

The Cultural Development of Moral Repair in US Military Veterans: A Hermeneutic Phenomenology Study

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Introduction

Despite efforts to thwart it, recent evidence shows the **suicide rate among military personnel is at its highest level since 2012**. **Moral injury** resulting from combat-related trauma has been suggested as having a mediating role in suicidal ideation.



Moral injury is perhaps best thought of as a **spiritual wound** or scarring of the soul where deeply held personal beliefs or truths about humanity become undone leading to feelings of **guilt, shame, self-condemnation, anger, and betrayal** (vs PTSD feelings such as fear, anxiety, hyper-vigilance). Left unattended, these feelings lead individuals to lives **disconnected and isolated** from the social world. Some, perhaps most, never learn how to heal from this type of injury. Instead, they suffer in silence, or worse.

How veterans heal from moral injury, otherwise known as **moral repair**, is even less understood and is the **focus of this qualitative research study**.

Cultural Psychology Research Framework



Cultural Psychological Lens

Carl Ratner
("...investigates the cultural origin, formation, and characteristics of psychological phenomena ..." (Ratner, 2002, p. 2))

Theory
Genetic Law of Cultural Development
Lev Vygotsky

Methodology
Hermeneutic Phenomenology
Martin Heidegger
Hans-Georg Gadamer

Research Questions

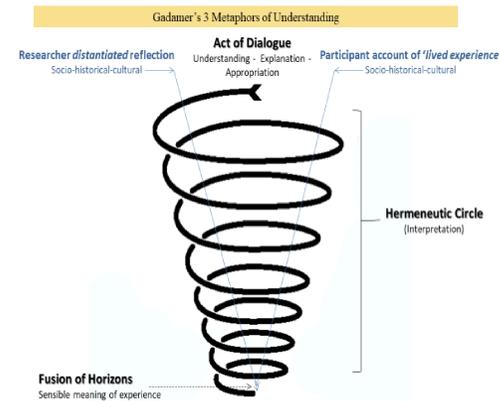
What is the nature of the lived experience of moral repair among US military veterans?
What are the significant activities, events, processes, situations, relationships, and things that lead to a veteran experiencing moral repair?

Data & Methods

PARTICIPANT DATA

Total participants = 14

Military Service	Army	Marine Corps	Navy			
	9	2	3			
Military Conflict	Vietnam	Persion Gulf	Bosnia	Iraq	Afghanistan	
	4	5	2	8	7	
Military Occupation	Infantry	Spec Ops	Psyc Ops	EOD	Chaplain	
	7	2	2	2	1	
Aged joined	> 20	20-29	30-39			
	5	8	1			
Age at interview	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70-79	
	3	1	4	3	3	



van Manen's Thematic Analysis (van Manen, 2014, p. 320) and related Research Question (RQ) element

Level	Description	Questions Explored in Text	Element(s) of RQ that Level of Analysis Supports
WHOLISTIC reading approach	Attend to the text as a whole	How can the phenomenological meaning or main significance of the text as a whole be captured?	Wholistic or general interpretation of the nature of the lived experience of moral repair among US military veterans
SELECTIVE reading approach	Listen to or read a text several times	What statement(s) or phrase(s) seem particularly essential or revealing about the phenomenon or experience being described?	Description or interpretation of meaning/significance imbued in activities, events, processes, situations, and relationships that lead to a veteran experiencing moral repair
DETAILED reading approach	Look at every single sentence or sentence cluster	What may this sentence or sentence cluster be seen to reveal about the phenomenon or experience being described?	Examples of activities, events, processes, situations, and relationships that lead to a veteran experiencing moral repair

Preliminary Findings & Conclusions

Theme 1: The military culture is central to the veteran's identity and place in the world.

- Military culture based on just war doctrine and core values
- Military culture provides the individual with a sense of purpose, trust, and belonging
- Military culture serves as a protective yet permeable shield from the full effects of moral injury to take hold.

Theme 2: Moral injury causes the veteran to lose his identity or place in the world.

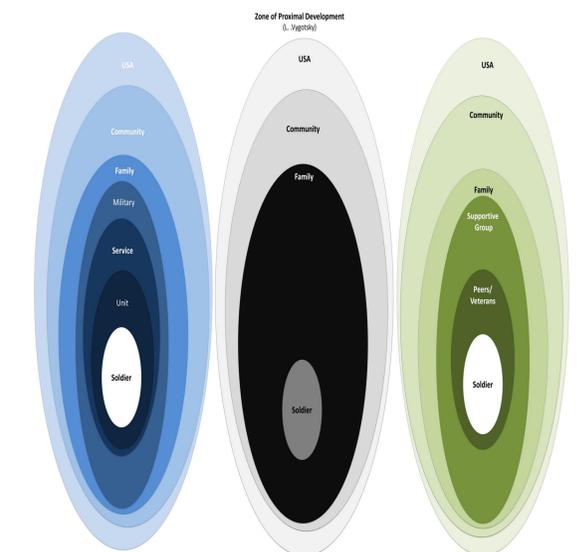
- Subsequent behaviors i.e. bad relationships (divorce, fights), inability to keep a job, self-medicating/drugs, etc. lead to self-isolation
- Feelings of anger, rage, guilt, shame, betrayal, self-condemnation, suicidal thoughts etc. fill the void.

Theme 3: Treating moral injury as a mental illness or disorder further isolates the veteran from the social world. (Medical model Inhibits/exacerbates healing.)

- Mental illness and disorder is rewarded (financially)
- Mental illness as stigma
- Not addressing root cause
- Treating the wrong symptoms
- Psychiatric medications and side effects - including suicidal thoughts
- Clinical therapy – not authentic, power-based doctor vs patient, etc.

Theme 4: Moral repair/healing is developed by reconnecting with the social world through culturally mediated activity.

- New/repaired purpose, new/repaired belonging, new/repaired trust
- Alternative holistic approaches/language/tools etc. work to reconnect veteran with his (military) identity/place in the world. *Uses military identity as a launching point.*
- Alternative language -
 - Normal response to trauma vs. mental illness/disorder
 - Peer/buddy/friend/trusted other vs. Doctor/Patient
 - Training vs. treatment
 - Practice vs. therapy



Zone of Proximal Development

Preliminary Recommendations

Academic

Proposed operational definition – Moral repair is the (psychological) internalization of trust/(social and spiritual) connectedness developed through culturally mediated holistic integrative activity.

Practitioner- paradigm shift in policy and practice

- Mental health care providers and caregivers should consider moral injury as a potential underlying factor/root cause of mental and emotional distress in order to provide appropriate care.
- The VA and other institutions should consider fundamental shift in mental health healing from a medical model to a holistic model. (Note: VA has introduced integrated health to its portfolio of services).
- Psychiatric medications should be prescribed rarely vs common practice.

References

Photo - Flags on the National Mall representing the 1,892 veterans who have committed suicide from Jan-Mar 2014 – a figure that amounts to 22 deaths each day. Credit Stephen Crowley/The New York Times.

Bryan, A. O., Bryan, C.J., Morrow, C.E., Etienne, N., and Ray-Sannerud, B. (2014). Moral Injury, Suicidal Ideation, and Suicide Attempts in a Military Sample. *Traumatology*.

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