Research Summary

Developing an understanding of moral injury in business settings

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Background

Moral injury refers to the lasting strong cognitive and emotional response that is caused by performing, witnessing, or failing to prevent an action that violates one's own moral beliefs and expectations (Litz et al., 2009; 2019). Typically, moral injury research has been conducted within military settings, and more recently within healthcare. The outcomes of moral injury explored in the literature range from psychological (such as intrusive thoughts, changes in cognition for instance feeling unwanted and unworthy), emotional (such as shame, guilt, and disgust), social (such as social withdrawal) and behavioural (such as avoidance and anger). Experience of these symptoms will not in themselves lead to mental health issues, but if the symptoms continue for a long time, or are repeatedly experienced, moral injury will be an outcome (Litz & Kerig, 2019). This research answers repeated calls for more evidence to understand the extent of the moral stress and injury problem within other occupations (e.g., Williamson et al., 2018; Ewen et al., 2021).

This research aimed to:
● Develop an understanding of the experience of moral stress and injury within business settings
● Examine the antecedents, mediators and moderators of moral stress and injury within business settings
● Examine the outcomes of moral injury within business settings (including links with burnout)

Summary of approach

An evidence-based-practice approach was taken to this assessment, where evidence was gathered from several sources. The stages of assessment were as follows:

Stage 1: Evidence review: A review was conducted of papers exploring moral injury in business settings. 7006 initial papers identified were filtered to 5 key papers.

Stage 2: Interviews: 16 individuals with lived experience with moral stress/injury in business settings were interviewed.

Stage 3: Synthesis and reporting: Finding were analysed and synthesised into recommendations and an initial measure of moral stress/injury in business settings.

Summary of findings – literature review

The literature review found very little evidence exploring moral stress/injury in business settings. Individual factors (i.e., moral attentiveness, and the importance they place on their role), and organisational factors (i.e. perceptions of organisational culture, processes, practices, and policies as fair and ethical) were thought to impact likelihood of experiencing moral injury or stress. Outcomes of moral injury and stress included emotional outcomes (i.e., stress and burnout), work related outcomes (i.e., turnover intention and employee engagement) and physical health outcomes.

Summary of findings – interviews

Whilst experiences differed in source, severity, and length, all followed a similar four-stage process:

1. **The event itself** (ranging from catastrophic transgressions to cumulative incidents; the majority involved witnessing transgressions of others)
2. **The initial reaction** (from shock to realisation that the transgression had not been a mistake)
3. **A period of reflection and processing**, and finally
4. **Taking action** (which for many involved leaving the organisation in which the event occurred).

Interviews supported literature in finding emotional outcomes of stress and burnout along with depression, anxiety, powerlessness and anger, physical outcomes such as sleep issues and excessive alcohol consumption and work-related outcomes. Interviews highlighted a wider range of work-related outcomes than previously found including participants experiencing loss of competence and confidence, withdrawal and disengagement, and apathy.

Factors that worsened and lessened the experience of moral injury or stress at varying levels included:

- **Individual level** - role identity saliency (+/-), moral attentiveness (-), emotional detachment (+), exercising compassion and acceptance (+) and taking recovery time (+)
- **Group level** - support from others (+), validation from experts (+), emotional contagion from others (-) and moral misalignment with others (-)
- **Leader level** - leadership characterized by bullying, power-play, and control (-), decisions based on relationship maintenance and profit (-)
- **Organisational level** - ethical culture (+), acknowledgement of harm (+), opportunity to raise concerns (+), lack psychological safety (-)

Recommendations

Level	Recommendation
Individual	o Seek allyship and support from others, and invest in self-care o Seek elements of the situation that you can control o Reflect upon your experience and what this means for your role and career o Seek professional help if struggling with anxiety, depression, or burnout
Group	o Seek validation and support from independent experts o Be aware of the impact of emotional contagion o As a manager, balance urge to protect your team with need to protect yourself
Leader	o Encourage a culture where leaders take responsibility for their actions o Develop leaders who are ethically and authentically oriented o Train and develop managers in people management skills o Undertake the Softer Success ® Wellbeing Assessment (SSWA) to assess risk of burnout and moral stress
Organisation	o Be prepared to acknowledge and learn from mistakes o Embed ethical standards in practices, processes, policies, and communications o Invest in an audit to assess the extent who you are providing a healthy work environment o Ensure the timely, transparent, and fair application of Internal Investigations o Harness psychological safety where employees speak freely without fear of recrimination o Provide tertiary support to those suffering from outcomes of moral stress o Ensure open and transparent recruitment and selection processes o Undertake the Softer Success ® Wellbeing Assessment (SSWA) to assess risk of burnout and moral stress