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When trust is lost: Moral injury in higher education

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Abstract

Transformation, or the lack thereof, student activism, and other day-to-day processes and rules in higher education institutions may lead to situations in which staff witness or are complicit in actions that contradict their sense of right and wrong. As a result, they may experience what is often described as 'burnout'. It may be more accurate to describe the responses in terms of violations of their moral code, or 'moral injury'. This conceptual paper draws on the literature on moral injury from other contexts and applies it to the experiences of staff in a higher education context, in South Africa and beyond, through the author's reflections on her own experiences. Moral injury has numerous potential effects, such as a loss of trust in self or others, feelings of guilt or shame, withdrawal, and interpersonal difficulties. Dealing with moral injury involves grappling with the conditions that create these injuries.

Keywords: burnout; higher education; institutional betrayal; moral injury; trust; staff wellbeing

Prologue

Scenario 1. Lecturer A finds themselves spending a lot of time filling in forms and documents required by the institution for quality assurance or university rankings, or other purposes. They feel that the management of the institution is out of touch with the realities of lecturing work, and that filling in endless documents takes them away from the work they feel they are really there to do, which is to teach undergraduate and postgraduate students.

Scenario 2. Lecturer B has to decide whether to allow a student to submit work late. They know that this student has experienced multiple life challenges and isn't really to 'blame' for missing work, but the rules of the department or institution do not allow them to give the student any more time to submit the work. They turn down the request, knowing that it will harm the student but not feeling able to make a different choice.

Scenario 3. Lecturer C witnesses students being shot with rubber bullets by the public order protection police during a protest. They feel angry and helpless.

Scenario 4. Lecturer D teaches online during the Covid-19 lockdown, knowing very well that many students are not able to access the lectures and will fall behind with their work. They are aware of the many inequalities in their classes and feel guilty for adding to these inequalities. They feel that they are receiving little or no institutional support in working through either the logistics or ethics of this situation.

Scenario 5. Lecturer E teaches classes and sets assignments in the first few weeks of the academic year, although they know that due to the processes of and delays in the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS)[1], a number of students will only join the class in the third or fourth week of the academic year. They know this is unfair but are unsure of what to do except offer those students who join late extensions and perhaps a couple of catch-up classes.

Scenario 6. Lecturer F realises that a number of students have used AI to complete their assignments. They also know of students who have been disciplined for submitting false, forged or altered documents as support documents for applications for Leaves of Absence or aegrotat exams. They are losing trust in students in general and wonders what the point of teaching in higher education is.

Scenario 7. A student reports to Lecturer G that she has been raped by another student. Lecturer G guides the student in reporting the rape to the institution. The student receives counselling and post-exposure prophylaxis, but the reported rape doesn't result in a disciplinary case. The female student leaves the institution. The male student graduates. Lecturer G feels frustrated and angry.

Introduction

These vignettes are based on a combination of my own experiences, conversations with other academics, and readings about higher education. What these varied, but not unusual, scenarios have in common is that they involve a lack of trust or a sense of a violation of how things should be. They are all, individually and collectively, potentially morally injurious experiences (PMIEs) (Nash, 2019) are things people experience that may or may not lead to moral injury. Nash states that the 'stress injury model of moral injury' describes moral injury as 'a literal wound to the mind, brain, body, and spirit inflicted by a life event that violates deeply held moral expectations of oneself and the world' (2019: 468). Moral injury has yet to be fully explored in the context of higher education. There is limited literature on students or pedagogy and moral injury (Anderson,

[1] NSFAS is a government-funded bursary scheme that funds South African undergraduate students who have a family income below a specified level. They currently fund over a million students a year in various kinds of post-secondary institutions in South Africa.

2024; Apoifis, 2022; Guth, 2018; Murray, et al., 2018; Simola, 2024) and it has received little attention in relation to staff in higher education, apart from research in the UK on lecturers' experiences of teaching during Covid (Hanna, et al., 2023) and research on Health Science clinical educators in the US (Kellish, et al., 2021). However, it's potentially applicable to a whole range of experiences and responses of staff in higher education institutions. I've concentrated, in the vignettes, on interactions with students, but research activities can also be morally fraught (Clift, et al., 2023).

There is a growing interest in care, well-being, compassion, being trauma-informed, and affect in general, in higher education. Much of the literature related to care and the affective turn in higher education relates to pedagogy, curriculum, and students (Apoifis, 2022; Bozalek, et al., 2014; Cherry & Wilcox, 2020; Davidson, 2017; Gachago, Bali & Pallitt, 2022; Henshaw, 2022; Laduca, 2023; Padmanabhanunni, 2020; Perry, 2006: Zembylas, 2023; 2024; Zembylas, et al., 2014). It is worth considering that the well-being of students is at least partly dependent on their interactions with staff, lecturers in particular (Eloffi, O'Neil & Kanengoni., 2021). It may be difficult for academic staff to contribute to the care and well-being of students when they, themselves, are not well. There is body of literature which looks at the well-being, or, more frequently, the lack of well-being of academic staff in higher education, both in South Africa (Janse van Rensburg, et al., 2018; Jasson, et al., 2022; Kanyumba, et al., 2024; Motala & Menon, 2020; Naidoo-Chetty & Du Plessis, 2021; Poalses & Bezuidenhout, 2018; Rothmann, et al., 2008; Van Niekerk & Van Gent, 2021) and internationally (Urbina-Garcia, 2020; Sabagh, et al., 2018). Much of this literature focuses on the concepts of stress and burnout.

Burnout may be related to, or mask, underlying moral injury. Burnout may be defined as a 'state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion resulting from a prolonged response to long-term exposure to demanding situations' (Sabagh, et al., 2018: 132). Some research suggests that burnout correlates with moral injury or distress (Dzeng & Curtis, 2018; French, et al., 2022; Rushton, et al., 2015) and that the two 'are overlapping constructs' (Linzer & Poplau, 2021: 1). Other writers argue that it's important to keep these two forms of harm distinct (Dean, Talbot & Dean, 2019). I would argue that it's necessary to bring the concept of moral injury into understandings of the working lives of staff, and indeed, students, in higher education. In the rest of this paper, I explore the concept of moral injury and use it to reflect on my own experiences as an academic member of staff in a higher education institution in South Africa.

My path to an understanding of moral injury

In the twenty years I've been teaching in an Extended Degree Programme in the same higher education institution, there have been several situations, often relating to activism and transformation, or the lack of it, that have been difficult to process, resulting in emotional and thought responses that I've found difficult to label or move on from, even years later. The most extreme example of this was the lifetime expulsion of two female students who participated in a protest against sexual violence (Pather & Smit, 2017; Solomon, 2017), an act that acquired the hashtag #RhodesWar. At least two aspects of this felt, and still feel, wrong to me. One was that

the expulsion took place more than eighteen months after the protest, so it was far from swift. The other was the degree of punishment, which was lifetime exclusion from Rhodes University with an endorsement on their transcripts that would make it almost impossible for them to study elsewhere, at least in South Africa. I had nothing to do with this disciplinary process and was not properly aware of it until it became public. I felt and still feel anger about this, but strangely, I also feel a sense of shame.

This and other situations, events, and processes, some of them similar to the range of scenarios described above, which felt 'wrong' and which I found difficult to move on from, were, for a while, difficult for me to explain to myself. I couldn't understand why some responses had this long, and rather mixed up, emotional tail. Then, in 2022, I was watching an online summit on collective trauma. A few of the speakers mentioned 'moral injury'. I looked up this term, which was new to me. This concept helped me to make sense of my responses to several situations and provided a sense of relief, in that I have a way to explain to myself these ongoing responses.

Defining moral injury

The term 'moral injury' was first used by psychiatrist Jonathan Shay (2014) as a response to his work with war veterans. He found that alongside post-traumatic stress, veterans were often also struggling with something else related to trust and a sense of right and wrong in addition to the fear created by trauma. His definition of moral injury is:

- 'A betrayal of what's right
- by someone who holds legitimate authority (e.g., in the military—a leader).
- in a high-stakes situation. All three.' (Shay, 2014: 183)

An example might be a military leader telling soldiers to fire on civilians. Later definitions are broader in their explanation of who can be responsible for this betrayal. Litz, et al., define 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' (2009: 697). The problem with this definition is that it makes it sound like the person or group who is wronged is not the self or one's group, which is not necessarily the case. The definition of moral injury from Nash (2019), given in the introduction, is broader. The term 'potentially morally injurious experience' or 'PMIE' is used in the literature to describe an experience that may or may not result in moral injury. I would contend that people working in higher education are regularly faced with PMIEs.

Litz, et al. (2009) describe a process through which a person may come to experience moral injury. They say that a potentially morally injurious experience 'creates dissonance and conflict because it violates assumptions and beliefs about right and wrong and personal goodness' and that '[if] individuals are unable to assimilate or accommodate (integrate) the event within existing self- and relational-schemas', they will experience moral injury (Litz, et al., 2009: 698). For Litz et

al. the important thing is how the person is able to work or think through, and possibly resolve, the cognitive dissonance that arises.

Moral injury from a cross-cultural perspective

Moral injury was first recognised in American military veterans, and most studies of moral injury have taken place in Western settings. However, '[m]oral injury has been conceptualized as a culturally widespread phenomenon that also is culturally shaped' (Haight, et al., 2020: 6). I'll draw here on some of the work that has been done on moral injury in Africa. Nwoye states that 'research and writings on moral injury and its aftermath in continental Africa are still in their infancy' (2021: 912), but some research does exist. When the concept of moral injury was described to widows from the Akan group in Ghana and to people, mostly religious professionals, who work with these widows, the concept appeared to be meaningful to them (Haight, et al., 2020). Many of the women had experienced betrayals of themselves or their children, often due to 'Akan gender roles, rituals and customary laws' (Haight, et al., 2020: 3). The participants were able to identify events leading to moral injury and responses to moral injury (Haight, et al., 2020: 5) and find ways of explaining the effects of moral injury that draw on local spiritual beliefs, describing it, for example, as 'killing the soul', a disintegration of the soul/spirit/body trinity, or as 'embitterment of the soul' (Haight, et al., 2020: 5).

A study of Turkana warriors in Kenya, who frequently experience raiding, also found moral injury relevant to this context (Zefferman & Mathew, 2020). This study shows how the context in which fighting takes place influences the types, seriousness, and responses to moral injury. For example, Turkana men and boys can often find ways of avoiding participating in raids and other conflicts, so they have choices. Raids are usually led by raid leaders, but 'these leaders do not have command authority or coercive power' (Zefferman & Mathew, 2020: 347). This means that the Turkana men cannot be forced by raid leaders to carry out acts that go against their sense of right and wrong, as soldiers in many other contexts can. Raid leaders can, in fact, be punished by the men they lead for breaking norms. This study found the concept of moral injury to be applicable in this very different context from the context in which it was first identified and found that context influenced the kinds of PMIEs and the effects of moral injury experienced (Zefferman & Mathew, 2020).

Effects of moral injury

The main effects of burnout are 'emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation or cynicism and perception of reduced personal accomplishment or professional efficacy' (Sabagh, et al., 2018: 133). These may overlap with some of the effects of moral injury, though the effects of moral injury are more wide-ranging.

The effects of moral injury can vary in intensity. Nash states that 'moral stressors and outcomes likely both occur on a spectrum of intensity and severity, from lower intensity moral challenges that result in mere moral frustrations at one end to higher-intensity morally injurious events that cause literal psychological, social, and spiritual harms at the other' (2019: 466). PMIEs

may be sudden and shocking, or in other situations 'the insults are smaller but can build up to a tipping point' (Brenner, 2017: 548).

Shay (2014) worked with soldiers who had post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) but noticed that there was something else they were struggling with. In PTSD what is lost is a sense of safety. In moral injury what is lost is trust – 'in oneself, in other people, in the army, and sometimes in society at large' (Subotic & Steele, 2018: 390). In higher education, the loss of trust would relate to some larger or smaller part of the institution or the government department responsible for higher education. Although I've experienced moral injury due to specific events in my institution, I haven't lost completely trust. I couldn't continue to work in the institution if I had. Rhodes University has currently opted out of participating in university rankings (McKenna, 2024), which protects me from some PMIEs which colleagues in other universities are experiencing. Under our current Vice-Chancellor, the university has made connections with the broader community that have had real impact on primary and secondary education in Makhanda, the city where it is based (Cohen, 2025; Wilmot, 2019). Many parts of the institution function well, and many people care deeply for students and each other. Nevertheless, there are certain processes and situations that I'm much less trusting of than I would have been in the past.

The emotional reactions to a morally injurious experience range from anger to guilt to shame and may depend on the person's role in the events. Currier, et al. suggest that when someone perpetrates or fails to intervene in a problematic situation, 'outcomes include feelings of shame and guilt; beliefs or attitudes about being unlovable, unforgivable, or incapable of moral decision making; self-handicapping; and acting out behavior' (2019: 393). They suggest that when someone witnesses a morally injurious event 'outcomes could be characterized by feelings of anger and moral disgust, beliefs or attitudes related to mistrust of others, and revenge fantasies for the responsible person(s)' (Currier, et al., 2019: 393).

It's useful to make a distinction here between shame and guilt. They are both 'self-oriented negative moral emotions' (Litz, et al., 2009: 699). Litz, et al. define guilt as 'a painful and motivating cognitive and emotional experience tied to specific acts of transgression of a personal or shared moral code or expectation' (2009: 699). Shame is understood as 'intense criticism of one's global self that contributes to an array of avoidant or aggressive problems' (Griffin, et al., 2019: 356). Guilt is 'I've done something bad'. Shame is 'I'm bad'. Shame tends to lead to withdrawal from other people. Shame makes it harder for people to access help and 'precludes access to the potentially reparative effect of social interaction' (Brenner, 2017: 549). I feel no guilt about the expulsion of the two female students because I had no hand in it. But I feel shame that I think is less individual than on behalf of the institution to which I belong.

Even when shame isn't the primary emotion resulting from a moral injury, withdrawal is a potential response. With shame, the withdrawal tends to be quite general. In other situations, where the moral injury is perhaps milder and more related to a specific role or activity, the person may withdraw from the role or activity and the people associated with it. Activists who have experienced moral injury concerning their activism may withdraw into their families and away from activism and relationships with other activists (Rak, 2022). In a multifaceted role like that of

an academic, it is possible to withdraw from parts of the role while continuing with others. If lecturers experience moral injury from the actions of their institution during a student protest, they might concentrate on their teaching and withdraw from participation in broader institutional activities, such as participation in committees and celebratory events such as graduation. This has been my own pattern of partial and temporary withdrawal.

Moral injury affects how people interact with other people. Shay argues that '[w]hen social trust is destroyed, it is replaced by the settled expectancy of harm, exploitation, and humiliation from others' (2014: 186). He states that the question 'Why should I trust you?' is constantly present, whether it is expressed verbally or not (Shay, 2014: 188). My experience of periods of student protest, and their aftermath, is that it affects relationships, and that trust becomes very difficult because of how contentious decisions and actions are in these times and how strongly lines get drawn between groups reacting to the activism in different ways (Becker, 2017). Interactions between people who have experienced different moral injuries are potential minefields.

Lack of trust, particularly in the self, feeling vulnerable or exposed in relationships, and feelings of shame or even guilt can lead to shifts in a person's sense of who they are. Moral injury can, therefore, lead to shifts in identity – particularly after having perpetrated or having failed to prevent or intervene in a bad situation, through which a person may lose a previously held sense of themselves as a good person. Subotic and Steele state that: 'Since the self is dependent on the other for its standing, if there is a breach of trust in the world, the self's identity and worth are crushed' (2018: 391).

I've learned that I find it difficult to intervene and tell people to stop doing things when those people have greater power than me. I also have generally chosen not to be on campus when there has been a threat of conflict or violence between students and police, even though staff interventions in these situations can reduce the threat. My moral issue here is not whether I know what is right or wrong. I have a strong sense that protecting students from harm is right. My moral issue is whether I am brave enough to do what is right. I've come to think of myself as rather a coward. That's part of the sense of shame I feel and it has affected my sense of myself as a good person.

Experiencing moral injury can also affect a person's religious or spiritual identity and beliefs. It's not surprising that moral injury would have effects in the realm of spirituality, since many people's morality is tied to their religious or spiritual beliefs. Currier, et al. suggest that moral injury 'might be linked to tension with God or a higher power, conflicts with religious people or institutions, or doubting teaching or doctrines from one's faith tradition (e.g., imperatives for forgiveness)' (2019: 394). Religious beliefs may either help or hinder the 'working through' of the cognitive dissonance that often arises in response to a PMIE.

Since moral injury is an injury to a person's moral life or sense of morality, there are effects in this area too. 'Moral injury leads to moral uncertainty and doubts in one's ability to make moral decisions going forward' (Subotic & Steele, 2018: 390). I find the metaphor of 'moral vertigo' (Zdrenka, 2016) very powerful, evoking both a sense of not knowing up from down, but also

evoking a sense of nausea that can accompany vertigo. Another response could be 'moral numbing' (Brenner, 2017). I understand this as a loss of sense of right and wrong and perhaps a kind of emotional numbing, in which the person feels unable to care about whether any action is moral or not. There is also the possibility that moral injury leads to greater moral development. 'Moral strain may provoke positive reactions, leading to greater motivation to seek change as well as moral, spiritual, and emotional development' (Brenner, 2017: 549).

Although the long-term effects of moral injury may be very negative, it's important not to pathologise individuals who experience it. Litz et al. state that 'anguish, guilt, and shame are signs of an intact conscience and self- and other-expectations about goodness, humanity, and justice. In other words, injury is only possible if acts of transgression produce dissonance (conflict), and dissonance is only possible if the service member has an intact moral belief system' (2009: 701). From a spiritual perspective, Antal and Winings (2015: 385) argue that '[if] we define spiritual fitness to include the capacity for empathy, moral engagement, and all the rest that good character entails then it would seem moral injury is directly, not inversely, proportional to spiritual fitness'. Moral injury can result when bad things happen to good people. Higher education needs people with 'intact moral belief systems' who display 'spiritual fitness'.

Trust, trauma, betrayal and moral injury

It is acknowledged that trauma resulting from the actions of another person or people, sometimes called 'interpersonal trauma' (Wamser-Nanney & Vandenberg, 2013), may result in greater harm than impersonal trauma or 'nonbetrayal' trauma (Mojallal, et al., 2024) resulting from something like a car accident or a house burning down (Kaminer & Eagle, 2010: 36). The harm is often exacerbated when the trauma is perpetrated by a loved one or trusted person, which can lead to what is referred to as 'betrayal trauma' (Gobin & Freyd, 2014). When this happens in childhood, in particular, the perpetrator might also be the caregiver and therefore the person who provides resources the child needs to survive (Adams-Clark, et al., 2024). It is also, obviously, possible for an adult to experience trauma at the hands of someone they are dependent on.

Trust is most often considered in relation to other individuals, but trust can also be placed in institutions and that trust can be betrayed in what is referred to as 'institutional betrayal' (Adams-Clark, et al., 2024; Christl, et al., 2024; Gómez, et al., 2016; Gorsak, 2019; Smith & Freyd, 2013). Institutional betrayal can take a number of forms, such as institutional negligence, unmet expectations, violations of trust, denial of wrongdoing, and perpetuation of harm (Imad, et al., 2024). Individuals can be dependent on institutions for a range of reasons. When the institution is their employer, the person is dependent on the institution for their livelihood. Betrayal trauma can be defined as 'traumas in which individuals or institutions that people depend on for survival harm or violate them in some way' (Freyd, et al., 2005: 84). Because of this dependence, the child or adult who experiences betrayal trauma might not be able to leave the situation and may experience further violations (Freyd, et al., 2005).

The concepts of moral injury and betrayal trauma developed out of different contexts, which makes it difficult to compare them or clearly distinguish between them. Betrayal trauma was first understood in relation to traumas experienced in childhood perpetrated by loved ones or caregivers. It has been expanded to include betrayal in adulthood by both trusted individuals and trusted institutions. Moral injury was first recognised in war veterans in relation to institutional betrayal and has been recognised in other adult roles and experiences. One seeming difference between them is that betrayal trauma is always caused by another, but moral injury can result from a person's own actions. This is complicated, however, by the fact that people who are betrayed by someone they love may blame themselves, even if this has no basis in the reality of the situation (Gagnon, et al., 2017). Moral injury includes situations in which individuals really are complicit in, or even directly responsible for, acts that they believe to be wrong.

There are clearly some overlaps between betrayal trauma and moral injury. It would seem that very small children can experience betrayal trauma, but an individual would need at least a basic sense of morals to experience moral injury. Some of the effects of betrayal trauma and moral injury seem to be similar, though people, and particularly children, who experience betrayal trauma may experience dissociation and even 'forget' that the event or events took place, which is not the case with moral injury. For the most part, the bodies of literature on trauma betrayal and moral injury do not speak to each other, so no real comparison, or bringing together, of the concepts has taken place, though this may be starting to change (Mojallal, et al., 2024).

Who is likely to experience moral injury?

Since moral injury results in a loss of trust, there must have been a degree of trust present. If a person has no trust in a specific institution or process, there can be no moral injury when the institution or process fails to do or does something that goes against the person's sense of right and wrong. There might be frustration, cynicism, or anger, but there is no moral injury where there was no trust that moral action should be expected in the first place. (Adams-Clark, et al., 2024; Christl, et al., 2024; Gómez, et al., 2016; Gorsak, 2019; Smith & Freyd, 2013).

There only needs to be a degree of trust, not full trust, for there to be a potential for moral injury. If you had asked me in the past if I trusted the ANC-led South African government, my answer would have been largely negative. I didn't trust them to be efficient. I didn't trust them to make good on their promises. Only after the Marikana massacre in 2012 (Neocosmos, 2016) did I come to understand that, until that point, I had trusted them not to shoot indiscriminately at citizens.

Anyone can experience moral injury, but there is a cluster of roles that make it likely that a person would experience a range of forms of moral injury, in which they witness, fail to prevent and/or perpetrate acts that they perceive to be wrong (Litz, et al., 2009) – as opposed to, for example, just witnessing such acts. Such people may experience both agential and receptive forms of moral injury (Simola, 2024). For example, moral injury has been researched not only among military personnel, but also among social workers (Fenton & Kelly, 2017), healthcare workers, and medical students (Dzeng & Curtis, 2018; Murray, et al., 2018; Rushton, et al., 2015),

activists (Karmel & Kuburic, 2021; Rak 2022), and educators (Cohen Lissman, et al., 2024; Glazer, 2022; Keefe-Perry, 2018; Levinson, 2015; Sugrue, 2020). In these roles, people have a degree of influence over other people's lives, and they can do great good, but circumstances may result in them doing harm. These are 'high stakes' roles, where lives, life chances, or quality of life are on the line. People may take up these roles due to strong callings to be involved in work or activities that are intended to help people.

The literature on moral injury and education mostly relates to public schools in the US. The writers point out that teaching, and particularly teaching in public schools, is a moral endeavour, since it is a human activity done in relation to other human beings (Sugrue, 2020). In American public schools, the 'other human beings' are young, often people of colour, and often disadvantaged in a number of ways. Keefe-Perry suggests that moral injury in this setting is probably less profound but more widespread than moral injury in the context of the military (2018: 495). Teachers may struggle when how they think things ought to be and what they think their role ought to be is in contrast with how things are (Keefe-Perry, 2018). For lecturers, this might be a sense of moral frustration that they can't give their students as much attention as they would like because they are so busy filling in paperwork, attending meetings, reviewing papers, getting up to date with new policies and technology, and so on (see McCullough [2024] for a satirical take on this situation). Some of these pressures, such as frequent changes in technology, may be unavoidable, but other aspects of the work required of academics are related to growing neoliberalism. In brief, neoliberalism is 'premised on the idea of individual gain and competition and on the idea that success pertains to financial wealth rather than social connection' (McKenna, 2024: 2). Neoliberalism and participation in rankings may result in only those activities that bring in money, or which can be reported in rankings exercises being valued (McKenna, 2024). An example of this comes from a conversation with a colleague at a different South African university. He has recently been told that being the editor of a journal, a role that he invests much time in and that he considers a service to his discipline, no longer 'counts' in performance review, possibly because it can't be 'counted'.

People who are called to a role or become deeply invested in it may identify strongly with that role. People may, therefore, identify very strongly with the role of being a soldier, teacher, social worker, doctor, or nurse. Even a temporary role or part-time role, like that of 'activist', may include strong identification with the role (Karmel & Kuburic, 2021). If a moral injury occurs in that role, whether perpetrated by others or the self, this may make identification with the role part of what the person has to grapple with. Some people may also identify strongly with a specific institution. It is possible that the more a person identifies with a role, and with the institution in which they play that role, the more likely, or more deeply, they are to experience moral injury when things happen in that institution, or in relation to that role, that feel wrong to that person. I studied at the institution I now work at, and I've worked here for 20 years. My identity is strongly tied to the institution, and I feel it deeply when things happen here that go against my sense of right and wrong.

Armies, schools, hospitals, and higher education institutions are hierarchical with definite chains of command. When people, such as lecturers, are somewhere in the middle of that hierarchy, they may have responsibilities but have limited power. When significant changes are being considered in an institution, there may be widespread consultation or requests for input, or even official task teams to make recommendations, but real decision-making happens at much higher levels, like Senate. I've participated in a couple of these processes but have now more or less lost trust in them. I've become more cynical with less faith that recommendations or ground-level will for change are likely to lead to transformation.

Another thing that social workers, health-care workers, teachers, and lecturers have in common is that they generally work for institutions that are in turn part of larger systems. Lecturers work in higher education institutions, which are affected by some form of government control of, or influence over, higher education, as well as by how higher education is funded in their context. In South Africa, the two main larger institutions are the Department of Higher Education and Training and NSFAS. Beyond these institutions are the broader ideological or cultural values, such as competitiveness and neoliberalism, or, in some contexts, even fascism, that shape higher education in so many ways.

Often, the people in caring roles, such as educators or healthcare workers, have little or no influence over the policies that direct their work or the resources that are or are not available to them to carry out their work. They often want to help people but are frustrated in their attempts to do so by policies or processes, or a lack of resources or leadership. As an example, I seem to spend the early part of every academic year in a constant state of moral distress as I witness students being unable to register because funding decisions by NSFAS are made too late and students attending classes without having eaten because classes start two to three weeks before students start to receive allowances from NSFAS. The delay in providing allowances is inevitable as NSFAS needs to know which students are registered where before they start paying allowances, but if families can't provide money to tide students over until NSFAS funding starts, the students really struggle. I might be able to help a few of them, but the need is vast.

There are other factors which influence whether a situation is experienced as a moral injury or not. In a military context, Griffin, et al. state:

> Antecedents of PMIEs included organizational contributors (e.g., leadership perceived as out of touch with 'boots on the ground'), environmental contributors (e.g., difficulty identifying threats concealed in an urban setting), cultural or relational contributors (e.g., dehumanization of enemy combatants), and psychological contributors (e.g., persistent fear, desire for retribution, grief over losses). (2019: 353)

Some of these antecedents could transfer to other contexts. The organisational contributors in higher education may be similar, where people who make decisions in the institution or the Department of Higher Education and Training or NSFAS have little or no direct contact with students. Environmental contributors could include a lack of resources, where

resources can include both money and material items as well as time, information, and leadership. In higher education, cultural or relational contributors would include growing neoliberalism, with its values and processes, such as audit culture, concern with reputation and rankings, 'publish or perish' culture, pressure to bring in funding, and viewing students as clients. The things that are valued in neoliberalism may conflict with what at least some individuals in higher education institutions value, and may entrench existing inequalities (Hlatshwayo, 2022; Hlatshwayo & Ngcobo, 2023; Hölscher, 2018; McKenna, 2022; Rossouw & Goldman, 2023). Psychological contributors could include prior negative experiences in the institution, or elsewhere, and the emotional traces that they leave.

There is probably a greater likelihood of PMIEs happening in contexts of great inequality or where some or all students/clients/patients come from disadvantaged backgrounds. In relation to moral injury among educators, one thing that may affect a teacher's ability to carry out their role as they wish, or yearn, to is what Levinson calls 'contextual injustices', which are 'historical and/or present-day injustices beyond the school, such as poverty, trauma, lack of health care, and racial and economic segregation' (2015: 211). Examples of the kinds of contextual injustices that affect students in some South African universities include things like students coming to classes without having eaten, using bursary money to help their families eat and not having money for things they need as students, and students starting the term late due to waiting for travel money. It's difficult to provide quality education to learners or students who are hungry or who miss classes for reasons beyond their control. These kinds of contextual injustices were even more extreme in 2020 and 2021, when students were living in home situations due to Covid-19 lockdown, making it almost impossible for them to work (Knowles, et al., 2023).

Levinson states that the second source of injustice is 'school-based injustices, including discriminatory school policies and insufficient resources, training, and professional supports for educators' (2015: 211). Within a university, too, a staff member may find various rules or practices unjust and likely to create moral dilemmas. The injustices could occur at the level of the department, the university as a whole, or the broader higher education context. Hanna, et al. discovered that during the Covid-19 pandemic in the UK, when rules and practices changed very abruptly and with little time for debate, '[q]ualitative data showed a systemic absence of leadership in the sector during the time, a sense of betrayal of staff and students by senior management and the government, and feelings of compulsion to act in ways which put lives at risk' (2023: 1). They found that these experiences led to 'affective responses which we understand here in relation to feelings of guilt, shame, and anger, leading ultimately to poor mental health and wellbeing' (Hanna, et al., 2023: 14).

Contextual injustices often intersect with university rules and policies, even if these aren't obviously discriminatory. As an example, at my university, students are required to be registered, to have done curriculum approval,[2] and to be on campus attending classes by the end of the

[2] Curriculum approval is the process by which students' courses are approved and students are enrolled in these courses. Curriculum approval automatically gives students access to the Rhodes University learning management system for their specific courses.

second week of term. In February 2023 (more than two weeks after the beginning of the term), some students contacted me asking me to do their curriculum approval, though they were not yet on campus for financial reasons, typically because their family did not have money for transport to get them to campus. My instinct was to do the curriculum approval for them, which would give them access to the learning materials for their courses online, even if they were missing lectures. They might even be able to submit work for their courses in the period before they were able to come to campus, thereby mitigating against the reasons for requiring students to be on campus within the first two weeks of term. As an employee of the university, however, I can't take the risk of breaking university rules and potentially being disciplined for doing so. I said no to these students, knowing that I was causing them harm, or at the very least failing to ameliorate the injustices they were experiencing. This is an example of a moral injury I've experienced where I have perpetrated, or at least been complicit in, the harm done to students.

Responses to moral injury

Levinson (2015) suggests that teachers who experience moral injury have three main ways they can respond. They can remain 'loyal' to their learners, even if this means bending some rules. They can 'exit' the system by moving to different kinds of schools where they do not face the same kinds of injustices, though this may create its own form of moral injury (Glazer, 2022); or they can leave teaching altogether. Their third option is to 'exercise voice' (Levinson, 2015: 208) and speak out against the situations that are causing moral injury. The difficulty is that speaking out or taking on an activist role, often creates its own PMIEs (Karmel & Kuburic, 2021; Rak, 2022). Levinson argues that these tactics are not really solutions and that it 'is society that owes them moral repair – most importantly, by restructuring educational and other social systems so as to mitigate injustice' (2015: 209). University lecturers may have similar responses, though also with some differences.

It may seem that higher education institutions, with all their ongoing debates about diverse issues, would be safe spaces to speak out. But not all higher education institutions are safe spaces for dissent or questioning, particularly when what is being questioned is the institution itself or groups that have power within or beyond the institution. Events in the US in 2025 are a stark reminder of this. The effects of speaking out can range from assassination attempts, such as those on the Vice-Chancellor of Fort Hare University (Ellis, 2024), to receiving a 'cease and desist letter' in relation to an interdict, as happened in my own institution (Abdool Karim & Kruyer, 2017), to more subtle actions like 'difficult' or 'disruptive' staff members seemingly being passed over for promotion, not receiving awards they have been nominated for, or not having their contracts extended. Drawing attention to moral injury creates the potential for experiencing further moral injury.

These are all quite extreme responses to moral injury and often what is needed is a way of working with the experience of moral injury. Rituals may be useful where these exist or can be adapted or created (Haight, et al., 2020; Zefferman & Mathew, 2020; Griffin, et al., 2019). The harm created by moral injury is at least partly spiritual, so a spiritual response may be required.

My path through (though not out of) moral injury

One of my responses to an action taken by the institution I work for which I thought was morally wrong, was to protest against it. When Rhodes University applied for an interdict against students protesting against sexual violence in April 2016, I joined a group of staff members who first requested that the interdict be removed and then, with the help of the Socio-Economic Rights Institute, opposed the interdict in court (SERI, n.d.). My participation in that group led to both vilification by staff who felt protected by the interdict as well as a space of safety and trust within the group at a time when trust was in short supply. That action was both a response to moral injury and a source of further moral injury, as activism often is (Karmel & Kuburic, 2021; Rak, 2022).

I've also been taught, by a therapist, to look at the bigger picture. Many years ago, I helped a student report a sexual assault. I felt shame for not intervening when someone was raising his voice at her during that reporting process. My mind got very stuck in that moment when I failed to act in accordance with my sense that someone who has just been raped should not be shouted at. But, when I thought about the bigger picture and remembered that she had graduated on time and was now employed it was easier to see that neither my inaction, nor even the rape, had affected her ability to move quite successfully through life. In a similar vein, it has been really meaningful to see one of the young women I mentioned at the start of the paper, who was excluded for life from Rhodes University, graduate from an institution in another country. I follow her on social media and was able, when she graduated, to tell her how sorry I was about what had happened to her and how proud I was of her for graduating.

Writing about all kinds of emotional experiences, including moral injury, can also be helpful. For some time, I wrote regular 'morning pages' (Burkeman, 2014). They often turned into moaning pages, but they helped some of the emotion stick on the page. Other forms of writing, such as other kinds of journaling (Brown, 2023), as well as poetry and other forms of memoir or 'life' writing (Garisch, 2012; Garisch, et al., 2024) are potentially useful at working through some of the effects of moral injury. Other forms of creative expression may also be beneficial.

Probably the greatest help to me, however, in dealing with moral injury has been recognising my experiences and responses as moral injury and being able to name and explain to myself and others, some of my responses to experiences I've had. And I can start to recognise it in others, too. Even if someone holds an ideological or a moral position that is different from my own, I can now identify and empathise with their experiences of moral injury.

Most of my responses, except for participation in forms of protest, have been attempts to repair after moral injury. As such, they would qualify as examples of 'care' without 'equity' and without attempts to change conditions (Bali & Zamora, 2022). I believe, though, that humans who act for the better of others need to balance self-care with activism and may need periods of rest or fallowness to find the strength and energy to engage in more potentially conflictual forms of activism when this is needed.

Conclusion

Many people in higher education may experience what is typically labelled as burnout. When people feel exhaustion or burnout they may be advised or perhaps even given a chance to rest. Other suggested 'solutions' might be 'yoga, mindfulness, wellness retreats, and meditation' (Dean, et al., 2019: 401). But rest and yoga aren't solutions to moral injury. Where moral injury has already occurred, an understanding of the concept may help in processing the experience and with dealing with the cognitive dissonance created by PMIEs. This has been my own path. As I've come to understand this as a response shared by many people in many situations across the world, I've felt more whole, less damaged or broken.

It would be better, of course, if the sources of moral injury could be reduced so that there is less processing of PMIEs to be done. In higher education, we need both care and equity (Bali & Zamora, 2022). 'Moral injury locates the source of distress in a broken system, not a broken individual, and allows us to direct solutions at the causes of distress' (Dean, et al., 2019: 401). Withdrawal is a common response to moral injury, but what is required is for staff to work against the injustices they have observed, in their own institutions and more broadly. The starting point is probably for staff to find people they really trust and who they can work with in this way, whether taking on something small or large. And if higher education institutions are truly committed to the well-being of staff, the potential for moral injury within the institution is a situation that needs to be taken seriously. This is no easy task because it involves deep reflexivity and, potentially, some fundamental changes. Institutions are embroiled in larger cultural forces, such as neoliberalism, and change is needed at a much broader, international level to really reduce moral injury in higher education.

Author biography

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