodemographic questionnaire.	<i>N</i> = 9 Ar-Am female who were 18 to 40 year-olds, fluent in English, and experienced the abuse before the age of 18-year-old. Recruitment: Advertisement were posted on the university website and clinical sites. Setting: Private office at the university.
Risk for Postpartum Depression among Immigrant Arabic Women in the U.S: Pilot Study (AA-PPD Study)	Determine the proportion of women at high risk for PPD and the risk factors that are related to PPD among immigrant women of Arabic descent.	Postpartum Depression Predictors Inventory-Revised (PDPI-Revised) Edinburgh Postpartum Depression Scale (EPDS) Demographic form.	<i>N</i> = 50 Arabic women who were 1–6 months postpartum and had been in the US for 10 years or less. Recruitment/setting: Community health center.
Arab-American Adolescents' Perceived Stress and Bullying Experience: A Qualitative Study (AA-Bullying Study)	Describe Arab American adolescents bullying experience and related stress.	One semi-structured individual interview conducted at the participants' residence	<i>N</i> = 10 Arab American adolescents who classified themselves as victims of bullying, were 14–16-year-old, and spoke and understood English Recruitment: Community health center. Setting: The participant's place of residence.

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