

# An emerging ethnographic grounded theory of moral-soul injury: Perspectives of former activists of the liberation struggle in South Africa

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This article presents the second cycle coding of the research on the ethnographic grounded theory of moral and soul injury. The research problem pertains to the question: What is the consequence of the trauma or moral injury being inflicted upon ordinary South African citizens as a result of socio-political hegemonic systems? The ethnographic grounded theory and coding as an analytical method informed and guided the research project. The research sample consists of 11 former liberation activists and 11 third-year students at a South African university. Effective and theoretical coding shaped the final analysis of the various codes.

**Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications:** The research result reveals a high level of moral- and soul-injurious trauma in South Africa.

**Keywords:** trauma; moral injury; soul injury; ethnographic grounded theory; socio-political; coding analysis; liberation struggle; South Africa.

## Introduction

'You lose hope. You ask yourself, was all the struggle worthwhile; you feel that there is nothing that you can do to change the situation; because of the broken promises of a better life, the resignation that things will stay the same – totally disempowers you.' (R4)

'Hindsight is 20/20 vision: having said that, the overarching feeling is that, maybe, just maybe, we should not have strived so hard for our freedom. It is worse to commit injustice than to suffer it? You cannot do what was done to you, for it does not absolve you of your pain. Would you rather suffer moral injury than to perpetrate it?' (R4)

This is the second of two related research projects (Dames 2026).<sup>1</sup> The first study offers a theoretical foundation of trauma or moral and soul injury, supported by a model of well-being. Opinions in this article are those of the research participants and not the author's. Despite the resignation, hopelessness, and total disempowerment, we need to embrace a disposition that we cannot resolve psychological and existential challenges through *lex talionis*. Yet the approach leaves us with the difficult questions: Should we merely suffer moral injury rather than perpetrate it, or would you have joined the ANC if you knew then what you know now? Were the sacrifices you made worth it? (Present 2022:206). Moral-soul injury and recovery strategies are yet to be explored from the perspective of South African pastoral therapeutics (Botha 2023; Kim 2023). 'Failing to explore issues of direct experience of trauma in moral injury risks ignoring how trauma may impair the recognition of moral injury itself' (McCoy 2023). The aim of this study is not to provide a therapeutic model for moral or soul injury. Future research should attend to it.

This is an empirical-ethnographic study with a grounded theory methodology in search of a theory that could help to explore moral injury (MI) and/or soul injury (SI) as a relatively unexplored social phenomenon in South Africa – at least in terms of practical theology and in relation to the historic and current lived experiences of political activists for liberation (Babbie & Mouton 2017:499; Schurink, Schurink & Fouché 2021:295). The research problem pertains to the question: What is the consequence of the trauma or moral injury inflicted upon ordinary South African citizens due to socio-political hegemonic systems? Grounded theory presupposes that there is a gap in theory and is an inductive process – starting from specific experiences in search of a theory. As an analysis tool, coding is a messy business. Grounded studies

1. Injured moral souls in 'democratic' South Africa: Towards a practical theological model of well-being.

**Note:** This article was republished with an updated Figure 6, removing the anonymity of the author and other well-known public individuals. This correction does not alter the study's findings of significance or overall interpretation of the study's results. The publisher apologises for any inconvenience caused.

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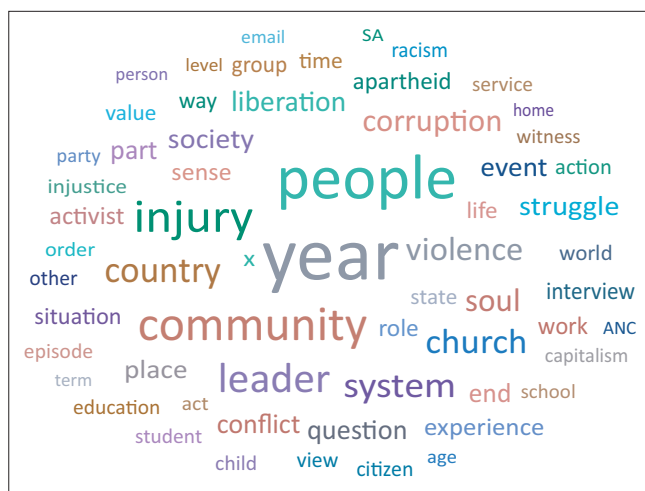
presuppose a lacuna regarding a theory for the phenomenon under study, namely moral or soul injury in lieu of former activists for liberation (1970–1990) in practical theology in South Africa.

ATLAS.ti 25 and manual coding were utilised to analyse the data (Saldaña 2013:3). Various categories surfaced from the relentless analysis in the process of first and second cycle coding. Axial coding served as a bridge between second cycle coding and theoretical coding (Saldaña 2013:51, 58, 223ff). Finally, the concept of moral-soul injury emerged as a consequential code, revealing the central concept which integrated the data from the participants (Rubin & Rubin 2011:201–202).

I need to emphasise that this article focuses primarily on the key research findings on moral injury in the life narratives of former activists in the liberation struggle (1970–1990). Due to the nature of the study, I used *in vivo* codes to capture the core existential experiences and context-related insights of the respondents. The aim was to follow grassroots hermeneutical skills to avoid the silencing of participants' voices or the reframing of their lived experiences.

The first cycle coding produced 398 ( $n = 398$ ) codes. I used the ATLAS.ti 25's AI (artificial intelligence) tool to generate the codes (Figure 1). However, it became clear that the AI-generated codes did not correlate adequately with the data collected from the research sample. This finding may reveal how Western knowledge systems are designed to conceal controversial insights or historically related truths of colonial hegemony.

Various coding methods, that is, *pattern coding*, *focused coding*, *descriptive coding*, *in vivo coding*, and *process coding*, were used (Saldaña 2013:88, 96, 209ff). The following *affective encoding methods* revealed the 'subjective qualities of human experience (emotions, values, conflicts, and judgements) (Saldaña 2013:5, 105). *Emotion coding* and *values coding* were essential for this study.



**FIGURE 1:** ATLAS.ti 25 AI generated codes.

## Research methods and design

## Initial research sample

The first sample consisted of 40 ( $n = 40$ ) participants across the country. None of the respondents accepted the invitation to participate in this study – for understandable reasons, that is, their close relationship with historic or current traumatic conditions in society.

My second attempt to secure participants was successful with the gracious support of one of the renowned higher education scholars in the country. The core sample of former activists consists of seven ( $n = 7$ ) participants (R1–R7 hereafter) – regarded as sufficient for a small-scale quantitative study (cf. Dames 2019). Their age range was 65–75 years, with an average of more than 20 years of work experience. All the participants hold postgraduate degrees and live and work in the Western Cape or in other parts of the country. The occupation of the participants varies from educationalists, ministers of religion, and a psychologist, to active community leaders representing non-government organisations (NGOs) and/or non-profit organisations (NPOs) across the country. The critical readers of this article suggested that I should increase the sample size. Hence, the additional random sample consists respectively of Indian ( $n = 1$ ) and White ( $n = 1$ ) male and female participants and black men ( $n = 5$ ) and women ( $n = 4$ ) participants. The sample consists of 11 third-year students at a South African university, preparing for pastoral ministry in their respective denominations from across the country. Research data of the student participants (S1–S11 hereafter) was attained from their assignments between 2015 and 2024. Furthermore, the lived narratives of four renowned former activists (Esau 2023; Isaacs 2010; Pedro 2024; Present 2022) for liberation and social change were added. The purpose was to utilise the two additional data sets to support the original research findings regarding the participation of the seven (activist) participants.

## Findings

In this section, I will describe the codes related to the research question. A total of 19 ( $n = 19$ ), from the initial 398 ( $n = 398$ ) codes, were identified and reduced to three ( $n = 3$ ) core codes. Note that the various descriptions below are summaries or forms of narratives of the essence of what the respondents shared. The 'notebook' presentation of the data should be viewed from a coding perspective, namely, *in vivo* codes, a technique which preserves the actual experiences, perceptions, and insights of respondents. As noted under the previous heading, the additional data sets of the four activists in book form and the 11 third-year students serve to undergird the coded results of the initial seven participants.

## Evaluating socio-political and cultural systems

This section deals with how and what the respondents have experienced, which could have caused MI or SI.



# Skare protesteer sonder voorvalle

Politieke Redaksie

DIE protesoptog waaraan sowat 2 500 lede van die Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) en die gemeenskapsorganisasies van Mangaung, Bochabela en Heidedal Saterdag in die Bloemfonteinse sentrale sakegebied deelgeneem het, het vreedsaam en sonder enige voorvalle verloop.

Die SA Polisie was deurentyd voorberei vir enige ontwikkeling, maar het nie een keer nodig gehad om in te gryp en om die skare te beheer of om iemand vir oortrekkings in hegtenis te neem nie.

Die optog is gekenmerk deur vlagswaaiende, singende en dansende ondersteuners van die organisasies, wat kortkort spontaan kreete van "Viva ANC", "release Mandela" en "equal rights for all" uitgeskreu het. Hulle het ook heeltyd sogenaamde vryheidsliedere gesing.

Bykans alle winkels langs die roete was net die optog gesluit en dié met veiligheidslekkie is met swaar kettings en slotte regrendel.

Ingange na woonstelblokke en hekke na private wonings is ook gesluit gehou enlegs enkele nuuskieriges wat deur die rensters geloer het, het die teenwoordig-

heid van inwoners, winkelpersoneel en kliënte verrai.

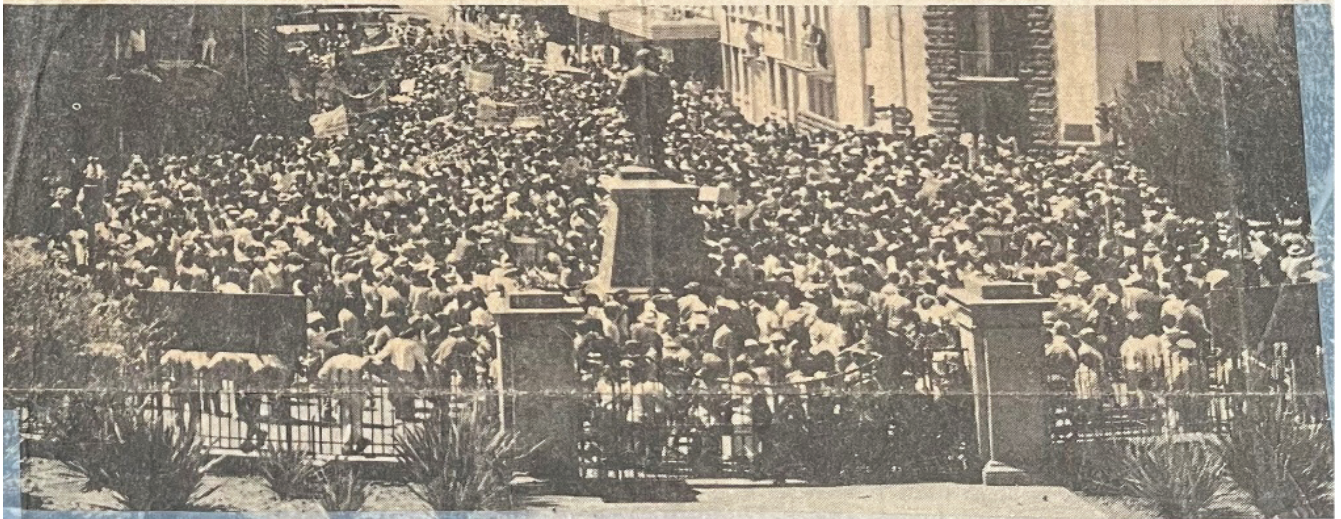
'n Afvaardiging van vyf leiers het omstreeks 11:00 twee versoekskrifte aan die aangewese Streekskommissaris van die SA Polisie in die Vrystaat, brig. Thom Erasmus, en 'n verteenwoordiger van die Vrystaatse Provinsiale Administrasie, mnr. Gideon Rossouw van die Departement Arbeidsverhoudinge, oorhandig.

Hierdie afvaardiging het uit mnr. Z.A. Dinga van Cosatu, Gerome Mtembu van die United Democratic Front (UDF), Mose Mogamise van Bochabela, James Seheri van Mangaung en Ronnie Pieterse van Heidedal bestaan.

Dié versoekskrifte dring onder meer aan op die vrylating van mnr. Nelson Mandela, die ontbanning van die African National Congress (ANC), die wegdoen met apart-

heidswetgewing, die afskaffing van die doodstraf, die opheffing van die noodregulasies, eenvormige tariewe vir alle inwoners van Bloemfontein en sy swart - en Kleurlingwoongebiede, een stadsraad vir al hierdie gebiede, die wegdoen met die sanitêre emmer-stelsel in die swart woongebiede, die oopstelling van hospitale en klinieke vir alle rasse en die vrylating van alle politieke gevangenes.

Die skare het omstreeks 09:00, ná afloop van 'n kort kerkdiens in die St. Rose Katolieke Sendingkerk in Bochabela, na die middestad beweeg. Dit het net ná 11:00 by die Nasionale Afrikaanse Letterkundige Museum in President Brandstraat aangekom en teen 11:30, nadat die versoekskrifte oorhandig is, teruggekeer na die Hoërskool St. Mary's in Bochabela, waar daar weer 'n kerkdiens in die Pax Nova-saal van die St. Rose Sendingkerk gehou is.



Source: Politieke Redaksie (Editorial Board), 1989, 'Skare protesteer sonder voorvalle (Crowd protest without incidents)', *Die Volksblad*, Oktober 16, 1

FIGURE 2: Protest action during the 1980s.

## Walls of resistance

**Code 1.1. Breaking through walls of resistance:** Breaking through the walls of resistance to real change is an enduring spiritual resilience with advocacy and determination to deal with brutal adversity as a betrayed people and activists, despite being interrogated and detained (Figure 2). Living without soul and moral injury calls for culling the dragon of capitalism, where it presents imminent conditions of suffering by the tentacles of the old white and neo-power establishment. White capitalism and not black people's power or political power is part of an enabler and under girder of pervasive poverty and marginalisation in the country. Resistance to oppressive realities presupposes subversion of these evils in collaboration and solidarity with the oppressed. This activity proceeds by discarding brutal forms of capitalism and neo-racist ideologies to advance the empowerment of the people in creating conditions for a deeper renewal of our society by advancing the ideal of altruism through a vision of social justice as noted by participants:

'Capitalism as the overarching dragon should be culled in order for all of us to live without soul or moral injury.' (R7)

'As activists, we underestimated the resistance to real change from the old power establishment. We also overestimated the commitment to a vision of social justice proclaimed by the liberation movement. I do not know what will break through the walls of resistance amongst the elites and create conditions for a deeper renewal of our society.' (R6)

A case in point is: 'Soweto's 16 June 1976 finally galvanised the UWC [University of the Western Cape] students into anti-apartheid action' (Pedro 2024:41). The UWC mass meeting on 30 July 1976 introduced the first of countless class boycotts. The initial class boycott was 'in sympathy with those who died in the Soweto uprisings' (Pedro 2024:38). This boycott was partly in sympathy with black people's universities and Soweto pupils and UWC's discontent with life in an unjust society (Pedro 2024:38). University of the Western Cape sought solidarity and improved relations with the broader black



community – the struggle would not ‘concern itself exclusively with an isolated struggle of “coloured people”’ (Pedro 2024:39).

### Code 1.2. Reliving structural racism and class divides:

Reliving structural racism and class divides is a shocking reminder of having struggled and again being sidelined because of resurrected white apartheid undergirded by neo-black apartheid as ingrained racial and class divides – an evil reintroduction of brutal racial injustice, racial discrimination, class classifications, and stereotypes. These severely impact the living conditions of communities by distorting and demonising racial relations based on ethnicity and segregation of citizens of different race and cultural backgrounds through false hierarchies of race, class, gender, ability, and age as is evident from participants voicing:

‘The shock of having to struggle and again being sidelined because of a racist ideology.’ (R4)

‘We cannot make a blanket conclusion that because of apartheid, everyone suffered more or less the same way. This is the mistake of the new racial ideologies under democracy. Some black people have been shielded by upbringing and money but now claim on the basis of colour that their needs must be privileged over other people. Social systems refract the impacts of advantage and disadvantage in numerous ways. Therefore, the current trends are deeply disturbing and will handicap generations of excluded people unless those with the resources and capacities will speak up for the marginalised.’ (R6)

‘Citizenship – unfortunately, the racial classifications were retained and no consistent attempt to develop a South African identity as primary as really part of nation building. These days, the old apartheid group labels have been resurrected in many places and discourses. Horrifying for me.’ (R5)

‘We have a constitution that is supposed to rid us from the fingers of racism and inequality. There remains the clause forcing people to state their “race.” This is a sickening remains of the racism so rife in our country. That affects the morality of our people and causes so much hurt. The issue of speaking about “African black” as supposed to other people of this country is a sickening reversal of the previous built-in apartheid-racism.’ (R7)

Consider the following account of moral injury and soul injury:

It was during the reign of Tony Yengeni that the ANC suspended my brother, Cecyl, as provincial organiser [...] in the Western Cape for the ANC. My brother, Cecyl [...] questioned the Africanist tendencies of the ANC, and he proceeded to argue for the ANC to give expression to the non-racial character of the movement. I was accused, with so much hostility coming from Vincent Diba. He proceeded to threaten me. That moment sounded and fell terribly familiar. I, there and then in that moment, decided that I would continue to make my contribution to the dawn of our democracy and that thereafter I would live out my passion, remaining actively involved with communities, working directly with the people but no longer on behalf of or for the ANC. (Esau 2023:71–72)

Another telling narrative from a Christian perspective:

As the Bible instructed, I must not only attend a ‘coloured church’ but also obey the government as the church’s authority is from God. In fact, it is in some way because of the church that

I developed a deep hatred for the apartheid system, which neatly divided us into racial groups: white, Indian, mixed race, and black people. How could I then love and pray to a God who divided his church in these same racial groups? To continue praying to him, I felt, would be to support apartheid. Though painful, I simply could not reconcile my upbringing in an apartheid church with my political convictions. (Present 2022:209–210)

From one of the student participant’s perspective:

‘I still experience the Dutch Reformed Church as an institution, being in attitude against integrating with other races.’ (S1)

Coming from a white male perspective, he notes the impact of a racist ideology which has marred leadership and membership in the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa (DRCSA):

‘There have been exceptional leaders like Prof. Johan Heyns, who sacrificed their lives for their convictions for racial integration.’ (S1)

Present (2022) recollects a moment when he experienced the liberation from MI and SI in an instance:

In the mid-2000s, I had looked at a white baby and saw a baby rather than a future soldier. I smiled for a second time and realised that, in a small way, my mind had been freed from the apartheid socialisation that had been part of my life since I was three weeks old. (p. 214)

**Code 1.3. Inconsistent justice:** Inconsistent justice is a banality of neo- and/or colonial prejudice and capitalist privilege, engendering inequality through selfish individualism by wielding a terror of power and authority as supported by participants:

‘The removal of apartheid legislation is of enormous significance.’ (R3)

‘Freedom of movement – money has replaced apartheid barriers. Job reservation vs BEE as corrective action, but this has become a vehicle for theft and graft.’ (R5)

Consider an example of inconsistent justice from the perspective of a former activist who was brutally tortured in captivity (Isaacs 2010):

What pains me the most today is that the hard-nosed comrades I lived with and who were so concerned with the welfare of the oppressed and who subsequently found their way into government, have allowed South Africa to become the most economically disparate society (in terms of the Gini Index) in the world. I also cannot understand how these hard-nosed, streetwise politicians were conned into buying such extremely expensive white elephants, in the form of warships, in the face of so much poverty and the rising infant mortality in our country reaching a level even worse than Afghanistan. (p. 244)

Another instance comes to mind (Present 2022):

I would remind people of my generation that by 1985, when we were going through one of the darkest periods in the country’s history, not all of us decided to act against the most oppressive government on the continent. I was one of those who raised my hand, who decided to act by joining the ANC. You have to

understand and accept too that, even in a democracy, fighting injustice may come with risks to your career, your family and even your life. In October 2007, I was promoted to chief director [in the Education Department of the Western Cape]. I, however, had a strained relationship with my new supervisor and decided, when she tried to institute trumped-up charges against me, to resign in October 2008. (pp. 206–207)

From another student participant's perspective, he critiques the practice of nepotism – the inequitable practice of economic advancement through political connections and affirmative action, even bribery:

'These days, in the place of a 'CV', all that one needs to secure a job is the colour of skin, affirmative action, political affiliation, and a 'good word' from the 'who's who', or, if one can afford, a sizeable 'initiation fee.' (S2)

**Code: 1.4. Subtle discrimination:** The loop of dehumanising and racial and class discrimination is a never-ending tragic and violent spiral. Extreme ambivalent and conflicting feelings of revenge and the need for reconciliation are stifled by the naturalisation of poverty and the institutionalisation of discrimination based on race, gender, and class stratifications expressed by participants:

'It is difficult to deal with feelings for revenge and a need for search for reconciliation.' (R5)

'I still harbour extremely negative thoughts towards white people who, according to me, don't realise how much damage apartheid has done and how much they have benefitted at the expense of black South Africans.' (R3)

'The obstacles in society seem overwhelming, poverty becomes naturalised, discrimination becomes institutionalised.' (R6)

For instance, a student participant, argues that the government has fostered patriarchal traditions and culture, which have limited leadership – especially for women, in the church. This patriarchal dominance has manifested in society as violence against women, 'The denial to females the right to leadership have bearing on, namely: physical violence, emotional abuse, economic abuse, harassment, and more' (S3).

Also, another student participant holds that:

'Many women contribute to their own subordination by silently submitting to the expectations placed on them by people who reject the validity of women having leadership positions.' (S4)

Drawing from these codes, we propose a theory of breaking through the walls of resistance.

## Theory for breaking walls of resistance

Breaking through the walls of resistance is reflected in, and the consequence of, a renewed struggle against structural racism and class divides, inconsistent justice, and forms of subtle discrimination. Subtle discrimination undergirded by inconsistent justice praxes fosters feelings of revenge against white and black people and an ambivalent need for

reconciliation. Resistance against dehumanising political and economic structural oppression necessitates an enduring spiritual determination and resilience.

Internal conflict is trauma suffered as morally injurious brought on by our moral actions and the actions of others against us. It is the erosive diminishment of our souls (Graham 2017:xi). Moral injury does not necessarily show symptoms of psychological disorders, but it presents various forms of inner conflict, namely perpetrating immoral or illegal practices, failing to prevent it or witnessing such acts, and in becoming aware of actions 'that transgress deeply help moral beliefs' (Koenig et al. 2018:659).

Inner conflict or ambivalence can be managed in a shared-therapy-praxis to alleviate the stress of individuals in changing their feelings and worldview (Brock 2023).

The result of moral injury can lead to various complicated emotional states, such as bitterness, unforgiveness, depression, anxiety, relational issues, and suicidality (Koenig et al. 2018). Moral living renders people vulnerable to moral injury, even in cases of unintentionally perpetrating harm to others (Woo 2023). The key question is who inflicts the wound of moral injury (Carlier 2023). Moral dissonance in society requires redress to transform moral challenges into spiritual opportunities to transform society (Graham 2017).

## Socio-political activism

### Code 2.1. Socio-political activism

Socio-political activism is when social and political systems require social activism based on a socialist worldview to influence neo- and/or imperialism to enhance affirmative action, to fight for human dignity, and land rights by demanding restitution for the suffering, oppressed, and marginalised as evident from participants' responses like:

'Our democracy has been hallowed, not only during the Zuma era but also under Thabo Mbeki that centralised the workings of the state and muted the voices of anyone critical and contrary to ruling ideology. Perhaps the most unfortunate result is an option for the black middle class by the ANC government against working and unemployed people. The old white establishment has not only bought into this regressive situation but has actively assisted to create it by its original model of black inclusion. The new black elite has been absorbed, but the great numbers of the poor live under lamentable conditions.' (R6)

From a student participant's point of view:

'We have recently seen a high level of corruption in our country. The public protector's report on Nkandla is one of them; [There is a] lack of service delivery within municipalities, which has resulted in a number of protests by different communities and many more.' (S5)

Note Figure 3 and Peter Present's (2022) recounting of the cost of political activism:

When I [Bibi, Peter Present's spouse] left home, I knew that the possibility of me having to face death or being responsible, directly or indirectly, for the death of others. I made this sacrifice





Source: Politieke Redaksie (Editorial Board), 1989, 'AWB dreig om optogte self te keer (AWB threatens to stop protest marches)', *Die Volksblad*, Bloemfontein, Oktober 16, 2

FIGURE 3: The cost of political activism.

not for me, but for the greater good. I had a purpose' (Present 2022:107). 'Since returning from our training in Angola, we had glimpses of what our futures could mirror as we followed the events and experiences of other MK [*uMkhonto weSizwe*] soldiers in the media or attended their funerals. Ashley Kriel would be murdered by the security police on 9 July 1987. It was, however, the murder of Anton Fransch that affected me most. (pp. 165–166)

## Code 2.2. Beyond the rainbow

Beyond the rainbow is a visionary awareness in the face of discrimination and persecution to redress bureaucratic impunity – a failure of restitution. It is to measure, guide, and clarify the longevity of life-threatening challenges, uncertainties, and seeking support based on confidentiality grounded in a belief in total liberation despite safety concerns as illustrated by participants' responses:

'My horizons remain open.' (R1)

'The Zuma presidency shook up the establishment and raised the difficult questions again.' (R6)

'Concern with status and titles seems to take precedence. Mouthing about the "poorest of the poor" and doing nothing concertedly. The fact that so-called service delivery protests still happen and the most violent is the one that will elicit a placatory response is upsetting. So, the patterns are continued, and resolutions awaits. Too often, the police are deployed when the real responsibility should be with the politician. Commissions of enquiry are great for catharsis, but the guilty are not energetically pursued. There is no restitution.' (R5)

'Some people operate with impunity [...] various pastors from charismatic churches e.g. Bashiri who exploit the vulnerability of people and enrich themselves tax-free and are not held to account

[...] reports of sexual abuse of church members [...] threaten what basis for belief the persons affected may have.' (R5)

'Hindsight is 20/20 vision: having said that, the overarching feeling is that may[be], just maybe, we should not have strived so hard for our freedom. It is worse to commit injustice than to suffer it? You cannot do what was done to you, for it does not absolve you of your pain. Would you rather suffer moral injury than to perpetrate it?' (R4)

'My opinion is that our public discourse is dominated way out of perspective, by political party rhetoric. We are currently trapped in a neo-liberal worldview, which focuses primarily, almost exclusively, on the rights of the individual over and above the needs of the community and even the family. These values take root in almost every aspect of life.' (R3)

Pedro (2024) recounts that the price for freedom was life threatening:

Already in 1967, [Warrant Officer Hernus JP 'Spyker' van Wyk] was the hard-hearted police official who crassly broke the news to the February-family of their son Basil's death, an ANC operative, 'Ek het net vir jou kom sê jou vark is dood.' [I just came to tell you that your pig is dead] (p. 246). Van Wyk and other security police 'severely tortured and assaulted the 25-year-old Sedrick Isaacs – the Security Police also subjected Isaacs to sleep deprivation. Van Wyk squeezed [Christmas] Tinto's foreskin and pulled all his public hair until he sank into unconsciousness. Tinto woke up in Valkenburg Mental Hospital, where he spent two months. (p. 246ff)

Present (2022) posits:

After [the wedding ceremony] in the hall of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in Goodwood. I was careful to manage my anxiety, and hide the angst I was feeling, my mind occupied with

the nitty gritty of our arrangements to leave the country [to join *Umkhonto weSizwe*]. A sadness enveloped me. Somehow, death was always around. We had already left behind our family, friends, and comrades, and now we had also started the slow process of leaving behind the few remaining belongings and memories of home. What made this particularly painful was that we realised that we may never again see what we sent home. Upon arrival at the camp, the experience felt somewhat surreal, strange – like I was there, but not really there. (pp. 85–94, 102)

### Code 2.3. Shadow of a violent governmental control

The South African government is a network of patronage with shambles of inefficiency under a shadow of violent control, which is retrogressively failing the people and causing intense suffering by stealing from the people's future through systems of extortion for self-enrichment. Consequential results are a total breakdown of society and democratic institutions as a result of white collar crime, pervasive and systemic corrupt municipalities fostering total social system collapse, and loss of our children who never tasted the sweet fruits of freedom because of running the country into the ground and creating a society with a scarred soul as seen from participants' responses:

'ANC elites in the vanguard – and the loyalty position adopted by the ANC leaves a bitter taste in the mouth. The system overall keeps people oppressed in order to ensure the system of extraction continues (a reference to how people are victims and casualties in a system of exploitation). Even when the system appears benign or civilised or enlightened, behind it is the shadow of violent control. By working to dismantle such systems, a person can find healing as well as a deeper meaning to existence.' (R1)

'The fight for power and money as part of all the coalitions and now the GNU, makes the citizens of the country to come last. Government and local authorities' main aim is to build their own wealth and capital. I bear witness to the abyss in which our children are falling.' (R7)

'Of course, after 30 years, corruption has permeated socio-political life.' (R2)

'The only way to address these failures is that they be removed from governance and new competencies and ethical commitments be encouraged across the board.' (R2)

'I have buried young people caught up in gang violence and have seen the dysfunction of the security services and their unwillingness to tackle violence in the community.' (R6)

'I feel that the country is being run into the ground – the fear of "too many black people in our prisons" is a misunderstanding of criminal activity.' (R4)

'Acknowledge that Black Economic Empowerment (BEEE) is disadvantaging black people – creating a safety net for incompetence as if black people cannot fend for themselves; Affirmative action (BEEE on an individual basis), another evil (but understandably necessary). Apart from the fact that it creates entitlement, it also creates a cushion for incompetence.' (R4)

'This brings me to our failure as a liberated country. We have gained freedom but have lost our youth and have not really tasted the sweet fruits of freedom.' (R4)

'Our society has become a neo-liberal capitalist morass of selfishness and greed.' (R3)

'I believe that we suffer a triple jeopardy of colonialism, apartheid, and corruption. This triple jeopardy has caused us to have a society with a scarred soul. The violence, racism,

crime, gender, and child-based violence we experience are direct results of the scarring of the soul of our society because of the triple jeopardy I refer to.' (R3)

A student participant (S11) notes the impact of poor, immoral, and unethical leadership on the poor and the vulnerable, especially those impacted by HIV and AIDS and poverty. Poor black women are especially at risk, but the failure of leadership compounds the plight of women, families, communities, and the entire country economically.

Another response from a student participant was:

'We've seen how African leaders have adopted a more individualistic approach to leadership, where self-enrichment and those who form their core has been the primary objective, at the expense of others.' (S6)

Student participant (S7) laments the fact that despite the expectation of the promise of a new future for South Africans by Mandela, the African National Congress (ANC) did not fulfil these expectations. Instead, they enriched themselves at the expense of neglecting the poor. The negative feelings towards leaders who have defaulted into criminality and power grabbing are strong. S-2 is of the opinion that the church has also fallen into corruption and abuse of leadership power.

We should never forget the worst atrocities endured for our democracy by activists who (Pedro 2024):

'were all associated with surveillance, arrests, abuse, and torture, which resulted in the continued trauma of anti-apartheid activists and leaders. Some of their [Van Wyk and the Security Police] actions resulted in the deaths of their victims. Among the first is that of Imam Abdullah Haron in 1969' (p. 247).

### Code 2.4. Desire for social revolution

The desire for social revolution is a longing to change the status quo by exposing discrimination, corruption, and entitlement by changing the previously held priorities in demanding social upliftment and a new identity of inclusive citizenship, diversity, and equality grounded in a new constitution:

'Much has changed. Much remains the same. The levels of poverty and unemployment affecting local communities [...] remain the same or worse.' (R1)

'I believe our country needs a socialist change to ensure that the wealth of the country is shared by the people. Maybe, we need a social revolution (not a violent insurrection) – changing the minds of individuals in our communities and influencing the leaders.' (R7)

'The existing order must be reformed, and systems must be renewed and restructured. The revolutions of the 19th and 20th centuries have shown that totalistic thinking leads to far-reaching oppression.' (R6)

A student participant (S8), from a Christian perspective, critiques the failure of the church to stand in solidarity with the victims of Marikana.

### Code 2.5. An ingrained moral rectitude?

The lack of an ingrained moral rectitude occurs when political leaders fail their inner values and moral compass.



It is why the citizenry challenge the dilemmas in life through critical spiritual reflection based on mutual consideration to critique the behaviour and concerns of others based on integrity, respect, and responsibility. Systemic issues need to be engaged, based on a moral compass with values such as professional integrity and societal accountability to establish social change and social cohesion with moral responsibility as indicated by the following participant responses:

'The 1994 and subsequent elections were fraudulent, in that the basic livelihoods of the people of South Africa were definitely not enhanced. The CODESA negotiations were farcical and only ensured a tighter grip on the economy and fiscus of the country in the hands of the capitalists.' (R7)

'One of the biggest contradictions in our society is the failure of the Moral Regeneration Movement. Its voice has been largely silent in critical years when South Africa needed it most.' (R1)

'The corrupt capture of our country and the aggrandisement of corrupt leaders cause the moral and social decline in our communities.' (R7)

'Our challenges are more than political and economic, our problems are spiritual as dignity, decency, respect, [and] integrity are essentially spiritual in nature. When relationships are sound and based on trust, people can begin to hold one another to account. The ineptitude and corruption of leaders create conditions in which young people perceive immoral actions as a reason to discard their inner values and moral compass. Moral justification invariably leads to human empowerment; however, our political leaders lack an ingrained sense of moral rectitude.' (R3)

A student participant (S9) refers to Tutu's definition of Ubuntu to emphasise that accountability to this philosophy should not cause enmity amongst individuals, based on the knowledge of being part of a greater whole, which can be diminished if others are not treated with dignity.

#### Code 2.6. Community cultural breakdown

Community culture engendered pre- and post-1994 ought to enhance the basis for cohesive group support, organising resistance by demanding socio-political and economic accountability. Community resistance forms the basis for engagements, empowerment, and participation to address social (community) issues such as violence, welfare, community breakdown, and community barriers through whistleblowing and social action as supported by the participant response:

'A key part of activism after 1994 was to defend our communities in their quest for their own rights. The activists in the churches, me included, forsook the privileges and largesse of the new state to identify and remain with poor communities.' (R6)

A student participant's (S10) view is an awareness of several instances of male leaders who have abused their powers and harmed their followers.

Another student participant (S11) reflects from a Christian perspective on the important role the church played in seeking a just and equitable society in both the pre-apartheid and post-apartheid eras. Churches are often reflective of the challenges in society, that is, racialised divisions. Therefore, he argues that churches can provide solutions by being 'laboratories for reconciliation.' We have a huge challenge regarding leadership in South Africa, where (political) leadership is marred by factionalism, ideologies, maladministration, and corruption.

#### Code 2.7. Reimagining the self in culturally diverse communities

Reimagining the self in culturally diverse communities is when an awareness of an ideal outlook from inordinate conditions leads to an experience of relief undergirded by aspects of religion, humour, and supportive relationships, namely Figure 4, when relational issues are redressed through mentorship and therapy:

'I excite myself about the possibility of a new world order, where dignity, decency, respect, and integrity can begin to enthuse me to believe that there is much hope for us all. Finding new paths to deal with supposedly immovable objects and unstoppable forces.' (R3)

A student participant (S12) posits that women are viewed as inferior by Christian men in the church. He attributes this and the broader discrimination against women in society to a patriarchal system and to traditional, cultural practices. Even in the context of the church, the doctrine of creation applied to men, whereas women are viewed as inferior. He views church influence in social and political spheres as being a dominant factor in South African society.

Drawing from these codes, we propose the following theory of violent governmental control.

#### Theory of violent governmental control

The consequence of violent governmental control re-inflicts the suffering of a triple jeopardy of colonialism, apartheid, and corruption – a bureaucracy of impunity, which is created by a lack of an ingrained moral rectitude, haunting society with scarred souls. Proactive activism demands restitution for the suffering, oppressed, and marginalised. It is the concretisation of cohesive, culturally diverse communities of inclusive citizenship with an unwavering moral compass of professional integrity and societal accountability.

Ideal communities foster wholeness and moral and soulful human living (Louw 2005; eds. Moschella & Butler 2020). Relational equilibrium within communities, however, is threatened and even destroyed when existential societal conditions become so harmful that they inflict personal and community wounds on the soul. They cripple a sense of worth and destabilise the ingrained moral compass of a society, diminishing the soul of individuals and communities with woundedness and permanent scars (Graham 2017:79).





Source: Caring community. ©Prof. Gordon E. Dames. n.d. All rights reserved

**FIGURE 4:** A caring community.

Geographical forced removals of families and whole communities during the apartheid era as well as the current White and foreign economically engineered removal of families and whole communities from their homes, are a neo-apartheid phenomenon of reliving existential trauma as supported by the participant response:

'My political consciousness was developed as a High School student at Noorder Paarl High School when we were evicted from our home which my parents built (my mother's brothers were all in the building industry as carpenters and bricklayers). They built the house on the property provided by my paternal grandfather, who was a schoolteacher. All my father's siblings lived on that property, two built their houses and started their families there when they got married. We were part of a community called the 'Rooikamp' in Paarl, not far from the church (St Stephen's Anglican Church) where we worshipped every Sunday. We attended St Stephen's Primary School where my paternal grandfather was a principal. The Group Areas Act destroyed this and all the surrounding communities on the West of the Berg River and the railway line. The school was raised to the ground, and this included the cemetery. The church landed up with the White Dutch Reformed Church, who, I think, used it as a hall when they built a big church where other people's houses once stood. My grandfather said that he would not move over his dead body - he went to lie down one Sunday afternoon and died before he was forced out of his home which was adjacent to his children's homes. The surrounding communities were all forcibly removed to the eastern side of the Berg River and the railway line. The church has since been returned to the St Stephen's congregation who had to rebuild a new place of worship. White South Africans live in what was 'our' house and where we were born.' (R4)

Traumatic experiences of violent governmental control can alter the soul's moral centre. Such traumatic circumstances and resultant soul wounds cause severe trauma – moral-soul injury (Graham 2017):

Trauma is the disruption of our holistic sense of life by unwanted, uncontrollable, an[d] intrusive circumstances and events that damage our integrity and threaten our existence. [...] Trauma rips apart the fabric of life and raises unavoidable questions of life's meaning and goodness. (p. 80)

The value of communal Ubuntu dynamics is critical to dealing with trauma (McCoy 2023, *author's emphasis*):

One of the powerful effects of trauma, in individuals and communities, is that connections are broken and assumptions about how the world is supposed to be are shattered [including] assumptions about who and how God is in the world. *One of the tasks in trauma recovery (or remaking) is to piece together from the shattered fragments a coherent view of God and the world.* (n.p.)

In the next section, I sorted codes according to external factors or the consequentiality thereof in terms of the research question. See Figure 5 as a reminder of the potential offset of post-traumatic lived experiences.

## Emotional coding

### Code 3.1. Trauma

Description: Trauma is the consequence of atrocities by various liberation forces outside and inside the country, and the ravages of post-apartheid failure, and deep disappointment in pretentious leaders grabbing the resources of the country. Preventable tragedies inflict suffering, sadness, and even suicidality, prompting substance abuse, necessitating coping strategies and empathy as a result of various factors of historical and current trauma because of events during and after the liberation struggle as evident from the participant responses:



NC- en Cosatu-vlae en "Release Mandela"-plakkate was goed aardevoordig, hoewel die opkoms van deelnemers nie dieselfde aangevoeling getoon het nie aan Saterdag se vreedsame protesoptog in Cosatu- en Gemeenskapsorganisasie-ondersteuners van Bloemfontein se swart en Kleurlingwoongebiede deur dié stad se sentrale kegebied. Voor in die middel staan suster Theresa van die Katolieke kerk St. Rose in Bochabela, ds. G. E. Dames van die NG kerk in Heidedal, en mnr. Z.A. Dinga van Cosatu.

Source: Politieke Redaksie (Editorial Board), 1989, Die Volkskas, Bloemfontein, Oktober 16, 1

**FIGURE 5:** A reminder of the potential offset of post-traumatic lived experiences.

'I have been deeply disturbed during the struggle years about atrocities committed by various liberation forces. Many activists lost their lives due to internal corruption and oppression within the liberation forces.' (R6)

'On campus, one young man was accused of being an 'impimpi' [collaborator/spy] – he was brutally attacked, but sanity prevailed among the majority, and we could help him (save him from mob "justice"). In another incident, a man barely escaped with his life before being necklaced.' (R4)

'Confronted daily by the ravages of post-apartheid failure. My predominant emotion is deep disappointment in the pretended leaders that have turned out to be mostly grabbing the resources of the country for themselves.' (R6)

Esau (2023) recounts:

We continue to remember Peter Cyril Jones as one of South Africa's selfless political leaders who, despite all the hardships he suffered and the trauma that he experienced, chose to continue to work tirelessly for the upliftment of the poorest of the poor. (p. 70)

She continues:

I remember [...] the brutal attack I experienced at the hands of the security police at Caledon Square Police Station. [...] The

way I coped with the memories of that night was to distance myself from it. I spoke of the woman detainee who was taken from Pollsmoor Prison to Caledon Square Police Station, the woman who was dangerously attacked and after 13 hours taken back to Pollsmoor Prison. I chose to mention only some parts of that night. Somehow, doing it this way [in written form] made it a bit easier. As time passed, I no longer wanted to be remembered of or remember any of it. I worked hard at burying it so far away, where they could no longer find me. (Esau 2023:56–57)

Sadistic brutality by security police was the order of the day (Isaacs 2010):

I was further assaulted (which some others also experienced), resulting in dislocation of my jaw and a split lip. I had chains put on my wrist, waist, and ankles and left naked in a damp and cold solitary confinement cell. On another occasion, I was strapped by my wrist[s] and ankles onto a wooden frame and flogged for 'insulting' the Prison Department: a degrading 'punishment' out of the 18th century. It is indeed fortunate that the human memory does not carry new physical pain. Unfortunately, memory does, for me, carry psychological pain and also the pain of continuous unrelenting cold that I experienced in the solitary cells, which lead to hypothermia ... I thought conditions could not be as bad on Robben Island as the dingy police cells with brutish sadists as personnel with their rubber batons, chalk circles, and electricity machines. (10ff, 46)

### Code 3.2. Anxiety

Anxiety is a form of depleted mental health among political activists, during the struggle for liberation, characterised by severe emotional distress as a result of factors such as the loss of or separation from loved ones, friends, access to education or employment – exacerbated by an experience of fear, displacement, hopelessness, and sadness, which can develop into depression, cynicism, pessimism, a total lack of motivation, or a state of complete despair as supported by participant responses:

'Noises of cars at 4 AM used to be unnerving. Post '94, those noises, if heard, were no cause for concern: no one was coming to detain you without trials.' (R5)

'I was fortunate to study in the USA in 2006, 12 years after democracy – I was only two weeks in the USA when police sirens rang up close to me. I started running, not knowing why. Fortunately, after about ten paces, it struck me: I did nothing, knew no one, and why was I running? It shocked me that my reactions were natural – I remembered back in the day, when the police sirens echoed, you ran. You will ask later what happened.' (R4)

Anxiety characterised the state of mind of Peter and Bibi Present throughout the period of their activism (Present 2022:86–89, 94, 102–103, 127, 156). The same fate befell their families. After returning home from Angola, Peter recounts (Present 2022):

Some nights, when large trucks rumbling down on the nearby road backfired, it sounded like an explosion or gunshots. Bibi and I would be jolted from sleep. We'd listen carefully, hoping it wasn't the security police. (p. 133)



### Code 3.3. Regret-resentment

Regret-resentment is the cause of resignation in what and how sacrifices for liberation have been compromised in and through intra- and interpersonal experiences, and corrupt political practices, which fuel feelings of scepticism, discontent, and revenge as forms of deep angered disappointment and frustration:

'There is a prevailing sense of disillusionment amongst educators (I single them out – most of them formed part of the people who grew up during the struggle and even took part in resistance). They found themselves disadvantaged in terms of advancement on the economic ladder and overlooked for such advancement. This unhappiness finds resonance in their place of work – teaching children. The relay of the narrative not about being 'black and/or white enough' and this brushes off on their learners. These become despondent, seeing that positions go only to 'African' people, feel that there is nothing for them to strive for.' (R4)

Contrary to current feelings of resignation in the democratically elected government, history demonstrates that imprisoned activists would never regret or resent their role in the struggle, despite the psychological methods of the apartheid regime:

A warder [...] Botha [...] was in charge on Robben Island, and he knows exactly what to do with terrorists [...] [*he used to say*] We would be released, if we managed to survive, when we were old and broken from the life of hardship on Devil's Island. The idea of fighting the government was stupid and would only bring destruction and death to those who dare[d] to do so, as we would be experiencing soon. (Isaacs 2010:45)

### Code 3.4. Betrayal

Betrayal is the consequence of inter- and intrapersonal bias, bullying, and avoidance suffered by former activists of the liberation struggle by pretentious leaders (according to a participant [R6]) with no experience of the liberation struggle who disrespect, exploit, and displace others who do not form part of a particular racial group, social class, or class system. Betrayal is sheer disillusionment in how the liberation struggle has been captured by the very same people for whom we sacrificed our professional aspirations, families, education, professions, mental, and physical lives as seen from participants responses:

'I still maintain that all the current elections are fraudulent and only a search for a place to "eat at the trough."' (R7)

'Ranges from disappointment to cynical to worried to frustrated to angry to bemused to feeling betrayed.' (R5)

'Bullying, extortion, intimidation is an increasingly used tactic, and how one responds is not easy. Talking to other victims isn't always helpful.' (R3)

The next episode resonates with betrayal on an MI or SI injurious level. Dr Beyers Naudé at his office at Khotso House, advised Peter Present that he would assist him to leave the country on condition that he married and acquired legal passports. However, Peter and Bibi Present felt the brutality of betrayal when they arrived at Naudé's office as a married couple (Present 2022):

But then, to my astonishment, he did a complete about-turn, making it quite clear that he could not assist or support us in any way. He showed no sympathy for our predicament whatsoever. I was astounded. The person we were relying on to help us leave the country was acting as though he had no idea why we were even there in the first place. ... Dr Naudé gave us the cold shoulder that day, especially as we now know that he provided invaluable support to the ANC and MK members over many years. (pp. 79–80, 86–87)

Multiple experiences of betrayal befell the Present (2020) couple, they:

[W]ere forced to take responsibility for [*their*] own safety in [*situations*] in which [*their*] lives were at risk, especially now that [*they*] were alone in another country, on [*their*] way to undergo military training and regarded by [*their*] homeland as 'terrorists'. Connecting with the ANC wasn't as straightforward (pp. 91, 200)

Bibi recounts 'how unreliable and unconcerned the ANC comrades in Zambia were [*perhaps a taste of what was to come in SA*] (Present 2020:151).

Another tragic, ironic form of trauma was that of Allan Boesak (Present 2022):

The Foundation for Peace and Justice (FPJ) was established in 1985 by the Belville South Dutch Reformed Mission Church, with Dr Boesak as one of its trustees. Ten years later, he faced charges of misappropriation of FPJ funds. But then, following a remark by the Minister of Justice, Dullah Omar, who stated that Boesak was guilty of nothing more than 'struggle bookkeeping' aimed at deceiving [*i.e. Bishop Desmond Tutu and Beyers Naudé*] the security police, the issue of financial accounting by some anti-apartheid organisations became a prominent issue in the media. [...] After being found guilty on theft and fraud charges, Boesak was sentenced to three years' imprisonment. [...] He pronounced at a press conference: 'It is deeply regrettable that because of who I am and my role in the struggle, this trial has been fatally politicised, to such an extent that even the judicial system did not escape its impact. I will be entering prison as an innocent man. (p. 179)

### Code 4.1. Moral-soul injury

Moral-soul injury (consider Figure 6) is the consequence manifested when our sense of humanity, dignity, and security are compromised by being deeply wounded, and in being timid, lacking the strength and focus to move forward. The injury happens when your personal experience or life story is forcefully affected by self-serving political, cultural, and economic systems and when your life is enmeshed within an existential crisis fostered by major events traumatic to the moral soul – killing the spirit of people – rendering our communities impotent. This state manifests from personal sacrifices to constraints and interruptions in the ability to live and work without a prospect of hope and healing:

'Moral injury works at a deep level. In this sense, apartheid was deeply injurious.' (R6)

'There is such neglect and sometimes collapse. Extrapolating from the individual to the national collective, we are constrained by trauma. It interrupts our ability to work together.' (R1)



Source: *Shadows of moral injury and soul injury re-envisioning new communities*. ©Prof. Gordon E. Dames. n.d. All rights reserved

**FIGURE 6:** President Nelson Mandela (a) welcome and (b) visit.

'Marikana and Life Esidimeni were two instances which were appalling and brought up feelings I thought I would not have to feel again.' (R5)

'I never understood the effect that the pre-apartheid "trauma" had on me. I realised that the trauma was deep – almost forgotten.' (R4)

'I still have anger issues against some people – who are still around and probably cared very little about the soul injuries they caused.' (R4)

'I believe that we suffer a triple jeopardy of colonialism, apartheid, and corruption. This triple jeopardy has caused us to have a society with a scarred soul. The violence, racism, crime, gender, and child-based violence we experience are direct results of the scarring of the soul of our society because of the triple jeopardy I refer to.' (R3)

Moral injury or soul injury could also present among contemporary Christian leaders whose mission is to support struggling local communities. A student participant (S4) observes that leaders often leave the ministry as a result of burnout and being overburdened by multiple tasks.

Note the recollection of a post-traumatic realisation (Present 2022):

Only years later did I realise that [an] incident was the first sign that I had underlying psychological issues. Although I had arranged for Bibi and the boys to receive all the necessary counselling immediately following the turmoil of the X incident, I failed to recognise my own trauma. On an emotional level, I was not in a very healthy space [...] relegating to the back burner all the issues that continued to haunt me over the years, albeit subconsciously. [...] The spark was lit that I was still carrying psychological scars. [...] I'd lived in my head – for more than two decades. [...] Eventually, 'I broke down then. I recall Anton [a psychologist] telling me that it was time for me to leave the bush and come home. (pp. 191, 194–196)

I hold that the moral injury and soul injury suffered by Peter and Bibi is a narrative of sincere solidarity, dedication, perseverance, loss, pain, anguish, anxiety, etc. especially, not being allowed to execute their mission for the struggle against an evil regime (cf. Present 2022:164–165).

#### Code 4.2. Ambivalence

Ambivalence is the consequence of internal identity conflict when political and economic leaders deprive you of your human rights within a system (whether democratic or apartheid) that purports to stand for the values of justice to advance patriotism. Ambivalence manifests in deep anger, a disappointment of letting our people down, and an acceptance of where we currently are, juxtaposed with a paralysis through bitterness as seen in the participants responses:

'I feel let down and what we as activists of the time have let people down. On other days, another key feeling is acceptance. We are where we are. We could not be further on this road. We must not allow ourselves to be paralysed by bitterness or disappointment.' (R1)

'I deal with contradictory internal conflict every day. But when I activate against the government and those in power, I get tainted as a traitor to this country that I love. I fear that one is curbed from voicing opinions contrary to what is perceived to be for the ruling organisations in this land.' (R7)

'Yes, the struggle was necessary for all the people living in South Africa; we gained freedom, but at what cost, but still remembering that sacrifices had to be made. However, being again on the receiving side of racism and being marginalised as a brown person, you ask yourself if it was worthwhile – maybe we should always be careful what we asked for?' (R4)

The ambivalence of what activists have endured and experience today is in stark contrast to a dreadful innocence by those enjoying the fruits of liberation while suppressing the history of the struggle at the cost of millions who still suffer in abject poverty, for whom 'many made the ultimate sacrifice for our freedom' (Present 2022:214).

#### Code 4.3. Existential dread

Existential dread when things are falling apart is a severe form of social disillusionment in which social decline, racial regression, and transgression of moral beliefs set in as a result of a failure of justice; the fear of retaliation causes emotional detachment, withdrawal, reduced involvement, political disengagement, disenchantment, and a lack of future perspective. The fear wounds our perceptions and impinges on our capacity to envision and plan creatively. Broken people cannot lead broken people, hence the moral and social



decline in our communities and the actions of broken leaders misappropriating financial resources in a feeding frenzy:

'My first anger was against the church – stepping aside after liberation when it was most needed. Our physically and socially broken and violence-ridden communities need the church for moral renewal to initiate the process of healing. Hence, the moral and social decline our communities experienced whilst being led by broken people who never had access to financial resources found them now in charge of those resources. Blowing the whistle is a life-limiting move; when you are still building your career, anything against those in power is career-limiting.' (R4)

Peter and Bibi recount (Present 2022):

Feelings of dread and anxiety of Peter having to leave nine days later had to be buried deeply. [...] I had no contact with Bibi since leaving Botswana and, in the long evenings alone, my mind constantly drifted to her; whether she was okay and how worried she must be. [...] I [Bibi] remember crying a lot; this was caused by the fear and uncertainty of Peter's fate. (pp. 152, 156)

#### Code 4.4. Social apathy

Description: Social apathy is when we are ever so quickly sliding into the abyss as a result of social exclusion and social injustice. These factors manifest in apathy, even a belief in conspiracy theories, pervasiveness of being disadvantaged, disempowered, and inequality. This situation prompts a desire for clarity based on social norms such as social responsibility and social justice supported by participant responses:

'I do believe that we are better off in terms of human relations, but we are ever so quickly sliding into the abyss created by corruption, state capture, and the lust for power and money by selfish individuals basking in the glow of imperialism and capitalism.' (R7)

'I think [soul injury is] destroying [our] interest and people's sense of agency.' (R5)

Our country could have been in a better space (Present 2022):

If only former activists for the liberation of this country could tell their stories of [the] sacrifices they made for the freedom of this country, then hopefully, the youth may craft a new path for a just, equal, and non-racist country geared to serve all. (p. 215)

Drawing from these codes, I propose the following theory of moral injury.

#### Theory of moral injury

Moral-soul injury is the manifestation of trauma based on emotions, values, experiences, and feelings. Moral-soul injury is caused by violent political systems of power, racial and class discrimination, and systemic discriminatory practices of perpetual injustice. Moral-soul injury manifests when your sense of humanity, dignity, and security is deeply wounded by being timid and lacking the strength and focus to move forward. The problem is when your personal experience or life story is affected by self-serving political, cultural, and economic systems. Life is enmeshed within an existential crisis fostered by traumatic, soul-injurious events,

which are killing the spirit of people and causing the impotence of communities. The situation manifests from personal sacrifices to constraints and interruption of the ability to work without a prospect of hope and healing, especially within a culture of scarred souls.

#### A wounded country

Research findings reveal that moral-soul injury is a manifestation of deep moral and soul-woundedness – a culture of scarred moral souls, brought on by a culture of governmental bureaucracy impunity.

Moral-soul injury is a severe form of trauma (Koenig et al. 2018). Morally ingrained values and, for example, the souls of activists are the essence of who we are as human bodies and body politics. They are the core fabric of life designed for healing and transformation, but if inflicted with moral-soul injury, the fabric can also be broken, scarred, or injured (Graham 2017:79). Hence, there is a correlation between Theory 3 and what Graham identifies as sources of moral injury, namely when someone witnesses or are a victim of or a perpetrator of explosive assaults, when a person is in a benign, constricted, and dangerous situation which inflicts high levels of trauma. Firstly, trauma-prone environments could be revolutionary training camps, public institutions, gender-based violence, histories of trauma, and trauma narratives which shape living conditions (Esau 2023; Isaacs 2010; Pedro 2024; Present 2022). Trauma-enabling environments inhibit preventative and healing resources. Secondly, trauma is brought on through illegal, unjust, or criminal choices, and lastly, a sense of grave loss (Graham 2017:81–81).

Moral-soul injury is, thus, the ruination or degeneration of our ability to protect individual and societal moral principles. The injury diminishes our agency to challenge leaders' moral compasses and ability to acknowledge guilt and shame as a result of harmful actions (Graham 2017:82). Although the trauma is insurmountable, those traumatised should 'piece together' the shattered fragments in their lives, in their living and working spaces.

The three concepts discussed earlier are related to the core variable of moral-soul injury to synthesise the research findings.

Figure 7 illustrates the relationship between the three concepts and the core concept:

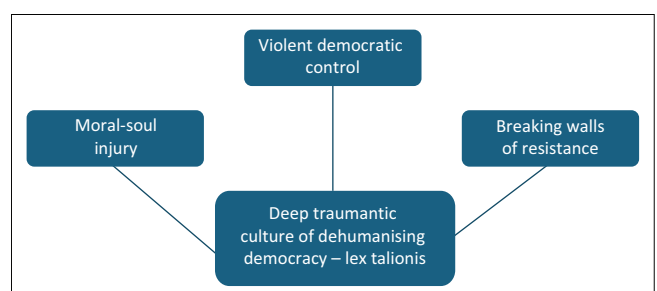


FIGURE 7: The relationship between the three concepts and the core concept.

The theory *deep traumatic culture of a dehumanising democracy – lex talionis*, is a devastating indictment for political and institutional leaders in South Africa.

Moral-soul injury is the manifestation of a deep culture of scarred moral souls, a woundedness brought on by the atrocities of certain activists and the violent impunity of the governmental bureaucracy, which are killing the spirit of people and causing the impotence of communities. South Africans live with perpetual suffering inflicted by political and economic power systems of injustice, as well as racial and class discrimination – cancerous systems which are robbing a nation's sense of identity, humanity, dignity, and security. These deeply infected wounds need a renewed struggle against dehumanised structural oppression, as well as racial and class divides, with an enduring spiritual determination and resilience. Or are South Africans faced with a dispensation of neo-black apartheid or retribution – *lex talionis*, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth against those who do not form part of the African Renaissance?

## Conclusion

The following participant responses caught my attention:

'By working to dismantle oppressive systems, a person can find healing as well as a deeper meaning to existence.' (R1)

'Marikana and Life Esidimeni were two instances which were appalling and brought up feelings I thought I would not have to feel again.' (R5)

'I never understood the effect that the pre-apartheid 'trauma' had on me. [ ... ] I realised that the trauma was deep – almost forgotten.' (R4)

If we concur with the value-based lived experiences of former activists for liberation, then we must concede that a violent dehumanising democracy resonates with a quadruple jeopardy of colonialism, apartheid, neo-apartheid, and corruption that cultivates a conducive environment for a climate of deep traumatic moral and soul-woundedness. Moral injuries to the soul need an awareness that the soul is an integrative whole of persons and communities in need of morally ingrained leaders to secure their safety, security, identity, and humanity. The research findings reveal a disturbing phenomenon of MI-SI in the country. Although the findings cannot 'be generalised', future quantitative research may prove invaluable.

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### Competing interests

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potential conflicts arising from their involvement. The terms of these funding arrangements have been reviewed and approved by the affiliated University in accordance with its policy on objectivity in research.

### CRedit authorship contribution

Gordon E. Dames: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Visualisation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication, and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

### Ethical considerations

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### Data availability

The author confirms that the data supporting this study and its findings are available within the article and its listed references.

### Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency, or that of the publisher. The author is responsible for this article's findings, and content.

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