

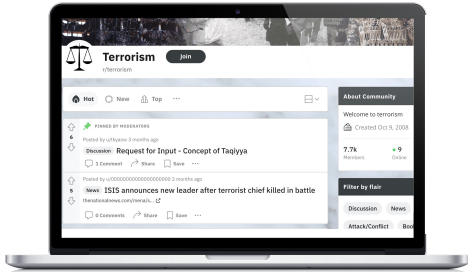


*Image from operation250

Psychological trauma and the observation of atrocities: Three theories to know

Outline of the Problem

Members of the DHS workforce and terrorism researchers are systematically exposed to the propaganda, ideologies, and psychologies of actors who seek to launch terrorist attacks. This content is inherently value-laden and possibly personally troubling. We examined over 13,000 research articles across multiple fields of work in which individuals are exposed to traumatic imagery or events. We found that there is a small body of extant research focused on a few key domains (namely digital forensic and internet child sex abuse prevention) that has explored the significant psychological trauma caused by exposure to extreme content.



For anyone looking to learn more about the psychological trauma that stems from exposure to traumatic images and the psychological factors that can impact this process, **we recommend knowing the three following types of trauma.** For more information, read the full report [here](#).

Trauma type 1: Moral Injury

Moral injury is the lasting emotional, psychological, social, behavioral, and spiritual impact of actions or decisions that violate an individual's core moral values or their behavioral expectations of themselves or others (Litz et al., 2009). It occurs when someone observes an act that violates a belief that they hold about the world and is increasingly being reported.

Trauma type 2: Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS)

STS is the consequent behaviors and emotions that result from knowing about a traumatizing event experienced by a significant other. Research has found that the outcomes of STS are equal to those of primary traumatic stress (i.e., the individual who experienced the atrocity), and that someone suffering STS can have symptoms equal to the person who was directly exposed to trauma (Chrestman, 1995).

Trauma type 3: Burnout

Burnout is the negative outcome of high job demands and is likely to occur in work domains in which people have high workloads, long hours, high stress, and make decisions that have high stakes. Burnout likely plays a role as both a cause of trauma in those who view images of atrocities online, as well as an outcome of the experience.