
Military Experience and Perceptions of Parenting: A Narrative Perspective on Work-Family Balance Expériences militaires et perceptions du rôle parental : une perspective narrative sur la conciliation travail-famille

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ABSTRACT

The authors of this study investigated subjectively constructed narratives of veterans' experiences trying to balance career and parental roles. Narrative-oriented inquiry was the primary orienting methodology. Five male veterans participated in the process of co-constructing their individual first-person narratives with the primary researcher. The six stages of Arvay's (2002) collaborative narrative method were used as the guiding framework for these narratives. Implications of these narratives with regards to future research and counselling practice are also discussed.

RÉSUMÉ

Les auteurs de cette étude ont examiné les récits d'expériences construits subjectivement par d'anciens combattants qui tentent de concilier leur carrière et leur rôle parental. La principale méthodologie d'orientation était une enquête narrative. Cinq anciens combattants masculins ont participé au processus de construction de leurs récits personnels à la première personne avec la chercheuse principale. Les six étapes de la méthode de narration collaborative d'Arvay (2002) ont servi de cadre directeur pour ces récits. On aborde aussi les implications de ces récits sur la recherche et la pratique du counseling.

In recent counts, there were 68,000 regular and 27,000 reserve military personnel in Canada, 24,000 civilian employees (National Defense and the Armed Forces, 2017), as well as 700,000 veterans (Veterans Canada, 2013). Literature exploring the experiences of military members and their families has frequently employed quantitative measures (e.g., Cozza et al., 2015; Ebata, Knobloch, McGlaughlin, & Ogolsky, 2013; Juvan & Vuga, 2013). Research has also often focused on how children have been affected by having parents who are in the military (e.g., Aralis et al., 2016; Brendle, Hicks, & Lenard, 2016; Grass, Grass, Huebner, Mancini, & Wilcox, 2007; Lieberman & Van Horn, 2013), as well as how PTSD has impacted military members' family lives (e.g., Cesur, Sabia, & Tekin, 2013; Creamer, Fletcher, Forbes, & Wade, 2011), communication and family conflict (e.g., Cook, Riggs, Thompson, Coyne, & Sheikh, 2004), mental health (e.g., Lyk-Jensen, Jepsen, & Weatherall, 2016), and social functioning (e.g., Frueh, Turner, Beidel, & Cahill, 2001).

Existing research has tended to show that a military career often has a negative impact on several aspects of family life. As researchers and active clinical practitioners, the authors of the current study desired to give voice to military members' experience of parenting and address a gap in the literature with respect to qualitative narrative inquiry. Existing research involving military families lacks detailed and open-ended narratives, and they are an important part of honouring as well as understanding human experience. The intention of the current study was to create space for veterans to tell their story related to the following research question: *What were military veterans' experiences of trying to balance their military career and parental roles while they were actively involved in the military?* The stories of these experiences will help inform current support practices for service members and veterans, as well as future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Work-Family Balance and Conflict

A prevalent issue in Western society is how to effectively balance work and family responsibilities. Work-family cohesion suggests that adapting to work and family-related stress can be impacted by how well the work environment aligns with the needs of the family structure and vice versa (Kerpelman, McFayden, & Pittman, 2004). More specifically, work-family balance refers to how the demands attached to occupying a certain role at work are balanced with the demands of occupying a family role (Carlson & Grzywacz, 2007). The relationship between work and family also has potential for work-family conflict that occurs when there are incompatible expectations and demands between the two domains (Boles, McMurrian, & Netemeyer, 1996; Cleveland, Heraty, & Morley, 2008; Cooklin et al., 2016). Situations that result in an individual being exposed to high degrees of stress or trauma at work can threaten the stability of the family and increase strain on the work-family fit (Kerpelman et al., 2004). For many employed parents, work and family domains often compete with each other for parents' energy, physical presence, and time (Alliger & Williams, 1994; Kelly, Moen, & Tranby, 2011). The overflow of work responsibilities into family life is a major factor contributing to parents' perceptions of parenting being stressful (Sidebotham, 2001) and can have a negative impact on mental health when this conflict is prolonged (Cooklin et al., 2016). Culture, the surrounding environment, and social organizations also shape role demands and how those demands should be met (Apospori, Nikan-drou, & Panayotopoulou, 2008; Blalock, Egisdottir, Perrone, & Webb, 2006). For example, Apospori et al. (2008) found in their study that women tended to be promoted only when organizational cultures did not value aggressive social relations and overabundant time commitment. The hard work and time required to advance in their career necessitated these women choosing between their career and family, thus creating work-family conflict. Conversely, in more humanistic and relationally oriented environments where women workers were supported in their family roles, less work-family conflict was experienced.

Work-Family Balance for Military Parents

The experience of work-family conflict is particularly intense in military families due to the nature of military family life (Casey & Corday, 2009). Military family life often involves life stressors that other population groups do not experience as often or all at once, such as frequent moves, periods of extended family separation, geographic isolation from extended family support systems, and the threat of harm to or death of a loved one (Black, 1993; Denning, Meisner, & Warner, 2014). A military career is one of the few that require a 24-7 commitment where members must be prepared to be called away at a moment's notice and stay until the job is finished (MacDermid Wadsworth & Southwell, 2011). There is also a reported increase in familial emotional intensity, both when the deployed parent leaves and during the struggle to reintegrate the deployed parent back into the family (Clymer, Faber, MacDonald, Weiss, & Willerton, 2008; Ebata et al., 2013; Grass et al., 2007).

While other population groups may experience some of these challenges, a career in the military is one of the few contexts where the above-mentioned conditions are inherent aspects of the job. For example, there may be similarities in terms of first responders regarding exposure to traumatic events; however, military members are the only professionals who are required to give their life under direct order from a superior and who are expected to kill other humans as a regular part of their duties. Even police officers are not required to give their lives under direct order nor kill other humans as a regular expected part of their job. In response to the stress, a higher percentage of regular forces members report less job satisfaction (12.7%) compared with civilians (9.5%). They also report higher job strain at 28.4% compared with 22.9% of civilians (Park, 2015). Given these reports, it is reasonable to believe that with the additional challenges military families experience, it may be a difficult task for these military parents to find balance between their responsibilities at work and within their families.

METHOD

The Narrative Approach to Research

Narrative processes provide a social and cultural grounding for human experience and facilitate understanding that allow people to make meaning of actions and events (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008). People construct past experiences and actions into personal narratives (i.e., talk organized around important events often to make a point) that form their identities and construct a perception of how they see their lives (Riessman, 2008). The specific narrative research design in this study was narrative-oriented inquiry (NOI; Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008). NOI can be viewed as a combination of social constructionism and narrative traditions, as it positions people as active creators in how they make meaning of their experiences in the context of particular situations. Narrative analysis is a particularly sensitive methodology with regards to understanding social processes

(Emerson & Frosh, 2004), as a narrative interviewing style allows space for people to tell their stories and make meaning of experience (Arvey, 2002).

We thought that because of the way people tend to create narratives of their lives as described by Riessman (2008), a narrative methodology would be the best fit for our inquiry. It is also an underutilized methodology for the current study's research question related to veterans' lived experience of balancing career and parental roles. We also believed that giving participants the opportunity to co-create their story was a favourable way to honour these veterans who sacrificed so much for our country. The way the results are presented allows the reader to experience the participants' story and, at the same time, provides a unique contribution to the existing body of research.

Participants

This study was approved by the ethics committee associated with the study. Participants were recruited with the help of local veterans' organizations surrounding the principal investigators' home university located in British Columbia, Canada. Veterans in the area surrounding the authors' university location were approached through local branches of the Royal Canadian Legion. These legions reportedly serve "veterans, ex-service personnel, and their families as well as seniors and youth" (Royal Canadian Legion, n.d.). Study participants were invited to take part in the study if they met the following criteria: (a) cohabit in intact marriages or common-law relationships where the couple is the primary and secondary caregivers of their child(ren), (b) had children while they were actively serving in the military, and (c) have at least one child who was 5 years of age or older. These criteria were included to ensure that parents had at least 5 years of parenting experiences that cover multiple stages of child development and different demands of parents (Brush, 2009). Participation was open to veterans regardless of their experience in combat situations or in which division of the Canadian Forces (CF) they served.

While recognizing the differences between the various branches of the CF, this study did not seek to address within-Forces variation and instead treated CF members as a distinct group from civilians. Twelve individuals in total (11 men and 1 woman) expressed interest in participating. Six of the 12 were not eligible to participate for the following reasons: 3 lived too far away for an interview to be arranged, one was currently still active in the CF, and two were not able to be contacted. An additional male veteran disclosed that his first child was born only a few months before he retired from the military and subsequently did not fit the research criteria. The screening resulted in 5 participants. This can be viewed as a reasonable sample size to establish a basis of understanding in studies such as this one involving exploratory qualitative analyses (Creswell, 2009, p. 217). Basic demographic information is summarized in Table 1.

Interview and Analysis Procedures

The intent of narrative analysis is to see how participants order their experiences—to make sense of events and actions in their lives (Riessman, 2008). There

is no assertion that a completely objective perspective of participants' experiences will occur; rather, it is acknowledged that how participants' experiences were described reflects constructions of personal stories and that readers will also form their own constructions of these stories. A topic-oriented style of interview involving open-ended questions was used in this study. Participants were all asked the research question at the beginning of the interview (i.e., "Can you tell me what your experience was of trying to balance your role in the military with your role as a parent?"), and then were prompted by the interviewer to expand on their descriptions when necessary (e.g., "You mentioned ... could you please tell me a bit more about that?", "Do you mind telling me a bit more about ...", "How does this fit into the larger story?", "What about military culture? Do you think that impacted your experience?", and "Who else is involved in the story?"). The in-person interviews lasted between one and two hours. Four of the interviews were held in the participants' place of residence at their request, and one was held at the principal investigators' home university. Participants were seen separately with the exception of one interview in which the participant's spouse sat in on the interview

Table 1
Summary of Participant Demographic Information

	Cliff	Bryan (Names changed to maintain confidentiality)	Don	Craig	Andrew
Gender	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male
Age	49	65	73	51	60
Number of children	4	2	2	1	1
Years in the Armed Forces	9	35	24	17	37
Dates served	1982–1991	1961–1996	1956–1980	1977–1990	1972–2009
Branch of the Armed Forces	Army	Army	Navy	Army	Army
Job position	Comm	Comm	Chief Engineer	Comm	Comm
Rank upon retirement	Corporal	Master Warrant Officer	Chief Warrant Officer	Master Corporal	Chief Warrant Officer
Times deployed	20+ times	150+ times	100+ times	4 years	100+ times
Examples of places deployed	Halifax Kingston Japan Norway Alert Bay Middle East	Germany Middle East Golan Heights	Singapore Thailand Samoa Azores Iceland Brazil Uruguay	Europe Golan Heights	Cyprus Europe Golan Heights
PTSD diagnosis	Yes	No	No	No	No

Note. Comm = Communications

and offered her perspective occasionally. It was requested by the participant that his spouse be present to increase his comfort level with being interviewed. The primary researcher decided that the benefit from him feeling more comfortable while telling his story outweighed the minimal influence observed from his spouse during the interview. It was also thought that in the spirit of narrative research viewing participants as co-researchers (Arvay, 2002), he had a right to include her.

The authors used the six stages of Arvay's (2002) collaborative narrative method as the approach to data gathering and analysis. The six stages of this method include the following: (a) setting the stage, (b) performance, (c) transcription, (d) four interpretive readings, (e) writing the narrative, and (f) sharing the story. In the first stage of this process, the primary researcher met with participants to start a dialogue about the research question, explain the overall process of the study, and describe respective roles and responsibilities. The interview itself was the second stage and operates under the belief that participants are co-investigators or co-actors in the research rather than individuals who are simply answering questions asked of them.

Transcriptions of the audiotaped interviews composed the third stage of this process. As described by Arvay (2002), the first transcription of each interview in this study is viewed as a rough draft that attempts to record all aspects of speech produced during the interview (e.g., laughter, pauses and silences, crying, tone of voice), and includes any nonverbal communication that was recorded in note form during the interview (e.g., body language, facial expression, movement) in brackets throughout the text.

The fourth stage involves four interpretive readings of the transcription. As people do not generally relate the stories of their experiences with a beginning, middle, and end, the transcript is organized into a coherent story line with events placed into temporal order (Arvay, 2002). The second reading is to determine "I" positions and look for how the narrator situates or presents him/herself in the story. The third reading specifically looked for answers to the primary research question posed in this study of how veterans story their experiences of trying to balance their military and parental roles. The fourth reading is a critical reading intended to facilitate reflexivity whereby any questions, thoughts, and reactions that may have been influenced from the researcher, as well as influences from the social world (e.g., military culture, general parenting practices within the larger Canadian context), can be acknowledged.

The fifth stage in this process is "Writing the Narrative" and stems from the previously discussed four interpretive readings. A plot line was devised by placing the episodes in order, and then the readings were put into one text written from a first-person perspective. The sixth stage is to share the completed first-person narratives with each of the respective participants (i.e., co-researchers). This sharing provided them with the opportunity to make any changes or additions that they think would make their stories more fitting with their experiences, as well as helping to equalize the power that unavoidably exists between researchers and participants.

Methodological Trustworthiness in the Current Study

In order to assess the trustworthiness of the study's findings, Guba and Lincoln's (1989) four widely recognized and accepted criteria in qualitative research (Loh, 2013) were addressed: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Regarding credibility, for example, participants were shown the completed first-person narratives resulting from data analysis so that they could personally confirm or dispute interpretations and assess the believability of the results (Arvay, 2002; Creswell, 2009; Riessman, 2008). In this study, most changes made to the original documents were factual details (e.g., the number of years the family lived in one city) and speech presentation (e.g., changing "gotta" to "got to"); however, participants largely affirmed their narratives as written (e.g., "I feel it is pretty good the way it is"; "Everything looks good the way you wrote it up"). Regarding transferability, as much information as possible about the participants' experiences and the context of the research was provided so that readers can assess for themselves whether the findings are indeed transferable.

For dependability (i.e., consistency of findings using this research method), Marla Arvay, whose method was the primary orientation of this work, was involved in the review process of this study. Audiotaped and transcribed interviews, field notes, thematic categories, and process notes were all used to engage in reflexive analysis and to help address issues related to confirmability. This reflexivity was facilitated through consistent consultation between the primary researcher, who was also the interviewer, and the secondary researcher during the transcription and analysis process wherein the intentions, motivations, and interpretations of the interviewer (an MA student at the time of the interviews) were critically discussed.

RESULTS

Under Arvay's (2002) methodological approach, the details of each story are considered the most important avenue for increasing understanding of the experiences of an individual. As such, individual narratives are presented as the results of the current study to appropriately honour these participants' experiences. Pseudonyms for participants as well as participants' family members were chosen by the primary researcher to preserve confidentiality.

Cliff, Age 49

"It's hard, you know ... trying to be a parent when you're in the military. It's hard because you're not there all the time. And balance? Yeah, there is no balance. Try banging your head on a wall. It feels like that a lot of the time. For the first 5 years of marriage, I was only home about 11 months or so. I joined in '82 and got married to Denise in '84. We had a little one on the way at that point. You know, you miss a lot and you're not there for the activities the kids want to do. When you come home, you want to do things with them but then you find out they're already doing things, so the time isn't there that you'd like to spend with

them. You come home and see how small your little ones are, and next time you see them they've grown about a foot! Or, you'll watch your kids call anyone in a green uniform 'Daddy!' because they don't recognize the face. They just recognize the uniform, but they don't recognize the face, you know. Ripped my heart out. I was everywhere in the world, except at home.

"You miss a lot of first things ... stuff like that. Hated that. When I was home, I think I was a fairly good parent, but like I said, I wasn't there enough. Didn't really have a chance. At the same time, though, it's your job to go away. You know, you've got to do it; it's part of why you joined up. You've got to go where you've got to go; it's something you know when you sign the line. And I was proud of my work. You know, I enjoyed it. I just didn't expect to have to go away as much as I did.

"And it was difficult coming back because Denise would have things set up the way she wanted, and if I tried to change that there'd be a scuffle. I'd come home and end up messing it up. You know, things that I thought or assumed ran a certain way didn't, like the schedules and routines that they had. Couldn't seem to keep up. It'd cause conflict between me and Denise, and with the kids too because let's say that I told my boy Jake to take out the garbage. Well, they had certain rules and certain jobs that they'd do. Things that Denise had set things up that I didn't know about. So, I'd sit there thinking, 'Why isn't he doing this?' It didn't seem like a big thing to me. They'd just say 'no' and that'd piss me off. You don't say 'no' to me; that's unacceptable. It's just a chore, you know. It's not like it's the end of the world. So, I'd take a step back, feeling like a third foot or something, and wonder what the heck's going on here ... and that would just lead to arguments. Then Denise would speak up and say 'It's not his night.' Okay. Well, why didn't someone just tell me that? You know, give me a copy of whose schedule it is so I know what's going on.

"It was like I could never keep up with what was going on at home. Always seemed a few steps behind everything and could never seem to find a fit with everyone else. I'd buy gifts when I was away; things that I thought the kids would have liked. I'd get home and give it to them, and they'd tell me they don't like those things anymore. They haven't liked them in 5 months. So, yeah. It's hard to be the parent because things change and you don't catch up. They don't really see you as being ... they know that you're 'Dad,' they know you're the father, but at the same time you just don't get the true bonding and interacting that you would if you were there full time.

"The military can be a good career, depending on your trade and what your job is. If you're in a static posting and are going to be in the same base for 6 or 7 years and you're not going away, then it can be a good thing being a parent and having this type of job. If you're in a field trade, one that has to travel, it's going to be a lot harder because you're just gone too often. It's hard to be a parent in that case, and hard to be a mate to somebody because they change and you change. And that's the same with your kids. They think one thing when you're home and the next time you're home that thought's not there anymore. If you're going to get married, you and your partner both have to be strong with the idea that you

might be spending a lot of time away, and there has to be enough communication that when you do come home, you know what's going on and you're not stepping on any toes around how things are run in the home."

Brian, Age 65

"I think Emma and I came to an understanding right from day one what military life was like. We knew that it can sometimes be a very hard life, and not just in the field units but even in the static units when work pressure gets to you. I was in field postings the whole 11 years that I spent in Germany. You'd spend 3 to 4 months a year out on exercises and training, away from your family. It'd be broken down, though, and you wouldn't often spend all that time away all at once. Emma and I came to an agreement that we would like to bring up our children not directly in the military environment but indirectly. We figured it would be best for the children to mix in a more normal society rather than only a military society because if you're in the married quarters, then you're living in a military society where people are all roughly the same age and same upbringing. I think living off-base in the general community, which we called the 'economy,' took off a lot of the pressure if you were having pressure at work. If you live in married quarters, you're spending your day at work and spending your off hours in a military environment too. So, we figured right from the start whenever possible we would rather live on the economy than married quarters. Give the kids a regular variety of life to experience.

"I think the hardest part was this UN posting 'cause I was away so much. Josh was 3 or 4 and Adam was just a little guy, so I missed that whole growing up period. Missed a lot of what they were doing at the time. And because you're away in basically an all-man atmosphere and you're working under pressure, you sort of get used to that environment, which is not exactly a family-oriented place to be. Then when you come back to your family you have to get used to being with your family again. And it was a slow process sometimes, fitting back in. I think it took a couple of weeks for me. And it was a big shock in some ways because you'd been in this ... segregated environment for 6 months, over 6 months really, and you'd come back, be happy to be back, but things are different.

"When I came back from the Golan Heights, we figured that we'd be able to settle in and have more of a normal family life, but I was only back to work for a couple weeks when I was posted back to Germany again. So, with 2 young children we went to Lars, Germany, and that was the longest time we spent in military quarters. Four years, I believe. And that was definitely a challenging experience. It was far more stressful than our last time there because the building we lived in had 20 families in it. And it was a 5-storey building with four apartments on each floor so you can imagine the chaos in that place. I remember the whole centre of the building was hollow. Almost reminds me of some of the old prison movies. It was really hard to have a balance between work and my family when we were living in military quarters, so one of the things we did to get some family time separate from the military was to buy a trailer. We put it in a German trailer park

and in the summer when we had spare time, we'd go down and spend the time in the trailer. That was great 'cause we could get away from the military environment.

"Because I spent so much time away, the biggest thing I could do to stay connected with my family was to try to dig in and get involved as much as possible when I was home, especially with the kids. My sons wanted to go into Cubs when we lived in BC, so I became a leader. I was a Cub leader there for 6 years. Kids were Emma's and my top priority. You know, I don't know if you'd call them traditions, but something that was really important to us and that helped with this balance was that we'd always try to eat together as a family, especially on weekends. We had family meals where we all expected to sit down and have a complete meal together, and on Sundays we had a more formal dinner. And we'd try to treat the kids as much as we could when I was home. I'll always remember when we were in Alberta the kids would love to go to Dairy Queen for a hotdog and a soft ice cream. That was a special treat and they loved it.

"If I were to advise anybody in the military now, I would say that the military is going to be your career, but not 24 hours a day. If possible and if you're going to raise a family, live off base on the economy because if you mix your 8-hour-a-day job with your family life then you become too military. Outside of the 8-hour work day, as much as was possible, we tried to make what we would consider to be a normal family life."

Andrew, Age 60

"Well, when I joined the military in 1972, it was quite a bit different than it is today. I spent a lot of time away from home. I think I was probably away from home about 200 days a year and that meant a lot of the burden was placed on my wife Kathy in bringing up Janine. We had her 3 years after I joined the military, and she was barely a year old when I was sent to Cyprus for 6 months. I changed a lot while I was away on that trip, mostly my physical appearance, 'cause I'd put on a few pounds that I probably shouldn't have! But she didn't really recognize me at first. My daughter didn't recognize me when I first came home, and that was a tough thing for me. She was so young when I left and it took a month or so before she realized, yeah, I belong in the house. That's probably the worst part for the children ... me being away a lot. I went away so often that going away for the 4, 5, 6 weeks on exercises that we did was basically nothing. That's just what you were used to doing. It was the longer, 6-month deployments that were a lot harder. I was probably a part-time parent more than a parent because I was away more than I was home.

"There was worry too when I was away, more so on Kathy's part for me 'cause we weren't always safe when we went away and she was fairly safe back here in Canada. I thought about them all the time when I was away though, 'cause a lot of the time, the wives wouldn't mention a lot of the stuff that was going on at home, like, if something was wrong, because they didn't want to worry us. And probably vice versa too when I think of it. There's a lot of stuff going on over there that didn't hit the news that we probably didn't tell our wives about because they'd

just worry about it. You just had to do it that way, and when I got back together with Kathy after the 6 months, you'd say 'Well, I didn't tell you this because you'd just worry about it...' Stuff like that. You'd have your connection afterwards but not while you were gone because there's nothing you can do. I would say I was a good parent when I was home, I mean, I did probably everything Kathy did. Probably a bit more actually because I thought that I had to give her a bit of a break while I was home. She basically ran the house and brought up Janine. She had to look after it all. And I was still working when I was home, but I just tried to give her a bit of a break in the evenings and stuff like that. When Janine was younger, I'd spend a lot of time helping her with the homework, reading to her at night. I'd probably make an extra effort with her when I was home to make up for being away so much.

"I think, um, with trying to work out a balance between work and my family? I probably tried to make up for me being away a little too much. Kind of spoiled Janine! I'd buy her little extra things that maybe I shouldn't have bought. And then when I did go away again, Kathy would have a little bit more of a problem getting her back under control. I guess Janine would say things like 'Daddy wouldn't have done this to me but you are!' You know, that kind of attitude. Kathy was the one who did most of the talking to Janine. Probably the tougher questions and stuff, she always went to Mummy because she was the one that was there 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. I wasn't. I guess you just get used to not being able to go to everything. Like birthdays and anniversaries? Hardly ever home for them in the first 10 years.

"I don't know exactly how to put how I balanced it ... if I had to do it all over again, I don't think I'd do a whole lot different. I mean, I had a good career with the military and I had a good family life growing up. There were times when I thought Janine might not get to university, but eventually she got there and she's doing well now. Our daughter is very happy where she is. We've got a grandson, and things just turned out good. You know, there's problems along the way of course, but overall, they turned out good. It's just a strong relationship, and the bond and the trust, and everything that goes with it to make it happen."

Craig, Age 51

"My story about trying to balance this parenting thing when I was in the army, probably starts right from the birth of our son, Ben. Before that, it was just my wife and I, and it was very difficult for me when Ben came along. It was a heck of a lot easier for Sarah. She was the baby of 7 kids herself and had 5 older sisters who all had kids way before she did. She knew how to change diapers and feed babies when she was 15. I had absolutely no idea what to do with Ben when he came along. I think the hardest thing for me was when he cried. I can't stand to hear a baby cry, and it doesn't really matter for what reason. It could have stubbed its toe or be hungry or have a full diaper, whatever. But you know, that uncontrollable crying that babies do sometimes? Yeah, drives me right off the deep end and I have to just get the hell out of there.

“So anyways, Ben was born when we’d been living in Germany for 2 years and in the first 2 years after that, basically Sarah worked Saturdays through Wednesdays and I worked Mondays through Fridays. So, I actually got to look after Ben on the weekends. We kind of had our own little routine where we’d watch cartoons and stuff like that, you know, after he was 9 months old. You know, it was ... it was different taking care of Ben because I never had to be responsible for somebody that small and who can’t do anything for themselves before. You’ve got to change them and make sure they eat. Entertain them more than anything really. But, you know, we got into a routine after awhile where every Saturday afternoon we’d watch a movie, then he’d go down for his nap and so would I! And that’s the way it was, you know, I’d make him things to eat, we’d go for walks, play in the backyard, kick the ball around, that sort of stuff. It was a huge learning curve for me. Big time. But, you know, I got through it. That’s why we only have one child though. We both decided that it wasn’t worth me losing my mind over. I’m not saying I have mental issues or anything like that, it was just that one thing about babies crying that drives me crazy. You know, I don’t have a problem with looking at dead bodies or decapitations or stuff like that, but babies crying just drives me off the deep end.

“When I was home, I’d get yanked away for some reason or another. Like, they’d do a complete what we used to call a ‘bug-out.’ They’d like to see how many people would actually respond in case there was ever a major offensive that happened. So, they’d pull stuff like that on a Friday night at 7 o’clock. Sarah is working and I’m looking after the baby, so I’d dress him up in air force blue and take him in to the base with me. I mean, we knew we weren’t actually going to deploy and she was only 5 buildings away, so if I ever did have to deploy I could have just dropped the baby off with her. We only had the one car, though, and I didn’t want to have to drop Ben off when I knew it was just a stupid exercise. You don’t deploy on a Friday night unless, you know, you see glowing skies.

“You know, I’m sure that he loved his mother more than he loved me. When he was growing up and I was there, he’d spend most of his time with his mom and just basically acknowledged the fact that I lived. Didn’t really feel that good at the time. I’m not sure if that was because I was gone a lot, but it could be. That was just kind of the way it was though. Even with Sarah. When Ben came along I became ... extra. It was hard to deal with at first, but you learn to accept it and move on. Maybe I just grew into that acceptance after realizing that there was nothing I could do to change it. I wasn’t there a lot, but I was the enforcer. That I could do. Sarah would always use the line ‘You wait ’til your Dad gets home!’ I could always play the bad cop and that’s a lot of what I did. Believe it or not, I sometimes even did the enforcing over the phone or a radio while I was deployed. I was the communications specialist so I could have access to phone lines or radio traffic, pretty much any time to speak to him. And I did that fairly often when I was deployed for long periods of time, not always for discipline though. Ben thought that was pretty decent sometimes. That it was pretty cool to be talking on the phone on his end, but knowing that it was going over a radio and that I’d

be receiving it miles and miles and miles away. It was nice for me too, to be able to still be a parent even when I was so far away from home.

“You know, being from the army side of things I used to yell and scream a lot. And sometimes that was enough just to put the fear of, we’ll say God into him. And, from a discipline perspective that’s the way we did it in the military too. So, by being exposed to that kind of atmosphere I guess that kind of rubbed off on me. It was about taking control and if you had to scream at somebody in front of a bunch of other people to get their ass moving, then that’s what you needed to do. It’s life or death, and if you’re not listening to me, then you’re gonna get killed or get me killed. And there was usually an adjustment for me when I came home too, ’cause there would be new rules or something that she’d come up with that I didn’t know about so I’d have to be introduced to those. She’d have to tell me ‘Oh, you can’t do that now’ or ‘You can’t say this now.’ So, it was difficult. She would take the lead on what we would do in terms of parenting, and I was fine with that. You know, you wouldn’t get a flooring estimate from somebody who did roofs.

“Having an actual balance didn’t really happen that much because I was essentially an absent parent. So, I guess that maybe the amount of deployment I did in that 5 years made it very easy for me to make the decision to finally retire from the military. I would have been in my 34th year if I was still in the military, but who knows where else I would have been. I probably wouldn’t still be married. When I sit back and think about what would have happened if I didn’t get out, I wonder, would my son be an asshole? Would he be in and out of jail or whatever? Would I still be married? I don’t know that. But I know that, as a result of what I did do, none of that happened. By getting out and establishing the roots, everything turned out well.”

Don, Age 73

“Balancing being a parent when you’re in the military? It’s quite a responsibility for the women, and my wife Tessa is one of the ones who did extremely well at it. Hardest part for Tessa was when we already had the one child and she was pregnant with the second, and I was posted to Halifax and ended up disappearing for 11 months. They sent me down around the end of January, and that meant I couldn’t come home on leave and wasn’t able to get home at Christmas time. It was kind of a stupid thing the navy did really, but they did things like that in those days. When I got back, Matthew of course, he didn’t recognize me. He didn’t remember me, so that was hard I guess. It took awhile for him to get used to me because he’d been with his mother all the time. I was a stranger coming in the house and he’d had his mother’s affections all the time I was away. So, me coming in I was sort of an intruder you might say, which wasn’t that great. Imagine, feeling like an intruder in your own home? I guess it was about 6 weeks really before he was fine. He realized who Daddy was and what Daddy did, so it was okay. It was fine after that.

“We used to go on 3-month cruises. Usually one big 3-month cruise a year, and then there were smaller ones. I don’t even know anymore how many times. I’ve lost track of them. But you wrote lots of letters during those periods. This was in the days before Internet and e-mail and all that, so you wrote letters and you wrote often. Two or 3 times a week actually. It wasn’t as good as if I was there all the time, but it helped me have some sort of presence at home. Some sort of balance I supposed. The first few days after I came back were kind of hard on me and the boys though, because I wasn’t always that friendly. After spending all that time on a submarine, you can imagine how I just wanted to get the heck away from human beings and just sit on a tree or something. I made sure not to be aggressive with the kids, and it didn’t usually last for very long. One of the things that really helped me to have a kind of balance is that we did a lot of things together. Actually, as a family, we did an awful lot of things. Working together on things helped created a close bond, and we could just pick them right back up again when I came home. It helped too that when I was away Tessa would do the same things with them that I did when I was home. There wasn’t set ‘mom’ and ‘dad’ stuff and that was a good thing, I thought.

“I was gone about half the year. I know that sounds like a lot of time away, but you just adapt to it I guess. You have to have a certain mindset, and it never really bothered me too much. It never bothered Tessa that much either. She accepted it and it worked out really good. We had a very good life actually. I know it sounds odd, but we never had any great calamities that I can think of. But then Tessa could have looked after anything that came up at home anyways. She quit work in December 1961 and was a stay-at-home-mom after that so that made balancing on my part a heck of a lot easier. We knew what it was going to look like, me being in the navy. We talked about it at the very beginning and it worked out okay. We did an awful lot together, and she wasn’t just the housewife while I was the husband-wage-earner either. I helped out and we worked together on just about everything.

“I mean it ... I’m not going to say it didn’t bother me at all. It bothers you a bit, you know, because you miss a lot of the things that the boys do, that the children do, like birthday parties and things. You miss a lot of that. I was away for both of the births actually and that was tough for Tessa. It would have been nice to be there. You missed just being with them in general too, just the day-to-day things. But you just have to accept that you’ve chosen that life and that’s it. You can’t sit and mope and complain that you’ve made the wrong decision. It’s part of the job needing to go away. Early on we got tired of living in town, so we bought a 40-acre place in ’67. We always had our own house. When you own your own home, you set down roots in the community. We had horses and they gave the boys an understanding of the bond between horses and man. I never brought my work problems home, and that was a good thing too. I would tell people now, that I guess you and your wife maybe have to have the same interests and the same temperament really. That’s what Tessa and I found anyway. It’s important

for a young couple to sit down and discuss things, what they're going to do and how they want to live their lives.

"Another thing we did to help with this balance was we didn't have any friends in the navy. We had very few friends in the navy and they weren't close friends. I always kept my family life, my home life, separate from the navy. It was a lot better that way. I saw a lot of people go through a tremendous amount of shock when they retire because everything they ever did was tied up in the navy. It was, almost like a mental meltdown, you know? I mean, their whole life and everything had been in the navy and then, bang, you're outside the main gate and the whole world is out there. And it's different. Whereas if you've established a home, then you're part of the community. It was a policy we had right from day one, that we'd keep our friends away from the job, outside-the-job."

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to provide space for veterans to story how they balanced military work and parenting; that is, to better understand how these fathers made meaning of holding both military and parental roles simultaneously. Given the sacrifices that military members make to protect and serve our country, a primary goal of the current work was to honour this challenging negotiation. Adopting a narrative orientation was a unique way to approach research within the area of military parents, and allowed the narratives constructed in this study to be personal, in-depth, meaningful, and contextual in a way that is far more challenging to do within quantitative frameworks. We hope the understanding gained by this study will be beneficial to the general body of existing research in this area as well as to practitioners in the counselling field who work with military families and veterans.

The participants in this study all expressed considerable difficulty in finding a sense of balance between their military and parental roles. As previously noted (e.g., Denning et al., 2014), the frequent deployments, inherent risks involved in their duties while away, inconsistency in being present at home, geographic relocations, and level of commitment necessary to their military positions were all described as having an impact on their ability to feel grounded in their parental roles at home. When work involves high degrees of stress or trauma, which is often a reality of military careers, it can be more challenging to find a satisfactory balance between work and family (Kerpelman et al., 2004). Although most of the veterans who shared their stories in this study had engaged in these roles approximately 20 years prior to their participation in this study, it is reasonable to believe that military members who are currently negotiating this balance may be experiencing even more difficulty, as contemporary expectations of fathers is for them to be more involved and "hands-on" with their children (Cooklin et al., 2016). There was a common description among these veterans of confusion with regards to how roles at home were to be filled (Betz & Thorngren, 2006), particularly upon return from deployment when parental responsibilities needed to be redistributed (Clymer et

al., 2008). They were unsure of how to fit in to their families once back at home, which caused strain in their family dynamics. This supports previous research findings that greater ambiguity experienced in one's family role is associated with poorer overall family function (Doblin-MacNab, Hollingsworth, & Marek, 2016).

Relevance to the Counselling Field

The shared experiences of these veterans may be helpful to practitioners who are working to support military service members. The strongest and most common point of emphasis among these veterans was how integral having a solid marriage was to their sense of finding a more successful balance between their military and parental roles. When these veterans had the sense that both partners shared an understanding regarding their respective roles, the realities of pre-, during, and post-deployment, as well as the inherent challenges of being involved in the military, transitions were easier and allowed for an easier sense of balance. The narratives from the current study seem to emphasize the importance of addressing the experiences of the couple together to help increase awareness and understanding of each partner's perspectives and facilitate communication between them. The division of family work generally ends up being more imbalanced when couples endorse more traditional attitudes around household and work roles (Lothaller, Mikula, & Schoebi, 2009), and a more egalitarian division of this family work often seems to be most beneficial for mothers and fathers (Deater-Deckard & Scarr, 1996). As a preventative strategy rather than one used after problems are already occurring, this study would suggest that regular couples' counselling before and after deployment to explicitly discuss aspects of family life such as roles, responsibilities, and coping strategies would likely be helpful.

Another recommendation for professionals working within the military community is to pay attention to what supports a family has outside of the military; for example, whether the family is living in military housing or in the general community (described in the narratives as living on the "economy"). In this study, 4 of the 5 veterans did not live in military housing and described the physical separation from their work environments as an important factor in helping them maintain a balance between their work and family roles. This was something that they emphasized as a piece of advice they would give to people who are currently in similar situations, and also something that has not appeared as explicitly in previous research. They described that living and having friends outside of the military helped them to experience a greater degree of separation from their jobs, which allowed them to have a more defined sense of coming home and leaving work-related matters at work. Incorporating strategies for social and relational connection outside of the military would likely help work-family balance, as the more contact with work that occurs at home, the higher experiences of work-family conflict, general stress, and physical health issues (e.g., sleep problems) tend to be (Schieman & Young, 2013).

These veterans also emphasized the importance and value of staying connected to their family while deployed, whether through letters or phone calls. Being able

to communicate with their family when they were not able to be there physically allowed them to still feel connected in some capacity and also helped their reintegration when they did come home. While it may not always be possible given the nature of a particular deployment, it would likely be beneficial to include strategies for remaining in contact as part of family counselling when working with military families.

Implications for Future Research

Given the experiences in this study, it may be useful to compare these past experiences to more current experiences with active military members—for example, interviewing currently active military members who live on and off military quarters around how they perceive the impact of either scenario on their ability to balance their military career and parental roles. Findings from this further exploration may help inform current practice regarding military housing. Additionally, the importance of the marital relationship emphasized by the veterans in the current study suggests that it would also be useful to explore this same question of balance in the context of couple interviews. Including perspectives from both partners, even if the central question is still on the military member's experience of balance, would likely provide further insight around what was helpful and what made finding this balance more challenging. Another area for future research would be to intentionally seek out a broader range of positions and ranks within the military, ages, sexual orientations, and ethnicities among participants. Given that the participants in this study were relatively homogeneous in these areas, it would be interesting to see if the commonalities between stories are still shared when participants have a more diverse background.

Limitations of the Study

The findings in this study are not generalizable to the larger veteran population because of the small sample size, nor is this the purpose of qualitative research. Participants were also sampled from a relatively small pool of individuals with fairly similar demographic characteristics. This makes it more likely that participants may have had common experiences, particularly given the similarity between their positions in the military, which may also have exaggerated the patterns found across narratives. It is also possible that the era in which these veterans were actively involved in their military positions influenced their experiences of parenting in ways that might be different in the present time; however, given the trend for modern-day fathers to be actively involved parents (Cooklin et al., 2016), it is reasonable to believe the challenge in balancing these roles would be even more difficult today.

Conclusion

Military members are faced with unique challenges in balancing their careers and family roles in comparison to civilian parents. Being both a parent and a military member draws heavily on the resources of that person, as well as their

spouse and family. As discovered in the narratives constructed within this study, sometimes military members can find that balance and sometimes that balance seems to be far more elusive. However, the love that these veterans had for their children was undeniable and serves to emphasize the importance of having supports in place, within both military and civilian communities, to help military members find this balance and have the family lives they hope for as they sacrifice so much to serve their country.

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