

Intro([00:03](#)):

Thank you for tuning in to the CASCW Podcast Channel. In this episode, Korina Barry chats with Dr. Wendy Haight, Gamble-Skogmo Child Welfare and Youth Policy Chair about Moral Injury in child welfare professionals. We hope you enjoy this conversation.

Korina Barry ([00:24](#)):

Wendy could you share a little bit more about who you are, kind of what your role is here at the university and the school.

Wendy Haight ([00:31](#)):

I am a professor here in the School of Social Work, and I am the Gamble-Skogmo Chair in Child Welfare and Youth Policy.

Korina Barry ([00:42](#)):

Can you share a little bit more about what it means to be the Gamble-Skogmo chair of Child Welfare?

Wendy Haight ([00:47](#)):

We have a wonderful resource in our school, created by Mr. Gamble and Skogmo. They were businessmen who wanted to do something for children, and they set up this endowment and it allows a professor to spend a significant amount of time doing largely community engaged research, around issues important to the wellbeing of children and families.

Korina Barry ([01:22](#)):

And we're going to talk today about Moral Injury, which is kind of one area of research that you all are doing. Could you share a little bit more about how, how did you begin studying Moral Injury and what, what brought you to that, that area of research?

Wendy Haight ([01:38](#)):

So I got involved when a community partner, a psychiatrist was speaking with me about some of the challenges that he faces in delivering the best quality of care to his patients. He's an inpatient psychiatrist. And he talked about, he introduced me to the concept of Moral Injury as an inpatient psychiatrist. He deals with many, very sick people. He talked for example about a young man who during an episode of psychosis killed his mother. Well, they got the psychosis under control, but then he was left suffering with the understanding that he had killed his mother. How do you live with that? And so this community partner had read about some research done by a psychiatrist at the VA hospitals, and they had noticed similar issues. They were noticing these issues primarily with veterans that yes, trauma occurs, but trauma can co-occur with Moral Injury, with the threats that they experience to their fundamental concepts and assumptions about what is right and wrong, what is just, and this could be in combat when maybe a child was killed or when they observed a superior officer abuse another subordinate or civilian.

Wendy Haight ([03:13](#)):

So all of these types of Moral Injuries they notice, and my community partner notice can create feelings of guilt and shame and threats to meet basic meaning system. And these feelings can be very intense and they can persist for years, even after therapy, because we don't have interventions specific to Moral

Injury. And so when I heard about Moral Injury from this community partner, I immediately made the connection to child welfare and the children and families that I had worked with as part of my duties as a Gamble-Skogmo Professor, but also prior to that. And to give you an example, I thought of a young boy who was part of a research project we did over time. It was longitudinal and it had, and the research focused on the experiences of children whose parents were addicted to methamphetamine and also involved in child welfare.

Wendy Haight ([04:26](#)):

And this little boy, we saw him at the age of eight and then when he was 11 at the end and at eight, he entered foster care with a lot of trauma and he'd gotten some high-quality intervention for that trauma. But when I spoke with him again, when he was 11, he was really suffering with Moral Injury, which I didn't name at the time, but he was suffering with trying to make sense of, or somehow live with an event that happened between him and his grandfather when his parents and their drug seeking, pressured him to steal money from his grandfather. So he was suffering with his parents, violating a basic assumption that he had about right and wrong. And then also that he had done that, and that was causing him feelings of guilt and shame and confusion even after the trauma had been successfully addressed. And so that's how I got involved with Moral Injury. And then as you know, we went on to look at Moral Injury in parents involved in the child welfare system and also child welfare workers. Now we're looking at Moral Injury and that is experienced in childhood and adolescence in individuals with foster care histories.

Korina Barry ([05:50](#)):

It's very powerful research. You all are doing.

Wendy Haight ([05:52](#)):

Thank you.

Korina Barry ([05:54](#)):

So Wendy you and your team are looking at and learning more about these different groups of individuals impacted by Moral Injury within the child welfare system and area, could you share a little bit more about what some of those different impacts are? When we're thinking of social workers who are working in the field of child welfare, who are supporting youth in foster care or supporting parents or other caregivers that are involved in child welfare, kind of what you're seeing, some of the different impacts and what maybe workers should know about that.

Wendy Haight ([06:35](#)):

We see a lot of convergence across people who are differently positioned vis-a-vis the child welfare system. I think both professionals and parents were impacted by the system and experienced Moral Injury as a result of characteristics of the system. We have an adversarial system and that and professionals talked about how that adversarial situation actually impedes their ability to help truly help and support families and children. And they felt morally injured by that because they most social workers, most child welfare workers, they go into the field because they want to help and support and empower families and children. But they find that within the system, which is overburdened under resourced, adversarial; that doesn't necessarily happen. And some expressed the feelings that, that really violated their personal and professional ethics and moral frameworks, likewise parents felt or

identified Moral Injury associated with involvement in the system. They went, they might have entered into the system hoping for and expecting that the professionals there would help them.

Wendy Haight ([08:12](#)):

And instead they felt additional stress and pressure and harm, and many described feeling attacked because of the adversarial nature of the system. And that these feelings they describe as making them less likely to engage in services that in fact could have been helpful to them. And to go back professionals and when they talked about Moral Injury from the system, many of them talked about feeling burned out, about feeling that they wanted to leave and not do this important work anymore. Children whom were as a new group that we're looking at. And I really can't say a lot about the results of that study, but children in terms of Moral Injury have not been studied. And this is one of the first studies of Moral Injury in childhood and adolescence. And so you can think about how the experience of Moral Injury might be impacting moral development as it's happening. And those are important questions that we'll, that we hope to address in our ongoing research.

Korina Barry ([09:36](#)):

And so absolutely understanding the impact on professionals and maybe the, feel the experience of burnout and high stress and fatigue and wanting to leave the workforce. I also wonder about hope and healing and wondering kind of in these maybe earlier stages of what you're seeing and finding and hearing from some of these professionals on kind of what is giving them hope, what is helping them heal? What is keeping them in this work?

Wendy Haight ([10:08](#)):

Supportive supervision seems very important. Peer support seems very important. There is new data from an intervention for Moral Injury. It's called Resiliency Strength Training. It's been implemented and evaluated with veterans, but it is widely applicable with adaptation. It is a peer support model where individuals who have this common experience of Moral Injury can understand one another, uh, can provide support to one another can work on ways of healing and processing Moral Injury. It's, non-stigmatizing, it's, we're not saying that Moral Injury is a mental disorder. It certainly is not. In some of these situations, if you don't, if you didn't experience moral injury, we would wonder about your, your moral development. So it's not a mental illness, but that doesn't mean that it doesn't cause profound suffering, uh, and persistent suffering, um, that it doesn't impact, impede, um, one's wellbeing. So I think it's important to, um, understand moral injury in the, in that context to provide support Resiliency Strength Training also provides support to the peer facilitators.

Wendy Haight ([11:49](#)):

So it's an intervention where the peer facilitators are supported and also taught certain exercises or activities that those who have experienced moral injury have described as being helpful. So reflective writing and talking and making sense of the, of the moral injury, um, forgiveness, activities like meditation and yoga have all been identified as ways of recovering. Spirituality seems to be very important because these moral injuries do cause certain, you know, existential crises in those who experienced them. And so spiritual practices have also been identified as helpful and are incorporated into resiliency strength training.

Korina Barry ([13:02](#)):

Okay. Thank you for, for folks listening and maybe still trying to wrap their heads around, like what, what does this mean? What is Moral Injury and maybe how is it different or the same, or have some overlap with post traumatic stress disorder or vicarious trauma or secondary traumatic stress. Could you share just a little bit more of what is different between those and maybe how there might be some overlap or commonalities?

Wendy Haight ([13:32](#)):

Yeah. There's overlap for sure. Um, but moral injury, moral injury often does overlap with trauma. So the veterans described by Jonathan Shay. Um, you can imagine, a soldier who experiences sexual assault from say a superior officer that, that would, um, and that would result both in trauma, but also moral injury. A profound violation, betrayal of trust, and assumptions about, the, how individuals treat one another, particularly those who are in positions of power. So Moral Injury often does overlap with trauma. Also as in the young boy from the rural methamphetamine involved family, he had both trauma and moral injury. So I think understanding moral injury can help us understand PTSD at a deeper, more complex level, but trauma can also occur without moral injury. So I think of a caseworker who had a car accident during some bad weather on a rural road, it was not her fault.

Wendy Haight ([14:58](#)):

There's no, you know, human fault or involved in that. Um, but she did experience PTSD. She didn't experience moral injury. Moral Injury also can occur without trauma. And an example of that is a very talented musician, a clarinetist, um, whose passionate ambition and hope was to study with one of the prominent clarinetist. So he applied to the graduate program to study with this person and his girlfriend at the time who didn't want him to leave, sent him a fake email rejection to the program. And when he learned about this, um, years later, when he ran into the clarinetist, who then asked him why he hadn't come to study with him, um, and he learned of this betrayal that he felt a profound, moral injury. He didn't feel trauma. He felt moral injury. So moral injury can co-occur with trauma and often does, but, but trauma can occur without moral injury and moral injury can occur without trauma.

Korina Barry ([16:11](#)):

Thank you. That that's a helpful distinction, I think, between the two. So is moral injury, a new phenomenon, or is it just maybe new to some of us folks in the child welfare area in naming and labeling?

Wendy Haight ([16:27](#)):

Yeah, I think the latter, moral injury, I believe is an ancient and likely universal human experience two of the foundational works in this area by Jonathan Shay are titled Achilles in Vietnam and Odysseus in America where Shay relates the suffering of Vietnam war veterans with the suffering of Achilles. And there are multiple examples that you can draw on throughout history and different cultural contexts. What is new is the attention paid to the phenomenon by mental health professionals.

Korina Barry ([17:12](#)):

So Wendy you and your team at Gamble-Skogmo have been a long time partner of ours at CASCW but moral injury. The, your work around moral injury is still new to us. And we've been fortunate to partner with you over the last year or so, and looking more into translating what you're finding in your research, into more accessible, you know, training products and ways that worker frontline workers and

supervisors in the field can access this important information. And so this past year we collaborated on this new video project. Could you share a little bit more about that video project?

Wendy Haight ([17:56](#)):

So Wendy, in the, in the video we listened to, we were able to hear from three different workers who were at each at different stages in their careers from pretty much fresh in the field for under a couple years, all the way up to, you know, 20 to 30 years in practice. I would also add that these workers also work in different areas, you know, rural, urban, suburban counties, and with different communities, demographic wise. But after hearing kind of their, their stories, some of their experiences, what stands out to you as a researcher and what feels important?

Wendy Haight ([18:35](#)):

What feels important to me is that after these workers, after parents, after youth shared these really difficult experiences with us and these difficult feelings, I believe we have a real obligation to systematically design and evaluate ways of addressing moral injury. And I think that's something that we can even begin thinking about now, and it's touched upon in the video. And I think it would be helpful to kind of extend those discussions a little bit when we did our research and in our ongoing research, we always ask people about ways that they found moving forward of recovering from moral injury. And we hear some common themes as the, one of the workers in the video describe there are things that individuals might do on an individual level to help them to be more resilient, to morally injurious events. So workers on the videos talked about spiritual practices, and this is a common theme, both within the literature and in our research asking those existential questions and dealing with issues of meaning, because that's fundamentally what moral injury is a lack of meaning, a disruption of meaning systems.

Wendy Haight ([20:10](#)):

So those spiritual practices, and can both help the person make sense of their experiences. And also to feel some sense of centering personally, given those experiences. So spiritual resources, activities that are soothing or centering like yoga or meditation are practices that consistently come up when individuals talk about how to recover. So that's what a person can do individually. I think peer support is also a theme that comes up routinely to be able to discuss with colleagues, common experiences and practices. That can be extremely helpful. Support as supervision is also very helpful. There's some empirical research suggesting that mentoring helps individuals be more resilient in the face of morally injurious events and to recover. So support is supervision, mentoring, those seem important, also important, seems to be taking action. So advocacy for social change, advocacy to help reduce the risk to others of moral injury is healing. So, advocating for lower caseloads for better quality service availability for clients. Those are important.

Korina Barry ([22:02](#)):

Yeah. You know, and this is kind of off the cuff. So no worries if you're,, you know, hearing the stories from these workers, and again, knowing that they're at all, three of them are at different stages of their careers. And I think of Sarah who is just entering this workforce and starting her career in child welfare. But then I also think of Carol who was on the other end and who has clearly had some resilience in staying in this field and doing this tough work. And I just wonder if anything, from their stories stood out to you regarding that and felt clear, felt like a clear connection to that maybe resilience or what has helped keep Carol there. If that makes sense.

Wendy Haight ([22:48](#)):

I think that some of the workers that we spoke with who were just starting out in their career were very idealistic, very, very motivated to help families to make changes. So I think the first assaults on that idealism from working within and overburden under-resourced system, they felt keenly and sometimes felt betrayed some sense of betrayal from their programs, from their professional trainings. They felt, like not prepared to deal with situations in which their idealism was crushed. I think that Carol is the older, I think that workers like Carol, who have shown resilience and were able to work within the system for a long period of time, I think they have much to teach us and much wisdom from which we can learn about how to better buffer those new workers just coming into the field. We have a course through educational technology innovations that will be coming online within the next month or so. That is a full course on moral injury for continuing education. It is free and it is available to anyone who wants to learn more. So there are five modules and each module includes PowerPoint lectures. It includes some video of workers and researchers discussing moral injury. And then it includes a quiz that you take for continuing education. So I encourage anyone interested in learning more to consider checking that out

Korina Barry ([24:45](#)):

Will information about this course be available on the Gamble-Skogmo website?

Wendy Haight ([24:49](#)):

Well, it should be.

Korina Barry ([24:50](#)):

Okay.

Wendy Haight ([24:51](#)):

And maybe we've got to make a note to do that.

Korina Barry ([24:54](#)):

Because we can link to that. And the video that we've listened to and other resources . You all have created a number of resources that we can link to in the episode.

Wendy Haight ([25:02](#)):

Yeah. Well, and we're also going to, CASCW will also have the course.

Korina Barry ([25:07](#)):

So when we hear Sarah's story or Ann's story where they're describing these moments of, I think what appears to be both moral injury and even some traumatic stress. And when other as and as other listeners who are hearing this episode, maybe are thinking like, Oh, wow, I I've experienced that. Or I can identify this moment or maybe may come across this in the future. Can you share, do you have advice or suggestions for how these folks might navigate and address that?

Wendy Haight ([25:45](#)):

I take as a model, the Minnesota One-Stop Parenting Parent Mentor Program and what that is, it is a peer support group. So individuals feeling like, Oh, I've experienced moral injury and I'm struggling with it. They might consider the Parent Mentor Program in Minnesota started as a grassroots group of African-American mothers who had experienced child welfare, who wanted to do better for other parents. And they were concerned about racial disparities. They comprise this group, they're now providing services to many Minnesota counties. But part of what I hear from those parents is that not only that, that they find healing and discussions with other parents who have experienced very similar feelings, including moral injury, I would suggest. And that being able to have time with those other parents, but then also use the difficult experiences that they have had personally to help others gives meaning to those troubling experiences. So I would encourage people who feel that workers who feel that they may be suffering from moral injury to check it out, see if, if there is a peer support group that they might comprise to support one another and help other workers who might be suffering as well.

Korina Barry ([27:34](#)):

We are going to take a few minutes to listen to this newly released video on moral injury in child welfare professionals, that both of our teams worked on this past year. Can you share a little bit more about the video?

Wendy Haight ([27:51](#)):

We spoke with three social workers, Sarah, and Carol at different stages of their career. Sarah was just beginning and Carol is a very experienced worker. They also practice in different contexts, rural, urban, suburban, but they all describe feelings of moral injury in relation to their work in child welfare.

Korina Barry ([28:25](#)):

Okay. We will listen to some of the audio from that video. Well, thank you, Wendy so much for taking time and joining me today to share a little bit more about the great research you're doing a little bit more of our partnership, um, and, and the work happening behind the scenes to help bring moral injury and the implications for child welfare, more to the forefront. We will, link to and include a lot of the resources that we mentioned too. And any additional resources you think of on our website and in the description of the podcast. And we'll be in touch for kind of future projects and findings to help keep spreading the word.

Wendy Haight ([29:09](#)):

You are very welcome. And thank you for your work in bringing our research into practice.

Outro ([29:19](#)):

This podcast was supported in part by a grant from the Minnesota Department of Human Services, Children and Family Services Division.