A Theoretical and Applied Review of Embodied Restorying for Post-Deployment Family Reintegration

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Paper presented at the National Communication Association

Las Vegas, NV   November, 2015

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to introduce the theory and practice of Embodied Restorying Practices (ERPs), applied in this case to promote military family reintegration. ERPs represent a sociomaterial, translational approach to family storytelling. ERPs are geared toward individuals and families who have experienced stress, separation, or trauma. A facilitator follows the steps of ERPs to encourage people to move beyond grand culturally imposed narratives about themselves or looped stories of trauma/difficulty. ERPs may prompt families to reframe stories in cognitive and material ways to create positive, unified, living stories of the future that, when reinforced by the family system, give members a sense of agency. Practical roots of ERPs stem from equine-assisted growth programs, but may be extended beyond the equine context as described. Theoretical review shows how ERPs fit in the context of research on family storytelling.

Keywords: military, family, stress, PTSD, deployment, family communication, storytelling, narrative, restorying, equine, sociomaterial,

Post-Deployment Family Reintegration and Embodied Restorying Practices:

Theoretical Review and Practical Application

Even though a majority of military service members and their families show remarkable resiliency in the face of physical and emotional stressors associated with deployment and family reintegration, close to a third of returning service members screen positively for serious, lingering emotional wounds in the form of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI), depression, and anxiety (Knobloch & Wilson, 2015). Such issues can threaten post-deployment family reintegration and prove difficult for other family members, who face their own set of ongoing challenges related to deployment transitions. Family communication scholars have taken a lead in helping better appreciate the stressors and transitions experienced by military families across the deployment cycle (e.g., Joseph & Afifi, 2010; Knobloch, Pusateri, Ebata, & McGlaughlin, 2014; Knobloch & Wilson, 2015; Merolla, 2010; Sahlstein Parcell & Maguire, 2014; Wilson et al., 2011). Yet, good treatment and support for these stressors is met with barriers. Returning service members might delay or avoid reporting post-deployment stress or reintegration problems in fear of endangering their career or facing the stigma of having gone to therapy or been labeled with PTSD (Hoge et al., 2004). Dominant societal and institutional narratives may further discourage families from seeking help by perpetuating the myth that veterans and family members should just "toughen up and get over it" or, conversely, that "the emotional wounds experienced by military families ruin all future hopes for normal functioning." Of the family reintegration programs that exist, many have been cited for their lack of theoretical grounding and effectiveness, as well as failure to treat more than one member of the family unit (Theiss & Knobloch, 2014).

We argue that family storytelling practices might aid family reintegration. Our primary purpose in this paper is to (1) describe the theory behind an innovative program of skills training, Embodied Restorying Practices (ERPs), and (2) demonstrate the steps of its practical application in the military family context. The intent of ERPs is to prompt the individual and family to take control of their own story and path toward reintegration by combining cognitive reframing, embodied storytelling, and family support to shed old labels and narratives and move forward in a new living story (Boje, 2013; 2014). ERPs are targeted at the whole family system, rather than just the solitary veteran in this case. It is a storytelling practice that may be useful in other cases where families have experienced trauma or separation that inhibits a family from moving forward together.

ERPs are related to existing research on family storytelling, but also push the limits of existing theory by taking on a translational and embodied/socialmaterial approach. Translational storytelling refers to efforts by interventionists to use storytelling or, in our case, *restorying,* to cope with difficult issues (see Koenig Kellas & Horstman, 2015). The concept of restorying goes beyond a retrospective analysis of family stories to promote the prospective creation of a new family story. The notion of *embodied* storytelling refers to the idea that storytelling is more than just text and words, but can have a sociomateriality to it whereby the story is told through engagement with physical/material objects.

Before describing ERPs, the review of literature sets the stage in two ways. First we examine challenges to post-deployment family reintegration, given ERPs may be especially useful when family stories are marked by trauma or separation. Second, we explore the range of work on family storytelling about difficult experiences, in order to show where ERPs fit with

previous work. Finally, we introduce theory and steps of ERPs and provide examples from a case application that used ERPs in a military family reintegration program.

Post Deployment Family Stressors and Communication Challenges

Exposure to stressors during active duty, as well as stressors related to separation from families and reintegration post duty, are often implicated in higher rates of psychosocial problems experienced by veterans compared to the general population. For example, veterans experience higher rates of suicide attempts and completed suicides, unemployment, alcohol and other substance abuses, criminal violations, prison sentences, along with the aforementioned depression, anxiety, PTSD, and TBI (Elbogen et al., 2012; Hawkins, Grossbard, Benbow, Nacev, & Kivlahan, 2012; Stewart, 2013; Teten et al., 2010; Tsai, Maris, & Rosenheck, 2012; Veterans Intervention Project Report, 2009; White, Mulvey, Fox, & Choate, 2012). The symptoms and consequences of these psychosocial problems can negatively impact how service members relate to their families. For example, rates of divorce among military personnel are estimated to be slightly higher than the general population (Riviere, Merrill, Thomas, Wilk, & Bliese, 2012). Although some spouses and partners of service members prove resilient in the maintenance of their relationships during deployment (e.g., Merolla, 2010; Sahlstein Purcell & Maguire, 2014), many report significant emotional and relational distress associated with the deployment cycle (Baptist et al., 2011; Medway, Davis, Cafferty, Chappell, & O'Hern, 1995). Beyond spouses and partners, children with a parent who is deployed often experience more behavioral problems, increased anxiety and anger about what their parent is doing, and poorer academic performance (Wilson et al., 2011).

Family members encounter different types of emotions, stressors, and communication challenges across the deployment cycle. Some researchers map these transitions according to

deployment stages (e.g. Pincus, House, Christenson, & Adler, 2001; Morse, 2006). Although we present Pincus et al.'s stages and associated research in the next section, we do so with wise caution. Sahlstein Parcell and Maguire argue that "these stages might provide a recognizable metanarrative for deployment but likely does not capture the varied experiences of spouses" (2014, p. 132). Similarly, we argue that the idea of family reintegration should be approached with flexibility. Even though society has idealized the norm of a service member reuniting with the family he/she left pre-deployment, some families and couples break apart during deployment or soon after. Thus some service members "reintegrate" to a different version of family or create a new family to integrate with once back home.

Still, for the sake of discussion, Pincus et al.'s (2001) deployment stages begin with the pre-deployment stage, whereby family members find out about an impending deployment and often experience uncertainty about the future that can include anxiety, sadness, and denial. They make preparations for deployment that can include both physical adjustments and emotional distancing between the family members (Sahlstein, Maguire, & Timmerman, 2009, Wilson et al., 2011).

Next, during the deployment stage, family members find ways to cope both emotionally and physically without a partner or parent present. Immediately after deployment, the family may be faced with a flurry of emotions related to the separation, along with adjustments related to altering roles and routines. In the sustainment stage, family members become more familiar with their new arrangements and routines. Separated by distance and accessibility, family members grow accustomed to making decisions and carrying on activities without communicating their thoughts and actions to the each other. For some, this promotes a closed style of communication between the service member and family at home (Faber, Willerton,

Clymer, MacDermid, & Weiss, 2008). It can be especially challenging to shift from a closed back to open communication style upon return (Segrin & Flora, 2011). There is strong evidence that during deployment families benefit from maintaining an open style of communication, which helps sustain an emotional connection (Baptist et al., 2011). For example, Wilson, Chernichky, Wilkum, and Owlett (2014) found that deployed parents who were able to have a more open style of communication were met with fewer child behavioral problems and more positive child behaviors upon their return. In addition, military couples who have less everyday talk and avoid more topics when they talk report experiencing more stress (Frisby, Byrnes, Mansson, Booth-Butterfield, & Birmingham, 2011).

In the redeployment stage, the month or so before the service member returns, family members may feel some apprehension about the reunion, but it is often masked by excitement and high expectations/hope for what it will be like to be together again. Finally in the post-deployment stage, initial excitement about the service member's return soon transitions to a readjustment to being together again. Spouses and children may have mixed feelings regarding how to share about experiences that occurred while separated and how to renegotiate family routines (Faber et al., 2008; Sahlstein et al., 2009). Upon return from deployment, some veterans and families also face confusion about how to deal with the uncertain state of their family relationships when they return, making them unsure about how much they want to open up and connect to each other again (Theiss & Knobloch, 2014). Some veterans even feel uncertainty about who their family is. The military family may have replaced their own family as the primary line of support and, indeed, the body of the soldier has belonged to the military.

Existing Research on Family Stories about Difficult Experiences

Much of the research on family stories reflects a particular interest in how couples and families establish and reestablish their identities, deal with uncertainties, and make sense of difficult experiences (Trees & Koenig Kellas, 2009). A brief review of research by communication scholars and narrative psychologists on the topic of family storytelling processes helps to see where the approach of embodied restorying is nested, at least in the family communication scholarship.

Koenig Kellas and Kranstuber Horstman (2015) explicate recent postpositivist approaches to family stories as well as critical and interpretive perspectives. As they describe, postpositivist approaches look at how patterns of storytelling operate in families. An example of postpositivist work is Communicated Narrative Sense-Making (CNSM) research, which refers to "an empirical approach to understanding the ways in which narratives and storytelling affect and reflect individual and relational well-being in the family" (Koenig Kellas & Kranstuber Horstman, 2015, p. 82). CSNM research can be categorized into three areas: retrospective storytelling, interactional storytelling, and, the area that connects most with our work, translational storytelling. *Retrospective storytelling* represents a looking back at a family or relational event such as courtship, adoption, or stepfamily beginnings. The views that families hold, as reflected in themes in the stories, relate to their current individual and relational well-being. For example, retrospectively told courtship stories that reflect fewer themes of disappointment, negativity, and chaos, and more themes of glorification and partner admiration are associated with more satisfied and less lonely partners currently and even into the future (Buelman, Gottman, & Katz, 1992; Flora & Segrin, 2000; Flora & Segrin, 2003). Similarly, positive themes of friendship and closeness in the retrospective stories of stepfamily beginnings are related to greater feelings of family satisfaction (Koenig Kellas et al., 2014).

Interactional storytelling is focused on the process of storytelling. As a tool to analyze that process, Koenig Kellas and Trees' (2005) developed the Interactional Sense-making Rating System. It provides a way to holistically analyzed the degree of engagement, turn-taking, perspective-taking, and coherence expressed among family members during storytelling. Among the four, perspective-taking and coherence have proven to be the stronger correlates to a variety of positive family outcomes such as perceptions of family supportiveness and family cohesion (e.g., Trees & Koenig Kellas, 2009).

Finally, Koenig Kellas and Kranstuber Horstman (2015) explain *translational storytelling* as "research that examines how storytelling can inform translational or interventionist efforts to help families cope with difficulty" (p. 85). They describe how this approach has been used in the Expressive Writing Paradigm to help families cope with traumatic life experiences. The Expressive Writing Paradigm typically involves writing for 15-20 minutes on 4 days about a particular trauma, unsettling event, or stressful episode (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986). In follow-up with participants, expressive writing has been found to be effective in improving phsychological and physiological health (Pennebaker & Francis, 1996; Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser, Glaser, 1988; see also meta-analysis by Frattaroli, 2006). The techniques of narrative therapy, expressive writing, and restorying in general tend to focus on helping families move on from the past by cognitively reframing and finding new modes of optimal functioning. Yet there are few published examples that operationalize how these techniques are applied at the *family* level and, namely, how the techniques of restorying, which interest us most, are applied in practice (Pagli & Ben-Ezra, 2010; White & Epston, 1990).

Besides postpositivist approaches, research on family narratives and storytelling has been strengthened by critical and interpretive approaches. Society has idealized master scripts that are

often twisted in people's own stories (Becker, 1997). From a critical perspective, we too are interested in the discursive and institutional powers (see Baxter & Braithwaite, 2006) that, in the case of military families, either silence or warp the stories of military family members. Some military families feel their family stories have been overtaken by dominant military/institutional narratives about how they are supposed to feel upon reuniting. In addition, some veterans or family members have experienced trauma that makes it difficult to even tell a story of their own. In other cases, the very idea of family has been supplanted by the military as family, or the separate lives that family members have led leave them to feel no capacity to make sense of their joint story, let alone move forward together.

Frisby et al. (2011) argues that when there is a lot that is uncontrollable about military life (e.g., deployment, active duty stressors, and dominant military narratives), communication skills and appraisals of that communication may be something that is controllable. For this reason, Frisby et al. suggests that relationship education programs should focus on specific skills that are attainable and easily implemented. Family storytelling may be one such skill. If not on their own, with the prompting of a facilitator people can learn to reframe and restory past experiences into new stories (White, 2007; see also Baxter, Norwood, Asbury, Jannusch, & Scharp, 2012). Langellier and Peterson (2006) argue that storytelling can be telling but also critiquing, relocating, reframing and rejecting. Storytelling can also be, as we add, showing and shaping. Certain physical environments and material objects can encourage new living stories to be shown and shaped in embodied, material ways. Adults and children alike who have experienced trauma and difficulty may look to material objects to help reveal stories and restory. There is something about connecting to and taking control of the material that may offer a sense

of self-agency. Thus, *embodied* restorying is not just a process of restorying by social constructivism but also one of sociomaterialism, as we discuss next.

What Are Embodied Restorying Practices (ERPs)?

   Practical and theoretical roots of ERPs. The practical roots of ERPs have a fascinating beginning that literally developed on a horse ranch. ERPs grew out of efforts on the part of a team of researchers and practitioners outside the discipline of communication using forms of equine skill training and storytelling to aid military family reintegration (Boje & Rosile, 2015). The team had developed their own equine-assisted personal growth program and were trained in Equine-Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EGALA, 2012). Their equine programs use a 100% on-the-ground (no riding) approach, that in the case of this team, had the veteran and family doing simple tasks, such as leading the horse around an arena, grooming a horse in the stall, and more complex problem solving challenges such as leading the horse without a halter or lead line through an obstacle course of cones, barrels, and rails. Without the need for words, veterans and their families learn to read the body language of horses, who react rather honestly, immediately, and reciprocally to stress levels of humans. Indeed, horses are a kind of living biofeedback mechanism, because over centuries horses learned to fear predators and react to even the slightest stress-movements or body language of humans. This gives people an experiential way to understand their own patterns. In the process of noticing horses' reactions and being in a different material environment, the team found that families often comment on how material objects in the horse arena (e.g., the halter, the stalls) or aspects of the horses themselves relate to their own individual stories and family stories. For example, after seeing a horse in a nice indoor stall, one veteran husband in their equine program commented, "I don't think he [the horse] wants to go out because out there is where all the bad things happen." The

wife and daughter laughed and said, "just like you dad," a connection that became important given the veteran's struggle to even leave the house for daily activities as he coped with flashbacks about what he referred to as "being blown up several times" during active duty. The point here is that the team became interested in the idea that material objects and environment influence storytelling. They become pivotal elements in the restorying process, as they help put images and metaphors to stories in situations where the story may be difficult to identify and tell in traditionally verbal ways. This is precisely the reason why animal assisted therapies are often used with at-risk populations.

Ongoing work is underway by this team and other practitioners to assess the effectiveness of equine programs on promoting military family reintegration. There appears to be hope for such equine-assisted methods. Still, few studies have rigorously tested the methods of equine programs with a control group or by comparison to other modes of treatment (Bachi, 2012; Martz, 2014; Mills, 2013; Russell, 2013). While there are encouraging results associated with other animal assisted therapies, Nuremberg et al. (2011) address logistic issues, safety, training, and accessibility barriers associated with establishing an equine program or another animal assisted therapy/skill building program. Simply put, horses are expensive and horse ranches are few and far between.

Our own team began to ask how/whether embodied restorying practices might be adapted beyond the actual horse arena to another arena that is more accessible. At this juncture, we adapted the use of ERPs for use in a more accessible setting (or in combination with other equine programs). That setting moved indoors where a facilitator could lead a family through embodied restorying sessions in a comfortable room that included material objects in a sandtray—a mini-arena if you will.

Theoretically, the *embodied* part of ERPs is rooted in current work in sociomateriality (Barad, 2003; Kress, 2009; Leonadi & Barley, 2010; Orlikowski, 2007; 2010). Instead of separating a purely social world from a purely material/physical world, there is a much more tangled approach here. Material storytelling is based on work from the Material Storytelling Lab in Aalborg University, Denmark, along with storytelling scholar David Boje (Boje, 2014; Rosile & Boje, 2002; Strand, 2012; Jorgensen, Strand, & Boje, 2013). Sociomaterial storytelling theory and practice is what Barad (2003) calls 'intra-active' with storytelling discourse. Sociomaterial storytelling allows participants to engage with a variety of material/physical objects in the telling of their story. We argue that material storytelling helps to get to stories that are difficult to talk about. Indeed, much of our memory is tied up with material objects. We eat a food, hear a song, see a picture, and it makes us think of a direct experience. Material storytelling uses non-human objects/characters, which may help people to externalize their stories to something outside themselves. In the horse arena, horses and the surrounding environment provide the material. In the indoor sand tray context, participants use material objects and action figures of their choice to depict their story in both material scenes and verbal ways (see Figure 1). A facilitator uses reflective responding, summarizing, questioning, and focusing to help direct participants as they learn to speak their stories about past experiences with the use of symbolic objects in the sand tray. For participants, the objects represent people, places and things embedded in the stories. It is not in any way to be confused with Jungian sandplay work with children where the expert interprets and psychoanalyzes the symbolism of the material objects chosen. Instead, in intraplay, participants comment on a material scene and shape a material reality to tell the story. Clearly, sand tray objects do not give the biofeedback that horses do, but these material objects still appear to be influential in eliciting the story and in externalizing the story. Ongoing

research is underway to compare the effectiveness of different contexts of embodied restorying (e.g., in the horse arena vs. the sand tray arena).

The *restorying* part of ERPs (Boje, 2014; Henderson & Boje, 2015; Rosile, 2007; Rosile & Boje, 2002; Rosile, Boje, Carlon, Downs, & Saylors, 2013) is a unique adaptation of White and Epston's (1990) classic work on restorying. Restorying was originally a way to intervene in family systems, using a text-based approach to cognitively reframe. ERPs likewise use cognitive reframing, but elicit the telling and shaping of the story in an embodied way with the aid of material objects. Restorying is designed to promote, in multiple sessions, re-configuration of a family's story. Instead of replaying and reliving stories of past traumas, the family learns to create a new story of the future. Restorying attempts to move a family away from repetition of a difficult/traumatic story. Pagli and Ben-Ezra (2010) point out people's tendency to assimilate traumatic/difficult experiences into stable life narratives that predict a future consistent with those difficulties, rather than a different future.

In one of the only studies to date to use restorying with combat veterans (not families) returning from deployment with the Israeli military, Palgi and Ben-Ezra (2010) show how an interventionist can help shape memories in a way to "shatter an old narrative." Trauma memories and difficult experiences can be treated as pre-narrative, not fully formed into a new, coherent, self-transformative narrative that reveals positive meaning in the midst of challenges.   In a "back to the future" approach, Palgi and Ben-Ezra treat the present trauma by going back and asking the veteran to find what they call "anchor points" or what ERPs call "little wow moments of exception." They represent exceptional moments that stand in contrast to the old story and can be woven into a new coherent story. In ERPs, veterans and family members are encouraged to consider times when they felt they were functioning at their best (either individually or as a

family), to reframe and externalize problems, and to consider how they might stand in contrast to other people's views of them or dominant societal narratives. They also consider how they can capitalize on their anchor points and moments of exception to jointly function in a new direction as a family. In the end, family members write letters to each other in which they share and publicize the new story as a means of gaining support and accountability (see steps of ERPs in Table 1). Without family support the old story finds its way back and becomes once again dominant.

We do not view restorying as formal mode of therapy. One common mode of therapy aimed at veterans with PTSD is Prolonged Exposure Therapy (PET), which involves prompting a veteran to become immersed in the memory of a past traumatic event and eventually desensitized (e.g. Foa, Hembree, & Rothbaum, 2007; Rothbaum, 2009). Likewise, in narrative exposure therapy, participants relive the trauma story in successive increments (Neuner, Schauer, Klaschik, Karunakara, & Elbert, 2004). Although it is one of the few modes of therapy approved by the Veteran Administration's Office of Mental Health Services and indeed has merit, PET tends to have low participation rates, high dropout rates (ranging from 29-32% in recent studies), and is directed at the individual veteran rather than the family system (Foa et al., 2005; Ironson, Freund, Strauss, & Williams, 2002). ERPs are particularly interested in the *family* story and the *future* story, rather than repeated immersion in the trauma. Also, individuals and families who are skeptical about formal therapy, as we have found to be the case among many veterans, tend to find ERPs more low-key, less clinical, and less threatening. Framed as a program of family storytelling, ERPs casually pose questions to families in a unique material environment (e.g., the horse or sand tray arena) and encourage them to shape a new story on their own. We have used ERPs in combination with an equine program or separately in sand tray work. These storytelling

practices, alone or in combination with equine programs, may provide another option along with PET.

Method

Participants and Procedure

As a means of demonstrating ERPs, we present qualitative data that includes excerpts and material descriptions from two families who participated in three indoor ERP sessions as a part of a larger military family reintegration program.

The study was approved by our university institutional review board. Research took place on the grounds of a horse ranch with both an outdoor horse arena and indoor rooms for ERP sessions. Before the first session, veterans and family members completed a questionnaire of demographic questions and measures of family communication, family distress, and individual and family well-being that were being piloted for another study. The family was recruited through advertisement at the veteran student services office of a large Southwestern university in conjunction with a program on equine skill-building and storytelling with post-deployment military families. Participants were asked to attend and bring their "family," with instructions that they could decide who family was to them based on how they felt, and that they did not necessarily have to be legally or biologically related. Thus we used an open, transactional definition of family, as explained by Segrin and Flora (2011). As advertised, each family was paid a $100 gift card upon completion of the last session. A licensed marriage and family therapist was on site and made available if desired by any participant before, during, and after each storytelling session.

Family #1 included a veteran and his wife who had 1 teenage child, although this child did not participate in the ERPs. The veteran had served 3 years in the military, including 1

deployment. The couple has been married 3 years, right before his deployment. Family #2 included a veteran, girlfriend, and the girlfriend's 10-year old daughter, all of whom currently live together and say they consider themselves a family. All three family #2 members participated in the ERPs. The veteran had been deployed twice for approximately two years deployed.

Prior to each family's first session, the facilitator explained that the research was designed to listen to family members stories about their past and encourage them to shape and create their future story together. Adults and children completed informed consent forms after being reminded that their participation was voluntary, they could end at any time, and their session would be videorecorded. Prior to each session, the family was invited to go outside and visit the horses as a means of relaxing them. Families were then ushered inside for their "family storytelling sessions," all of which took place indoors with a facilitator and a sand tray full of a wide variety of material objects (e.g., action figures of soldiers, military vehicles, children, adults, animals, building, plant, etc.), as depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Material storytelling sand tray used in ERPs

Videorecordings were transcribed verbatim and verified against the original recordings. Participants' names were replaced with pseudonyms. Using Boje's (1991) recommendations for verbatim storytelling transcriptions, transcribers also noted overlapping talk and pauses or other nonverbal emphasis by using brackets. Transcription resulted in 90 pages of text. The few excerpts we provide in the following section reduce the richness of the experience, but are intended to depict the steps of ERPs in the short space here.

Steps of Embodied Restorying Practices

ERPs are typically conducted over the course of 3-4 sessions. In our case, we used 3 sessions that lasted 60-90 minutes each. The steps of ERPs are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Steps of the Embodied Restorying Process

1. ***Characterize:*** "Describe you at your "best," or your family at their best, either in words or by arranging a scene in the sand tray. What would a favorite grandparent, parent, teacher, family member, or best friend, say about you? This is you or your family on your best days or the you that these favorite people know you have the potential to become. In contrast, there are the old 'received narratives' which have been imposed on you and your family by others. These received narratives constitute a received self-identity. For example, society, films, families, and institutions such as the military or professional training, all tell us who we should be and how we should behave."
2. ***Externalize:*** "Describe your 'old story,' your description of you/your family in the past. Feel free to make any problems or struggles into another character in your story (use an object in the sand tray to describe this character/problem)." (Note: Sometimes this externalize step features very little talking at first, as participants choose characters, arrange scenes, and then later describe. Also, some people prefer to talk about their old story before they describe their "best" self.
3. ***Sympathize:*** "How has the problem (the old story) benefitted you or how is it understandable?"
4. ***Revise:*** "Identify negative consequences of the problem." This helps reaffirm the commitment to change them.
5. ***Strategize:*** "Find the 'little wow moments' of exception to the usual 'same old story.'"
6. ***Restory:*** "Re-write history and write a new future life/family story. This time, highlight all the 'little wow moments' from family members and make them the "new normal" (instead of the exception) in the future story."
7. ***Publicize:*** "Identify a support network and write letters to potential supporters to request participation in the new story of the future. It does not matter if the letter recipients respond or not. Consider family and friends who can support and 'call you on it' if the old story creeps back in."

Findings and Interpretation from ERP Case Application

Our aim in this section is to highlight, through transcripts and material descriptions, what we consider to be excerpts that epitomize that nature of storytelling in each stage or ERPs. Because this article is an introduction of ERPs, the goal is not to follow the story line of one family in its entirety.

Steps 1 (Characterize) and 2 (Externalize):

The first of the three sessions with families focused primarily on steps 1 and 2. The steps are not linear and most families progress through steps 1 and 2 intermittently. Indeed, our veteran participants seemed to find it easier to start by externalizing their old problem story (step 2) and only later in the session did the "best" self, as described in step 1 begin to emerge.

The facilitator began by giving each family member in the session his or her own sand tray and inviting them to tell their own story using the objects in the sand tray if they wanted. The facilitator asked participants to describe in words or create a scene with the sand tray objects to depict them and their family at their "best" or the potential that they have to become (step 1). They were told that sometimes there are labels which have been imposed on us by others, for example society, films, families, or institutions like the military telling you who you should be and behave. In contrast to stories about being at their best, participants were also asked to talk about what the facilitator called their old stories (step 2). They were prompted to make the problems into another character in their "old story." Sometimes the externalize step features very little talking at first, as participants choose characters, arrange scenes, and then later describe the problem and how it stands in contrast to their best version of self and family.

The three members in family #2 worked quietly and separately, but quickly set up scenes and characters to depict their problems and old story. The veteran's partner chose a purple monster, which she said is "like my past that kinda follows me around wherever I go." This past included what she referred to as being an "angry mom," past mistakes, and the wear and tear of serving as primary caregiver to her veteran partner who was not able to drive now and suffered from panic attacks. To depict her ideal self, she chose a wise owl figure who represented a new future of finishing her college degree and getting a good job with the help of professors who recognized how smart she was. She longed to shed old labels from her own troubled past and be better at understanding and dealing with her veteran partner's physical and emotional issues. In describing herself at her best, she took pride in the moments when she felt like a good caretaker. She suggested to her veteran partner that she was like his "wolf pack."

Indeed, in describing his family at its ideal, the veteran husband from family #2 choose a figure that was an angel and noted that his partner "was an angel" because of the way she cared for him. He felt worth something to his wolf pack in contrast to the military labels that deemed him unworthy for military service anymore. The veteran from family #2 externalized the character in his old problem-saturated story by choosing a monkey figure. He said the military named him as "unemployable and PTSD, then cognitive tinnitus, it's like a really long list….it's like a little guy in my head that like someone said freak out!" Later in the session as he characterized his ideal self and family functioning, he said, "No, no, the monkey's not dead….I have [Angie and Ashley]."

As for the daughter in family #2, she commented on her mother's depiction of the purple monster. One of the unique features of ERPs with the family unit is that members comment on each other's sand tray scenes. The daughter said, "My mom is over here and then my Mommy

was angry." Yet in characterizing her ideal story, the daughter set up a scene in which her

parents were happy watching her compete in gymnastics. She gave herself a medal in the sand

tray.

In steps 1 and 2, people seem to resonate with naming their problems and wanting to

materially see that the problems can be separate from the self. As for the veteran from family #1,

the first session was dominated by his telling of his old story. It really was not until the second

session that the story of his "best" self began to emerge. When the first session began, he spent

close to 15 minutes in silence arranging a military scene, using objects and figures depicting him

guarding the perimeter of their position at the base of a hill in Afghanistan. Simply arranging the

material scene brought up emotions for him and his wife. His wife just watched him, even

though the facilitator offered her the opportunity to talk and create a sand tray scene if she

wanted. Later the veteran began to move the characters in the scene and looked only at the

characters and sand tray as he told the story of being hit himself with an IED that came offa hill.

He also told about a small child who had been hit by an IED and died in his arms as he tried to

seek help for her. Even though the wife became much more expressive in the second and third

sessions, she was most interested in supportively listening to him tell his story. It was as if the

problems he was describing in his old story were the problems in her old story. His trauma

became part of her trauma. Following are excerpts of the stories that the veteran from family #1

was trying to put behind him:

> I still remember the words too, I was….roger, you might wanna get, uh, every medic that
>
> we have on, on, on the file down to the main….Sure enough right about that time there
>
> was about 15 or 20 uh, about 15 or 20 kids started coming in that had triggered an IED
>
> that the insurgents had set off. And uh, the, the, the little girl that was wrapped in that

blanket, I had to carry her to the expected pile . . . .she might have gotten hit by the brunt

of it, but what I saw underneath that blanket, uh, you wouldn't get that kind of detail in

horror movies, let's put it that way."

Steps 3 (Sympathize), 4 (Revise), and 5 (Strategize)

In the second session, a week later, we worked on steps 3, 4, and 5. Steps 3, 4, and 5

work to dislodge stuck narratives of trauma that get repeated by the individual and family.

Problem-saturated stories and trauma stories can compromise one's capacity to be present in

relationships, let alone dream about the future. The goal in this session is to discover and collect

the bits of exceptional moments, "little wow moments" that often get left out of the trauma

stories. Little wow-moments are spread out in pieces of conversation, nonverbal behavior,

material representations. They can be between the lines of narrative because they are not yet part

of a new, stable narrative. The objective of the facilitator is to move from the stuck-in-the past

embodiment of trauma by all family members to a re-embodiment of a new living story of the

future. It is important to notice glimmers of possibility and small bets on the future. Further the

facilitator needs to notice more than the verbal, but look for ways that materiality calls forth

different memories of events, making it possible to construct new sociomaterial alignments. It is

these realignments that are telling in the body language, movement of material objects, and

fragments of discourse that have not been shaped into a new story.

This session begins with step 3, sympathizing with the old story, but moves into deeper

exploration of the negative consequences of the old story (step 4, revise), along with recognition

of little moments of exception and strategizing about how to capitalize on these positive

moments to move on (step 5). Again, participants do not always progress through the steps in a

linear pattern.

Some participants are better than others at step 3, that is, sympathizing about how the old story has benefited them.   In family #2, the veteran said that "the VA put me to 100 real quick….like when I came back, I got a speech impediment, real bad, uh, my memory was….I was about as functioning an individual as a, like a five year old." But he sympathized, by saying that even though the military thought he was "blown up," he was "gonna try and do whatever to break the cycle….I finally went through and applied for it [VA benefits] and I got my payback and now I have a giant TV." The old story of being labeled as PTSD and "blown up" by the military at least got him some benefits and reason to be cared for by caretakers like his partner. Likewise, the veteran from family #1 acknowledged that his flashbacks, blackouts, and memory loss after returning home from deployment have been "pretty hard to deal with I guess on their [my family's] part." He sympathized with himself and said, "I mean I don't, I don't know, you know, until I come out of it. So it's kind of hard to hear all of the stuff I've done when all I remember is, you know, sitting on the couch in the living room."

The revising step 4 is about further identifying negative consequences of the problem to help reaffirm the commitment to change them. In family #2, the veteran's partner described that the negative consequences of her old character, the purple monster who was an angry mom, were obstacles to pursuing her wise owl, her degree and a new job. The veteran in family #2 explored the negative consequences of being stuck in his old story saying, "After being "blown up a bunch of times…..and retired altogether….If it wasn't for [Angie] I probably would've just locked the doors to my house and stayed incoherent….cause I talked to my dad and my grandpa about it and they're like 'nah, you just get over that stuff…huh? No I'm gonna talk about it so it doesn't happen to me."

In the latter part of the second session, most family members were able to strategize—a critical part that rests on finding the "little wow moments" of exception to the usual same old story. Here participants think of specific actions, thoughts, or behaviors that act as anchor points connecting them to their new story and ideal version of self and family. For example, the veteran from family #2 said, "I dropped the news, and for the most part dropped the internet too [because of how they portray veterans and fighting]. He was strategizing about how to avoid the negative perceptions and labels about veterans and see himself as healthy and functioning in the future.

The veteran's wife in family #1 was able to name moments of exception when they felt like a family again and to strategize about how to promote more of this feeling:

I would just say we like to do a lot of, we do a lot of small traveling…. Like little mini vacations…. we've actually just learned that we both have to have…we both have to have like some kind of respite and just vacation time and we've been, we-we utilize our family. Um, and unfortunately, you know, [Andrew's] not real close with his family, but uh, so it's mostly my family but…Family's very, very supportive…. my Dad loves having a son-in-law that, you know, served, and uh, there just kind of, there is some good bonding that's going on there and uh… so we're trying to…well we're trying to eventually move to be closer to family….Needless to say we can visit, and uh, I can, I can get some peace and Aaron can have some [incoherent]."

Step 6 *(Restory) and 7 (Publicize)*

A week later, the final of the three sessions began with the facilitator explaining that restorying is about creating a new story of the future with an action plan to get there and commit to. After this prompting from the facilitator, the veteran in family #2 said: "Well it's pretty

simple in general…we're happy, uhh, maybe a baby. And I want to be able to drive." The

daughter interrupted by making a bunk bed in her sand tray and saying she wanted a baby sister

in the story. Then the veteran went on to say, "…and do the, the stuff I generally enjoy doing,

like uh I have a real big gun collection that I don't shoot anymore. And I have a boat that I never

take out. Be able to stay at home alone [without panic attacks], be able to drive and be able to be

the rock I want to be for the two babies." This veteran's partner described herself in the new

story as, "I'm gonna be the assertive lioness instead of the cranky mom." In the new story, she

said she saw herself "learning to communicate better without, just shutting down. Just…and

walking away from an argument or when we have a discussion." The daughter, who had been

listening carefully to her mother and [Jim] create their new family stories, said her new family

story would include bunk beds, her mom getting a new job, going to the Olympics, and in the

new story "I'm climbing up a tree—I think."

      As for step 6 (publicize) the facilitator prompted the family members to write down their

new stories and consider who could be a support system to help them uphold this story as well as

to "call them on it." Both families named a support system that included not only their

immediate family, but also extended family, friends, and military buddies. In some ways, the

letter writing in ERPs is akin to the Expressive Writing Paradigm, except here participants are

writing a future story full of hope rather than an old story full of trauma. Also, we feel that

having the family together listening to each other over the course of the sessions is vastly

different than individual talk therapies or treatments. Hearing about other family members

struggles and, perhaps more importantly, their dreams create what Gottman terms "shared

meaning" (Gottman & Silver, 1999). Gottman argues that shared meaning is critical for the

marital bond and in this case the family bond. For individuals who feel that meaning has been

lost or warped, and for families who have felt disconnected, finding a shared dream and new story, is potentially uplifting. Further, sharing that dream with a support system may help the dream turn into actual behaviors and events that substantiate and actualize that dream.

Conclusion and Future Directions

This paper introduces the theory and practice of ERPs, showing how these practices may be used to promote military family reintegration post deployment. Application is limited to these two case families. One serious limitation is that for the purposes of writing this article, we collapsed the richness of the sociomaterial storytelling back to narrative coherence, and admittedly selected only a few examples. Ironically, we reduced material storytelling to the verbal, which is not the way embodied, experiential storytelling plays out in real situations. Still, we hope to provide an initial introduction to the theory and practical steps of ERPs and set the stage for larger scale work already underway designed to compare ERPs with other modes of promoting military family reintegration, such as PET or equine-based programs. Future work will be critical in examining how/whether ERPs relate to changes in family communication, and to individual and family well-being over time. Future researchers may also consider analyzing the interactional storytelling in ERPs, as concepts of coherence and perspective-taking, for example, may relate to the successful development of a new living story.   Given the Expressive Writing Paradigm has been so fruitful in helping people to overcome trauma and improve physical and psychological health (Frattaroli, 1996), we feel there may be hope for ERP's given they take on a similar translational approach. They do so, however through storytelling, rather than writing, and focus on both past and future experiences. In addition, ERPs may have the added benefit of working with the whole family, rather than the individual, and use a

sociomaterial, embodied approach that brings out a story when words may be limiting or not come easily.

For the purposes of this article, we sometimes found it difficult to describe ERPs alone, without further addressing the equine component that we usually add to most of our work. Still, we have yet to experimentally test the combined versus separate effects of ERPs alone, our equine program, and a combination of both. Our thinking is that being around horses presents a safe risk for participants, allowing them to further confront feelings of danger, unknown, and challenge. In addition, finding success in managing a horse is a fear overcome that may relate in an embodied way to being able to manage one's life story. Yet, few people have access to a horse ranch, and we hypothesize here that ERPs alone in the indoor sand tray arena still have the power to be beneficial.

Finally, we add that we have been inspired by the practitioners on our team who encourage family communication scholars not to shy away from developing, assessing, and engaging in interventionist approaches. Family communication scholars have rightly reserved formal forms of therapy and intervention to trained psychologists. Yet there are ways for family communication scholars to apply their skills in less formal ways. Indeed, there are a variety of ways to improve family communication and relationships. L'Abate (1990) describes three different types of prevention efforts (also see Segrin & Flora, 2011). Primary prevention refers to educational programs geared toward well-functioning families. They help families to maintain relationships by teaching skills (e.g., coping or communication) that may help families to avoid or better deal with potential stressors. Secondary prevention programs attempt to target potential "at-risk" families and equip them with skills and interventions before more serious crises or dysfunctions develops. Primary prevention along with secondary prevention are areas

in which family communication scholars have much to offer. Finally, tertiary prevention often involves formal therapy, offered by trained individuals, to help families cope with dysfunction, breakdown, and crisis. Tertiary prevention is the most common of the three and usually occurs after significant damage has been done to the family (Segrin & Flora, 2011). Bradbury and Fincham (1990) offer another summary of L'Abate's primary, secondary, and tertiary distinction as "before it happens, before it gets worse, and before, it is too late" (p. 376), although it is sometimes difficult to draw an exact line between the three.

In this application, we categorize ERPs as secondary prevention, in part because the stressors and challenges of military family life put members at risk. The families in our case, however, were not seeking other more formal therapy. Of course, more formal therapy might be useful for some of the families in our current and future research, and we indeed informed families of that option. Yet, some of the people who may be attracted to ERPs or equine programs may be adverse to or skeptical about the idea of more tertiary, formal therapy, but open to the idea of secondary prevention and skill building programs targeted specifically at their situation. In other words, families might be open to the idea of "telling their story" and "considering how they want to move forward as a family in a new way," which is essentially what embodied restorying is at its core.

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