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# Evaluation of Los Angeles County's 2019 Moral Injury Conference

**F**rom May 29 to 31, 2019, the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health (LACDMH) and the Shay Moral Injury Center at Volunteers of America hosted a three-day conference, “Moral Injury and Pathways to Recovery.” The RAND Corporation evaluated the reach and impact of the conference as part of a contract funded by LACDMH and administered by the California Mental Health Services Authority (CalMHSA). The specific goals of the evaluation were to describe (1) the characteristics of those attending the conference, (2) attendees’ awareness of key conference themes, and (3) attendees’ knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and experiences as they relate to moral injury. This report describes the outcome of this evaluation. The report begins with an overview of the concept of *moral injury* and some general background on the topic. This is followed by a description of the moral injury conference, its goals, and RAND’s methods for evaluating the conference. Evaluation results are presented and discussed, along with recommendations for any future moral injury conferences.

*Moral injury* is an emerging concept associated with experiences of trauma. It has been defined

variously as the psychological or spiritual harm that results when someone “perpetrates, fails to prevent, bears witness to, or learns about acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations” (Litz et al., 2009, p. 700) and as a “disruption in an individual’s sense of personal morality and capacity to behave in a just manner” (Drescher et al., 2011, p. 8). In the emphasis on moral transgression, moral injury is distinct from other forms of trauma and appears to require unique forms of treatment or intervention (Litz et al., 2009). Originally conceived as a

## KEY FINDINGS

- Conference attendees were diverse in their racial and ethnic backgrounds, but not their educational backgrounds or religious affiliations.
- Most attendees were women and over 30 years old.
- Conference attendees were mostly mental health professionals and religious and community leaders working with veterans and people exposed to community violence.
- Nearly all conference attendees endorsed key moral injury themes, although endorsement of the concept of *posttraumatic growth* was less common than other themes.
- Most participants reported gaining relevant knowledge.

way to understand and address issues experienced by military veterans (Shay, 1994), the concept is increasingly applied to other populations and other traumas, including workers in child protective services (Haight, Sugrue, and Calhoun, 2017), physicians and other health care workers (Talbot and Dean, 2018), and educators (Sugrue, 2019). In these populations, moral injury is an alternative or complementary view of symptoms sometimes labeled burnout (Talbot and Dean, 2018).

Few scientific studies of moral injury have been conducted outside military contexts, and studies tend to involve small samples, are inconsistent in quality, and are inconsistent in their measurement of the construct (Griffin et al., 2019). Conceptions of moral injury largely emphasize disruption of belief in oneself and a just world by morally transgressive events, along with a “wide range of biological, psychological/behavioral, social, and religious/spiritual sequelae associated with exposure to potentially morally injurious events” (Griffin et al., 2019). In this way, the emerging literature parallels a larger literature in psychology developed over the past few decades examining the conditions under which negative life events shatter personal belief systems versus foster individual growth (Collins, Taylor, and Skokan, 1990). The topic of moral injury is transdisciplinary; those who study or attempt to heal moral injury include psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, and other mental health professionals; spiritual leaders; and theologians. The topic also spans diverse religions and spiritual beliefs.

LACDMH and the Shay Center hosted “Moral Injury and Pathways to Recovery” with the goals of deepening knowledge about moral injury and effective recovery strategies and strengthening collaborative connections. The conference covered new applications of the moral injury concept beyond military veterans—to the incarceration and child welfare systems, social movements, religious communities, and caregivers. Targeted attendees consisted of mental health professionals, veterans, consumers of mental health services, students, scholars, researchers, and community and congregational leaders, as well as families affected by moral injury.

The conference included an option to register for the first day of the conference only. Day one

consisted of five plenary sessions. Days two and three had tracks of ten hours of seminars.

All sessions were designed to do the following:

- Educate attendees in holistic and intersectional strategies for recovery from moral injury–related trauma. Such strategies consist of clinical approaches, art therapies, academic theories and research, narrative and other humanities-based approaches in medicine, peer-led recovery, and theological or religious perspectives and spiritual or ritual practices.
- Enable attendees to practice and apply effective strategies for addressing moral injury–related traumas in both individuals and the communities they serve.
- Increase capacities for addressing moral injury in diverse families and communities as an aspect of trauma exposure and as a consequence of societal issues, such as poverty, racism, sexism, homophobia, violence, and other forms of discrimination and oppression.
- Provide opportunities for networking and building collaboration and partnerships among colleagues working on moral injury.
- Offer self-care strategies for caregivers to mitigate the isolation and burnout of professionals and volunteers working with survivors of moral injury trauma.
- Create networks for support, education, and best-practice sharing to address moral injury in the future.

**RAND’s evaluation of the conference had three goals: to describe (1) the characteristics of those attending the conference, (2) attendees’ awareness of key conference themes, and (3) attendees’ knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and experiences as they relate to moral injury.** To accomplish this, RAND conducted an online survey of individuals who registered for the conference, inviting them to participate in the survey using the email address they provided as part of their conference registration. All registered attendees (245 individuals) were invited to participate in the five-minute survey and offered \$10 as an incentive to complete it; 110 people did so (a 45 percent response rate). The field period for the survey was June 8–30, 2019.

## Findings

### Conference Attendees Were Diverse in Their Racial and Ethnic Backgrounds, but Not Their Educational or Religious Affiliations, and Most Attendees Were Women and Over 30 Years Old

Characteristics of the sample of attendees responding to our survey are displayed in Table 1. In interpreting these and other findings, the possibility should be kept in mind that individuals with particular characteristics may be more likely to respond to the RAND survey. We can describe only those who responded to our survey, not any who might have been present at the conference but failed to participate. However, these descriptives are our best indicator of the likely characteristics of conference participants. The descriptives suggest a diverse group of attendees in regard to several characteristics. Far more Native Americans, Alaska natives, native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders, and blacks attended than would be expected based on Los Angeles County Census statistics (U.S. Census, undated). Making way for this diversity, the two largest racial/ethnic groups in Los Angeles County, Latinos and whites, were under-represented compared with their percentages in the county. Consistent with the traditional application of moral injury to describe the experiences of veterans, they were strongly represented at the conference. Veterans made up 11 percent of the sample RAND surveyed but only about 3 percent of Los Angeles County’s population, suggesting good relative reach to this affected group.

Other groups overrepresented at the conference suggest some limits to diversity. The conference targeted scholars and might be expected to include a relatively large percentage of individuals with college or advanced degrees; indeed, 81 percent of survey participants were educated at this level, and the majority of the sample, 60 percent, had advanced degrees. Only 18 percent of survey respondents were male, and only 9 percent were under 30 years old. There was also little attendance by individuals following faith traditions other than Christianity. Fifty-four percent of the sample described themselves as Christian, and another 10 percent reported

TABLE 1  
Survey Sample Demographic Characteristics

Characteristic	Percentage
Gender	
Male	18
Female	81
Other	1
Age	
18–29	9
30–49	35
50–64	41
65 or older	16
Race <sup>a</sup>	
White	56
Black	21
Asian	12
Native American or Alaska native	10
Middle Eastern or North African	4
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	2
Other	11
Latino	25
Education	
High school completion or equivalent	1
Some college	9
Associate’s or technical degree	9
College degree	20
Advanced degree	61
U.S. veteran	11
Religious affiliation	
None	9
Agnostic or atheist	7
Baha’i	1
Buddhist	3
Christian	54
Hindu	0
Jewish	5
Muslim	1
Other	20
Religion/spirituality is an important part of participant’s life (moderately or strongly agrees)	89

NOTE: Percentages are rounded and might not sum to 100.

<sup>a</sup> Some individuals endorsed multiple categories.

following a Christian faith in their write-in responses to the “other” religion category (typically, Catholic). The next most common responses were atheist or agnostic (7 percent) and none (9 percent). An additional 9 percent (who wrote in a religion) described a set of beliefs that blended religions or were primarily spiritual. Consistent with the conference theme, nearly nine in ten respondents reported that religion or spirituality was an important aspect of their lives.

More than one-half of attendees responding to the survey (57 percent) reported attending all three days of the conference, 22 percent attended only one day, and 20 percent attended two days. One percent attended less than one day.

### Conference Attendees Were Mostly Mental Health Professionals and Religious and Community Leaders Working with Veterans and People Exposed to Community Violence

The survey asked attendees to describe themselves using categories of attendees targeted by conference organizers (these categories are listed in Table 2). The great majority of conference attendees, 91 percent, were individuals who described themselves as volunteering or working with individuals who have experienced moral injury, most often working with military veterans or people exposed or subjected to community violence. Attendees were mental health professionals (37 percent) and religious and community leaders (31 and 27 percent, respectively). About one in four said that they were volunteers, and an equal percentage said that they were family members or caregivers to someone who has been morally injured. Other backgrounds and professions were less common, as displayed in the table. **More than three in four attendees (78 percent) said that they had personally experienced moral injury**, indicating that most conference participants had both a personal and a professional stake in the proceedings. Almost one-half of attendees reported that they had experienced professional burnout in the past 12 months, consistent with literature suggesting that burnout and moral injury may result from similar situations and have overlapping symptoms (Talbot and Dean, 2018).

TABLE 2  
Characteristics of the Sample Related to Moral Injury

Characteristic	Percentage
Works or volunteers directly with individuals who have experienced moral injury	
No	9
Yes <sup>a</sup>	
Military veterans	44
Children in the child welfare system	21
Incarcerated individuals	22
Individuals exposed or subjected to community violence	45
Health care workers	33
Job or role <sup>a</sup>	
Academic or researcher	18
Mental health professional	37
Religious or spiritual leader	31
Community leader	27
Volunteer (working with individuals or communities that have been morally injured)	23
Family member or caregiver of someone who has been morally injured	23
Student	15
Peer-support specialist	10
Consumer of mental health services	11
Physical health professional	4
Experienced burnout related to caring for those with moral injury (in past 12 months)	45
Personally experienced moral injury	78

<sup>a</sup> Sums to >100 because some individuals endorsed multiple categories.

### Nearly All Conference Attendees Endorsed Key Moral Injury Themes, Although Endorsement of the Concept of *Posttraumatic Growth* Was Less Common Than Other Themes

Given the conference goal of deepening knowledge of moral injury, it is reasonable to expect that all or nearly all in attendance would come away with an acceptance of key moral injury concepts. RAND

measured conference participants' acceptance of a central tenet of moral injury, that a traumatic event can undermine a person's belief in him- or herself or belief that life has meaning. Consistent with expectations, nearly all attendees, 97 percent, moderately or strongly believed that this was the case (see Table 3). Nearly as many attendees (94 percent) agreed with the less well-established idea that was integral to LACDMH and the Shay Center's conference program—that moral injury can result from poverty, racism, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of discrimination. Importantly, should LACDMH and the Shay Center desire that the conference ultimately influence the well-being of Los Angeles County residents, nearly all conference participants (97 percent) reported that they planned to incorporate strategies for addressing moral injury with the individuals and communities they serve. This suggests good acceptance of key messages among attendees and intentions to act on them, although we cannot be certain (given the limits of our methodology) whether attendees held these beliefs and intentions before attending or acquired them at the conference.

RAND also asked whether participants believed that moral injury could result in posttraumatic growth in the form of “increased personal strength and a greater sense of purpose or meaning.” In contrast to other moral injury beliefs RAND measured,

this was not a particular theme of the conference but is an emerging area of study in moral injury research and is important because such a belief would suggest the possibility of affected individuals not only healing from moral injury but also growing stronger than they were prior to the injury as a result of the process of recovery (Harris et al., 2015). Seventy-two percent of attendees endorsed this idea. Although this is a strong majority of conference participants, this is an area LACDMH and the Shay Center might consider focusing on more strongly in future conferences to deepen understanding of the process and foster hope among attendees.

### Most Participants Reported Gaining Relevant Knowledge

**Most participants reported gaining knowledge in areas consistent with conference goals, as well as access to resources and expanded personal contacts, also consistent with stated conference goals. However, a minority did not report these gains or felt confused about how to address moral injury going forward.** As indicated in Table 4, 86 percent of participants said that they learned useful strategies to help those with moral injury and how to apply knowledge of moral injury to new populations and contexts. Roughly the same percentages (84 to 87 percent) said that attending the conference increased their capacity to address moral injury in diverse families and communities, made them aware of additional resources for addressing moral injury, and expanded their moral injury networks. Slightly fewer, but still a strong majority, indicated that they learned useful strategies to support their own well-being (80 percent) or to support caregivers to those who have experienced moral injury (76 percent). These are areas in which LACDMH and the Shay Center may wish to expand their coverage in future conferences. Finally, the vast majority of attendees (81 percent) did not agree that the conference left them “confused about how to address moral injury in the communities or individuals” they serve. Although these are positive findings, indicating that most attendees experienced the conference as intended, they indicate room for progress. In particular, 20 and 24 percent

TABLE 3  
Nearly All Conference Participants Endorsed Key Conference Themes and Plans to Act on Conference Information

Moral Injury–Related Belief or Intention	Percentage That Moderately or Strongly Agreed
A traumatic event can undermine a person's belief in him- or herself or belief that life has meaning	97
Moral injury can result from poverty, racism, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of discrimination	94
You plan to incorporate strategies for addressing moral injury with the individuals or communities you serve	97
Trauma can result in increased personal strength and a greater sense of purpose or meaning	72

TABLE 4

Most Participants Reported Gaining Knowledge, Resources, and Personal Contacts at the Conference, Consistent with Conference Goals

Perception of the Conference	Percentage That Moderately or Strongly Agreed
At the conference, you . . .	
learned useful strategies to help those with moral injury	86
learned how to apply knowledge of moral injury to new populations and contexts	86
increased your capacity to address moral injury in diverse families and communities	85
learned useful strategies to support your own well-being and address or prevent burnout	80
learned how to support caregivers to people who have been morally injured	76
expanded the network of people and organizations you can use to help in your moral injury-related work	84
The moral injury conference . . .	
made you aware of resources to help those with moral injury that you did not know about before	87
left you confused about how to address moral injury among the communities or individuals you serve	19
represented a wide variety of cultures, spiritual traditions, and professional perspectives	88

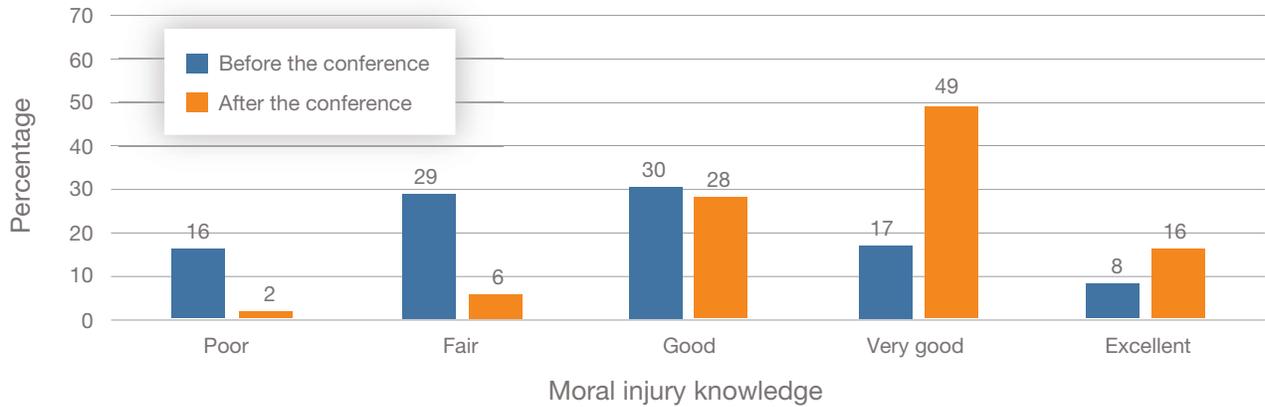
of attendees would benefit from enhanced programming around strategies to support their own and others' well-being, respectively. And it may be helpful for future conferences to incorporate a closing session to address the one in five who were left confused about how to address moral injury. This session might focus on integrating the day's sessions or next steps for attendees.

**The majority of attendees perceived a substantive increase in their levels of overall knowledge of moral injury and recovery from before to after the conference.** Two items were included in the survey to provide a summary picture of the conference's impact on participants. These items asked respondents to rate their knowledge of moral injury before the conference as poor, fair, good, very good, or excellent and then, separately, to rate their knowledge of moral injury after the conference using these same options. Overall, 69 percent of attendees rated their postconference knowledge at a level greater than their preconference knowledge; the ratings of 23 percent indicated no change or a decrease in perceived knowledge. The average change across all participants was just less than one point (0.96). That is, attendees moved from a rating of good to very good, or poor to fair, and so on, on average. Detailed results are displayed in Figure 1. Most notably, although only 25 percent of attendees rated their preconference knowledge of moral injury as very good or excellent, 65 percent rated their postconference knowledge at these levels. Only 2 percent rated their postconference knowledge of moral injury as poor.

**It is unclear whether spending more time at the conference resulted in greater increases in knowledge, a result that would support a scientifically stronger causal argument that the conference made a difference in participants' understanding of moral injury and recovery.** In an effort to determine whether those who attended more of the conference acquired greater amounts of knowledge and other resources, RAND tested for differences between those who attended for three days versus those who attended for fewer days, examining responses to all of the items displayed in Tables 3 and 4. Only one statistically significant difference was observed. One hundred percent of those who attended all three days of the conference reported that they plan to incorporate strategies for addressing moral injury with the people they serve, while 94 percent of those who attended for fewer days reported this intention. This might indicate that greater time spent at the conference increased attendees' motivation or that

FIGURE 1

Participants Rated Their Knowledge of Moral Injury More Positively After the Conference Than Before, with Nearly Two in Three Rating Their Postconference Knowledge as “Very Good” or “Excellent”



those who already planned to use information from the conference in their moral injury work spent more time there gathering that information. Likewise, the lack of other statistical differences may indicate that nothing additional was gained by attending the conference longer or that those who spent more time at the conference were more knowledgeable about moral injury before the conference than those who spent less time there and thus gained less additional knowledge. This might occur if those who are new to moral injury were more exploratory in their approach to the conference, committing fewer days of their schedules to a topic of relatively unknown utility to their work. To clarify whether this was the case, RAND tested whether those who attended the conference for three days reported a smaller difference in pre- versus postconference knowledge than those who attended for a shorter period. Seventy-six percent of those who attended the conference for fewer than three days rated their postconference knowledge higher than their rating of their preconference knowledge, while this was true of only 63 percent of those attending all three days. This difference did not reach statistical significance, but it provides some limited support for the notion that moral injury novices might have spent less time at the conference but learned more than those already well acquainted with the topic. If true, this would provide stronger support for the conclusion that conference had a causal effect on participant knowledge.

## Conclusions

The “Moral Injury and Pathways to Recovery” conference attracted a racially and ethnically diverse group of attendees. A majority of attendees were Christian and were mental health professionals or religious or community leaders working with veterans and individuals exposed to community violence. We found that nearly all conference participants endorsed key conference themes and planned to act on conference information. We noted that posttraumatic growth was endorsed less often than other themes, so future conferences may want to build on this area, in addition to continuing to promote other themes. Our analysis found that most participants reported gaining relevant knowledge, as well as access to resources and expanded personal contacts. Further, the majority of attendees perceived a substantive increase in their levels of overall knowledge of moral injury and recovery from before to after the conference. However, about one in five participants felt confused about how to address moral injury going forward or said that they did not learn strategies to support their own or others’ well-being, suggesting potential areas of improvement for future conferences. Overall, the findings suggest that the conference was largely successful in attaining its major goals.

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