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## THE POLITICAL LANGUAGE OF MORAL DISTRESS: PART I

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### Summary

Given the ubiquity of “scarce resources” in public services under the regime of neoliberalism in Canada as well as other countries, the term moral distress has gained purchase in professional circles. In order to dig deeper into this term, I reviewed some of the literature to get a sense of its essence and context. Moral distress can be defined as “the experience of being seriously compromised as a moral agent in practicing in accordance with accepted professional values and standards. It is a relational experience shaped by multiple contexts, including the socio-political and cultural context of the workplace environment” (Varcoe, Pauly, Webster & Storch, 2012, p. 59). Moral distress involves a violation of professional and personal values, moral conscience, and core ethical obligations.

Although few colleagues still advise “letting go” of morally distressing situations (as if we can “let go” of our values

at will), social work and related literature confirms that helping professionals experience moral distress when they cannot carry out moral obligations and standards of care in the milieu they inhabit (Dzeng & Wachter, 2019). Helpers are adversely and cumulatively affected, in physical, emotional, and spiritual terms. Moreover, dominant capitalist culture normalizes people’s insensitivity to the suffering of others as well as promotes the acceptance of unjust social policies and organizational constraints as “givens”, further exacerbating the lived experience of moral distress

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**Descriptors:** moral distress, moral conscience, ethical obligations

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## EL LENGUAJE POLÍTICO DE LA ANGUSTIA MORAL: PARTE I

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### Resumen

Dada la ubicuidad de la “escasez de recursos” en los servicios públicos bajo el régimen del neoliberalismo en Canadá y otros países, en los círculos profesionales ha ganado aceptación el término *angustia moral* [moral distress]. Con el fin de profundizar en este término, revisé parte de la literatura para tener una idea de su esencia y su contexto. La angustia moral puede definirse como la experiencia de una persona cuando “se ve gravemente comprometida como agente moral al ejercer de conformidad con los valores y estándares profesionales aceptados. Es una experiencia relacional que se ve moldeada por múltiples contextos, incluidos los contextos sociopolíticos y culturales en el ámbito laboral” (Varcoe, Pauly, Webster y Storch, 2012, pág. 59). La angustia moral entraña la violación de valores profesionales y personales, la conciencia moral y las obligaciones éticas fundamentales.

Si bien son pocos los colegas que siguen aconsejando “dejar ir” las situaciones moralmente angustiosas (como si pudiéramos “dejar ir” nuestros valores a

voluntad), la literatura de trabajo social y áreas afines confirma que los profesionales asistenciales experimentan angustia moral cuando, en su entorno, no pueden cumplir con sus obligaciones morales y los estándares de atención médica (Dzeng y Watcher, 2019). Las personas que trabajan en labores asistenciales se ven afectadas adversa y acumulativamente en términos físicos, emocionales y espirituales. Además, la cultura capitalista dominante normaliza la insensibilidad de las personas ante el sufrimiento de los demás, promueve la aceptación de políticas sociales injustas y considera como “hechos” las limitaciones organizativas, exacerbando así aún más la experiencia vivida de la angustia moral.

**Descriptor:** angustia moral, obligaciones éticas, conciencia moral

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I contend that as social workers we must politicize the notion of moral distress by making explicit its ethical dimensions that are rooted both in the competing and often contradictory values present in our workplaces and in our broader intertwined social, political, and economic contexts. This is indispensable in order to resist the individualization of our angst and the personalization of what are essentially political and institutional failures to meet collective needs. In doing this, we broaden our understanding of the concept, identify its contextual features, and appreciate moral distress as a structural and collective issue rather than solely an individual one.

Social workers' experiences of moral distress can be found in the spaces between stated institutional values and our lived reality of trying to help people. In the tension between organizational demands and professional ethics, the unvoiced expectation that our primary commitment is to the institution or organization (Austin, 2012) clashes with our desire to better the lives of people, families, and communities. The makings of moral distress are also located in employers' disregard of staff, specifically in their capacity as knowers (Bradbury-Jones & Irvine, 2019). Furthermore, the paucity of democratic

participatory spaces in institutions in which to express distinct perspectives, influence policy and ethical issues, and critique both institutions and the organization of society itself allows moral distress to fester.

Institutional denial of the social structures, systems, and policies that give rise to social inequalities and inequities also generates the conditions for moral distress even though these very institutions are shot through with the very disparities they disclaim. Take, for example, the prevalent liberal assumption that helping systems are fair and benign for all, despite ample evidence of systemic colonialism and racism or the gross inattention to the social determinants of health that leaves people facing systemic threats such as lack of an adequate income to afford food, dental care, medications, and decent housing.

In our experience of moral distress, we can feel powerless and despondent when compromising deeply held professional and personal values and/or allowing ourselves to be compromised, betraying ourselves, clients, and communities. We may question whether we are complicit in perpetuating systems as they are by being silent. A host of external and internal factors can impinge on our moral agency to speak up and



act on our values, for example, the pall of organizational silence, normalization of unethical practices, lack of support from colleagues and management, the intolerance of dissent, fear of reprisals, and self-preservation. It is worth noting that the existence of external factors does not minimize the role of discernment in reflecting on our own internal constraints to moral agency (Mänttari-van der Kuip, 2020). And yet despite these obstacles, we do pursue right courses of action. Nevertheless, and even with a good dose of moral courage, we face limits to ethical practice that simply cannot be tackled at the level of the individual social worker through ethical reasoning.

Some time ago, Merlinda Weinberg (2009) pointed out that theoretical understandings of moral distress neglect the political and social structures that shape service delivery and thus locate the responsibility for ethical decision making at the level of the individual rather than in the political aspects that influence organizational and clinical practice such as neoliberalism and austerity policies. An array of factors - inequities based on gender, "race", and other axes of oppression, unjust social and institutional policies across sectors, human rights brea-

ches, disparities in the allocation of resources, and top-down hierarchical structures - create conditions ripe for moral anguish. Accordingly, the political process and those whom we, as citizens, elect to make social policy and allocate resources to meet people's interrelated social, physical, spiritual, and ecological needs are squarely implicated in helping professionals' experiences of moral distress.

I believe that we must be clear and precise about how social and institutional policies and constraints conflict with our professional values, ethical obligations, and Code of Ethics. A social justice framework can help us articulate our experiences in today's social work context of marketization that privileges "roles", procedural tasks, service rationing, and efficiency. Analyzing the roots of moral distress serves many purposes: to make dominant value systems visible; connect the personal and the political (Weinberg, 2009); stimulate critical reflection and discussion on moral issues; highlight the need for collective advocacy with clients and communities; and enhance social compassion and moral sensitivity. Naming the values we hold and how they are violated engages us in a process of moral deliberation and accountability with

ourselves and others that can clarify both necessary actions and allies. The articulation of our values and the ethics at play in situations of moral distress can prompt us to act alone and in concert with others as moral agents to advocate for changes in organizations, policies, and practices. Clarity and action are critical to maintaining our moral integrity as well as contesting the individualization and pathologization of ethical struggle. Moral distress as a response to the violation of professional responsibilities and ethics (Peter & Liaschenko, 2013) calls us to collective reflection and action to challenge the harshness of an unacceptable status quo.

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