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# Moral Injury & Veterans

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# Definitions of Moral Injury



Current definitions emphasise the potentially morally injurious event (MI):

- Brett Litz (2009):

*“a psychological state that arises from events which involve perpetuating, failing to prevent, bearing witness to, or learning about acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations”*

- Jonathon Shay (2014):

*“the psychological consequence of a betrayal of what’s right by someone who holds legitimate authority in a high-stakes situation”*

- Jacob Farnsworth (2017)

*“a situation occurring in a high-stakes environment where an individual perceives that an important moral value has been violated by the actions of self or others”*

# Potential MI events

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- Betrayal (perpetrated by leaders, peers, trusted significant others or oneself)
- Disproportionate violence (e.g. mistreatment of enemy and acts of revenge)
- Incidents involving civilians (violence against civilians perpetrated by self or others)
- Within-rank violence (including sexual trauma, friendly fire)
- Bearing witness to human suffering
- Killing

# Why study MI?

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- PTSD understood as a fear-based disorder resulting from exposure to life-threatening events (Friedman et al., 2011)
- But for many, their most distressing and haunting experience is an event that transgressed deeply held moral and ethical beliefs (Stein et al., 2012)
- Military trauma is associated with relatively poor response to treatment (Steenkamp et al., 2015)
- May be because the experience causes a crisis of conscience or moral injury (Litz et al., 2014)
- Affect associated with a moral injury may not be fear, but rather shame/guilt?

# MI & mental health



## Results of meta-analysis:

- Strongest association between MI & PTSD
  - **0.30** ( $p < 0.0001$ , 95% CI 0.20, 0.39).
- Significant association with depression
  - **0.23** ( $p = 0.0002$ , 95% CI 0.11, 0.37).
- Significant association with suicidal ideation
  - **0.14** ( $p < 0.0001$ , 95% CI 0.08, 0.20).

BJPsych

The British Journal of Psychiatry (2018)  
212, 339–346. doi: 10.1192/bjp.2018.55

## Review article

### Occupational moral injury and mental health: systematic review and meta-analysis

Victoria Williamson, Sharon A.M. Stevelink and Neil Greenberg

#### Background

Many people confront potentially morally injurious experiences (PMIEs) in the course of their work which can violate deeply held moral values or beliefs, putting them at risk for psychological difficulties (e.g. post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, etc.).

#### Aims

We aimed to assess the effect of moral injury on mental health outcomes.

was not consistently significant. Moderator analyses indicated that methodological factors (e.g. PMIE measurement tool), demographic characteristics and PMIE variables (e.g. military v. non-military context) did not affect the association between a PMIE and mental health outcomes.

#### Conclusions

Most studies examined occupational PMIEs in military samples and additional studies investigating the effect of PMIEs on civilians are

# MI case study 1

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- MR P, gentleman in early 50's, joined Army when 16, deployed multiple times to Northern Ireland.
- PTSD with multiple traumas, co-morbid depression, anger, alcohol & physical health (restricted mobility & chronic pain).
- MI Trauma: 2<sup>nd</sup> Deployment to N.I.
  - Unit were controlling a riot. Mr P's role was to shoot rubber bullets at crowd. Hit young boy.
    - **Affect:** shame
    - **Cognitions:** 'I am a wicked person', 'I killed him'

# MI case study 2

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- Mr R, gentleman in early 40s, ex-officer, deployed to Iraq once and Afghanistan once.
- PTSD to single incident trauma, co-morbid depression.
- MI Trauma: Op Herrick
  - Leading convoy of trucks. Pre-designated path through a town was blocked so had to choose alternative. IED attack on convoy that resulted in a fatality & life changing injury in British personnel.
  - **Affect:** guilt & shame
  - **Cognitions:** 'I let them down', 'I'm not the man I thought I was'.

# Impact of MI on UK veterans



- Qualitative pilot study of veterans & clinicians.
- Key findings:
  - MI seen as common for veterans.
  - Believed to be linked to poorer mental health status.
  - Poorly understood concept – i.e. what constitutes a moral injury & how does impact of an MI differ to other trauma exposure.
  - Lack of manualised approaches to treatment MI highlighted.

EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF PSYCHOTRAUMATOLOGY  
2019, VOL. 10, 1562842  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/20008198.2018.1562842>



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TRAUMATOLOGY  
An Official Journal of the International Association of Trauma Studies



BASIC RESEARCH ARTICLE

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## Moral injury in UK armed forces veterans: a qualitative study

Victoria Williamson<sup>a</sup>, Neil Greenberg <sup>a</sup> and Dominic Murphy<sup>a,b</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Moral injury has been found to adversely affect US veteran mental health, and the mental health difficulties resulting from moral injury can be particularly challenging to treat. Yet little is known about the impact of moral injury on the well-being of UK armed forces (AF) veterans and how moral injury is currently addressed in treatment.

**Objective:** The aim of this study was to examine UK AF veterans' experiences of moral injury, and the perceptions and challenges faced by clinicians in treating moral injury-related mental health difficulties.

**Method:** Five veterans with reported moral injury symptoms and four clinicians took part

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 2 August 2018  
Revised 1 November 2018  
Accepted 10 December 2018

### KEYWORDS

Moral injury; veteran;  
military; mental health  
treatment; clinician





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# Current Studies

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# Moral Injury Outcomes Study International Consortium

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- Researchers and clinicians across US, UK, Canada, Australia, working with current serving military members and veterans.
- Development of the Moral Injury Outcomes Scale (MIOS).
- Three phases:
  1. Content generation and creation of the initial measure
  2. Scale refinement and reliability testing
  3. Testing construct validity of the final scale

# Imagine Study (FiMT funded)



- Gap in data specific to UK veterans.
- King's Study PI: Prof Greenberg, CI's: Dr Williamson, Dr Stevelink & Dr Murphy
- Two stage study:
  - Qualitative interviews with 30 veterans & 15 clinicians
  - Online questionnaire to explore experiences of MI in veterans
- Anticipated outcomes:
  - Rich understanding of events that constitute a MI for UK veterans
  - Provide knowledge on the impact of MI on physical and emotional health
  - Understand the challenges faced in therapy when treatment clients with MI
  - Provide insight in the potential risk and/or protective factors for psychological adjustment difficulties following an MI

# Thanks for Listening

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# Questions?

