Assessing the research evidence on moral injury: Current status and future horizons

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Causes of Military Trauma

INTENSE OR PROLONGED STRESS

Life threat  Aftermath of violence  Traumatic loss  Moral injury

N. Stein et al. (2012), Behavioral Modification
Causes of Military Trauma

INTENSE OR PROLONGED STRESS

Life threat

Aftermath of violence

Traumatic loss

Moral injury

N. Stein et al. (2012), Behavioral Modification
Shay’s (2014) Def’n of MI

“(a) a betrayal of ‘what’s right’; (b) by someone who holds legitimate authority; (c) in a high stakes situation.”
What is Moral Injury?
Litz et al. (2009), Clinical Psych. Review

“Disruption in an individual’s confidence and expectations about one’s own or others’ motivation or capacity to behave in a just and ethical manner. This injury is brought about by bearing witness to perceived immoral acts, failure to stop such actions, or perpetration of immoral acts that are inhumane, cruel, depraved, or violent, bringing about pain, suffering, or death of others.”
# PTSD vs. Moral Injury

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>PTSD</th>
<th>Moral Injury</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Precipitating event</td>
<td>Threat of death and/or serious injury</td>
<td>Act that violate deeply held moral beliefs and/or values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(A1 Criterion)</td>
<td>Witness or victim</td>
<td>Perpetrator, witness, or victim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual’s role at</td>
<td>Fear, horror, helplessness</td>
<td>Guilt, shame, anger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>time of event</td>
<td>Safety</td>
<td>Trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predominant painful</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>emotions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is lost?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Shay (2014)
Atrocities and Killing: Unique Impact

**Vietnam** – PTSD, functional impairment, interpersonal violence, guilt, suicide

**Gulf War** – PTSD, alcohol frequency and problem use

**Iraq War** – PTSD, alcohol misuse, anger, relationship issues

Currier et al. (2014); Maguen et al. (2009, 2010a, 2010b, 2011); Marx et al. (2010)
Table 1. Descriptive statistics for Moral Injury Questionnaire—Military version items for community and clinical sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MIQ item</th>
<th>Community sample (N = 131)</th>
<th>Clinical sample (N = 82)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1) Things I saw/experienced in the war left me feeling betrayed or let-down by military/political leaders</td>
<td>6.61*</td>
<td>2.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) I did things in the war that betrayed my personal values</td>
<td>6.63*</td>
<td>1.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) There were times in the war that I saw/engaged in revenge/retribution for things that happened</td>
<td>7.05*</td>
<td>1.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) I had an encounter(s) with the enemy that made him/her seem more ‘human’ and made my job more difficult</td>
<td>3.61</td>
<td>1.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) I saw/was involved in violations of rules of engagement</td>
<td>5.37</td>
<td>1.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6) I saw/was involved in the death(s) of an innocent in the war</td>
<td>6.27</td>
<td>1.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(7) I feel guilt over failing to save the life of someone in the war</td>
<td>9.41</td>
<td>1.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(8) I had to make decisions in the war at times when I didn’t know the right thing to do</td>
<td>6.50</td>
<td>1.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(9) I feel guilt for surviving when others didn’t</td>
<td>10.94</td>
<td>1.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(10) I saw/was involved in violence that was out of proportion to the event</td>
<td>5.65</td>
<td>1.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(11) I saw/was involved in the death(s) of children</td>
<td>6.33</td>
<td>1.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(12) I experienced tragic war-zone events that were chaotic and beyond my control</td>
<td>9.11</td>
<td>1.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(13) I was sexually assaulted</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>1.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(14) I sometimes treated civilians more harshly than was necessary</td>
<td>7.06</td>
<td>1.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(15) I felt betrayed or let-down by trusted civilians during the war</td>
<td>7.17</td>
<td>1.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(16) I saw/was involved in a ‘friendly-fire’ incident</td>
<td>4.46</td>
<td>1.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(17) I destroyed civilian property unnecessarily during the war</td>
<td>6.76</td>
<td>1.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(18) Seeing so much death has changed me</td>
<td>9.26</td>
<td>2.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(19) I made mistakes in the war zone that led to injury or death</td>
<td>4.98</td>
<td>1.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(20) I came to realize during the war that I enjoyed violence</td>
<td>8.24</td>
<td>1.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average item score</td>
<td>9.74</td>
<td>1.62</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .001.
How Do MIEs Occur?

Currier, McCormick, & Drescher, Traumatology

- N = 14 Iraq/Afghanistan Veterans in final month of a long-term, residential treatment program for PTSD outside of the VHA
- 50% ethnic minorities, 50% were divorced/separated at the time
- Active Duty Army and Marines, 1 to 7 deployments, nearly 6 years had passed since last war-zone deployment
- Mean PCL = 58.14 (SD = 12.14); 9/14 exceeded clinical threshold
- High levels of exposure to MIEs were endorsed on MIQ-M
- Participants completed 45- to 75-minute semi-structured interview regarding eight possible MIEs (e.g., harm to civilians, betrayals)
- Interviews transcribed and content analytic procedures were used to code predominant themes from qualitative interviews
Qualitative Themes

• 25 distinct circumstances of MIEs emerged in the content analysis

• 4 higher clusters:
  1. Organizational
  2. Environmental
  3. Cultural/Relational
  4. Psychological
Accumulation of Anger

“You're just mad. I started taking it out on people. Sometimes they were innocent but more on the persons that I thought weren't. I would give some payback . . . to get out some frustration and some aggression. There wasn't really time for any type of outlet, so you have no outlet and something else is going to have to give. Sometimes I did not take it as far as doing really extreme acts, but I would butt strike people, bad guys that were being held by us . . . I would like hit them or something like that or be really aggressive with them. A lot of times you have bad guys and you know they were bad because a lot of time when we got into terrorist cells there was a lot of ammo, grenades, stuff like that. You can see other methods of torture . . . so you get really angry.”

-Iraq Veteran from AD Army
Civilians Make Unsafe Decisions

“We were in a firefight and we’re trying to lock down the city and there’s civilian people everywhere and I was holding down a corner, making sure no one got out of our zone, out of our circle. Well, I was letting civilians run past me because there were groups of them and they wanted to get the hell out of there . . . and I would have too you know. All hell was coming down on this area, so I was letting civilians run past me . . . and I hear over the radio my commander telling me that my helicopter’s patrolling and called down that the bad guys are getting out of our perimeter because you know . . . because I was letting people through. So, ‘you know, stop doing that.’ There’s tons of civilians coming through over here’ and he’s like ‘I don’t care, just stop the problem.’”

-Iraq Veteran from AD Army
Moral Injury, Meaning Making, and Mental Health in Returning Veterans

Joseph M. Currier,¹,² Jason M. Holland,³ and Jesse Malott²

¹University of South Alabama
²Fuller Theological Seminary
³University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Objective: This study examined whether exposure to morally injurious experiences (MIEs) contribute to mental health problems among returning Veterans via meaning made of possible traumas. Method: A total of 131 Iraq and/or Afghanistan Veterans completed assessments of exposure to possible warzone traumas, meaning made of a salient stressor from their lives, and mental health symptomatology (e.g., posttraumatic stress, depression, suicidality). Results: Structural equation modeling findings revealed that MIEs were indirectly linked with mental health outcomes via the extent to which Veterans were able to make meaning of their identified stressors. However, we also found that the direct path from MIEs to mental health problems was statistically significant. Conclusion: These findings provide preliminary evidence that difficulties with meaning making could serve as a mediating pathway for how MIEs increase the risk for adjustment problems after warzone service, but that other factors associated with moral injury also have a bearing on psychological functioning among Veterans. © 2014 Wiley Periodicals, Inc. J. Clin. Psychol. 71:229–240, 2015.
Sample Description

- N = 131 Iraq/Afghanistan veterans recruited from 2011 to 2013
- Average age = 28.47 years (SD = 5.87), 88% men; 42% Hispanic, 26% Caucasian, 16% Asian American, 12% African American
- 35% served in Army, 38% in USMC, years of military service was 6.62 (SD = 4.09), recency of deployment = 3.02 years (SD = 2.42)
- Assessed for exposure to combat stressors (MIQ, CES), suicide (SBQ-R), depression (PHQ-9), PTSD (PCL), and meaning (ISLES)
- 6 participants reported attempting suicide since their deployment; 24% reported serious suicidal ideation at the time of the study
- 35% exceeded PTSD clinical threshold (M = 39.55, SD = 6.32)
- 20% scored in clinical range for depression (M = 7.74, SD = 5.62)
Meaning Making: Mechanism of MI?
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Meaning Making: Mechanism of MI?
What we know about MI

1. Additive risk for problems with mental health and spirituality

2. Associated with more complex constellation of symptoms than other types of military traumas (e.g., inappropriate guilt, shame)

3. MIEs occur in complicated sets of organizational, environmental, relational/cultural, and emotional circumstances

4. Meaning making could be key factor
1. Better illumining possible types of military traumas and treatment approaches
2. Development of moral injury symptom measure
3. Assess other correlates and outcomes of MI (e.g., help-seeking, stigma, suicide)
4. Spiritually-integrative treatments for MI
5. Community engagement and social advocacy
Thank You!

Questions?