

# **Moral Case Deliberation pilot intervention 2019**

## *Part of project: Academic Research Climate Amsterdam*

### **The ARCA project**

ARCA project investigates the academic research climate (see [www.amsterdamresearchclimate.nl](http://www.amsterdamresearchclimate.nl)). We repeatedly noted that research integrity dilemmas are seldom discussed in research groups though they are frequently encountered.

### **Moral Case Deliberation**

Moral awareness and an organizational climate that allows for moral learning are important conditions for responsible conduct of research (RCR). Moral Case Deliberation (MCD) is an established intervention in health care that raises moral awareness and fosters an open culture (Van der Dam et al. 2015; Widdershoven & Metselaar, 2012). We want to apply this technique to research integrity dilemmas. Deliberation of these dilemmas consists of members from a research group discussing a dilemma that is related to detrimental research practices and seeks advice how to deal with them. We want to assess whether MCD has the potential to support researchers when dealing with research integrity dilemmas and whether MCD can strengthen researchers' moral competences for better handling future dilemmas. This is expected to affect the research climate within the participating departments by stimulating the dialogue on research integrity (RI) among researchers.

### **Aim of the study**

We want to evaluate the pilot intervention of MCDs involving research integrity dilemmas in research groups. We aim to investigate how researchers perceived the MCD sessions, if they feel strengthened in their moral awareness and whether they think the method could be beneficial for other research groups in creating an open culture.

### **Intervention**

The intervention consists in the fact that we organize a series 4 MCDs (per research group) of approx. 1,5-2 hours within a 6-month timeframe (Jan 2019-June 2019). We will discuss a specific individual research integrity dilemma of one of the researchers from the research group

### **Research team**

The researchers involved in this Moral Case Deliberation pilot intervention are (no specific order):

Tamarinde Haven, MSc.

Dr. Joeri Tjeldink

Dr. Fenneke Blom

Prof. Dr. Lex Bouter

Dr. Bert Molewijk

Prof. Dr. Guy Widdershoven

### **Research questions**

Below we sketch our three main research questions that will guide the pilot intervention.

- 1) What are participants expectations and experiences with MCD sessions involving research integrity dilemmas, before and after the 4 sessions?
- 2) What themes, norms and values play a role in Moral Case Deliberation session involving research integrity dilemmas?
- 3) Does the quality of the dialogue in the MCD sessions involving research integrity dilemmas change with practice?

- 4) To what extent do participants think MCD sessions involving research integrity dilemmas could be beneficial to other research groups in fostering an open academic culture?

In order to answer our main questions, we make use of different research methods. Below we describe those three methods and their procedures. Research question 2 and 3 will be investigated using detailed observation and note-taking. Research question 1 is answered by means of two online evaluation questionnaires (pre- and post-measurement). Research question 4 is explored via the survey and in-depth interviews after the 4 MCD sessions.

### **Operationalisation research questions**

In this section we further define how we will answer our three main research questions, using sub questions that together put forth a reply.

1. *What are participants expectations and experiences with MCD sessions involving research integrity dilemmas, before and after the 4 sessions?*
  - 1.1. After the MCD sessions involving research integrity dilemmas: What are participants' overall experiences with the MCD method?
  - 1.2. After the MCD sessions involving research integrity dilemmas: To what extent did the MCD sessions enhanced emotional support?
  - 1.3. After the MCD sessions involving research integrity dilemmas: To what extent did the MCD sessions enhanced collaboration?
  - 1.4. After the MCD sessions involving research integrity dilemmas: To what extent did the MCD sessions improve moral reflexivity?
  - 1.5. After the MCD sessions involving research integrity dilemmas: To what extent did the MCD sessions improve moral attitude?
  - 1.6. After the MCD sessions involving research integrity dilemmas: To what extent did the MCD sessions have a positive impact on an organizational level?
  - 1.7. After the MCD sessions involving research integrity dilemmas: To what extent did the MCD sessions have concrete results?
2. *What does a Moral Case Deliberation session involving research integrity dilemmas look like?*
  - 2.1. Which themes are mentioned and which norms and values belong to those themes in research integrity MCDs?
  - 2.2. Do the norms and values become more varied over MCDs (i.e. are participants more diverse in specifying norms and values in session 3 and 4 compared to session 1 and 2)?
  - 2.3. Do participants become better (i.e. faster in time) at denoting the norms and values that play a role in a particular dilemma?
3. *Does the quality of the dialogue in the MCD sessions involving research integrity dilemmas change with practice?*
  - 3.1. Is there a shift in time spent on each step of the MCD?
  - 3.2. How many participants participate in each step of the MCD?
  - 3.3. How active are participants during each step of the MCD (i.e. depth of discussion, engagement of participants)?
4. *To what extent do participants think MCD sessions involving research integrity dilemmas could be beneficial to other research groups in fostering an open academic culture?*
  - 4.1. To what extent do participants feel capable handling research integrity dilemmas before and after the MCDs?
  - 4.2. To what extent do participants feel like they can discuss research integrity dilemmas with their colleagues before and after the MCDs?

- 4.3. To what extent do participants describe the culture at their department as open before and after the MCD sessions?
- 4.4. How do participants rate themselves at postponing judgment before and after the MCD sessions?
- 4.5. How do participants rate collaboration at their department before and after the MCD sessions?
- 4.6. To what extent do participants think that MCD can help them navigate future research integrity dilemmas?
- 4.7. To what extent do participants think that MCD can be beneficial for other research groups in creating an open culture?

### **Ethical considerations**

The research protocol will be reviewed by the METc (ethics committee/International Review Board). All participants will receive an information letter by e-mail to explain the intervention as well as the study's aims and method of data collection. This letter also contains the privacy policy. At the first meeting an informed consent form is presented to confirm participation and indicate that they have understood the purpose of the study and understand how their responses will be anonymized and used for research purposes. If any new participant joins in the following sessions, this procedure will be repeated.

### **Intervention**

All researchers will receive an explanatory e-mail about the intervention. When convening for the first MCD, they will be asked to read the information letter and to give informed consent that their input is anonymized and used for research purposes. If researchers join at another moral case deliberation than the first, they will also have to give informed consent upon (re)reading the printed information letter and having had the opportunity to ask questions.

### **Moderators**

Someone who is qualified to lead an MCD session is called a moderator. The MCDs will be performed by different members of the research team. These members (Tamarinde Haven (TH), Fenneke Blom (FB) and Joeri Tjndink (JT)) are trained in conducting MCDs and have successfully completed the MCD training course to become a MCD-group moderator. The MCD moderators (TH, FB and JT) have experience in using the MCD-method within the obligatory RI-education for PhD students.

### **Methods**

#### **Participants**

Participants for this pilot consist of academic researchers in four research groups, one per disciplinary field from within the VU University Amsterdam and the VU University medical center. We distinguish (1) social and behavioral sciences, (2) medical and life sciences, (3) natural sciences and (4) humanities. The participating research groups ideally consist of academic researchers (PhD students, postdocs, assistant and associate professors as well as full professors), research assistants, interns and lab personnel. Moral case deliberation groups should consist of between 8 and 12 researchers and participants are expected to attend all 4 sessions (min. 3 sessions)

#### **Procedure**

##### *1 & 2. Observation and note-taking*

In order to answer research questions 2 and 3, we will consistently bring an observer to the MCD sessions who will make detailed (confidential) process notes during the MCDs.

##### *Procedure*

The observer will be introduced by the deliberator and his/her purpose will be explained. The observer will not take place in the MCD dialogue. He/she will make process notes about the norms and values participants

bring up. The observer will also score, per step of the MCD, how much time is spent on it, how many participants contributed and which steps contained the most active/in-depth dialogue. This will allow us to see if the dialogue among participants deepens over time and which parts provoke active reflection.

Putting these observational notes together, we first aim to create an imaginary case description of an MCD involving research integrity dilemmas. Second, we will create a list of norms and values. This list is not intended to be exhaustive, nor subject to statistical frequency analysis, it is merely intended so that we can get insight into which norms and values play a role in research integrity dilemmas. That list will then also be checked with the interviewees.

Finally, we aim to see if – over time – quality of the MCD dialogue improves by comparing time, participation and diversity in participation per step of the MCD. We suppose here that more participation (more researchers taking part in the discussion), more diversity (researchers think more diversely, or out of the box) and more time per component indicate better dialogue quality.

#### *Analysis*

For creating an MCD case description, the ARCA researchers will compare all the descriptions they have and average the time spent on each step in the MCD process. The ARCA researchers will then together come up with imaginary cases, which does justice to the actual MCDs they attended. This case will also be checked with Prof. Widdershoven and Dr. Molewijk, who both have extensive experience with the MCD method to ensure we provide to a portrayal of an MCD involving research integrity dilemmas.

For the list of norms and values, the ARCA researchers will put together a comprehensive list based on all observational notes.

For the improvement in quality of dialogue, time/participation/diversity will be compared between MCD 1 and 2, 1 and 3, 2 and 3 and so on.

#### *3. Online questionnaire*

To answer research question 1 and 4.1 to 4.4, we distribute an online survey before and after the MCD sessions. This questionnaire is designed to measure overall experiences with the MCD intervention and included the EuroMCD. The EuroMCD was validated and designed in collaboration with both ethicists and healthcare workers to evaluate relevant MCD outcomes (Svantesson et al., 2014).

#### *Procedure*

Participants will receive an informational e-mail, describing the purpose of the questionnaire and referring to the privacy policy. About two weeks before the first MCD, participants will receive an online invitation to take part in the survey questionnaire. After giving informed consent, they will be asked to fill out the survey. This will take at most 5 minutes.

They will again receive an invitation to complete the survey about a week after their final MCD. Participants are encouraged to fill in the online questionnaire. The survey concludes with the question if we can contact the researcher for an in-depth interview.

#### *Analysis*

In the evaluation of the survey responses, we will compare pre-and post MCD mean scores on the self-designed instrument. We will contrast pre- and post MCD scores assess the frequency of participants who felt strengthened in their moral competences or more apt at dealing with dilemmas (by calculating how many people agreed with a certain statement).

#### 4. *In-depth interviews*

For determining the added value of MCD sessions involving research integrity dilemmas, if there is one, we will conduct in-depth interview to assess how participants look back on the intervention. We want to find out if they feel strengthened in their moral awareness by the MCD sessions and whether they think the MCD method could be beneficial for other research groups in creating an open culture.

##### *Procedure*

Besides the procedure described above (asking the participants when they fill in the survey whether we can contact them for an interview), we will ask at the final MCD who is interested in sharing their views through an interview that can be arranged in person or over the telephone/Skype. When sending out the informational e-mail, we will also describe the reason we would like to have an interview with participants from each research group. The e-mail invites participants and asks whether he/she would like. When that does not result in a sufficient number of interviewees, we will send out a general e-mail to invite participants to share their experiences with the MCD.

The interview topic guide is currently under construction. It will consist of four questions that are the same for each participant, namely:

- 1) "How do you think the skills practiced in MCD can help you in navigating the research environment?"
- 2) "How do you envision MCD fostering a healthy research culture in your department?"
- 3) "What should be measured in order to see if MCD helped in creating a healthier research culture?"
- 4) "How do you think MCD can deepen conversations about research integrity?"

The interviewer may refer back to the sessions and ask the interviewee to reflect on those.

- 5) We would like to share with you an imaginary MCD case that we wish to use in a paper. {reads case}  
How does this reflect your experience with MCD?

##### *Analysis*

Interview participants will receive a summary of the interview and are asked to check this summary to get the greatest reliability. In analyzing the in-depth interviews, we will use inductive content analysis to analyze the interview data. Two researchers will independently read through and code the transcripts to identify recurring themes. Individual codings of the researchers will then be compared and thoroughly debated in order to achieve consensus on the importance of certain themes and their meaning.

#### **Outcome**

We intend to write a manuscript to describe the intervention, its (preliminary) process evaluation and exploratory thoughts on how the method can be effective to increase reflection on research practices and foster research integrity at departments and research groups. Furthermore, we explore how we can efficiently implement MCDs at research groups/departments.

#### **Preparations and materials**

Below we list the materials used in this MCD pilot that will be added to the protocol (if applicable):

- Information letter
- Privacy policy
- Survey questionnaire
- Audiotape electronics
- Facilities/rooms at the participating department of the research group

#### **How is my data processed?**

Observational notes contain data about how many participants were present, how frequently each

participant (codified as p1, p2, etc.) participated actively and how long the MCD session was. No personal data except the disciplinary field of your research group will be collected and processed.

For the online questionnaire we will use the survey program Qualtrics. Once the before- and after questionnaire are matched, they are decoupled from e-mail addresses. We only collect your disciplinary field and no other personal information.

The interviews will be transcribed. The interview transcripts will be analysed confidentially for recurring and important themes. Also, there will be some quotes highlighted to illustrate the themes discussed. These occur, stripped of personal information, in a scientific publication.

All data is stored encrypted on Surfdrive. None of the data collected for this intervention will be shared with third parties, unless for research purposes under a data transfer agreement to ensure that persons authorised to process the personal data have committed themselves to confidentiality and the receiving party agrees that the pseudonymized personal data will only be used for scientific research purposes. More elaborate information on privacy issues can be found in our [privacy policy](#).

### **Planning**

The MCDs will be performed in the third year of the Academic Research Climate Amsterdam project (2019). We aim to start with the MCDs in January 2019 at the 4 departments.

<b>What?</b>	<b>When?</b>
Design of information letter, privacy policy and research protocol	May – September 2018
Introduction of MCDs with head departments in F2F meeting	September 2018
Construction of evaluation survey and instruments	October-December 2018
Invitation of participants and planning of MCDs in 2019	October 2018
First MCD	January/February 2019
MCD 2/3/4	March –July 2019
Evaluation survey	August 2019
Report to head of department (optional)	September 2019
Drafting manuscript	September 2019 – March 2020