



Moral Distress

He, A.S., Lizano, E.L, & Stahlschmidt, M.J. (2021). When doing the right thing feels wrong: Moral distress among child welfare caseworkers. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 122, 105914. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105914>

WHAT IS THIS RESOURCE?

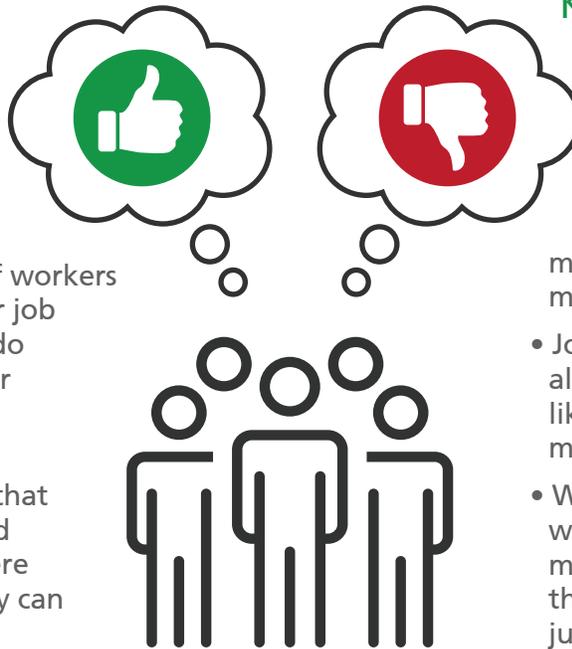
This study examined moral distress experiences among 1,879 public child welfare caseworkers and how internal and external constraints contribute to these experiences. Data was taken from a multisite child welfare workforce improvement project involving two state-administered and two-county administered child welfare agencies.

WHAT ARE THE CRITICAL FINDINGS?

Moral distress happens when a professional knows the ethically appropriate action but cannot take that action due to internal (personal) or external (institutional) constraints, leading to painful feelings and psychological difficulties. Child welfare caseworkers face morally complex situations on a daily basis. Yet, this is seldom acknowledged, including experiences of moral distress.

In this study:

- **Over 60%** of workers encountered morally distressing conditions.
- **More than 40%** of workers reported that their job required them to do things against their better judgment.
- **More than half** of workers reported that too many rules and regulations interfere with how well they can do their jobs.



Key findings:

- Low psychological safety (i.e., feeling unsafe to take risks, feeling undermined in expertise, or being afraid to disagree with a supervisor) was the main factor associated with moral distress.
- Job stress and time pressure also increased workers' likelihood of experiencing moral distress.
- Workers with more education were less likely to experience moral distress related to doing things against their better judgment.

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS FOR OUR WORK?

Acknowledging and understanding caseworkers' moral distress experiences is vital to worker well-being. Workers need to feel safe speaking up about moral distress so they feel more empowered to advocate for families' needs. Organizations can support workers by:

- Focusing on positive psychological safety in the workplace:
 - Destigmatizing perceptions of failure
 - Reducing or eliminating culture of blame
 - Training supervisors on how to develop a psychologically safe climate
- Incorporating the concept and impact of moral distress into new caseworker training and staff professional development