

Moral Injury in Context

Psychological, Ethical and Social Dimensions

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Outline

1. Moral injury as a multidimensional phenomenon
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

SOCIAL



Mental health problems

Moral injury

Moral issues

PSYCHOLOGICAL

MORAL

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(simplified, more complex in reality!)

	Dominant PTSD-models	Moral Injury-concept
Event	(Life)threat <i>Sense of safety is violated</i>	Moral transgression <i>Sense of a just and meaningful world is violated</i>
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

Chaplains and social workers	Focus	Critical of...
	Moral injuries as part of life	Individual therapy, 'problem solving'
	Attention for 'person in the uniform', moral compass	Reactive approaches
	Addressing occupational culture and leadership	Instrumental and individual approaches
Psychologists (incl. clinical psychology and positive psychology)	Focus	Critical of...
	Guard concept, seek clinical utility	Inflation of concept of moral injury
	Therapy through bottom up, shared sense making	Top-down therapy ('quick fixes'), protocols
	Strengthening individual control and moral fitness	Venting without goal of rehabilitation

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

RISKS

- Turning dominant medical approaches (PTSD, DSM) into 'strawmen'
 - Romanticisation of suffering
 - De-responsibilisation
 - Inflation/erosion of concept
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- 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 context-sensitive 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 ánd self
- Ability to account for decisions made, to others ánd 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 and 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 decision-makers 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

