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Moral injury in relation to public debates: The role of societal misrecognition in moral conflict-colored trauma among soldiers

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**Moral injury in relation to public debates:****The role of societal misrecognition in moral conflict-colored trauma among soldiers****Abstract**

The last decade has witnessed fast-growing scholarly interest in the concept of moral injury, which addresses the link between the ethics of military intervention and deployment-related suffering. However, current research on moral injury, predominantly psychological in nature, tends to approach the phenomenon as an internally contained disorder. Consequently, it medicalizes moral injury and de-contextualizes it from the people who send soldiers to conflict zones and 'welcome' them back. This article addresses the ways in which the experience of moral injury is embedded in and shaped by public debates on military intervention, drawing on relevant literature from the fields of psychology, philosophy, and social sciences, and on in-depth qualitative interviews collected in 2016 and 2017 with 80 Dutch veterans. The article examines the explicit public condemnation experienced by Dutch veterans deployed to Bosnia as peacekeepers, and the more subtle public misunderstanding experienced by Dutch veterans deployed to Afghanistan as combat soldiers. It demonstrates that public criticism and admiration may both be experienced as misrecognition, and, in turn, societal misrecognition may directly or indirectly contribute to moral injury. Moreover, not only soldiers and veterans may struggle with the moral significance of military intervention, but society as well.

**Keywords**

moral injury; military trauma; veterans; social suffering; Netherlands; Afghanistan; Bosnia

**1. Introduction**

'Have you ever been deployed?'

'Have you ever killed anyone?'

'Do have any problems now?'

As numerous veterans told me, people typically ask them these three questions. Also, they explained, they usually felt unable to answer them with anything but silence.

It is well-documented that, initially, traumatized individuals are often incapable of speaking about their experience (Herman 1967, Scarry 1985, Sturken 1998). This 'unspeakability' is generally explained as the result of a person's (unconscious) attempt to banish traumatic memory from consciousness because it is too terrifying (see e.g. Herman 1967), that it, as a form of avoidance behavior, which is one of the official criteria of PTSD (DSM-V 2013). Further, trauma studies point to a belief among traumatized individuals that no one will be able to understand their pain, which some scholars suggest is misplaced fear (Tedeschi and Calhoun 1993), while others assert that pain, as an utterly 'interior' experience, simply resists linguistic expression (Scarry 1985, p. 5). The latter idea is supported by research in the field of neurobiology, which indicates that neurological malfunction may play a role in people's incapability to attach semantic representations to traumatic events (Hull 2002).

While all valid, such explanations tend to focus on the traumatized individual. Yet, it seems just as important to consider societal factors when examining deployment-related illness, that is, to include a focus on what in medical anthropology has been dubbed 'social suffering' (Kleinman *et al.* 1997). The abovementioned three questions provoke consideration of whether the 'unspeakability' of traumatic experiences reflects only mental disorder or also includes social disorder, for soldiers' missions and homecoming are directly and indirectly influenced by the prevailing perceptions in society.

The last decade has seen fast-growing scholarly interest in the concept of moral injury, which addresses the link between the ethics of military intervention and veteran suffering (see e.g. Litz *et al.* 2009, 2015, Nash and Litz 2013, Shay 2014, Frankfurt and Frazier 2016). 'Moral injury' refers to the deep feelings of guilt, shame and/or anger that may be engendered by perpetrating, witnessing or falling victim to an event that 'violates assumptions and beliefs about

right and wrong and personal goodness' (Litz *et al.* 2009, p. 698). It has also been defined as 'a betrayal of "what's right"' either by oneself or another (Shay 2014, p. 182). Interestingly, the concept does not readily interpret feelings of guilt, shame and anger in terms of disorder but approaches them as possibly appropriate responses to external events of injustice (Molendijk 2018a). As such, it has the potential to move from a focus on intrapsychic pathology to context-sensitive understanding of trauma. However, the current literature on moral injury, mainly psychological, still approaches it as internally contained rather than socially shaped (MacLeish 2010, Scandlyn and Hautzinger 2014, Molendijk *et al.* 2018).

This article examines the link between moral injury and public perceptions, drawing on two cases: Dutch veterans deployed to Bosnia as peacekeepers (1994–1995) and Dutch veterans deployed to Afghanistan as combat soldiers (2006–2010). The first section discusses current research on moral injury and calls attention to its societal dimensions. The next section specifies the methods of the research on which this article is based. The subsequent sections sketch the attitudes that prevail in Dutch society toward the military in general, before turning to the abovementioned cases. The first case study discusses the public condemnation that Bosnia peacekeepers experienced on returning home; the second describes the more subtle misunderstanding experienced by Afghanistan combat soldiers. The two cases reveal that both public criticism and admiration may be experienced as misrecognition and that both veterans and society may struggle with the moral significance of military intervention. The final sections reflect on these findings, arguing that societal misrecognition – being morally harmful – may directly and indirectly contribute to moral injury.

## **2. Moral injury as a socially shaped phenomenon**

The concept of moral injury is intended to capture what current models of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are believed to overlook: the moral dimensions of trauma (Farnsworth *et al.* 2014). Current PTSD models tend to regard threat as the key characteristic of traumatic

experience and accordingly emphasize fear-related responses, thus paying marginal attention to the moral aspects of trauma. In contrast, the concept of moral injury centers on moral transgression and emphasizes moral emotions such as guilt, shame and anger (Drescher *et al.* 2011, Litz *et al.* 2015, Molendijk 2018a).

As suggested, it seems that trauma research would benefit from a further development of moral injury's social dimensions. While current conceptualizations of moral injury implicitly approach an individual's moral beliefs as a harmonious mental system (Molendijk *et al.* 2018), philosophical and social scientific studies teach us that, instead, people's moral beliefs constitute a complex total of socially shaped and therefore potentially competing beliefs (Bandura 1991, Zigon 2008, Hitlin and Vaisey 2013). Individuals develop moral beliefs and expectations through the socialization process of becoming members of a community. Interacting with their social environments, they continuously alter acquired beliefs and expectations, and adopt new ones (e.g. Bandura 1991, Hitlin and Vaisey 2013). Consequently, it seems that moral injury may be more complicated than a private condition, and that public perceptions may play an important role in the experience of moral injury.

Like all individuals', soldiers' moral beliefs and expectations are shaped by those of society, including taboos on violence and killing (Grossman 1995, Bica 1999). Yet, at the same time, as soldiers they are asked to use force when necessary. Accordingly, the morality of their conduct is both a question with which they may struggle, and a continuous topic of public debate. In turn, it seems, accusatory public debates about soldiers' actions may aggravate their struggle. This article will show that this indeed is the case. Moreover, it will reveal that if public perceptions do 'injustice' to soldiers' personal experience, these perceptions may not only exacerbate the soldiers' guilt and shame, but may also become morally injurious in themselves.

### **3. Research methods**

This article draws on a research project aimed at advancing the understanding of personal and social dimensions of deployment-related moral injury. The research combined a literature study and an empirical study, employing 'grounded theory'. Grounded theory is an inductive and iterative approach aimed at theory development (rather than theory testing) such that the emergent theory is well grounded in data (rather than in extant theory) (Charmaz 2006). This means, *inter alia*, that while the literature study precedes data collection and analysis, the results of the data analysis also guide additional searches of the literature.

The literature study contained theoretical and informative components. The theoretical component focused on psychological, philosophical, sociological, and anthropological literature on the topics of distress and morality. The informative component focused on political practices and public debates that characterized the Dutch Bosnia and Afghanistan missions, respectively, which provided an important context for the analysis of the collected primary data. The empirical data comprised qualitative, semi-structured interviews with 80 Dutch veterans: 40 former Bosnia peacekeepers (deployed between 1994 and 1995 as part of Dutchbat, UNPROFOR) and 40 veterans former Afghanistan combat soldiers (deployed between 2006 and 2010 as part of TFU, ISAF). 'Veterans' should be understood here as individuals who have been deployed on a mission and may or may not still be serving on active duty.

Between July 2016 and March 2017, I conducted 40 interviews (20 Bosnia veterans; 20 Afghanistan veterans) for this study. In accordance with the grounded theory approach, theoretical sampling was used to select the interviewees. While, for instance, random sampling is driven by the aim to collect data representative of a given population, theoretical sampling serves the aim of collecting theoretically valuable data (Glaser and Strauss 1967, p. 63). The purpose of this study – to advance understanding of moral injury – required a non-probability sample of interviewees of which a substantial number (had) experienced deployment-related distress. Since there is no database of contact details of all Dutch veterans, I recruited interviewees through announcements on websites and Facebook groups for Dutch (ex-)soldiers, soliciting Bosnia and Afghanistan veterans for a study 'on how soldiers and veterans deal with

challenges during deployment and after homecoming'. I also employed snowball sampling, identifying research participants who could then refer me to colleagues, acquaintances, or friends. Doing so resulted in 'multiple snowballs' (Penrod *et al.* 2003). To those who responded to my initial request, I explained the specificities of the research in detail, to assure informed consent. Of the interviewees, about half reported significant deployment-related distress.

Further, I selected 40 interviews (again 20 Bosnia veterans; 20 Afghanistan veterans) from an existing database of interviews conducted by the Netherlands Veterans Institute as part of a life story initiative, which thus allowed me to expand this study's data to 80 interviews. Because an initial exploration of the interviews had revealed a balanced distribution of veterans with and without mental health problems, I took two random samples of 20 each from the collections of interviews with Afghanistan veterans and Bosnia veterans, respectively. The interviews of these samples were conducted between 2008 and 2014. The archived interviews, which had no particular objective to examine moral injury, are limited in that the interviewers often did not ask (supplementary) questions when I would have done so. On the other hands, they interviews also strengthened the study because they served the purpose of triangulation, providing accounts of moral injury without the researcher seeking such material.

Data coding and analysis was done with the help of the qualitative data analysis program ATLAS.ti. The process followed guidelines generally employed for interpretive grounded theory research (Charmaz 2006). This means that although the analysis was informed by existing theoretical insights, it occurred inductively. The analysis was guided only by intentionally open questions such as 'did public perceptions of veterans' missions play a role in their experience of moral distress, and if so, how?' In the initial coding phase, regularities were coded at a low level of abstraction, resulting in themes such as 'silence' and 'confusion'. In the focused coding phase, themes were grouped into more abstract categories, for instance 'self-estrangement'. Eventually, core categories were established, which regarding the societal dimensions of moral injury was 'misrecognition'. The data coding results guided a specified search of relevant theoretical literature. This iterative process is reflected in the structure of this article.



The research followed the ethical guidelines for good research practice as defined by the Association of Social Anthropologists (2011). To ensure the anonymity of the participants, all names in this article are pseudonyms.

#### 4. Dutch national attitudes toward the military

Opinion polls conducted since 1963 show that a steady majority of the Dutch public supports the armed forces. Yet, the polls also reveal that only about 50 percent really consider the armed forces 'necessary', with between 20 and 35 percent preferring the label 'necessary evil' (AIV 2006, p. 8, Schoeman 2008, p. 323). The Dutch public generally does not believe that recent military interventions have served national interests such as national security (Dimitriu and Graaf 2016, p. 17). While there is societal support for the military organization and its personnel, Dutch society seems to hold an uncomfortable attitude to the missions on which today's soldiers are sent, and specifically the use of force on these missions (cf. Soeters *et al.* 2007).

This discomfort with military violence seems to define the Dutch national self-image: a non-martial, consensus-seeking nation, which finds honor in neutrality and tolerance, and favors peaceful, 'civilized' solutions over violent ones (Zaalberg 2013). Contrasting images of other western nations help reinforce this self-image, of which an important one today is the portrayal of the US as a war-inclined nation (cf. Klep 2011, Grandia 2015). Certainly, images are seldom one-on-one representations of reality, and this also holds for the Dutch self-image. Considering recent missions, it can be said that many militaries focused on strategies of diplomacy and development, and tried to avoid using force (Olsthoorn and Verweij 2012, Zaalberg 2013). Moreover, the Dutch did use forceful tactics (Van der Meulen and Soeters 2005, Zaalberg 2013).

Nevertheless, the image exists, and an image is powerful; it shapes public perceptions and as such influences decision-making (Ringsmose and Børgesen 2001, Dimitriu and Graaf 2016). As I have discussed elsewhere (Molendijk 2018b), the Dutch self-image of possessing strong moral principles encouraged the Dutch government to contribute peacekeepers to

Srebrenica, Bosnia, while, as will be discussed in this article, the subsequent shattering of this self-image fueled harsh criticism of the peacekeepers in the Dutch public debates. In the case of the Afghanistan mission, as will become clear, the Dutch self-image informed the creation of the notion that an allegedly friendly 'Dutch approach' was employed in Afghanistan, and when 'our soldiers' were revealed to engage in combat rather frequently, this generated both praise and criticism and a confluence of fascination and aversion.

## **5. Public perceptions and morally injurious experiences: Bosnia**

In the following sections, I discuss the experiences of Dutch Bosnia veterans and, subsequently, those of Dutch Afghanistan veterans. The interview excerpts that are provided serve to illustrate the findings that emerged from the analysis of all interviews. That is, they represent themes that many stories had in common.

The discussion of each mission is divided in three. In the first part, I describe the public perceptions that surrounded the mission in question. In the second, I descend to the level of veterans' experience and examine the ways in which these perceptions affected them. In the third part, I briefly return to the level of public perceptions to analyze what happened at the societal level to give rise to these perceptions. As will become clear, although the Bosnia and Afghanistan missions were relatively dissimilar in terms of the public responses they evoked, they were remarkably similar in the ways the responses affected the veterans.

### *5.1. Public accusations*

In the 1990s, as the former Yugoslavia started falling apart and new republics were created, war broke out between several parties, including Bosnian Muslims (Bosniaks), Bosnian Croats and Bosnian Serbs. In 1992, the United Nations established an international peacekeeping force, and a year later it declared six Safe Areas: demilitarized zones in which war refugees were supposed

to be safe and able to receive humanitarian aid. One of these was the Safe Area of Srebrenica, which was supposed to protect Bosnian Muslim refugees (NIOD 2002).

In the summer of 1995, Bosnian Serb forces attacked the Srebrenican Safe Area, where Dutch peacekeepers were stationed at the time. The Dutch had been deployed with few troops and light weaponry, and received no substantial air support during the attack. Against the aggression of an overwhelming majority of Bosnian Serb forces, they felt unable to put up a forceful military resistance. As later became known, the fall of Srebrenica was followed by the murder of thousands of Bosnian Muslims by Bosnian Serb forces; the estimated number varies between over 7000 and over 8000 (see e.g. NIOD 2002, Karčić 2015).

In the Netherlands, initially there was a manifest 'public mandate' for intervention in Bosnia (Klep and Winslow 1999, p. 97) and just after the fall of Srebrenica, the Dutch peacekeepers were hailed as heroes. However, when it became clear that mass murders had taken place, heated debates started on who was to blame for this drama. While there was sympathy for the fact that the Dutch peacekeepers had not been equal to the sheer power of the Bosnian Serbs, they were also accused of being passive cowards and collaborators (Klep and Winslow 1999, NIOD 2002, Van de Bildt 2015).

Since then, the Dutch public has become far more sympathetic to the Srebrenica peacekeepers (Algra *et al.* 2007). Yet, it seems that to this day, many are unsure of how to judge their inaction. Though most people now seem to agree that the peacekeepers had no option, some believe that they should have tried anyway and fought themselves to death (cf. Graaff 2006, Steenbergen 2014).

## *5.2. Frustration, silence, confusion*

The ways in which the media reported the Srebrenican drama stood in stark contrast to the veterans' experience. Many told me that they still became furious when the media said that they had 'surrendered without a fight', that they had been 'unwilling to fight' or that people had been

'murdered before their very eyes'. Similarly, editorials considering the question 'would those men still be alive if another military had been there?' infuriated them. In the interviews, they exasperatedly told me that 'we *did* fight' and 'we *did* resist', that 'we tried to help the women and children' and that 'we didn't know that the men would be murdered'.

Debates in the media also affected the veterans' daily life. John told me, for instance:

In the shop, the local supermarket, you'd get: 'how could you let that happen?' Well there you are, tongue-tied. You want to react physically, but you know that [such a reaction] is no good either. At the time, I was in a mode that it actually could've happened.

Though John could control his rage, many others told me that they were not always able to do so.

Public accusations led many Bosnia veterans to keep quiet about their experience. Consider the following quotes.

You're being called a war criminal. I didn't dare tell people that I'd been there. (Piet)

What can you say? People already have their opinion. I was way too afraid for confronting questions, for accusations. Like, 'you let people...' – people have said this to me – 'you let people die over there.' There's nothing worse you can say to me.  
(Bob)

I had a jacket that said 'Srebrenica'. I was being called a coward on the street. (...) I walked on, took off my jacket. I've never worn it again. (Anton)

Many veterans not only remained silent in public, they did not tell their families either. They did not want to bother family members with their problems, whom they believed would

not be able to understand their experiences anyway. Several veterans suggested that at home, it was not the fear of accusations that made it hard for them to talk, but the experience that questions of blame were waved off altogether. As one veteran explained, family members would often say such things as 'don't worry so much, it wasn't your fault', or, 'it was over there, not here'. He said that 'as a result, you don't want to admit that you're suffering. You're angry with everyone, but you don't want to admit that you have problems yourself.'

Public accusations led not only to a sense of being misunderstood, but also to self-doubt and amplified feelings of guilt. Bob, for instance, said that the heated debates in the media 'added to my guilt'. When people accused him, they only said 'what I was already thinking myself'. Further, many veterans described how public accusations led to profound confusion. Philip's account provides an insightful illustration. For years, he had been unable to sleep well, 'not because of nightmares', he told me, 'but because I was always watching documentaries, trying to understand things'. He wanted to know 'which story is the right story', but he could not find one that matched his experience. The fact that the only stories he could find felt so distorted was not only impactful in itself, it also seriously hindered him in examining his own feelings. Public accusations made Philip 'furious', but at the same time, he did not want to give in to his anger because it felt egotistical 'that I'm whining about this while 8000 people died over there'. He felt guilty, but also could not let himself be guilty because 'if I asked myself questions, I felt, like, I was like the rest of the Netherlands attacking Dutchbat [the name of the Dutch battalion] with unfounded accusations. I can't do that either'. As a result, Philip said, 'I can't find closure, and it still keeps on festering.'

Like Bob and Philip, many other veterans admitted that people's allegations infuriated them, on the one hand because they thought that the people had it 'all wrong', and on the other, because at the same time they were haunted by the fear that these people were actually right.

### *5.3. Tragedy versus 'whodunit': Complex experiences versus simple stories*

Before turning to the case of Afghanistan veterans, it seems insightful to reflect on the question of what happened in Dutch society to give rise to such accusatory public debates. In 2002, seven years after the Srebrenica debacle, a much-anticipated report on the events in Srebrenica was published. It included a critical analysis of how Dutch media became involved in 'a somewhat one-sided fixation on incidents' (NIOD 2002, p. 3416). Within several days, various media commentators published *mea culpas* in agreement. The editor-in-chief of a well-read national newspaper, for instance, stated: 'We, some more than others, have offered too much morality, too few facts, too many opinions, too little analysis and too much emotion' (Broertjes 2002, cited in Rijsdijk 2012, p. 116).

Even before the mission started, the conflict in the former Yugoslavia tended to be interpreted within a framework of 'good guys' (the Bosnian Muslims, and, initially, the Dutch peacekeepers) versus 'bad guys' (the Bosnian Serbs) (NIOD 2002, p. 3414, Algra *et al.* 2007). Yet, in the aftermath of the mission, public debates became particularly simplistic. The haunting question that dictated the debates was 'how could this have happened?', directly followed by 'who let this happen?' (ibid).

Events such as the Srebrenica debacle, it seems, threaten the present order of society, and to take away this threat, society creates particular national narratives (Tal 1996, Edkins 2003). It defends the status quo, for instance, 'by reducing a traumatic event to a set of standardised narratives (twice- and thrice-told tales that come to represent the story of the trauma) turning it from a frightening and uncontrollable event into a contained and predictable narrative' (Tal 1996, p. 6). As such, it reconstructs events that threaten the social fabric into stories that offer 'closure' and assure the continuation of the existing state of affairs (Tal 1996, Edkins 2003).

Consequently, the public narratives that emerged were different from the veterans' own. Their stories were about horrifying circumstances and human vulnerability, and the utter inadequacy of neatly demarcated boxes for right and wrong. The ways in which veterans narrated their experiences, then, can be described as a tragedy. A tragedy acknowledges that

inescapable situations may arise in which people, as a result of cruel bad luck and human error, become part of evil (cf. Golden 1975). This does not mean that a tragedy absolves perpetrators from responsibility; rather, it shows that we are all capable of wrongdoing. A tragedy permits the audience 'a glimpse of something that men cannot accept: the truth of their own violence' (Pellón 1988, p. 40). It unmaskes as an illusion the notion that good character prevents people from wrongdoing and tells a story of fragility and violence as inherent to the human condition.

Rather than tragedy, the narratives reflected in and produced by public debates appear more like a 'whodunit', a detective story that begins with a murder and then proceeds by unraveling facts and puzzle solving, which eventually lead to the resolution of the crime and the identification of the murderer. Rather than telling a story of insurmountable human vulnerability, a whodunit attributes weaknesses and violence to particular actors labeled 'guilty'. To be clear, with this analogy I do not intend to ridicule the Dutch debates but to capture how the public focused on scandal and the question of blame. Some media commentators and other public critics said that 'Dutchbat failed' and located responsibility for the events in Srebrenica exterior to them (see Van der Meulen 1998, pp. 37–38). Others contended that 'we as the Netherland failed' (ibid). When this was the case, the Srebrenica tale became a detective story in which the investigator discovers that he is involved in the crime as well.

The Dutch public, it seemed, felt compelled to expel the unsettling experience of tragedy, and did so by restructuring it into a legible story of exceptional violence for which particular actors are responsible. A tragedy offers no clear answer to the events it conveys, whereas a whodunit does. Moreover, a whodunit divides the world into good versus bad. While explanations such as 'cowardice' are embarrassing, they do make sense. Even including oneself in the equation of cowardice seems easier to grasp and thus less discomforting than no explanation at all. It helps restore disrupted assumptions of benign normalcy and images of 'good guys' versus 'bad guys'.

## 6. Public perceptions and morally injurious experiences: Afghanistan

This section turns to the Dutch mission in Afghanistan. With respect to this mission, public narratives were generally more diverse and nuanced than outright condemnation. Still, to the veterans who served on this mission, they were not without problems either.

### 6.1. Public criticism and admiration

In 2001, shortly after the infamous 9/11 attacks, US-led troops invaded Afghanistan. After these had toppled the Taliban government, the UN established a security mission in Afghanistan, with NATO taking the lead in 2003. The Dutch government made a substantial contribution of troops to this international mission, motivated by a desire to present the Netherlands as a trustworthy partner and ally of the United States and NATO (Grandia 2015). Another reason was the expectation that this mission would repair the reputation of the Dutch as unwilling to fight (Klep 2011, Grandia 2015). Yet, at the same time, a major reservation concerned anticipated public criticism of the use of force (ibid). Both expectations turned out to be correct. On the one hand, news of Dutch engagement in combat bolstered the image of Dutch troops as a military that *was* willing to fight (Klep 2011). On the other, it fueled debates revolving around the question of whether the Dutch operation was actually a 'combat mission intentionally disguised as a reconstruction mission' (Dimitriu and Graaf 2016, p. 14).

Throughout the mission, public debate centered on an imagined dichotomy between an alleged US 'terrorist hunt' versus a friendly 'Dutch approach' (TK 2006, p. 18), and on the binary question of whether the mission was a 'combat mission' or a 'reconstruction mission' (Ringsmose and Børgesen 2001, p. 520). In principle, the combat/reconstruction dichotomy existed in political and public debates only. However, because it had become a political and public reality, it affected the military reality, both in formal consequences – such as an imposed



non-cooperation between the Dutch NATO contingent and US-led troops – as well as informal consequences, namely a fear of political repercussions felt at all levels of the military organization (Molendijk 2018b). This fear proved well founded. The more it became clear to the Dutch public that their soldiers often had to engage in combat, the more public support dwindled (Ringsmose and Børgesen 2001).

### *6.2. Frustration, silence, confusion*

Though many veterans deployed to Afghanistan spoke critically of the ‘cowboy behavior’ of their US colleagues, they did not share the views expressed in Dutch public debates. On the contrary, they characterized Dutch civilians as naive people who, in the words of one veteran, only wanted to see soldiers ‘go forward strewing teddy bears’.

The veterans were most frustrated by people who ‘just had their opinion ready’. They all shared anecdotes of occasions when people, after finding out they were in the armed forces, quickly steered the conversation into ‘a speech on everything that’s wrong with the Afghanistan mission’. It was not criticism as such that bothered them – they too were critical of their mission – but the fact that they had their own field of expertise explained to them in an accusatory manner by ‘aunt Trudy who’d read about it once, sitting on the couch’. In fact, on several occasions, people had asked them how they dealt with ‘having murdered people’.

After telling me about their experiences in Afghanistan, including combat, civilian casualties and feeling both fear and joy, many veterans remarked that they usually did not share this much with others out of a fear of misunderstanding. One veteran put it as follows. ‘I’m careful about telling things to people who cannot imagine it, who’d think, “This guy is not right in the head”.’ Veterans who did not report deployment-related mental health problems told me about their communication difficulties nonchalantly, but distressed veterans spoke bitterly about them as something that hurt and isolated them.

Most Afghanistan veterans received not only criticism but also admiration. However, many felt that expressions of appreciation were often clouded by double standards. As mentioned above, when people heard they were in the military, they were typically asked 'Have you ever been deployed?', 'Have you ever killed anyone?' and, 'Do you have any problems now?' The veterans found these questions sensationalist and inconsiderate.

Consider Richard's account. Speaking of his combat experience, Richard explained that the Taliban often fired from *qala's* [units of houses], corn fields and weed fields – 'you don't see a thing' – and admitted that he might have hit a civilian instead of an insurgent. Later in our conversation, he told me that at the time and especially after he had lost a close colleague, he 'really wished' he had seen 'up close the guys I had possibly wacked'. Richard had told me earlier that he found direct questions about his combat experiences rude. When I asked why, he explained that of all the people who had ever started a conversation by asking him about this topic, no one had been genuinely interested.

Okay, so imagine, I don't know this guy and suddenly I say, 'Did you ever kill someone?' And he says 'yes', without blinking. Later, I go to a mate of mine and I say, 'Listen to this! There was a guy, and this guy says without a blink that he's killed someone. This guy is fucking sick in the head, man.' It's just a nice story, so people have something to tell each other, they don't really care about it in any way other than that.

Negative experiences like these had led Richard and many other veterans to stop telling people they were in the military.

While many veterans lamented civilians' lack of understanding, some also indicated that they themselves no longer understood things that used to be so ordinary for them. Bas, for instance, wrote the following on his Facebook page (cited with permission).

I can't find the 'civilian switch' anymore. I don't think I have it. I don't understand lunchboxes. I don't understand that people happily join traffic jams every day, on their way to fancy office buildings where they will walk out at 17:02 to repeat the traffic jam ritual. If I had an opinion about a colleague's behavior I'd still want to say how I feel. I could still do that but probably I'd be called into the boss' office five minutes later, to explain why my colleague is crying and hugging the radiator. (...) I left the service out of anger, sadness, and frustration. I left because I thought I'd become unfit. Unfit for another deployment. I was empty. I didn't want to become a soldier who tried to avoid deployment. (...) I realize very well that things will never be the same. And yet, if that were possible... I miss it.

Similar to Bas, many veterans no longer understood the worlds that used to be their own. Some had not only become disconnected from the civilian universe, but also from the military world, leaving them stuck in between and unable to understand even themselves.

### *6.3. Not/wanting to hear about violence: Complex experiences versus simple stories*

As in the case of Bosnia, it seems worthwhile to reflect on the question of what made the experiences of the Afghanistan veterans possible. As many of them suggested, most people [civilians] simultaneously do and do not want to hear about their deployment experiences. They want to hear about the killing, what it feels like, and whether it is hard. Yet, the veterans noticed, people often expect a particular response: they expect to hear that the veteran is still burdened by the fact that he or she killed, or they simply want to hear a sensational story about the thrilling madness of war.

Instead, veterans' stories are about the moral complexity of violence and the utter illusion of Rambo-like imaginings. They are, for instance, about the normalcy of cheering and laughing when seeing a fire blast, about the piercing cries of soldiers about the loss of a buddy,

about the black humor used to cope with this loss, about the easy acceptance of 'collateral damage' resulting from combat, and, at the same time, about profound feelings of guilt because of having been unable to save a child from being abused.

Such stories are destabilizing. It seems, then, that while a 'national trauma' may prompt a nation to create simplistic whodunit narratives, and while Dutch society seems particularly uneasy with the use of force, military violence in general causes discomfort and thus provokes efforts to expel this discomfort. War stories are attractive, but only as long as they allow us 'both to feel a sense of our own mortality and to hold that sense at bay' (Brothers 1997 cited in Griffin 2010, p. 8). As a result, the military operates in the margins of society, where violence is to take place (cf. Bredow 2006, Hautzinger and Scandlyn 2013, pp. 62-3). At the level of representation, the gore of military violence is carefully kept out of the frame while that which is in the frame is 'cleansed' by means of justifications ('hero') in combination with euphemisms ('use of force') (cf. Christensen 2008, Griffin 2010). Indeed, heroic images have a relevant element in common with accusations: they are both one-dimensional caricatures.

Therefore, to expel the discomfort of violence, it must either be condemned as immoral, or, in order to accept violence back into the realm of the normal and justifiable, it must be 'sanitized'. This can be done by representing military actions as humanitarian efforts, or conversely, as action movie scenes, while the most unnerving actions may be attributed to 'a few bad apples'. In doing so, society is able to justify military conduct and even idealize soldiers while, at the same time, keep the soldier and his acts of violence at a safe distance.

## **7. Misrecognition as a crucial social factor in moral injury**

Many differences may be noted between the two cases discussed in the previous sections. One obvious difference is that while the mission in Bosnia led to harsh accusations, the Afghanistan mission provoked not only criticism but admiration, too. At the same time, there were obvious parallels regarding the ways in which public perceptions affected the veterans. In both cases,

veterans described a frustrating sense of being misunderstood, loss of speech and confusion. In this analytical section, I reflect on these findings, which will lead me to bring forward 'misrecognition' as the overarching theme tying these issues to one another and to moral injury.

As suggested throughout this article, the accounts veterans told me did not match the publicly prevailing moral categories of perpetrator and victim, normal and abnormal, and good and evil. Many of the veterans I spoke to appeared to struggle with conflicting feelings, which some veterans expressed by saying that they 'can't work out' or 'can't resolve' them. In my interviews with veterans, some constantly switched between saying 'I did wrong' and 'I didn't do anything wrong'. More generally, some expressed both profound guilt and great pride with respect to the things they had done. Some switched between speaking with resentment about the 'fucking backward' locals in their deployment area and sympathetically calling them 'the poor bastards'. Some emphasized that there is 'no right or wrong but only survival in war' but also said they blamed themselves or others for what they had done on their deployment. And, as became clear, some accused judgmental Dutch civilians of 'not understanding shit' but also said they judged themselves in the very same way. Because of their struggles with conflicting feelings, many veterans struggled with all kinds of moral questions, including those about the very meaning of right and wrong. They kept themselves up at night with questions such as: How to do right when forced to choose between two evils? What do right and wrong mean in the battle for survival? Was I a good soldier, and is being a good soldier really good? What do good and bad even mean? As questions like these indicate, morally injured veterans may struggle not just with feelings of guilt, shame and anger, but also with moral conflict, doubt and disorientation.

All the veterans emphasized that they generally felt more understood by their fellow veterans than by civilians, because veterans 'speak the same language'. In fact, they said, in the company of other veterans, often 'no words are necessary'. Yet, as their stories made clear, to communicate and share one's pain with others, including family and friends, could be extremely difficult. For such interactions, no words were readily at hand, and the words that *were* used did

not necessarily have the same meaning to all interlocutors. What descriptions of deployment experiences meant to the veteran often signified something else to the other person.

Many veterans said they felt misrecognized. When they did, they did not mean they felt a lack of praise – on the contrary, many rejected ‘hoorays and cheers’ as ‘bullshit’ – but that the public did not realize, let alone acknowledge that ‘I’m a human being too’. Their description of misrecognition resonates with its conceptualization by philosopher Honneth (1997, 2005), who argues that the significance of recognition and misrecognition lies in the fact that it is about a moral relation with others, which may be respected or violated. Indeed, recognition does *justice* to one’s experiences, while misrecognition does *injustice* to one’s experiences and as such can be morally injurious.

Public debates can validate and invalidate one’s own interpretation of one’s experience and as such give or withhold a sense of understanding. When the latter is the case, it may become a problem to even express one’s experience. To utter ‘I am in pain’ is to make a claim asking for recognition (Das 1996, p. 70). Besides the risk that such a claim may be literally denied, another obstacle is that it can only be made with difficulty outside the prevailing narratives and frames of reference of a particular community, which can make it very hard to even articulate such a claim (cf. Das 1996, Butler 2009, Molendijk *et al.* 2016). No one is completely free in his choice of words and, particularly, in the meaning of those words, because society shapes and limits the words and meanings available for one’s experiences. The words may be there, but their appropriateness and significance is not up to the individual. The individual has to deal with others’ perceptions of what his experiences signify and what kind of person he is, and when he feels that these perceptions are distortions, the ‘recognizability’ of his pain and thus its ‘speakability’ are already problematic beforehand.

Consequently, veterans may choose to remain silent. Yet, even then, misrecognition may damage not only one’s moral relation with others but also the way one relates to oneself (see also Honneth 1997). This does not necessarily mean that veterans completely internalize public perceptions. All the veterans I spoke to felt to a greater or lesser extent that prevailing

narratives 'did not match', which thus engendered anger. At the same time, this mismatch hindered many of them in making sense of their experiences, as that would have to happen outside existent representations. This, in turn, amplified or possibly even caused feelings of both guilt and moral disorientation, which some expressed with phrases such as 'it caused a short-circuit in my head'. 'I didn't understand my own behavior' and 'I wasn't myself anymore'. Accordingly, their sense of societal estrangement, which can be defined as feeling cut off from society, may also have contributed to a sense of self-estrangement, that is, to a feeling of being removed from oneself. Indeed, the self is always embedded in society. Society offers its members a moral framework of values and norms, and thus, when one becomes a stranger to society, this may also cause alienation from oneself.

## **8. Conclusion**

This article showed that not only veterans may struggle with the moral significance of military intervention, but society as well. It seems that the more society experiences violence as unsettling, the more it feels compelled to lock violence up in neatly closed boxes for wrong and right, and vice versa. This has important implications for veterans.

As is the case for all human beings, veterans depend on the shared narratives of society for the development of their life stories and 'the moral' of these stories. Therefore, when they feel that public narratives misrecognize their experience, this process may be seriously distorted. Even when veterans reject rather than internalize these narratives, this is not without personal consequences. For one, they may still influence the ways in which soldiers are sent on a mission and treated afterwards. What is more, even without leading to internalization, they may still hamper veterans' self-understanding, as it can be extremely difficult to make sense of experiences for which there are no words. Therefore, public perceptions can contribute to a sense among veterans that they have lost themselves to the war.

The concept of moral injury, it seems, has itself become something unsettling. For instance, a Dutch military psychiatrist once suggested that the term might better be avoided because it could be interpreted negatively as signifying that soldiers are likely to commit immoral acts. In the US, similar concerns can be heard. At an annual conference on combat stress in the United States, a Marine commander said he was ‘insulted’ by the term ‘moral injury’, because it would imply that soldiers’ problems are a result of immorality (McCloskey 2011). In fact, to avoid this connotation, the US Marines Corps employed the term ‘inner conflict’ instead of ‘moral injury’ (Nash and Litz 2013, p. 368). Responses like these underscore that the concept of moral injury has the potential to reveal unsettling moral complexities that would otherwise remain unseen.

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## **Moral injury in relation to public debates: The role of societal misrecognition in moral conflict-colored trauma among soldiers**

### *Research highlights*

- Conceptualizes ‘moral injury’, which refers to military trauma, as in part a socially shaped phenomenon.
- Examines Dutch veterans’ suffering in relation to public debates.
- Argues that perceived misrecognition may go beyond perceived condemnation.
- Identifies relations between misrecognition, moral disorientation and self-estrangement.
- Argues that both veterans and society may struggle with the moral significance of war.