

## STUDY NOTES

# UNDERSTANDING THE LINK BETWEEN MINORITY STRESS AND MORAL INJURY

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## HIGHLIGHTS

### WHAT ARE STUDY NOTES?

*Study Notes* provide a plain-language summary of a research project led or supported by the Atlas Institute for Veterans and Families. The aim is to ensure that Veterans and Families can better access and understand emerging research and key findings.

A single research study cannot give us all the answers, but every well-conducted study gives us a piece of the puzzle.

- Experiences of minority stress (discrimination, marginalization and internalized stigma) have been proven to have an impact on the mental health of sexual and gender minorities (SGMs). In fact, SGMs are at a greater risk of developing mental health conditions because of their socially stigmatized identities.
- As the first mixed methods study to explore dimensions of moral injury that results from minority stress among SGMs, this study helps create a starting point for understanding how these are linked and why SGMs experience higher rates of mental health challenges compared to the general population.
- The study identified four core themes related to moral injury among SGMs: shame, guilt, betrayal/loss of trust and attachment injuries.
- The intensity of minority stress-related moral injury was positively associated with riskier (or more harmful) alcohol use and trauma-related.
- The study and its findings, along with further research based on these, can support the development of new clinical interventions and/or support existing therapies to be more inclusive, appropriate and tailored.
- Findings from this research can be directly applied to Veterans and LGBT Purge survivors because there were a number of participants reflecting these perspectives.



## WHY IS THE STUDY IMPORTANT?

**MORAL INJURY** refers to the psychological, social and spiritual impact of events or acts that a person performs, witnesses or fails to prevent, which conflict with one's own deeply held beliefs.

It is a specific type of psychological injury that reflects enduring impact on an individual's self-image and world view.

To learn more about moral injury and what it can feel like, visit: [atlasveterans.ca/moral-injury](https://atlasveterans.ca/moral-injury)



There is a large body of evidence telling us that sexual and gender minorities (SGMs, i.e. members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community) are disproportionately affected by mental health challenges, including posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), substance use disorders, mood and anxiety disorders (e.g. generalized anxiety disorder and major depressive disorder), body image disturbances, and suicide ideation and attempts.

Research has shown that this increased risk for developing mental health conditions among SGMs results from minority stress factors, such as discrimination, marginalization and stigmatization<sup>1</sup>. SGMs can often experience unique social stressors based on the oppressed and stigmatized identities of their community – including rejection and violence – which can often lead to feelings of overwhelming shame, guilt and betrayal, all of which are signs of moral injury<sup>2,3,4</sup>.

This exploratory research provides a starting point for understanding the links between these minority stress experiences and moral injury. This will help researchers and service providers to better understand why SGMs experience higher rates of mental health challenges, especially trauma-related symptoms, and ultimately improve treatment and outcomes.



## WHAT DID THE STUDY AIM TO FIND OUT?

This study aimed to determine if SGMs have similar or unique presentations of moral injury, as well as to further understand the impacts of minority stress-related moral injury on overall mental health and well-being.

The core questions the study aimed to answer were:

- What core features of moral injury are SGMs experiencing due to their stigmatized identities?
- Are the core features of moral injury among SGMs different or the same as current findings about moral injury in previously investigated populations?
- Do themes emerging from the interview data align with numerical measures of exposure to and perceived intensity of minority stress-related potentially morally injurious events, and is this associated with mental health outcomes?

### QUALITATIVE DATA

Descriptive information that captures characteristics and qualities of observable experiences, expressed in words instead of numbers. It can include information from things like surveys, focus groups or interviews.

### QUANTITATIVE MEASURES

Methods of gathering numerical information that can be used to perform comparisons and statistical analyses.



## WHAT DID THE STUDY DISCOVER?

### CISGENDER

When a person's sense of gender is the same as the sex (male/female) assigned to them at birth (i.e. they are not transgender).

- Study findings identified four core themes related to moral injury among SGMs:
  - Shame
  - Guilt
  - Betrayal/loss of trust
  - Attachment injuries
- Attachment injuries emerged as a feature of moral injury that was unique to SGMs when compared to core features of moral injury from studies with heterosexual and cisgender individuals. This showcases the complexity and distinctiveness of moral injury presentation in this group.
- The presentation of moral injury features in the qualitative interviews varied based on data about exposure to and perceived intensity of minority stress-related potentially morally injurious events.
- Exposure to and intensity of minority stress-related potentially morally injurious events were associated with increased hazardous alcohol use and trauma-related symptoms.

*Learn more about what these findings mean in the [Implications section](#).*

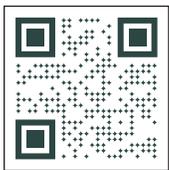


## HOW WAS THIS STUDY CONDUCTED?

### THE LGBT PURGE FUND

is a not-for-profit corporation that was set up to manage a portion of the funds that emerged from the class action settlement related to the "purge" in the military, Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) and federal public service between the 1950s and mid-1990s. These funds are used for projects that focus on reconciliation and memorialization.

Learn more about the LGBT Purge Fund: [lgbtpurgefund.com](http://lgbtpurgefund.com)



This study was designed in collaboration with the LGBT Purge Fund using a mixed methods approach that included:

**QUALITATIVE DATA:** Individual semi-structured interviews with research participants to better understand the lived experiences of SGMs in relation to the morally injurious dimensions of their minority stress experiences.

**QUANTITATIVE MEASURES:** This included self-report questionnaires and a clinical assessment. Self-report questionnaires measured exposure to minority stress-related potentially morally injurious events, alcohol consumption, symptoms of depression, presence and severity of trauma-related symptoms, childhood trauma and lifetime exposure to traumatic events.

The clinical assessment was performed to screen for the presence of mental health challenges.

### PARTICIPANTS

There were 37 SGM participants:

- Diverse sexual orientations, genders, racial and ethnic identities
- Included LGBT Purge survivors and Veterans

Participants were recruited across clinics and agencies serving SGMs, as well as with assistance from the LGBT Purge Fund and the Atlas Institute for Veterans and Families network.



## WHAT ARE SOME STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY?

The following strengths may have supported the study results:

- The use of a mixed methods research design (using qualitative and quantitative measures and comparing them) allowed the study to draw richer conclusions about the morally injurious dimensions of minority stress.
- Multiple means of data collection (self-report questionnaires, clinical assessments, semi-structured qualitative interviews) helped generate more specific results to better understand moral injury from minority stress experiences
- Performing qualitative research with a large sample enabled researchers to explore more and different ways SGMs might be impacted by minority stress-related potentially moral injurious events. This led to a broader scope of minority stress-related experiences and outcomes being included in the study analysis and findings.

The following limitations may have impacted study outcomes:

- The Moral Injury Events Scale was adapted to capture minority stress-related moral injury among study participants. However, there is currently no validated scale that specifically measures moral injury from minority stress experiences.
  - The Atlas Institute has a project underway to validate a scale for minority stress-related moral injury.
- A median split method used to categorize participants into “low” and “high” moral injury groups relied on an arbitrary threshold, rather than research-validated cutoff scores for minority-stress related moral injury severity, as this does not currently exist.

### MEDIAN SPLIT METHOD

A method of research data analysis in which researchers calculate the midpoint of reported participant scores. Individual participant scores are then categorized as “low” or “high” in relation to this midpoint.



## WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF THIS STUDY?

### For Veterans

This study helps to build a better understanding of the mental health impacts of minority stress on SGM Veterans and active-duty members.

The study findings can also help Veterans and still-serving members to understand the challenges faced by their 2SLGBTQIA+ peers and Family members. The findings could also lead to new clinical interventions and/or enable existing therapies to be more inclusive, appropriate and tailored.

Because this research was performed in collaboration with Veterans who were LGBT Purge survivors, its findings can be directly applied to support this group of Canadian Veterans, for whom the events of the LGBT Purge have resulted in significant impacts (e.g. exclusion from service, forced concealment of their identities, interrogations, harassment, etc.).

Military members may also experience minority-related stressors for various reasons. The military community has a distinct collective identity and functions as a minority group within broader society, with additional minority groups also existing within the Canadian Armed Forces itself. For this reason, findings from this study can also be applied to support further general research on marginalization and stigma within and outside military communities.

### For Veteran Families

This study can help Families understand the unique challenges impacting loved ones who are 2SLGBTQIA+ Veterans or active-duty members.

Additionally, because there were non-military 2SLGBTQIA+ participants in the study, findings are also relevant to Family members who identify as SGMs.

### For service providers

The findings help build a conceptual framework for how minority stress can lead to moral injury, trauma-related symptoms, and mental health challenges. This can enable service providers to better understand and support the unique circumstances and challenges faced by SGM Veterans, active-duty members, and their Family members.

Service providers can also use this information to work towards developing targeted interventions that can help mitigate mental health burdens in SGM Veterans, active-duty members, and their Family members, as well as to build more inclusive models of care.

## For researchers

This study supports the need for further research to:

1. Build a moral injury framework relevant to the context of minority stress
2. Develop a scale that measures minority stress-related moral injury

The study also highlights the need to apply an intersectional lens in future mental health research. For example, further research should focus on mental health outcomes related to specific minority stress experiences due to gender diverse, racial or ethnic minority identity.

## For policy makers

The study and its findings can help policy makers to understand how minority stress can impact SGM individuals at an institutional level and to shape priorities in combating institutional stigma and discrimination.

It may also support the development of guidelines to prevent minority stress experiences and help create system improvements that will allow 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals receive better access to mental health support.

## For other groups

SGM civilians may also be able to garner insights from the study to better understand their mental health in the face of minority stress experiences they have endured.

The study's findings may also encourage SGMs to identify mental health challenges they might be struggling with and reach out for mental health support.

Members of society can learn about the profound and damaging effects of minority stress and learn how to be more supportive of 2SLGBTQIA+ members in their community.

This information can also be used to combat community and society-level minority stress-related stigma and discrimination.



## FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Based on the findings of this research study, the Clinical Research team at the Atlas Institute is currently:

- Collecting data to validate a minority stress-related moral injury scale.
- Conducting further analyses to examine the relationship between trauma and minority stress. Findings from this work can eventually be used to advocate for more accurate reflection in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) criteria for PTSD of the types of identity-related traumatic events that SGMs (or other minority groups) typically experience.



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Please note the names listed include only those who have explicitly consented to being acknowledged as a contributor.

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