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The potentially morally injurious nature of encountering children during military deployments: A call for research

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ABSTRACT

Armed forces personnel are a population at risk for exposure to potentially traumatic and morally injurious events because of the high-risk nature of military operations. One potentially morally injurious event (PMIE) could be when military personnel encounter children during deployment. These encounters may lead to acute and chronic psychological, behavioural, and social consequences, culminating in moral injury and other adverse mental health problems. According to anecdotal evidence, military personnel reported feeling torn, morally and ethically, in their decision-making when they encounter children in the line of duty. The decision to engage or kill a child may be difficult to reconcile with one's moral and ethical code, and decisions may have deadly consequences for oneself and others. To date, however, no reliable data exist as to the impact that encountering children during deployment may have on psychosocial and spiritual well-being. In this article, additional research into this domain is encouraged by providing a rationale for studying encounters with children during deployment through the lens of a PMIE, as well as relevant contextual and institutional factors to consider when examining the mental health impact of such experiences.

Key words: child, ethical, mental health, military, moral injury, potentially traumatic and morally injurious events, soldier

RÉSUMÉ

Le personnel des Forces armées forme une population vulnérable à des événements au potentiel traumatique et préjudiciable sur le plan moral en raison de la nature très risquée des opérations militaires. Les moments où les membres du personnel militaire affrontent des enfants pendant leur déploiement peuvent constituer des événements au potentiel préjudiciable sur le plan moral (ÉPPM). Ces affrontements peuvent avoir des conséquences psychologiques, comportementales et sociales aiguës et chroniques, qui culminent par des blessures morales et d'autres troubles de santé mentale. D'après des données isolées, les membres du personnel militaire ont déclaré s'être sentis déchirés quant à leurs prises de décision morales et éthiques lorsqu'ils(elles) affrontaient des enfants dans l'exercice de leurs fonctions. Il peut être difficile de concilier la décision de combattre ou de tuer un enfant avec son propre code moral et éthique, et ces décisions peuvent avoir des conséquences mortelles pour soi et autrui. Cependant, aucune donnée fiable n'a porté sur les effets possibles de l'affrontement d'enfants pendant le déploiement sur le bien-être psychosocial et spirituel. Dans cet article, l'exposition du bien-fondé de l'étude des affrontements d'enfants pendant le déploiement favorise la tenue d'autres recherches sur le sujet en fonction d'un ÉPPM et de facteurs contextuels et institutionnels pertinents à envisager lors de l'examen des répercussions de ces expériences sur la santé mentale.

Mots-clés : blessures morales, enfant, éthique, événements au potentiel traumatique et préjudiciable sur le plan moral, militaire, santé mentale, soldat

LAY SUMMARY

Armed forces personnel are a population at risk for exposure to potentially traumatic and morally injurious events because of the high-risk nature of military operations. The impacts of deployment-related potentially morally injurious events (PMIEs) are increasingly being documented, with outcomes such as mental health and interpersonal problems showing consistent associations with exposure to events that deeply transgress an individual's deeply held moral beliefs. To date, the literature on deployment-related PMIEs has focused on events such as killing and exposure to atrocities.

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The impacts of situations in which military personnel encounter children, including children recruited and used as soldiers by local armies and militia, have not yet been examined systematically. This article highlights the scarcity of existing research on this topic and provides recommendations for future study regarding the impact of military encounters with children through the lens of moral injury.

INTRODUCTION

Although military deployments vary widely in scope, objectives, and geography, deployment operations are often imbued with moral complexities. For instance, military operations may represent the apex of conflict between opposing ideologies, and legal permissibility of military deployments may, at times, be incongruent with the civilian world regarding certain foundational moral rules (e.g., sanctioned killing in war). Moreover, the complex nature of military operations may force personnel to choose between actions with competing moral values or obligations, wherein acting consistently with one underlying value means failing to fulfil another.

Although a relatively nascent area of research, the capacity for morally complex and challenging deployment experiences to prompt a particular form of psychological distress called moral injury (MI) is increasingly well documented. Although there is no consensus definition of MI,¹ broadly, MI describes the psychological, social, and spiritual distress, harm, or impairment that results from experiencing a violation of deeply held moral beliefs. These violations are referred to as potentially morally injurious events (PMIEs) and may include acts of commission, acts of omission, or witnessing acts deemed to violate one's core values.² During deployment, organizational, environmental, and psychological factors such as restrictive rules of engagement, impoverishment, and hopelessness may also interact, setting the stage for PMIEs to occur.³

Examples of deployment-related PMIEs shown to exact psychosocial sequelae associated with MI include killing and witnessing atrocities. Less well studied, however, is how encounters with children during military deployments might lead to deleterious consequences similar to those shown to be associated with other PMIEs.⁴ Encounters with children can occur in many ways during deployments — from military personnel's routine interactions with civilian populations, a large proportion of whom are children, or in the context of hostile situations in which children may be armed or under suspicion of spying.⁵

Although clinical and anecdotal accounts suggest these various encounters with children may be potentially morally injurious,^{5,6} there remains a dearth

of empirical inquiry into this subject. For instance, a recent systematic review by Ein et al. examined the extant literature on military encounters with children and found psychological consequences pertinent to MI were identified as one of several potential impacts of such encounters.⁵ More important, however, nearly all sources identified were anecdotal. Thus, no rigorous and methodical empirical data (e.g., incidence reports) yet exist as to the prevalence of encountering children during deployment or the degree of impact such experiences may have on psychosocial and spiritual well-being. The aim of this article is therefore to encourage additional research in this domain by providing a rationale for studying encounters with children during deployment through a PMIE lens and discussing relevant contextual and institutional factors to consider when examining the mental health impact of such experiences.

THE POTENTIALLY MORALLY INJURIOUS NATURE OF ENCOUNTERING CHILDREN DURING DEPLOYMENT

A recent commentary review by Denov outlines various facets of how encounters with children may be potentially morally injurious.⁶ The author speculates as to how encounters with children during deployment can represent both self- and other-based transgressions, that is, PMIEs prompted by either one's own or others' actions (or lack of actions).² For example, hesitation caused by facing children with weapons may lead to a failure to protect unit members, leading to self-based MI, whereas a sense of betrayal may occur if an individual is constrained from providing aid to suffering children. Of note, Denov's analysis relies on only a portion of the qualitative evidence included in Ein et al.'s systematic review,^{5,6} again showcasing the scarcity of available data in this area.

Recent theory and evidence stemming from moral foundations theory may provide additional support and insights into the potentially morally injurious nature of deployment-related child encounters. According to this theory, in-group loyalty, respect, and purity or sanctity make up a binding moral foundation that supports a group's evolutionary survival.⁷ A study showed that PMIE exposure was significantly correlated with binding

moral foundations, and it was found to mediate the association between binding moral foundations and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms.⁸ No such associations were observed for individualizing moral foundations (i.e., those that protect the individual),⁷ suggesting that violations of beliefs that serve a binding function may be relevant to the development of MI.⁸ It is important to note that binding moral values have been theorized to encompass the protection of vulnerable persons, including children, with some scholars suggesting that military encounters with children may violate binding values through loss of perceived innocence.^{6,9} This perceived loss may occur in several ways, for example, as a result of circumstances inherent to deployment (e.g., poverty, differing cultural norms) or actions taken by a child (e.g., shooting to kill), which, from the perspective of many societal norms, may violate expectations and beliefs about what constitutes an “ideal” childhood.¹⁰ Research among civilian child protection workers, although similarly sparse and predominantly qualitative, appears to support the notion that witnessing children being harmed, and a sense of collective failure to protect children from harm, is a potential source of MI.¹¹

CONTEXTUAL AND INSTITUTIONAL FACTORS

Denov’s review omits describing important contextual details that may be relevant in considering the psychological impact of deployment encounters involving children.⁶ For instance, as observed in Ein et al.’s review,⁵ ambiguous encounters with children are not uncommon. When children are encountered on military deployments, their roles and intentions can be difficult to determine, particularly given the fast-paced nature of conflict settings.⁹ For example, children running toward military members could be curious or a signal intended to alert local militia to the presence of allied personnel and, in turn, to initiate a potential ambush. Attempts to understand the nature of deployment experiences with children, therefore, need to account for such ambiguities and their potential ramifications.

Even when the rules of engagement are clearly defined, encounters with children on deployment may, nevertheless, present a conflict between specified mission objectives and military personnel’s moral beliefs. For example, soldiers must decide whether to follow through with actions in line with the mission objective (e.g., killing a child combatant), risking a violation to their moral values (doing no harm to children), or to disobey orders

and potentially risk the lives of themselves and others, as well as fail to achieve mission objectives by choosing not to act. Further complicating the matter, after an experience in which a child was seemingly a threat, whether that situation was ambiguous or not, that experience may prime soldiers to consider other children in the conflict setting as suspected combatants, potentially causing a loss of confidence and moral agency.¹²

Another potential domain of impact of encounters with children is family well-being and community belongingness. For instance, deep feelings of shame and guilt that may result from encounters with children during deployment may make it difficult for military members to separate these emotions from interactions with family after deployment. They may avoid being in contact with their own children to protect them from the kind of person they feel they have become from their experience during deployment.⁹ Children may also become a constant reminder of these experiences, evoking withdrawal from family and community. Moreover, military members who are parents at the time of encounters may have difficulty reconciling their role as parents with their role as soldiers in the aftermath of such experiences. Additional research on these personal contextual factors may help to clarify mechanisms underlying different patterns of distress (e.g., avoidance in PTSD vs. identity conflict dissonance in MI) and impairment in the wake of child encounters during deployment.

Identifying specific institutional and organizational factors that could potentially mitigate negative outcomes from encountering children during deployment is a critical yet underexplored area. Findings from Ein et al. shed light on the urgent need for continued training, policy, and support for military personnel to better navigate such encounters.⁵ As such, further research is urgently needed to inform policies and training aimed at developing more effective preventive and constructive responses to these encounters, reducing the potential of negative consequences experienced by military personnel and their extended communities.

Furthermore, support from leaders, peers, and family may also mitigate negative outcomes from encountering children during deployment. However, this area of research is also limited, and future research is needed to examine these potential protective factors.

Conclusions and future directions

Although existing clinical testimony and anecdotal accounts point to the capacity for challenging encounters

with children during military deployments to cause psychological distress akin to MI, additional research using more rigorous methodological approaches is needed. In particular, additional rigorous quantitative and qualitative studies are needed to better understand the prevalence of such encounters and the contextual and institutional factors that may be most likely to harm or protect military personnel encountering children during deployment. Future studies are also needed to tease apart the complex elements of these encounters (e.g., exposure to children, moral appraisals of encounters, identity or role disruptions, clinical distress) to better understand the mechanisms involved in developing differing patterns of distress (e.g., PTSD, depression, MI) in the aftermath of child encounters during deployment. Moreover, an interdisciplinary approach to this line of work is needed, including dialogue among professionals from fields such as organizational psychology, moral philosophy, military policy, and international security.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Natalie Ein, PhD, is a postdoctoral associate with the MacDonald Franklin OSI Research Centre. She completed her master's degree and PhD at Ryerson University in the psychological science program. Ein's background is in stress-related intervention research, including methodological reviews (meta-analyses, systematic reviews), mixed-methods designs, and psychophysiology.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have nothing to disclose.

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