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Moral Distress and Moral Injury in the Context of Autism

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What are morals?

- Determine what is 'right' or 'wrong' may be considered from differing perspectives
- Moral Universalism = absolute moral truth and that all moral rules should be applied to all people and situations
- Moral Relativism = there are no universally agreed standards of right and wrong and that morals are subjectively influenced by factors such as cultural norms, social factors and customs etc. (Aarsbergen, 2006).

Examples



Universalism: “You should always be on time”



Relativism: BUT...if you have to give someone mouth to mouth resuscitation and miss your train making you late...

Moral Rules versus Values

– Moral foundations

- Care/harm
- Fairness/reciprocity
- In-group/loyalty
- Authority/respect
- Purity/sanctity
- Liberty





The conflict

“You should always be on time”

versus

“it is important to care for other people”

= potential discomfort

Moral Injury

Shay (2014) moral injury is present when:

- 1) There has been a betrayal of what is morally right
- 2) By someone who holds the legitimate authority;
- 3) + they occur in a high-stakes situation.

- What is high stakes?
- What situations cause these?
- What causes moral injury?

The scale....



Moral Frustration
Moral Stress
Moral Injury



Moral Injury



The strong cognitive and emotional response that can occur following events that violate a person's moral or ethical code.



Potentially morally injurious events include a person's own or other people's acts of omission or commission, or betrayal by a trusted person in a high-stakes situation.



Anyone can experience MI – not confined to combat/health professionals.

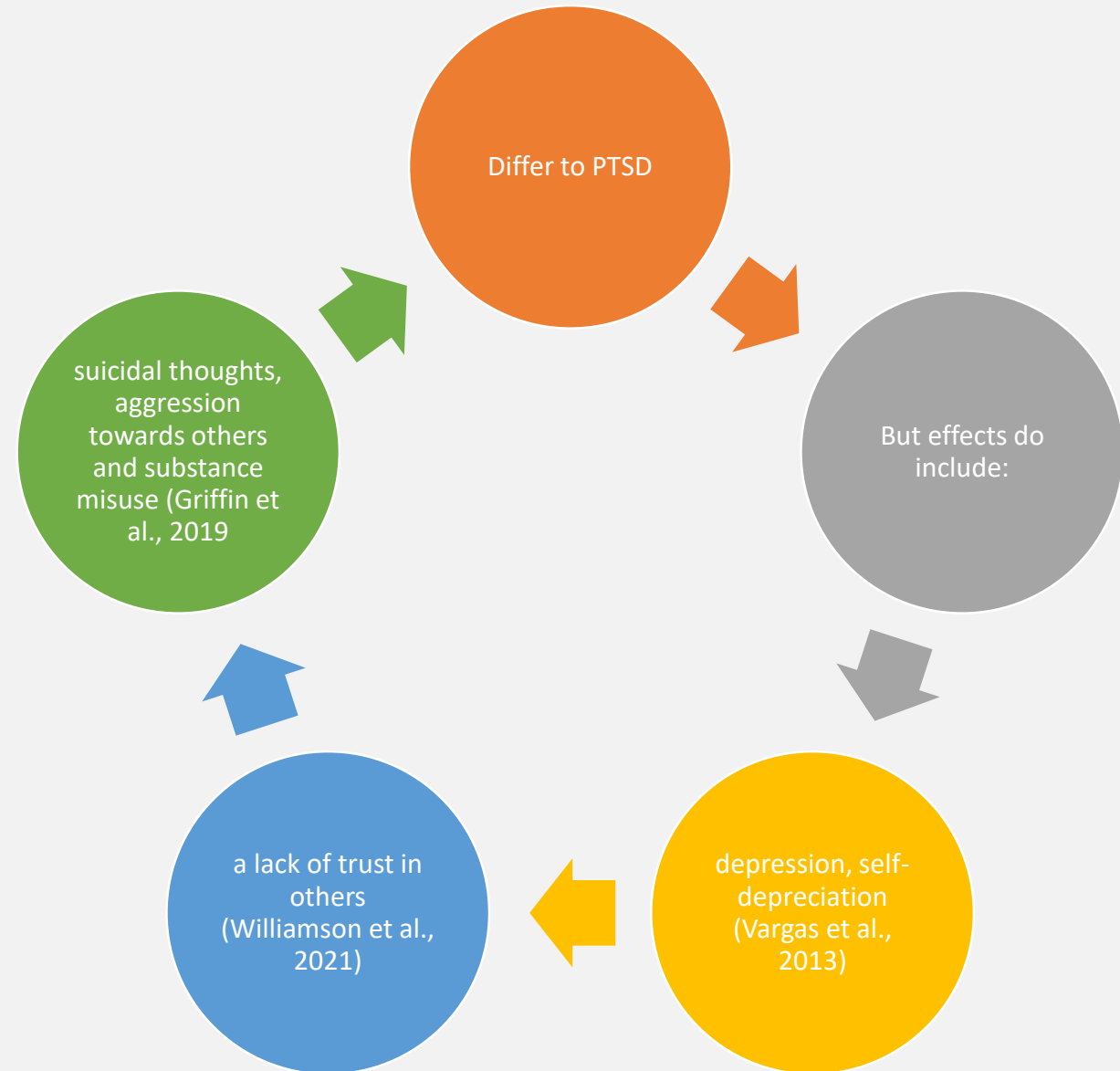
Why are we talking about moral injury in the specific context of autism?

Clinical Knowledge – commonly reported stress response to the ‘breaking of rules’, ‘sensitivity to wrong doing’, ‘injustice’ and ‘infidelity’. All theme around hypersensitivity to morality (‘hyper-morality’) and psychological distress when this is violated by others or self.

Diagnostic knowledge – autism is associated with a heightened and rigid need for rules/predictability and pre-occupations (with order) – it makes intuitive clinical sense to expect a heightened propensity for moral injury in autism.

Research – next to nothing on MI/ASD! Some, limited theory/research of relevance

Effects of Moral Injury

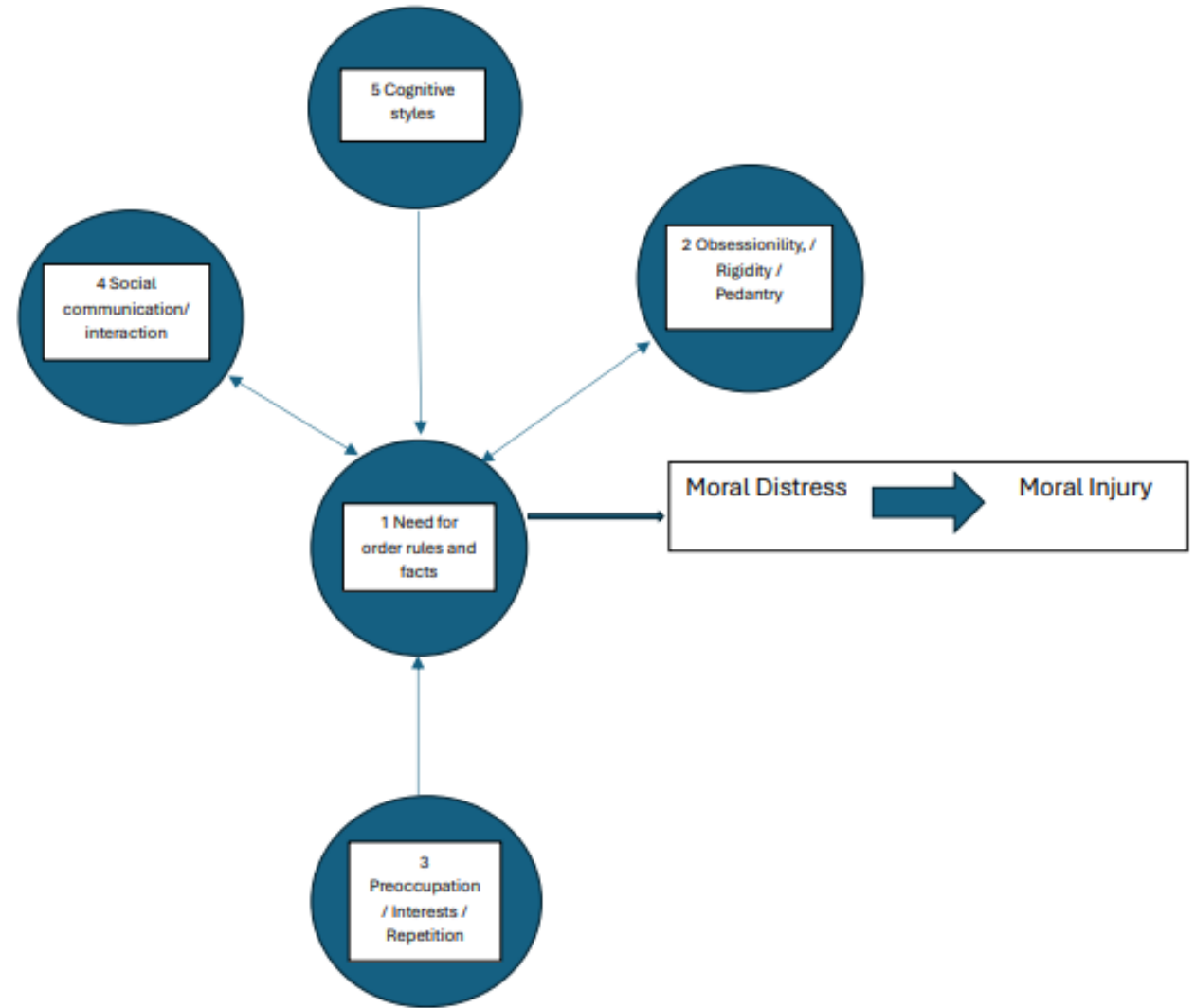


Autism

Strengths - fair, authentic,
reliable (Kirchner, 2016)
and loyal (Attwood, 2006)

Challenges

Autism and Moral Injury



Consider
these in the
context of...



1) Need for Order, Rules and Facts

- Extends to Moral Order and Adhering to Moral Rules
- When people in an autistic person's private life or those in the public space break even minor rules (e.g. do not do what they are expected to, act in irrational ways, are inconsistent or are hypocritical in saying one thing and doing another), this can be experienced as an intense loss of order
- Can generate a visceral reaction
- Perseveration
- Less tolerant to moral transgressions – the “should’s”

Who has not
met the
standards?

Can be directed towards the self as
well as others

Rejection Sensitivity Dysphoria

Intolerance of Uncertainty

Heightened Anxiety

Examples

COVID

Road Rage

IPV



Consider
these in the
context of...

2)
Obsessionality,
Rigidity and
Pedantry

Rules and order needed

Rules need to be applied rigidly

At all times

To the letter

Across all aspects of life

Without exemptions or flexibility

Schemas

Perfectionism

High 'unrelenting'
standards

Hyper-criticality (self and
others)



Consider
these in the
context of...

3) Preoccupation, circumscribed interests and repetition

Some people with autism may also be at a greater risk of experiencing moral distress because of pre-occupation and perseverative interests which are known features of autism

Collectively, they may create a tendency to obsessively and repetitively analyse and ruminate over even minor errors committed by others or oneself and do so more so than non-autistic populations (Gotham et al, 2014)

Maladaptive brooding

Compulsive moral rituals/obsessions to restore order/safety

Meta- cognition

Thinking about thinking

Over reliance on worry/inflexibility –
emotional dysregulation

Anger Rumination

Sadness Focussed Rumination

Hyperfocus on transgressions

What do we know?

Adults with autism traits showed greater levels of proneness to shame and externalising which is associated with blaming others, other-directed hostility, and displaced anger and aggression (Bear et al., 2009; Tangney et al., 2007)



Consider
these in the
context of...

4) Social Communication/ Interaction

- Social Cognition – inferring the intentions and states of others
- Theory of Mind and Moral Decision Making
- Accidental harms more harshly
- High levels of affective empathy – motive for harm protection
- Camouflaging - Fear of moral confusion and the authentic self



Consider
these in the
context of...

5) Cognitive Styles

- Cognitive Flexibility – inhibition, shifting of rules, subtle social inputting
- Coherence – local and central
- Social Imagination
- Context Blindness = Micro-Morality
- Rules based decision making - absolutism



Consider
these in the
context of...

Impact of Moral Injury

- Mental Health : Anxiety; Social Withdrawal; Low Self-Esteem; Worthlessness; Chronic and Intense Guilt; Anger; Agitation; Rumination; Fatigue; Burnout; Lack of Trust; Disillusionment; Deep Depression; Suicidality
- Social Impact: Impaired daily functioning; friendships; employment; relationships; engagement with socio-political context.
- Misdiagnosis of PD
- Forensic Risk



Exacerbating effects – The digital world

- 24-hour exposure to moral transgressions & rule-breaking (news feeds, research, online platforms for communication)
- Moral transgressions harder to separate from own daily life
- Moral transgressions in personal + public life fuse
- Generalised threat, frequent triggers & amplified focus



Recommendations

Formulation

Strategies to Enhance resilience

Psychological Therapies

Lifestyle Coaching

Self-Help

Mental Health Services for Trauma

Cultural Support

Strengths Philosophy and Systemic Moral Health





Any Questions?

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