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Genocide research and vicarious trauma: a Self-care discussion

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Shamshad, welcoming me to his home, in Kandahar, Afghanistan. Photo taken in 2012, by me.

I acknowledge the traditional lands of the Teechamitsa (Lekwungen Songhees) & Xwsepsum (Esquimalt) & ancestors and families.

Esquimalt lagoon, view from Heron House / sneq' wa e'lun

In brief

Points I'll be covering today

1 | What are **moral & spirit injuries** in field work?

2 | What about **emotional residue** when studying narratives of genocide?

3 | Tools for **personal reflection & preparation** for (field) research

4 | **Considerations of self-care** when resources are not in abundance

Quick Guide

moral injury

spirit injury

what each **is**

Moral injury

- a problem of **transgression**
- VNM era: focus on **systems** failures: "a betrayal of what's right, by someone in authority, in a high-stakes situation" (Shay 2014).
- Iraq/AF era: focus on **individual** failures: "perpetrating, failing to prevent, **bearing witness to, or learning** about acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations ... with lasting psychological, biological, spiritual, behavioral, and social impact" (Stein & el 2009).

Spirit injury

- a problem of **oppression**
- Indigenous PHPC: a "denigration and devaluing and disconnect ... of wounds that have festered, sometimes for ages" (Lavallee 2021)
- B/AR scholarship: "the immense psychological, physical and intellectual energy to keep up the alleged purity of Europe and the West ... that continues to exact a heavy material, physical, psychological and emotional toll on racialized subjects" (Dei 2018)

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Quick Guide

moral injury

spirit injury

how each **indicates**

Moral injury

- Self-blame, difficulties trusting, and spiritual / existential problems
- When blame is **systemic:** negative and **externally directed** emotions such as anger, trust issues, lack of forgiveness for others, loss of enjoyment or purpose
- When blame is **individual**: negative and **internally directed** emotions such as guilt, shame, lack of self-forgiveness, loss of enjoyment or purpose

Spirit injury

- Self-blame, loss of hope, and relational & existential problems
- Intergenerational impacts

Quick Guide

moral injury
spirit injury

what each is & is not

Moral injury

- Typically a **dissonance / betrayal** of deeply held moral beliefs and values
- A response to difficult ethical **decisions**

Spirit injury

- an **instilled and relational** "pronounced **distaste** for the [self and way of life] … and [sense of humiliation] when reminded of their origins" (Grandin 1875, as cited in Bial 2016)

PTSD

- Typically a **fear-based disorder**
- A response to a traumatic **event**

Historical trauma

- "a cumulative emotional and psychological **wounding** over the lifespan and across generations, emanating from massive group trauma" (Brave Heart 1998)

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par exemple: some **epistemological tensions** when researching genocide

'Vous n'étiez pas là lorsqu'on préparait le génocide. Vous n'étiez pas témoin de notre souffrance pendant ces quatre ans. Et maintenant vous venez vous servir de notre génocide, pour nourrir votre paternité!'

"You weren't there when the genocide was happening to us. **You weren't witness** to our suffering during those four years. **And now you come** to serve yourself from the pain of our genocide, **for the purposes of** feeding your own professional scholarship!"

- Justin, DRCongo (Batwa)

par exemple: some epistemological tensions when researching genocide

"There is nothing beautiful about the war in my country. I don't want to draw a picture of things I don't want to see anymore. Sometimes I felt like they only want me to talk about what happened so that they, the [white people], can feel better...

Let me and my sisters, let us achieve hopes and dreams as equally as your own daughters. Only then, will I be fine. Until then, I don't really want to draw."

- Emérance, 16 (Rwandaise)

par exemple: some epistemological tensions when researching genocide

81% of civilian casualties in Afghanistan are children (as of 2017).

In 2023, every day, **167 children** die in Afghanistan from preventable diseases including starvation and malnutrition.

Read more here (my thought piece about Shamshad and research in Afghanistan here).

how do we hold all this?

Some tools for personal reflection & preparation

See also **this** helpful article

Learn about / situate your **privilege**

Who you are, your experiences, & what (political) affiliations you represent take up space before you enter the room.

Also cultivate gratitude; small wins can be sustaining.

Learn to **critically self-reflect**

Three prongs: Do no harm; Know that good intentions are not enough; and Employ culturally competent & relevant processes.

Learn to **theorise anger**

Grief, anger, and impunity can motivate individual and collective action. Theorising anger in your research can help inform change in policies / practices.

See also this useful paper here.

Learn to **advocate**

It's not about your research; it's about the experiences of survivors and their desires for self-determination.

Model vulnerability.

Retain your dignity. Advocacy does not necessitate always being in a bad mood.

Considerations for self-care when resources are not in abundance

1. Prioritise self-care

You are responsible for your own oxygen mask. Remember what sustains you.
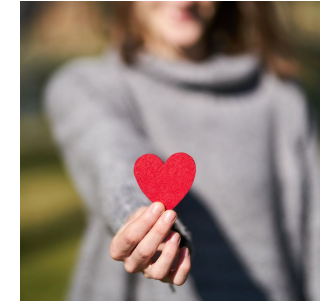

2. Take care of yourself

Your physical body absorbs tension too! Ensure adequate food intake, rest, exercise (this can include massages).

3. Utilise community resources

This can include alternate care pathways (community leaders, sports groups, faith communities).

4. Practice self-compassion

Take breaks. Don't try to do everything. Practice quietude. Accept that you are developing a dark sense of humour.
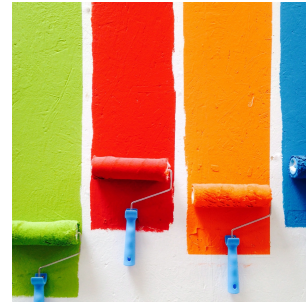
Considerations for self-care when resources are not in abundance

5. Seek support from others & stay connected

Genocide research can be lonely as well as solitary. Connect with other genocide scholars. Share wisely. But share. Support each others' hearts as well as minds.

6. Play / be creative

Do something active that disengages your mind. Turn up the music and dance! Break out the finger paints! Join that book club! Do tai chi in the park!

7. Stay connected

Genocide research can be sad. Social support can foster resilience, especially when ruminating about injustice and impunity.

Also honour the relationships you develop, however temporary.

8. Recognise your work is still about hope (and that you are not alone in it)

Have confidence in your work. It is important, especially if you are in a realm that does not validate "hopeless causes".

Omar, who started a DDR program for child soldiers

"**To be truly radical is to make hope possible rather than despair convincing.**"

~**Williams 1989**, p. 118

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additional resources: assessments for moral injury*

*Note. Moral injury **has not been recognised** as a clinical, diagnosable condition.

- ## Moral Injury Questionnaire (MIQ)
  20-item questionnaire for military personnel assesses exposure and frequency of events that soldiers may experience in war

- ## Moral Injury Events Scale (MIES)
  9-item questionnaire for military personnel asks about war-related events that include perpetration by self, by others, and perceptions/feelings of betrayal

- ## Expression of Moral Injury Scale (EMIS)
  17-item questionnaire for military personnel asks about self- and other-directed moral emotions and conflicts related to military experiences

- ## Trauma-Related Guilt Inventory (TRGI)
  32-item questionnaire for general use measures feelings and beliefs regarding guilt related to a traumatic event

- ## Moral Injury Symptom Scale-Health Professional (MISS-HP)
  10-item questionnaire for healthcare professionals assesses betrayal, guilt, shame, moral concerns, loss of trust, loss of meaning, difficulty forgiving, self-condemnation, religious struggle, and loss of religious/spiritual faith

merci / salamat / thank you!

any questions?

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PS my favourite go-to dance song is **here**.