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Emotional Reactions and Moral Judgment: The Effects of Morally Challenging Interactions in Military Operations

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This study explores the association between different types of morally challenging interactions during military deployment and response strategies (e.g., moral justification), as well as the mediating role of moral emotions. Interviews with Dutch servicemen who participated in military operations (e.g., in Afghanistan, Angola; \(N = 45\)) were content coded. We found a relationship between local-cultural and team-related interactions and moral justification; these effects were mediated by other-condemning emotions. Similarly, other-condemning emotions mediated the relationship between local-cultural interactions and relativism. This study points at the importance of other-condemning emotions in shaping military reactions to frequently occurring morally challenging interactions.

Keywords: dilemmas, moral emotions, military deployment, moral disengagement, numbing, relativism

During a patrol mission in Afghanistan, where I was one of the drivers, we escaped from a suicide attack. A man had blown himself up in a marketplace close by. We are still not sure what his target might have been. Except for him, nobody had died in the incident. . . . Since we were this close to the site, we were commanded to collect body parts and remains of the bomb. After identification, the...
body would be returned to his relatives in order to ensure a proper funeral. We all started to collect whatever we could find. However, at one moment I started to realize what I was doing. . . . This man . . . maybe we had been his target! And now I had to collect body parts so he could get his funeral! It wasn’t me who had blown him up in pieces! The whole situation made me sick, I was disgusted by what we had to do. At the same time I felt so angry, I felt he had it coming and I didn’t want him to have the honor of a proper funeral. I didn’t want to comply with our orders then . . . but there was not much choice. (Fragment from an interview with a female Dutch Corporal regarding her deployment experiences)

This example illustrates the challenging situations that military personnel may encounter during deployment. In this case it involves choosing between the conflicting values of compliance on one side and fairness on the other. It has generally been acknowledged that military deployment comes with such morally challenging interactions (for an overview of differing types of moral challenges, see Richardson, Verweij, & Winslow, 2004). We define morally challenging interactions as situations in which an individual is confronted with an intrapersonal “clash” of values caused by an interaction with others. Morally challenging interactions may occur in every environment in which individuals interact. However, in some environments these dilemmas are more evident than in others, for example, due to cultural diversity and extreme circumstances. We propose that they are particularly likely to occur in the context of military operations because of (a) large cultural differences, (b) a necessity to act, (c) a not self-evident situation, and (d) high stakes (cf. Kramer, 2007). These features create an environment susceptible to extreme, complex, and morally challenging situations. Others have referred to such situations as moral dilemmas (e.g., Van Baarda & Verweij, 2006). Because servicemen do not always perceive a situation as a dilemma but refer to it as an interpersonal frustration, the more neutral term morally challenging interaction is used throughout this article. Confrontations with morally challenging interactions may evoke strong emotions, because deciding on the best course of action to take is often regarded as extremely difficult (cf. Van Baarda & Verweij, 2006; Verweij, Hofhuis, & Soeters, 2007). This is clearly illustrated in the example described in the introduction, wherein the Dutch Corporal experiences both anger and disgust. In turn, these emotional reactions are likely to influence the (behavioral) response strategies (cf. McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson, 2001). For example, anger may trigger aggression, as has been illustrated by incidents such as the My Lai Massacre and more recently the Haditha Incident. In the 1968 My Lai Massacre in South Vietnam, more than 400 civilians—including children, women, and the elderly—were gang-raped, mutilated, and eventually killed by U.S. troops (cf. Oliver, 2003). U.S. Marines killed 24 Iraqi civilians—including children, women, and the elderly—in Haditha, Iraq, in 2005 (cf. Knickmeyer, 2006).

The goal of this explorative study is to gain insight in the process of moral judgment in military operations by exploring the relationship between morally challenging interactions and response strategies. We also focus on the possible mediating role of emotions. Because there is a lack of earlier empirical research in this field (cf. De Graaff, Den Besten, Verweij, & Giebels, 2014), transcripts of interviews with recently deployed Dutch servicemen serve as input for a narrative analysis, based on the grounded theory approach (cf. Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Glaser & Strauss, 2009).

This study has both a theoretical and practical ambition in relation to moral judgment during military deployment. First, we aim to increase the understanding of the psychological process of moral judgment in the context of morally challenging and emotionally charged encounters that
present themselves during military operations. Due to the exploratory nature of this study, the results give a first glance at the type of interactions servicemen experience and the processes present in these experiences. Furthermore, by exploring different types of morally challenging interactions, we may be able to estimate to what extent this process is contingent upon the specific type of interaction. As such, the outcomes of the study are also likely to have practical value for the deployment of troops by military organizations, as it may result in recommendations for predeployment-training programs to better identify risky encounters and to prevent incidents of irresponsible acts from happening.

In the remaining part of the introduction, we provide an overview of the field on the affective approach in moral judgment research, followed by a theoretical framework that we use as the basis for our analyses.

MORAL JUDGMENT RESEARCH: AN AFFECTIVE APPROACH

Historically, studies on moral judgment mainly focused on (a) group dynamical processes, such as obedience and anonymity (e.g., Milgram, Orenstein, & Zafirri, 1989), and (b) on cognitive processes in individual reasoning following the social cognitive theory (cf. Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996; Greene & Haidt, 2002). From the 1990s onward, an affective approach gained more and more attention in the field of moral psychology. This led to an abundance of studies focusing on intuition and emotion in relation to moral judgment (e.g., Greene & Haidt, 2002; Haidt, 2001; Harris, 2003; Kroll & Egan, 2004; Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007). Research on the incorporation of emotions in moral judgment in the military context is scarce (cf. Schut, De Graaff, & Verweij, 2014). Most studies address emotions in relation to stress or symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and are mainly of a more clinical nature (e.g., Engelhard, Olatunji, & de Jong, 2001; Friedman, 2006; Litz et al., 1997; Rademaker, Vermetten, & Kleber, 2009; cf. De Graaff et al., 2014). Moreover, the nonclinical literature focusing on moral judgment within the military is mostly theoretical/conceptual of nature and not so much empirically driven (e.g., Olsthoorn, 2005; Olsthoorn, Meijer, & Verweij, 2010; Richardson et al., 2004; cf. De Graaff et al., 2014). Furthermore, the few empirical studies that were conducted on moral judgments in the military mainly focused on cognitive processes without addressing emotions and intuition (e.g., Olsen, Eid, & Johnsen, 2006; Seiler, Fischer, & Voegtl, 2011; Verweij et al., 2007; Williams, 2010).

Moral emotions can be defined as “[emotions] that are linked to the interests or welfare either of society as a whole or at least of persons other than the judge or agent” (Haidt, 2003, p. 276). Thus, moral emotions reflect basic human emotions (such as anger, compassion, and fear) but in a specific context enclosing a “third-party” aspect that causes a moral challenge (Rozin, Lowery, Imada, & Haidt, 1999). These moral emotions are often caused by events in which the social order of human life is inflicted, such as discrimination, or aggression, and that do not necessarily and directly involve the observer himself or herself (Rozin et al., 1999). Haidt (2003) distinguished between four categories of moral emotions: (a) other-condemning emotions, (b) self-conscious emotions, (c) other-suffering emotions, and (d) other-praising emotions (see Table 1). In the opening example of this article, the potential harm of the suicide bomber may have led the corporal to experience feelings of disgust and anger (other-condemning emotions toward the bomber).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main Category</th>
<th>Subcategory</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Operationalization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Other-condemning emotions</td>
<td>Anger</td>
<td>Encloses feelings that involve a negative judgment regarding others. Sometimes referred to as the “hostility triad” (Rozin et al., 1999).</td>
<td>Discusses feelings of frustration, madness, rage, hatred, disapproval, anger, contempt, disgust, loathing, aversion, superiority, and so on, in a moral context.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Contempt</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disgust</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-conscious emotions</td>
<td>Pride</td>
<td>Involves ongoing assessments of the individual’s perception of his/her personal moral worth and ability to fit within a community (Rozin et al., 1999).</td>
<td>Discusses feelings of pride, self-importance, self-satisfaction, and so on, in a moral context.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Shame</td>
<td></td>
<td>Discusses feelings of shame, embarrassment, guilt, humiliation, disgrace, blame, remorse, and so on, in a moral context.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Embarrassment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Guilt</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Compassion</td>
<td>Most strongly felt when it involves close relatives (such as one’s kin or friends), but can also be caused by the suffering of total strangers (cf. McCullough et al., 2001).</td>
<td>Discusses feelings of compassion, empathy, sympathy, pity, concern, care, and so on, in a moral context.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other-suffering emotions</td>
<td>Awe</td>
<td>Positive emotions that originate in situations in which an individual considers other people’s behavior as virtuous (cf. Emmons &amp; Crumpler, 2000).</td>
<td>Discusses feelings of awe, gratitude, elevation, admiration, respect, appreciation, and so on, in a moral context.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gratitude</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Elevation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
MORAL JUDGMENT RESEARCH: RESPONSE STRATEGIES

Emotions may have a prolonged effect (cf. McCullough et al., 2001; Tangney et al., 2007; Thiel, Connelly, & Griffith, 2011). According to Lerner and Keltner (2001), emotions trigger processes that persist beyond the eliciting situation. These emotion-related processes subsequently direct behavior and cognition in response to objects or events that may have only a slight relation to the original cause of the emotion (Lerner & Keltner, 2001). Research shows, for example, that anger motivates aggressive actions toward the inflictor (cf. Haidt, 2003) or more punitive judgments of others involved in the incident, even when this is not appropriate (cf. Thiel et al., 2011).

Individuals deal with their emotions in interpersonal relationships and social interactions by using a certain response strategy (cf. Gable & Gosnell, 2013). Generally, response strategies in morally challenging interactions can be regarded as a form of coping. Coping refers to an individual’s attempt to regulate one’s reaction and meet the specific demands of a stressor (cf. Connor-Smith & Flachsbart, 2007). Although decades of research on coping have identified an abundance of different strategies (for military studies, see Limbert, 2004; Nilsson, Sjöberg, Kallenberg, & Larsson, 2011; Rademaker et al., 2009), a recent meta-analysis by Connor-Smith and Flachsbart (2007) shows that two global categories of response strategies are distinguished under such conditions. First, individuals may use active (or engagement) strategies, involving vigorous attempts to manage the situation at hand. Second, individuals may make use of passive (or disengagement) strategies, for example, by avoiding the stressor (Connor-Smith & Flachsbart, 2007). To further categorize active response strategies, we used Bandura’s framework of “moral disengagement” (e.g., Bandura, 1999). We distinguished the passive response strategies into “numbing” (e.g., Lifton, 1973) and “ethical relativism” (e.g., Whetham, 2008).

“Moral disengagement” refers to the process in which the behavior of an individual or a certain group of people—despite their moral self—gradually and often unwittingly becomes irresponsible (Bandura, 1999). According to Bandura, the self-regulatory process of internal moral control permits an individual to selectively activate or withdraw from his or her moral standards (cf. Bandura, 1999; Bandura et al., 1996).

“Numbing” is a term introduced in the field of psychiatry and refers to the process of desymbolization and deformation. This refers to a state of mental disturbance: An individual is no longer capable of human mentation (Lifton, 1973). Therefore, the individual is incapable to create and re-create meaningful images and forms in relation to an occurring event (Lifton, 1973). Within the clinical literature, similar attempts of suppression are referred to as psychological dissociative defense mechanism, which is strongly related to the well-researched elements of depression and PTSD (cf. Nijenhuis & Van der Hart, 2011). However, discussing the comprehensive theories on depression and PTSD falls outside the scope of this article. Instead, numbing is used (which resembles elements of the mentioned clinical models) as a concept in this study. This is because it is better confined and well studied within a military context (e.g., Litz, 1992; Litz et al., 1997). Thus, “numbness” refers to an individual’s absence of emotional responsiveness to situations that “normally” evoke an emotional reaction (Litz et al., 1997).

Another passive response strategy, “ethical relativism,” differs from numbing, as the service-men do not “shut down” their feelings, but they tend to relativize and overrationalize the situation at hand (cf. Whetham, 2008). Ethical relativism emerges from “what at first appears to be commonsense position that ethical judgments vary from culture to culture and that therefore there is no objective standard by which to judge a specific act” (Whetham, 2008, p. 305). Thus, in this
disengagement strategy the servicemen are aware of their environment and the challenge they face—in contrast to numbing—but they do not act upon these situations, because they believe they have no right to do so given the specific cultural determination of the situation.

To summarize, based on theory and previous moral judgment research discussed in the preceding sections, the model depicted in Figure 1 is hypothesized to explain the relations between morally challenging interactions, moral emotions, and response strategies. It is assumed that emotions mediate in the relation between morally challenging interactions and response strategies during military operations. Table 2 presents the operationalization of the response strategies described in the previous paragraphs.

METHOD

For the purpose of this study, transcripts of interviews were content analyzed according to grounded theory approach. The aim of this study was twofold. For the first aim—categorizing the types of moral challenges in military operations—no previous research or theory was used to make constructions of this reality. Here, coding was used as “an iterative, inductive, yet reductive process that organizes data” (Walker & Myrick, 2006, p. 549). By means of coding themes, categories of moral challenges could be constructed from the servicemen’s narratives. Second, this study aimed to gain insight in the relationship between moral challenges and behavioral responses—in terms of engagement and disengagement strategies—and the mediating role emotions play in this relation. For this purpose, the proposed theoretical framework was used as a starting point for abduction: a qualitative research strategy within grounded theory in which theoretical knowledge and presumptions serve as heuristic tools to make sense of social phenomena in social interactions (cf. Richardson & Kramer, 2006).

Sample

Participants were selected from units that experienced direct contact with the local population or coalition forces during a military deployment. First, participants having being deployed in Afghanistan as part of Task Force Uruzgan (under ISAF command from 2006 to 2010) were interviewed. Additional servicemen participating in other operations were recruited for participation as the process continued in accordance with snowball sampling (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981; Noy, 2008). Most participants had been deployed to Afghanistan, and others were deployed to
TABLE 2

Response Strategies Based on Bandura (1999), Lifton (1973), and Whetham (2008)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constructs</th>
<th>Main Category</th>
<th>Subcategory</th>
<th>Operationalization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Active response strategies</td>
<td>Reconstruction of own behavior or the incident</td>
<td>Moral justification</td>
<td>Justifies what happens, for example by saying that the goals justify the means.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Advantageous comparison</td>
<td>Compares the incident or own behavior with other situations that are considered worse, for example by saying that torture is permitted since the victim killed innocent children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Euphemistic labeling</td>
<td>Uses language that masks what happens, for example discussion collateral damage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reconstruction of own role in the incident</td>
<td>Displacement of responsibility</td>
<td>States not to be held responsible for what happened, for example by saying someone else gave an order.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Diffusion of responsibility</td>
<td>States it is unclear who is responsible in the situation, for example by saying there were others present as well who could have intervened.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reconstruction of the parties involved</td>
<td>Dehumanization</td>
<td>Uses language that dehumanizes individuals or groups of people, for example by referring to them as dogs instead of people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Blaming the victim</td>
<td>States the victim has to blame himself for getting into this situation, for example by saying they started the terrorizing first.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passive response strategies</td>
<td>Numbing</td>
<td></td>
<td>Discusses a state of emotional numbness or apathy, for example by saying the situation goes by in a blur.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relativism</td>
<td></td>
<td>Puts the situation in perspective, for example by saying that (cultural) differences are omnipresent and improbable to overcome.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

countries such as Angola, Iraq, Liberia, and Bosnia. The deployment experiences varied between one and five times deployed ($M = 2, SD = 1.2$). The participants differed in age and rank, varying from 18 years to 47 years old ($M = 28$ years, $SD = 8.3$) and from private/marine up to lieutenant colonel. Of the participants, 17 were in a leadership position. Most participants were male. Only seven women participated in the study, which can be explained by the fact that very few women are enlisted and deployed abroad.

**Procedure**

First, brigade commanders were asked to support this study. They all considered the topics addressed relevant and gave their consent for us to contact their subordinates. Second, 60 individuals were initially personally contacted by e-mail (officers) or by a personal letter to their commanding officers (for troops and noncommissioned officer). Participants were given the
opportunity to address this call by sending an e-mail to the researchers or by informing their commanding officer, who in turn would inform the researchers about the servicemen’s willingness to participate. The participants were informed that the project aimed at gaining insight into deployment experiences and its impact on the daily life of individual servicemen. All participants were ensured confidentiality, meaning their commanding officers or other third parties would not be notified of their individual answers. A total of 45 servicemen voluntarily agreed to participate in this study, and with them a meeting was arranged. A further 11 servicemen—willing to take part in an interview session—eventually did not participate for differing reasons, such as unavailability or not meeting the research criteria. At the beginning of each interview session, the participant was again informed about the procedure and the possibility to abort the session at any time. It was also ensured that those participants who were approached by their commanding officers were truly present on a voluntary basis.

**Interview format.** Data were collected by qualitative semistructured interviews following a prepared interview guide. The interview guide was tested in a small number of interviews before using it in the main study to ensure that all participants were asked similar questions regarding their deployment experiences. Regular informed consent procedure was followed. The participants were all interviewed by two behavioral scientists. One of the interviewers (the first author of this article) was continually present throughout all interview sessions, whereas the second interviewer position was shared between two researchers. The meetings were arranged at a location that suited the participant. Most interviews were carried out near the servicemen’s workplace or at their homes. The interview location was quiet and secured from disturbance in order for the participants to speak freely. Therefore no colleagues, commanders, or family members were present or near during the interview sessions, which lasted approximately 50 min. The interviews were all digitally recorded and transcribed afterward.

The interviews consisted of open-ended questions covering basic demographic information (such as rank, age, and professional function) and of individually adapted follow-up questions covering the interviewee’s general experiences in the mission area. This general introduction was needed for the servicemen to construct internalized and evolving stories (narratives) wherein morally challenging situations would be addressed. The participants were invited to share their experiences and narratives, so open-ended questions were asked, such as “Can you give us an example of a situation that was quite difficult to cope with during deployment?” This gave the researchers the opportunity to go into detail with regard to the respondents’ remarks. When respondents did not describe it themselves explicitly, morally challenging situations were addressed with questions like, “Did you encounter situations in which you were confronted with ‘unusual’ things?” and “Can you explain what you considered unusual in this particular example?” Other questions were “Did you engage in behavior you later thought of as condemnable?” and “Did you encounter situations in which your own principles or convictions about right or wrong were challenged?” To address the emotions experienced in the situations, we elaborated upon the servicemen’s narratives and their facial or nonverbal expressions with questions such as, “This seems to affect you in some way. Can you explain your feelings about this situation a bit further?” When the serviceman gave no hint of having experienced emotions in the specific situation, we explicitly asked him or her to reflect on the situation and to think over the emotions that he or she experienced.
Coding procedure. After the interview sessions, the interviews were transcribed and systematically content analyzed by three researchers, two of whom were unaware of the specific research questions. The first author of this article coded all transcripts. For this, a manual coding guide was developed describing the rating strategy, covering the operationalization of each construct (see Tables 1 and 2). Markers that highlighted key aspects of the construct, from the responses of the pilot study, represented high agreement with each construct.

First, two transcripts were coded independently by all raters. The goal was to categorize the specific types of morally challenging situations. After coding, the three raters discussed their findings. This led to an abundance of codes that had to be narrowed down to general applicable codes in terms of which other parties were involved in the morally challenging situation. Finally, four remaining general codes were added to the manual coding guide: (a) local cultural interaction, (b) work–home interaction, (c) team-related interaction, and (d) coalition force interaction (for a discussion, see the Results section).

Then, two raters coded four interviews independently (κ = .43) and discussed their findings. It became apparent that at times one of the raters had coded a narrative, whereas the other rater had left the narrative uncoded. Therefore, kappa showed moderate agreement. It was decided that the rater who had left narratives blank needed to code these specific sections again (unaware of the other rater’s codings). This was performed and led to a higher kappa (.78), which reflects substantial interrater agreement. For the remaining interview transcriptions, this procedure was followed to establish agreement about the codes.

RESULTS

This section first provides an analysis of the morally challenging interactions described by the interviewed Dutch military personnel. Then, descriptive data of the measured constructs are reported. Finally, the mediation model is tested on the basis of regression analyses, in line with Baron and Kenny (1986).

An Overview of the Reported Morally Challenging Interactions

On the basis of the “others” involved in the situation, the reported morally challenging situations were categorized as relating to four broad types of interaction: (a) local cultural interaction, (b) work–home interaction, (c) team-related interaction, and (d) coalition force interaction. Moral challenges in the category of local cultural interactions originate from perceived differences in moral standards between the Dutch forces and local principles or values. Other researchers referred to such situations as morally and culturally critical situations (cf. Schut et al., 2014). A sergeant, who found himself and his unit in such a delicate situation, described an example of such a challenge:

When we arrived at a local police station we heard a woman screaming. It turned out she was locked away in the ammo box we installed only a few days before. She was stressed. Without her husband being present, local traditions prohibited the woman from being in a room with other men. So the policemen locked her up in the ammo box. For us, that caused a dilemma. We didn’t want to provoke
the policemen or put the woman’s honor to shame, but we also wanted to protect her safety and well-being and get her out of the box.

Work–home morally challenging interactions refer to situations that create a moral challenge in the interaction with close relatives, such as spouses, parents, children, or other loved ones. An example of a moral challenge in work–home interactions was described by a corporal who experienced a dilemma when communicating with family back home:

We had experienced quite a lot; several wounded, one of my buddies had died, and I had to collect body parts of a suicide-bomber. . . . I wanted to share these experiences with my family back home. . . . I needed their comfort and reassurance. However, I knew that when I would tell them what I was facing every day it would hurt them terribly.

Team-related morally challenging interactions refer to situations in which the serviceman’s interaction with direct colleagues—such as unit-members, staff members, or a commander—causes a moral challenge. One of the platoon commanders described how (from his perspective) the military staff obstructed the operation, a challenge we categorized as a work-related interaction. He described,

The staff’s perspective was completely off. They used their previous deployment experiences as frame for this operation. However, Afghanistan is quite different from for example former Yugoslavia. So, they continuously asked me to carry out impossible assignments which created for me the dilemma: to obey orders or to assure the wellbeing of my own personnel?

A fourth category of morally challenging interactions refers to moral challenges caused by cooperation and communication with other coalition forces present in the mission area. A sergeant described an example of a moral challenge in relation with interaction with coalition forces. This sergeant’s team was confronted with destructions in a village caused by one of the Western coalition partners:

It was quite a challenge to explain to the villagers that we were not “the bad guys” . . . that we had nothing to do with this. The villagers were frustrated and angry, and the situation got hostile. I understood their reaction, I would probably be angry too, had I been in their situation. The situation remained under control, the villagers cooled down. The next day we had to carry out an assignment together with the coalition partner that had caused the damage to the village. It felt awkward to cooperate with them since I didn’t agree with their way of operating and it felt like deceit towards the villagers. However, I had no choice but to deal with it since we needed the coalition forces to complete our own mission.

Descriptive Data for Our Main Constructs

All narratives were coded for the operationalization of the different variables, including the types of morally challenging interactions. For each narrative, the times a variable was mentioned was determined. The means, standard deviations, and correlation between the variables measured in this study are presented in Table 3.

Table 3 shows that challenges related to team-related interactions were most often mentioned \((M = 4.67, SD = 4.17)\). Least mentioned were coalition force interactions \((M = 1.73, SD = 1.10)\). Other-condemning emotions were the most described moral emotions by the participants.
Correlations Between Demographics, Type of Interaction, and Response Strategies and Emotions

|                          | M   | SD  | 1   | 2   | 3   | 4   | 5   | 6   | 7   | 8   | 9   |
|--------------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| 1. Gender (1, 2)         | 1.16| 0.37| —   | —   |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| 2. Age                   | 28.76| 8.33| −0.05| —   |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| 3. Rank                  | 4.09| 3.12| .09  | .84**|      |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| 4. Leadership (1, 2)     | 1.62| 0.49| −.68**| −.61**|     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| 5. No. of deployments     | 2.05| 1.13| −.21 | .61**| .42*| −.47**|      |     |     |     |     |     |
| 6. Local cultural interaction | 2.55| 2.35| .28  | .28  | .44 | −.24| −.03| —   |     |     |     |     |
| 7. Work-home interaction | 1.50| 0.80| −.21 | .13  | .01 | −.12| .12  | .39 | —   |     |     |     |
| 8. Team-related interaction | 4.67| 4.12| .04  | .59**| .71**| −.47**| .43*| .38| −.24| —   |     |     |
| 9. Coalition force interaction | 1.73| 1.10| .41  | .02  | .40 | .16 | −.05| .16 | −.26| −.15| —   |     |
| 10. Moral justification   | 1.38| 2.09| .27  | .35* | −.10| −.01| .49* | −.14| .48**|      |     |     |
| 11. Euphemistic labeling | 0.16| 0.42| −.16 | .11  | .18 | .04 | .15  | .55*| .06 | .36*| −.39| —   |
| 12. Displacement of responsibility | 0.51| 1.08| .14  | .14  | .32*| .03 | .27  | .56**| −.25| .37*|     | .13 |
| 13. Diffusion of responsibility | 0.04| 0.21| .21  | −.02| −.08| .17 | .20  | .01 | −.20| −.04| .12 |     |
| 14. Dehumanization       | 0.04| 0.21| −.09 | −.22| −.18| .17 | −.23| −.16| —   | −.21| —   |     |
| 15. Blaming the victim   | 0.13| 0.34| −.17 | .08  | .16 | −.10| .14  | .21 | .21 | −.21| .04 |     |
| 16. Numbing              | 0.42| 0.75| .42**| .07  | .24 | .13 | .03  | .76**| −.22| .47**| .33 |     |
| 17. Relativism           | 2.53| 2.69| .31* | .01  | .25 | .17 | −.10| .49**| .02 | .45**| .44 |     |
| 18. Other-condemning emotions (positive) | 2.98| 3.36| .17  | .06 | .16 | −.12| −.00| .62**| −.28| .53**|     | .14 |
| 19. Self-conscious emotions (negative) | 0.98| 1.14| −.05| −.06| .19 | −.14| −.17| −.10| .07| .22 | .09 |     |
| 20. Other-suffering emotions | 0.20| 0.51| −.05| .03  | .01 | −.06| .16  | .45*| −.15| .17 | −.22|     |
| 21. Other-praising emotions | 0.89| 1.34| .55**| −.06| .09 | .14 | −.17| .74**| −.38| .06 | .46 |     |
| 22. Other-condemning emotions (positive) | 1.11| 1.30| .06  | .05 | .08 | −.36*| .03  | .13| .02 | .30 | −.23|     |

Note. N = 45. Advantageous comparison was not mentioned, therefore it is not presented in this table.
Gender 1 = male, 2 = female. Leadership 1 = in a leadership position, 2 = in a subordinate position.
*p < .05. **p < .01.

(M = 2.98, SD = 3.36). Least described were negative self-conscious emotions (M = 0.20, SD = 0.51). The response strategy servicemen most often reported was relativism (M = 2.53, SD = 2.69), whereas the least mentioned were diffusion of responsibility (M = 0.04, SD = 0.21) and dehumanization (M = 0.04, SD = 0.21). Advantageous comparison was not expressed at all and is therefore not presented in the table.

Correlations

First, a correlation analysis between morally challenging interactions and response strategies was conducted. This analysis showed significant correlations between both the mentioning of local cultural interactions as well as team-related interactions with the response strategies: moral justification, euphemistic labeling, displacement of responsibility, numbing, and relativism (all .36 < r < .76; all ps < .05). Then it was tested whether the mentioning of specific interactions is correlated with certain emotions. This correlation analysis showed significant correlations between local cultural morally challenging interactions and other-condemning emotions (r = .62, p < .01), negative self-conscious emotions (r = .45, p < .05), and other-suffering emotions (r =
TABLE 4
Correlations Between Response Strategies and Emotions

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<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Moral justification</td>
<td>.59**</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.33*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Euphemistic labeling</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>-.18</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Displacement of responsibility</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td>.21</td>
</tr>
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<td>4. Diffusion of responsibility</td>
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<td>-.09</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.35*</td>
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<td>5. Dehumanization</td>
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<td>.10</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>-.06</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Blaming the victim</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Numbing</td>
<td>.51**</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.57**</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Relativism</td>
<td>.53**</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.41**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

.74, p < .01). A significant correlation was also found between team-related morally challenging interactions and other-condemning emotions (r = .53, p < .01).

Several significant correlations between emotions and response strategies were found (see Table 4 for a complete overview of the correlations between these variables). Other-condemning emotions positively correlate with the response strategies: moral justification, numbing and relativism (all .51 < rs < .59; all ps < .05). Also, other-suffering emotions positively correlate with these three response strategies and with diffusion of responsibility (all .33 < rs < .57; all ps < .05).

Regression Analyses

To test our mediation model, we performed a series of regression analyses in which each time a different response strategy was used as the dependent variable. In line with Baron and Kenny’s (1986) approach, we included only local-cultural and team-related interactions as predictors, as they were the only situations showing a relationship with both emotions and response strategies. In Step 1, we entered the control variables rank, gender, age, number of deployments, and leadership position; in Step 2 we entered the type of moral interaction; and in Step 3 we included the emotional category, to examine its possible mediating role. These analyses show that emotions have a mediating effect for certain response strategies. Only other-condemning emotions had a significant mediating effect on the relation between several types of morally challenging interactions and response strategies. Both the relation between local cultural morally challenging interactions and moral justification (B = .26, p ≤ .05) or relativism (B = .30, p < .05) is mediated by other-condemning emotions. Also, other-condemning emotions had a significant mediating effect in the relation between work-related morally challenging interactions and the response strategy moral justification (B = .33, p < .01; see Tables 5 and 6 for more details).

Finally, significance of the indirect path was established by conducting a Sobel test, using the bootstrapping procedure (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). These analyses showed the indirect effect...
TABLE 5
Regression Analysis With Moral Justification as Dependent Variable

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Control variables</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 2a</th>
<th>Model 2b</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
<th>Model 4</th>
<th>Model 4a</th>
<th>Model 4b</th>
</tr>
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<td>Age</td>
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<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.02</td>
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<td>-.49</td>
<td>-.76</td>
<td>-1.20</td>
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<tr>
<td>No. of deployments</td>
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<td>-.24</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>-.59</td>
<td>-.85</td>
<td>-.64</td>
<td>-.72</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leadership position</td>
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<td>1.58</td>
<td>1.72</td>
<td>1.63</td>
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<td>.62</td>
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<td>.78</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rank</td>
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<td>.33</td>
<td>.35</td>
<td>.32</td>
<td>.36</td>
<td>.09</td>
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<td>.12</td>
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<td>Type of interaction with others</td>
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<td>Local cultural interaction</td>
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<td>.98**</td>
<td></td>
<td>.27**</td>
<td>.09</td>
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<td>Team-related interaction</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Interaction-effect of emotions</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other-condemning emotions</td>
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<td>.33**</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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</table>

Note. $R^2 = .20$ for Model 1 ($p < .01$), $\Delta R^2 = .31$ for Model 2 ($p < .01$), $\Delta R^2 = .89$ for Model 2a ($p < .05$), $\Delta R^2 = .01$ for Model 2b (ns); $R^2 = .20$ for Model 3 (ns), $\Delta R^2 = .22$ for Model 4 ($p < .01$), $\Delta R^2 = .14$ for Model 4a ($p < .01$), $\Delta R^2 = .05$ for Model 4b (ns).

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

To be significant for the relationship between local cultural interactions, other-condemning emotions, and moral justification, 95% confidence interval (CI) [.01, 1.43]; 1,000 bootstrap resamples, at a significance level of $p < .001$. For the relationship between team-related interactions, other-condemning emotions, and moral justification the indirect effect showed to be significant at a $p < .01$ level, 95% CI [−.28, −1.34], 1,000 bootstrap resamples. This was also the case for...
the relationship between local cultural interactions, other-condemning emotions, and relativism, 95% CI [.01, .58], 1,000 bootstrap resamples. Therefore, the prediction that other-condemning emotions mediate the relationship between local-cultural interactions and moral justification or relativism is supported. As is the prediction that other-condemning emotions mediate the relationship between work-related interactions and moral justification.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

In the present study, we explored the presence of emotions in morally challenging interactions related to military deployment and their mediating role in the relation between these interactions and the following (behavioral) response strategies. This study offers three main conclusions.

First, four broad types of morally challenging interactions can be distinguished in relation with military deployment (i.e., local cultural, work–home, team-related, and coalition force interactions). Team-related morally challenging interactions were most described, followed by local-cultural morally challenging interactions.

Second, the present study shows that the participating servicemen report using relativism most often as a response strategy in morally challenging interactions. In relation with local cultural interactions, servicemen express that they find themselves in a different culture where they should respect common traditions. However, doing so may lead to what Schut and Moelker (2014) referred to as “moral incapacity,” because one’s own values are sidelined or neglected in that situation. Also, the response strategies moral justification, numbing and relativism showed a strong relationship with local cultural and team-related morally challenging interactions.

Third, the findings of this study indicate that other-condemning emotions are most brought up by the servicemen in differing morally challenging interactions. Also, strong correlations between local cultural morally challenging interactions and emotions, as well as strong correlations between work-related morally challenging interactions and emotions, were found. The results addressing the mediator effect of emotions revealed that only the relations between local cultural or team-related interactions and moral justification, and between local cultural interactions and relativism, proved to be significantly mediated by other-condemning emotions.

**Limitations and Future Research**

Although offering several interesting suggestions about emotions experienced in relation with military deployment, and their influence on response strategies in morally challenging interactions, this exploratory study also has limitations. To explore moral judgment, narratives of servicemen were used and consequently interpreted. Tables 1 and 2 presented the operationalization of concepts, which should be used as a means to interpret the material as objectively as possible. The described operationalization should be regarded as “sensitizing concepts.” These give direction to researchers’ focus and are a suggestion of the participants’ construction of their social reality by helping the researchers understand the participant’s situation and feelings (cf. Blumer, 1969; Schwartz & Jacobs, 1979). In explorative/qualitative research, this is common methodology. The next step is to use the categorization of morally challenging interactions that we propose, with the findings regarding moral emotions and response strategies as a framework or a starting
point for further exploration and validation. To do so, quantitative screening methods should be used during the interview sessions and when analyzing the material.

Recent studies pointed out the relevance of judgment difficulty and moral intensity for ethical decision making (cf. Sparks & Siemens, 2014). Also, moral judgment research showed that certain morally challenging situations evoke more intense emotional processing than others (cf. Greene & Haidt, 2002). Therefore, we suggest to address these features of morally challenging interactions (such as proximity and intensity) in relation to emotional reactions during military operations in future research. After all, research suggests a strong link between moral intensity and mental health problems such as PTSD and moral injury (Litz et al., 2009).

Earlier research regarding moral judgment indicates differences between individuals’ emotional responses to morally challenging situations (e.g., Fumagalli, et al., 2010; Gibbs, Arnold, & Burkhart, 1984; Hannah et al., 2013). Differences were found, for example, in the success at interpreting others’ emotional expressions and in the degree of expressivity of emotions between men and women (cf. Gross & Levenson, 1993; You, Maeda, & Bebeau, 2011). Due to the small sample, we cannot present strong insights regarding how moral emotions and response strategies correlate with leadership or gender. However, small significant effects of gender and leadership position were found in our study as well (see Table 3). We would suggest that future research further elaborates on how this correlates with emotions and response strategies in extremely complex and stressful morally challenging interactions.

Conclusion

Because complexity of today’s military operations are growing, confrontations with morally challenging interactions are inevitable (cf. De Graaff & Van den Berg, 2010). It is important to address the servicemen’s responses in morally challenging interactions because, when it comes to their own behavior, individuals tend to reaffirm their moral self-concept even when they have engaged in immoral acts (Harkrider et al., 2013). Subsequently, this “moral cleansing” can result in engaging in prosocial behavior (e.g., helping others to relieve oneself of feeling guilt), or it can license individuals to engage in future immoral acts by self-indulgent behavior (Harkrider et al., 2013). Within a military context this may result in undesirable (side) effects because people’s well-being and political systems are at stake (cf. Richardson et al., 2004; Seiler et al., 2011). The results of this exploratory study show that the responses of servicemen are mediated by emotions in certain morally challenging interactions. The present study suggests that experiencing emotions and using different response strategies is not exclusive to local cultural morally challenging interactions but is also related to other types of morally challenging interactions. Until now, intercultural (problematic) interactions had received little attention (e.g., Schut et al., 2014; Schut & Moelker, 2014). Our study suggests that interactions, for example, within work units or between family members can also become morally challenging. The findings of this exploratory study highlight the need for future research with a broader scope beyond intercultural interactions.

Finally, it is worth to briefly consider the policy implications of our findings. Within the military, ethical training mainly focuses on teaching rational decision-making models in a high stake environment like deployment (cf. Seiler et al., 2011). However, our findings are a reminder that emotions—regardless of intensity—are inevitable in morally challenging interactions and influence a serviceman’s behavioral responses. Therefore the military would benefit from expanding
its attention in the direction of affective processes (cf. De Graaff & Van Gils, 2012). This would stimulate a professional culture in which recognition of, and adequate coping with, emotions in moral challenges are considered relevant. As such, the military guards its employees from moral injury and other parties from incidents with negative consequences.

Nevertheless, caution should be taken when interpreting the results of this study. After all, this study was conducted as an exploratory study giving a first glance at the processes at work and proposing a framework of types of morally challenging interactions. We urge other researchers to further analyze what is occurring in “battlefield ethics.” In addition, the field needs to expand beyond the “military gates,” as moral challenges are not exclusive for this domain. It is important that links are established between the military, humanitarian aid workers, social workers, law enforcement officers, and medical professionals in order to cooperate and learn from one another’s policy, training, and care/administration-system regarding coping with morally challenging interactions. In the public domain, some doubt is cast upon the relevance of emotions and ethics in some professions. Our findings are a strong reminder that morally challenging interactions and the consequent processes cannot remain neglected, as Van Baarda and Verweij (2006) already highlighted in their appeal for stimulation of “moral competence” in the military.

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EMOTIONAL REACTIONS IN MILITARY OPERATIONS


