
Moral injury and soldiers in conflict

BOOK CONVERSATION: ANTONIO DE LAURI AND TINE MOLENDIJK

Tine Molendijk, Moral Injury and Soldiers in Conflict. Political Practices and Public Perceptions (Routledge, 2021).

Antonio De Lauri (ADL): To begin, what is a “moral injury” (for soldiers) and how did this concept develop?

Tine Molendijk (TM): For many, the idea of troubled soldiers will bring to mind the term post-traumatic stress disorder. This is today's most used term for psychological problems among soldiers, so well known that even the acronym PTSD is common usage. But is it always the most appropriate term? According to the official definition, PTSD may develop after experience of or directly or indirectly witnessing actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence. Also, fear responses are at the heart of post-traumatic stress. Yet the stories of many military veterans are not about exposure to threat and their symptoms are not fear-based. Just as often their stories are about experiences of moral conflict and resulting feelings of guilt, shame, and anger. This is how the concept of moral injury came into being. Increasingly, both scholars and practitioners voiced criticism about the fact that current PTSD models focus mainly on fear, and as a result, pay only marginal attention to the moral dimensions of trauma.

Jonathan Shay can be called the founding father of moral injury. Shay is a psychotherapist who has spent decades treating Vietnam veterans with severe trauma-related problems. Comparing the experiences of these veterans with those of Achilles and other Greek warriors in Homer's Iliad, he has described how military trauma has crucial moral dimensions. To capture this, he coined the term moral injury in the 1990s. Psychologists Brett T. Litz and his colleagues have played an important role in further developing the concept of moral injury.

Moral injury is usually defined as the psychological, biological, and social impact of a transgression of deeply held beliefs and expectations, of which the morally injured person may have been the victim, the witness, or the perpetrator, at least in his/her own eyes. Although PTSD and moral injury are not mutually exclusive and partly overlap in practice, their focus is different. In current PTSD research, emotions such as guilt and blame are often either disregarded or treated as resulting from irrational thoughts, so as misplaced emotions. By contrast, the literature on moral injury explicitly goes against such an approach. The term “injury” instead of “disorder” is no coincidence. Moral injury emphasizes that moral considerations and judgments should be taken seriously, and that feelings of guilt, shame, and/or betrayal should therefore be considered potentially “appropriate” emotions. This is because it is moral considerations and emotions that make a person human.

ADL: Although the concept of moral injury may illustrate some important elements of military experience, it may also somehow overlook the different moralities at play in war contexts as well as the complexity of emotions and feelings linked to deployment. What do you think?

TM: I agree that current theory on moral injury tends to take an overly simplistic approach to morality in war, for instance by speaking of “the” civilian morality versus “the” military morality. Yet I am attracted by the concept of moral injury precisely because I think it has the potential to go beyond such dichotomies. By combining philosophical, psychological, and social scientific insight, we can illuminate the moral complexities at play in military practice.

That said, I agree that a one-dimensional focus on the “injury” part of military practice disregards that it can also be exciting, thrilling, and fun. Let me unpack what I mean.

To start, the phenomenon of moral injury—as I approach it—can bring to light that military practice is an area of moral tension. Examining moral injury shows that military practice is a field where questions about right and wrong come up all the time and different values can clash with one another, giving rise to dilemmas and other moral challenges. A person’s moral beliefs and expectations never form a neatly harmonious unity, but always a complex, even “messy” whole. This applies to all people, including, and perhaps even specifically, soldiers. Like all people, soldiers are part of a family, a circle of friends, various subcultures, and society as a whole, and all these social spheres have their own specific values and moral standards that are not necessarily neatly in tune with one another. In addition, soldiers belong to a military community, with values and standards that may be at odds with those of society and, moreover, may conflict with each other: Soldiers must be loyal to their “brotherhood” but also guarantee the safety of civilians, and in doing so they must at all times comply with their political mission. Moreover, they must try to manage all these values and moral standards in high-risk environments as potential targets and witnesses and performers of violence. As a result, some deployment situations can cause moral conflict in a soldier, and in some cases a moral injury.

At the same time, for many military personnel, day-to-day practice could hardly feel farther removed from being “an area of moral tension,” as I just called it. On the contrary, mentioning a term like this in the workplace may well be met with laughter by colleagues. Many soldiers will point out that to them their work is just as morally complicated as any other type of work. “You know well what is right and wrong,” one might say with a shrug. And another might say: “You just have to use your common sense.” This is literally what soldiers have said to me.

Now, to some extent such responses may lie in the military can-do mentality, which focuses on being specific and solving problems, and which thus rejects the notion of doubt and tension. Partly it will also lie in the fact that terms like these often evoke highly exceptional, Hollywood-like images, for example of snipers who must decide whether or not to kill a child. Yet shoulder-shrugging responses are also the result of something else, namely that military practice simply isn’t always highly complicated, let alone painful. For many veterans, their deployments were the best experiences they ever had.

ADL: In your book, you invite the reader to understand the perspective of soldiers. You have collected and shared the stories of several Dutch veterans deployed to Bosnia (Srebrenica) and Afghanistan. Can you briefly tell us a bit more about these stories?

TM: For me as an anthropologist, an investigation always starts with delving into the viewpoint of my research participants. So, for this book on moral injury, I listened to the life stories of eighty soldiers, so they could share what was important to them rather than to me. Also, to make sure I captured the full story and the heterogeneity of soldiers, my selection spanned the entire spectrum of moral injury, ranging from soldiers and veterans without any mental health problems to soldiers and veterans with severe and persistent moral injuries.

What struck me most is that when soldiers spoke about morally injurious experiences and feelings of guilt or blame, they rarely did so as unequivocally as suggested in current conceptualizations of moral injury. Some soldiers explicitly expressed confusion about the significance of their experience. They said that they “can’t work it out” and “can’t solve it,” or their experience caused “a short circuit in my head.” Others expressed confusion implicitly and perhaps unconsciously, uttering ambivalent, even conflicting interpretations of their experience.

For instance, some soldiers constantly switched between saying “I did wrong” and “I didn’t do anything wrong.” 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 that they blamed themselves or others for what they had done on their deployment. Some soldiers expressed great suspicion of the military and politicians, but also said they would give anything to serve in another mission. Some accused judgmental Dutch civilians of “not understanding shit,” but said they judged themselves in the same way. Some said they had learned “to put things in perspective,” but admitted they could get angry about trivial things. And some switched between saying “I can’t stand injustice any longer” and “I’ve become completely indifferent to it all.”

Of course, veterans' statements of non-guilt could just be what they tell themselves, while their stated guilt is what they really believe, or vice versa. But, keeping in mind that morality is not harmonious but complicated, in my book I propose another view. My contention is that in many cases, veterans' expressions of guilt and non-guilt may both be considered genuine, even though they conflict, because when experiencing irresolvable moral conflict, it makes sense to feel guilty and not guilty at the same time.

ADL: Another aspect you address in the book is the relationship between moral injury and public perception. Can you elaborate on this?

TM: Injury is, by definition, a relational phenomenon. Shame, guilt, and anger are all emotions that are about relations with other people. More generally, morality is relations. People do not develop their moral beliefs and expectations in a social vacuum, but in the context of the world they live in and the communities they belong to. So, inevitably, public perception plays a crucial role in moral injury.

Military personnel, specifically, by definition do their job as part of a greater whole. After all, military intervention is a collective undertaking. Soldiers are sent on a mission in the name of society, with the monopoly of violence given by the state. Political leaders decide where to go and what to do there, and society as a whole debates whether a mission is legitimate and whether military action is justified.

Such debates occur not only in parliament and media, but also at birthday parties, in bars, at home. Soldiers told me many stories about such interactions. And as they told me, most people 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 people often seem to expect a particular response: They expect to hear that the soldier is still burdened by the fact that he killed, or they simply want to hear a sensational story about the thrilling madness of war. Instead, soldiers' stories are like the examples I just shared. They are paradoxical. And they can be full of "dirty talk."

But such stories evoke discomfort in civilians: they mess up the notions of perpetrator and victim, normal and abnormal, and good and evil. As a result, they unwittingly reinforce public perceptions of veterans as crazy or at least psychologically damaged. Soldiers are aware of this attitude in society. And because of this attitude, they usually do not readily share their stories. Instead, some isolate themselves from society.

ADL: In your research you also focus on issues such as boredom, thrills, and humor. It is important to go beyond the analysis of the normative and institutional aspects of war and soldiering. Do you think there is still some resistance, for example from scholars, in addressing these issues?

TM: As I write in the book, a typical war story is "about the normalcy of cheering and laughing when seeing a blast of fire, the piercing cries of soldiers at the loss of a buddy, the black humor used to cope with this loss, the easy acceptance of 'collateral damage' resulting from combat and, at the same time, about profound feelings of guilt at being unable to save a child from abuse" (Molendijk 2021, p. 135). Soldiers often describe a confluence of antagonistic feelings, including fear, adrenaline, and excitement. This is the case not only for morally injured soldiers, but also for soldiers in general.

People don't like such stories because they mess up the notions of perpetrator and victim, normal and abnormal, and good and evil—and researchers are people, too. First, we find such stories disconcerting because we actually want to hear only about how traumatizing they are to veterans. That's more reassuring than hearing that combat can "feel good." And second, we just don't like paradoxes. I noticed that when researchers hear soldiers making contradictory statements, they tend to try and resolve which one is sincere and which is false. Yet, as I maintain, paradoxical stories are a logical reflection of the moral complexity of the military job.

So my advice to researchers would be to be aware of the tendency to readily approach contradictions in research data as kinks that need to be ironed out. And be aware of your own moral beliefs and expectations and how they shape the way you approach war and soldiering. Take stories seriously, including dirty talk, including contradictions. Only then does it become possible to really capture soldiers' experience and the wider contexts in which their experience is embedded.