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Using Conference Sessions as Research Settings: A Field Note

Micah Saviet

Springer Institute, micah@springerinstitute.org

Elizabeth Ahmann

Maryland University of Integrative Health, eahmann@muih.edu

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Abstract

Recruiting subjects for research studies can be challenging. Respondent time and burden may pose challenges when trying to recruit busy professionals as participants. Holding a focus group during a research-oriented conference session is a novel way to address recruitment barriers for such subjects. In this field note, we address recruiting participants by word of mouth and snowball sampling for a focus group study held during a research session about Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) coaching at a professional conference. We found that this novel approach yielded experienced participants, with a depth of perspective, who were already primed to think about important issues in the field and had a desire to contribute. Participants commented about the ease and convenience of engaging in a research study during a conference session while they had already set time aside from other professional obligations. This type of recruitment yields a convenience sample with both the benefits and drawbacks of a high degree of self-selection among participants. We found that participants engaged enthusiastically in our focus group study related to the emerging field of ADHD coaching. Study recruitment at a conference may be particularly suited to research on “hot topics” or an emerging field that would easily attract and engage participant interest.

Keywords

qualitative, focus group, research recruitment, commentary, field notes

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Using Conference Sessions as Research Settings: A Field Note

Micah Saviet¹ and Elizabeth Ahmann²

¹Springer Institute, USA

²Maryland University of Integrative Health, Maryland, USA

Recruiting subjects for research studies can be challenging. Respondent time and burden may pose challenges when trying to recruit busy professionals as participants. Holding a focus group during a research-oriented conference session is a novel way to address recruitment barriers for such subjects. In this field note, we address recruiting participants by word of mouth and snowball sampling for a focus group study held during a research session about Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) coaching at a professional conference. We found that this novel approach yielded experienced participants, with a depth of perspective, who were already primed to think about important issues in the field and had a desire to contribute. Participants commented about the ease and convenience of engaging in a research study during a conference session while they had already set time aside from other professional obligations. This type of recruitment yields a convenience sample with both the benefits and drawbacks of a high degree of self-selection among participants. We found that participants engaged enthusiastically in our focus group study related to the emerging field of ADHD coaching. Study recruitment at a conference may be particularly suited to research on “hot topics” or an emerging field that would easily attract and engage participant interest.

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Introduction

Research with healthcare providers, or other busy professionals, as subjects can be an important way to explore questions of processes, of practices, of ethics, and the like. Yet, recruiting such professionals for research can pose challenges. This may be even more the case with qualitative research, as it may require that a busy professional, with a demanding schedule, set aside a designated chunk of time for study participation. In this research note, we describe a novel process, not previously reported in the literature, of recruiting attendees at a professional conference to participate in qualitative research conducted during a conference session. A full report of the study, including results, is published elsewhere (Saviet & Ahmann, 2021).

Review of the Literature

Literature on research study recruitment suggests that recruitment can be challenging and that recruitment strategies deserve more attention and discussion (e.g., Kadam et al., 2016; Namageyo-Funa et al., 2014; Patel et al., 2018). In a qualitative study exploring recruitment for clinical research, Newington and Metcalf (2014) report that: “The general perception of recruitment was that it is hard to recruit the desired numbers in the allocated time and that more

often than not, extensions to the recruitment period are required” (p. 3). Issues of infrastructure, the type of research, recruiter characteristics, and participant characteristics were all identified as factors relevant to the recruitment process (Newington & Metcalf, 2014). In a paper exploring challenges and strategies in recruitment for qualitative research, Archibald and Munce (2015) identify similar factors as important to consider: “characteristics of the recruiter; institutional and community gatekeeping; understanding participants, behaviors and differences; and determining the participant sample” (p. 2). They suggest that the “time and resources required” for recruitment are underestimated while “available, willing and eligible participants” are overestimated (p. 2).

Recruiting health care professionals for research poses additional challenges (e.g., Bruneau et al., 2021; Hysong et al., 2013; Johnston et al., 2010). In an examination of nurses as study participants, a particular recruitment challenge identified was the time needed to participate in a study and competing practice commitments (Luck et al., 2017). Leysen et al. (2019) also identified “unpredictable and busy daily workloads” as a factor in recruiting general practitioners into a study on palliative care, despite the degree of initial interest that had been expressed. These studies both suggest that when recruiting health care providers as study participants, one recruitment strategy to consider is minimizing participant time burden.

In a recent qualitative study, we recruited participants at a conference and conducted a focus group during a conference session. A literature search, on August 1, 2021, of both PubMed and Google Scholar, on the following terms yielded no studies discussing this recruitment approach: “conference session” OR “conference” AND “research” AND (“recruitment” OR “participants”). While the study methods and results are reported elsewhere (Saviet & Ahmann, 2021), this field note outlines our novel recruitment process and study setting, an approach that proved useful for engaging busy professionals.

Background

As researchers, we study a not-widely explored field: coaching for individuals with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). There have been only some 38 studies to date on this subject, examining processes and outcomes of this modality. We regularly publish and actively promote, disseminate, and engage in ongoing research about this emerging evidence-based practice (e.g., Ahmann & Saviet, 2021; Ahmann et al., 2017; Ahmann et al., 2018).

Despite our experience, when we were invited to present a 3-hour long session about our research, at the International Conference on ADHD (Saviet & Ahmann, 2019), we were initially uncertain about how to proceed. Having submitted an abstract for a 1-hour session, we were unclear about how we might fill an additional 2 hours. It would have made sense to lecture about our research for one hour, and entertain questions, but to fill the additional time, we needed to consider options that would provide for a high level of participant engagement. After consideration, we decided that rather than deciding what to “present” during that time, we would use the extra time for what the field of ADHD coaching needs more of: research.

Thus, we planned to actively engage our conference session participants in a research project for a portion of our allocated three-hour conference session. Conducting a focus group with the session participants would both help them understand, firsthand and experientially, the research process, as well as provide an interesting set of data to explore. We decided to explore the previously unexamined topic of between-session communication among ADHD coaches and their clients.

The Process

We obtained Institutional Review Board approval for this focus group study. Our conference session was titled “Exploring ADHD Coaching Delivery Methods: Research and Discussion.” Word of mouth (informal invitation) both prior to and on the day of the conference session was used to invite coaches to this session, inform them that would include a focus group study, and recruit participation. Snowball sampling (Parker et al., 2019) was also employed. In the conference session, we presented about our completed research for the first 1.25 hours (Saviet & Ahmann, 2019) and then shared that we would be transitioning to an optional research opportunity in which attendees could participate, a focus group for ADHD coaches. By inviting the ADHD coaches to participate we lost a few non-coach session attendees but retained enough individuals for a useful focus group. We had participants complete an informed consent and brief demographic questionnaire. We then arranged chairs around a circular table in the conference room and set up a recording device.

Since we did not know how many people would be attending our session, we had devised strategies for moderating a varied number of break-out focus groups. In advance of the conference, we recruited several coaches who would be willing to facilitate if need be. Another challenge was how to handle session attendees who were not coaches, and therefore not meeting study inclusion criteria. In this case, we chose to allow them to observe the focus group after completing an informed consent addressing confidentiality. While some researchers offer incentives for participation, we did not offer any for this study.

The Group Experience

The richness of this particular focus group experience suggests that recruitment of study participants at a professional conference, and conducting research as part of a conference session, can be quite fruitful.

In this case, recruitment at a conference led to a group of eight highly experienced participants, having between 3 and 10 years of experience in the field (Saviet & Ahmann, 2021). This level of experience contributed a depth of perspective on the research topic. Beginning with the first question, the conversation quickly gained momentum and participants seemed to feed off each other’s thoughts as the conversation gained traction. While the facilitator (MS) offered some paraphrasing, summarization of points, and occasional probing, the conversation among the participants seemed to grow in complexity and expand in depth almost organically as the conversation transitioned from one of the four key focus group questions to the next. Of particular interest to the facilitator, participants nodded agreement or added affirming words (e.g., “yes,” “uh-huh”) after nearly every comment made by other participants. This apparent high degree of attunement among participants contributed to a feeling of consensus being reached about the questions discussed.

We observed that participants at a conference may already be particularly primed to think about issues in the field. In this case, as the facilitator, MS had a sense that participants seemed eager and almost excited to be asked their views on the research questions, seeming to crave a medium in which to share their knowledge. It appeared they had bottled-up experiences just waiting to be expressed, as well as an accompanying desire for their experiences to be understood. In fact, the richness of this expert focus group was evidenced by the fact that the facilitator had to carefully monitor the time in order to move the group through each key question in the allotted time frame. It felt as though the conversation could have continued much longer, had time permitted.

Finally, at the conclusion of the focus group, participant coaches actually “thanked” the researchers for doing this “important work,” indicating that they highly valued contributing to

this research as well as appreciated the opportunity to share their knowledge and skills on the study topic.

We interviewed several participants specifically for the development of this article, to gather their perspectives on participating in research at a conference session. One participant commented:

I enjoyed the process. It was great for time management knowing we were taking care of the research there, knowing exactly how long the session would be, and knowing I didn't have to block time out of my work schedule. I felt more relaxed doing it. I also preferred being able to talk about the issue versus taking an online survey. It was a fun and educational process.

Another participant echoed the sentiment about the ease and convenience of this format for participating in research: "I'm so busy. If participating in a study works with my schedule I would do it; if it is a survey, I would probably just rush through it. At the conference I was already there, so it worked for me." Additionally, a participant talked about the importance of participating in research in an emerging field: "It was important for me to participate to support the ADHD coaching community and its growth."

Use of the novel recruitment strategy of engaging conference participants in a study led, in this case, to valuable research outcomes and contributions to an emerging field. After the published study was shared with focus group participants, one participant, a practicing coach and coach trainer, shared the following in an email to us: "Your research is important in our work as ADHD coaches and answers questions ... that come up frequently in our training programs." Another participant shared the following after reviewing the published study: "The findings and discussion of your focus group study... will help ADHD coaches.... Thank you for doing this vital work."

Strengths and Limitations

Recruiting conference participants for research, combined with running a focus group as part of a conference session, was an interesting and effective experience that both we and the participants seemed to enjoy. While we have conducted online focus groups on another topic with success, there was a greater intimacy and personal involvement from participants in the in-person setting.

One factor that may have contributed to the effectiveness of this focus group is the nature of the ADHD coaching field: an emerging profession seeking wider recognition and acceptance. It is possible that members of an emerging field might feel a particular impetus to devote conference time to sharing their experiences in a research study. It is likely that not every potential research topic would lend itself to ease of recruitment during a conference.

Participation in a research study held during a conference session leads to a high degree of "self-selection" among study participants. This can be a factor contributing to potential bias (Lavrakas, 2008a). In this circumstance, study participants are characterized by (a) motivation to attend a professional conference, (b) interest in attending a research-oriented conference session, and (c) willingness to engage in a research project. Participants must believe in the importance of contributing their own perspectives to furthering the evidence-based in their field. Self-selection can function as both a strength and a limitation in a study.

As researchers, we recognize that this approach to recruitment for our own study led to an extreme type of convenience sample (Lavrakas, 2008b), biased by the fact that all participants were coaches attending a conference, having an interest in research, and willing to join all or part of a lengthy research-oriented conference session. At the same time, this

approach led to a very rich data set that likely would not have been obtained with a broader sampling approach. This novel approach might not be appropriate for all types of research, particularly studies in which a wider range of perspectives would be useful.

A secondary benefit of the approach we took in incorporating a focus group into a longer conference session about research was that participants learned about the process of research from start to finish. They left the session having learned about research in the field, the research process, and having contributed directly, during the session, to an important and relevant study.

Implications

Luck et al. (2017) and Leysen et al. (2019) spoke to the challenge of recruiting busy professionals for research. Blocking time out for research in the middle of a busy week during which they are seeing clients and/or conducting trainings can be a barrier to overcome in study recruitment. For busy professionals, time dedicated to a conference is time already blocked out of their clinical or practice schedules and open for broader pursuits in the profession. It may be easier for some professionals to participate in any study in this circumstance, and particularly an in-person focus group. Also, when participants have already traveled to a conference, conducting a study on site eliminates geography as a barrier to pulling professionals together for an in-person study.

While our experience with recruiting and engaging study participants at a conference may have been particularly successful given the nature of the field of study, this recruitment approach may be applicable in various other circumstances. Research in any emerging field, “hot topics,” or potentially controversial topics in any field, as well as particularly timely topics, might be most likely to lead to successful participant recruitment and engagement during a conference session. These types of topics are ones about which potential participants might feel a personal stake and investment in sharing a perspective—a perspective that may contribute to greater understanding of a given subject, the development of new approaches related to a topic or issue, and/or a furthering of some aspect of their field. As an example, physicians are unlikely to be interested in spending conference time in a focus group exploring a general topic such as evidence-based medicine but joining a session around a hot topic or a controversial and timely, pertinent issue such as COVID-related physician burnout might generate significant interest and participation.

Conclusions

In summary, recruiting and engaging participants at a conference session in research, particularly in qualitative research (i.e., a focus group) is an innovative and potentially useful practice that addresses a recruitment concern of limited time available for busy professionals to participate as research subjects. In our experience, this novel recruitment and research approach also allowed conference session participants to both experience the research process firsthand as well as leave the session with a feeling of contribution to the exploration of an important subject in an under-researched field.

The full methods and findings of this focus group have been published elsewhere (Saviet & Ahmann, 2021), providing a valuable contribution to the growing body of research literature in the emerging field of ADHD coaching.

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Author Note

Micah Saviet, MSW, LMSW, CEAP received his master's degree from the University of Maryland School of Social Work. He is Director of Springer Institute. He is interested in both research and clinical aspects of the mental health system. Additionally, he is particularly drawn to researching and exploring client-centered, behavioral-based strategies aimed at helping individuals with ADHD and others cope more effectively, and even thrive. He is a published author and international presenter. Please direct correspondence to micah@springerinstitute.org.

Elizabeth Ahmann, ScD, RN, PCC, NBC-HWC has a master's degree in nursing and a doctorate in public health. She is Director of Research at Springer Institute. In addition to a coaching practice focused on clients with ADHD, she is a member of the ADHD Coaches Organization's Research Committee and is a Professor and Curriculum Manager in the Health and Wellness Coaching Department at Maryland University of Integrative Health. She is a published author and international conference presenter. Please direct correspondence to eahmann@muih.edu.

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