

**Psychological Impacts and Strategies for Supporting Journalists Facing Moral Injury**

by

Sarah Tesla

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APPROVED BY

Dawn Percher, M.A., R.C.C., Capstone Supervisor, Master of Counselling Faculty

Amanda Murphy, M.C., R.C.C., Faculty Reader, Master of Counselling Faculty

School of Health and Social Sciences

## **Abstract**

This paper examines the growing concern of moral injury among journalists, building on the foundational work of Dr. Anthony Feinstein, who first highlighted the prevalence of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression, and substance abuse among war correspondents (Feinstein & Nicolson, 2005; Feinstein et al., 2018). While PTSD has been more widely studied, this review extends the discussion to the less-explored phenomenon of moral injury among journalists. Originally conceptualized within military psychology, moral injury refers to the profound psychological distress that arises when individuals are compelled to act in ways that violate their moral beliefs or witness events that conflict with their ethical standards. The paper reviews critical studies, including the development and validation of the Toronto Moral Injury Scale for Journalists (Osmann et al., 2024), which marks a significant advancement in assessing the unique psychological challenges this professional group faces. However, despite these advances, important research gaps remain, particularly regarding the long-term effects of moral injury and its impact on journalists from diverse cultural backgrounds. The paper concludes by proposing directions for future research and the development of therapeutic interventions to support journalists' mental health, emphasizing the need for longitudinal studies and culturally sensitive approaches. It also explores the most effective therapeutic strategies for moral repair.

*Keywords:* moral injury, journalism, cultural sensitivity, moral repair

**Contents**

Chapter 1: Introduction	4
Overview	4
Purpose Statement	5
Theoretical/Conceptual Framework	5
Contribution to the Field	6
Reflectivity and Positionality Statement	7
Chapter 2: Literature Review	10
The Impact of War	11
From PTSD to Moral Injury	14
Western News Culture	18
Toronto Moral Injury Scale for Journalists	21
Summary	24
Chapter 3: Discussion and Application	26
Discussion	27
Application	30
Conclusions	34
References	37

## Chapter 1: Introduction

“I have seen so many friends and colleagues become unrecognizable from trauma: short-tempered, sleepless, and alienated from friends. But after years of witnessing so much suffering in the world, we find it hard to acknowledge that lucky, free, prosperous people like us might be suffering, too.”

–Lynsey Addario, *It's What I Do: A Photographers Life of Love and War*

### Overview

Recent studies by University of Toronto neuropsychiatrist Dr. Feinstein have aimed to elucidate the psychological effects of conflict on journalists, including moral injury (Feinstein & Nicolson, 2005; Feinstein et al., 2018). While trauma and PTSD have been more deeply researched in combat veterans and first responders (Idås et al., 2019), the impact of trauma on journalists, particularly concerning moral injury, remains in the nascent stages of academic inquiry.

The study of moral injury among journalists is a relatively new field that acknowledges the profound psychological, behavioural, social, and sometimes spiritual consequences that arise when individuals act in ways or witness actions that violate their core values and moral beliefs (Litz et al., 2009). Journalists, who are bound by an ethical code requiring impartial and unbiased reporting, may find themselves in moral dilemmas during assignments. They often witness events unfold, manage tight deadlines, and constantly search for breaking stories, all while grappling with the question of whether, when, or how to intervene—especially when the subject (person, animal, environment) is in imminent danger or when they observe corruption, betrayal, political manipulation, or criminal activity.

Current research has successfully established the psychological risks to journalists working in combat zones overseas and day-to-day traumatic events more commonly experienced here in North America. However, the study of moral injury, particularly its effects on journalists, is relatively new and, as such, raises questions about what strategies and therapeutic modalities therapists can draw upon to best support journalists seeking support with moral repair.

### **Purpose Statement**

This paper aims to review existing literature on the psychological impact of reporting on traumatic situations to better understand the circumstances under which moral injury is most prevalent. It will also explore the concept of moral injury beyond its traditional association with combat veterans, examining how it manifests in other populations, particularly journalists. Additionally, the paper will review the standard measures used to assess moral injury and discuss strategies and therapeutic modalities that have proven effective in fostering moral repair.

Historically, news culture has upheld a "tough as nails" ethos, particularly for journalists working in challenging environments. In light of this cultural backdrop, the current global landscape, and the growing awareness of the traumatic impacts on journalists, this paper seeks to emphasize the significance of moral injury and explore how the therapeutic community can best support journalists in their journey toward moral repair.

### **Theoretical/Conceptual Framework**

Historically, journalism has been a male-dominated profession (Addario, 2015). Despite significant progress in incorporating women's contributions and amplifying diverse voices, numerous challenges persist in news gathering, both domestically and internationally. These challenges include the power and influence of Western media in shaping the narratives of other cultures, as well as the biases that have historically contributed to racism, trauma,

misinformation, and the exploitation of vulnerable groups—particularly women, people of colour, and LGBTQ2+ communities (Cherry, 2023; Morell, 2020). This paper examines current research critically and explores therapeutic approaches to moral repair through a trauma-informed, feminist, intersectional, culturally sensitive, and anti-oppressive framework. The goal is to identify gaps and opportunities in the current research to address these challenges and advocate for greater cultural relevance and sensitivity in journalism.

### **Contribution to the Field**

Existing research on moral injury has predominantly focused on military populations, leaving a significant gap in understanding how this psychological stress manifests in non-military professions, particularly journalists. Journalists are frequently exposed to ethically challenging situations, yet the unique psychological impact of these experiences has not been adequately addressed. The standard measures for diagnosing PTSD and related trauma symptoms, while helpful, do not fully capture the complexity of moral injury as it relates to the ethical dilemmas journalists face. Furthermore, the research has primarily centered on Western journalists, raising concerns about the cultural specificity and generalizability of these findings. This limitation highlights the need for more culturally sensitive research that considers the diverse experiences of journalists worldwide.

The existing research also needs to fully address the structural power dynamics and societal inequities that contribute to the psychological burden on journalists. Western media's dominance in global news reporting often perpetuates biases and inequities, exacerbating journalists' moral dilemmas, particularly those covering stories in non-Western contexts. This research aims to dismantle these structural issues by advocating for a more culturally inclusive

understanding of moral injury that acknowledges journalists' varied experiences across different cultural and geopolitical landscapes.

This research is invaluable as it broadens the scope of moral injury studies and provides a foundation for developing tailored therapeutic approaches for journalists. By focusing on the specific challenges journalists face, this paper contributes to the broader field of mental health by offering new insights into how moral injury can manifest outside of military contexts. For instance, the Toronto Moral Injury Scale for Journalists (Osmann et al., 2024) represents a significant advancement in creating profession-specific tools that can more accurately assess the psychological impact on journalists. This tool, along with the findings of Feinstein's (2018) research, will inform the development of therapeutic modalities better suited to addressing the unique needs of journalists. By understanding the specific moral and ethical challenges journalists face, therapists can develop more effective strategies for moral repair, ensuring that interventions align with this unique population's values and experiences.

### **Reflectivity and Positionality Statement**

More than twenty years ago, I completed my journalism degree with the ambition of becoming an international correspondent. While I did not achieve that specific goal, I have remained closely connected to the profession, particularly as a photo documentarian and storyteller. Over the years, I have developed a deep fascination with journalism's culture, its role in bearing witness and recording history, and how journalists hold those in power accountable. I have immersed myself in countless memoirs, biographies, and documentary films, seeking to better understand the motivations and passion behind the most disruptive and courageous journalists, from early figures like Herodotus to contemporary feminists such as Martha Gellhorn

and Gwen Lister and even the tragedies behind notable contributors such as Tim Hetherington and Kevin Carter.

In 2017, I took a two-year sabbatical from my work as a communications professional to fulfill a lifelong dream of practicing the kind of documentary work I had long admired. Inspired by Richard Engel's memoir, *And Then All Hell Broke Loose: Two Decades in the Middle East*, I embarked on a journey through Iran, Iraq, Israel, Palestine, Turkey, Egypt, and Jordan. This experience was one of the most formative of my life, offering me a glimpse into the world, which is largely misunderstood and into the culture of foreign correspondents. A pivotal moment was meeting the Middle East Bureau Chief for CBC in Tel Aviv, where we spent an afternoon discussing his work covering Palestinian resistance over several bottles of wine. I was struck by how deeply he and others struggled with their mental health. This realization led me to explore the literature on trauma and, eventually, moral injury upon my return to Canada and completing my Master's in International Studies.

As time has passed, I have become more reflective about my position as a photographer and storyteller. As a cisgender white woman, I have had the privilege of working on numerous projects overseas in communities affected by conflict, political unrest, poverty, and health crises. Most of these projects have been in communities of Black and Brown bodies. My whiteness, national origin, and socioeconomic status have profoundly influenced my relationships with community members and organizations, granting me access to restricted spaces, freedom of movement, safety, security, clean water, nourishment, and, ultimately, the ability to leave once the project was completed. This privilege also allowed me to be invited into intimate spaces to witness traumatic stories.

Whiteness carries immense privilege, protections, and resources, which I continue to recognize through my work and when reading about the experiences of journalists working overseas (DiAngelo, 2018). My travels exposed me to the power imbalances and colonial structures perpetuating these disparities. This awareness has led me to question whether it is appropriate for a white person to tell the stories and perspectives of people of colour, requiring a commitment to examining the impacts of white privilege, not just historically but every day (McIntosh, 1990). Each time I was invited into spaces occupied by Black and Brown individuals, I carried what McIntosh described as the “invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks” (p. 1). Becoming accountable for that privilege has meant declining projects, advocating for Black and Brown storytellers and photographers, and questioning my motives for being in those spaces. Allyship has been a process of reckoning with my cultural group membership, a journey that continues to unfold.

As I delved into the literature for this project, I kept at the forefront questions about how Palestinian journalists cope as they report during the war against all odds, what it means for a Sudanese journalist to cover civil war and famine in their community versus a white correspondent from CNN parachuting in, or the impact of white CBC reporters descending on rural Indigenous communities to cover tragedies linked to intergenerational trauma – and how each of these individuals perceives and reflects on the trauma they witness. How can we begin to include the voices of journalists worldwide and ensure that cultural sensitivity and healing are addressed in ways that care for everyone? Furthermore, do the privileges that Western correspondents hold make them more or less susceptible to moral injury? Or are we all vulnerable regardless of our cultural and social locations?

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

“The poison that is war does not free us from the ethics of responsibility.”

—Chris Hedges, *War is a Force that Gives us Meaning*

The mental health of war journalists has emerged as a critical area of study in recent decades, reflecting the increasingly dangerous and ethically complex environments in which these professionals operate (Feinstein & Nicolson, 2005; Feinstein et al., 2018). The pioneering work of Feinstein and colleagues has been instrumental in shedding light on the psychological toll that war reporting exacts on journalists, particularly through their seminal study on the prevalence of psychopathology among this group (Feinstein et al., 2002). This early research highlighted the heightened risks of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), major depression, and substance abuse among journalists covering conflict zones, drawing attention to the need for greater support and intervention in this high-risk profession.

As the field has evolved, the focus has expanded from traditional trauma-related disorders to include the concept of moral injury—a form of psychological distress that arises when individuals are forced to act in ways that violate their moral beliefs or witness events that conflict with their ethical standards (Litz et al., 2009). While moral injury has been extensively studied in military populations, its relevance to journalism, particularly in war and crisis reporting, has only recently begun to garner attention (Feinstein et al., 2018). This shift in focus reflects a growing recognition of the unique ethical dilemmas faced by journalists, who must navigate the tension between their professional duties and their personal moral codes.

The introduction of tools such as the Toronto Moral Injury Scale for Journalists (Osmann et al., 2024) underscores the importance of developing profession-specific measures to assess and address moral injury in journalism. These tools represent a significant advancement in the

field, enabling more precise identification and can help inform intervention strategies tailored to the unique challenges journalists face. However, despite these advancements, significant gaps remain in our understanding of the long-term effects of moral injury on journalists, particularly those working in non-Western contexts. This literature review seeks to explore these gaps, examining the existing research on moral injury in journalism, proposing directions for future study and focusing on the implications for therapeutic interventions and support mechanisms.

### **The Impact of War**

Before questions surrounding moral injury in journalists began to emerge, researchers began to draw attention to the critical issues surrounding the mental health of war journalists and the need for greater support and intervention in this high-risk profession. Feinstein (2002) was the first researcher to identify this gap, which led to a seminal study on war correspondents and, subsequently, more resources and interest in journalists' mental health.

In this early paper, the authors investigated the psychological impact of war reporting on journalists, explicitly focusing on the prevalence of psychopathology, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), major depression, and substance abuse, among war journalists compared to their counterparts who do not report on war. The aim was to understand the extent and nature of the psychological distress experienced by journalists who regularly confront extreme dangers in conflict zones (Feinstein et al., 2002).

The authors hypothesized that war journalists would exhibit higher levels of psychiatric difficulties, particularly PTSD and major depression, compared to journalists who do not report on wars (Feinstein et al., 2002). They also suspected that these psychological issues may go largely untreated within this group. The key variables included exposure to war (independent

variable) and the prevalence of psychiatric symptoms such as PTSD, depression, and substance abuse (dependent variables).

The rationale for the study stemmed from the lack of empirical data on the mental health of war journalists despite the well-documented psychological toll of combat on soldiers and civilians. The authors noted that while anecdotal evidence exists about the struggles of war journalists, no systematic research had been conducted prior to their study. Given the rising number of journalists killed in conflict zones and the increasing dangers of war reporting, this research addressed a significant gap in the literature by examining the mental health consequences of this hazardous profession.

The study involved 140 war journalists and a control group of 107 journalists who had never covered wars. The participants were recruited from major news organizations such as CNN, BBC, Reuters, and others. Only journalists fluent in English were included. The response rates were approximately 80% for both groups, ensuring a representative sample of experienced war journalists, with an average of 15 years spent reporting from conflict zones (Feinstein et al., 2002).

The study employed a two-phase methodology. In the first phase, journalists completed self-report questionnaires assessing PTSD (using the Impact of Event Scale-Revised), depression (using the Beck Depression Inventory-II), and psychological distress (using the 28-item General Health Questionnaire). The second phase involved structured clinical interviews with 20% of the participants from both groups, using the Structured Clinical Interview for DSM-IV Axis I Disorders (SCID) to diagnose PTSD, mood disorders, and substance use disorders. The Impact of Event Scale-Revised, Beck Depression Inventory-II, and the 28-item General Health Questionnaire were the primary tools used to measure psychological variables.

The researchers found that war journalists had significantly higher scores on the Impact of Event Scale-Revised, indicating more frequent and severe symptoms of PTSD, including intrusive thoughts, avoidance behaviours, and hyperarousal (Feinstein et al., 2002). Their mean scores on the Beck Depression Inventory-II were also significantly higher, suggesting a greater prevalence of depressive symptoms. The lifetime prevalence of PTSD among war journalists was 28.6%, and 21.4% for major depression, rates comparable to those found in combat veterans but exceeding those in the general population. Feinstein et al.'s (2002) study also revealed that war journalists had higher weekly alcohol consumption and were more likely to consume alcohol excessively than their non-war-reporting peers. Despite these high levels of psychopathology, war journalists were not more likely to seek treatment, highlighting a significant gap in mental health care within this population.

Despite the pioneering nature of this study, there were several gaps in the research. Notably, the study lacked longitudinal data that could elucidate the progression and long-term outcomes of psychopathological conditions such as PTSD and depression in this population. Additionally, the study exclusively focused on English-speaking journalists, overlooking non-English-speaking war correspondents' experiences and psychological impacts. This limitation raises concerns about the generalizability of the findings to a more global cohort of journalists, particularly those operating in non-Western contexts where coping mechanisms and cultural responses to trauma may differ significantly.

While robust in its design, the study has methodological limitations. In particular, the study's focus on Western journalists raises questions about its cultural sensitivity and the applicability of its findings to non-Western journalists. Cultural differences in coping mechanisms, support structures, and the stigmatization of mental health issues might result in

different psychological outcomes for journalists from diverse backgrounds. Additionally, while the study appears to have adhered to ethical standards by ensuring confidentiality through individual identification numbers, the potential for re-traumatization during the survey process is a concern that the study did not fully address.

This study represents a significant contribution to the field by being among the first to examine the psychological well-being of war journalists systematically. As I dug more deeply into literature published since 2002, I wanted to know if the research would address the limitations identified in this study by incorporating longitudinal designs that track the psychological health of war journalists over extended periods, particularly after they have ceased war reporting. Additionally, expanding the research to include non-English speaking journalists and those from a variety of cultural backgrounds would offer a more comprehensive understanding of the global impact of war reporting on mental health. Finally, intervention studies focusing on the effectiveness of various support mechanisms, such as counselling, peer support, and organizational policies, are necessary to develop evidence-based strategies for mitigating the psychological risks associated with war journalism.

### **From PTSD to Moral Injury**

Since Feinstein et al.'s seminal study in 2002, the body of literature examining the impact of war on journalists has expanded significantly (Feinstein & Nicholson, 2005; Buchanan & Keats, 2011; Idås et al., 2019). However, it was not until 2018 that the issue of moral injury gained attention, prompted by the increasing global focus on the refugee and migration crises in Europe, a result of conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa. Feinstein and colleagues (2018) subsequently explored the emotional health of journalists reporting on these crises. Their primary research question was whether journalists covering the refugee and migration crisis in

Europe were more likely to experience moral injury rather than post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The study specifically investigated the emotional and psychological effects on journalists who witness and report on the severe conditions faced by displaced individuals, with a particular emphasis on distinguishing the prevalence and nature of moral injury from that of PTSD.

The authors hypothesized that moral injury would be more prevalent among journalists covering the refugee crisis than symptoms typically associated with PTSD (Feinstein et al., 2018). They suggested that moral injury may correlate with other factors such as workload, lack of organizational support, and personal attributes like parenthood. The study was designed to explore how these variables—moral injury, PTSD symptoms, and related factors—interact and manifest in this specific group of journalists.

This research was motivated by a growing body of literature indicating that journalists, like military personnel, are vulnerable to psychological distress due to their proximity to traumatic events (Feinstein et al., 2018). However, the unique ethical dilemmas and moral conflicts faced by journalists in the context of the refugee crisis—such as witnessing suffering without intervening—may predispose them to moral injury rather than traditional trauma syndromes like PTSD. The study aimed to fill a gap in the literature by systematically exploring this hypothesis, leveraging the concept of moral injury, which has been extensively studied in military populations but not in journalistic contexts.

The study included 80 journalists out of 114 approached, yielding a response rate of 70.2% (Feinstein et al., 2018). The participants were drawn from nine major European and American news organizations associated with the International News Safety Institute. The sample consisted of 47 men and 33 women, averaging 42.95 years. Most (58.5%) were married,

and 61.4% had children (Feinstein et al., 2018). The participants were highly experienced, with an average of 18.28 years in journalism and 19.65 months covering the refugee crisis. Most participants (85%) were university-educated, and 71.3% had been covering the refugee crisis close to home.

The study employed a descriptive research design using a secure, password-protected website for data collection. Participants were given unique identifiers to ensure confidentiality and were asked to complete a series of standardized psychological assessments. This approach facilitated journalists' participation while working in diverse and challenging environments. The study employed several well-validated measures to assess the psychological impact on journalists. The Impact of Events Scale-Revised (IES-R), a 22-item tool, was utilized to measure symptoms of PTSD, including intrusion, avoidance, and arousal. This scale, closely aligned with DSM-IV criteria for PTSD, demonstrated strong reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values of .88 for intrusion, .86 for avoidance, and .79 for arousal (Feinstein et al., 2018). The Beck Depression Inventory-Revised (BDI-II), a 21-item scale, was used to assess depressive symptoms. Moral Injury Events Scale-Revised (MIES-R), adapted from a military-specific scale, was employed to measure moral injury. This 11-item scale focused on experiences where journalists witnessed or participated in actions that conflicted with their moral values.

Beyond these scales, the study also explored journalists' perceptions of their work environment, including workload, organizational support, and resource control — which indirectly touched on questions about newsroom culture (Feinstein et al., 2018). Data on alcohol consumption and past psychiatric history were also gathered to account for potential confounding variables. The study revealed that while PTSD symptoms were generally low among journalists, moral injury was more prevalent and significantly linked to several factors. Higher moral injury

scores were notably associated with being a parent ( $p = .031$ ,  $d = .49$ ), working in isolation ( $p = .02$ ,  $d = .59$ ), an increased workload ( $p = .017$ ,  $d = .57$ ), and a perceived lack of organizational support ( $p = .046$ ,  $d = .47$ ) (Feinstein et al., 2018). Additionally, a strong correlation was found between moral injury and feelings of guilt ( $p = .01$ ). Journalists who covered the refugee crisis close to home and those who had stepped outside their professional roles to assist refugees reported heightened levels of guilt, which was closely tied to moral injury. In contrast, the IES-R scores indicated that PTSD symptoms were low across all subscales, and no significant relationship was observed between moral injury and depression as measured by the BDI-II. However, regression analysis identified that intrusion symptoms of PTSD were significant predictors of moral injury ( $\beta = 0.324$ ,  $p = .006$ ). The link between PTSD and moral injury is a notable connection.

The findings support the research question, confirming that moral injury, rather than PTSD, is the primary psychological risk faced by journalists covering the refugee crisis. The study demonstrates that moral injury is a distinct psychological phenomenon influenced by personal circumstances such as parenthood, work environment, and the nature of the events witnessed (Feinstein et al., 2018).

However, the study's cross-sectional design did not allow for conclusions about the long-term effects of moral injury on journalists. Additionally, the study's focus on journalists from Western news organizations did not fully explore the cultural dimensions of moral injury, mainly how journalists from different backgrounds might experience or report these phenomena differently. The ethical implications of reporting on traumatic events without intervention were also not deeply examined.

By highlighting the unique psychological risks associated with covering the refugee

crisis, the study makes a significant contribution to understanding the mental health challenges faced by journalists in conflict and crisis settings. Again, future research could consider adopting longitudinal designs to explore the long-term consequences of moral injury among journalists and to determine whether these effects persist or diminish over time. Expanding the research to include journalists from non-Western countries and those covering different crises would enhance the findings.

### **Western News Culture**

The first two studies reviewed in this paper primarily focused on the impacts of trauma and moral injury on journalists working in overseas contexts. Although domestic (US and Canada) journalists may not encounter combat situations or the dramatic scenes of refugees arriving on their shores, they are nonetheless at risk of experiencing trauma and moral injury through their coverage of everyday news events (Buchanan & Keats, 2011; Morell, 2020).

The rationale behind this research stems from the increasing recognition of the mental health risks associated with trauma reporting. Previous studies have identified a "macho culture" within journalism that discourages the expression of emotional distress, potentially exacerbating PTSD symptoms (Morell, 2020). Notably, the culture of journalism presents several challenges that impact journalists' mental health and well-being. Traditionally, the profession has been characterized by a reluctance to address mental health issues openly, with many journalists preferring to cope through social means rather than seeking professional help. This stigma is particularly pronounced among those who view their work as a calling, leading to a culture where admitting mental health struggles is uncommon (Morell, 2020).

However, recent events have intensified the pressures on journalists. The COVID-19 pandemic, economic downturns affecting the news industry, and widespread social unrest have

collectively heightened stress levels among media professionals. These factors have underscored the necessity for mental health care to be considered as essential as physical health care within the industry (Morell, 2020). The lack of diversity in newsrooms has also been identified as a significant issue. Predominantly white newsrooms can create hostile environments for Black journalists and other journalists of colour, adversely affecting their mental health. The psychological fatigue associated with code-switching and the feeling of needing to conform to the dominant culture contributes to stress and a sense of isolation among minority journalists (Morell, 2020).

In response to these challenges, there is a growing recognition of the importance of resilience and purpose in journalism. Industry leaders are now tasked with fostering newsroom environments where mental health care strategies are integrated into the professional toolkit alongside traditional tools like notebooks and cameras. This shift aims to support journalists in managing their profession's unique stresses and promote a healthier, more inclusive workplace culture (Morell, 2020).

Buchanan and Keats (2011) investigated the psychological effects of covering traumatic news, with a particular focus on how the frequency and intensity of such coverage influence the severity of PTSD symptoms. Additionally, the study considered cultural factors related to newsroom environments and the social pressures associated with the journalism profession. The authors hypothesized that both the frequency and intensity of trauma exposure will be positively related to the severity of PTSD symptoms in journalists (Buchanan & Keats, 2011). The variables analyzed included the frequency and intensity of trauma exposure and the four primary PTSD symptoms: hyperarousal, intrusion, negative cognitions, and avoidance.

Buchanan and Keats's (2011) study utilized a multimethod approach, incorporating both

quantitative survey data and qualitative interview data. The target population was U.S. newspaper journalists, with 4,110 journalists contacted via email. Of these, 254 respondents completed the survey, representing a response rate of approximately 7%. The sample included 78% reporters and 22% photojournalists, with diverse experience levels, from less than five years to over 20 years in the field (Buchanan & Keats, 2011). Additionally, 57% of the sample were female, and the mean age was 39.34 years.

The study employed regression analysis to assess whether the frequency and intensity of trauma coverage predicted the severity of PTSD symptoms. Additionally, qualitative interviews were conducted to explore journalists' coping mechanisms and comfort in seeking social support within their workplace. The mixed-methods approach allowed the researchers to gain a comprehensive understanding of the psychological toll of covering traumatic events.

The survey employed several validated instruments to measure the variables of interest. The primary tool used to assess PTSD symptoms was the Impact of Events Scale-Revised (IES-R), which measures intrusion, avoidance, and hyperarousal symptoms. Additionally, the Beck Depression Inventory-II (BDI-II) was used to evaluate depressive symptoms. The study also adopted the Journalism Trauma Exposure Scale (JTES) to measure the frequency and intensity of trauma exposure specific to journalists (Buchanan & Keats, 2011). The JTES is a psychometric tool developed to assess the types and frequency of traumatic experiences journalists encounter in their professional work. Given that journalists often cover events involving violence, disasters, and other distressing situations, the JTES aims to measure their exposure to potentially traumatic events, which can impact mental health and lead to conditions like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or secondary traumatic stress. The study found that while PTSD symptoms were generally low among journalists, there was a significant association

between moral injury and several factors. Specifically, higher moral injury scores were associated with being a parent ( $p = .031$ ,  $d = .49$ ), working alone ( $p = .02$ ,  $d = .59$ ), and increased workload ( $p = .017$ ,  $d = .57$ ) (Buchanan & Keats, 2011). Although intrusion symptoms of PTSD are significant predictors of moral injury ( $\beta = 0.324$ ,  $p = .006$ ), no significant association was found between moral injury and depression (Buchanan & Keats, 2011). Interestingly, these findings have metrics similar to those of Feinstein et al.'s (2018) study, which was a year earlier and focused on the coverage of the refugee and migration crisis.

I noted several limitations in the study. First, the response rate was relatively low, and the study's cross-sectional design prevented the determination of causality. There were also potential methodological issues, such as the reliance on self-reported data, which could be subject to social desirability bias. Ethical considerations include the potential for re-traumatization of participants during the interview process. Despite these limitations, the study made significant contributions to understanding the psychological impact of trauma reporting on journalists and highlights areas for future research, such as the long-term effects of moral injury and the development of interventions to support journalists in the field.

### **Toronto Moral Injury Scale for Journalists**

The primary research question in the study by Osmann et al. (2024) focused on developing and validating a psychometric scale to measure journalists' moral injury. The authors aimed to address the lack of a profession-specific tool for detecting moral injury among journalists, which is crucial given the unique ethical dilemmas and potentially morally injurious experiences (PMIEs) journalists face, particularly those covering conflict, violence, and other high-stress situations (Osmann et al., 2024).

The authors hypothesized that a psychometric scale developed with input from journalists

and tailored to their specific challenges would demonstrate strong internal reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity when compared with existing scales for PTSD, anxiety, and depression (Osmann et al., 2024). The variables under investigation included the newly developed PMIE items specific to journalism, along with established measures for PTSD, anxiety, and depression.

The rationale for developing the Toronto Moral Injury Scale for Journalists stems from the growing recognition of moral injury as a significant psychological issue, particularly in professions like journalism that involve frequent exposure to ethically challenging situations (Feinstein et al., 2018). The study builds on existing literature that has primarily focused on military populations, extending the concept of moral injury to civilian contexts such as journalism (Idås et al., 2019; Litz, 2024). By creating a tailored scale, the authors sought to improve the accuracy and relevance of moral injury assessments in this professional group, thereby enhancing the potential for effective interventions and support.

The study involved two main phases: initial scale development through focus groups and subsequent validation through a more extensive survey. The focus groups included 39 journalists from various news organizations in Canada, representing TV, radio, online, and print media. The survey phase included 159 journalists selected based on their involvement in covering conflict, violence, and other morally challenging stories (Osmann et al., 2024). The sample was diverse in terms of media platform and professional experience.

The methodology involved both qualitative and quantitative approaches. First, focus groups were conducted to generate potential scale items related to moral injury based on the experiences and input of journalists. These items were refined and subjected to exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to identify underlying factors. The final scale was validated using confirmatory

factor analysis (CFA) and tested for internal consistency, convergent validity with PTSD, anxiety, and depression scales, and discriminant validity.

The Toronto Moral Injury Scale for Journalists was developed using 15 initial PMIE items from focus group discussions. These items were tested alongside established measures, including the PTSD Checklist for DSM-5 (PCL-5), the Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI), and the Beck Depression Inventory-II (BDI-II). The internal reliability of the final nine-item scale was strong (Cronbach's alpha = .86), and the scale showed good convergent validity with the PCL-5 ( $r = .40$ ), BAI ( $r = .31$ ), and BDI-II ( $r = .36$ ) (Osman et al., 2024).

The researchers found that the Toronto Moral Injury Scale for Journalists had a three-factor structure encompassing Organizational/Management, Individuals/Non-Management, and Online factors, which accounted for 67.06% of the variance. The PMIE items were significantly associated with PTSD, anxiety, and depression, supporting the scale's convergent validity (Osman et al., 2024). The findings supported the authors' hypothesis, demonstrating that the newly developed Toronto Moral Injury Scale for Journalists is a reliable and valid tool for assessing moral injury in this professional group.

The study successfully addressed the research question by providing a profession-specific instrument that captures the unique moral challenges faced by journalists. The authors' conclusions are supported by the empirical data, which showed strong correlations with established measures of PTSD, anxiety, and depression. The study provided a robust foundation for further research and clinical application of the moral injury scale in journalism.

While this study provides a valuable tool for assessing moral injury in journalists, it also highlights, like the previous studies, the need for further research to explore the longitudinal effects of moral injury and to test the scale in different cultural contexts. Additionally, future

research could focus on validating the scale in more extensive and more diverse populations of journalists, including those working in various cultural and geographic contexts. The study could also explore the impact of organizational support and interventions in mitigating the effects of moral injury among journalists.

### **Summary**

The exploration of moral injury within journalism is a relatively new and increasingly significant area of research, driven mainly by the pioneering work of Dr. Feinstein and colleagues. Since Feinstein's seminal studies on the psychological impact of conflict on journalists, the focus has expanded from trauma and PTSD—areas more traditionally associated with combat veterans and first responders—to the complex and nuanced experiences of moral injury among journalists. This shift marks a significant development in understanding how journalists are psychologically affected by their work, especially in high-stress and ethically challenging situations.

Moral injury, a concept rooted in military psychology, is also highly relevant to journalists, who are often held to an ethical code of impartiality and objectivity. The potential for moral injury arises when journalists face the difficult decision of whether to intervene in the events they cover or remain detached observers—choices that can lead to profound internal conflict and psychological distress.

The development of tools like the Toronto Moral Injury Scale for Journalists further underscores the growing recognition of the need for profession-specific measures to assess and address moral injury. The scale provides a reliable and valid tool for evaluating the unique moral challenges journalists face. It represents a significant advance in the field, offering a means to understand better and mitigate the psychological risks associated with journalism in conflict and

crisis settings.

However, the research in this area is still in its early stages, and several gaps remain. For instance, the studies conducted so far have primarily focused on Western journalists, raising questions about the applicability of these findings to journalists in different cultural contexts. Additionally, the cross-sectional design of these studies limits the ability to conclude the long-term effects of moral injury. There is a clear need for longitudinal research that tracks the psychological health of journalists over extended periods, particularly as they continue or cease to report on conflicts.

Moreover, the ethical and cultural dimensions of moral injury in journalism require further exploration. Different cultural attitudes toward trauma, morality, and mental health can significantly influence how moral injury is experienced and reported. Understanding these differences is crucial for developing effective interventions and support mechanisms that are culturally sensitive and appropriate. Addressing the research gaps will be essential for developing effective strategies to support journalists' mental health and ensure the sustainability of their crucial work in reporting from the front lines of conflict abroad and crisis here at home.

### Chapter 3: Discussion and Application

“We discovered that one of the strongest links among us was questions about the morality of what we do: when do you press the shutter release and when do you cease being a photographer?”

—Greg Marinovich, *The Bang-Bang Club*

Storytelling is one of humanity’s oldest forms of knowledge sharing, processing, learning, and socialization, dating back to our beginnings (Lawrence & Paige, 2016). Holmwood et al. (2022) further describe storytelling as essential for fostering social and community health. Journalism is a storytelling profession. Regardless of the medium — whether writing, photography, or videography — journalists present narratives with the aim of being unbiased observers. However, the act of storytelling is inherently subjective. Relationships are formed, intimate conversations occur, and bearing witness to the sights, sounds, smells, and tastes surrounding unfolding events inevitably has a psychological impact. Journalists are expected to be present and act as conduits to the broader world.

This research prompts questions about how the therapeutic community can create psychologically and culturally safe interventions for journalists focused on moral repair. The central question posed in the reflexivity statement—how can we incorporate the voices of journalists worldwide and ensure cultural sensitivity and healing in ways that consider everyone?—guides this inquiry. Therefore, three theoretical approaches have been explored—narrative therapy, acceptance and commitment therapy, and emotion-focused therapy—emphasizing culturally informed integration among these approaches.

### **Narrative Therapy**

Journalism can expose professionals to traumatic events and moral dilemmas that may lead to moral injury (Feinstein et al., 2018). This psychological distress, distinct from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), emerges when journalists face situations that challenge their values, such as witnessing violence, reporting on human suffering, or grappling with ethical constraints (Denborough, 2021). Narrative therapy focuses on re-authoring personal stories and honouring individual experiences and provides a structured and compassionate approach to support moral repair for journalists (Wylie et al., 2024). Through trauma-informed and culturally sensitive practices, narrative therapy may help journalists navigate and reconcile moral injury.

Trauma-informed approaches are crucial for journalists exposed to events that may violate their moral expectations; instead of focusing solely on diagnostic labels, narrative therapy can center on understanding how journalists' experiences shape their identity and moral framework. This therapeutic stance aligns with Denborough's (2021) emphasis on moral injury, recognizing trauma not as an individual pathology but as a response to violated values. Narrative therapy, therefore, can allow journalists to process their trauma without feeling stigmatized or constrained by medical labels, fostering a space where their distress is understood as part of their commitment to ethical journalism.

In practice, narrative therapy's externalizing technique serves as an effective tool in addressing the impact of moral injury on journalists. By separating journalists from their trauma, for example, labelling their distress as suffering or hopelessness, externalizing may enable them to reframe their experiences, providing agency to address and confront their trauma without

self-blame (Denborough, 2021; Wylie et al., 2024). This process is particularly valuable for journalists who may feel isolated in their experiences or burdened by guilt over what they have witnessed or reported. In recognizing that “the person is not the problem,” narrative therapy helps journalists regain control over their stories, cultivating a therapeutic distance from the traumatic events they have encountered (White, 2007).

Narrative therapy is uniquely suited to support journalists from diverse cultural backgrounds, offering a framework that respects and integrates cultural values and personal histories. This approach is particularly relevant in a globalized profession where journalists may work across borders or witness events outside their cultural contexts, potentially exacerbating moral injury. Denborough (2021) advocates for culturally sensitive practices within narrative therapy, emphasizing that healing moral injury involves understanding the broader social and cultural values that individuals hold dear. For journalists, who may operate under distinct cultural norms and ethical guidelines, a culturally sensitive therapeutic approach validates their unique experiences and acknowledges the cross-cultural complexities of their profession.

An example of a culturally sensitive intervention is the remembering practice, which honours the relationships and values that shape a journalist's moral identity. This approach invites journalists to consider the perspectives of significant figures in their lives—such as mentors, community leaders, or family members—who embody the values they hold important. By reconnecting with these figures through therapeutic dialogue, journalists can draw on a culturally resonant source of support and guidance, allowing them to contextualize their experiences within a larger cultural framework (Denborough, 2021). This technique fosters resilience, reinforcing a journalist’s moral foundation even when confronted with ethically challenging situations.

Other narrative interventions include re-authoring, which encourages journalists to reconstruct their identities by crafting alternative narratives highlighting their resilience, values, and agency. This process is essential for journalists who might struggle with guilt or worthlessness due to perceived failures in their reporting or the limits imposed by journalistic standards in traumatic scenarios (Denborough, 2021). By identifying moments of personal strength and moral alignment, re-authoring helps journalists rebuild their identities to incorporate their professional and ethical aspirations.

Double listening, another narrative practice, allows therapists to attend to the journalist's trauma story and moments of moral resilience and resistance within these narratives. This technique is particularly beneficial for journalists because it captures the nuances of their experiences, recognizing both their pain and their dedication to ethical storytelling. Through double listening, therapists can help journalists identify values and strengths that persist despite their moral distress, thus fostering a more balanced self-narrative (White, 2007). This intervention is effective in re-establishing a journalist's sense of agency, as it validates their responses to moral challenges rather than focusing exclusively on the trauma.

Additionally, witnessing letters are a powerful narrative intervention that can help journalists communalize their experiences of moral injury. In this practice, therapists, colleagues, or other supportive figures write letters that bear witness to the journalist's experiences and values, allowing them to feel seen and supported by their community (Denborough, 2021). These letters create a dialogue that can counter isolation and validate the journalist's ethical struggles, affirming their commitment to truth and social responsibility even in the face of moral injury. For

journalists working far from their cultural and social roots, witnessing letters can provide a sense of belonging and moral support that can help mitigate the isolating effects of their profession.

Through interventions like externalizing, remembering, re-authoring, double listening, and witnessing letters, narrative therapy can help journalists across cultures address moral injuries by re-establishing their values and agency. Narrative therapy can assist in individual healing and provide journalists with tools to reconcile their experiences within the broader context of their cultural and professional identities (Wylie et al., 2024). By fostering a supportive environment that honours journalists' unique experiences and moral commitments, narrative therapy holds significant potential for the moral repair of journalists from diverse backgrounds.

### **Acceptance and Commitment Therapy**

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) offers a valuable framework for moral repair, addressing the psychological injuries associated with moral distress and moral injury. Rooted in cognitive-behavioural principles, ACT enables individuals to engage in valued actions by fostering mindfulness, emotional regulation, and acceptance of challenging experiences. Such interventions support individuals, including journalists, to transform moral distress into moral resilience (Nishikawara & Maynes, 2023).

A core ACT intervention is developing psychological flexibility, enabling individuals to adapt to moral challenges that align with their values. Psychological flexibility helps journalists process feelings of guilt, shame, or regret that arise from these situations (Nieuwsma et al., 2015). By cultivating awareness and acceptance of these emotions without judgment, ACT allows journalists to avoid the detrimental effects of emotional suppression, enabling them to incorporate these challenging feelings into a coherent narrative of their professional values

(Brémault-Phillips et al., 2022). For journalists, this flexibility supports them in facing challenging assignments without compromising their moral integrity, fostering a more resilient and adaptable approach to their work.

ACT also emphasizes letting go, an essential intervention in moral repair (Lerner, 2017). For journalists, letting go may mean accepting the limitations and ethical dilemmas inherent in their profession. Reporting within constrained timelines or navigating the ethical complexity of presenting sensitive information can result in moral injury when actions feel misaligned with personal or professional ethics. Within ACT, letting go does not imply excusing harmful actions but instead releasing the emotional burden of guilt or resentment. This approach is particularly relevant for journalists who may carry the weight of difficult reporting decisions, enabling them to process these experiences without compromising future professional commitment (Brémault-Phillips et al., 2022). However, letting go of practices requires cultural sensitivity, as different cultural or religious backgrounds may shape how journalists interpret guilt, redemption, and accountability.

Mindfulness, another ACT component, promotes moral resilience by helping journalists stay anchored in the present, even amidst distressing memories or ethical dilemmas. For example, journalists covering conflicts or traumatic incidents often experience secondary trauma, where mindfulness practices can support them in processing this without becoming overwhelmed (Nishikawara & Maynes, 2023). Mindfulness enables journalists to respond to high-stakes situations with emotional regulation and steadiness, reducing impulsive actions that may lead to ethical missteps. However, cultural considerations are essential when integrating mindfulness, as

practices like meditation or self-reflection may need adaptation for journalists from collective-oriented cultures, where shared support may be more meaningful.

Additionally, ACT's values-based strategies emphasize reconnecting with core professional and personal values, which is critical for moral repair. For journalists, re-engaging with values like truthfulness, transparency, and social justice can restore a sense of purpose and motivation, even after distressing assignments or morally challenging stories (Nieuwsma et al., 2015). For instance, a journalist experiencing moral injury from covering a traumatic story may benefit from revisiting the broader value of informing the public to guide their sense of purpose and drive. However, defining "values" can be complex across diverse cultural contexts, as values may vary according to cultural, social, and religious influences. ACT practitioners must consider these influences and adapt value-based interventions to support a diverse spectrum of journalists effectively.

ACT offers valuable interventions for moral repair through psychological flexibility, letting go, mindfulness, and values-based action, which can benefit journalists facing moral distress. These techniques provide a structured approach to addressing moral adversity, making ACT a promising therapeutic framework for journalists experiencing moral injury. However, cultural sensitivity is imperative, as interventions like letting go, mindfulness, and values alignment must respect cultural meanings and practices. Culturally responsive adaptations of ACT can enhance its effectiveness, supporting journalists in maintaining resilience and integrity across a range of professional and cultural contexts (Nishikawara & Maynes, 2023).

### **Emotion Focused Therapy**

Emotion-focused therapy (EFT) also offers the potential to facilitate moral repair among journalists, especially as they navigate the complex emotional landscape of reporting distressing or morally challenging events. EFT emphasizes the therapeutic importance of acknowledging and processing emotions, which aligns well with the experiences of journalists, who often suppress emotions like guilt or sympathy to maintain objectivity (Cherry, 2023). For journalists, emotional suppression can lead to moral injury—psychological harm that arises from actions or experiences that conflict with personal or professional values (Hopper & Huxford, 2015).

A primary intervention in EFT involves helping individuals identify and articulate difficult emotions, fostering a better understanding of their moral injuries. For journalists, this process can reveal suppressed emotions associated with challenging reporting situations, such as guilt after covering a traumatic event or frustration from reporting unethical practices. Hopper and Huxford (2015) emphasize that journalists often engage in emotional labour to separate their feelings from their reporting, leading to a disconnect between their personal values and professional responsibilities. In an EFT context, helping journalists reconnect with and process these emotions is central to moral repair, as it enables them to confront and accept their emotional responses without sacrificing their professional integrity.

Another core EFT intervention is the cultivation of self-compassion, which can be helpful for journalists who often internalize distress from their work. For example, journalists may feel a profound moral responsibility when reporting on humanitarian crises or social injustices, leading to guilt or a sense of inadequacy (Addario, 2015). Through EFT, these journalists can learn to approach themselves with empathy and understanding, recognizing that their emotional responses are valid rather than failures in professional objectivity (Knight, 2020). This

self-compassion is particularly important as it helps journalists see their experiences as part of the human aspect of their role, promoting psychological resilience and reducing the risk of burnout.

EFT also emphasizes empathy and relational processing as part of moral repair. Lünborg and Medeiros (2021) highlight that journalists navigate complex emotional dynamics in newsrooms, especially those covering sensitive stories. EFT's focus on empathy can be instrumental in supporting journalists to reflect on their emotional interactions within professional relationships, whether with colleagues or sources. This relational processing is not only essential for personal healing but also fosters a more balanced and compassionate approach to future reporting. For example, a journalist covering sensitive topics may develop a greater ability to empathize with sources and their communities, enriching the narrative while maintaining ethical standards.

Considering cultural sensitivity, it is crucial to adapt EFT to respect the diverse backgrounds of journalists. For instance, in collectivist cultures, where personal emotions may be secondary to group welfare, EFT may need to incorporate communal perspectives to resonate with journalists' cultural values. Journalists from such backgrounds may benefit from EFT interventions that explore how moral repair extends beyond individual healing to include the well-being of their communities (Knight, 2020). Furthermore, cultural adaptations of empathy and self-compassion exercises may be necessary for journalists whose beliefs about emotional expression differ from Western norms. Addressing these nuances ensures that EFT supports moral repair in a culturally respectful and inclusive manner.

EFT offers valuable tools for addressing the emotional dimensions of moral repair in journalism through interventions such as emotional articulation, self-compassion, and empathy. By supporting journalists in processing complex emotions associated with their work, EFT not only aids in personal healing but also contributes to a more ethically engaged journalistic practice. However, cultural sensitivity is essential in adapting these interventions, as empathy and self-compassion can carry different meanings across cultures. With these adaptations, EFT holds promise for helping journalists navigate the moral complexities of their profession.

### **Conclusions**

Integrating culturally sensitive therapeutic approaches — namely, narrative therapy, acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), and emotion-focused therapy (EFT) — offers a comprehensive framework for addressing moral injury in journalists. Each therapy provides unique tools for processing trauma and moral distress in ways that validate the ethical and cultural complexities journalists face. Central to these interventions is the ethical responsibility of care, which requires practitioners to create a safe and inclusive therapeutic environment that upholds dignity, trust, and respect for autonomy. This involves adapting interventions to align with cultural values and ensuring that the power dynamics inherent in the therapeutic relationship are navigated ethically. By prioritizing informed consent, active collaboration, and genuine attunement to the lived experiences of journalists, therapists honour their duty of care while fostering empowerment and agency. An ethical foundation ensures that the therapeutic process does not inadvertently reinforce harm but instead promotes healing and is adaptable to ensure these interventions are culturally sensitive and ethically grounded.

By re-authoring personal stories and fostering externalizing techniques, narrative therapy helps journalists navigate moral injury by reframing their experiences and reclaiming their narrative agency (Denborough, 2021). Through culturally adapted practices, this approach respects the diverse moral and cultural identities journalists bring to their work, creating a supportive environment that acknowledges both the individual and community aspects of moral injury (White, 2007).

ACT contributes significantly by building psychological flexibility, mindfulness, and letting go as tools for moral resilience, enabling journalists to manage complex ethical dilemmas without compromising personal integrity (Brémault-Phillips et al., 2022; Lerner, 2017). In particular, mindfulness practices support journalists in staying present and emotionally regulated during high-stakes reporting, while values-based action reinforces their core ethical commitments (Nishikawara & Maynes, 2023). The emphasis on letting go, a complex concept that varies culturally, is crucial for journalists struggling with self-blame or moral ambiguity (Lerner, 2017; Nieuwsma et al., 2015). By respecting these cultural differences, ACT not only promotes moral repair but also enhances resilience across diverse journalistic contexts.

EFT's focus on emotional articulation, empathy, and self-compassion complements these approaches by addressing the affective dimensions of moral injury, allowing journalists to process complex feelings related to their work. This approach is particularly relevant for journalists who often face emotional suppression as part of their professional identity, potentially leading to moral disconnection and psychological strain (Addario, 2015; Hopper & Huxford, 2015). EFT's attention to relational processing within newsrooms and with sources further supports journalists in developing empathetic, ethically sound narratives that resonate with both their personal and cultural values (Knight, 2020).

Together, these therapeutic approaches offer holistic and culturally adaptive interventions that support journalists in reconciling their professional roles with their moral identities. By fostering a therapeutic space that honours the complexities of moral injury, these frameworks provide journalists with essential tools for resilience and ethical integrity, ensuring they can continue serving as ethical witnesses in the diverse cultural landscapes they navigate.

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