

When the personal is academic: thoughts on navigating emotions in research on moral injury

When the
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Abstract

Purpose – How should researchers navigate and interpret the moral emotions evoked in them in research on trauma? In this reflective essay, the authors discuss their experience as researchers on moral injury (MI) in veterans and police personnel in the Netherlands. Stories of MI usually do not allow for a clear-cut categorization of the affected person as a victim or perpetrator. This ambivalence, in fact, is explicitly part of the concept of MI. It means however that researchers face complicated psychological, ethical and methodological challenges during research on MI.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors contemplate these challenges by describing two empirical cases demonstrating the particular moral challenges that emerge in MI research. Drawing from literature on qualitative research and emotions, the authors distil different perspectives on the role of moral emotions in research.

Findings – Reflecting on the ambivalent and difficult emotions the authors experienced as researchers when listening to personal accounts of moral injury, the authors offer insights into the necessity and delicacy of navigating between the methodological potential and the ethical and psychological risks of such emotions.

Originality/value – This study is relevant for all researchers examining trauma, in particular when the research is surrounded by complex ethical questions. While the issue of managing emotions in research on trauma is challenging in itself, it is further complicated when the stories related by respondents challenge the researcher's own moral beliefs and values.

Keywords Emotions, Police, Military, Trauma, Moral injury, Counter transference

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Moral injury (MI) refers to the moral turmoil resulting from having perpetrated or having failed to prevent morally transgressive acts, involving feelings of shame, guilt and betrayal (Shay, 1995; Litz *et al.*, 2009; Junger, 2017). Stories of MI also have a moral and emotional

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impact on the ones engaging with these stories (Molendijk, 2021b). Take the policeman who in an attempt to protect a colleague used excessive force towards a civilian, resulting in that person's death, or the soldier who became so indifferent to the local population during his deployment that he ignored the call of a father to help his dying child. Both developed deep feelings of guilt along with feelings of mistrust towards others.

Their stories reveal vulnerability and suspicion, as well as hope for understanding on the part of their interviewers. How can researchers best navigate their interactions with morally injured respondents? How can they maintain critical detachment to stories of suffering? How can they write compassionately about people who perpetrated moral transgressions without victimizing them? In the process, how can researchers deal with their own ambivalent feelings of both compassion and moral outrage?

We were confronted with these questions during our qualitative research on the contextual dimensions of MI from a social sciences perspective, which revealed that the political and societal context plays an important role in MI. By doing fieldwork and interviews, we found that, for instance, veterans and police personnel with MI often initiate public ritual practices in which they call for societal and political recognition and reparation. These practices engendered strong moral emotions in our respondents, and in us, too.

Few studies still take a positivist approach to emotions as “white noise” obscuring a clear view of the data. Much research instead sees the potential of emotions generated by research on trauma, viewing emotions as sources of information (Withuis, 2002; MacLeish, 2018). At the same time, it is acknowledged that such research can cause strong feelings of guilt and vulnerability in researchers, thus posing mental health risks (Dickson-Swift *et al.*, 2007; Watts, 2008; Sherry, 2013). Yet, how to find a balance between viewing emotions as sources of information and avoiding emotional exhaustion? This question is particularly relevant *and* complicated in research on MI. While experiencing strong emotions is difficult in itself, the main challenge in our research on MI lies in their moral ambivalence. MI sufferers are usually neither unequivocal victims nor clear-cut perpetrators but fall in a category where narratives of victimhood and perpetration coincide (Shay, 1995; Brock and Lettini, 2013; Graham, 2017; Molendijk, 2021a). The concept of MI explicitly acknowledges this. Accordingly, those listening to stories of MI are demanded to not readily resort to either pity or judgment but to consider a response that recognizes the ambivalence of these stories (Shay, 1995; Brock and Lettini, 2013; Graham, 2017; Molendijk, 2021a). Different from “regular” research on trauma where victims and perpetrators belong to distinct and well-defined categories, then, research on MI challenges researchers’ moral beliefs, creating contradictory moral responses in researchers, including condemnation, compassion, guilt and anger (Shay, 1995; Molendijk, 2021a). Moreover, in the case of MI, the felt ambivalence does not allow for easy answers [1].

As few MI researchers have written about the process of navigating the role of emotions in their research process, the full complexity only dawned on us in the course of the research. Tine, who initiated said research on MI, tried to solve the emotionally charged interactions with her respondents with a psychoanalytically inspired approach to these interactions as *data*, namely data about feelings of guilt and mistrust in morally injured veterans and about discomfort in civilian others when hearing raw stories of war trauma (Molendijk, 2021a). Naomi stepped in the footsteps of this study to delve further into the specific ritual practices that morally injured veterans and police personal employ [2]. Yet, she realized that treating the delicate interactions with her respondents as just as another source of “data” offered no answer to the ethically and psychologically significant dilemmas she experienced. While she agreed that “the personal is academic”, she started to feel drained. The instrument through which to make sense of her data – herself – stopped working, leaving her with a pile of data without a way to make sense of it. She took a break from fieldwork due to the emotional magnitude of it, which allowed her to explore why engaging with this particular topic had been so challenging.

In this reflective paper, we contemplate how to approach moral emotions that research on MI evokes in researchers [3]. In line with its purpose, it is a personal reflection on the challenges we encountered with open-ended conclusions rather than a rigorous analysis with clear findings. We first briefly discuss why research on MI is a moral and emotional undertaking in itself. Next, we describe two situations that occurred during our research to illustrate how research on MI leads to challenging interactions that are at the same time informative and distressing. Finally, we reflect on different ways in which the emotions evoked in research on MI could be viewed.

Examining moral injury

Research on MI in uniformed personnel comes with many challenges, which already starts when reaching out to respondents. Gaining trust of potential respondents is delicate (Liamputtong, 2007), and may already cause inner tension and doubts in the researcher as it is a lot to ask from someone to share their personal experiences for academic purposes without much to reciprocate (Goodwin *et al.*, 2003). In interviews on MI, moreover, the researcher can experience unease in judgment, for instance when hearing stories of moral transgression. Afterwards, researchers may experience discomfort about appeals for recognition by interviewees, especially when acts seem morally wrong. Analysing these interviews may mean reliving the sometimes tense moments in the interviews, while also feeling the need to create a “scientific” distance, and feeling guilty about “using” private trauma stories for research purposes, all at the same time (Campbell, 2002; Withuis, 2002; Warr, 2004). More generally, the repeated exposure to stories of trauma can cause significant distress in the researcher (Campbell, 2002; Dickson-Swift *et al.*, 2007).

While in part these experiences emerge in any study on sensitive subjects, research on MI is particularly complicated. The distinctive characteristic of MI – and the reason why researchers find it a valuable addition to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder – is that it addresses the moral dimension of trauma (Boudreau, 2011; Farnsworth *et al.*, 2017; Wachen *et al.*, 2017; Moon, 2019; Yandell, 2019). Thus, research on MI is about themes such as guilt, shame, betrayal, recognition and justice. Moreover, in research on MI, these themes are particularly thorny. As stated, moral suffering usually does not allow for a clear-cut categorization of the affected person as either victim or perpetrator, as both tend to be true. In harming another human being, a person may profoundly harm themselves, and stories about this demand researchers to consider a response that recognizes this ambivalence (Shay, 1995; Brock and Lettini, 2013; Graham, 2017; Molendijk, 2021a). This is complicated and emotionally demanding. Stories of MI often challenge the moral beliefs and values of the researchers without offering an unequivocal way of viewing the moral emotions, demands and judgments that the researcher experiences.

Research on MI in police personnel and military veterans adds even another complexity. Researchers have to recognize the role of institutional forces in their respondents’ actions and injuries, while being careful not to equate this with “sympathy or compassion” for their respondents nor with a denial of respondents’ agency as participants in violence. Hence, researchers have to navigate the “continuous collaborative” relation between empathy and critique (Mohr *et al.*, 2021; Webb, 2021, p. 600). Consequently, in researching moral dimensions of trauma, ethical, psychological and methodological challenges are fundamentally tied together. The researcher is an integral part of the creation of a social context wherein stories of trauma are heard or ignored, and given or denied recognition (Herman, 1997; Didier and Rechtman, 2009).

Challenges in dealing with stories of moral transgression and requests for recognition of morally ambivalent stories: two cases

Having outlined the general difficulties that come with research on MI, let us zoom in on several particular challenges. Below we describe two situations that are exemplary of

the dynamics and challenges we have encountered in research on MI. The first involves challenges in dealing with stories of moral transgression, the second is about respondents' requests for recognition of morally ambivalent stories. To create a sense of immediacy, which we find important given this paper's topic, the descriptions are narrated from Naomi's first-person perspective.

Case I: Dealing with stories of moral transgression

One recurring type of interaction I experienced involved interlocutors sharing experiences of moral transgression, where they acted in ways that in hindsight transgressed their moral values and in some cases led to MI. Consider the following situation during a group conversation with several veterans. One veteran confessed that they had once grabbed and killed a man who they believed had harmed a child. The veteran related that they did not feel guilty about killing him, but only about not having being able to stop the presumed harm of the child. The rest of the group responded in an understanding manner, some stating that they completely understood the veteran's actions. As the story shocked me, all I did was nod to avoid verbally responding. Although an awkward silence was avoided by the other veterans' responses, the situation left me uncomfortable. The veteran's confession felt heavy, while my own (lack of) response left me feeling both inadequate and complicit. I did not want to justify his actions, but at the same time, I felt compassion for the veteran. Also, openly objecting would have meant crossing a professional boundary as I was invited in this "safe space" as an outsider.

In the weeks that followed I had difficulty talking about this interaction with colleagues and friends. Writing about it felt even more impossible. To repeat the story in any way would feel like a parasitic act, a betrayal to the veteran. I would be "using" their experience for academic gain. Also, the thought of anonymizing the story, stripping it from its situational and life story context, felt like an unfair thing to do. I experienced strong moral judgment about the veteran's act and the way in which the group had responded to their story, while simultaneously I felt guilty about these negative emotions.

I found myself thinking, "What do I make of this"? I struggled to find the right "form" to write about it. Writing about the encounter stripped of my own emotions would not do justice to the interaction, I felt. In doing so I would fail to convey the moral significance of the interaction: what was at stake. Yet, the idea of writing down about the mixture of judgment and compassion I felt did not sit right either. I was unsure about the extent to which including my personal response was informative, and about whether I wanted to be "seen" in such a personal way.

Notably, I saw the therapeutic value of the veteran's "confession" for all participants. I also recognized that the event was academically interesting, as it offered insight into why MI can make people withdraw, as their stories are often not only difficult to share, but also challenging to hear. The micro dynamic in this conversation between the veteran and me seemed to be exemplary for meta dynamics between morally injured individuals and their civilian communities, dynamics often characterized by discomfort and silence. Finally, the encounter showed me both how important and how difficult it can be to find a balance between recognizing and understanding stories of moral transgression, without "normalizing" them.

Case II: Dealing with requests for recognition of morally ambivalent stories

Another recurring type of interaction involved requests for recognition during interviews or informal interactions. This type of interaction is particularly relevant in MI research because of the moral significance of recognition and misrecognition (Molendijk, 2021a). During an interview, a retired police officer told me about responding to a call together with a colleague to

check on a person causing nuisance, who turned out to be homeless, addicted, and visibly confused. The colleague put the person in the police car with some force, and told the interviewee to drive. To the interviewee's confusion, the colleague's directions did not lead to the police station but to the outskirts of the city, where the colleague threw the person out of the police car. The next day at the police station, they were told a body was found there. We talked about the interviewee's feelings of guilt and shame around what happened, the legal aftermath that followed and how it is something that profoundly affects them till this day.

Shortly after, the interviewee emailed me to ask me what I thought about the interview and how I felt about the story that they shared. I had not expected this, and it took me days to think about it and reply. I was not sure what to think. I had felt shock and disbelief about what had happened, I had felt some judgment in me, but also sadness and compassion for the way they had struggled afterwards. I felt slightly uncomfortable about the request, not only because I was asked to take off my "academic safety blanket" and reply from a personal standpoint, but also because I felt the interviewee hoped for a specific answer where I recognized that they had been a victim, too. I asked myself, who am I to deny recognition to a vulnerable person who took the time to share their story with me? Even the middle option of only replying as a researcher and hiding under that blanket felt wrong, because it felt cowardly. Then again, would complying with the request, even though I had conflicting feeling about the interaction, not be a kind of "self-betrayal"?

As in the first case, this interaction was informative as well. Being asked for recognition – which often occurred – made me realize that both as a researcher and a human being it is impossible to be a "neutral player" in the complicated field where recognition is requested, demanded and sometimes denied. I cannot be a "neutral player", as staying silent is also a form of engagement with these questions, whether I want to or not. Moreover, these encounters showed that not only *asking* for recognition but also *being asked* for it is morally significant and emotionally complicated. Requests for recognition, again, offered insight into meta dynamics between morally injured individuals and the communities of which they are part.

Emotional challenges and their methodological, ethical and psychological significance

The challenges described above have an overarching theme: they are about the moral judgments and emotions that stories of morally critical experiences may evoke in researchers – blame, guilt, shame, betrayal – and about the challenge of relating to these emotions both academically and personally. The question of how to understand these moral judgments and emotions is multidimensional. Feelings of blame, guilt, shame, betrayal are a psychological challenge. This challenge, in turn, creates a methodological puzzle around the question of whether to approach moral judgments and emotions of the researcher as obstacles or sources of information [4]. Moreover, in revealing ways in which trauma research puts not only interviewees but also researchers in a vulnerable position, both challenges also pose an ethical challenge.

How to relate to (moral) emotions in trauma research? Two perspectives

So how can (moral) emotions in research on trauma be understood? The studies on this question seem to share an (implicit) rejection of the positivist view of emotions as "white noise" obstructing a clear view of the data, agreeing that the emotions evoked in research interactions are possibly meaningful ways of understanding. Yet, they also differ in the specific role they attribute to emotions, and the aspects that they unwittingly leave unaddressed.

Emotions as "means" to create a "way of knowing"

A first perspective can be found in, *inter alia*, the works of Withuis (2002) and MacLeish (2018, 2019) [5]. Studying letters of communist resistance fighters during WWII, Withuis experienced feelings of indiscretion, and the burden of appeals to recognize the pain of

the fighters and even appropriate their ideological views [6]. While acknowledging that “to categorize, necessarily means to betray the relation that they so carefully built” (p. 2014), she rejects complicit silence as an alternative. She proposes that researchers examine trauma stories through the notions of transference and countertransference, psychoanalytical notions that are increasingly applied in scientific research. In research contexts, transference is used to indicate the totality of feelings and reactions of the respondent toward the researcher. Countertransference, in turn, is meant to describe the feelings and reactions of the researcher toward the respondent and their transference. In line with psychoanalytic understandings, such interactions between researcher and respondents can be viewed as an analytical tool. The emotions of the researcher become “instruments, albeit instruments that must be handled with the utmost of care” (Withuis, 2002, p. 202), including careful reflection of the role of researchers’ own personal history and sensitivity.

MacLeish (2018, 2019) takes his approach to moral emotions even further beyond the researcher and research participant to the societal macrolevel. In his analyses of military trauma and the concept of MI, he approaches moral judgments and emotions as insight into what is at stake for society when relating to stories of military violence, which according to him is an uncomfortable ambivalence evoking a desire to differentiate between “good” and “bad” violence (MacLeish, 2018). He signals that concepts such as MI are implicitly embraced as a solution to this ambivalence [7]. The implication of MI, namely that soldiers are also hurt by “bad” violence, functions as “a balm to therapists [and] civilian readers of non-scholarly accounts of moral injury” (MacLeish, 2018, p. 140). MI, then, is not just about the soldier’s experience, but also about “broader cultural narratives about violence” and about how “civilians feel about soldiers having done and endured those things, and what feelings soldiers are expected to have in order to anchor civilian orientations to war violence” (MacLeish, 2019, p. 277).

Withuis and Macleish thus offer frameworks through which researchers can understand their interactions with research participants as indicative of macrolevel dynamics. As mentioned, this is the approach that Tine initially adopted. However, as Naomi came to realize, this approach leaves the psychological significance of these interactions out of the frame. Though Withuis does explicitly start by pointing out feelings of voyeurism, indiscretion and betrayal toward research participants, she ultimately interprets these feelings as methodological “instruments”. In Macleish’ approach, the psychological impact on the researcher and ethical significance of the researcher’s experiences are left unaddressed entirely.

Emotions as fundamental “way of knowing”

Another perspective is to view emotions not just as a source of data but as playing a more central role in research. For one, there is a growing body of research on potential (mental) health risks of sensitive research on both research participants and researchers [8]. (e.g. Lee-Treweek and Linkogle, 2000; Johnson and Clarke, 2003; Dickson-Swift *et al.*, 2007). Furthermore, there is a line of research considering emotions as fundamental “way of knowing”. As Nussbaum (2001) argues, our emotions not only contain information but are even equipped with intelligence, and are of central importance in ethical thinking and making judgments of value.

Campbell (2002) approaches emotions both as a “way of knowing” and as a psychological and ethical challenge requiring careful attention. Experienced in research among rape survivors, she explains that “research built from a foundation of caring balances the requirements of science with a personal concern for the well-being of all those impacted by a project” (Campbell, 2002, p. 128). Such research would involve, among other things, carefully choosing in what way to interact with respondents, thinking about how participating in research might affect the respondents’ lives, weighing how and when data should be published, and taking into account the toll the research can have on the researchers. Campbell maintains that although the responsibility of “caring” can induce fear and anxiety in

the researcher, it can also lead to a relation between the researcher and the research participants with mutual care for each other's well-being.

Thus, whereas Withuis and MacLeish approach emotions as a methodological opportunity, Nussbaum and especially Campbell place emotions at the heart of doing research, considering emotions in terms of their impact on research participants and researcher. Yet, this is not without problems either. An approach overly focused on methodology risks to lose sight of the psychological and ethical dimensions of emotions in research, but an approach too focused on care and emotional engagement may become a psychological pitfall as it may be draining for the researcher. Importantly, what "caring" might look like in research on MI is rarely straightforward. The already complex psychological and political dynamic around recognizing trauma is heightened in MI, as the moral questions around the traumatic events causing MI are often equivocal. Accordingly, the researcher's response may be a more ambivalent confluence of compassion and judgment, making it more challenging to decide what "care" might look like.

Concluding remarks

Research on MI demands the researcher to be compassionate and critical at the same time, to walk the fine line between recognizing and reproducing narratives of victimhood by perpetrators and to endure the moral disorientation felt as a result. The moral emotions evoked in both the respondent and researcher can be viewed as a methodological pitfall and a methodological tool, as a psychological risk and as an ethical challenge to be mitigated. Our research showed that all these interpretations are true, which however means that researchers face another demand of deciding when "the personal is academic" stops being true because the research has become too overwhelming. This is a specific risk in research on MI, which may violate and confuse researchers' moral beliefs without offering researchers a clear way out, as the acceptance of ambivalence and discomfort is integral to the concept of MI. For us, research on MI has meant trying, and at times failing, to do research that is emotionally sustainable, ethically right and methodologically sound.

Rejecting an "emotions as white noise" perspective, most qualitative researchers on trauma now see the emotions that such research can engender as data, or even a way of knowing in itself. While valuable, in both cases emotions are viewed only as a methodological issue. Consequently, the mental health implications of seeing and experiencing such emotions are ignored. Other researchers have explicitly focused on the mental health risks of strong emotions in research on trauma. Yet, in these studies, the abovementioned methodological and fundamental epistemological questions are left unaddressed. While in terms of theoretical contribution it makes sense that different perspectives focus on particular issues, the researcher in practice needs to juggle all these truths, especially in research on MI.

For the researcher, it is important to acknowledge that emotions can be both (methodologically) useful and (psychologically and ethically) detrimental. In fact, we may need to bring back part of the perspective on emotions as "white noise". Though in a fundamental epistemological sense this may be untrue, in a psychological and ethical sense, emotions can certainly become painfully "loud", even to the extent they do become a methodological hindrance, too. Emotions are an indispensable source of knowledge, but they may also overwhelm the researcher, making it impossible to use their potential as data. Therefore, it is important to offer researchers the space and possibility to navigate these emotions so that they can process the emotions evoked in them during the research, both personally and academically, as Naomi did. This allows researchers to emotionally process their research experiences and in doing so reflect on the extent to which these emotions are a hindrance obscuring clear view from their data, a tool to analyse the data or a fundamental part of the data.

We hope this reflection can serve as a starting point to further explore the methodological, ethical and psychological challenges of MI research in conjunction rather than separately. We hope to read more accounts of MI researchers' process of (not) finding a way to navigate the emotions engendered by their research, especially emotions that they are undecided about whether or not they can be considered informative, harmful or fundamental to doing research.

Notes

1. Next to the specific complexities that contact with respondents might bring, the broader context of this research entails waging our role as researchers in the existence, framing, reproduction and interpretation of transgressions carried out by uniformed government personnel toward civilians. Hence, recognizing that stories of MI also might tell a story of harm inflicted on "other" people in the context of a skewed power dynamic, leaving the "other" – without voice in the interview. This means asking ourselves, what voices and experiences are we as researchers amplifying? And what material consequences that might have for the voices that as a consequence might become even less heard? This issue will be elaborated in the article.
2. Tine obtained her PhD with a study on MI. Upon completion, she set up a follow-up research project, in which Naomi conducts further research on MI.
3. With moral emotions we refer to emotions such as guilt, shame, anger and compassion, which are "linked to the interests or welfare either of society as a whole or at least of persons other than the judge or agent." (Haidt, 2003, p. 853). Moral emotions can impact research practice by being informative of moral values at stake, by acting as a guiding force behind ethical decisions around research and by potentially causing distress in the researcher when multiple moral emotions arise simultaneously.
4. Though delving into fundamental debates in philosophy of science goes beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth noting that these questions are about the extent to which the mind, body and emotions are obstacles that should be neutralized as much as possible (a positivist's answer), inescapable lenses through which we observe the external world (a critical realist's answer) or even part and parcel of that world (a constructionist's answer).
5. The reason we have chosen the work of MacLeish and Withuis is that their work combines insights into research on the complex moral dimension of trauma with the role of emotions, in the context of military institutions and war.
6. Withuis (2002) describes the challenges of the researcher as the "psychological force of victimhood", where the research participant – intentionally or not – creates a symbiosis with the researcher. Accordingly, the researcher may feel forced to comply with demands for recognition by the research participant, including ideological interpretations of their suffering, as if the rejection of this would mean abandoning a group that have been through something horrible. A risk of complying in these demands for recognition is that the researcher becomes an extension of their research participant, a spokesperson for their trauma, resulting both in bad research and the appropriation of others' grief: the personal and ideological have become inextricably intertwined.
7. According to MacLeish, when framing, labelling and containing violence-engendered trauma with concepts such as MI, a distinction is made between war violence that society accepts as legitimate and also does not (need to) bother the soldier, versus violence such as the death of innocent children, which is not only considered unacceptable by society but also, to society's relief, mentally injures the soldier (MacLeish, 2018).
8. These studies also offer practical suggestions for how to mediate these risks. Lee-Treweek and Linkogle (2000), for instance, emphasize that assessing the risk for not only the participants but also the researcher should be encouraged. Dickson-Swift *et al.* (2007) argues that there is a role to play for universities in writing policy on minimizing the possible impact of doing qualitative research on sensitive topics, which should structurally take into account the effects that this type of research can have on the researcher's emotional and physical health. Most researchers now solely rely on informal support networks, such as friends, family and colleagues, for dealing with the emotional effect of research. Johnson and Clarke (2003) suggest that formalizing these types of support by developing a researcher support network could be useful.

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