Moral injury in Provisional IRA members: Preliminary evidence of moral beliefs injuring, protecting & disillusioning

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Moral injury has recently gained much attention in the field of military psychiatry. However, it has not yet been applied to actors of non-state political violence. Investigating the incidence of moral injury in these populations would increase the understanding of the negative psychological effects of engagement in non-state political violence. This study examined whether moral injury could be applied to former Provisional IRA members who were active during the ‘Troubles’ in Northern Ireland. Nine autobiographical sources from former Provisional IRA members were qualitatively analyzed through interpretative phenomenological analysis. This analysis revealed preliminary evidence of morally injurious experiences and symptoms, and how these symptoms were coped with through reparative actions. There was also evidence of moral disillusionment with the Provisional IRA, and evidence of protective factors that decreased susceptibility to moral injury. The preliminary evidence of moral injury in this population supports the applicability of the concept and indicates that further investigation is warranted.

Keywords: moral injury, Provisional IRA, interpretative phenomenological analysis, psychological distress, autobiography

# Introduction

I’m someone that’s living that lived in the past, that went through it and is able to recount and tell them [the young today] the horrors of it. And how much it can take lumps out of your head. Because it has taken lumps out of mine, there’s no doubt about it. I have the rest of my life to live thinking on things that I’ve done and maybe hurt people. And I’m very, very, sorry for it.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Actors of non-state political violence may suffer from negative psychological and emotional effects following their engagement in such violence. Related experiences could lead to trauma, depression and/or severe guilt in some individuals. This is exemplified above in the quote of a former paramilitary combatant in Northern Ireland. Further understanding on this topic is valuable, given that these negative psychological effects may contribute to decisions to disengage from non-state political violence. Investigating the occurrence of moral injury in actors would provide further insight into how they are affected by their engagement. Moral injury has been predominantly studied in members of traditional state militaries and arises when an individual perpetrates or witnesses a perceived moral transgression. This may result in long-lasting psychological, social, and emotional problems**.**

The current study examines whether the concept of moral injury is applicable to former members of the Provisional IRA. It is the first study to apply moral injury to a population that engaged in non-state political violence. However, a chapter has been written on this study previously,[[2]](#endnote-2) which this article expands upon in greater detail. The Provisional IRA during the ‘Troubles’ was chosen based on personal interest, and due to the amount of texts available which former members wrote themselves (or which included a significant amount of their direct testimony) allowing for sufficient source material to be available for analysis. The Provisional IRA was also chosen given that prior evidence suggests that experiences related to membership resulted in psychological distress in some individuals,[[3]](#endnote-3) and due to the organization sharing risk factors for moral injury which have been identified in traditional state militaries.

To investigate the applicability of moral injury to the Provisional IRA, nine autobiographical accounts of former members were analyzed through interpretative phenomenological analysis. The findings support moral injury’s occurrence in some former members, and suggests that morally injurious experiences evoked disillusionment with the Provisional IRA’s utilization of non-state political violence. Given that the study’s findings are preliminary, the study aimed to justify further research on this topic. The article therefore closes with recommendations for future research on moral injury in former IRA members and other former actors of non-state political violence.

## Prior research on the negative psychological effects of engagement in non-state political violence

Whilst moral injury has not yet been investigated in actors of non-state political violence, some studies have indicated that involvement may negatively affect the psychological wellbeing of its actors. This is due to the lifestyle involving exposure to stressful, violent, and traumatic situations that may have an effect on their mental wellbeing.[[4]](#endnote-4) Corner and Gill[[5]](#endnote-5) conducted probability-based behavioral sequence analyses on 90 terrorist autobiographies. These analyses indicated that there are a wide range of risk factors and stressors associated with engagement and disengagement from terrorism, which impacted on multiple aspects of the lives of less resilient individuals. Additionally, Barrelle[[6]](#endnote-6) found that some former violent extremists suffer from anxiety, paranoia, trauma, substance abuse, burnout, psychotic breakdown, and emotional breakdowns as a result of their involvement in violent extremist groups. Therefore, psychological distress can be a by-product of involvement in non-state political violence or related experiences such as incarceration.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Researchers have established a variety of “push factors” that might drive an actor away from non-state political violence.[[8]](#endnote-8) One such relevant push factor is disillusionment. Disillusionment and subsequent disengagement may occur when an actors’ expectations are unmet, or when there is incongruence with their fantasies and the reality of non-state political violence.[[9]](#endnote-9) Actors may become disillusioned with group leaders or members.[[10]](#endnote-10) Disillusionment can also occur when individuals have to face the reality of perpetrating acts of violence against their victims.[[11]](#endnote-11) When confronted with the reality of this violence, some actors have been found to experience guilt.[[12]](#endnote-12) Whilst guilt or remorse may contribute to disengagement, it can also occur in actors who are “stuck” in their group as they have an absence of available opportunities for disengagement.[[13]](#endnote-13)

Studies have also been conducted with former members of the Provisional IRA to understand how they were affected by their involvement in the ‘Troubles’. Outside of the direct engagement in violence during the ‘Troubles’, many Provisional IRA members experienced a complex combination of burdens and losses, including the mourning of deceased friends or loved ones, survivor guilt, fear, regret, anger, and humiliation.[[14]](#endnote-14) Many former political prisoners were also found to be severely affected by their negative experiences during interrogations and imprisonment.[[15]](#endnote-15) Subsequently, when the conflict ended, former Provisional IRA members had to face the significant challenge of transitioning from either prison or the organization itself.

Through surveys and interviews with Republican and Loyalist former politically motivated prisoners, Jamieson, Shirlow and Grounds[[16]](#endnote-16) found indications of resilience and reflectiveness in these populations. However, there was also evidence of significant psychological harm. The authors suggest that as a group, former politically motivated prisoners are substantially more likely than others in Northern Ireland to suffer from some form of psychological distress. For example, they found that 39.9% had scores indicative of clinically significant mental health problems.[[17]](#endnote-17) Over half of the former political prisoners reported feeling seriously depressed at some time since their release,[[18]](#endnote-18) and over half reported symptoms characteristic of PTSD.[[19]](#endnote-19) Additionally, 68.8% of the former political prisoners in the investigation engaged in hazardous levels of drinking, and 53.3% met the threshold for alcohol dependence.[[20]](#endnote-20) A number of the interviewees attributed their alcohol abuse, at least in part, to an attempt to “self-medicate” in order to cope with their experiences and losses.[[21]](#endnote-21) Other studies have reported similar findings of both resilience and psychological difficulties associated with imprisonment experiences during the ‘Troubles’ in former political prisoners.[[22]](#endnote-22)

Ferguson, Burgess and Hollywood[[23]](#endnote-23) interviewed Loyalist and Republican paramilitaries on their experiences related to the ‘Troubles’ and revealed that there was evidence for genuine feelings of guilt and regret about the violence they had committed. Some of these individuals spoke of how the psychological pain of living with these actions had resulted in their fellow combatants committing suicide or turning to alcohol to cope. Another study by the same authors also found psychological distress in those who were involved in the conflict, including struggles with coming to terms with the consequences of their actions.[[24]](#endnote-24) Some of the expressions of psychological distress in these actors may allude to symptoms of moral injury in this population, such as severe guilt.

## Moral injury

Moral injury is a relatively new concept that has recently gained much attention in the field of military psychology. An early proponent of moral injury is Jonathan Shay who suggests it occurs when there has been: “(a) a betrayal of “what’s right”, (b) either by a person in legitimate authority or by one’s self, (c) in a high stake situation”.[[25]](#endnote-25) Litz et al.[[26]](#endnote-26) extended Shay’s original concept to perpetrators of morally injurious events. They define moral injury as occurring when; “one perpetrates, fails to prevent, bears witness to, or learns about acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations”.[[27]](#endnote-27)  Litz et al.[[28]](#endnote-28) expand on this definition by explaining that moral injury can only occur when the individual is (or becomes) aware of the discrepancy between their moral beliefs and the experience, which subsequently creates cognitive dissonance and inner conflict. Therefore, individuals are unable to successfully accommodate the experience into pre-existing moral schemas, which results in emotional responses and dysfunctional behaviors.[[29]](#endnote-29) However, if the individual resolves the cognitive dissonance between their moral beliefs and their actions, they are able to continue without impairment or moral injury.[[30]](#endnote-30)

Although there is consensus in the field that moral injury is a valid concept, there is little clarity on what events do or do not constitute as morally injurious.[[31]](#endnote-31) Schorr et al.[[32]](#endnote-32) suggest that potential sources can be divided into ones of personal responsibility (e.g. killing/injuring an enemy in battle, disproportionate violence, harming civilians and civilian life), or events where others are responsible (e.g. betrayal by trusted others, betrayal by systems, others causing disproportionate violence, or harming civilians and civilian life). Litz and Kerig[[33]](#endnote-33) expect that different types of events result in different psychological outcomes and symptoms.

Moral injury can be emotionally, psychologically, behaviorally, spiritually, or socially damaging in the long-term.[[34]](#endnote-34) Whilst it is not categorized as a mental illness, it can result in significant psychological distress.[[35]](#endnote-35) Its symptoms include guilt, shame, spiritual/existential conflict, loss of trust, depression, anxiety, anger, re-experiencing, intrusive thoughts, self-harm, and social problems.[[36]](#endnote-36) Long-lasting guilt and shame are a result of moral injury causing intense negative appraisals or attributions of one’s self.[[37]](#endnote-37) Moral injury’s capacity for impairing trust elevates despair, suicidality, and interpersonal violence.[[38]](#endnote-38) This is because when social trust is destroyed, it is replaced by an expectation of harm, exploitation and humiliation. Lastly, analyses suggest that morally injurious experiences are recalled intrusively and re-experienced.[[39]](#endnote-39) This can result in psychological distress, avoidance, and emotional numbing.

Moral injury shares several features and symptoms with PTSD. Both develop after a traumatic situation, and are associated with subsequent psychological problems, affective changes, and social problems.[[40]](#endnote-40) However, PTSD usually arises following a life-threatening event and its source of distress is fear-based, whereas moral injury develops through a moral conflict of one’s actions, or the actions of one’s peers or leaders.[[41]](#endnote-41) Moral injury appears to have a distinct pathology and trajectory relative to other trauma types.[[42]](#endnote-42) Moral injury can occur in the absence of active PTSD symptoms but may also be co-morbid with PTSD or other disorders frequently associated with trauma.[[43]](#endnote-43)

Whilst moral injury has predominantly been investigated in military personnel and veterans, it has also been applied to civilian populations.[[44]](#endnote-44) For example, evidence of moral injury has been found in refugees,[[45]](#endnote-45) journalists,[[46]](#endnote-46) parents and professionals involved with child protection services,[[47]](#endnote-47) law enforcement[[48]](#endnote-48) and educators[[49]](#endnote-49). Many of the populations to which the concept of moral injury has been extended to witnessed moral transgressions, but moral injury can also occur in individuals who perpetrate moral transgressions.[[50]](#endnote-50) Litz et al.[[51]](#endnote-51) claim that perpetration appears to be more morally problematic for the individual than witnessing atrocities. Therefore, greater investigation into the applicability of moral injury to perpetrators of violence, such as actors of non-state political violence, is warranted.

## Applying moral injury to former Provisional IRA members

The Provisional IRA and traditional state militaries share risk factors for moral injury. The Provisional IRA was an organization “run with iron discipline”.[[52]](#endnote-52) Members considered themselves as soldiers operating in a military hierarchy and the conflict as war.[[53]](#endnote-53) This is reflected in the military structure of the movement. Litz et al.[[54]](#endnote-54) suggest that there is a higher likelihood for moral injury to occur during conflicts in urban environments and when employing guerrilla warfare, given that this increases uncertainty and risk to civilians. Provisional IRA attacks often utilized guerilla tactics against their British targets,[[55]](#endnote-55) and attacks commonly took place in urban environments in Northern Ireland and England.

Other common contextual factors that risk moral injury include events that involved within-rank violence, betrayal, disproportionate violence, and incidents involving civilians.[[56]](#endnote-56) Examples of such events were common in the Provisional IRA. The Provisional IRA was responsible for nearly 1,800 deaths between 1969 and 1998, and killed more than 500 civilians.[[57]](#endnote-57) There was also “internal conflict” and a “high level and intensity” of violent feuding within the Provisional IRA.[[58]](#endnote-58) The Provisional IRA was responsible for almost 125 deaths of its own members, although “several of them” were killed in premature explosions.[[59]](#endnote-59) For example, suspected informers were murdered. Lastly, former members have commented on feeling deeply betrayed by the leadership for a variety of strategical choices, such as those relating to the eventual increased politicization of the movement.[[60]](#endnote-60)

Moral beliefs are complex, multifaceted, and culturally and socially relative.[[61]](#endnote-61) There is no consensus on a universal principle that governs the moral behavior of all people, in all cultures, and under all conditions.[[62]](#endnote-62) In relation to the perpetration of non-state political violence, it is still unclear whether actors perceive this violence to be altruistic and moral,[[63]](#endnote-63) or whether they employ psychosocial mechanisms to “morally disengage” from violence which prevents feelings of self-condemnation.[[64]](#endnote-64) Contextual factors shaped a unique moral environment in nationalist communities in Northern Ireland during the ‘Troubles’, which led some individuals to argue that Republican violence was morally justified. From its beginning in 1969 the Provisional IRA stated they perceived their armed struggle to be morally legitimate. They claimed the right to wage war for Ireland in the “people’s name”, and fundamental to their ideology were the convictions that their violence was causally efficacious and necessary.[[65]](#endnote-65) For example, the lack of democratic, non-violent avenues for political change was one of the justifications the Provisional IRA put forward to morally justify their strategy of violence.[[66]](#endnote-66)

This unique moral context may have created an environment for moral injury. Interviews by Ferguson et al.[[67]](#endnote-67) support this. These interviews suggest that the “abnormality” of Northern Ireland during this time resulted in “normal” people perpetrating immoral or violent acts, which they never would have committed if Northern Ireland had been a “normal” place. Ferguson et al. propose that some former paramilitary members in this context may have joined paramilitaries to bring about political change, but then felt “forced” to engage in what they perceived as immoral behavior which created feelings of guilt. This dissonance between moral beliefs and behavior suggest risk for moral injury, which occurs as a result of this cognitive dissonance being unresolved[[68]](#endnote-68) and evokes psychological distress and guilt.[[69]](#endnote-69)

Given that individuals can continuously alter moral beliefs through interaction with social environments,[[70]](#endnote-70) individuals may have grown disillusioned with the IRA’s narrative of morality over time when confronted with the realities of involvement. Such disillusionment could have occurred when the “acceptable” levels of non-state political violence are exceeded.[[71]](#endnote-71) For example, the IRA claimed to forge an “economic bombing campaign”. In bombings, there would often be a time lag and the IRA would report the planting of the bomb to security officials.[[72]](#endnote-72) The IRA claimed the attacks were aimed at causing damage rather than taking civilian life, as such attacks would often result in a loss of support. However, in reality these attacks were usually unpredictable and difficult to control, putting civilians at great risk. As a result, especially between 1971 and 1976, many civilians were killed in accidental explosions.[[73]](#endnote-73) In instances where large numbers of civilians were killed, moral injury could be triggered given that using or witnessing disproportionate violence against civilians constitute as morally injurious events.[[74]](#endnote-74) Such moral injury and guilt could then result in the strategy of violence no longer being perceived as justified, potentially encouraging disillusionment and disengagement.

Due to the shared risk factors, one would expect members of the Provisional IRA to have similar responses to those of soldiers of traditional state militaries. If moral injury is identified in former members, this means that some of the literature on moral injury could be generalized to this population. For example, literature on treating moral injury would be beneficial to supporting disengaged members of the Provisional IRA if required. Of course, there are still many fundamental differences between the experiences of traditional state soldiers and former Provisional IRA members, such as those related to the illegality of and justifications for the Provisional IRA’s use of violence. As a result, not all of the literature will be able to be generalized if moral injury is identified in this population. Identifying such differences and how they impact the incidence of moral injury would contribute to moral injury’s conceptualization and the understanding of its risk factors.

Despite these differences, Provisional IRA members were still subjected to similar traumatic events and contextual factors that risk moral injury in soldiers. In fact, they may have been at a greater risk for moral injury given that the factors that are listed above were more prevalent in the IRA’s type of warfare than in traditional state militaries, such as the increased risk of civilian deaths in their bombing campaign in the 1970s. Therefore, these shared risk factors support why moral injury should be studied in this population, and the increased likelihood of such factors and events indicates a need to do so.

# Methodology

## Autobiographical Sources

Autobiographies and memoirs were chosen as the source materials to explore whether former Provisional IRA members experienced moral injury. Such sources have been previously analyzed in studies on non-state political violence and have provided insight into topics such as actor decision-making,[[75]](#endnote-75) disengagement[[76]](#endnote-76) and psychological distress associated with experiences of “being” an actor of non-state political violence.[[77]](#endnote-77)

A strength of analyzing autobiographical accounts is that it provides a detailed overview of an actor’s personal experiences, psychology, perceptions, and insights.[[78]](#endnote-78) Autobiographies allow individuals to “speak for themselves”, which increases the likelihood that they are representative of the experiences of those involved in non-state political violence.[[79]](#endnote-79) Additionally, the backlash some of the authors received in response to the publication of the accounts included the current study (see Table 1) illustrate the significant control mechanisms of the Provisional IRA, which limit the likelihood that detailed accounts will be forthcoming. Conducting interviews has been made more difficult following the Boston College Belfast Project. This project included interviews with paramilitary members detailing their involvement in criminal activity.[[80]](#endnote-80) Whilst the project’s confidentiality agreement stated that the interviews would not be released until after the interviewee’s death, the British government issues a subpoena to release the interview recordings in 2011. Following legal proceedings, a number of recordings have been used as evidence in criminal cases and investigations. Analyzing existent autobiographical accounts allows researchers access to valuable data without the challenges that come with recruiting former actors for interviews.

There are several limitations associated with the analysis of autobiographies. Findings from autobiographical sources are not generalizable to the Provisional IRA as a whole. The fact that these individuals were motivated to share their accounts may indicate that they were not representative of the thousands of other activists who kept their stories to themselves. Furthermore, autobiographical sources are potentially biased, as the authors may have been motivated to write them to portray themselves (or the Provisional IRA) favorably or to justify their actions.[[81]](#endnote-81) Alternatively, they may have wished to portray the IRA unfavorably due to personal agendas. Furthermore, the narratives may have been influenced by hindsight or retrospective bias.[[82]](#endnote-82) Such limitations are risks for this study given that the majority of the accounts were written after the Good Friday Agreement, and the former members may therefore have been selective about what they chose to disclose.

Additionally, the former members may not have been truthful about their involvement, and accounts could be disputed within the Republican movement yet are difficult to validate. Some of the actors that were included in this analysis have been accused of lying about their experiences during the ‘Troubles’. Caution should be taken in interpreting the findings in this study, with the findings regarding individual cases only being valid provided that the former Provisional IRA member offered a truthful account of their experiences. However, the current sample was large enough for consistent themes to arise across cases which in turn dissipates this issue of trustworthiness. Additionally, this study was not interested in assessing the “truth” of events, but rather how these events were reflected upon and interpreted by the individuals themselves.[[83]](#endnote-83)

Autobiographical accounts were selected for analysis based on whether they matched the inclusion criteria. Accounts had to be written or co-written by individuals with a history of membership of the Provisional IRA. Accounts written by Republicans prior to the ‘Troubles’ were excluded, as were members of Loyalist paramilitaries. Accounts were excluded if the writing did not focus sufficiently on the writer’s personal experiences within the Provisional IRA. Accounts by writers who never formally admitted prior membership were excluded.

Sources with co-authors were only included when it was clear the former Provisional IRA member evidenced a significant contribution to the work themselves or included a considerable amount of direct testimony. One source was written by journalist and historian, Ed Moloney.[[84]](#endnote-84) However, within the source there is a considerable amount of direct testimony taken from an interview transcript with Hughes. Similarly, another source was written by journalist Brendan Anderson[[85]](#endnote-85). This source is composed largely of Cahill’s direct testimony, with Anderson contributing by setting the context and translating this testimony into text. These two sources were therefore deemed appropriate for analysis. It is important to caveat that the accounts presented in these two sources, and those with co-authors, may have been edited or influenced by those other authors. This is a risk to any autobiography that has been edited for publication. It is unlikely that this significantly influenced the findings presented in this study given that all of the sources involved the direct contribution of the former member in some form.

Nine autobiographical accounts that fit the inclusion criteria were identified and included in the analysis. This sample was purposefully kept small as the study focused on demonstrating the utility and applicability of moral injury, rather than on providing an in-depth insight into its existence in this population. Additionally, interpretative phenomenological analysis is more suitable to smaller sample sizes, as it goes into greater analytical depth.[[86]](#endnote-86) The sources are presented in Table 1. There is significant heterogeneity in the former Provisional IRA members included in the analysis. Former rank-and-file members in the organization are included, as well as individuals who previously held leadership positions. It included both members from Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

Table 1. Autobiographical sources included in analysis.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Author(s)** | **Title** | **Date of publication** | **Former member** | **Profile** |
| Anderson, B. | Joe Cahill: A Life in the IRA | 2004 | Joe Cahill | Cahill was a former chief of staff and a founder of the Provisional IRA. He served on the IRA Army Council as late as the 1990s and became a key figure in Sinn Féin. |
| Bradley, G. & Feeney, B. | Insider: Gerry Bradley’s Life in the IRA | 2011 | Gerry Bradley | Bradley was a senior Provisional IRA operator during the ‘Troubles’ in Belfast. He remained committed to the IRA but felt abandoned when the movement politicised. Bradley claimed to be ostracised and faced hostility following the publication of this book. There is speculation that this contributed to his suicide. |
| Collins, E. & McGovern, M. | Killing Rage | 1998 | Eamon Collins | Collins was a former Provisional IRA operator who gathered intelligence. Collins became an RUC informant but legally retracted. Following his acquittal, he was exiled by the IRA from the Northern part of Ireland but returned in 1995. Collins publicly shared his critique of the IRA and political violence. He was murdered in 1999. |
| Doherty, T. | The Dead Beside Us: A Memoir of Growing up in Derry | 2017 | Tony Doherty | Doherty was a Provisional IRA member who was arrested just after his first operation. He became one of the leading campaigners in the Bloody Sunday campaign after his release. |
| McGuire, M. | To Take Arms: A Year in the Provisional IRA | 1973 | Maria McGuire | McGuire was a member of the Provisional IRA in the 1970s for one year. She was its first defector. McGuire’s membership of the Provisional IRA has been disputed, with claims having been made by Seán Mac Stíofáin (whom she was critical of within her account) that she was only a member of Sinn Féin. |
| Moloney, E. | Voices from the Grave: Two Men’s War in Ireland | 2011 | Brendan Hughes | Hughes was a former Provisional IRA operator, Officer Commanding of the Belfast Brigade, and leader of the 1980 hunger strike. Hughes resigned from the Army Council and left the IRA in the early 1990s. He became increasingly critical of the political direction of Sinn Féin and its leadership. |
| O’Callaghan, S. | The Informer | 1999 | Sean O’Callaghan | O’Callaghan was an active member of the Provisional IRA and head of the Southern Command. He was an informer for the Gardaí for 14 years after becoming disillusioned with the IRA. He left the IRA and Ireland when he became disillusioned with his work with the Irish Government. |
| O’Doherty, S. P. | The Volunteer | 2011 | Shane Paul O’Doherty | O’Doherty was an active member of the Provisional IRA, including as an explosives officer in the Derry brigade. He launched a letter bomb campaign in London. Following disillusionment and a religious conversion in prison, O’Doherty wrote to his victims to apologise and renounced his commitment to the IRA. |
| O’Rawe, R. | Blanketmen | 2016 | Richard O’Rawe | O’Rawe was a senior IRA member and Provisional IRA press officer in Long Kesh prison. He left the Republican movement in 1985. He was ostracised by former comrades following the publication of this book. |

## Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was utilized to qualitatively explore whether moral injury was evidenced in the autobiographical sources. This form of analysis is increasingly used to analyze accounts of non-state political violence.[[87]](#endnote-87) The emphasis in IPA is on interpreting an experience as the participant perceives it, rather than to gain an objective record of the event.[[88]](#endnote-88) IPA is often used when participants provide information on significant life experiences that had important implications for their identities.[[89]](#endnote-89) It is therefore the most suitable qualitative method for the current study considering its focus on how the former members were morally and psychologically affected by their involvement in the IRA.

Guidelines on IPA by Smith, Flowers and Larkin[[90]](#endnote-90) and Smith and Osburn[[91]](#endnote-91) were followed. In the first stage of the analysis, each source was read individually, and anything of relevance was noted. The accounts were then annotated and coded in the second stage. Emergent themes were created in the third stage, which involved greater interpretation and analysis. The researcher initially concentrated on themes and connections available in the sources on how the former members were psychologically and morally affected by their involvement, rather than attempting to find evidence that would fit descriptions of moral injury. Following this, preliminary connections amongst these themes were made, and the themes were clustered involving the creation of superordinate themes out of some of the initial emergent themes. This fourth stage was more interpretative and theoretical, but the themes were still grounded in the initial text. This grounding was ensured by continuous reference to, and checking of, the original sources to confirm the themes reflected the meaning in the accounts.

After the analysis of the first source, these stages were repeated for the next source until all autobiographical accounts were analyzed individually. Analysis was initially individual to avoid the themes from one source biasing the construction of the themes from the subsequent sources. Overarching themes and patterns were then identified across the cases and may be found in the results section. The validity of the findings may have been affected by the role of the researcher and the unavoidable subjective and interpretative nature of IPA. Verbatim quotes from the autobiographies are included to support the arguments being made in the results, and to increase transparency by revealing the interpretative activity of the researcher.

# Results

The interpretative phenomenological analysis of the autobiographical sources identified four themes. The first theme is *morally injurious experiences and symptoms.* It reveals the different experiences that likely resulted in moral injury in former Provisional IRA members. The morally injurious experiences were defined as three subthemes and included experiences of the organization’s strategy of violence, experiences of informing, and experiences of the hunger strike campaigns. The second theme is *reparative actions*. This theme details how the individuals who likely experienced moral injury coped with its associated consequences through engaging in various forms of reparative acts or restorative justice. The third theme is *moral disillusionment.* This theme explores how former members questioned the moral justification of the IRA’s strategy of violence, resulting in disillusionment with the organization. The fourth theme was *factors preventing moral injury.* This theme discusses factors that shaped the former members’ perceptions on the moral justification of utilizing violence and would have prevented moral injury from occurring. Three of such factors were identified and presented as subthemes; the context of the ‘Troubles’, devotion to the Republican cause and the role of personality.

## Theme 1: morally injurious experiences and symptoms

Three types of morally injurious experiences were identified in the analysis. These experiences demonstrate evidence of cognitive dissonance between the former members’ moral beliefs and the actions that they were affiliated with, witnessed, failed to prevent, or perpetrated themselves. All experiences also evidence the significant psychological consequences associated with moral injury. Shane Paul O’Doherty, Sean O’Callaghan, Eamon Collins, Richard O’Rawe, and Brendan Hughes displayed evidence of moral injury. There was no evidence of moral injury in the other four sources.

### Subtheme 1: strategy of violence

The use of violence by the IRA as a political strategy was morally injurious when members were confronted with the reality and consequences of such violence. For example, when Collins saw the daughter of a man whose death he was responsible for, “a terrible sadness and a wave of guilt enveloped”.[[92]](#endnote-92) Such confrontations often resulted in realizations that this violence was wrong and unjustifiable. This happened to O’Doherty when he was confronted with evidence of the injuries his letter bomb campaign had caused.

… I was horrified. Here in black and white, was the plainest proof that my use of violence had transformed me from an idealist on high moral ground to an offender with a seemingly endless list of human rights’ violations to his name. None of this reeked of justice. I was coming face to face finally with the consequences of my long-distance bombings and I was not happy. There was no justification whatsoever for these injuries, and I was deeply sorry for the selfish and callous disregard I had shown for civilian casualties… (Shane Paul O’Doherty)[[93]](#endnote-93)

Provisional IRA members appear to be at particular risk for moral injury when “innocent civilians” rather than British targets were killed as a result of their own or the IRA’s actions. O’Doherty demonstrated this during a moment of severe distress when he momentarily believed that the warning of a bomb he had placed had been ignored.

This would be the end of my life. I would not be able to live with the guilt of blowing up innocent people. It did not matter that we had given warning by telephone, which was proof that we had not intended to kill or injure innocent people, nor did the collective nature of the effort dilute my own personal sense of guilt. This would be the end of everything. How would I ever rid myself of the guilt of this slaughter? (Shane Paul O’Doherty)[[94]](#endnote-94)

Lastly, moral injury caused by the IRA’s strategy of violence may only affect some Provisional IRA members once they have become disillusioned with the campaign and when the reality of their acts of violence dawns on them. This happened to O’Callaghan.

I realized that joining the Provisional IRA had been the biggest mistake of my life. One way or another the disgustingly stupid things I had been involved in would haunt me for years to come. (Sean O’Callaghan)[[95]](#endnote-95)

As evidenced in the statements, guilt is the most common symptom of the potential morally injurious events found in this sample. Shame and anger were also common symptoms and were often mentioned alongside feelings of guilt when former Provisional IRA members described their affective states associated with the violence they perpetrated or were affiliated with.

I knew I was using my anger to give myself a respite from my guilt … I felt disgusted with myself, ashamed of myself. (Eamon Collins)[[96]](#endnote-96)

… I became a serious human rights’ violator and brought dishonour and shame on my cause and on myself. (Shane Paul O’Doherty)[[97]](#endnote-97)

Depression, psychological distress, nightmares and intrusive thoughts were also mentioned. The individual that displayed these feelings most prominently was Collins after he had played a role in an assassination of a man who had left the Ulster Defence Regiment.

I felt an extraordinary pain that would not go away. Every now and again I would fall off to sleep, but would wake again after what seemed a few minutes. In my sleep I moved in darkness, but the darkness seemed to have a form; like the mouth of a beast. I was inside the beast. Awake, the images in my mind were worse. I could see Mickey shooting him; see the lunchbox dropping to the ground, see Mickey’s English football scarf catching the arc of blood that sprayed the air. I had never felt so empty. I had chosen this way and I could not turn back. I remember touching my wife, kissing her hair and crying silently. I was crying for Hanna, perhaps for his wife and child, but also mostly for myself, for what I had become. (Eamon Collins)[[98]](#endnote-98)

Lastly, Collins evidenced feelings of conflict and hopelessness as a result of his moral injury and involvement with the Provisional IRA.

I had lost so much of what was moral and good in my fight against oppression that I had been left without faith in any defensible aspect of civilization. (Eamon Collins)[[99]](#endnote-99)

The symptoms associated with these confrontations with the reality of the IRA’s strategy of violence have all been associated with moral injury.[[100]](#endnote-100)

### Subtheme 2: informing

Both Collins and O’Callaghan informed on the Provisional IRA to police services. Although Collins did experience significant psychological pressures as a result of providing statements to the RUC (which contributed to his decision to retract his statements), it is unclear whether his experience as an informer was morally injurious.

O’Callaghan did appear to experience moral injury following the murder of an informer. An informer to the Garda himself, O’Callaghan had provided persistent warnings to his contact in order to prevent this murder. However, the murder was not prevented. This experience resulted in symptoms affiliated with moral injury, including lasting psychological distress, anger, exhaustion, and a loss of trust.[[101]](#endnote-101)

I just did not know what to think, never mind do. There was a filthy taste in my mouth from the whole bloody business and I believe that Corcoran’s life could have been saved without great difficulty. I had done everything possible to prevent his murder, and equally the Gardaí had done nothing. (Sean O’Callaghan)[[102]](#endnote-102)

His murder haunted and sickened me then and has continued to do so ever since. There is no doubt that it destroyed my desire to continue as an informer. I knew that the work was important but although I could provide the necessary information I was powerless to ensure that people acted upon it. (Sean O’Callaghan)[[103]](#endnote-103)

Given that O’Callaghan had turned to informing as a result of his guilt for his actions as a member of the provisional IRA, his symptoms of moral injury and general psychological state was likely greatly worsened by this experience. What separates this morally injurious experience from subtheme one is that it was not a result of his own or the IRA’s actions but arose after witnessing the consequences of the Garda’s inaction.

Whilst not suggested in O’Callaghan’s autobiography, an allegation exists that O’Callaghan himself shot Corcoran. In 1988, O’Callaghan was reported to have told newspaper ‘the Kerryman’ that he killed him, although O’Callaghan later denied this.[[104]](#endnote-104) If O’Callaghan was responsible for this murder, this would further explain and contribute to his moral injury.

### Subtheme 3: hunger strikes

O’Rawe and Hughes played roles in the hunger strike campaigns of the early 1980s. Hughes was the Officer Commanding during the first hunger strike in 1980 and took part in it. O’Rawe was the IRA press officer in Long Kesh Prison during the hunger strike in 1981. O’Rawe and Hughes were greatly affected by witnessing the deaths of the hunger strikers. Their moral injury was associated with the belief that they should have done more to end the campaign to prevent further deaths.

I remember almost crying with frustration and feeling that I was letting external influences impact on what I believed was the right thing to do. I hated Long Kesh, I hated the hunger strike, and most of all I hated myself. (Richard O’Rawe)[[105]](#endnote-105)

Since that time, I have had to grapple with the terrible knowledge that I personally displayed an appalling degree of moral ambivalence on the issue of the hunger strike. I let my hunger-striking comrades down; I took the line of lead resistance rather than say the unpalatable words that no one wanted to hear. (Richard O’Rawe)[[106]](#endnote-106)

… It was as simple as that, I felt guilty. And I continued feeling that way for many, many years afterwards… I found it very, very hard to live with myself because I felt that possibly I should have been dead rather than the other ten men. (Brendan Hughes)[[107]](#endnote-107)

These statements reveal symptoms of moral injury such as guilt, anger, negative self-appraisal, and despair [[108]](#endnote-108). Hughes also felt guilty for not letting a hunger striker die, who instead suffered from long-term eyesight and brain damage. This feeling of guilt was so strong it resulted in suicidal thinking:

… I was totally and utterly demoralised, full of feelings of guilt, and thinking; ‘Should I have led Sean die?’ It was murderous. I remember one time tensing myself up, pushing to try and stop my heart; I was suicidal. I had a constant clear image of having a gun and just blowing my head off. That went on for a long, long time after the hunger strike, and especially during the second hunger strike when men began to die. I mean, it was the worst period of my life; it was even worse than the hunger strike itself. It took me years and years to get over it. I still have feelings about it and it’s very difficult for me to talk about this. It brings it all back. (Brendan Hughes)[[109]](#endnote-109)

## Theme 2: reparative actions

As a result of their symptoms of moral injury, some individuals felt motivated to make amends for their prior actions. These reparative actions likely helped them cope with their guilt, although it is unclear how effective this was. It should be noted that it is also possible that this is how the authors wished to portray themselves.

Reparative acts were attempted in different forms. The first example of this is O’Callaghan handing himself over to launch an inquiry into a murdered informer’s death, and to provide evidence in court proceedings about other IRA members:

I know that nothing can bring any of these three people back from the dead, but at least in the case of Sean Corcoran I could do something to right the wrongs of the past. (Sean O’Callaghan)[[110]](#endnote-110)

A second example of restorative justice is O’Doherty apologizing to his victims:

I attempted to explain to each person what had motivated me to act as I did, and I apologized wholeheartedly for (depending on the case) intentionally or accidentally injuring or attempting to injure them. (Shane Paul O’Doherty)[[111]](#endnote-111)

The third example is Collins deciding to change society through peaceful means:

I said I was interested in struggling against injustice and inequality but I felt that the work I was doing in Dublin was of more use than the taking of life. (Eamon Collins)[[112]](#endnote-112)

The last example of a reparative act is O’Rawe explaining that he wished to share his experience:

But there was something else: a persuasive voice, which refused to be silent, whispered that I had no right to paper over the truth or to deny the families and the Irish people my first-hand account of what had happened. (Richard O’Rawe)[[113]](#endnote-113)

## Theme 3: moral disillusionment

Two-thirds of the autobiographical sources evidenced questioning of the moral justification of the Provisional IRA’s strategy of violence, or specific aspects of this violence. The author proposes to term this ‘moral disillusionment’. These individuals were Eamon Collins, Maria McGuire, Brendan Hughes, Sean O’Callaghan, Shane Paul O’Doherty, and Richard O’Rawe. This does not necessarily generalize to other former Provisional IRA members, given that such disillusionment may motivate individuals to write autobiographies. A first indicator of moral disillusionment were feelings of conflictedness between their loyalty to the cause and their doubts on the morality of IRA’s strategies.

I knew the armed struggle was wrong, yet so was the daily oppression of nationalist people. I had felt confused and lost. (Eamon Collins)[[114]](#endnote-114)

I wanted to fight these soldiers of a foreign army, but, in my heart of hearts, I would not wish the individual to die, because in that moment he was hit, he ceased to be a uniformed soldier, and became a human dreading death and wanting to hold on to life. At the same time, I remembered with bitterness so many Irish who had had their lives taken away by this army… (Shane Paul O’Doherty)[[115]](#endnote-115)

The second quote additionally reveals that moral disillusionment commonly occurred when individuals were confronted with the reality of the strategy of violence, and disillusionment was most common when the campaign resulted in the killing of “innocent civilians”. This was perceived to be morally unjustified and was very similar to the onset of moral injury in subtheme one.

Surely Belfast had realized how far they were overloading the system, and that twenty warnings could never be dealt with? If they hadn’t realized it, they had no business dealing with bombs at all. And if they had… there was no way their actions could be justified. (Maria McGuire)[[116]](#endnote-116)

Incidents relating to decisions and actions by leadership may have resulted in moral disillusionment. For example, Hughes believed that the IRA was acting immorally in its murdering of informers. Although he believed (at the time) that killing informers was justified, this was only the case when it was done to act as a deterrent. However, if an informant’s murder was denied by the IRA, he believed this to be “brutal, brutal murder”.[[117]](#endnote-117) An incident resulting in O’Callaghan’s moral disillusionment was when a member made a joke about a policewoman who had been killed; “maybe she was pregnant and we got two for the price of one”.[[118]](#endnote-118) The incident affected O’Callaghan greatly, and influenced his decision to leave the organization and become an informer.

This was the man I respected so much, the man who was to become my boss. To whom I was going to bring my worries and doubts. How the f\*\*\* could anyone hate so blindly? And this man was second in command for the Provisional IRA. I burst into tears and lay down on one of the mattresses on the bedroom floor. (Sean O’Callaghan)[[119]](#endnote-119)

For all of these individuals, moral disillusionment appeared to be a gradual process and for many it factored into their decision to disengage. This is evidenced in O’Doherty’s quote below:

I was so convinced by my own experience that violence is guaranteed to injure or kill the innocent, that I was being drawn inevitably toward a pacifist position. I could no longer cordon off my attacks on military or political targets as “legitimate” or “just” – I felt that only a pacifist position was truly moral, or truly Christlike. I may have been working on the feeling that only a pacifist outlook would guarantee a conscience free from the guilt of having maimed and hurt people… (Shane Paul O’Doherty)[[120]](#endnote-120)

Interestingly, all of the individuals who evidenced moral injury also evidenced moral disillusionment. The single individual who evidenced moral disillusionment without moral injury was Maria McGuire, who was in the Provisional IRA for only a year before disengaging. In turn, all of the individuals who did not evidence moral disillusionment also did not evidence moral injury. These individuals were Cahill, Bradley, and Doherty.

## Theme 4: factors preventing moral injury

The factors listed in these subthemes shaped the moral beliefs of some former Provisional IRA members, resulting in them viewing the IRA’s strategy of violence as morally justifiable either temporarily or consistently. These beliefs would have protected them from moral injury, as they would not have felt conflicted between their actions and moral values.

### Subtheme 1: role of context

The context of the ‘Troubles’ shaped moral beliefs regarding the justification of violence in a variety of ways. First, the culture of romanticization of the Republican cause prevented some individuals from questioning the morality of it.

But [the romanticization of Republicanism] also inoculated us against the cruelty of our protest and the reality of the situation, and blinded us to the modern world and political events of the day. (Richard O’Rawe)[[121]](#endnote-121)

Secondly, violence was normalized, or even seen as exciting, for many of the members who grew up in this context. This may have resulted in a gradual disinhibition and perceived legitimization of violence as a result of growing up in this context.

When I was first handed a gun, I felt: this is it, the real thing. I was excited. I felt fear. I was apprehensive. I felt responsible. They gave you a gun for a purpose and it was to defend the people in the Unity. That’s what I was for. It meant I had moved beyond the street rioting. I had power, some control. (Gerry Bradley)[[122]](#endnote-122)

Lastly, witnessing or experiencing violence caused by British soldiers resulted in some individuals seeking out violence as a form of revenge, believing that retaliatory violence was justified and legitimized.

Other times I would feel a surge of rage whose power would unbalance me: I would sit alone in my room and think with pleasure of blowing off the heads of those parascum. (Eamon Collins)[[123]](#endnote-123)

‘Why are ye joining the Irish Republican Army? I hesitated, intending to follow the others. Then it just came out: ‘To get revenge for me da’s murder.’ (Tony Doherty)[[124]](#endnote-124)

Doherty states that he immediately regretted saying this, and the IRA recruiter notified him this was “not a good enough reason” to join.[[125]](#endnote-125) He describes that after this meeting, one of the other boys admitted he was joining for the same reason (i.e. in response to Bloody Sunday). Following a discussion between the boys in relation to this and the treatment of local men by the police and security forces, Doherty describes a feeling settling in his head as “a blend of justifiable vengeance and moral authority”.[[126]](#endnote-126)

Similarly affected by the death of a loved one, Cahill recounted how he was impacted by the execution in 1942 of his officer commanding and close friend, Tom Williams.

‘Tom’s death is something I never got over,’ he says. ‘It has lived with me ever since. ... Probably the hardest thing in my life was parting from him.’ (Joe Cahill)[[127]](#endnote-127)

It is possible that this may have elicited feelings of vengeance in Cahill, which would have further contributed to his perceptions of Republican violence as morally justified. Although this cannot be concluded from the autobiographical account alone, this execution did result in a violent reaction from the IRA and the resumption of their campaign. Furthermore, for O’Doherty, witnessing violence perpetrated by British soldiers on Bloody Sunday re-affirmed the morality of the armed struggle when he began to experience doubts.

I blinked back the tears and felt that there was a reason why I was witnessing [Bloody Sunday]. It was clear to me that I was a fool for having drifted away from the IRA. (Shane Paul O’Doherty)[[128]](#endnote-128)

### Subtheme 2: devotion to the Republican cause

Evidence of an unquestioning devotion to the Republican cause and its morality was found in Collins’ and Bradley’s accounts. Such devotion contributed to an acceptance of casualties.

If the IRA told me to shoot somebody, I did, because the IRA was right. (Gerry Bradley)[[129]](#endnote-129)

[Another member] had become an IRA zombie: any sparks of goodness and decency had long ago been extinguished, and the vacuum had been filled with an unthinking brutal commitment. The needs of the IRA were the touchstone of his morality. (Eamon Collins)[[130]](#endnote-130)

### Subtheme 3: role of personality

Certain personality types were described as less likely to reflect on the morality of violence. O’Callaghan describes one such individual.

Hanna was an extremely dangerous and irrational man who was convinced he had never done a thing wrong and who had no scruples about those with whom he worked. (Sean O’Callaghan)[[131]](#endnote-131)

It is possible that Hanna was unique in this. For instance, O’Callaghan commented that Hanna had “worked with the UVF, the UDA, the Provisional IRA, and RUC Special Branch”.[[132]](#endnote-132)

Other individuals were described in the accounts as enjoying violence. For example, Collins stated that a member “gleefully” described murders he had committed,[[133]](#endnote-133) and O’Callaghan provided an example of an individual who “enjoyed people being afraid of him”.[[134]](#endnote-134) Additionally, as a response to questioning the morality of the violence he was affiliated with, Collins attempted to “harden” his personality against guilt:

… I had become a person who could, with barely a flicker of disquiet, contemplate the killing of any enemy of the republican movement. Even now I can hardly comprehend the mental state I was in. I had insulated myself so well from feelings of compassion that the doubts that were eventually to undermine my confidence in the rightness of our campaign first surfaced in response to fears for my own safety, and not as a result of stabs of conscience. (Eamon Collins)[[135]](#endnote-135)

# Discussion

The IPA results revealed there was preliminary evidence of moral injury in five of the nine autobiographical sources of former Provisional IRA members. Litz et al.[[136]](#endnote-136) define moral injury as occurring when one perpetrates, fails to prevent, bears witness to, or learns about acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs. All of the morally injurious events found in the autobiographical sources were included in this definition. Whilst the circumstances and contexts of the morally injurious events differed from those experienced by military populations suffering from moral injury, they can be categorized under the same definitions and conceptualizations. Additionally, there are similar psychological, social and emotional consequences in both populations. Moral injury’s symptoms include guilt, shame, existential conflict, loss of trust, depression, anxiety, re-experiencing, psychological distress, emotional numbing, and intrusive thoughts.[[137]](#endnote-137) The analysis yielded evidence of all these symptoms in response to the morally injurious events.

To cope with these symptoms, some of the individuals resorted to reparative actions. These actions were to “make up” for their prior involvement and actions, either by damaging the IRA or through helping its victims. Reparative activities have been found to be a common response to guilt and moral injury.[[138]](#endnote-138) They have been suggested to have a therapeutic role, given that they help restore the sufferer’s self-esteem, reconnect them with their moral values, and encourage self-forgiveness.[[139]](#endnote-139) However, it is unclear whether these actions alleviated the former Provisional IRA members’ guilt.

It may also be that former Provisional IRA members wished to continue to be engaged in the conflict but in a non-violent role. This motivation is common in former political prisoners in Northern Ireland, as many engage in restorative justice projects, peace-building efforts, and ex-prisoner support services.[[140]](#endnote-140) This allows them to maintain their collective post-imprisonment identity whilst contributing to the community and “giving back”.[[141]](#endnote-141) As well as these efforts aiding reintegration efforts and benefitting the communities,[[142]](#endnote-142) they may also provide relief to potential symptoms of moral injury such as by increasing social connectedness and reducing negative self-appraisals.

The analysis of the autobiographical sources found that moral injury was most apparent when the Provisional IRA members were confronted with the realities and repercussions of the IRA’s campaign of violence. Whilst Republicans may have initially felt compelled to engage in violence for moral reasons and political change, this confrontation created feelings of moral conflict and cognitive dissonance between their involvement and their moral beliefs. This cognitive dissonance occurred most frequently when the IRA condoned acts that resulted in disproportionate violence and “unnecessary” deaths, including those of civilians, informers, and hunger strikers.

Apart from this cognitive dissonance triggering symptoms of moral injury, the analysis revealed it also evoked disillusionment with the organization on a moral basis. In fact, all of the five individuals who evidenced moral injury also evidenced moral disillusionment. This moral disillusionment often contributed to psychological and/or physical disengagement from the Provisional IRA, even if some of these individuals still supported the Republican ideology. Further research would clarify whether this disillusionment indicates that they changed their moral beliefs regarding the use of violence, as appears to be the case in some of the current accounts, or whether this means that processes of moral disengagement (as proposed by Bandura[[143]](#endnote-143)) failed.

The reality of violence leading to disillusionment in actors of non-state political violence has been suggested previously, such as by Horgan[[144]](#endnote-144) and Bjørgo.[[145]](#endnote-145) Experiences alluding to moral disillusionment have also been evidenced in other politically violent and extremist populations, such as in a former UVF member,[[146]](#endnote-146) ISIS defectors,[[147]](#endnote-147) former members of Al-Qaeda,[[148]](#endnote-148) former members of Al-Shabaab,[[149]](#endnote-149) former members of Islamist extremist groups,[[150]](#endnote-150) former members of ETA[[151]](#endnote-151) and in former right-wing extremists.[[152]](#endnote-152) Similarly to the findings in this study, moral disillusionment was most commonly experienced when the violence targeted “innocent” civilians and was a contributing factor to disengagement in many of these cases. Moral disillusionment may therefore provide cognitive openings to disengagement, although further research is required to understand this in greater detail. Furthermore, moral injury has been suggested to cause disenchantment with previously held values and an army’s morality.[[153]](#endnote-153) The relationships between moral disillusionment, disengagement and potential moral injury in these individuals therefore also requires greater attention and clarification.

Not every former member of the Provisional IRA will have experienced moral injury or disillusionment, and individuals disengaged for a variety of reasons. For example, many individuals were motivated to withdraw for more mundane reasons related to changes in their personal lives.[[154]](#endnote-154) In the current study, three accounts that did not evidence moral disillusionment also did not evidence moral injury. These individuals were likely protected from moral injury by their beliefs in the morality of the IRA’s campaign, as they demonstrated little reflection or guilt about the utilization of violence. This would have prevented their actions or the realities of involvement from conflicting with their moral beliefs. The analysis yielded a variety of factors that partially explain this temporary or consistent protection from moral injury. Further research is required into the factors that shape moral beliefs in this population and how this might prevent individuals from being susceptible to moral injury or moral disillusionment. For example, alternative factors may play a role in this as well, such as the dehumanization of the enemy, de-individuation through group cohesion, or the role of authority in diffusing feelings of responsibility.[[155]](#endnote-155)

## Implications

Whilst this study yielded preliminary evidence that some of the former Provisional IRA members experienced moral injury, interviews are required to establish the extent to which the concept is applicable to this population and to provide insight into its causes and consequences. Such interviews would additionally aid the identification of risk and preventative factors in this population, and would likely elucidate the links between moral injury, moral disillusionment, and disengagement.

This research is recommended not only for former Provisional IRA members, but also for other populations engaging in non-state political violence. Given the heterogeneity in organizational roles of the individuals included in this analysis, it would be useful to examine whether different roles affect the incidence of moral injury and moral disillusionment, and whether evidence of this is found in individuals who did not voluntarily disengage. This is in line with Horgan’s suggestions that further research is required into whether some roles are more likely than others to result in voluntary disengagement, and that the ease with which disengagement can occur may be a function of the type of role(s) held.[[156]](#endnote-156)

Future research should not only examine the incidence of moral injury in actors of political violence, but also how they are generally psychologically affected by their involvement. Although not discussed and analyzed in this study, the autobiographies evidenced that many of the Provisional IRA members faced significant psychological challenges throughout their involvement and underwent severely traumatic experiences during interrogation and imprisonment. For example, whilst Cahill[[157]](#endnote-157) did not reveal any evidence supporting the themes that were discussed in this study, he did describe his negative experiences during imprisonment. Such severe and potentially traumatic experiences likely had a lasting psychological impact on some of these individuals and is in line with research discussing the negative effects of imprisonment during this time.[[158]](#endnote-158)

A greater understanding of the issues highlighted in this study would be beneficial to programs aiming to facilitate disengagement and reintegrate former actors of non-state political violence. A better understanding of why actors disengage would help predict whether they will re-engage and may provide knowledge on how to deter individuals from joining violent groups in the first place.[[159]](#endnote-159) Importantly, support should be provided for psychological and emotional problems such as moral injury to ensure they do not become barriers to reintegration.

## Limitations

As discussed previously, there are several limitations associated with the analysis of autobiographies and the validity of the findings may also have been affected by the interpretative and subjective nature of IPA. Furthermore, IPA seeks to explore the participant’s interpretations of their own experiences. However, analyzing autobiographical sources may have affected the understanding of the individual’s experience given that these texts may have been revised by editors or co-authors. Conducting interviews would prevent this from limiting the analysis, as the researcher would be able to directly access their personal narratives.

IPA is a method that aims to gain deeper insight into a small sample’s experiences. This means that the results cannot be generalized to the wider populations of disengaged Republican paramilitary members active during the ‘Troubles’. Additionally, the fact that these individuals were motivated to write autobiographies and share their accounts in the first place may indicate that they were not generalizable to the Provisional IRA as a whole. The majority of the cases included in this study disengaged from the Provisional IRA and evidenced disillusionment (see Table 1). It is therefore possible that these individuals were more likely to demonstrate evidence of moral injury than former members who did not publicly share their story. The current study did not attempt to yield findings that are generalizable to this group as a whole. Rather, it illustrates the applicability of moral injury to this population with preliminary evidence of its occurrence.

It is unclear from these preliminary findings whether former Provisional IRA members experienced moral injury at a higher or lower rate than members from traditional state militaries or other groups in this context; such as members of the RUC, British soldiers, or Loyalists. It should be noted that there were instances of British soldiers and members of the RUC engaging in illegal activities during the ‘Troubles’, including the mistreatment and alleged torture of prisoners[[160]](#endnote-160) as well as collusion with Loyalist paramilitaries.[[161]](#endnote-161) Additionally, violence was utilized against civilians to quell protesting and Republican resistance.[[162]](#endnote-162) These events suggest risk for moral injury and should be explored in future research.

Due to the specific focus on the Provisional IRA, the findings can also not be generalized to other contexts or groups that employ non-state political violence. These other contexts should be similarly investigated considering the most commonly referenced event that prompted moral injury and moral disillusionment in this study was a confrontation with the reality of violence, and how this injured or killed civilians. This is also relevant to other contexts, given that similar confrontations have previously been identified as triggering disillusionment in individuals from various contexts and ideologies.[[163]](#endnote-163)

Some limitations were associated with the attempt to establish whether moral injury was present in this sample. Given that the autobiographies were written retrospectively, it is difficult to disentangle the feelings of the individuals whilst they were involved in the conflict from the feelings and reflections at the time of writing. Individual differences likely affected how much such individuals disclosed on the psychological impact their involvement had on them. Some may not have felt comfortable disclosing on such personal matters in public writing. This is especially an issue for individuals with moral injury, who may have avoided relevant topics out of guilt, shame, or distress. Alternatively, individuals may have been motivated to write autobiographies because of these feelings. Further research would elucidate these issues and provide further evidence for (or against) the occurrence of moral injury in former Provisional IRA members.

# Conclusion

Despite the further research that is required, this study found preliminary evidence of morally injurious events and symptoms in former Provisional IRA members active during the ‘Troubles’. This suggests that moral injury is a concept applicable to this population. Research should continue to be undertaken, as resulting findings would provide greater insight into the experiences of involvement in, and disengagement from, non-state political violence as well as may aid rehabilitation and reintegration efforts in the future.

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