

MORAL INJURY

SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP NEWSLETTER

VOLUME 3, ISSUE 1



UPDATE FROM THE CHAIRS

Dear SIG Members,

We hope this first spring issue of 2021 finds you and your loved ones safe and well. There has been much transition and renewal in the air and concurrently, much work remains ahead of us as we continue to navigate the pandemic and confront ongoing oppression and discrimination. We feel motivated to continue to move towards community and collaboration, engaging in curious, compassionate, and unifying dialogues.

In line with this spirit, the Moral Injury SIG is working on a collaboration with the

Complex PTSD SIG and we are pleased to share that we will be issuing a joint newsletter for our next issue – *the first of its kind in ISTSS!* Stay tuned for more updates on this topic and related efforts. We would also like to draw your attention to our SIG's mission statement below, which has been updated and refreshed to reflect how we've grown and set a course for future endeavors. We are planning for upcoming newsletter issues to include greater visibility of lived experiences, which we believe will add much value to the

conversation around moral injury.

In this issue, our very own student co-chair Jason Cruze continues with the theme of collaboration, penning an important discussion on the interdisciplinary nature of moral injury. Following this article, we are pleased to spotlight SIG member Dr. Victoria Williamson, a researcher spearheading the effort to examine and better characterize the impact of moral injury in UK veterans, as well as studying moral injury across other occupational groups. Although we did not receive any

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submissions for trainee spotlights this round, you will still find a list of training sites that offer clinical and/or research opportunities within the U.S. in the Trainee Section.

Also in this issue, we are particularly excited to announce the launching of our SIG Facebook page! We hope this becomes a resource for general discourse about moral injury across all shapes, sizes, and disciplines. Anyone can join the ISTSS Moral Injury SIG Facebook group and we hope this provides greater access to interested persons for whom ISTSS membership costs are prohibitive. Finally, check out the Research Highlights for a sampling of articles on moral injury published since our last newsletter.

Moral Injury SIG Chairs,

Amanda K., Bart, Amanda G., Jason

MISSION

The Moral Injury Special Interest Group (SIG) aims to bring together individuals from across healing disciplines and beyond in order to provide a professional home for moral injury discourse and development. The SIG strives to facilitate dynamic conversations and collaborations that advance our understanding, assessment, and healing of moral injury and related phenomenon. We are strongly committed to examining and recognizing how historical and contemporary traumas impact moral pain and moral injury within individuals and communities. The SIG approaches this task in the spirit of humility by working to include and bring together a host of diverse perspectives.

These primary objectives of the Moral Injury SIG are addressed in the following ways:

- Advocate for the expansion of traumatic stress conceptualizations to include the developing landscape of moral injury.
- Provide support for collaborative exploration of moral injury among SIG members through fostering multi-disciplinary moral injury conceptualization, research, assessment, and services.
- Establish and maintain an active SIG listserv to facilitate direct and wide-spread sharing of relevant content of interest (e.g., publications, training opportunities, new topic areas within moral injury).
- Serve as an additional resource for ISTSS members with lived experiences of moral injury



ISTSS International Society
for Traumatic Stress Studies
37th Annual Meeting

Trauma in Context:
Moving Beyond the Individual

November 2 – 5, 2021
Pre-Meeting Institutes, November 1, 2021

THE SOCIAL CONSTITUTION OF MORAL INJURY

JASON CRUZE, M.A.

In her editorial titled, “George Floyd and Our Collective Moral Injury,” Dr. Oxiris Barbot makes a profound point about the collective nature of moral injury by arguing that it is a burden we all must share, “so that we are all made stronger in the struggle to advance racial equity.” She goes on to say that part of the responsibility is to understand and address the “outrage at those in authority who are failing us...to feel morally injured by actions committed in the name of maintaining false power structures, and by those who choose to linger in descriptions of the wreckage rather than take actions to prevent it” (Barbot, p. 1253, 2020). Although the majority of research on moral injury has involved military Service members and Veterans, moral injury is neither merely a medical construct nor restricted to the experiences of Veterans and Service members (Nash, 2018). The construct of moral injury brings all of us to the knees of our own moral fragility. It is particularly felt by those historically marginalized who suffer the failure of equal treatment and opportunities for fair life prospects; whose moral reception is rooted in severe social injustice and alienation from the political community. Advancing the construct of moral injury to engage in

trauma’s social context can help to uncover its wider social constitution through the lens of betrayal trauma theory (Gómez et al., 2016). Moral injuries that occur as a result of social injustice can be especially severe, since the trauma involves a violation of one’s dignity and sense of equal belonging in the political community.

The hope is, in better understanding the social constitution of moral injury, we might make more progress towards rebuilding trust in our moral relations through actively taking collective responsibility to recognize and repair the severe social injustices felt by those at the margins of society. All moral injuries present reparative duties that intersect with the individual and the political community. By highlighting the importance of the historical, social, and cultural factors of moral injury beyond the battlefield, we can identify the broader effects of social identity and power center stage.

There is a deep interdependency between people’s mental health and how we order our social and political lives. A distinctly insidious way in which the social and political world is structured, largely invisible to those safeguarded by racial and economic privilege, are the

contexts that make it strenuously burdensome for people to exercise their agency freely. This is evident in the literature on the psychology of power: defined by societal structures that manifestly demonstrate social hierarchies built on race, gender, and class (Kraus & Torrez, 2017). Class plays a central role in the social constitution of moral injury. What can be labeled as ‘economic’ moral injury is embedded in sociohistorical power structures that systematically isolate marginalized populations to the economic edges of society. As we know, poverty can lead to severe stress, which can give rise to mental illness. Consequently, mental illness is exacerbated by the effect it can have on labor market participation (Schoenbaum, et al., 2002).

The “culture of poverty” has largely shaped the perception and moral condemnation of people from low socio-economic backgrounds by attributing inner-city poverty to a deficiency in family values. Economic injustice results in further grievances with outcomes that determine the segregation of one’s social networks, what neighborhood one lives in, what school one attends, etc., which have devastating consequences for Black and Brown people in

America. The lack of social capital denies poor people channels of knowledge that are necessary for access to resources needed to get ahead in life (Coleman, 1988). This can result in silencing the testimonies of those suffering as a result of their social disadvantage. We can label this form of moral injury ‘epistemic’ moral injury: the undermining and betrayal of an individual *as a knower* based on discrimination and prejudices about one’s social background (Fricker, 2007).

‘Political’ moral injury can be especially grievous because the forces of political and legal power can make it extremely difficult, and perhaps foolish, not to simply give up hope in the trustworthiness of political institutions. As Judith Herman reminds us, “our own society faces a dilemma with respect to the legacy of slavery. The unhealed racial divisions of our country create an ongoing potential for violence” (Herman, p. 243, 2015). America still fails to confront the impact of slavery, Jim Crow, and unjust policies that have consistently denied black and brown people opportunities afforded to other Americans. How do we reconcile our own commitment to political trust when the reality is that unconscious anti-black bias subsists in police officers, prison guards, parole boards, probation officers, prosecutors, judges, and jurors (Armour, 1995)? Speaking to the moral experience of “betrayal of what is right by someone in authority” (Shay, 1994), Malcolm X shares his

own testimony of what it feels like to experience moral injury at the level of cultural and institutional betrayal: “I’m not an American. I’m one of the 22 million Black people who are the victims of Americanism. One of the 22 million Black people who are the victims of democracy” (Breitman, 1994). He courageously makes the case for rejecting the authority of the American political system when its betrayal invalidates its own moral standing. In her book, *The New Jim Crow*, Michelle Alexander makes the parallel case between Malcolm X’s testimony of severe social injustice and our current reality of severe social injustice pertaining to incarceration. In the last 50 years America was shaped by a commitment to mass incarceration and excessive punishment. The prison population went from 300,000 to 2.3 million; a 500% increase in my lifetime. The greatest tragedy of the era of mass incarceration has been its impact on people of color. The Bureau of Justice has reported that it expects one in three Black male children will end up in jail or prison at some point during their lifetimes. If you’re poor, and particularly if you’re a person of color, there is a presumption of guilt that can follow you in society and into the courtroom (Armour, 1995). This creates moral injury at the level of despair in communities of color. The pandemic, and the death of George Floyd and the repeated protests that followed, have underscored where we are in terms of decades of policies that

have exacerbated social injustice in America.

Empathizing with those suffering from moral injuries as a consequence of social oppression calls for a sustained commitment to humanistic values of social justice such as, affirmation of human dignity, a common humanity centered belief, and the radical equality of all lives. Reflecting more deeply on the interdependency of humans, and the intersecting contexts of social oppression, including privilege, power, history, politics, colonization, might help foster more curiosity about one’s own role in the social constitution of moral injuries: “as people who live – in a broad sense – together, we cannot escape the thought that the terrible occurrences that we see around us are quintessentially our problems. They are our responsibility – whether or not they are also anyone else’s” (Sen, p. 282, 2000). To be on the right side of the social divide one needs to also grasp their own moral standing among others subjected to severe social injustice. That is, the ways in which one’s positionality in society benefits from others’ marginalization. This can be especially challenging for those in positions of racial privilege. In one study, when white people were faced with evidence of racial privilege, they denied that they had benefitted at all. They responded by claiming their own personal hardships. The acknowledgment and active acceptance of racial privilege can be especially difficult for many white people due to the perceived value of meritocratic systems as a

dominant cultural belief that's linked to moral virtues within white culture (Philips & Lowery, 2015).

To carefully and authentically engage an individual's moral injury requires understanding the individual's social context and the moral significance of severe social injustice (Gómez, 2020).

Avoiding the broader context of inequality and the ways in which it can impact mental health and outcomes of trauma, risks trauma work becoming what Warren Kinghorn calls, "conspiracies of avoidance," where the deeper forces of trauma are never engaged (Kinghorn, p.17, 2020). Treating moral injury can cause further moral injury when the clinician is encumbered by the hegemony of trauma's symptoms (Kinghorn, 2020) and distances themselves from the reality of the social context of moral injury.

Understanding the social constitution of moral injury may potentially help us to cultivate our shared values of social ethics, cultural humility (Mosher et. al., 2017), political awareness, self-awareness of our own moral standing, and an orientation towards psychotherapy as a "healing practice, scientific endeavor, and social justice action" (Diaz, 2012).

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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ARTICLE SUBMISSION

We invite SIG members to submit relevant articles of no more than 1,500 words. Submissions may be data-driven, descriptive, theoretical, clinically oriented, etc. provided that they are relevant to the field of moral injury. Consistent with our mission to bring together clinicians and researchers from across healing disciplines and related fields, we hope to consider a range of submissions.

Articles should be no more than 2000 words (including references, tables, and figures). At least one SIG member should be an author on all submissions, though non-members may contribute in any role. As always, collaborations among members are highly encouraged. Submissions should be addressed to the SIG student co-chairs:

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MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

DR VICTORIA WILLIAMSON



Dr Victoria Williamson is a researcher at the University of Oxford and King's College London. She completed her PhD at the University of Bath in 2016 which examined parental responses following child experiences trauma. At King's College London, Victoria's research focuses on psychological adjustment after traumatic events, including combat trauma and moral injury. At the University of Oxford, her research aims to identify effective approaches to screen for child mental health difficulties in schools and deliver an accessible parent-led intervention to support child adjustment.

1. What inspired your work on the topic of moral injury and what led you to serve those suffering after morally injurious experiences?

I have been working in the field of moral injury since 2017. As many veterans either do not respond well or drop out of standard PTSD treatment, my work in moral injury was driven by a desire to better understand the types of traumatic events experienced by service personnel/veterans and to develop ways to better respond to their needs. I led the first exploratory study of moral injury in UK military veterans in 2018. At this stage, research in the US military had found moral injury exposure could adversely impact mental health, yet it was unclear whether moral injury was experienced by UK military veterans and what impact exposure could have on wellbeing. Our research showed that moral injury was significantly associated with poor mental health outcomes as well as negatively impact familial and occupational functioning.

2. What were some of the most informative learning experiences that impacted your career path?

During my PhD, I had the opportunity to carry out research in Khayelitsha, an informal settlement in Cape Town, South Africa. Khayelitsha is home to around one million people, the majority of whom live in make-shift housing, with an approximate 51% unemployment rate. This settlement has extremely high rates of violent crime and more than 80% of community youth report exposure to severe trauma. There is a substantial gap between the number of individuals who require and those who receive mental health treatment in South Africa and few healthcare professionals receive training in appropriate care for victims seeking help following trauma. My work in Cape Town inspired me to pursue a career working with and for individuals who experience trauma and to design accessible, evidence-based treatments.

Reference: Williamson, V., Butler, I., Tomlinson, M., Skeen, S., Christie, H., Stewart, J., & Halligan, S. L. (2017). Caregiver responses to child posttraumatic distress: A qualitative study in a high-risk context in South Africa. *Journal of traumatic stress, 30*(5), 482-490.

3. What do you find most challenging about this work at this time? What do you find most rewarding?

Working with individuals who have experienced moral injury can pose a number of challenges for researchers. As described in our recent editorials, carrying out moral injury research in an ethically responsible way, including taking steps to safeguard confidentiality and the management of clinical risk, can require additional planning and collaboration with local research ethics committees. Nonetheless, this research is also very rewarding as my aim with this work is to better understand the experience and impact of morally injurious experiences and, ultimately, develop high-quality support for those who are suffering.

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4. Describe your goals for you career and your work in the field of moral injury going forward.

Currently, our research group are carrying out a feasibility study funded by the Forces in Mind Trust to develop and pilot a manual for the treatment of moral injury related mental health difficulties. Our goal is to develop a treatment approach that addresses morally injured patient's difficulties and promote wellbeing. I am also involved in several studies of moral injury with non-military populations and hope to see research in the field of moral injury continue to extend in other occupational groups that are at high risk of trauma exposure.

NOMINATIONS FOR SPOTLIGHT

The Moral Injury SIG welcomes nominations for students, researchers, and clinicians, and anyone advancing the moral injury field to be “spotlighted” in an upcoming newsletter.

Nominations should include a brief nominating statement and the CV of the nominee. Self-nominations are encouraged. Nomination materials should be addressed to the SIG Chairs:

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ANNOUNCING THE SIG FACEBOOK PAGE

We are very excited to announce the launching of Moral Injury SIG's Facebook page! We recognize that although the listserv is a helpful forum, emails can feel like additional burden and not all those who work or are interested in moral injury can afford to be ISTSS members. We have created this social media page to provide another forum for collaboration and discourse on moral injury. We encourage SIG members to join the Facebook group and also shared with anyone else who is interested or involved in the field of moral injury including those with lived experiences.

The page will be moderated by our student co-chairs, Amanda Gentz and Jason Cruze, and we will post with relative frequency to foster engagement. We encourage those who join the Facebook group to post anything relevant including articles, trainings, general questions, ideas, media (new books, films, art), personal experiences, etc., We hope that you all find resource useful and community-affirming.

Instructions for Joining the Facebook Page:

- (1) On Facebook, search "ISTSS Moral Injury SIG" (below is a screenshot of what the page header looks like)
- (2) Click "Join Group"



Joining the SIG

1. Log in to the ISTSS website as a member
2. Click "Edit Your Profile" on the right side of the page
3. Click the "SIG Choices" tab
4. Check "44 - Moral Injury"
5. Click "Save" – You're a member!

TRAINEE Section

Welcome to the trainee section! This corner covers various topics that arise as a trainee working with moral injury across disciplines. Every newsletter includes a spotlight and a list of training opportunities. If you'd like to nominate a trainee or spotlight your training site or if there's anything else you'd like to see covered here, please email Amanda Gentz agg5225@utulsa.edu

Training Opportunities

The following is an up-to-date list of sites that offer opportunities in moral injury (clinical, research, or otherwise) within the U.S. for trainees.

If you would like your site listed here, please email Amanda Gentz agg5225@utulsa.edu

Site	Location	Training Level Offered
Boston VA Health Care System	Boston, MA	Psychology Postdoctoral Fellow <i>*More opportunities available working in Dr. Brett Litz's laboratory</i>
Road Home Program: Center for Veterans and Their Families (Rush University Medical Center)	Chicago, IL	Psychology Postdoctoral Fellow <i>*Email Dr. Brian Klassen for information about clinical & research opportunities (brian_klassen@rush.edu)</i>
Rocky Mountain Regional VA Medical Center	Denver, CO	Psychology Intern & Postdoctoral Fellow <i>*Email Dr. Jacob Farnsworth for more information (jacob.farnsworth@va.gov)</i>
Loma Linda VA Medical Center	Loma Linda, CA	Psychology Postdoctoral Fellows via Holistic Mental Health focus area
San Francisco VA Health Care System	San Francisco, CA	Psychology Intern & Postdoctoral Fellow <i>*Email Dr. Shira Maguen for more information (Shira.Maguen@va.gov)</i>
VISN 17 Center of Excellence for Research on Returning War Veterans	Waco, TX	Psychology Postdoctoral Fellow
VA North Texas Health Care System	Dallas-Fort Worth, TX	Psychology Externs, Interns, and Postdoctoral Fellows <i>*Email Dr. Wyatt Evans for more information (wyatt.evans@va.gov)</i>

MORAL INJURY RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

Note: This is not an exhaustive list of articles relevant to the field of moral injury. Listed articles were compiled from a standard database search of keywords. All articles yielded by this search were included.

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