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Values Affirmation in The Treatment of Moral Injury: A Pilot Study

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VALUES AFFIRMATION IN THE TREATMENT OF MORAL INJURY:
A PILOT STUDY

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Abstract

Mainly studied in the context of military veterans, "moral injury" refers to extreme guilt and shame experienced as a result of perpetrating, bearing witness to, or failing to prevent events that transgress deeply help moral beliefs and expectations. The current pilot study aimed to examine the potential use of a brief values affirmation intervention in the treatment of moral injury associated with everyday moral transgressions. This study included 90 participants recruited from Amazon's MTurk. Participants completed a survey in which they were assigned to complete either a values affirmation or control task, recall a moral transgression and reflect on the recalled event. It was hypothesized that participants in the values affirmation condition would experience less shame and guilt associated with the recall of a moral transgression than the control condition, and this effect was expected to be mediated by participant's perceptions of the event as morally injurious. Results indicate that the values affirmation had a significant effect on shame, but not moral injury or guilt. Observed patterns suggest that the values affirmation tended to increase, rather than decrease moral injury. Implications of the findings, limitations of the methodology, and potential directions for future research are discussed.

Keywords: Moral Injury, Values Affirmation, Guilt, Shame

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Introduction

In recent years, an emerging area of research and practice has found that violating deeply held moral beliefs and expectations can result in "moral injury" (Shay, 2014). Although construct validation efforts are ongoing, the term moral injury refers to the lasting psychological, social, emotional, and spiritual harm experienced by individuals who perpetrate, fail to prevent, or bear witness to moral transgressions (Litz et al., 2009; Griffin et al., 2019). Existing literature has predominantly focused on moral injury within military contexts. However, morally injurious events (MIEs) are common within other sociocultural contexts including high-stakes occupations such as child protective services, healthcare and other frontline professions (Gray et al., 2012; Haight et al., 2017). Although moral injury is commonly researched within high-stakes, life-or-death situations, researchers have suggested that even seemingly innocuous acts can later be perceived as moral violations (Dursun & Watkins, 2018). It is possible that individuals may experience moral injuries that violate deeply held moral values or beliefs in their everyday lives. Although a growing body of literature has pointed to the importance of studying moral injury, further research is needed to empirically test the development of moral injury and explore possible mitigating factors, with the aim of including such variables in interventions (Dursun & Watkins, 2018; Griffin et al., 2019). The current research is a pilot study exploring the possible use of a brief values affirmation intervention. Reflecting upon one's core personal values may limit self-threats related to moral injury, decreasing shame and guilt following the recall of everyday moral transgressions.

Moral Injury

Psychiatrists originally developed the construct of moral injury following the Vietnam War, when countless veterans presented with symptoms of distress, existential crises, and

persistent loss of trust that were not captured by the DSM diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Gray et al., 2012). Although PTSD and moral injury have many overlapping outcomes, such as depression, social withdrawal, and hopelessness, recent literature has suggested that PTSD and moral injury are distinct constructs (Nieuwsma et al., 2015; Griffin et al., 2019). Whereas PTSD involves threats to physical safety and results in fear-based symptoms (i.e., anxiety), moral injury occurs in high-stakes situations that contradict core values, resulting in negative moral emotions (i.e., shame and guilt). Trauma-informed treatments have been found to be mostly ineffective in the treatment of moral injury (Griffin et al., 2019). These treatments are based on theoretical fear-based models of trauma, and do not sufficiently address the processes hypothesized to be central to moral repair (Drescher et al., 2011; Gray et al., 2012). In order to inform the development of effective moral injury treatments, the mechanisms by which moral injury occurs must be considered.

Not all individuals exposed to potentially morally injurious events (PMIEs) experience enduring adverse outcomes. These events are referred to as "potentially" morally injurious because exposure does not ensure adverse outcomes. When individuals perceive a PMIE to be inconsistent with their belief systems and worldview, the individual may experience extreme moral emotions (i.e., guilt, shame). Researchers suggest that moral injury develops as a result of individual's own *perceptions* of events as inconsistent with their core beliefs in a positive moral self (Litz et al., 2009; Nash et al., 2013). According to cognitive dissonance theorists, when individuals perceive events to conflict with their existing core self-concept, they are likely to experience psychological discomfort and related negative mental health outcomes (Aronson et al., 1995; Steele & Liu, 1983;). Individuals are motivated to resolve this cognitive dissonance by changing their beliefs about themselves to be consistent with their unethical actions. This defense

mechanism leads to a breakdown of the internal moral self-concept, and subsequently, leads to stable internal attributions of blame (Currier et al., 2014: Haight et al., 2017; Litz et al., 2009). This lack of global meaning and self-integrity contributes to the experience of guilt, shame, rage and depression, as well as a loss of trust in one's own or other's ability to behave ethically (Drescher et al., 2011).

Some evidence suggests that shame and guilt experienced as a result of moral injury may be alleviated by acceptance, forgiveness, and a recommitment to personal values (Park, 2010). Interventions that have focused on defining values as a way of mitigating moral injury, such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) have been explored (Niewsma et al., 2015). While these treatments are successful in decreasing shame by promoting non-judgmental acceptance and action towards value-oriented behaviour, research has provided little support of these interventions in the treatment of moral injury (Farnsworth et al., 2017; Griffin et al., 2019; Niewsma et al., 2015). Further, few effective interventions have been developed and validated to treat moral injury, as a separate construct from PTSD (Griffin et al., 2019) The current study proposes a brief intervention focused on promoting personal values in order to provide relief from moral injury symptoms.

Values Affirmation

Identifying and reflecting on core values, through the use of brief values affirmations, has been shown to buffer against negative outcomes of self-threats (Crocker, Olivier, & Nuer, 2009). Values affirmations are well-established interventions that encourage individuals to rank-order a list of values and characteristics (e.g., family, religion, athletic ability) and write about either their most important value and why it is important to them, or their least important value and why it might be important to someone else (Harber, 2005). This brief, 10-minute exercise

has been found to improve academic performance, mental health outcomes and well-being of stigmatized groups with enduring effects, ranging from one week to a year after the intervention (Thomaes et al., 2012; Cohen et al., 2009).

Self-affirmation theorists provide multiple explanations for how this brief writing task has such robust effects. First, when people are reminded of "who they are", they are relieved from the task of establishing self-integrity and self-identity. Thus, individuals gain a more expansive view of the self and its resources and perceive themselves to be better able to cope with identity threats (Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Steele & Liu, 1983). Second, value affirmations allow people to "transcend the self". By orienting people to values they care about beyond themselves, values affirmations induce positive, other-directed feelings such as love and connectedness (Crocker et al., 2009).

The Current Study

Moral injury occurs when an event is perceived to transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations. The dissonance between one's experiences and the belief in a moral self threatens one's core sense of self. It is thus expected that values affirmations, which have been evidenced to serve as a buffer to decrease self-identity threats, will also decrease moral injury associated with moral transgressions.

The current research is a pilot study, which aims to examine whether a values affirmation intervention will decrease moral injury-related shame and guilt within the general population. Although the majority of moral injury literature has focused on military contexts, it is important for future research to measure whether everyday moral transgressions experienced by a lay population may lead to similar problematic negative moral emotions. Some research has suggested that even mundane, seemingly innocuous acts may be morally injurious if they are

later perceived to be incongruent with core personal moral beliefs and expectations (Dursun &

Watkins, 2018). Therefore, any experience that threatens moral self-identity is potentially

morally injurious, although the severity of guilt and shame may vary, depending on the situation

and the individual.

In order to measure moral injury related to everyday moral transgressions, participants in

the current study will be asked to recall a time when they perpetrated, failed to prevent, or

witnessed an event that violated their personal values. Past studies have found that reflecting

upon and writing about a past moral transgression stimulates ethical dissonance between moral

values and behavioral misconduct (Barkan et al., 2012). Therefore, it can be expected that

recalling a past moral transgression will invoke self-identity threats, similar to those central to

moral injury.

It is hypothesized that individuals who write about the value that is most important to

them (i.e., affirmation condition) will experience less perceived moral injury, guilt and shame

following the recall of a moral transgression than those who write about the value that is least

important to them (i.e., control condition). It is further hypothesized that the dependant variables

of moral injury, guilt and shame will be positively correlated. If these predictions are supported,

this work may have important implications to inform future research on the treatment of moral

injury within more high-stakes populations. All hypotheses, materials, and the data analysis plan

can be found at https://osf.io/7svgu.

Method

Participants

Based on a power analysis, 60 participants would be needed for the current study

assuming a medium-large effect size (Cohen's $d = .65$, as indicated in the literature on values

affirmation) with .80 statistical power. We recruited additional participants in the event that we

would need to exclude participants if they were unable to recall a moral transgression, did not

complete the dependent measures, and/or if they did not follow the instructions.

A total of 143 participants were recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk)

crowdsourcing platform. MTurk workers ages 18 and older with an approval rating of 95% or

higher, residing in the US, Canada or the UK were eligible to participate in the current study.

CloudResearch (cloudresearch.com) was used to select MTurk workers who met the inclusion

criteria. Further, 53 participants who failed to complete necessary survey components were

excluded from data analysis (41 participants did not provide any responses to one or more of the

dependant variable questionnaires, and 12 participants did not report a moral transgression). The

final sample included in the current study ($N = 90$) consisted of 52 men and 38 women between

the ages of 20 to 66 ($M = 36.58$, $SD = 9.83$). Participants were compensated for their

participation according to the U.S. national minimum wage of 7.25 USD per hour. As the study

took about 10 minutes to complete, each participant received 1.20 USD for their participation.

Materials

Values Affirmation. The values affirmation manipulation used in the current study was

developed and empirically validated by Harber (2005). Participants were provided with the

following list of 11 values/characteristics that people commonly indicate are important to them:

(1) artistic skill/aesthetic appreciation, (2) sense of humour, (3) relations with family/friends, (4)

spontaneity/living in the moment, (5) social skills, (6) athletics, (7) musical ability/appreciation,

(8) physical attractiveness, (9) creativity, (10) business/managerial skills, and (11) romantic

values. The values-affirmation condition task instructed participants to rank the values in order

from *most* to *least* important to them, think about their *highest*-ranked value and write 2-5

sentences explaining how it influences their behaviors and actions. The control condition task instructed participants to think about and rank the values in order from *least* to *most* important to them and write 2-5 sentences explaining why their *lowest*-ranked value might be important to someone else, and how it may influence other people's behaviors/actions.

Recall Task. In order to manipulate the recall of a moral transgression, the survey included detailed instructions adapted from those used by Barkan et al. (2012). The task prompted participants to think about a time when they felt morally compromised or behaved unethically and were told that other people engaging in this type of introspective task frequently write about instances where they acted selfishly at the expense of someone else, took advantage of a situation or were dishonest, untruthful or disloyal. Participants were instructed to write a brief description of the event, providing as much detail as they felt comfortable sharing. Participants were also asked to indicate how important the event was to them on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = not important at all, 7 = very important), and approximately how long ago this event occurred by providing their best guess for the month and year of the event.

Moral Injury Scale. The Morally Injury Event Scale (MIES) was adapted from Nash et al.'s (2013) measure of the extent to which an event is perceived to be morally injurious. For the purpose of the current study, the 11-item self-report scale was abbreviated to include four items relevant to everyday moral perpetrations (Cronbach's α = .81) and were presented in randomized order for each participant. The abbreviated MIES included statements about how the moral transgression participants had just recalled. An example scale item is "I acted in ways that violated my own moral code and values". Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with each statement on a 7-point Likert scale, from -3 (strongly disagree) to +3 (strongly disagree). Responses were recoded to be on a 1 to 7 rating scale so that all dependent measures

are on the same rating scale. Responses to the four scale items were averaged to produce a score of perceived moral injury associated with the recalled event, with higher scores indicating a higher level of moral injury.

Moral Emotions Scale. The Moral Emotion Scale (MES) was developed and validated by Wright and Gudjonsson (2007) to measure offense-related feelings of shame and guilt. This scale consisted of 10 statements in which 5 items assessed guilt and 5 items assessed shame related to participants' feelings about the recalled event. The 5-item scale measuring guilt associated with the moral transgression included statements such as "I will never forgive myself for what I have done" (Cronbach's $\alpha = .77$). The shame-related items included statements such as "After what I did, I feel less worthy than other people" (Cronbach's $\alpha = .86$). The level of agreement with each statement was rated on a 7-point Likert scale, from -3 (strongly disagree) to +3 (strongly disagree). Responses were recoded to be on a 1 to 7 rating scale. Each participant's responses to guilt and shame-related items were averaged separately, with higher scores indicating a higher level of guilt and shame. The scale items were randomized for each participant to account for order effects.

Procedure

Participants were directed to a Qualtrics survey, where they were presented with a letter of information about the current study. Mild deception was used in order to account for expectancy effects. Specifically, participants were told that the survey would consist of two separate unrelated studies: the first study examined the importance of values in people's everyday lives and the second study explored common moral transgressions. Participants who provided consent to participate in the study were then randomly assigned to either the values affirmation condition or the control condition.

Participants were then presented with the recall task and instructed to think about and provide a brief explanation of a time when they felt morally compromised or behaved unethically, how important the event was to them, and how long ago it occurred. Participants were then asked to reflect on the event they had just described and answered questions about moral injury (i.e., MIES), followed by the questions about their moral emotions (i.e., MES).

Given that the values-affirmation intervention was expected to mitigate moral injury that participants may have experienced after recalling a moral transgression, those in the control condition were also provided with the opportunity to engage in the values-affirmation intervention. Control condition participants were presented with an abbreviated version of the values-affirmation manipulation, in which they were presented with the same 11 values/characteristics and asked to write about one that was *important* to them.

At the end of the study, all participants were asked to provide demographic information including their age, gender, and racial/ethnic group. Finally, participants were presented with a debriefing letter which included an explanation of and the reasons for deception, a list of trauma-informed mental health supports for any participants who may be experiencing distress as a result of recalling a moral transgression.

Results

Primary Analyses

Correlational analyses were conducted to identify relationships between moral injury and moral emotions (guilt and shame) associated with the recall of moral transgressions. The moral emotions (guilt and shame) were positively correlated, $r(88) = .81$, $p < .001$ Further, moral injury was positively correlated with both shame, $r(88) = .43$, $p < .001$ and guilt, $r(88) = .55$, $p < .001$.[1]

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[1] Correlation analyses were intended to be included in pre-registration but were accidentally omitted.

Perceived importance of the transgression and number of years since the transgression were also correlated with moral injury, shame and guilt. Years since the transgression was not significantly correlated with *guilt*, $r(88) = .13$, $p =.216$, shame, $r (88) = -.06$, $p = .586$, or moral injury, $r(88) = .21$, $p = .052$. Perceived importance, however, significantly correlated with guilt, $r (88) = .45$, $p < .001$, and shame, $r(88) = .37$, $p < .001$, but not moral injury, $r(88) = .12$, $p = .276$. An independent samples *t*-test indicated that there was no significant difference in perceived importance of the event between the affirmation (*M*= 4.75, *SD*=1.72) and control conditions (*M*=4.50, SD=1.62), $t(88) = .71$, $p = .480$. There was also no significant difference in the number of years ago recalled transgression occurred, between the affirmation (*M*= 4.45, *SD*=5.28) and control conditions (*M*= 6.15 *SD*=8.73), $t(88) = -1.11$ $p = .270$.

Separate independent samples *t*-tests were conducted to identify differences in moral injury, guilt and shame associated with the recall of moral transgressions between the affirmation (*n*= 44) and control (*n* = 46) conditions. Moral injury did not differ significantly between the affirmation (*M* = 5.16, *SD* = 1.13) and control conditions (*M* = 4.90, *SD* = 1.40), $t(88) = .89$, $p = .374$, *d* =.19. Guilt also did not differ significantly between the affirmation (*M* = 4.21, *SD* = 1.21) and control conditions (*M* = 3.92, *SD* = 1.31), $t(88) = 1.08$, $p = .283$, *d* = .23. However, participants in the affirmation condition reported a greater amount of shame *(M*= 3.91, *SD* = 1.59) than those in the control condition (*M* = 3.19, *SD* = 1.28), $t(88) = 2.37$, $p = .020$, $d = .50$.[2]

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[2] When perceived importance of the transgression was controlled for, the pattern of findings remained the same. The values affirmation intervention led to more shame compared to the control condition, $F (1, 87) = 5.07$, $p = .027$, $\eta^2 = .048$. The values affirmation and control conditions did not differ for guilt, $F (1, 87) = .72$, $p = .399$, $\eta^2 = .007$, or moral injury, $F (1, 87) = .66$, $p = .418$, $\eta^2 = .007$.

Exploratory Analyses

An exploratory analysis was conducted to examine survey respondents' descriptions of recalled events that they perceived to transgress their personal morals/ethics. Although recalled moral transgressions varied greatly according to content and severity, clear patterns emerged. All transgressions were categorized by the researcher into one of the following themes: close relationships, money, work/school, or violations of social norms (see Table 1).

Participants most frequently recalled moral transgressions that involved violations of some aspect of close relationships. A close relationship was defined as an intimate bond with others, such as friends, family members, and romantic partners. This category did not include transgressions involving distant interpersonal interactions such as those with strangers, acquaintances, or co-workers. Common relational transgressions involved cheating on a romantic partner, exposing secrets or lying to a significant other, or prioritizing something, such as work or money, over a close relationship. Although some of these responses involved aspects that overlapped with other common themes, any dilemma involving a clear transgression of duties to a close relationship partner was categorized as a relational dilemma.

Another common theme that emerged throughout the survey responses was work/school. Moral transgressions that were categorized to involve the workplace and/or school involved the violation of some sort of duty to one's workplace or academics. Common transgressions involved violations of workplace ethics or academic integrity, such as acting in a way that provides an individual with an unfair advantage over coworkers or classmates. For example, some participants wrote about instances of lying or cheating for academic or occupational benefit. Others reflected on times when they were forced to carry out orders of a superior in the workplace, acting in ways that were contrary to their own personal beliefs.

Table 1

Examples of Moral Transgressions

Theme	Examples
Close Relationships *n=33*	"A few years ago, I was supposed to get married, but I fell in love with someone else about a month before the wedding. I felt bad because I didn't keep the promises that I made."
	"My friends and I went out last year and we had a friend that was being a little awkward and distant when we went out. Instead of asking her what was wrong I went along with my other friends and distanced her more and made her feel left out. I felt horrible because that is never how I usually act."
Money *n=17*	"When I applied for financial aid, I did not include my emergency fund that I have hidden. I felt guilty but then I would have to use my emergency fund. I promised myself that I would make donations to the school throughout my life. Small monthly payments. I told myself that probably everyone does this."
	"After grocery shopping, I went home and realized the cashier had accidentally given me an extra $10 bill. I just kept it and didn't take it back to the store."
Work/School *n=30*	"Well, a new guy joined in our office recently. He is very much active and also doing all the work better and faster than me. I got some ego towards him and deleted his project from main server. I really felt that I have behaved unethically."
	"I was forced to lie about the facts of an assignment at school. It was a group assignment, and I was not able to go against what the group decided to do. They lied about certain facts about the assignment, and I regret agreeing to it till today."
Norm violations *n=10*	"A time I behaved unethically was when I went on a vacation during the pandemic. It was unethical and selfish because the best thing for society would be if I had stayed at home."
	"A few days ago, I saw someone stuck on the side of the road in the snow. I easily could have stopped to see if I could help them, especially since I didn't have anywhere to be, but chose to just ignore it and drive on. I felt bad because it was freezing outside, and it could have been as simple as me giving them a jump. I think this was very selfish of me in retrospect and would want someone to help me if I were in the same situation."

Note: Moral transgressions recalled by participants have been categorized by researchers, according to common themes that emerged throughout the survey. Example items were chosen based on representativeness of frequent responses.

A third theme that frequently appeared throughout recalled moral transgressions were events in which participants scam, cheat or steal money that was not legitimately earned. These transgressions were either direct or indirect, such as intentionally stealing money or objects from an institution or individual or indirect in nature, such as failing to report or return something of monetary value.

Finally, a small number of participants wrote about general norm violations in which they acted in a way that directly contradicted widely accepted societal expectations. For example, some individuals recalled instances in which they violated illicit (but not illegal) norms during the Covid-19 pandemic, such as going on vacation. Others wrote about participating in or witnessing public belligerence when provoked by others or during public protests. A few individuals wrote about a failure to engage in commonly expected public decencies to help out a stranger. Due to the small sample for each type of transgression, additional analyses were not conducted involving comparisons between the affirmation and control conditions.

Discussion

The results of the current study provide interesting insights into the nature of moral injury associated with everyday moral transgressions. As expected, correlational analyses revealed a positive relationship between moral injury and negative moral emotions (i.e., guilt and shame) associated with the recall of everyday moral transgressions. However, no significant differences in either moral injury or guilt were observed between participants who completed the values affirmation manipulation and those in the control condition. Shame was the only dependent variable that significantly differed between the conditions with participants in the values affirmation condition reporting more shame than those in the control condition.

Litz et al. (2009) defined moral injury as "the lasting psychological, biological, spiritual, behavioral and social impact of perpetrating, failing to prevent, or bearing witness to acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations" (p. 700). As shame and guilt are hallmark psychological reactions of moral injury (Farnsworth et al., 2014), it is not surprising the current study found positive correlations between moral injury, shame, and guilt. However, moral injury is a relatively new empirical construct that has been primarily studied within military contexts and other high-stakes, life-or-death situations (Dursun & Watkins, 2019). As the construct of moral injury continues to undergo conceptual development and empirical investigation, the current study provides valuable information about morally injurious events within the general population (Bryan et al., 2016). Specifically, the current findings indicate that everyday morally injurious events, as measured by Nash et al.'s (2013) Moral Injury Event Scale (MIES), are associated with shame and guilt-based reactions.

Interestingly, the values affirmation intervention had a significant effect on the negative moral emotion of shame, but not guilt. Litz et al. (2009) suggested that guilt occurs in situations where people feel remorse about their behavior, while shame occurs when people blame themselves because of perceived personal inadequacies and flaws (Dursun & Watkins, 2019). Thus, it is not surprising that the values-affirmation task, which oriented participants towards an introspective view of the self, impacted negative internal attributions about moral transgressions.

Given that this is a pilot study, the descriptive statistics (i.e., averages) of the dependent variables in each condition were examined more closely. Although the findings of the current study only showed a significant effect of the experimental manipulation on shame, a consistent pattern emerged: participants in the affirmation condition reported more moral injury, more guilt, and more shame than those in the control condition. These observations run counter to the

hypothesis that the values affirmation would *decrease* moral injury and negative moral emotions after recalling a transgression. This hypothesis was founded on a wide body of self-affirmation research, which has validated the use of values affirmations to decrease cognitive dissonance associated with threats to individual's self-identity (Crocker et al., 2009; Currier et al., 2014). However, specific mechanisms associated with violating the *moral* self were not considered. Past research has found that ethical dissonance causes people to engage in defensive appraisals of the moral transgressions to decrease discomfort caused by negative moral emotions (Gunn & Wilson, 2011). One study by Wohl et. al. (2009) found that collective guilt experienced by groups of perpetrators was reduced when the transgressions were defended against, such as by trivializing harm, justifying the reasons for inflicting harm, or by minimizing the role of the ingroup in the transgression. Values affirmations have been found to decrease these defensive appraisals, thereby increasing group-based negative moral emotions (Cehajic-Clancy et al., 2011). The values affirmation used in the current study may have increased shame and guilt by decreasing defense mechanisms participants have developed to avoid these feelings. However, further research should directly measure the impact of values affirmations on defence mechanisms (i.e., avoidance) in order to support these claims.

Further, limitations of the methodology used in the current study may explain the lack of support for the hypotheses. Firstly, all participants were asked to recall a moral transgression immediately after completing the values affirmation task. Studies of negative moral emotions have shown that the appraisal of an event as discordant from one's own actions and values causes cognitive dissonance which directly causes the feelings of guilt and shame (Breslavs, 2013). Thus, it is likely that immediately after being reminded of their ideal moral selves, participants may have experienced a temporary increase in cognitive dissonance and reported

higher levels of shame and guilt. Future studies should attempt to place the values affirmation task after the recall of a moral transgression, rather than before, in order to assess whether the timing of the intervention influences its effectiveness.

The increase in shame immediately following the values affirmation intervention may be a necessary component in long-term acceptance of the event. Past research has found that one of the key determinants of moral injury is how moral transgressions are reconciled (Litz et al., 2009). When people fail to forgive themselves for the event, they experience severe moral conflict which corresponds with the avoidance and emotional numbing symptoms of PTSD (Dursun & Watkins, 2019). Although value affirmations may increase moral injury to begin with, processing the event while affirming values may help people separate their actions from themselves, causing less moral injury in the long run. Thus, it is important for future empirical studies to assess the long-term impact of values-affirmations on moral emotions.

A second limitation of the methodology used in the current study may be associated with the choice of values affirmation manipulation used. For values affirmation manipulations to be effective, people must gain a more expansive view of the self and its resources to cope with threats to identity (Sherman & Cohen, 2006). According to the findings of the current study, it is possible that a single, brief values-affirmation may not be powerful enough to change people's self-views. Using more extensive, longer values affirmations that can be implemented repeatedly over time may be more effective at changing people's view of the self than a brief, single intervention (Thomaes et al., 2012). More testing is necessary to determine whether the placement of the intervention (i.e., before or after recalling a moral transgression) may influence the effectiveness of the values affirmation. Future studies should use more extensive values affirming processes over longer periods of time to get a sense of whether or not affirming values

may be an effective way to reorient the self and limit the negative impact of transgressing the moral self.

Thirdly, the current study may have been flawed by the assumption that moral injury resulting from everyday moral transgressions involves similar mechanisms as the types of high-stakes moral injury that have been studied to date. Existing research has studied moral injury within military contexts, which generally involves transgressing, failing to prevent, or bearing witness to life-or-death situations. Such extreme transgressions are likely to impact an individual's view of the self as "good" (Byran et al., 2016). In these extreme situations, in which transgressions are integrated into an individual's self-concept, affirming one's values by reminding them of who they are might help separate them from the event. On the other hand, everyday moral transgressions such as those involving friends, work, money, or social norms may not have caused such extreme moral injury. This kind of lapse of judgment is sometimes referred to as "moral distress" rather than moral injury and tends to have a lesser impact on the transgressor's self-identity (Lachman, 2016). These transgressions are easily justified and subconsciously defended against. Thus, value affirmations for this type of transgression may increase moral injury, whereas it still may decrease moral injury for more extreme situations. Future studies should aim to test values affirmation on other populations who have experienced more extreme, life-or-death moral injurious events, such as military veterans and frontline workers.

Further limitations of the current study are associated with self-report biases. When asked to report moral transgressions, participants may have felt too guilty and/or shameful to report their most extreme transgressions. Further, people's perceptions of past events may change over time, and thus be reported and interpreted differently than they occurred. Future studies should

aim to manipulate moral injury by asking participants to make morally injurious decisions in which they must violate deeply held values and beliefs in controlled environments and examining the outcomes of these decisions. Lastly, although perceived importance of the moral transgressions was measured and controlled for, the objective severity of the events was not. Future studies should control for both how severe the are perceived to be by the transgressors, and the real severity of transgressions, as assessed by objective raters.

Exploratory Findings

Although the quantitative analyses provide little support for the hypotheses, a detailed review of the moral transgressions recalled by participants provide interesting insights into the kinds of everyday moral transgressions that are frequently experienced within the general population. A few common themes emerged from participants' written descriptions of the transgressions.

The greatest number of respondents described a violation of some responsibility to a romantic partner, friend, or family member. These interpersonal dilemmas varied from repeated acts of infidelity to failing to make a friend feel included in a social situation. It has been found that violations of interpersonal relationships evoke strong negative moral emotions (Baumeister et al., 1994). This may, in part, be attributed to the nature of interpersonal relationships which are characterized by expectations of mutual concern, which may be easily violated (Aronson et al., 1995). Further, guilt and shame may have adaptive relationship functions such as motivating people to treat their partners better to compensate for past transgressions and avoid future ones. Further research is needed to examine moral injury within the context of interpersonal relationships, and its potential adaptive functions.

The second most reported type of morally injurious behaviours were those associated with the workplace and/or school. Workplace transgressions involve violations of psychological contracts between organizational members such as fairness among coworkers and honesty and transparency in one's work (Lachman, 2016). One study by Crane et al. (2013) suggests that moral distress in the workplace occurs when individuals act in ways that oppose their moral framework. The workplace environment is especially conducive to moral stressors, as employees are often forced to make immoral decisions due to institutional constraints or competitive environments in which transgressing personal values is necessary (Williamson et al., 2018). As moral injury can lead to significant personal and organizational impairments, it is an important topic for future industrial and organizational researchers to examine the role of moral stressors in the workplace.

A third commonly reported category of moral transgression involved undue or unethical financial gain. Many of the participants wrote about situations in which they received money that was unfairly earned either by cheating, stealing or lying. These transgressions ranged from picking up a 10-dollar bill to lying to gain more insurance. Past studies have suggested that individuals assign less blame to moral transgressors if the transgressor enacted their deed to obtain relatively large sums of money. Small amounts of money, however, accentuate the immorality of others' transgressions (e.g., Xie et al., 2013). This indicates that large amounts of financial gain may be considered acceptable justification for immoral behaviour. Further research is needed to examine whether moral injury, shame and guilt associated with undeserved financial gain differs according to the amount of money that is involved.

Lastly, some participants reported transgressions that involved the violation of widely accepted social norms. Interestingly, many of these transgressions involved current events

affecting the social world such as the Covid-19 pandemic and increased racial tensions in response to right wing politics or police brutality, such as leading to the death of George Floyd. In a time when there is social turmoil, people may feel increased scrutiny and social judgment, thereby increasing shame and guilt. Responses about going on vacation during the pandemic, receiving a vaccine under false pretenses, or responding insensitively to racial injustice provide insights into the kinds of common moral transgressions that may occur in response to current events. Recent studies have identified moral injury in populations of frontline workers during the Covid-19 pandemic such as healthcare providers, religious leaders, and teachers (Williams et al., 2020). However, as evidenced by the current study, members of the general population are also experiencing unprecedented stress associated with moral transgressions. It is important that researchers continue to identify potentially morally injurious events emerging in the general population to help the population overcome trauma-related guilt and shame.

Implications

The current study contributes to a growing body of research examining the presence and implications of moral injury beyond the military domain. This study suggests that violations of close personal relationships, work, school, money and social norms may cause some degree of moral injury, guilt and shame. When left untreated, moral injury can lead to the inability to self-forgive, demoralization and self-harming behaviours (Griffin et al., 2019). Thus, it is important that future researchers extend the study of moral injury to include everyday populations. Studies of moral injury in different populations are important to inform ongoing efforts to operationalize moral injury by identifying the types of events that cause, and don't cause, moral injury

The researchers of the current study intended to pilot the use of a values affirmation in the treatment of moral injury. Although the current findings suggest that reminding people of

their values increases, rather than decreases, negative moral emotions, more research is needed to support this claim. Future researchers should aim to develop a better empirical understanding of how values affirmations may influence people's perceptions of moral transgressions and the fallout from these events.

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Curriculum Vittae

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Education

Bachelor of Arts, Honours Specialization in Psychology   2017 – Present
Huron at Western University   London, ON
- Deans Honor List   2018, 2019, 2020

Scholarships

2020-2021   Professor Frederick Walter Burd Prize in Psychology
                      Awarded to the student with the highest standing entering Honors Specialization in Psychology
2020–2021   The Professor Mark R. Cole Award in Experimental Psychology
2017   Huron Scholarship of Excellence
2017   Huron Faculty Entrance Scholarship

Academic Experience

Research Assistant, Dr. Claire Crooks   October 2020 – Present
Centre for School Mental Health, Western University   London, ON
- Organized a focus group to study the efficacy of Teach Resiliency: an online platform providing teachers with tools and resources to promote teacher and student mental health

Research Assistant, Dr. Irene Cheung   September 2018 – Present
Huron at Western University   London, ON
- Proposed research ideas in the fields of Industrial-Organizational and Trauma Psychology
- Conducted in-depth literature reviews, data collection and analyses using SPSS, wrote research reports

Centre for Undergraduate Research Learning (CURL) Intern   May – September 2020
Huron at Western University   London, ON
- Assisted the Faculty of Psychology to prepare for the upcoming academic year in the development of online instructional procedures and materials, including preparing syllabi, lecture content and designing and implementing the OWL learning portals
- Created the curriculum for the introductory Psychology research component (PSYCH 1100E)

Clinical Experience

The Child and Adolescent Psychology (CAP) Centre   Summer 2015- Summer 2020
Receptionist, Clinical Assistant, Internship Coordinator   Aurora, ON
- Launched a post-doctoral internship program, meeting the requirements of the College of Psychologists of Ontario and composed an extensive manual for the program
- Scored non-interpretive clinical data, conducted in-depth client telephone intakes and teacher interviews, edited psychological reports, researched community services for referral

Academic Presentations

Moral Dilemmas in the Workplace, Dr. Irene Cheung   Postponed due to COVID-19
Midwestern Psychological Association (MPA)
- Accepted to present co-authored poster abstract exploring warmth and competence perceptions of decision makers in the workplace, using hypothetical every day ethical dilemmas

Volunteer Experience

Huron's Mentorship Program   September 2019 - May 2020
Mentor
- Met with a first-year student on a monthly basis to provide insight, guidance and advice to inspire academic and career goals

Tanenbaum CHAT Kimel   September 2016 - June 2017
Head of Student Leadership
- Selected by school administration as the head female Student Leader, responsible for programming weekend retreats and specialty school events for over 500 students, grades 9 through 11; promoted a cohesive and supportive culture