



TARGET ARTICLE



Moral Distress: What Are We Measuring?

Laura Kolbe  and Inmaculada de Melo-Martin 

Weill Cornell Medical College

ABSTRACT

While various definitions of moral distress have been proposed, some agreement exists that it results from illegitimate constraints in clinical practice affecting healthcare professionals' moral agency. If we are to reduce moral distress, instruments measuring it should provide relevant information about such illegitimate constraints. Unfortunately, existing instruments fail to do so. We discuss here several shortcomings of major instruments in use: their inability to determine whether reports of moral distress involve an accurate assessment of the requisite clinical and logistical facts in play, whether the distress in question is aptly characterized as moral, and whether the moral distress reported is an appropriate target of elimination. Such failures seriously limit the ability of empirical work on moral distress to foster appropriate change.

KEYWORDS

Moral distress; moral agency; empirical bioethics; clinical practice

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