

RESEARCH

"I Have Served to Tell": A Qualitative Study of Veterans' Reactions on Participating in a Living Library Project

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Since the Vietnam War, storytelling has emerged as a viable intervention for war veterans seeking treatment for PTSD, depression, and other adjustment issues. To procure its benefits, however, storytelling must happen in a safe environment with trusted listeners. This article considers a yet-unexplored venue for veterans to share their stories—the Living Library. Individual interviews of six participants in a 2019 Living Library event hosted by a mid-sized Midwestern university commemorating Memorial Day cultivated four themes: (1) negative experiences of telling their stories before the event; (2) utilitarian motives for sharing at the Living Library event; (3) perceived advantages/benefits of participation in the event; and (4) clear "next steps" they shared regarding their post-Living Library narratives. The authors found that veterans used the Living Library to work through previous discomfort in sharing their narratives in ways that forged bonds between civilian and veterans, allowed them to become more comfortable with their military identities, and mitigated negative psychological symptoms related to being deployed.

Keywords: storytelling; mental health; Living Library; military student affairs

Introduction

Adjustment to civilian life is often difficult for war veterans who return from combat with symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and other adjustment issues. Compared to deployment, where veterans live in a close-knit community and are demanded loyalty from superiors, civilian life can be jarring. Among other stressors, a disconnect between civilian and military life can lead to an increased sense of isolation, substance abuse, and suicidal ideation (Haller, Angkaw, Hendricks, & Norman, 2015).

Since the Vietnam War era, storytelling has emerged as a viable intervention for war veterans seeking treatment. From the pioneering "rap groups" of the 1970s to more formal narrative therapy approaches, sharing war experiences can be a poignant salve for veterans suffering from combat stress and related issues (Wilson, Leary, Mitchell, & Ritchie, 2009). The act of storytelling, among other benefits, allows individuals to actively process their own experiences and, consequently, develop more coherent narratives about them (Mamon, McDonald, Lambert, & Cameron, 2017). It can also, however, lead to a reliving or reexperiencing of the painful event for the storyteller (NIMH, 2001). Drawing on his work with Vietnam veterans, Shay (2003) emphasized that narratives about traumatic events should be shared within safe environments, with trusted listeners.

What constitutes a "safe environment" in the context of retelling war stories? Who exactly are "trusted listeners?" Research has shown that veteran support groups have increased social connection and positive emotion, as well as normalized symptoms among participants (Westwood, McLean, Cave, Borgen, & Slakov, 2010). Other more creative interventions that have been successful include folktale telling (Alston, 1995), art projects (Keats & Arvay, 2004), and theater (Rayneard, 2011). This article exposes a yet-unexplored venue for veterans to share their narratives in a safe, trusting environment—the Living Library. To date, no study of the Living Library using veterans as participants has been recorded, a gap this work purports to fill.

Living Libraries

Founded in 2000 in Denmark, the Living Library (LL)¹ has spread worldwide, operating on six continents and in hundreds of cities (Calderon, 2014). At Living Library events, invited attendees (Readers) and enlisted participants (Books) commune in a public library to engage in 20-minute one-on-one intimate conversations. Guided by volunteer organizers, Readers are encouraged to "check out" as many Books as they would like in a three-hour period. The Books are screened and selected by organizers via the story they

have to tell, which often involves a controversial or little talked about topic.

In founder Roni Abergel's words, the Living Library is "not a storytelling event. It's about having difficult conversations with people who experience prejudice. We're not talking about our garden or our stamp collection. We like to talk about the things that hurt, the things that people are afraid to talk about" (Granger, 2017, p. 20). Human Libraries Australia (2010), as stated in Watson (2015), describes itself as,

[a] national strategy for connecting and strengthening local communities through conversation. Through conversation, communities are brought closer together, attitudes changed, prejudice and fear reduced, and social inclusion is strengthened. It is a simple yet powerful strategy for building cohesion between diverse community members who wouldn't ordinarily meet. (p. 20)

Emanating from the "Stop the Violence" movement in Copenhagen, the Living Library is a form of social activism. The Living Library's social activist roots align it with the potentially transformative and therapeutic act of veteran storytelling.

Purpose of Study

The present study draws on qualitative data from a 2019 Living Library event hosted by a mid-sized Midwestern university commemorating Memorial Day. More specifically, it addresses three primary goals: (1) to assess the power of the Living Library experience to bring people from disparate backgrounds (civilians and veterans) to dispel stereotypes and prejudice and encourage dialogue and understanding; (2) to discern how the Living Library project builds community, given the experience as conceived by its originators is designed to serve the community in which it is hosted in unique and powerful ways; and (3) to add to the literature outlining potential benefits and risks of veterans who tell their stories of military service.

Review of the Literature

Living Library literature

The existing research literature on the Living Library (LL) is limited. Watson (2015) pointed out that until 2015 only five studies, excluding magazine/newspaper reports about specific LL events, had been published on the phenomenon. From these studies, three overarching points of discussion about the topic emerged: adaptability, space, and attitudinal change. Studies published after 2015 have tended to address these same themes.

Adaptability. The concept of adaptability refers to the links the LL naturally makes with the broader community. Ashmore (2010), in her study of the Lismore Living Library, noted the potential of the LL to "forge connections within the community by 'breaking down barriers' to communication" (p. 5). The LL, in the author's view, provided oral

sources of information that served as cognitive mediators to topics of importance to the community. The LL can "include a greater diversity of types of programs and services...allowing for new learning opportunities as well as fostering connections between those with common interests" (p. 5). Similarly, Pope (2013) noted how a LL on her college campus increased students' connection with diverse members of the community: "Students have met and now communicate with people with whom they would not normally have had the opportunity to associate" (p. 292).

Wentz (2012) stated that LLs "weave the library more tightly into the fabric of the community" (p. 39). The author observed the LL's penchant for helping public libraries partner with community organizations. Such collaboration reinforces the library's value to the community, as it "increases the library's resource base, people power, and reach, and raises the library's profile in the community" (p. 39). Lankes, Silverstein, and Nicholson (2007) labeled this aspect of LL as a form of participatory library service, whereby access to local history and cultural heritage is enhanced.

In their overview of implementing a LL component into the women's studies curriculum in Augustana College, Blizzard, Becker, and Goebel (2018) articulated how the phenomenon benefited both the campus library and the broader community. First, by facilitating opportunities for intergenerational and intercultural conversation between community members and students, it provided a "great 'town and gown' bridge" (p. 15). Additionally, it brought positive media coverage to the library and university. Third, it encouraged curricular collaborations between librarians and teaching faculty that would not have come otherwise. Finally, the Human Library brought students into the library who were then "more likely to become more comfortable with using the library and its resources to their advantage" (p. 16).

Space. The idea that "space matters" speaks to the capacity of the LL to mesh with the mission and purpose of public libraries. Not all researchers agree that the two align. Ashmore (2010) noted that by attaching themselves to traditional library structures, LLs might alienate some. Watson (2015) pointed out that spaces designated for countering prejudice might make some members of "ingroups" vulnerable. Citing Ashmore, Watson said, "Some users will be less willing to participate because they do not want to be seen as prejudiced against any individual they wish to speak to; the statement 'What's your prejudice?' can be interpreted as accusatory" (p. 59).

On the other hand, in connecting with the mission of the public library as a public forum and place for the exchange of ideas, LLs can be natural breeding grounds for presenting multiple viewpoints in a "neutral, safe space...which invites readers to ask probing questions" (Wentz, 2012, p. 38). Dreher and Mowbray (2012) concurred in their assertion that a LL event is thought to contribute to a "non-judgmental atmosphere conducive to open conversations" (p. 25), keying into the democratic purpose of the public library.

Space can undermine or enhance inequalities through the ways in which people who occupy it are identified (Valentine, 2007). Writers reflecting on the LL have determined that a space such as the public library represents egalitarianism. Sen, McClelland, and Jowett (2016), for example, noted that the library, as a democratic institution, is "a powerful place of communal meaning that we can all join and belong in together" (p. 894). The LL, where all participants are accorded equal status, inheres an interdependence for the purpose of knowledge production: "Readers need Books, Books need Readers, Libraries require Librarians, and Librarians need good Books and enthusiastic Readers" (p. 896). The LL, in this sense, is the embodiment of interconnectedness.

Attitudinal change. As indicated above, the LL prods a community to seek out spaces that honors difference in an egalitarian setting. Thus, it has the potential to impact attitudinal change for both Reader and Book.

Reader attitudinal change

To date only two quantitative-based studies have examined Reader attitudinal change brought about by the LL. Orosz, Banki, Bthe, Toth-Kiraly, and Tropp (2016) reported that participants scored consistently lower levels of prejudice on two separate prejudice measures (social distance and modern racism) toward two distinct target groups in Hungary—Roma and LGBT people—because of participating in a Living Library. The authors noted that sharing personal stories, which are likely to elicit greater feelings of intergroup closeness and intimacy, yields stronger effects on affectively-based dimensions as compared to cognitively-based dimensions of prejudice. Furthermore, their study indicated that the perceived prejudice of one's peers did not seem to fundamentally alter the effectiveness of the LL intervention.

Groyecka, Witkowska, Wrobel, Klamut, and Skrodzka (2019) hypothesized in their study of a LL event in Wroclaw, Poland that talking to Books would affect social distance, homonegativity, and attitudes about diversity towards gays and lesbians, transgender individuals, Muslims, dark-skinned people, and Roma. Online surveys following the event elicited responses from 87 Readers. Using a series of ANOVAs that measured participants' attitudes before and after the event, the authors found that participation in the LL significantly changed the preferred social distance with Muslims, but not the other minority groups represented. The shift in homonegativity and general attitude toward diversity workgroups was insignificant. The researchers found that offering Books about Muslims has the potential of "improving not only the extremely negative but also potentially superficial opinions that Poles have about Muslims" (p. 318). Why attitude shifts did not occur among the other populations can be attributed to the origins of certain prejudice. In the authors' words, "prejudices toward Muslims are not that strongly ingrained, suggesting they are easier to shift as they depend on media, rather than real contact" (p. 319).

The bulk of literature related to LL and Reader attitudinal change has used qualitative methodology. Kudo, Motohashi, Enomoto, Kataoka, and Yajima (2011), utilizing on-site questionnaires of HLs as their data source, denoted two findings related to attitudinal change. First, Readers increased their knowledge and empathy regarding groups of people represented by Books. In some cases, this change involved the Books "setting the record straight" by addressing common misconceptions about issues (Dreher & Mowbray, 2012). Clover and Dogus (2014) similarly recognized that some Readers in the LL events they observed intended to reflect on the social situations represented by the Books. These individuals were able to recognize their personal complicity in perpetuating myths about problematic social issues based on stereotypes they held about the Books.

Readers in Jackson, Huang, and Kasowitz-Scheer's (2015) study of a mobile application to mediate the face-to-face encounters in an LL event noted attitudinal changes. Responding to a series of open-ended questions about their experiences, Readers recognized benefits from being part of the LL event. Responses from questionnaires included increased awareness of the various topics discussed and general lessons learned, such as "motivating yourself to depend on your strengths" and "don't take yourself too seriously" (p. 49).

For Readers in Sen, McClelland, and Jowett's (2016) study, the LL experience took on a utilitarian bent. Reporting on the implementation of the LL in four postgraduate social work courses in the UK, the authors advocated for its use in motivating Readers to think about their work and careers as social workers. Per an analysis of the post-event evaluation data, Books perceived that narrating their experiences had influenced the future practice of the student participants. Student Readers at the event corroborated the Books' assumption: "The power of accessing direct narratives about good and poor social work practice resonated strongly" (p. 901). There was further, albeit preliminary, evidence that some students carried this knowledge into their field placements, which, according to the authors, provided "illustrative support for the contention that the Library can function as a connective space between the *learning about* and the *doing of social work*" (p. 902).

Book attitudinal change

Other studies have focused on the impact of LLs on those individuals enlisted as Books. Kudo et al. (2011), for example found that Books increased their ability to be self-reflexive about their narratives. Participants from the study used the term "discovering the unknown self" as a process that emanated from dialogue with Readers. Kinsley (2009) noted that allowing Books to create their own titles and book summaries is key to this outcome:

This can mean details need to be modified a number of times before the Book is satisfied the catalogue or title is correct. After a Living Library session, the Liv-

ing Book can become aware the details may not be exactly what was intended. (p. 22)

Ashmore (2010) also commented on this possibility: "In the process of creating a narrative in cooperation with Readers, Books actually alter their understanding of their own self-appointed topic and what it means to them" (p. 3).

According to Jackson, Huang, and Kasowitz-Scheer (2015), Books perceived that their presence allowed Readers to gain a different perspective on issues not typically discussed. They admitted their satisfaction at being able to help Readers sort through their own experiences. In the words of one participant, "What I had dealt with and struggled through on my own was of value to someone else facing the same concerns was a good feeling" (p. 49). Similarly, Books in Brown's (2016) study anecdotally stated how their involvement in the HL made them feel valued, as if they were "making an active contribution towards the promotion of tolerance and diversity" (p. 8).

Finally, Dobreski and Huang (2016) listed a series of benefits articulated by Books in exit surveys from four HL events hosted by three different institutions. Eight major categories of benefit were determined, ranging from altruistic to more self-focused in nature. The former included helping and teaching others. More self-focused advantages of HL participation, as reported by participants, were learning, self-expression, reflection, therapeutic benefits, and personal enjoyment. The most reported benefit in the authors' study was the ability to make connections. In the words of one participant, "It was a great way to meet a pretty diverse group of people" (p. 2).

Veteran storytelling literature

There are numerous recorded benefits of storytelling for veterans. The most discussed benefit across many storytellers stems from this idea that there is an unbridged gap between civilians and veterans in society (Mamon, McDonald, Lambert, & Cameron, 2017). Through storytelling, veterans can bridge that gap and bring an understanding of their experiences during and after deployment to civilians in ways that benefit both groups. The social connection between the two groups is strengthened through storytelling, which aids in normalizing the symptoms that they experience from their service.

A related benefit of storytelling stems from its reminiscent quality. While serving, veterans typically experience tight-knit social support. Many describe a sense of accountability and loyalty to their platoon or squad (Mamon et al., 2017). Rose, Herd, & Palacio (2017) noted that this sense of community is unique to the military and is not always found in the competitive and individualized civilian sector. Storytelling, then, helps veterans structure their experiences in a way that feels familiar and comforting to them. It also brings them in contact with their peers, which can help alleviate stress and anxiety of sharing with others. Storytelling has allowed them to form a new identity for themselves that

blends their experiences from the service and their new civilian lifestyle in ways that are comforting, therapeutic, and less stressful (Woolf, 2012).

Veterans additionally report that their feelings of isolation go down when sharing their stories with others (Mamon et al., 2017). They can share in ways that gives them both control over their experiences and allows others to level with that burden as well. Listeners can provide validation to the storytellers through active listening, question-asking, and empathy for their experience. For some, being able to educate others about their lifestyle can be very rewarding (Wilson, Leary, Mitchell, & Ritchie, 2009).

There are additional mental health benefits reported by veteran storytellers. Prolonged storytelling for this group has seen the reduction of symptoms such as agitation, sleep difficulties, and paranoia (Landes, Garovoy, & Burkman, 2013). Others took the experience to integrate themselves into further treatments, allowing them to open more to the idea of bettering their own mental health (Mamon, McDonald, Lambert, & Cameron, 2017).

Research shows that, while there are many benefits to storytelling for this client group, there are some possible risk factors associated with the act. Study participants have shared that there have been instances where they felt a sense of re-traumatization after sharing with others (Mamon, McDonald, Lambert, & Cameron, 2017). Those who reported these emotions stated that these feelings subsided rather quickly as time went on. Other participants have shared that, through telling their story, they felt more vulnerable than empowered (Wilson, Leary, Mitchell, & Ritchie, 2009). Caddick, Smith, & Phoenix (2015), for example, discussed the views of veterans who described ideas of masculinity being a potential barrier to sharing experiences.

This article explores the motivations and experiences of war veteran Books of a Living Library planned for a mid-sized Midwestern university's 2019 Memorial Day event. Recognizing that these participants may have perceived themselves as part of a marginalized group (veterans) attempting to make a connection with a representative of a majority group (civilians), the study illuminates a unique approach to veteran storytelling not otherwise discussed in the literature. In this way, it adds to the literature of potential benefits and risks of veterans sharing the narratives of their war experiences.

Methods

Justification for methodology

The study utilized qualitative methodology with a case study approach. According to Flyvbjerg (2006), case studies allow researchers to come to understand human phenomena, since they learn best through context-specific examples. Creswell (2013) further noted that case studies explore in depth a program, event, activity, or process. For the present study, the event analyzed was a Living Library accompanying a Memorial Day commemoration event on a mid-size Midwestern university campus. Creswell also stated that cases

are bound by time and activity. For this study, the bound activity involved individual interviews with all Books enlisted for the event.

Sample and interview protocol

After obtaining approval from the primary investigator's (PI) university's Institutional Review Board (Reference # 2019MC018), the PI and his research assistant (RA) sent a preliminary email to the eight Books who had agreed to be part of the event requesting that they be part of the study. The PI and RA subsequently followed up with these individuals at the event itself. Two Books initially enlisted for the Living Library did not show up. The PI and RA set up individual interviews to be conducted at a later date with the remaining six.

Individual interviews lasted on average one hour and 15 minutes. All interviewees signed informed consent documents verifying their eligibility for the study. Specifically, they were (1) 18 years of age or older and (2) recruited as a participant in the Living Library event at the study site. With the permission of the interviewees, the investigators audiotaped the interviews. The investigators used a semi-structured interview process, achieving data saturation. The interview protocol is included in the Appendix.

Data analysis

Qualitative data analysis adhered to Padgett's (1998) open coding, the process of continual internal review. The PI and RA first read all transcripts without making any markings on them. A second reading and marking of transcripts elicited general categories. The investigators in collaboration then classified the data according to the category represented, keeping them malleable throughout the process. From this reading, four themes emerged, which are elaborated upon in the Findings section.

Internal validity

Researchers have adopted measures of reliability and validity specific to qualitative research. Lincoln and Guba (1985) used the term credibility, which refers to the confidence that the results of the study accurately represent the phenomenon being studied. Among the several techniques the authors cited in their work, this study utilized peer debriefing.

Creswell (2013) cited intercoder agreement as a form of peer debriefing that contributes to reliability of qualitative research. Reliability, according to the author, refers to "the stability of responses to multiple coders of data sets" (p. 253). In this study, the PI and RA met on three separate occasions to discuss impressions and thoughts connected to the data. Through an iterative process of independent and conjoint coding, they came to agreement on the categories and themes extracted from the data.

Findings

The veterans interviewed for this study reflected on their previous experiences with sharing their stories upon

returning home, and how these experiences compared to their participation in the LL event in question. Data analysis of the interview transcriptions cultivated four themes: (1) negative experiences of telling their stories before the event; (2) utilitarian motives for sharing at the LL event; (3) perceived advantages/benefits of participation in the event; and (4) clear "next steps" they shared regarding their post-LL narratives.

Negative experience sharing beforehand

The books interviewed expressed a common struggle with sharing their stories before the LL event. Being a part of the military isolated these individuals from civilian life. Many recounted upon returning home that they were perceived negatively by their friends, family, and society in general. For some, this lack of acceptance was indicative of the time during which they served. In the 1970s, one participant recalled, returning veterans were not well accepted and often struggled to blend into civilian society: "We couldn't wear any military insignia...I'm one of those guys that was spat at and ridiculed..." Other struggles these individuals faced included difficulty finding employment due to their military status, lack of access to mental health care, and having no one with whom to share their experiences.

These feelings in part stemmed from how others perceived them as veterans and the experiences that this label carried. For some, there was difficulty separating their military selves from their civilian selves in the telling of their stories. In the words of one Book, "...I kinda had two lives. I had my military life, put on my uniform...and then take it off and be a member of the community...kinda be invisible."

For other participants, this discomfort came from an unwillingness to share due to the feelings of having to "prove" their experience to those who listened to their stories: "I haven't told that many people... first, no one believes me. I'm burdened with having to prove it." Related to this experience was discomfort with the idea of what a veteran "should" look like. The participants shared that they often did not have the stereotypical look of a military personnel, an experience one Book carried into the LL space. She was surprised to hear a Reader at the event ask if she was a veteran.

A few participants stated that they even had a difficult time acknowledging to themselves that they were veterans. One individual shared, "I didn't even acknowledge that I was a veteran...the first couple years was a pretty tumultuous time." Others shared a disdain in the perceived bureaucracy of the military both during and after deployment. One individual described his particular branch of the military as "...unforgiving and... not receptive. The whole system is antiquated." Another spoke of frustration with his ability to access VA services upon returning home.

Although most Books reported that they were unable to share their story with others, therefore precluding them from any sort of community, they eventually found an outlet that offered them support. One veteran shared her

breakthrough on telling their story: "It was a professor I had...that probably saved my life. Cause he was a veteran... he provided a totally different context to look at things through." Another said that his breakthrough had been many years later while being screened by a caseworker. "She asked me several questions, and I broke down and started crying...She touched a nerve of some kind..." Although the initial experience with sharing had been a long and difficult road for these individuals, most Books were able to eventually find someone with whom to communicate. For some these supports were peers, for others family, and others took to sharing with the public.

Motivation for attending: Education/bridging the gap

Participants were asked why they agreed to be part of the LL event. Most acknowledged an educational component to their participation: They wanted to educate civilians who may know very little about the military and military culture.

A few participants reported an urge to represent a group within the military that was otherwise underrepresented. One participant, for example, shared her perceived duty toward speaking on behalf of women veterans, a group that they explained was usually not given a platform to tell their stories. She stated, "women and men have a very different experience in the military."

Other participants described a sense of duty toward sharing the overall diversity of the military experience. These Books talked about how each story was different to individual veterans, and that civilians tended to assume a very general experience to everyone who serves. One participant stated that the military is "...not a homogenous group at all. Like not even close. So, even though they all had a military experience, who they were in that experience is still so different."

Some Books came to the event with the intention of sharing a sort of product with the readers that they had hoped would increase visibility. For one participant, this product was a project that he had started up after returning from the service. The hope was to encourage others to investigate the work he was doing in the countries they had fought in to bring about positive change. For another Book, the hope was to use something like the LL at the place she worked in order to help other members of that community share their stories.

A final motivation Books cited for attending the event was their hope to educate civilians in order to "...connect with people and put a human face to some of the issues..." as one participant stated. The hope was to bridge the gap between veterans and civilians and give veterans a greater sense of community with the public.

Advantages and benefits of sharing at the Living Library

Books discussed the personal benefits that they experienced from participating in the LL event. Some individuals reflected on how they were forced to check their own assumptions

and biases while sharing their stories. One participant stated that they "...[forgot] that my experiences are radically different than most... now I really try to check my assumptions." Regarding bias, the veterans reported that they had expectations of the civilians to know very little about the military, feel very detached, and have a misunderstanding of the military experience. Participating in the event allowed them to rethink the assumptions they had and approach issues with a much more open mind than they had previously.

Another reflection piece for the participants included the perceived growth and progress they had made in their reentry into civilian life. For some, this recognition included the reinforcement of important aspects of their stories they had not thought of previously. One participant shared that she had never discussed in detail the story that she told at the event before, so she wasn't sure what to expect out of telling it: "It was the first time I've ever really like...that it was centered on that." Another participant spoke about how difficult it would have been for him "to participate in an event like the Living Library even five years ago"—and now he viewed it as an "incredible opportunity." Although many of the participants had been out of the military for quite some time, they found their stories being built upon in surprising ways. In telling their stories, for example, they found a drive to educate others and change the minds of those that may have had misconceptions on who they were as veterans. Some mentioned their expectations of how the readers would react to these stories, and how they were surprised at the interest and acceptance from their audience.

An additional benefit from participation in the LL cited by the Books was the recognition that they could access support from their veteran peers. In this regard, the storytellers hoped that their stories reached other veterans and opened their mind to experiences that were not their own: "So I think the important thing is to provide forums like you've done and will do hopefully, to get people to talk...word of mouth is the best thing, veteran to veteran." Another Book discussed the importance of veterans exchanging stories so as to broaden the female veteran experience, noting, "...opportunities just are not as...as readily available as they are for male returning vets..." Storytelling allowed for veterans to recognize the struggle of their peers and form a more understanding community amongst each other.

There is also the acknowledgement that bridging the gap between veterans and civilians through LL participation was advantageous to their psyches. The participants of the event described the feelings of isolation between veterans and civilians upon returning home from their service. These included many misconceptions, such as what the military was about and what a veteran was supposed to look like. One individual shared his feelings on how storytelling can help close this space between the two groups, stating that "...anything that...puts a human face to it, generates enthusiasm or curiosity...curiosity is the antidote to judgment." This participant encouraged storytelling to not only dispel myths and raise awareness, but to even change policy and increase

much needed services to veterans, an agenda that included civilians.

"Next steps" for participants of the Living Library

After experiencing the Living Library event, some of the participants pondered what their next steps might be. For a few, ideas that they already had were validated from their participation. One individual talked about a book that she had thought about writing to share her experiences: "And a lot of these different stories could be a chapter." Another veteran wanted to use the event as an opportunity to connect with and give back to veterans on campus: "If I can do things... to help veterans either on campus or off campus...get involved with veteran organizations...I'm starting to get a little time in my schedule to do that."

Other participants were given new ideas on what they wanted to do moving forward. One participant thought about bringing the idea of a LL to her place of employment as a way to get veterans involved in storytelling: "How can I bring this type of platform here? 'Cause I...see the value in it, and I think it is different and outside of the box." Similarly, the LL inspired another veteran to coalesce an idea he had about a "woodworking club" for veterans. He articulated the benefit of such a project: "So how do we get them to come in there to at least just talk? Well, that's one of the reasons we are starting this project...you get to talking, and you build a confidence and trust."

Discussion

A review of the data indicates that participants in this Memorial Day Commemoration Living Library event came with certain "baggage" related to their sharing their stories. Their choice to be a Book was another step in a long, sometimes arduous journey of battling to have their stories heard. Though the six participants might have come with different motivations, all were confident they could educate about their military experience, and they assumed that Readers would come with little knowledge of such. This confidence was coupled with some doubt that this goal could happen, given their storytelling experiences previous to the LL event.

The following section interprets the study's findings through the lens of the literature about veteran storytelling and LLs and their potential impact on participants. Specifically, it considers whether and how involvement in this LL event enabled participants to (1) bridge the gap between veterans and civilians; (2) better come to terms with their military identities; and (3) mitigate the effect of negative mental health symptoms, including preventing re-traumatization through the recounting of painful experiences.

Bridging the gap between veterans and civilians

Mamon et al. (2017) acknowledged two benefits storytelling provides for veterans who attempt to create a bond with civilians. First, storytelling helps veterans gain control over their own narratives. Second, the act of telling stories nor-

malizes the veterans' experiences. The uniqueness of the LL setting allowed for both experiences for its participants.

Books at the LL event were at times surprised and pleased to learn that civilians desired to hear their stories, an experience they have not always had in the past. This perceived willingness of the civilian to hear their stories allowed Books to "rewrite the narratives" with which they came to the event. Most experienced at best hesitance and at worst silence in telling their stories to civilians beforehand because of an assumption of civilian bias. Here in this safe, controlled space, they were given permission to share about an aspect of their experience related to discrimination/oppression, per the mission and purpose of LLs, and, thus, confront the bias head on.

In other words, recounting an experience of vulnerability related to their service forged a common ground between veteran and civilian. In the words of one participant, "So I thought if there's a way that we can help people understand...They're lookin' for that combat interaction. Well, there's a lot more to the military than that." Still another Book reflected on the power of storytelling, where "connecting with people and putting a human face on some of the issues, and especially one that people would not assume is a veteran" is evident. She added, "if it's a, a human connection behind it, then it tends to change minds a lot more readily."

Perhaps more unexpectedly, participants' stints as Books made them aware of biases they themselves held regarding civilians and their perceptions of the military. One Book acknowledged this awareness in her reflection about someone at the event mistaking her for a Reader:

And so what that showed me at the speaking event was the people that don't know much about the military, they also don't know anybody in the military, and it speaks volumes, and kinda goes hand in hand that if you don't know anybody in the military, you will have no perspective of what the military's like. So of course you'll just say, 'Are you a veteran?' to a person standing at the door.

Another Book recognized through his role as Book that he held a bias against veterans who refused to return to the location where they fought. He said, of the Reader who confronted this idea, "He stands as kind of the example of why I shouldn't have high expectations for anybody to, to return to those places." These participants' reflections suggest the potential power that LLs have in allowing Books to step into Readers' shoes, an outcome that normalizes the experience for the former.

Reconnecting with their military identities

The literature on veteran storytelling has indicated that therapeutic group connections, which primarily involve storytelling, can mimic the cohesion veterans experience during deployment (Westwood, McLean, Cave, Borgen, & Slakov, 2010). There is also benefit in integrating differ-

ent eras of service groups in which older veterans take the role of mentors for younger veterans (Lyons & Swearingen, 2007). Finally, Barron, Davies, & Wiggins (2008) remind us of the importance of collective commemorations, such as national remembrance days, whereby veterans can participate in rituals and ceremonies that validate who they were and are as military personnel. As demonstrated in this study, the LL served as a kind of "safe support" where veterans felt comfortable sharing with others and in the presence of other veterans in an act of peer camaraderie.

More than one Book, in reflecting on their LL experience, recognized the growth and progress they had made since their reentry into civilian life. For most, this chapter in their story represented one more piece of evidence that their military efforts and careers were worthwhile and valuable. These individuals saw the LL experience as a springboard for them to continue to do the work of affirming a military identity as a civilian. For one participant, this task involved becoming more prominent as a role model for university students involved in the military veteran support group. For another, this project took on a more serious bent. He used the experience to research information about Agent Orange and the impact on his children: "So now I've gotta deal with this now. I just can't leave this hang. I've gotta work through now how I can use this differently."

For a few participants in the LL in the present study, this clarification process involved confronting biases they had regarding other veterans. One individual who had had negative experiences with veterans in the past who judged him because of his deployment status, noted that the Readers who identified as vets at the event showed "proper etiquette": "Even if they felt differently about it, they're there and they understand I'm here for this individual speaking to me; therefore, it is etiquette, proper, you know, to listen." Responding to specific questions from Readers, they acknowledged how they changed the typical defensive conversational patterns they used when speaking to other veterans: "I saw that by the second, third person that my story started to kind of, you know, dissipate, if you will." Another noted how the event helped her come to terms with the LGBT experience in the military, an identity that she had struggled with during and after deployment. Her conversations with other veterans at the LL reminded her that "you really cannot like pigeonhole people by age, race, or by experience that you don't know."

A final indication that the Books used the LL as an opportunity to reconnect with their own military identities is a comment shared by nearly every participant in the study. When asked to critique the event, the Books shared that they all sensed a common bond with the other Books. Though the event did not allow them to speak with each other in a formal way, they all expressed a desire to connect with them. The fact that some Books shared contact information with an intention to keep in touch speaks to the power of the LL to "foster connections between those with common interests" (Ashmore, 2010, p. 5), a key component in their adaptability function.

Mitigating the effects of mental health symptoms

Given the limitations of the study's methodology, it is not possible to determine whether the Books perceived or experienced that negative mental health symptoms were mitigated due to their participation in the LL event. The literature indicates that veterans can reduce their feelings of isolation (Mamon et al, 2017) and symptoms such as sleep difficulties and paranoia (Landes, Garovoy, & Burkman, 2013) through the act of storytelling. Lack of follow-up and the reality that the LL is a one-time event prevent the researcher from making any definitive conclusions about this finding from the literature.

However, there is an indication on two fronts that the LL has the capacity to contribute to positive mental health. First, it gave the Books an opportunity to reflect on and address the discomfort that came from their time in the military. Second, it gave them a forum for articulating "the next chapter" of their narratives, how they will continue to tell the positive stories they have created about their military experience.

The post-event interviews indicated that Books in the LL gave themselves permission to work through anxiety, frustration, and anger that stemmed from their time in deployment. One participant noted, "prior to being a Book, I did some research and found that there is a lot of data that the VA has been given on Agent Orange and...[its impact] on children...and grandchildren of [veterans]. Reflecting on his LL experience, he added, "So I now need to think in terms of my own personal life, how am I gonna maximize that without, without scaring my kids, or making them feel like they're different." Another Book reflected about his discomfort at the LL being put in a position to defend the fact that he was in the infantry and not deployed. Yet, his role as a Book revalidated his decision to return to the Army: "I've grown now to the point where I really wanna be infantry." Still another Book, who used the LL as an opportunity to publicize and promote work on behalf of the Children's International Library Project, said of his time serving, "You spend all that time and effort and the outcome isn't all that great, and [you] sorta carry that weight around with you. But then, an opportunity like this comes along..."

Other participants' experiences made clear another consistent finding from the event: Participation in the LL was a stepping stone for something "greater" that they were working on that gave them pride for being part of the military. Reflecting on his sharing about the Children's International Library Project, the aforementioned Book said, "This is what I'm supposed to be doing...and I'm gonna do the best job I can." Another Book, a professor, saw his participation in the LL as inspiration to get his students to tell their stories. He hoped that his students would say, "He stood up and was tellin' the story, maybe I can too. And we can, you know, expand our learning community." Finally, a Book viewed the LL as a viable intervention she could bring to her own workplace related to the experience of individuals who identified as transgender:

I can have a human library about the transgender experience, and have a diverse group of trans individuals talking about that, that can lead to people being more interested in building up their skill sets to be more competent in working with that population.

The phenomenon represented here is akin to what happens in therapy or in a support group. People seeking professional help often need and feel impelled by an outside perspective to come to greater clarity about a presenting problem. The HL's unique structure accelerates this process. Knowing that they will "never see the person again" frees them up to take risks in telling their stories that they may not take otherwise. This very act of risk-taking can alter the way the Book feels about not only the content of the story, but also the process of telling the story.

The literature on veteran storytelling indicates that for some, retelling their story is a retraumatizing act (Mamon et al., 2017). The participants in the LL for this study offer another possible impact: affirmation that their story is another chapter in a narrative that produces good for the world and, by implication, for themselves.

Limitations and Future Research

This study harbors many of the same limitations inherent in qualitative research in general—small sample size, researcher bias, and lack of generalizability, to name a few. Though six is a credible sample size for qualitative research, and in this case, it comprised the entire population, it in no way signifies the diversity of experience represented by the veteran population. In addition, there is no indication that the LL event in and of itself caused an attitudinal change among participants, a critique that others writing about Living Library events from a qualitative research standpoint have acknowledged.

Notwithstanding the limitations of the study's methodology, its findings suggest that this LL had positive benefits for veteran participants, which corroborates the literature about LLs in general. Participating in an event that brings together diverse members of the community forged common bonds with individuals who in the past had at best been silent and at worst confrontational with them. The informal set-up and space configuration, moderated by organizers who paid attention to the length of the conversations, evened the playing field for both veteran and audience member.

The transformation that veterans might experience through events like LLs, as indicated in this study, deserves further research. More qualitative studies about the experiences of veterans telling their stories in public venues need to be conducted. Researchers might consider an attitudinal-based and longitudinal survey approach to the study of LLs, thereby offsetting the limitations of qualitative research. Finally, the experiences of Readers who attend LL events featuring veteran Books could offer a perspective that informs veterans' intentions in telling their stories.

Appendix

Interview Protocol for Study

1. What prompted you to be part of this Living Library event?
2. With whom have you shared your story about your military service up to now? In general, how comfortable have you been sharing that story?
3. Would you describe your experience at the event as a positive or negative one? Why?
4. What did you learn from the "Readers" at the event, if anything? Describe any memorable interactions you had with them.
5. What did you learn about yourself by participating in this event?
6. What effect might this event have on your willingness to share your story about your military experience in the future?
7. Did anything surprise you about the experience as a whole? Explain.
8. If you were to participate in another Living Library event, what would you do differently?
9. Anything else you would like to add?

Note

- ¹ The term Living Library has been reserved for Human Library events with a specific, focused theme, as in the study site for this article. I will use that term, though much of the literature uses the term Human Library. For convenience sake, I will designate it with the abbreviation "LL" throughout.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

Author Contributions

The primary investigator enlisted the aid of a research assistant in conducting interviews, analyzing the data, and crafting the manuscript through an Undergraduate Research Project grant through the university with which both are affiliated.

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