Moral injury in context: Moral distress and trauma in frontline professions

A special panel presentation of research project findings, at 'A 'new security landscape' in Europe? Challenges and consequences for the military and society,' organized by ERGOMAS. Stockholm, Sweden.

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Chair: Tine Molendijk

A substantial number of frontline personnel, such as military and police members, develop moral injury, including guilt, shame and anger resulting from perpetrating or experiencing moral transgressions, moral dilemmas, and apparently senseless situations. Like PTSD, moral injury is often studied as a psychological trauma-related disorder, while it is an inherently relational condition shaped by social contextual factors. These factors have largely been overlooked in both research and practice. The presentations in this panel examine three contextual dimensions of moral injury – organizational, socio-technical and socio-political – and explore contextual initiatives to mitigate moral injury in Dutch military and police practice.

ABSTRACTS OF PANEL PRESENTATIONS

Organizational dimensions of moral injury

Dr. Teun Eikenaar

Like soldiers, police officers have legal and coercive powers that imply they have to make decisions on a good course of action in high stakes situations, often in split seconds. However, what this means in terms of moral injury among police officers is largely understudied, especially so in relation to the organizational dimensions of their work. This contribution adds to this field by presenting an empirical exploration of moral injury among a group of Dutch police officers. By adopting a contextual approach that attends to the organizational dimensions of policework, this study shows police moral injury can only be understood in its relation to the particularities of police work, its occupational culture and institutional demands. It thus shows the relevance of officers' experience of working in a 'greedy institution' that keeps demanding effort without the trust or support deemed necessary for the job. Theoretically, therefore, this study adds to existing conceptualizations of moral injury, and proposes the notion of 'compound moral injury' to capture its multifarious sources. Lastly, the relevance of these findings for military contexts is explored by reflecting on similarities and differences between the police and military organizations and occupations.

Socio-technical dimensions of moral injury

Sofie van der Maarel

Many militaries are experimenting with innovative technologies such as drones, artificial intelligence, and robots. While most studies focus on the ethical dimension of these technologies, this discussion integrates the social and technical aspects of soldiers' experiences. In particular, it focuses on the socio-technical dimensions of moral injury. Emerging technologies are often not fully integrated into military practice, resulting in a limited understanding of their implications for moral injury. Studying military innovation processes, however, helps identify three factors that could potentially lead to symptoms of moral injury: trust, control, and responsibility. Firstly, technologies change military practice and require soldiers to trust technologies that are often not fully functional, leading to feelings of insecurity, betrayal, and mistrust. Secondly, due to the large amounts of data and information processed in algorithms and bulk data analysis tools, soldiers' sense of control on the battlefield changes. Thirdly, this has implications for soldiers' feelings of responsibility, as responsibility is increasingly distributed among human and nonhuman actors, making it harder to identify who can be held accountable. This lack of clarity can lead to soldiers experiencing feelings of guilt, shame, and betrayal by their organization.

Socio-political dimensions of moral injury

Dr. (Tine) Molendijk

This contribution discusses a qualitative, ethnographic study of socio-political dimensions of moral injury in the Dutch military. In military moral injury, political practices, like decision-making and framing, and public opinion, may play an important role. Unresolved conflicts at the political level create potentially morally injurious situations for soldiers, leading to experiences of institutional betrayal and a subsequent search for reparations. Moreover, public condemnation or heroification of veterans may contribute to moral injury. Societal narratives often cast soldiers in the roles of villains, heroes, or victims. This oversimplification can result in a profound sense of misrecognition, as veterans commonly perceive these portrayals as unjust, alienating distortions of their deployment experiences. As the causes of moral injury lie not only in the individual but also at the organizational, political and societal levels, solutions must span these domains. The practical implications of a holistic approach include the need for a more elaborate moral vocabulary, adherence to the Just War Tradition's decision-making framework, and the implementation of purification and reintegration practices.

Initiatives in military and police practice

Dr. Jeannine Suurmond

Initiatives in military and police practice

Most studies addressing interventions aimed at mitigating moral injury adopt a clinical approach, focusing on individual-oriented treatment modalities. In contrast, the more contextual interventions within military and police settings, which also play a role in mitigating moral injury, are less researched. This exploratory study constitutes the initial phase of a broader action-research project, investigating contextual interventions aimed at preventing and reducing moral injury among Dutch military and police personnel. Adopting a holistic perspective on moral injury, the study maps a range of existing initiatives, from ethical dilemma training to buddy systems. Drawing on insights from desktop research and expert interviews, the discussion focuses on the initiatives and strategies currently operational within the Dutch armed forces and police and their role in preventing and reducing moral injury. The objective is to gain a better understanding of existing and potentially lacking context-interventions within the different organizations and to identify those with significant promise. Ultimately, the study contributes towards the development of best contextual practices in the mitigation of moral injury and the safeguarding of the mental well-being and moral integrity of frontline personnel.