Moral Injury As an Identity Wound: In Families As In War

STRESS, TRAUMA, AND RESILIENCE (STAR) SEMINAR
NATHANSON FAMILY RESILIENCE CENTER
UCLA HEALTH
SEPTEMBER 30, 2016

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The opinions stated herein are those of the author, alone, not the USMC or the Department of the Navy
Ancient Concepts With Deep Roots, Re-Emerging in the Context of War
### Definitions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Moral Injury (MI):</th>
<th>Moral Repair:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Damage to a person resulting from a violent contradiction of deeply held moral expectations</td>
<td>Rebuilding after a moral injury</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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- **Violent contradiction:** abrupt intrusion of information about the self or others that is irreconcilable with existing schemas
- **Deeply held moral expectations:** non-negotiable requirements for behavior of the self or others in high-stakes social situations
# Moral Injury Events Scale (MIES)

**Subscales: Perpetration, Betrayal**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Moderately Disagree</th>
<th>Slightly Disagree</th>
<th>Slightly Agree</th>
<th>Moderately Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I saw things that were morally wrong.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am troubled by having witnessed others’ immoral acts.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
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<td>I acted in ways that violated my own moral code or values.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>I violated my own morals by failing to do something that I felt I should have done.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am troubled because I violated my morals by failing to do something I felt I should have done.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>I feel betrayed by leaders who I once trusted.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel betrayed by fellow service members who I once trusted.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel betrayed by others outside the U.S. military who I once trusted.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Nash et al., 2013; Bryan et al., 2015
Moral Injury Event Exposure Best Predicted PTSD Group Membership in N = 208 OEF Marines

* Only Moral Injury Events Scale scores were significantly different ($p < .01$) across all three PTSD symptom-level groups

Nash & Litz: Unpublished data from Marine Resiliency Study
Pathways to PTSD from Perpetration, Betrayal, and Combat

Jordan, Eisen, Bolton, Nash, & Litz, In Press
What is Damaged in Moral Injury?

Identity. Core Self.

Facets of Identity

Continuity over time
Emotional repertoire
Authority over oneself
Relationships
Concept of the world
Self-concept
What are the Effects of Moral Injury on Identity?

What are the facets of Moral Injury?


Sin: Judeo-Christian Root of MI

Sin: Judeo-Christian concept of moral transgression

“Cain said to the Lord, ‘My punishment is greater than I can bear! Today you have driven me away from the soil, and I shall be hidden from your face; I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and anyone who meets me may kill me.’” (Emphases mine)

— Genesis 4:13-14 (NSV)
**Miasma: Greek Root of Moral Injury**

*Miasma*: Ancient Greek concept of moral defilement or pollution, often resulting from unjust killing

“What can I do? **Where can I hide** from all this and not be found? What wings would take me high enough? How deep a hole would I have to dig? My **shame** for the evil I have done consumes me… I am soaked in blood-guilt, polluted, contagious… I am a pollutant, an offense to gods above.” (Emphases mine)

— Herakles in Euripedes’ *Herakles* (424 BCE)
Facets of Moral Injury

- **Authority over oneself**
- **Concept of the world**
- **Continuity over time**
- **Emotional repertoire**
- **Relationships**
- **Self-concept**

**Negative moral emotions**
- Shame
- Guilt
- Anger
- Contempt
- Loss of honor
- Loss of joy

**Social alienation**
- Loss of trust
- Severed ties
- Disconnection
- Contamination
- Unforgivability
Janoff-Bulman: Shattered Assumptions

Three **Necessary** Assumptions

- The self is worthy
- The world is benevolent
- The world is meaningful

Facets of Moral Injury

- Negative moral emotions
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  - Guilt
  - Anger
  - Contempt
  - Loss of honor
  - Loss of joy

- Social alienation
  - Loss of trust
  - Severed ties
  - Disconnection
  - Contamination
  - Unforgivability

- Damaged concept of the world
  - "There is no God"
  - "There is no goodness"
  - "Life has no meaning"
  - "Life has no purpose"

- Damaged self concept
  - "I am not good"
  - "I can’t be trusted"
  - "I am a failure"
  - "I am hopeless"
Erik Erikson: “Identity Crisis”

‘The term “identity crisis” was first used, if I remember correctly, for a specific clinical purpose in the Mt. Zion Veterans’ Rehabilitation Clinic during the Second World War... Most of our patients, so we concluded at that time, had neither been “shellshocked” nor become malingerers, but had through the exigencies of war lost a sense of personal sameness and historical continuity. They were impaired in that central control over themselves for which, in the psychoanalytic scheme, only the “inner agency” of the ego could be held responsible. Therefore, I spoke of a loss of “ego identity.”


Herman: “Complex PTSD”

Complex PTSD: Herman’s Criteria

1. Prolonged subjugation to totalitarian control
2. Alterations in affect regulation
3. Alterations in consciousness
4. Alterations in self-perception
5. Alterations of perception of perpetrator
6. Alterations in relations with others
7. Alterations in systems of meaning

“However, I shall argue what I’ve come to strongly believe through my work with Vietnam veterans: that moral injury is an essential part of any combat trauma that leads to lifelong psychological injury. Veterans can usually recover from horror, fear, and grief once they return to civilian life, so long as ‘what’s right’ has not also been violated.”

Facets of Moral Injury

- Instability
- Unpredictability

- Inability to calm down
- Loss of self-control
- Impulsivity
- Outbursts
- Unresponsiveness

- “There is no God”
- “There is no goodness”
- “Life has no meaning”
- “Life has no purpose”

- Loss of continuity over time
- Negative moral emotions
- Social alienation
- Damaged concept of the world
- Damaged self concept

- Shame
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- “I am not good”
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Moral Injury Affects All Facets of Identity

Identity
- Continuity over time
- Authority over oneself
- Concept of the world
- Emotional repertoire
- Relationships
- Self concept

Moral Injury
- Loss of continuity over time
- Loss of self-regulation
- Damaged concept of the world
- Damaged self concept
- Negative moral emotions
- Social alienation
Targeting Self-Regulation: Restore Health to Brain and Body

- First, put out the fire!
- Sleep!
- Reduce stress load
- Stop panic attacks or rage outbursts
- Sleep, exercise, diet
- Prayer, meditation, yoga
- Self-calming
- Psychopharmacology
Targeting Self-Concept: Competence and Self-Confidence

- Competence before confidence
- Do, create, atone, become
- Identify and correct cognitive distortions
  - Over-generalizations
  - Black-and-white thinking
- Align with a benevolent moral authority
Targeting Concept of the World: Social Justice, Spirituality

- Return to the world
- Give or seek amends
- Seek organizations or entities that still deserve respect and idealization
- Make the world a better place
- Religious practice
- Art, journaling
Targeting Moral Emotions: Mindfulness, Exposure Therapy

- Learn to tolerate intense negative moral emotions
- Mindfulness meditation
- Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)
- Practice positive moral emotions
  - Joy
  - Awe
Targeting Social Alienation: Peers, Family, Community

- Overcome barriers to trust
- Repair relationships
- Build new relationships
- Sharing stories in a trusting relationship
- Mentorship
- Family or peer support
- Mirroring