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Listening to Veterans: The Welcome Johnny and Jane Home Project

Paula J. Caplan and Heather Milkiewicz[1]

Abstract

The astonishing power of listening, often these days underestimated, is explored with regard to having civilians simply listen with respect and without judgment to the stories of veterans from all United States wars since World War II. Twenty-two veterans each spent between two and three hours telling their stories about their time at war and since trying to return home, with the listeners being nontherapist civilians who had been told to focus totally on the veteran, not to interrupt or ask questions, or make comments. Feedback immediately after each session and at least one month later revealed that every veteran experienced their session as extremely positive, many saying that it was the first time they had had the opportunity to say whatever they wanted in the way that they chose, and numerous benefits were reported. This study points the way toward the usefulness of a nationwide project of giving veterans this opportunity as one way to help reduce veterans' isolation and the emotional pain so many of them experience.

Introduction and Literature Review

Veterans from all wars in which the United States has fought are often isolated from others in their communities when they return home (Caplan, 2011a). Three major reasons for this isolation are their fear of not being understood, their fear of upsetting the listener, and their fear that the listener will consider them mentally ill if they describe their ongoing grief, fear, shame, mistrust of others, moral anguish, and/or other feelings that plague them (Caplan, 2011a). It has been

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[1] Paula J. Caplan is a Fellow in the Women and Public Policy Program at Harvard Kennedy School and Associate in the DuBois Institute, Harvard University. Heather Milkiewicz is a student at Harvard Kennedy School. Inquiries to paulacaplan@gmail.com

noted that there are multiple reasons that American civilians have not tended to give veterans the chance to tell their stories (Caplan, 2011a).

In light of the robust research demonstrating in a vast array of settings that human connection, or social support as it is sometimes called, promotes emotional healing (e.g., Summerfield, 1999; Watters, 2007, 2010; Steptoe & Roux, 2009; Diener, 2000; Coyne & Downey, 1991), and in light of the feedback she received from war veterans to whose stories she listened over the years, Caplan (2011) proposed a national war-literacy project that would consist simply of every civilian simply listening to a veteran's story of their experiences at war and on returning home. She calls this project the Welcome Johnny and Jane Home Project, and it is sometimes called The Listening Project (whenjohnnyandjanecomemarching.weebly.com). The veterans to whom she listened sometimes described the experience of being able to tell their stories as the first time they had been able to speak without feeling judged, as enabling them to talk about experiences they had never before spoken about, and feeling that the listening session was the beginning of their reconnection with the larger, nonmilitary community.

Caplan (2011) pointed out that the psychiatrizing of American society is has been so pervasive that many people who are not therapists mistakenly assume that there is nothing they can do to help veterans heal emotionally. This assumption is not consistent with the literature on the effects of social support. Furthermore, although it is often assumed that veterans' emotional difficulties will be dealt with by their close family and friends, often their relationships with these people are so fraught with the effects of war and homecoming, and the stakes are so high if a veteran tries to talk to one of them, and something goes wrong, that it seemed important to investigate the effects of having a civilian nontherapist who did not previously know the veteran listen to their story.

A study was designed to gather information systematically about the effects of simple listening sessions between veterans and civilians, and although the focus of this study was on veterans, we were also interested in how it would affect the civilian listeners.

Methodology

Participants

The veteran participants consisted of a convenience sample of 22 people, 17 men and 5 women, who were recruited through phone and email outreach to 30 national, state and community veteran-related organizations as well as within the Harvard University veteran community. They ranged from 26 to 93 years of age, with the average being 45.27 years. The length of time since they had returned from

war ranged from 1 1/2 to 66 years. One was a veteran of World War II, five were from the Viet Nam War, one was from the First Gulf War, eight were from the Iraq War. Of the other four, two reported having been in Iraq and Afghanistan; one on "missions in Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Korea, Iraq/Afghanistan, Iraqi Freedom, and New Dawn; and one in Haiti, Iraq, and Ecuador.

Three women civilians were the listeners, and they conducted the interviews in public but quiet locations in person for 17 of the sessions and by phone for 5. The sessions ranged in length from one to three hours, with almost all running about two hours long. The sessions tended to come to what the veterans said was a natural stopping point. At that time, the listeners would ask if there was anything else the veterans would like to share, and if there was, would give them the chance to say more.

Procedures

The following email message was sent to veterans' groups:

> If you are a veteran of any United States war and are willing to tell your story of your experiences at war and since returning home, to a nonjudgmental listener who is not a therapist but an ordinary citizen, please get in touch with us. This is part of a "Listen to a Veteran's Story" project that is designed to provide veterans the chance to tell their stories as they see fit. Between two and three hours of your time will be requested, and everything you say will be totally confidential. We will also ask for your suggestions about how we can improve these interviews. If you have questions or would like to participate, please contact _____ .

Each veteran was scheduled to meet with a listener and was asked to sign a consent form that included the following:

> Veterans from United States wars starting with World War II have said that it is helpful to them to be able to tell their stories to nonjudgmental civilians who are not therapists. The purpose of this study is to give you a chance to tell whatever you want about your experiences at war and since coming home. Your interview will most likely take between two and three hours. Immediately afterward, you will be asked three brief questions about whether the interview was a good or bad experience for you and whether you have suggestions for us as we do more of these interviews in the future. One month after your interview, you will be contacted and asked the same three questions. This will allow us to evaluate whether such interviews are helpful and whether your views about that change during that month.
>
> If you choose to speak about anything that is difficult or upsetting for you, then if you wish to talk with someone about that, your interviewer will be available and can also put you in touch with someone who has done hundreds of these interviews and will be available to you.
>
> No recording of any kind will be made of anything that you say in the interview, and what you tell the interviewer will be kept totally confidential. Although the interviewer will be listening fully to what you say, the only information that will be collected and saved will be your answers to the three brief questions at the two different times.
>
> We hope that, like most veterans who have participated in this kind of interview, you will find that there are benefits to you of getting to say whatever you would like, having someone who is there specifically to listen carefully and respectfully to everything you say, and knowing that what you say will be kept totally confidential.

To begin the interview, the listener said the following:

> As an American whose government sent you to war, I take some responsibility for listening to your story, so *if* you want to talk about your experiences at war and since coming home, I will listen for as long as you want to talk, and I will not judge you.

Each element of that introductory statement was purposefully chosen. The first two phrases makes it clear that the listener understands that being an American citizen means being connected in important ways to those who are sent to fight American wars. The third phrase makes it clear that the listener is not intending to put pressure on the veteran to talk but only providing the opportunity. The fourth phrase makes it clear that this will not be a brief session that the listener will interrupt, and the fifth is intended to imply that any possible differences in the

veteran's and listener's politics or other attitudes will not be relevant and that, though a civilian who therefore might be assumed to disapprove of what happens in the military, the listening session will be free of judgment.

The listeners followed the guidelines for listening sessions in the Caplan (2011) book (Chapter 6), which consist primarily of the instruction to listen silently but with total attention as much as possible. This includes avoiding asking questions, making interpretations, and drawing conclusions. It even includes the suggestion to avoid saying things that the civilian might assume would be welcomed, such as, "How brave you were!" There are two reasons for this: (1) the purpose of the session is to allow the speakers to say what they want, in whatever order they want, without interference and without having to try to respond to what the listener might say, and (2) the civilian has no way to know how the listener might feel. Thus, for instance, a civilian might call brave an action that torments the veteran because they "only" saved two of their buddies rather than five from an Improvised Explosive Device. If a veteran seemed to have a great deal of trouble beginning to speak, the listener again followed the guidelines from the Caplan chapter and asked one or two questions about their early life or some other biographical question to get them going.

Immediately after the interview, and then again at least one month later, the listener asked the veteran to respond to the following three questions:

(1)What, if anything, was good about this interview for you?

(2) What, if anything, was bad about this interview for you?

(3) What suggestions do you have about how these interviews should be conducted in the future?

This is the first identifiable study of war veterans' descriptions of the effects on them of simply being listened to without judgment as they tell their experiences of war and coming home. Therefore, the questions we asked them were open-ended. The categories of responses reported in the listening session were derived by hewing as close to the exact words of the participants as possible.

The three listeners were asked to make notes about their reactions to the listening sessions.

Results

All 22 participants described the listening sessions as positive experiences, both immediately after the session and in the follow-up. Six of the 22 reported

something negative or disturbing about the session immediately afterward, and six did so in the follow-up. Thirteen had suggestions for listening sessions to be done in the future.

Because all participants reported positive feelings about the session, the categories of responses to question (1) from the two time periods are combined here below, and key quotations are given for each category of response.

Beneficial effects of the session

The numbers of participants who gave each category of response is in parentheses just before the category.

- (14) It was open-ended, free-form, there was no agenda or pressure from the listener, because it was not an interview, the listener did not interrupt, and the veterans could choose what to tell and how to tell it. Comments included that they enjoyed the free-form aspect, which allowed them to tell their stories without being interrupted with questions about military terminology or their own motives in the military or the role of the military more generally. One reported feeling able to tell his story to someone who appeared genuinely interested without worrying about either confusing the listener or any potential judgment from the listener. Another reported relief at not having to package stories or omit "personally important or interesting aspects" that when omitted will limit the listener's understanding. A veteran from Iraq and Afghanistan described feeling able to "ramble and jump back and forth" in his story in a way that "made sense in my own mind." This, he said, allowed him to go freely through the range of emotions he felt had felt and re-experience, which he said does not often happen in other settings, "since there is either less time or a specific purpose for telling a part of his story." He felt he could say whatever he liked, "without needing to come to a specific conclusion or point," and this felt "freeing." Similarly, another veteran said the seesion provided a "unique period of reflection," and still another said it allowed her to present a complete picture "in content and in depth." And one veteran said the session was "unique versus other contexts in which there is either a set agenda or purpose for telling my story, or people are asking specific questions," and this allowed him "to capture both ongoing internal conflicts as well as new insights" regarding war and his experience both when there and in leaving, including his wish to make an impact in policy decisions about war and the military.
- (6) Had space/time to think and speak, sometimes even think about certain things for the first time or the first time in a long time. A Viet Nam veteran said he could talk about things that do not "come up in general conversation," and the session him "the opportunity to bring the experience of war explicitly back to the forefront for a little while...to feel connected to others," and that "it is important [for him and for citizens of this country] to remember the impact that

experiencing such death and destruction can have both on soldiers and civilians alike in order to feel more concretely connected to something larger, as a citizen of this country, and the veterans coming home." Another Viet Nam veteran said it was helpful for his "personal emotional benefit," because he rarely talks to others about his experience in as much depth or for as long a time as he did in the session. Therefore, he said, he does not "have an opportunity to divulge information so as to allow me to tell my story uninterrupted and at length." Furthermore, certain parts of his experience are still painful, so that he does not tend to offer it voluntarily but could do so in the listening period. In the latter setting, he said, he felt "more emotional relief instead of pain, because I was disclosing information in a setting that was created specifically for veterans to share their stories, which made it seem more natural and therefore felt comfortable." An Iraq War veteran appreciated the chance to "tell the story continuously from start to finish...and the freedom to start wherever." He said that both the continuity he was allowed and the free-flow nature of the experience "triggered other experiences and stories" that he might not have thought of otherwise. And a veteran from Afghanistan said that the listening session "allowed me to fully explain my experience in a way that I wouldn't feel comfortable sharing in just any setting. I was able to explain fully and articulate why I felt different when I returned home from my first deployment, which is often hard." He said he was able to do that both because the session was confidential and because the listener made him feel comfortable.

- (5) It was confidential.
- (4) The person really wanted to listen. The 93-year-old World War II veteran said it was good "just having someone listen" and noted that that had been unusual, because in all the decades since he came home from Europe, he has "not had an opportunity to tell my story at length." The listener was one of only two people outside his family to whom he has spoken at any length about the war, and "My story is all true and a significant experience in my life, and I feel satisfaction or enjoyment in being able to share it with others," both remembering things himself and giving others insight into war at that time. He said, "Not many others have asked about my experience or offered to hear it all in detail. Therefore, the opportunity to share this experience has been and continues to be lacking."
- (3) Felt comfortable and/or trusted the listener.
- (3) Felt safe and/or listened to without judgment.
- (2) It was one-on-one.
- (2) Felt engaged or connected to others.

- (2)Felt understood and/or sympathized with for what they had gone through. A Viet Nam War veteran said it made him feel "more of myself."
- (2) Felt proud to improve civilians' understanding of the military. The participant who had been on missions to the largest number of countries reported having "a sense of pride...doing my part to improve the understanding that civilians have about the military by sharing my own personal stories."
- (2) Felt it allowed them to help others.
  Both of these veterans were women, and immediately after the session, when asked what was positive about it, both mentioned only that it allowed them to help others, including veterans and the community at large. But in the follow-up, both of these women mentioned that they liked that it was open-ended, and one reported that she liked the confidentiality. In the words of one, the format allowed her to "express [her] experiences more completely" and with "more openness and fullness," and similarly, the other said it allowed her to "remember and reflect" in a way that she had not had a chance to do in quite awhile.
- (2) Felt encouraged to share. A Viet Nam veteran said that he had attended many group sessions at the VA for war-traumatized people but in this listening session had been able, because of the one-on-one situation and because of the listener's obvious warmth and compassion, "to remember and recall things in the past that affected me, but I didn't realize how much it had affected my behavior the rest of my life. I never realized it had.
- (1) Had a chance to think about positive aspects so the negative didn't overwhelm me.
- (1) Liked talking to a civilian not previously known to them. An Iraq War veteran said that it was a relief to share with someone she had not known her struggles to integrate successfully in some social situations due to the lack of initial emotion or affection she now feels.

Negative or uncomfortable effects of the session

Although six participants reported negative effects immediately after the session, and the same number did so in the follow-up, four participants mentioned something negative at both times, two others did so only right after the session but not in the follow-up, and two mentioned something negative in the follow-up only.

One Viet Nam veteran immediately after the session reported having held back somewhat, for fear of becoming agitated after talking about traumatic experiences, and in the follow-up did not mention this but said he did not need psychotherapy, and the listening session had felt like psychotherapy, because the listener spoke only minimally. Similarly, an Iraq War veteran said immediately that he had felt somewhat anxious and found it difficult to talk about his feelings about war, death, and destruction; in the follow-up, he said that the lack of verbal feedback

was at times disconcerting, because he did not know what the person was thinking. Another Viet Nam veteran said right after the session that he found it hard to discuss these subjects, and in the follow-up, he said he was uncomfortable not knowing "the agenda" for the session, but he also said that the experience was positive, because it was free-form, gave him space to think and speak, allowed him to feel connected to others, and made possible the important work of remembering the impact of death and destruction on soldiers.

Another Iraq War veteran said immediately that he felt "a bit guarded," because this was an "experiment" and because he did not know the listener's political agenda; in the follow-up, he said that he wasn't sure how to gauge how much military background the listener had, but he also said that he was relieved to be allowed to speak freely, without having to worry about explaining military jargon, "which can be frustrating and breaks up the story." A veteran from Iraq and Afghanistan said he had initially been unsure what the researchers were looking for and how much personal information he could share, but once the listener assured him he could say what he liked, he felt comfortable speaking. An Iraq veteran who only reported something uncomfortable in the follow-up described his internal dialogue, when he was wondering if in describing his experience, he was being accurate or embellishing it, and he found it difficult to gauge the listeners "exact" feelings, but he also said both immediately after the session and in the follow-up that he liked its open-ended nature.

A First Gulf War veteran said immediately after the session that he was uncomfortable telling his story because he had not done "enough" and had not been on the front lines, but in the follow-up, he had nothing negative to report. And a veteran of several current missions felt awkward at times, because she did not consider her experience especially unique or riveting.

Suggestions for future listening sessions

Of the 13 participants who had suggestions for future sessions, ten mentioned more structure, dialogue, or questions from the listener, but all of those participants strongly stressed the benefit of the session being open-ended. Two veterans suggested having groups of veterans talk with groups of civilians, and one suggested that the listener could ask, "What can I do?"

Listeners' responses

(*to be filled in later, but they were wonderfully positive and very moving)

Discussion and Recommendations

The unanimity with which the participants described strongly positive benefits to them of even a single listening session suggests the importance of encouraging civilians to make themselves available for such sessions. And the positive effects for the civilians also suggest that these sessions matter greatly for them. It is no small thing for veterans and civilians to break down the walls that are so often between them, reducing the isolation veterans feel that can make their suffering so much worse and putting both in touch with their common humanity

and the power of confronting together the matters of life and death, love and loss, fear and rage, guilt and anguish that involve being at war and returning home. The veterans in this study made it clear that they wanted to be listened to and benefited from it. Their responses suggest that it would be helpful to implement such listening sessions widely.

Many of the benefits the veterans described seem likely to be interconnected, such as feeling encouraged to share, feeling engaged, trusting the listener, feeling safe, and not feeling judged. It is possible that in a future study, it would be informative to use the open-ended questions as in the present one but to follow that with a checklist that includes all of the categories that emerged from this study. That would make it possible to look at correlations among categories. At least some of the participants might have experienced benefits that, for whatever reasons, they did not articulate in this study but might recognize if shown the list of categories.

As for the negative feelings that some of the veterans reported, none presented a compelling reason not to do the sessions, and everyone of the minority who reported anything negative also said extremely positive things about their sessions. But the negative comments suggest that it would be advisable in the future to make stronger points of the facts that the session will not be psychotherapy, that the listener is not a therapist, that there is no agenda other than to provide a chance for the veterans to say what they like, and that the listener is not there to judge.

Based on their suggestions for the future of the Welcome Johnny and Jane Home Project, it might be informative to do the listening session first and then offer the veteran the chance to respond to questions about their time at war and after coming home. Suggested questions are listed in Chapter 6 of *When Johnny and Jane Come Marching Home* (Caplan, 2011a). Furthermore, it could be helpful, after the listening session, to offer to put interested veterans in touch with the Veteran-Civilian Dialogues (http://www.intersectionsinternational.org/our-work/veterans-war) in order to see whether they might be holding one of their events in their area. And, as one veteran suggested, it would be important and certainly in keeping with the spirit of The Welcome Johnny and Jane Home Project to ask each participant if there is any kind of help they would like and to try to arrange for such help to be provided.

The final word goes back to the 93-year-old World War II veteran, who in all these decades has almost never been asked to tell his story and who was happy "just having someone listen." It does not carry the mystery or power of professional or technological approaches, but the power of "just" listening is astonishing (Caplan, 2011b).

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