

# Moral Stress, Organizational Climate, Moral Practice Dilemmas and Attitudes Toward Research Measures

© 2013 Fisher, True, Alexander, & Fried

Fisher, C. B., True, G., Alexander, L. & Fried, A. L. (2013). Moral stress, moral practice and ethical climate in community-based drug use research: views from the frontline. *American Journal of Bioethics: Primary Research*. 4(3), 27–38.

National Center for Research Resources (#1 R21 RR026302-01)

## **Abstract**

### **BACKGROUND:**

The role of front-line researchers, those whose responsibilities include face-to-face contact with participants, is critical to ensuring the responsible conduct of community-based drug use research. To date, there has been little empirical examination of how front-line researchers perceive the effectiveness of ethical procedures in their real-world application and the moral stress they may experience when adherence to scientific procedures appears to conflict with participant protections.

### **METHODS:**

This study represents a first step in applying psychological science to examine the work-related attitudes, ethics climate, and moral dilemmas experienced by a national sample of 275 front-line staff members whose responsibilities include face-to-face interaction with participants in community-based drug-use research. Using an anonymous Web-based survey we psychometrically evaluated and examined relationships among six new scales tapping moral stress (frustration in response to perceived barriers to conducting research in a morally appropriate manner); organizational ethics climate; staff support; moral practice dilemmas (perceived conflicts between scientific integrity and participant welfare); research commitment; and research mistrust.

### **RESULTS:**

As predicted, front-line researchers who evidence a strong commitment to their role in the research process and who perceive their organizations as committed to research ethics and staff support experienced lower levels of moral stress. Front-line researchers who were distrustful of the research enterprise and frequently grappled with moral practice dilemmas reported higher levels of moral stress.

### **CONCLUSION:**

Applying psychometrically reliable scales to empirically examine research ethics challenges can illuminate specific threats to scientific integrity and human subjects protections encountered by front-line staff and suggest organizational strategies for reducing moral stress and enhancing the responsible conduct of research.



## **Moral Stress, Organizational Climate, Moral Practice Dilemmas and Attitudes Toward Research Measures**

The following Community Research Worker measures are included:

- Research Moral Stress Scale (RMSS)
- Research Ethics Climate Scale (RECS)
- Organizational Research Support Scale (ORSS)
- Research Commitment Index (RCI)
- Research Mistrust Index (RMI)
- Research Moral Dilemmas Scale (RMDS)

These six scales tap moral stress (frustration in response to perceived barriers to conducting research in a morally appropriate manner); organizational ethics climate; staff support; moral practice dilemmas (perceived conflicts between scientific integrity and participant welfare); research commitment; and research mistrust among community research workers. Measure development and validation was supported by a federal grant from the National Center for Research Resources (1R21RR026302-01, Celia B. Fisher, Principal Investigator)

Details about the psychometric properties of these scales can be found in:

Fisher, C.B., True, G., Alexander, L., & Fried, A.L. (2013). Moral Stress, Moral Practice, and Ethical Climate in Community-Based Drug Use Research: Views from the Front Line. *AJOB Primary Research*, 4, 27-38.

Contact Author: Celia B. Fisher, Ph.D., Marie Ward Doty Endowed Chair and Professor of Psychology, Director, Center for Ethics Education, Fordham University, Department of Psychology, Dealy Hall 117F, 441 East Fordham Road, Bronx, NY 10458, Tel: (718) 817-3793. [Fisher@Fordham.edu](mailto:Fisher@Fordham.edu)

## Research Moral Stress Scale (RMSS)

For each statement, think about your experiences as a CRW working on studies involving drug use. Check the box that indicates how much you agree or disagree with each statement. There are no right or wrong answers—we are just interested in your experiences and opinions.

**IN MY MOST RECENT OR CURRENT JOB WORKING ON DRUG USE RESEARCH . . .**

	1 Strongly Disagree	2 Somewhat Disagree	3 Somewhat Agree	4 Strongly Agree
1. I was emotionally drained at the end of the day.				
2. I worried the job was hardening me emotionally.				
3. I felt energetic after working with research participants*				
4. I was isolated from my own community by doing this job.				
5. I accomplished many worthwhile things in this job.*				
6. I questioned the meaningfulness of my job.				
7. I was over-burdened by the demands of my job.				
8. This job was stressful.				
9. I did not receive enough training to do the research job assigned to me.				
10. I lacked the time to do my research job well.				
11. I saw other research team members treat participants with disrespect.				
12. I did not believe some participants really understood the research they agreed to participate in.				
13. I believed the research screening criteria excluded people who should be in the study				
14. I knew some participants had given false answers to get into the study.				
15. I thought the research had little value.				
16. I felt I was offering false hope to research participants.				
17. I could not provide participants with the service referrals they needed.				
18. I could not correct a problem in how the research was conducted.				
19. I could not adequately protect participants' confidentiality.				
20. I believed the risks of participation were too high for some drug users.				

21. I did not believe participating in the study would benefit participants.				
22. I believed that offering money made some participants ignore the risks of the research.				
23. I lost the trust of participants because they had a bad research experience.				
24. I felt tempted to hint at inclusion criteria with potential participants when pressured to get the numbers.				
25. I found my moral values conflicted with what I was asked to do.				

\* Reverse scored

## Research Ethics Climate Scale (RECS)

For each statement, think about your experiences as a CRW working on studies involving drug use. Check the box that indicates how much you agree or disagree with each statement. There are no right or wrong answers—we are just interested in your experiences and opinions.

**“The organization where I currently or most recently worked on a drug use related study...”**

	1 Strongly Disagree	2 Somewhat Disagree	3 Somewhat Agree	4 Strongly Agree
1. Encouraged CRWs to discuss their ethical concerns about the study.				
2. Provided training in research ethics for CRWs.				
3. Viewed ethical procedures as important when designing the research.				
4. Stressed concern for participant welfare in all aspects of the research.				
5. Stressed the importance of making sure participants understand the informed consent information.				
6. Monitored staff adherence to ethical procedures.				
7. Provided participants with fair and non-coercive payment/compensation				
8. Had adequate policies to protect participant privacy and confidentiality.				
9. Had a safe and confidential procedure for CRWs to report ethical violations by other staff.				
10. Provided a summary of research results to communities in which research was conducted.				
11. Did not have ethics policies relevant to the real ethical challenges faced by CRWs.*				
12. Ignored when staff engaged in ethically questionable research practices.*				
13. Did not tell participants about all of the research participation risks.*				

\* Reverse scored

## Organization Research Support Scale (ORSS)

For each statement, think about your experiences as a CRW working on studies involving drug use. Check the box that indicates how much you agree or disagree with each statement. There are no right or wrong answers—we are just interested in your experiences and opinions.

**“The organization where I currently or most recently worked on a drug use related study...”**

	1 Strongly Disagree	2 Somewhat Disagree	3 Somewhat Agree	4 Strongly Agree
1. Provided adequate feedback on how CRWs are performing their job.				
2. Provided clear expectations about job duties for CRWs.				
3. Respected the opinions of CRWs.				
4. Included CRWs in recruitment and data collection planning.				
5. Had policies to protect CRW safety in doing their job.				
6. Appreciated that CRWs are often overworked.				
7. Recognized the safety risks that CRWs take in doing their work.				
8. Made CRWs feel comfortable discussing job pressures.				
9. Respected CRWs' assessment of whether a participant should be entered into a study.				
10. Made CRWs feel part of the research team.				
11. Provided counseling for CRWs who experienced trauma on the job.				
12. Gave CRWs enough information to do their job well.				
13. Had unrealistic expectations about the number of drug users that CRWs can recruit.*				
14. Put too much pressure on CRWs to get high numbers of participants.*				
15. Ignored CRWs when they tried to describe problems they see while doing their jobs.*				
16. Required CRWs to take on too many different roles for the same study.*				

\* Reverse scored

## Research Commitment Index (RCI)

For each statement, think about your experiences as a CRW working on studies involving drug use. Check the box that indicates how much you agree or disagree with each statement. There are no right or wrong answers—we are just interested in your experiences and opinions.

	<b>1</b> Strongly Disagree	<b>2</b> Somewhat Disagree	<b>3</b> Somewhat Agree	<b>4</b> Strongly Agree
1. It is my responsibility to increase the community's trust in research.				
2. I serve as a role model for people in the community where I conduct my research work.				
3. I feel responsible for educating the community about the importance of participating in research.				
4. I see myself as a bridge between the community and the research organization.				
5. I believe the results of the studies I work on will be used to improve the lives of people in the community				
6. It is important that participants trust me.				

### Research Mistrust Index (RMI)

For each statement, think about your experiences as a CRW working on studies involving drug use. Check the box that indicates how much you agree or disagree with each statement. There are no right or wrong answers—we are just interested in your experiences and opinions.

	1 Strongly Disagree	2 Somewhat Disagree	3 Somewhat Agree	4 Strongly Agree
1. Drug users in poor communities are paid less for being in a study than middle class drug users.				
2. Research exploits drug users who are desperate for help.				
3. I sometimes feel the people I work for are exploiting the research participants				
4. I find that participants accepted into the study do not really meet the eligibility criteria				
5. Drug use related research that is conducted in poor communities will mostly benefit middle class communities.				
6. Most investigators do not care about participants; they just want to get the study done.				

## Research Moral Dilemma Scale (RMDS)

For each statement, think about your experiences as a CRW working on studies involving drug use. Check the box that indicates how much you agree or disagree with each statement. There are no right or wrong answers—we are just interested in your experiences and opinions.

	1 Strongly Disagree	2 Somewhat Disagree	3 Somewhat Agree	4 Strongly Agree
1. I discourage drug users from participating in a study if I don't think it will be good for them				
2. Even when it's not part of my job, I counsel participants about their drug problems.				
3. I find it hard to "sell" a study to participants when I do not believe the study will produce useful results				
4. I find the questions I am told to ask unintentionally give away the inclusion criteria to prospective participants.				
5. I won't go out to 'sell' a study to drug users if I don't trust the investigator.				
6. I exclude drug users from participating if I believe they are lying about which drugs they use				
7. I find it difficult to protect participant confidentiality when people in the community know what type of study I am working on.				
8. I warn participants not to have too much hope that the research will help them				
9. I use my own money to buy coffee or other small goods to keep participants interested in participating.				
10. I socialize with research participants during off-work hours				
11. I avoid discussing research risks when explaining the study to prospective participants.				
12. The questions I am told to ask unintentionally give away the drug use inclusion criteria to participants				