

UC Irvine

UC Irvine Previously Published Works

Title

Sentenced to Shame: Moral Injury Exposure in Former Lifers

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4n3854k8>

Journal

Psychological Trauma Theory Research Practice and Policy, 16(5)

ISSN

1942-9681

Authors

DeCaro, Joanne B

Straka, Kelci

Malek, Nadia

et al.

Publication Date

2024-07-01

DOI

10.1037/tra0001400

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

Sentenced to Shame: Moral Injury Exposure in Former Lifers

Joanne B. DeCaro¹, Kelci Straka^{2,3}, Nadia Malek², and Alyson K. Zalta²

¹ Department of Criminology, Law and Society, University of California, Irvine

² Department of Psychological Science, University of California, Irvine

³ School of Nursing, Johns Hopkins Medical Center

Objective: A significant increase in the release of individuals who served life sentences (i.e., lifers) in California has created the opportunity to study aspects of their psychological wellness for the first time. Moral injury may be a particularly relevant factor to consider in this population but has not been previously studied. This study is the first to explore the concept of moral injury within a currently or formerly incarcerated population. **Method:** Former lifers currently in reentry in California ($N = 41$) completed a survey that measured their moral injury exposure (MIE), MIE-related guilt, MIE-related shame, MIE-related rumination, religiosity, attempts at making amends, and flourishing. **Results:** As expected, a high rate of lifetime MIEs was endorsed (97.6%). Events linked to life sentence crimes (75.6%) and time in prison (56.1%) were very common. Lower levels of MIE-related shame ($r = -.58, p < .01$) and higher levels of religiosity ($r = .35, p < .05$) were significantly associated with greater flourishing. By contrast, degree of MIE exposure, MIE-related guilt, and MIE-related rumination, and making amends were all weakly associated with flourishing. **Conclusion:** Our results highlight that MIE is pervasive in this population and extends beyond life sentence crimes. Moreover, our findings suggest that it is lifers' self-concept following MIEs that appears to affect well-being upon release, rather than the extent and nature of moral injury exposure. Further research exploring moral injury in incarcerated and formerly incarcerated populations is needed to improve their well-being and chances of successful reentry.

Clinical Impact Statement

This study is the first to explore the concept of moral injury within a currently or formerly incarcerated population. The study suggests that the incarcerated experience high levels of moral injury exposure and that shame related to moral injury exposure may affect a person's ability to succeed postrelease. The high likelihood of moral injury exposure should be considered in treatment plans and goals for patients who have experienced long-term incarceration.

Keywords: moral injury, shame, flourishing, incarceration, prisoner

Supplemental materials: <https://doi.org/10.1037/tra0001400.supp>

This article was published Online First October 20, 2022.

Joanne B. DeCaro  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1241-3457>

Joanne B. DeCaro's contribution was supported by a Ford Foundation Predoctoral Fellowship administered by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. Funding for the project was supported by the UCI Academic Senate, Council on Research, Computing, and Libraries, University of California, Irvine.

We offer our sincere gratitude to Jyotsna Grandhi, Alessandra Yareli Contreras, and Jessica Estrada for their assistance. We also thank the Francisco Homes for their kind support.

Joanne DeCaro served as lead for conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, methodology, project administration, supervision, writing—original draft, and writing—review & editing. Kelci Straka served in a supporting role for formal analysis, writing—original draft, and writing—review & editing. Nadia Malek served in a supporting role for formal analysis, writing—original draft, and writing—review & editing. Alyson K. Zalta served as lead for formal analysis and funding acquisition, contributed equally to conceptualization, supervision, and writing—review & editing, and served in a supporting role for writing—original draft.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Joanne B. DeCaro, Department of Criminology, Law and Society, University of California, Irvine, Social Ecology II, Irvine, CA 92697, United States. Email: jdecaro@uci.edu

In 2011, *Brown v. Plata* initiated a shift in state parole policy that resulted in a significant increase in the release of “lifers”¹ (i.e., those sentenced to a life term in prison) in California. Between 1990 and 2010, a lifer in California had only a six percent chance of leaving prison alive (Weisberg et al., 2011). From 1991 to July, 2013, 2,373 lifers were paroled from California prisons (Levin, 2014), whereas between 2014 and 2018, 4,759 lifers were paroled (California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, Office of Research, Division of Internal Oversight and Research, 2016, 2017, 2018). This policy shift has created an opportunity to study the well-being and experiences of “former lifers,”¹ people sentenced to what had previously amounted to pseudodeath sentences behind bars.

Ample research in the field of criminology speaks to the importance of prosocial mentality, environments, and relationships in

¹ Of note, the terms lifer and former lifer are the terms this population uses to describe itself and are also common terms in the literature on this population (Appleton, 2010).

the reentry process (i.e., period following release from prison; e.g., Berg & Cobbina, 2017; Berg & Huebner, 2011), with recidivism being of particular concern. Recidivism has many definitions, but studies commonly use composite definitions, which include reconviction, reincarceration, self-reported crime, technical violation, and fresh criminal charges. Research shows that a parolee's psychological well-being is important for maintaining a prosocial mentality, which in turn reduces the likelihood of recidivism (Pettus-Davis et al., 2019; Link et al., 2019). Reentry scholarship has found that social ties, particularly family relations, and a sense of purpose and legitimacy found through employment to be crucial well-being factors that contribute to desistance in reentry (Palmer & Christian, 2019; Western et al., 2015). Thus, aspects of eudemonic well-being, or "living well," may be particularly important to study among former lifers. Flourishing is an aspect of eudemonic well-being that captures the social ties and social control emphasized in reentry scholarship. Flourishing includes the concepts of having supportive and rewarding relationships, contributing to the happiness of others, being respected by others, and leading a purposeful and meaningful life (Diener et al., 2009; Jankowski et al., 2020). Better understanding experiences and predictors of flourishing among former lifers may contribute to the development of better treatment plans and health outcomes, as well as maintaining desistance.

One factor that may play a critical role in flourishing among former lifers is exposure to morally injurious events. Moral injury exposure (MIE) refers to perpetrating, failing to prevent, or bearing witness to acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations (Litz et al., 2009). Studies largely conducted in military populations have found that morally injurious events are associated with negative physical and mental health outcomes, including diminished well-being (Griffin et al., 2019; Williamson et al., 2021). Moral injury exposure may be particularly relevant to lifers because morality is deeply interwoven within law and justice (e.g., Durkheim, 1893/1984), particularly with the typical acts (e.g., murder) and sentences (e.g., 25 years to life) found in the population of lifers. For those sentenced to life, the judge, justice system, and society, have told these individuals that they have committed such morally egregious acts that they are no longer fit to be in their community. Consequently, lifers are very likely to experience transgressions that would be viewed as morally injurious and it is quite likely that MIE and consequences of MIE may affect well-being among former lifers.

There are several potential responses to MIEs that may play a critical role in long-term well-being. Moral emotions, particularly guilt and shame, are considered to be primary symptoms resulting from MIE (Litz et al., 2009). Guilt refers to a feeling of responsibility or remorse for actions and decisions that one perceives as wrongdoing whereas shame refers to a global negative belief about oneself (Tangney & Dearing, 2002). Prior research has shown that although guilt can be adaptive, shame is particularly maladaptive and is associated with poorer well-being (Tangney & Dearing, 2002; Velotti et al., 2017). Shame may be a common experience for former lifers given that some legal philosophers argue that shame is the express function of incarceration (Brooks, 2014). Lifers, in particular, are often labeled as "irredeemable," "super-predators," and other terms that can create severe, long-lasting, internalized stigma as well as societal messaging that may promote moral emotions in response to these events. Thus, moral emotions

following MIE, and shame in particular, may diminish well-being among former lifers.

Research on moral injury has also explored several other factors that may serve as potential mechanisms by which MIEs affect health outcomes. In particular, researchers have explored rumination a process that may lead to negative health outcomes following MIEs (Bravo et al., 2020; Zalta & Held, 2020) and forgiveness as a potential pathway toward healing from MIEs (Purcell et al., 2018). In the context of moral injury, event-related rumination (Cann et al., 2011) may be particularly important as individuals attempt to make meaning of the event. Higher levels of rumination may indicate that the individual continues to struggle with the event and their role in it, which may be associated with poorer well-being. With respect to forgiveness, the moral injury literature has pointed to religiosity as a potential source of moral repair that could help individuals to recover from MIEs (Litz et al., 2009). The criminology literature has focused on "making amends" and positive actions as potentially important steps for "going straight" and establishing a prosocial identity (Burnett & Maruna, 2006). Therefore, MIE-related rumination, religiosity, and making amends may all be relevant predictors of flourishing in this population.

This study is the first to open dialogue between the fields of trauma and criminology on moral injury in currently or formerly incarcerated populations. Our study conducted a survey of 41 former lifers to understand the nature of morally injurious events and flourishing in this population. We also sought to explore what demographic and psychological factors related to MIE are associated with flourishing among former lifers given the importance of well-being in the reentry process. To our knowledge, this study is the first of its kind with a formerly incarcerated population; thus, we present primarily descriptive findings. We hypothesize that former lifers have experienced a high degree of MIE and that high levels of shame in response to MIE will be associated with lower levels of flourishing.

Method

Participants

Participants ($N = 41$) were adults that served a life sentence or a virtual life sentence (i.e., incarcerated for a similar length of time as a lifer and/or committed a serious offense normally associated with a life sentence) and had been paroled. As soon as someone is paroled from prison following a life sentence, they are considered to be a former lifer. All participants ($N = 41$) in the study were male with an average age of 56.3 years ($SD = 10.5$, range = 31–75). Participants were 44% white ($n = 18$) and 56% nonwhite ($n = 23$). The majority were never married ($n = 19$; 46%) or were divorced or separated ($n = 13$; 32%). Over half of participants were employed either full-time ($n = 12$; 29%) or part-time ($n = 12$; 29%), and the majority had at least some college ($n = 31$; 76%). Most participants were imprisoned based on a charge of murder ($n = 32$; 78%). Participants reported, on average, spending 28.4 years ($SD = 8.8$, range = 13–47) in prison and being out on parole for an average of 1.1 years ($SD = 1.2$, range = 0–5). The majority of participants described themselves as fairly religious with a mean score of 6.5 on a 10-point scale ($SD = 3.0$, median = 7, range = 0–10). On average, participants reported spending 57.3%

of their free time trying to make amends for their morally injurious index event ($SD = 36.4$, range = 0–100%). See Table 1 for other sample characteristics.

Procedures

Participants were recruited by three methods: from a pool of participants who had previously conducted an oral history with the Restorative Justice Fund nonprofit, through events at a local reentry facility, and from word-of-mouth recruitment from other study participants. Twenty of the participants were recruited from the oral history pool, and the rest were recruited by the other two methods. A person had to be over the age of 18 and a former lifer or virtual lifer to be eligible for inclusion in the study. Participants were given the option of completing an online survey via Qualtrics or completing a paper-and-pencil survey. For those participating online via Qualtrics, participants viewed an online consent form and indicated their agreement before being directed to the online survey. For those who completed the paper-and-pencil survey, a paper consent was included in their packet and they were asked to sign and return the consent along with their survey. The survey took approximately 30 minutes and participants were compensated \$15 for their participation. For participants who had completed an

oral history with the Restorative Justice Fund, they had an option to consent for their oral history interview to be included as data in this study. Nineteen of the twenty participants who had completed an oral history consented to including their data.

Measures

Demographics

Participants were asked to report their age, gender, marital status, education level, race/ethnicity, total time spent in prison, life sentence start and end dates, life sentence crime, and employment status. We also asked participants to rate how religious they are on a scale of 0 to 10.

Moral Injury Events Scale (MIES; Nash et al., 2013)

The MIES is a nine-item, commonly used measure of exposure to morally injurious events in the context of the military. For the current study, participants were asked to rate the extent to which they have experienced or been troubled by morally injurious events “based on the experiences you’ve had over the course of your life” on a six-point Likert-type scale from *Strongly Disagree* (1) to *Strongly Agree* (6). In addition to capturing overall exposure to morally injurious events, a three-factor structure of the MIES (Bryan et al., 2016) is widely used reflecting Transgressions of Self, Transgressions of Others, and Betrayal. The Betrayal items originally designed for military populations were modified for those who experienced incarceration (see Supplement Table S1). After completing the MIES, participants were asked to report what types of events they were thinking about when completing the MIES by selecting all that applied: their life sentence crime, other events that happened prior to imprisonment, events that happened during imprisonment, and events that happened after imprisonment.

To evaluate the percent of participants in our sample with exposure to moral injury, we calculated whether individuals endorsed Transgressions by Self, Transgressions by Others, and Betrayal based on whether the individual responded either “moderately agree” or “strongly agree” to at least one of the items in the subscale (Wisco et al., 2017). We also calculated whether individuals endorsed any moral injury exposure based on responding “moderately agree” or “strongly agree” to any one of the items on the measure.

We calculated two different MIES scaled scores to evaluate whether degree of morally injury exposure related to other variables. We created an average of the first six items that comprised Transgressions of Self and Transgressions of Others (MIES-6) given that these items did not require modification from the original MIES. We also calculated a nine-item average (MIES-9) using the modified versions of the three Betrayal items. In the current study, the MIES-6 ($\alpha = .86$) and MIES-9 ($\alpha = .80$) exhibited good internal consistency.

Morally Injurious Index Event(s)

Participants were asked to: “describe the event that most deeply violated your morals or values AND caused you the most distress below (it can be something you witnessed or something you did).” Although participants were asked to report a single event, many participants described multiple events in response to this question ($M = 1.53$, $SD = .98$, range = 0–5). Participants were then asked to report whether the event(s) referred to their life sentence crime, an

Table 1
Sample Characteristics

Variable	<i>n</i> (%)
Male	41 (100)
Race/ethnicity	
White	18 (43.9)
Black/African-American	9 (22.0)
Hispanic or Latino/a	5 (12.2)
Asian/Pacific Islander	3 (7.3)
Native American	2 (4.9)
Other/mixed race	4 (9.8)
Marital Status	
Single (never married)	19 (46.3)
Divorced/separated	13 (31.7)
Married/committed relationship	7 (17.1)
Widowed	2 (4.9)
Employment status	
Employed - full-time	12 (29.3)
Employed - part-time	12 (29.3)
Unemployed - job-seeking	11 (26.8)
Unemployed - not job-seeking	6 (14.6)
Education	
9th to 11th grade	3 (7.3)
12th grade	7 (17.1)
Some college - no degree	22 (53.7)
Associate's degree	6 (14.6)
Bachelor's degree	3 (7.3)
Life sentence crime	
Murder	32 (78.0)
Robbery/kidnapping	5 (12.2)
Sexual crime	4 (9.8)
MIES endorsement	
Self transgressions	36 (87.8)
Other transgressions	37 (90.2)
Betrayal	32 (78.0)
Self and other transgressions	40 (97.6)
All items	40 (97.6)

Note. MIES Endorsement refers to whether the participant endorsed one of the items as “moderately agree” or “strongly agree” based on the approach by Wisco and colleagues (2017).

event that happened before imprisonment, during imprisonment, or after imprisonment. They were also asked to report what percentage of their free time they spent engaging in activities as an attempt to make amends for their morally injurious index event (from 0–100%).

Event-Related Rumination Inventory (ERRI; Cann et al., 2011)

The ERRI is a 20-item self-rated measure that assesses event-provoked repetitive thinking about a highly stressful event. Respondents rate the frequency of their intrusive and deliberate ruminative thoughts scored on a scale from not at all (0) to often (3). For the current study, participants were asked to respond to the items with respect to their morally injurious index event(s). Ten items focus on intrusive rumination (ERRI-I) which involves involuntary thoughts about a traumatic event immediately following the event. The other ten items focus on deliberate rumination (ERRI-D) which involves intentional thought about the event in the weeks following it. Subscale scores are calculated by summing the responses, with higher scores indicating higher levels of rumination. In the current study, the ERRI subscales exhibited excellent internal consistency (Intrusive $\alpha = .95$, Deliberate $\alpha = .89$).

Trauma-Related Guilt Inventory (TRGI; Kubany et al., 1996)

The TRGI is a 32-item questionnaire that assesses trauma-related guilt and cognitions about a specified traumatic event. In the current study, participants were asked to answer the questions with respect to their morally injurious index event(s). The questionnaire contains 3 scales and 3 subscales. The current study only used the 4-item Global Guilt scale which captures the frequency and intensity of guilt (e.g., “I experienced intense guilt that relates to what happened”), the 6-item Distress scale which assesses the amount of distress experienced when thinking about the event (e.g., “What happened causes me emotional pain”), and the 7-item Hindsight-Bias/Responsibility subscale which assesses beliefs regarding the respondents’ guilt (e.g., “I was responsible for causing what happened”). In this study, the TRGI scales exhibited good internal consistency (Global Guilt $\alpha = .92$, Distress $\alpha = .88$, Hindsight-Bias $\alpha = .92$).

Trauma-Related Shame Inventory (TRSI; Øktedalen et al., 2014)

The TRSI is a 24-item inventory that assesses trauma-related shame and associated cognitions about a specified traumatic event. For the current study, participants were asked to respond to the items with respect to their morally injurious index event(s). The items consist of 12 internalizing and 12 externalizing dimensions of trauma-related shame scored on a Likert-type scale (0 = “not true of me” to 3 = “completely true of me”). The current study only assessed the internalizing subscale (TRSI-I) which captures self-condemnation (i.e., judgmental stance of oneself) and affective/behavioral aspects of shame (i.e., hiding and withdrawal behavior). The total score is formed by summing responses, with higher scores indicating greater internalizing shame. In the current study, the TRSI-I exhibited excellent internal consistency ($\alpha = .93$).

Flourishing Scale (FS; Diener et al., 2009)

The FS scale is an 8-item questionnaire assessing subjective well-being, as measured by an individual’s perception of their relationships, self-esteem, meaning, purpose, and optimism. A 7-point Likert-type scale is used for each item from *Strongly Disagree* (1) to *Strongly Agree* (7). The items are summed to create a total score with scores ranging from 8 (languishing) to 56 (highest possible flourishing). In the current study, the FS scale exhibited excellent internal consistency ($\alpha = .93$).

Analysis Plan

For the morally injurious index event(s), open ended responses were coded by the lead author and a team of three qualitative coders. For respondents who listed multiple index events, each event was coded separately. All coders conducted their ratings independently; these ratings were then compared and discrepancies were addressed through discussions to reach consensus. The following variables were coded for each event described by the participant: event timing (preprison, prison, postprison), age of the participant when the event occurred (child, adult), event kind (act of perpetration nonlife sentence crime, act of perpetration life sentence crime, witness, victimization), whether the participant had intervened for witnessed events (yes, no), who caused the harm (self, guard, unknown other, family, friend, prisoners), who was harmed (self, vulnerable other, nonvulnerable other, other unknown), event duration (singular, multiple discrete events, prolonged series of events), and event nature (murder, assault, emotional abuse, sexual offense, domestic violence, system betrayal, property crime, and kidnapping).

Statistical analyses were performed using SPSS Version 26. To evaluate the nature of moral injury exposure in the sample, descriptive analyses were conducted examining the variable distributions. Specifically, using the MIES, we evaluated rates of endorsement of moral injury exposure as well as participant ratings of the types of events they were thinking about when answering the MIES. To evaluate the nature of morally injurious index events experienced by participants, we analyzed frequencies of the coded variables. Because participants often reported multiple events and each event was reported separately, participants could be represented in multiple categories within a given variable.

To evaluate the degree of flourishing in the sample, we first conducted descriptive analyses examining the variable distribution. Pearson correlations were then used to examine the relationship between participants’ age, total years spent in prison, years since parole, religiosity, the percentage of time spent making amends, exposure to morally injurious events (MIES-6, MIES-9), responses to index event(s) (ERRI-I, ERRI-D, TRGI, TRSI-I), and flourishing (FS). For correlational analyses, missing data was handled with pairwise deletion.

Exploratory analyses were also conducted examining whether characteristics of morally injurious index events were associated with flourishing. For these analyses, we conducted a series of independent samples *t*-tests evaluating whether there were differences in flourishing between individuals who described index events in which a particular characteristic was present compared to individuals who did not describe any index events with that particular characteristic present. For example, one of the analyses examined

whether levels of flourishing differed between those who reported at least one index event that occurred during prison compared to those who did not report any index events that occurred during prison. For these analyses, two participants with missing flourishing scores were excluded from the analyses.

Results

Moral Injury Exposure

The majority of participants endorsed moral injury exposure: 90.2% of participants ($n = 37$) endorsed transgressions by others, 87.8% ($n = 36$) endorsed transgressions by self, and 78.0% ($n = 32$) endorsed betrayal. In aggregate, 97.6% of participants ($n = 40$) had a positive endorsement of one or more MIES-9 items (see [Supplement Table S1](#) for frequencies of ratings for each MIES item). When asked about what events they were thinking of when answering the MIES, 82.9% ($n = 34$) endorsed thinking of their life sentence crime, 70.7% ($n = 29$) endorsed thinking about other events that happened prior to imprisonment, 85.4% ($n = 35$) endorsed thinking about events that happened during imprisonment, and 34.1% ($n = 14$) endorsed thinking about events that happened after imprisonment. Because participants were asked to respond to the MIES based on experiences they had over the course of their life, they were allowed to select as many options as applied; these results show that most participants were thinking about multiple events across different stages of life when responding to the MIES.

[Table 2](#) describes characteristics of participants' morally injurious index events. The majority of individuals described index events that included their life sentence crime (75.6%); however, this was not universal. Other common index events that participants described included events before (51.2%) and during imprisonment (56.1%). The most common type of index event described involved murder (41.5%). Participants largely described index events that were single time events (61.0%) and where they were the ones that caused harm (63.4%). In the qualitative coding, the respondents in each category represent the number of individuals that reported an index event falling in that category. Given that most participants reported multiple events that were coded independently, the categories are not mutually exclusive.

Flourishing

Participants reported an average flourishing score of 48.1 ($SD = 8.2$, median = 49, range = 27–56). In a large sample of U.S. college students, the average flourishing score was a 44.97 ([Diener et al., 2010](#)), and in a nationally representative study of adults in New Zealand, scores from 8 to 45 represented individuals in the lower 50th percentile and scores from 46 to 56 represented individuals in the top 50th percentile ([Hone et al., 2014](#)). Thus, on average, lifers in reentry appeared to report relatively high levels of flourishing.

Bivariate correlations between demographic variables, degree of lifetime exposure to morally injurious events (MIES-6 and MIES-9), responses to morally injurious index event(s) (ERRI-I, ERRI-D, TRGI, TRSI-I), and flourishing (FS) are reported in [Table 3](#). Greater levels of MIE-related shame (TRSI-I) were significantly associated with lower levels flourishing with a large effect size ($r = -.58$,

Table 2

Characteristics of Morally Injurious Index Events

Variable	<i>n</i> (%)
Index event timing	
Life sentence crime	31 (75.6)
Events prior to imprisonment	21 (51.2)
Events during imprisonment	23 (56.1)
Events after imprisonment	6 (14.6)
Age when event occurred	
Childhood	8 (19.5)
Adulthood	31 (75.6)
Event kind	
Act of perpetration	27 (65.9)
Witnessing	17 (41.5)
Victimization	9 (22.0)
Nature of event	
Murder	17 (41.5)
Assault	9 (22.0)
Emotional abuse	6 (14.6)
Sexual offense	6 (14.6)
Domestic violence	5 (12.2)
Act of system betrayal	5 (12.2)
Kidnapping	2 (4.9)
Who caused harm	
Self	26 (63.4)
Guard	7 (17.1)
Stranger	5 (12.2)
Family member	4 (9.8)
Friend	1 (2.4)
Other incarcerated person	7 (17.1)
Who was harmed	
Self	8 (19.5)
Vulnerable person harmed	14 (34.1)
Vulnerable person not harmed	17 (41.5)
Event duration	
Singular event	25 (61.0)
Multiple discrete events	2 (4.9)
Prolonged events	20 (48.8)

Note. Participants often reported more than one morally injurious index event. All events were rated; the percentages in the table reflect the percent of individuals that experienced an index event falling into that category. Therefore, categories are not mutually exclusive and can add up to over 100%.

$p < .01$). Additionally, greater religiosity was significantly associated with greater flourishing, though with a moderate effect size ($r = .35$, $p < .05$). With respect to guilt (TRGI), the global guilt scale had the strongest correlation with flourishing with a moderate effect size, though this correlation was only marginally significant ($r = -.31$, $p = .055$). By contrast, the TRGI distress subscale and hindsight bias subscale had weak associations with flourishing that were nonsignificant (r s: $-.18$ to $-.24$). Similarly, degree of exposure to morally injurious events (MIES-6, MIES-9), event-related rumination (ERRI-I, ERRI-D), and making amends were weakly and nonsignificantly associated with flourishing (all $|r| < .28$).

We also explored whether different features of morally injurious index event(s) (e.g., event timing, age of the individual at the time of the event, nature of the event) were associated with flourishing (see [Supplement Table S2](#)). None of these analyses were statistically significant and the effect sizes were generally weak, though some analyses revealed medium to large effect sizes. Specifically, individuals who described morally injurious index events that occurred when they were a child reported higher flourishing than

Table 3
Bivariate Correlations

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. Age													
2. Years in prison	.494**												
3. Years since parole	.208	.271											
4. Religiosity	-.080	-.115	-.272										
5. Amends (%)	.060	-.186	-.040	.127									
6. MIES-6	-.522**	-.435**	-.048	.035	.104								
7. MIES-9	-.430**	-.314*	-.026	.110	.098	.891***							
8. ERRI-I	-.277	-.401*	-.060	.095	.123	.569***	.605***						
9. ERRI-D	-.193	-.371*	.034	.125	.168	.229	.201	.560***					
10. TRGI global	.180	-.076	.119	.110	.269	.181	.353*	.435**	.420**				
11. TRGI distress	.131	-.197	-.010	.191	.164	.158	.323*	.451**	.432**	.904***			
12. TRGI hindsight	.184	.016	.373*	-.225	.062	.002	-.002	.165	.381*	.594***	.556***		
13. TRSI-I	.116	.056	.044	-.197	-.028	.187	.294	.452**	.257	.717***	.563***	.541***	
14. FS	-.187	-.110	-.241	.346*	.275	-.142	-.224	-.230	.049	-.314	-.237	-.183	-.577***

Note. *N* ranged from 35–41 based on missing data. MIES-6 = Moral Injury Events Scale-Six-Item Scale (two MIES subscales-other and self only); MIES-9 = Moral Injury Events Scale-Nine-Item Scale (all MIES subscales-other, self, and betrayal); TRGI-Global = Trauma-Related Guilt Inventory-Global Guilt Scale; TRGI-Hindsight = Trauma-Related Guilt Inventory-Hindsight Bias/Responsibility Subscale; TRGI-Distress = Trauma-Related Guilt Inventory-Distress Scale; TRSI-I = Trauma-Related Shame Inventory - Internalizing Subscale; ERRI-I = Event-Related Rumination Index-Intrusive Rumination Subscale; ERRI-D = Event-Related Rumination Index-Deliberate Rumination Subscale; FS = Flourishing Scale.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

those who did not report a morally injurious index event that occurred during childhood ($d = -.60$, $p = .143$). Additionally, individuals who described an index event that involved the perpetration of a nonlife sentence crime reported higher flourishing than those who did not describe an index event that involved the perpetration of a nonlife sentence crime. Given the small sample sizes in some groups, these analyses should be interpreted with caution.

Discussion

To our knowledge, this study is the first to explore MIE within a formerly incarcerated population. As expected, our findings demonstrated an extremely high degree of MIE within our sample. Although life sentence crimes were a common source of MIE, our results indicate that other experiences before and during prison are also critical sources of exposure. This is not surprising given that incarcerated individuals experience higher rates of childhood victimization and community violence (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1999; Huculak et al., 2011), which could be sources of moral injury exposure. Moreover, it is well-documented that violence occurs in prison, with assault victimization 18 times higher for males in prison than the general population (Wolff et al., 2007). Indeed, in terms of who caused harm during morally injurious index events, guards and other incarcerated persons ranked highest after self. It is also notable that when asked about which morally injurious event bothered them the most, many lifers reported more than one event. These findings suggest that studies of moral injury among lifers should not focus exclusively on life sentence crimes and should consider the impact of cumulative exposure to morally injurious events in this population.

Interestingly, our results revealed relatively high rates of flourishing in our sample, suggesting that it is possible for former lifers to achieve well-being in reentry. Our results also showed that higher levels of shame due to MIE were associated with a decrease in flourishing postrelease with a large effect. By contrast, event-related

guilt was not strongly associated with flourishing. This pattern of findings was expected given previous research demonstrating that shame is a maladaptive moral emotion whereas guilt has adaptive qualities which support positive behavior change (Dorahy, 2010; Tangney et al., 2007). Expressions of guilt are required in the parole process. To receive parole, a lifer must demonstrate to the parole board that they have taken full responsibility for their past actions and demonstrate high levels of guilt over those actions (*In re Shaputis*, 2008). However, societal stigma experienced postrelease, such as an “ex-con” identity and parole restrictions, has been shown to lower self-esteem and perceived ability to go “straight”—most likely through the mechanism of shame (LeBel & Richie, 2020). Future research on the impact of the parole and reentry process on moral emotions and trajectories of MIE-related shame would be an important line of inquiry.

Surprisingly, degree of MIE and rumination about morally injurious events were not associated with flourishing. Given the high rates of MIE in our sample, it is possible that a restriction of range in the degree of moral injury exposure may have led to a weak correlation with flourishing. Exploring the relationship between the extent of MIE and flourishing in a broader population of incarcerated individuals may reveal a stronger relationship. It is also possible that it's not the experience of MIE but how MIEs affect one's concept of self that impacts well-being. It was also surprising that MIE-related rumination was not associated with flourishing in our sample, particularly since intrusive rumination was moderately to strongly correlated with shame. Notably, our participants had spent an average of 28 years in prison, giving them extensive time to think about and make meaning of their experiences. It is possible that rumination may be more important in predicting well-being in the period soon after exposure to MIEs. Indeed, Zalta and Held (2020) hypothesize that the rumination process following MIEs will ultimately resolve with either external explanations of the event (leading to guilt) or internal explanations of the event (leading to shame). It is also worth noting that most aspects of

individuals' index MIEs were not associated with flourishing post-release, including the nature of the event experienced, who was harmed, and who caused harm during the moral injury event. Collectively, these findings further suggest that it is lifers' interpretation of MIEs, rather than the extent or nature of the events themselves, that appear to affect well-being upon release.

Higher levels of religiosity were moderately associated with higher levels of flourishing in our sample. This is consistent with prior research showing that religiosity is associated with enhanced well-being (Ellison & Levin, 1998). There are many possible mechanisms by which religiosity would enhance well-being among former lifers (e.g., social ties, self-esteem). One possibility is that religiosity may offer a pathway to forgiveness (Lutjen et al., 2012), which could be significant for lifers given their high rates of MIEs. Studies have shown that religion in prisons offers a means to atone for past acts and receive forgiveness to reestablish a sense of self-worth (Clear et al., 2000). Further research is needed to explore whether the benefits of religiosity are related to or independent from MIEs in this population. Interestingly, making amends, which has been discussed more consistently in the criminology literature as a mechanism for atonement, was not significantly associated with flourishing. This is notable given that participants reported a relatively high amount of free time spent making amends. This may suggest that former lifers still place high value in this process, though it may not directly impact their own well-being.

The limitations of this study should be considered when interpreting the results. This study uses cross-sectional data and has a relatively small sample size. Participants self-selected for the study and were recruited through specific organizations; thus, it is possible that the sample is not representative of the population of former lifers. However, it is worth noting that the majority of former lifers must parole to a transitional reentry home and the majority of our sample was drawn from a reentry home. Additionally, this study does not capture the experiences of people still incarcerated. It is possible that sampling from people who have been recently released from prison causes a higher degree of hope and overall sense of flourishing than would be found for people still incarcerated and those who have been out of prison for a longer period of time. Longitudinal studies exploring the impact of moral injury exposure from incarceration to reentry would be valuable in understanding how factors such as shame and well-being might change during this critical transition period.

There are several reasons why it is important to consider the well-being of people who have harmed others in serious ways. The vast majority of incarcerated people (~95%) will be released from prison at some point (James, 2015). Their well-being has an effect on their success in reentry and likelihood of reoffending. On a more basic level is the question of whether a person can be more than the worst thing they have done. Notably, participants in our sample reported that they currently spent 57.3% of their free time trying to make amends for their morally injurious index event. Our findings suggest that while it is rational to strongly condemn crimes like murder and sexual assaults as acts (and encourage guilt for these acts), it is counterproductive and potentially harmful to both the individual and society to continually shame people who have in the past committed these acts.

Our study has several important implications for professionals who work with incarcerated people or people with histories of

incarceration, especially those who have harmed others in their past. Specifically, health care and other professionals working with these populations could benefit from training on moral injury and on the harm of stigmatizing language that may increase shame. Language such as "offender," "inmate," "sexual predator," and "convict" can be replaced with "incarcerated person" or "formerly incarcerated person," which makes no judgment on their guilt or innocence and does not replicate the language used to dehumanize them in prison. In general, when members of this population are discussed in medical and behavioral health spaces, it can be beneficial to the client to de-center the crime and their incarceration as a primary feature of their identity, while at the same time being considerate of this population's higher levels of trauma and moral injury. More specifically, it is important for professionals to recognize that MI exposures beyond life sentence crimes may contribute to experiences of moral injury in this population, including events that occur during incarceration. On a larger societal level, a better understanding of the high levels of guilt and shame experienced by lifers and the strong desire to make amends could help breakdown some of stigmata of "coldness" and "heartlessness" associated with this population.

This study offers a first look into moral injury exposure in a formerly incarcerated population. Due to this, the study is primarily descriptive and exploratory in nature. These limitations notwithstanding, our findings indicate that this population has experienced a high degree of MIE and that MIE-related shame and religiosity are associated with flourishing postrelease. There is a need for further research exploring moral injury in incarcerated and formerly incarcerated populations, such as currently incarcerated lifers, incarcerated juveniles, incarcerated women, people incarcerated for shorter sentences, and the equivalent paroled populations. A better understanding of the challenges these populations face due to MIE would support the development of services to improve their well-being, which could improve their chances of successful reentry.

References

- Appleton, C. A. (2010). *Life after life imprisonment*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199582716.001.0001>
- Berg, M. T., & Cobbina, J. E. (2017). Cognitive transformation, social ecological settings, and the reentry outcomes of women offenders. *Crime & Delinquency*, 63(12), 1522–1546. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011128716660521>
- Berg, M. T., & Huebner, B. M. (2011). Reentry and the ties that bind: An examination of socialties, employment, and recidivism. *Justice Quarterly*, 28(2), 382–410. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07418825.2010.498383>
- Bravo, A. J., Kelley, M. L., Mason, R., Ehlke, S., Vinci, C., & Redman, J. C. (2020). Rumination as a Mediator of the Associations Between Moral Injury and Mental Health Problems in Combat-Wounded Veterans. *Traumatology*, 26(1), 52–60. <https://doi.org/10.1037/trm0000198>
- Brooks, T. (Ed.). (2014). *Shame Punishment*. Ashgate.
- Bryan, C. J., Bryan, A. O., Anestis, M. D., Anestis, J. C., Green, B. A., Etienne, N., Morrow, C. E., & Ray-Sannerud, B. (2016). Measuring moral injury: Psychometric properties of the moralinjury events scale in two military samples. *Assessment*, 23(5), 557–570. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1073191115590855>
- Bureau of Justice Statistics. (1999). *Prior abuse reported by inmates and probationers*. <https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/parip.pdf>
- Burnett, R., & Maruna, S. (2006). The kindness of prisoners: The strengths-based resettlement in theory and in action. *Criminology & Criminal*

- Justice: An International Journal*, 6(1), 83–106. <https://doi.org/10.1177/174895806060668>
- California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, Office of Research, Division of Internal Oversight and Research. (2016). *Offender demographics for the 24-month period, ending December 2016*. https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/research/wp-content/uploads/sites/174/2021/06/DataPoints_122016.pdf
- California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, Office of Research, Division of Internal Oversight and Research. (2017). *Offender demographics for the 24-month period, ending December 2017*. https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/research/wp-content/uploads/sites/174/2021/06/DataPoints_122017.pdf
- California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, Office of Research, Division of Internal Oversight and Research. (2018). *Offender demographics for the 24-month period, ending December 2018*. https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/research/wp-content/uploads/sites/174/2021/06/201812_DataPoints.pdf
- Cann, A., Calhoun, L. G., Tedeschi, R. G., Triplett, K. N., Vishnevsky, T., & Lindstrom, C. M. (2011). Assessing posttraumatic cognitive processes: The Event Related Rumination Inventory. *Anxiety, Stress, & Coping: An International Journal*, 24(2), 137–156. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10615806.2010.529901>
- Clear, T. R., Hardyman, P. L., Stout, B., Lucken, K., & Dammer, H. R. (2000). The value of religion: An inmate perspective. *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, 16(1), 53–74. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1043986200016001004>
- Diener, E., Wirtz, D., Tov, W., Kim-Prieto, C., Choi, D. W., Oishi, S., & Biswas-Diener, R. (2010). New well-being measures: Short scales to assess flourishing and positive and negative feelings. *Social Indicators Research*, 97(2), 143–156. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-009-9493-y>
- Diener, E., Wirtz, D., Tov, W., Kim-Prieto, C., Choi, D., Oishi, S., & Biswas-Diener, R. (2009). New measures of well-being: Flourishing and positive and negative feelings. *Social Indicators Research*, 39, 247–266. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-90-481-2354-4_12
- Dorahy, M. J. (2010). The impact of dissociation, shame, and guilt on interpersonal relationships in chronically traumatized individuals: A pilot study. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 23(5), 653–656. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.20564>
- Durkheim, E. (1984). *The division of labor in society*. Free Press. (Original work published 1893) <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-17729-5>
- Ellison, C. G., & Levin, J. S. (1998). The religion-health connection: Evidence, theory, and future directions. *Health Education & Behavior*, 25(6), 700–720. <https://doi.org/10.1177/109019819802500603>
- Griffin, B. J., Purcell, N., Burkman, K., Litz, B. T., Bryan, C. J., Schmitz, M., Villierme, C., Walsh, J., & Maguen, S. (2019). Moral injury: An integrative review. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 32(3), 350–362. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.22362>
- Hone, L., Jarden, A., & Schofield, G. (2014). Psychometric properties of the Flourishing Scale in a New Zealand sample. *Social Indicators Research*, 119(2), 1031–1045. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-013-0501-x>
- Huculak, S., McLennan, J. D., & Bordin, I. A. (2011). Exposure to violence in incarcerated youth from the city of São Paulo. *Rivista Brasileira de Psiquiatria*, 33(3), 314–320. <https://doi.org/10.1590/S1516-44462011005000011>
- In re Shaputis, 44 Cal. 4th 1241. (2008). <https://scocal.stanford.edu/opinion/re-shaputis-33124>
- James, N. (2015). Offender reentry: Correctional statistics, reintegration into the community, and recidivism. Congressional Research Service.
- Jankowski, P. J., Sandage, S. J., Bell, C. A., Davis, D. E., Porter, E., Jessen, M., Motzny, C. L., Ross, K. V., & Owen, J. (2020). Virtue, flourishing, and positive psychology in psychotherapy: An overview and research prospectus. *Psychotherapy*, 57(3), 291–309. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pst0000285>
- Kubany, E. S., Haynes, S. N., Abueg, F. R., Manke, F. P., Brennan, J. M., & Stahura, C. (1996). Development and validation of the trauma-related guilt inventory (TRGI). *Psychological Assessment*, 8(4), 428–444. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1040-3590.8.4.428>
- LeBel, T. P., & Richie, M. (2020). Does thinking of oneself as a “typical former prisoner” contribute to reentry success or failure? In A. Leverenz, E. Y. Chen, & J. Christian (Eds.), *Beyond Recidivism* (pp. 172–194). New York University Press. <https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9781479862726.003.0009>
- Levin, M. (2014, May 15). Behind California’s dramatic increase in lifers freed from prisons. KQED. <https://www.kqed.org/news/135494/behind-californias-dramatic-increase-in-murderers-freed-from-prisons>
- Link, N. W., Ward, J. T., & Stansfield, R. (2019). Consequences of mental and physical health for reentry and recidivism: Toward a health-based model of desistance. *Criminology: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 57(3), 544–573. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9125.12213>
- Litz, B. T., Stein, N., Delaney, E., Lebowitz, L., Nash, W. P., Silva, C., & Maguen, S. (2009). Moral injury and moral repair in war veterans: A preliminary model and intervention strategy. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 29(8), 695–706. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2009.07.003>
- Lutjen, L. J., Siltan, N. R., & Flannelly, K. J. (2012). Religion, forgiveness, hostility and health: A structural equation analysis. *Journal of Religion and Health*, 51(2), 468–478. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-011-9511-7>
- Nash, W. P., Marino Carper, T. L., Mills, M. A., Au, T., Goldsmith, A., & Litz, B. T. (2013). Psychometric evaluation of the moral injury events scale. *Military Medicine*, 178(6), 646–652. <https://doi.org/10.7205/MILMED-D-13-00017>
- Øktedalen, T., Hagtvet, K. A., Hoffart, A., Langkaas, T. F., & Smucker, M. (2014). The Trauma Related Shame Inventory: Measuring trauma-related shame among patients with PTSD. *Journal of Psychopathology and Behavioral Assessment*, 36(4), 600–615. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10862-014-9422-5>
- Palmer, C., & Christian, J. (2019). Work matters: Formerly incarcerated men’s resiliency in reentry. *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion*, 38(5), 583–598. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EDI-10-2018-0177>
- Pettus-Davis, C., Renn, T., Veeh, C. A., & Eikenberry, J. (2019). Intervention development study of the five-key model for reentry: An evidence-driven prisoner reentry intervention. *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, 58(7), 614–643. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10509674.2019.1635242>
- Purcell, N., Griffin, B. J., Burkman, K., & Maguen, S. (2018). Opening a door to a new life”: The role of forgiveness in healing from moral injury. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 9, Article 498. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2018.00498>
- Tangney, J. P., & Dearing, R. L. (2002). *Shame and Guilt*. The Guilford Press.
- Tangney, J. P., Stuewig, J., & Mashek, D. J. (2007). Moral emotions and moral behavior. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 58(1), 345–372. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.56.091103.070145>
- Velotti, P., Garofalo, C., Bottazzi, F., & Caretti, V. (2017). Faces of shame: implications for self-esteem, emotion regulation, aggression, and well-being. *The Journal of Psychology: Interdisciplinary and Applied*, 151(2), 171–184. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00223980.2016.1248809>
- Weisberg, R., Mukamal, D. M., & Segall, J. D. (2011). *Life after limbo: An examination of parole release for prisoners serving life sentences with the possibility of parole in California*. Stanford Criminal Justice Center.
- Western, B., Braga, A. A., Davis, J., & Sirois, C. (2015). Stress and hardship after prison. *American Journal of Sociology*, 120(5), 1512–1547. <https://doi.org/10.1086/681301>
- Williamson, V., Murphy, D., Stevelink, S. A. M., Allen, S., Jones, E., & Greenberg, N. (2021). The impact of moral injury on the wellbeing of U.K. military veterans. *BMC Psychology*, 9(1), Article 73. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-021-00578-7>
- Wisco, B. E., Marx, B. P., May, C. L., Martini, B., Krystal, J. H., Southwick, S. M., & Pietrzak, R. H. (2017). Moral injury in U.S. combat veterans:

Results from the national health and resilience in veterans study. *Depression and Anxiety*, 34(4), 340–347. <https://doi.org/10.1002/da.22614>

Wolff, N., Blitz, C. L., Shi, J., Siegel, J., & Bachman, R. (2007). Physical violence inside prisons: Rates of victimization. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 34(5), 588–599. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093854806296830>

Zalta, A. K., & Held, P. (2020). Commentary on the special issue on moral injury: Leveraging existing constructs to test the Heuristic Model of

Moral Injury. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 33(4), 598–599. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.22516>

Received April 5, 2022

Revision received August 19, 2022

Accepted September 14, 2022 ■

Members of Underrepresented Groups: Reviewers for Journal Manuscripts Wanted

If you are interested in reviewing manuscripts for APA journals, the APA Publications and Communications Board would like to invite your participation. Manuscript reviewers are vital to the publications process. As a reviewer, you would gain valuable experience in publishing. The P&C Board is particularly interested in encouraging members of underrepresented groups to participate more in this process.

If you are interested in reviewing manuscripts, please write APA Journals at Reviewers@apa.org. Please note the following important points:

- To be selected as a reviewer, you must have published articles in peer-reviewed journals. The experience of publishing provides a reviewer with the basis for preparing a thorough, objective review.
- To be selected, it is critical to be a regular reader of the five to six empirical journals that are most central to the area or journal for which you would like to review. Current knowledge of recently published research provides a reviewer with the knowledge base to evaluate a new submission within the context of existing research.
- To select the appropriate reviewers for each manuscript, the editor needs detailed information. Please include with your letter your vita. In the letter, please identify which APA journal(s) you are interested in, and describe your area of expertise. Be as specific as possible. For example, “social psychology” is not sufficient—you would need to specify “social cognition” or “attitude change” as well.
- Reviewing a manuscript takes time (1–4 hours per manuscript reviewed). If you are selected to review a manuscript, be prepared to invest the necessary time to evaluate the manuscript thoroughly.

APA now has an online video course that provides guidance in reviewing manuscripts. To learn more about the course and to access the video, visit <http://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/resources/review-manuscript-ce-video.aspx>.