# Moral Injury in Context Psychological, Ethical and Social Dimensions

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#### **Outline**

- 1. Moral injury as a multidimensional phemonenon
  - 2. Risks and opportunities of the concept
  - 3. Context-sensitive interventions for moral injury

# Moral injury: Psychological, moral and social

## Moral injury

The psychological, spiritual and social impact of perpetrating, failing to prevent and/or witnessing situations that violate deeply held moral beliefs and expectations

(cf. Litz et al., 2009)

## History of moral injury research

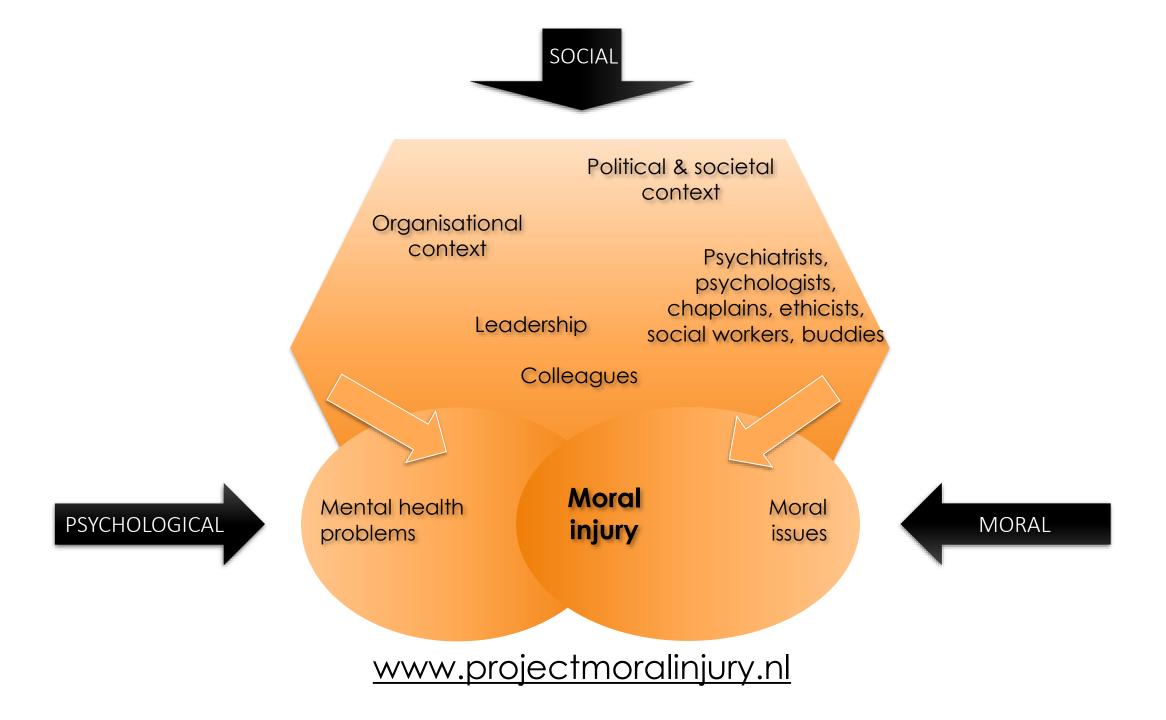
'90ies: Introduced by Jonathan Shay to draw attention to the ethical and social dimensions of trauma, often overlooked in PTSD theory and treatment.

**2009**: First conceptual model by Litz et al, to draw attention to ethical and social dimensions of trauma, although Shay's work was not referenced.

**2010-now**: Surge in research on moral injury in the field of military trauma, later also in police, healthcare, humanitarian workers.

**Predominantly**: From a clinical psychological approach, focusing on psychological dimensions: diagnosis and clinical treatment

**Also**: From a philosophical, theological and social scientific approach, focusing on ethical and social dimensions



(simplified, more complex in reality!)	Dominant PTSD-models	Moral Injury-concept
complex ii.	(Life)threat	Moral transgression
Event	Sense of safety is violated	Sense of a just and meaningful world is violated
Key responses	Fear-related responses (intrusive memories, hyperarousal)	Moral emotions (guilt, shame, anger)
(Perceived) role in event	Victim or witness	Victim, witness, responsible agent
Approach to blame of self or others	Resulting from 'distorted cognitions' (DSM 5), thus need to be challenged	Possibly appropriate, thus (self)forgiveness may be needed

Table 2.1 in Molendijk 2021

# Disciplinary differences

	Focus	Critical of
	Moral injuries as part of life	Individual therapy, 'problem solving'
Chaplains and social workers	Attention for 'person in the uniform', moral compass	Reactive approaches
	Addressing occupational culture and leadership	Instrumental and individual approaches
	Focus	Critical of
Psychologists (incl. clinical		
Psychologists (incl. clinical psychology and positive	Focus	Critical of

Modified from table 2 in Eikenaar 2022

Risks and opportunities of the concept

#### Rise of 'moral injury' as concept in line with current developments

- Attention to ethics, attention to moral questions surrounding work practices (work practices inevitably have a moral dimension)
- Attention to the problems of over-pathologisation, DSM reduction
  - Attention to the problems of over-individualisation
    - Attention to the benefits of holistisc approaches

#### **OPPORTUNITIES**

- Attention to moral dimension of mental health
  - De-pathologisation
  - De-individualisation
  - Holistisc approach

> From 'disease', 'disorder', DSM-reduction

To suffering as tragic struggle, as 'disorder' between individuals and wider context

#### **OPPORTUNITIES BECOMING DANGERS**

#### "Moral injury" offers:

- Self-understanding and self-empathy ("I understand now I'm not a bad person, I suffer because of it, I have a conscience")
- **Recognition** ("Finally people understand my problems are real, too")
- **All without the stamp on the forehead of mental illness** ("I understand now I'm not crazy, I don't have a disorder")

#### Risk:

 Primary and secondary gain: the direct and indirect benefits of symptoms that may paradoxically perpetuate the symptoms

#### **OPPORTUNITIES**

- Attention to moral dimension of mental health
- De-pathologisation
- De-individualisation
- Holistisc approach
- From 'disease', 'disorder', DSM-reduction

To suffering as tragic struggle, as 'disorder' between individuals and and wider context

#### RISKS

- Turning dominant medical approaches (PTSD, DSM) into 'strawmen'
- Romanticisation of suffering
- De-responsibilisation
- Inflation/erosion of concept
- From suffering as tragic struggle, as 'disorder' between individuals and wider context

To denying the pathological dimension while externalising all problems suffering and calling everything 'trauma'

See Molendijk, 2022, in Br J Psychiatry

# Practical implications: Possible contextsensitive interventions for moral injury

## Expectation management & training

- Beware of possible adverse effects of 'resilience training' (positive psychology-focus).
   Risk of denial of legitimate ethical struggles + risk of professional feeling abandoned/betrayed in hindsight
- Beware of possible effects of 'romantic' recruitment campaigns
- Advice: be honest and realistic
- Dilemma: where is the line, what is the right balance? Instilling sense of purpose versus addressing realities of high-impact work

## **Ethics training**

#### To increase moral competence:

- Recognizing moral dimension of (deployment) situation
- Morally responsible decision-making
- Ability to verbalize decisions made, to others and self
- Ability to account for decisions made, to others and self



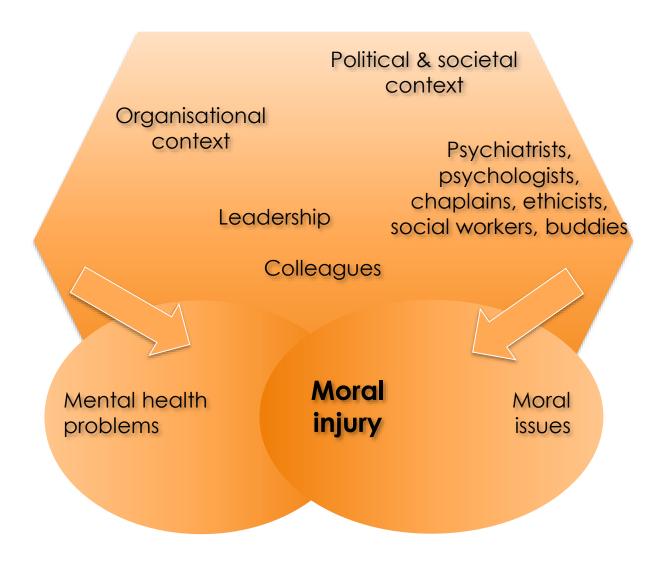
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#### **Example organizational context:**

- Organisational ethical climate that acknowledges moral challenges and invests in ethical leadership and social support (in line with 'Just Culture' theory)
  - i.e. don't just do more mindfulness etc. It only asks more from the professional, and loads all responsibility on their shoulders, thus increasing moral injury risk...!
  - i.e. don't just do 'leader bashing'.
     Problem is not just immoral leaders:
     they are stuck in impossible demands
     and double bind messages, too.
     Morally injurious leadership is both
     problem ánd symptom.



#### **Example political context:**

- Political decision-making that is realistic and just (for armed forces: in line with Just War Theory)
  - E.g.: ethics-sensitive decision-making framework
  - E.g. moral deliberation for decisionmakers and planners (again, don't do 'leader bashing')

#### **Example societal context:**

- Societal narratives: society needs to go beyond caricatures of heroes-victims-villains
  - Recognition is not synonymous to an applause or 'thank you for your service'
  - Recognition is acknowledging complexity incl human fragility

