

# Moral Injury & Autism

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# Moral Injury

- The strong cognitive and emotional response that can occur following events that violate a person's moral or ethical code.
- Potentially morally injurious events include a person's own or other people's acts of omission or commission, or betrayal by a trusted person in a high-stakes situation.
- Any one can experience MI – not confined to combat/health professionals.

# Why are we talking about moral injury in the specific context of autism?

- **Clinical Knowledge** – commonly reported stress response to the ‘breaking of rules’, ‘sensitivity to wrong doing’, ‘injustice’ and ‘infidelity’. All theme around hypersensitivity to morality (‘hyper-morality’) and psychological distress when this is violated by others or self.
- **Diagnostic knowledge** – autism is associated with a heightened and rigid need for rules/predictability and pre-occupations (with order) – it makes intuitive clinical sense to expect a heightened propensity for moral injury in autism.
- **Research** – next to nothing on MI/ASD! Some, limited theory/research of relevance
- **So where next?**
  - **Clinical Frameworks** – proposed structure for understanding MI in ASD
  - **Research** – proposed direction

# Clinical Frameworks

# How is Autism Relevant? Clinical Framework

- 5 Dimensions of autism that may contextualise heightened propensity for moral injury – focus on HFA to illustrate subtlety of such ASD contexts
  - 1. Need for order, rules, predictability
  - 2. Obsessionality, pedantry and repetition
  - 3. Pre-occupation / circumscribed interest
  - 4. Social communication/interaction features
  - 5. Cognitive styles
- FARAS – forensic applications
- Today - Illustrative **examples** of how each ASD feature may play out, to contextualise heightened propensity for moral injury – **in non forensic**

# 1. Need for order, rules, predictability

- Heightened need for **moral, social & philosophical order** – (not just environmental /practical order)
- **Psychological wellbeing** reliant on:
  - People being fair, consistent, and predictable → behaving according to rules/what they say
  - Unbroken loyalty, fidelity, and honesty → society and people need to have integrity (predictable)
- Rules are rules – **absolutist not contextual** - not relaxed due to variant social norms or emotional contexts
- **'Justice Sensitivity'** – heightened need for justice and reaction to injustice
- Rules rigidly apply to:
  - **Others** (strangers or known – individuals or groups) → anger/anxiety when rules are broken
  - **Self** - Own behaviour (in private life and towards others) → guilt/anxiety when rules are broken

## 2. Obsessionality, pedantry and repetition

- **Exacting standards** → need for every **detail** to be correct
- **Repetitive rumination & analysis** when order/logic is violated
- React strongly to, and obsessively ruminate on, small transgressions, rule-violations and micro-injustices

### 3. Pre-occupation / circumscribed interests

- Injustice or wrong-doing becomes an intense, repetitive pre-occupation/interest → → repeatedly and intensely thought about, 'researched' → → distress / threat / guilt
- Preoccupation / interest can become focussed on person/group → → repetitively analyse/research/highlight their transgressions → → repetitive complaints & communications



# 4. Social communication/interaction features

- Social communication and interaction styles (v **ToM/intention & implicit social rules**)
  - Take people at face value & **expect them to do what they say**
  - Overlook social/emotional nuances shaping behaviour – expect people to **follow moral logic, with consistency**
- People's infidelity, inconsistent morals and rule-breaking & the lack of moral absolutes in social relationships → **lead to intense distress**
- **Social injustice** in **private and public life** regularly lead to **anxiety, guilt and anger**
- Over-analysis of **own behaviour** & its violation from expectations/social rules
- **Anxiety** about '**getting it wrong**', saying the wrong thing & upsetting others – '**rejection sensitive dysphoria**'
- **Guilt** at social errors – recent and historical

# 5. Cognitive styles

- **Detail focus & context blindness** – making every moral detail focal regardless of bigger contextual exemptions
- **Systemising** (need for absolutist logic)
  - Rule/fact driven - not social/emotional driven  
(morality is not based on ‘**common sense psychology**’ – but on concrete, invariable rules)
- **Cognitive rigidity** and **attention shifting** problems – cannot adopt flexibility around rules & find it harder to move focus away from wrong doing  
→ intense, frequent and repetitive rumination & **fixation** over ‘**micro-transgressions**’
- **Visual dominance & hyperphantasia** – replay situations of injustice or own wrong doing – akin to **flashbacks of moral violating situations** → intense anxiety & guilt

# Implications

# Clinical & Forensic Implications: Mental Health Impact & Risk

- **Mental Health Impact**

- Anxiety (social/generalised anxiety), depression, CFS, eating disorders
- OCD – moral obsessionality and religious scrupulosity & death anxiety
- Intense pathological guilt – intrusive, intolerable ('survivor guilt', pathological grief)
- Anger at injustice (angry, intrusive rumination)
- Social withdrawal and avoidance
- *Misdiagnosis of PD (avoidant, EUPD, paranoid)*

- **Forensic Risk (See FARAS)**

- Reactive aggression
  - Visceral reaction to perceived/actual injustice or moral rule-breaking
- Instrumental aggression
  - Anger at perceived/actual injustice → plan violent revenge / punishment for rule-violation
  - Guilt at inaction in the face of injustice → plan restorative act of violence

# The Digital World, Social Media & Moral Injury

- 24-hour exposure to moral transgressions & rule-breaking (news feeds, research, online platforms for communication)
- Moral transgressions harder to separate from own daily life
- Moral transgressions in personal + public life fuse
- Generalised threat, frequent triggers & amplified focus

Research

# Research/Theory of Relevance

- Very limited in depth and breadth
  - ASD research itself has limitations (HFA under-researched)

## Relevant research/theory

- Moral reasoning in ASD – difference not immature development
- ‘Justice sensitivity’ in ASD and neurodivergent samples
- ‘Social sensitivity / rejection sensitive dysphoria’
- Research has clinical implications (e.g. therapy) – urgently needed
- Today’s research presentations are a much needed development

# Summary & Conclusions



# Summary & Conclusions

- Moral injury is very frequently described by individuals with autism
- Several features of autism appear to create contexts for heightened propensity to moral injury
- Moral injury can have significant implications – contributing to mental health impacts and in some, to forensic risk
- Research of relevance to this area is extremely limited and needs to be developed in order to inform clinical practice

Thank You

Reflections

&

Discussion

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