

Exploring moral distress among occupational therapy students in fieldwork: Implications for curriculum and workforce

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Introduction:

- Health professions students frequently encounter ethically complex value-laden situations during fieldwork
- A better understanding of the moral distress experiences of health professions students enables educators to intentionally shape curricula to build ethical awareness and strengthen moral resilience
- For OT students, these early ethical conflicts matter. They shape professional identity, confidence, and future willingness to advocate - all central to WFOT's vision of occupational therapy as ethically grounded, person-centred profession

Definition: Moral distress occurs when someone knows the ethically right action but feels unable to carry it out due to constraints¹. This can result in guilt, frustration, isolation, burnout and attrition².

Methods: A rapid review is a streamlined systematic method to quickly gather and summarize existing evidence.

Databases Searched (Dec 17/25 – Jan 21/26):

- CINAHL Plus (EBSCO)
- MEDLINE, Embase, APA PsycInfo (OVID)
- ERIC (ProQuest)

Key Search Terms:

moral* distress*, moral* stress*, moral* injur*, health profession*, allied health*, health disciplin*, student*, trainee*, learner*, intern*, field*, practicum*, clinical educat*, clinical learn*.

Eligibility Criteria:

- Peer-reviewed articles
- English language
- Published 2000–present
- Health professions students in practicum/fieldwork
- Focus on moral distress, moral stress, or moral injury

Screening & Selection

- Total records identified: 154
- Duplicates removed: 17
- Records screened: 137
- Full texts assessed: 22
- Full-text excluded: 11
- **Final included studies: 11**

Extracted data were synthesized thematically.

PRISMA Diagram

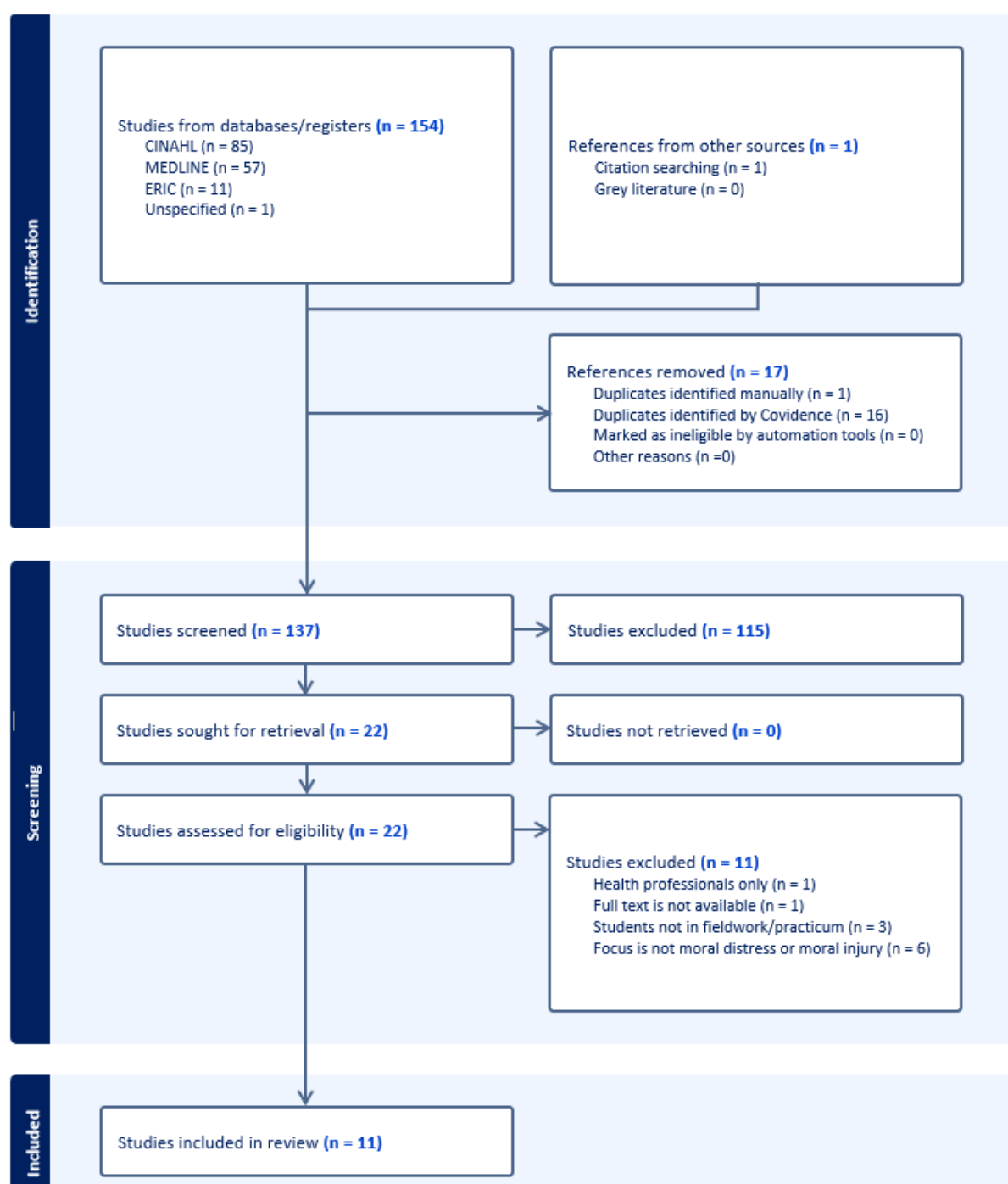


Table 1

Type of Extracted Paper

Label of type of paper	Count
Research study (quant)	1
Research study (qual)	2
Research study (mixed)	3
Program evaluation	1
Review	2
Case example/report	1
Commentary	1

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Findings: Our findings include descriptive and analytic findings, as well as strategies and recommendations for educators, students, and preceptors.

Scope of the Evidence:

- **Methodological Variety:** Research used qualitative, mixed-methods, and quantitative approaches. Included program evaluations, commentary, and integrative reviews to explore moral distress (Table 1).
- **Varied Healthcare Professions:** Studies focus on medical, nursing, midwifery, rehabilitation students, and mixed trainee groups, in clinical education. Some included both students and professionals (Table 2).
- **Diverse Geographic Scope:** The review includes studies from North America, Europe, the UK, and China, highlighting wide geographic representation (Table 3).
- **Conceptual Complexity:** Moral distress is defined in various ways, reflecting complexity in measuring and understanding it in education overall.

Common Catalysts of Moral Distress:

- **Systemic Constraints and Hierarchies:** Systemic constraints and hierarchical structures are major influences causing students to experience moral distress and feelings of powerlessness^{3,4,5}.
- **Ethical Conflicts in Practice:** Students witness unethical care and face pressure to conform, causing conflict between ethics taught and clinical behaviours^{3,4,5,6,7,8}

Table 2

Extracted Papers Count of Articles by Student Professional Group

Student profession	Count
Rehab profession(s) (OT, PT, and/or SLP)	1
Medical students	3
Nursing students	3
Multiple professions	3
Other: Midwifery	1

What's your story?

Think about a time during your placement when you felt ethically or morally conflicted about what to do. Perhaps you knew the right course of action or wanted to act in a certain way but felt unable to do so.

Student experiences & consequences:

- **Hidden Curriculum** influences behaviour and identity formation; students report pressure to conform to practices that conflict with their values.⁷
- **Emotional and Professional Impact:** Experiences of moral distress create emotional strain (feelings of guilt, shame, frustration, and fear) and ultimately shape students' perceptions of professional norms and future careers.⁹
- **Link to Burnout and Attrition:** Negative emotions from moral distress contribute to burnout, compassion fatigue, and intentions to leave the profession.¹⁰
- **Disproportionate Impact on Students from Equity-denied Groups:** Underrepresented minority students experience greater emotional burden and dissonance with their professional identity than peers.⁷
- **Need for Systemic and Individual Solutions:** Addressing moral distress requires individual coping strategies and systemic approaches for safer learning environments.³

Table 3

Extracted Papers Country of Work

Country	Count
Canada	2
Europe	2
UK	1
USA	5
Other: China	1

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Strategies for Support and Resilience

Protective Factors and Educational

Supports:

- **Protective Personal Attributes:** Moral courage, self-compassion, mindfulness, and strong professional values help buffer moral distress in students.^{3,9}
- **Educational Interventions:** Case-based ethics discussions, reflective spaces, and peer mentoring foster resilience and ethical competence.¹¹
- **Program Supports and Tools:** Programs like Ethik First⁸ and tools like the Moral Distress Thermometer⁹ support ethical dialogue and distress monitoring.

Building Moral Resilience* and Professional Identity:

- **Cultivating Emotional Awareness:** Validating emotions and promoting mindful awareness support constructive responses to ethical dilemmas.¹¹
- **Systemic Support and Interventions:** Team-based ethical consultations and early distress screening reduce negative outcomes and foster resilience.^{8,11}
- **Professional Identity Formation:** Integrating resilience practices helps students align personal values with professional ethical standards.¹¹

Practical Recommendations for Preceptors and Educators:

- **Normalize Moral Distress from the Start:** Educators can name and normalize moral distress early to help students recognize and manage it.¹²
- **Foster Psychological Safety:** Create psychologically safe environments where students feel empowered to raise ethical concerns without fear.^{8,11}
- **Specific Support for Students from Equity-denied Groups:** Provide identity-safe mentoring and channels for reporting mistreatment to reduce emotional burden on underrepresented minority groups.⁷
- **Guidelines for Global Health and International Placements:** Implement clear scope of practice guidelines and robust supervision in global health contexts to reduce risk of moral distress.⁶

Moral resilience enables individuals to maintain moral integrity amidst ethical challenges and distress. Experiencing moral distress may be an antecedent to moral resilience.

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