

Normative Motivation in Whistleblowing Decision Making

Raymond Doe
Lamar University

Bryan A. Landrum
Lamar University

Eli J. Barclay
Lamar University

Ken M. Carona
Lamar University

Whistleblowing presents a conundrum – either the decision is heralded as the ultimate justice or it is perceived as the ultimate betrayal. The opportunity cost of fairness or loyalty occurs within a personal, situational, or cultural contexts. When would an employee decide to report an unethical behavior? This study adopts the theory of planned behavior to manipulate these normative beliefs in addition to the motivations and then measure the intention of whistleblowing in an organizational context. Using a sample of 162 participants, the results showed a significant interaction between the normative beliefs and the motivations as well as a main effect of normative beliefs on the intention of whistleblowing.

Keywords: whistleblowing, motivation, normative beliefs, decision

INTRODUCTION

Whistleblowing at the workplace is the reporting of a practice, or a product, by an employee to others who have the power to take action. Many of the known scandals recorded and the whistleblowers celebrated, or villainized, often describe the arduous decision they usually face prior to the behavior. Famous among these scandals are Enron, WorldCom, and Tyco.

Employees face unacceptable situations in the workplace. Experiencing these situations firsthand is usually met with some resistance or even denial of the case (Campbell, 2001). When dealing with situations that require attention, an employee has the options to either leave the workplace, remain silent, or blow the whistle (Mesmer-Magnus & Viswesvaran, 2005). Blowing the whistle consists of many factors beyond a mere yes or no decision. Some claims are simply biological, while others are based on morals. The human emotion of sadness, for example, has been identified as influencing ethical decision making (Doe et al., 2019). However, there are mixed findings on religiosity and ethical behavior. Some studies argued that religiosity and spirituality favor altruistic tendencies and corporate social

responsibility, but other studies suggest that religiosity could lead to covert discrimination against individuals who do not share one's beliefs (Chan-Serafin et al., 2013).

According to Rehg et al. (2008), whistleblowing behaviors are expressed differently between genders, where men are more likely to blow the whistle rather than women. In the public domain, shoplifters were reported significantly less by women than men (Gelfand et al., 1973). Even when there were proportionate levels of moral development and locus of control, men were still more likely to blow the whistle than women (Miceli et al., 1991). Initial research showed that the fewer people witnessing a wrongful act increased the chances of whistleblowing (Dozier & Miceli, 1985; Graham, 1983). However, more recent evidence shows that there is a positive correlation between group size and chances of whistleblowing (Miceli & Near, 1988; Miceli et al., 1991). In effect, group membership invokes a social identity. Depending on the power wielded by this identity, an individual is influenced to engage in whistleblowing. Anvari et al. (2019) refers to this group power paradigm as the social identity model of whistleblowing.

Proper attitudes can also be a factor supporting whistleblowing. Proper organizational attitude that notices unacceptable behaviors is important in increasing the chances of whistleblowing (Finn, 1995). This can also support prosocial behavior, where whistleblowers receive no benefit in reporting wrongdoings (Brief & Motowidlo, 1986). Attitudes such as these, which promote whistleblowing, can even prevent wrongdoings from happening and correct wrongdoings and practices already in place (Graham, 1983; Hooks et al., 1994).

An employee's professional identity may determine their tendency to blow the whistle. A professional identity could be considered an employee's involvement within an organization (Aranya et al., 1981). Though an employee's perseverance is negatively correlated with their professional identity, their tendency to report illicit behaviors is strongly correlated (Taylor & Curtis, 2010). A study by Kaplan and Whitecotton (2001) reinforced this by finding that an employee with a strong professional identity correlates positively with their likelihood of reporting inappropriate behaviors.

Like professional identity, organizational commitment is an employee's strength of involvement in an organization (Porter et al., 1974). A strong commitment to an organization could lead to whistleblowing, as the employee may see it as an act toward the best interest of the company in a long-term standpoint but with the sacrifice of short-term repercussions (Hirschman, 1970). However, organizational commitment is inversely related to the perseverance and likelihood of reporting unethical behavior (Taylor & Curtis, 2010). The commitment of an employee does not only apply to the organization itself but also toward coworkers and other employees of an organization. This could potentially affect the tendency to blow the whistle, just as commitment to the organization is high, commitment to one's fellow employees could be high as well. If whistleblowing meant affecting a fellow employee, then there becomes an increased hesitation between the organizational and coworker commitments (Fletcher, 1993).

Certain incentives can adjust the weight of commitments. Providing rewards on fixed and fair intervals can encourage employees to report wrongdoing in benefit of the organization (Bateman & Organ, 1983). Monetary rewards have been used in studies in which cash rewards, along with long-term employment contracts, had a positive effect on whistleblowing. However, those that had a slightly higher willingness to blow the whistle also had lower levels of moral reasoning (Taylor & Curtis, 2010).

Even though incentives may be used to promote whistleblowing in some organizations, others do not appreciate it. A common punishment towards whistleblowing in organizations is employment termination (Glazer & Glazer, 1989). Actions such as whistleblowing, from an organization's perspective, may look as a potential threat to either financial, reputational, or normalcy to the organization itself (Miceli et al., 2008; Near & Miceli, 1996; Rehg, 1998; Rehg et al., 2008). Retaliation may also come from coworkers as well. Common methods such as lost influence, status, and ostracism from coworkers are methods of retaliation to whistleblowers (Decker & Calo, 2007; Dworkin & Baucus, 1998; Miceli & Near, 1992). Such retaliations have been shown to prevent further whistleblowing (Arnold & Ponemon, 1991; Near & Miceli, 1986).

To combat this retaliation from an organization and coworkers in response to an employee's whistleblowing, the employee may look to third parties outside the organization to report wrongdoings

within. Mesmer-Magnus and Viswesvaran (2005) found that with a lack of supervision, employees were more likely to report wrongdoings. However, they were more likely to be retaliated against from outside the organization. Although Park et al. (2008) described in detail the choices that an individual is faced with in reporting a wrongdoing, internal versus external whistleblowing has been studied the most in the literature. Using the theory of planned behavior as a context for the attitude and the behavior, this study manipulated normative beliefs of would be whistleblowers to find out whether motivations play a significant role.

METHOD

Participants

The data collected for this study were from 162 participants attending a medium size university in the southeastern United States. Each participant received research credits for participating in the study. Participants consisted of 139 females (85.8%) and 22 males (13.6%). Ninety-five percent were between the ages of 18 and 24, and the average age was 21. Approximately 6.2% were working full time, while 59.9% were working part time, and the remaining 34% were not working at all.

Measures

A 33-item questionnaire was used covering attitudes, intention, and social norms. Attitude toward whistleblowing was measured using a 7-point Likert-type scale, where 1 indicated “not at all important” and 7 indicated “extremely important” in reporting of unethical behaviors. Intention was measured by using two hypothetical scenarios. The scenarios were manipulated as having a reward (job promotion and monetary incentive) or punishment (theft accusation and loss of credibility). Participants were asked on a 7-point Likert-type scale where 1 indicated “very unlikely” and 7 indicated “very likely” to choose the likelihood of reporting the incident. Subjective norms were asked directly after each scenario using a 7-point Likert-type scale where 1 indicated “very hard” and 7 indicated “very easy” on the difficulty of reporting the unethical behavior to the respected outlet, depending on the treatment group (internal, external, or family). They were then asked using a 7-point Likert-type scale where 1 indicated “don’t care at all” and 7 indicated “very much care” on how much the participant cared on whether the respected group would disapprove of their decision. These three ratings were averaged to produce a composite score of intention.

Procedure

Participants signed up for the study using SONA system for administering research offered at the university. Upon arrival, the experimenter first read and explained the informed consent. Once the participant agreed to continue, they were given the 33-item questionnaire. Once the questionnaire was completed the participant was given credits and dismissed.

RESULTS

A Pearson correlation was used to determine the relationship between attitude and intention on reporting the unethical behavior. There was a significant, positive, moderate correlation between attitude and intention ($r = .252, p = .001$). Participants that had higher attitude scores tended to show higher intention scores on reporting the incident.

A 2x3 ANOVA analysis showed that normative beliefs had a significant effect on intention scores, $F(2, 156) = 10.078, p < .001, \eta^2 = .114$. The internal group ($M = 5.47$) had the highest intention on reporting unethical behaviors than external ($M = 4.92$) or family groups ($M = 4.93$). Motivation consequences, however, did not significantly affect intention scores, $F(1, 156) = .690, ns, \eta^2 = .004$. There was also a significant interaction between normative beliefs and motivation consequences on intention scores, $F(2, 156) = 3.530, p = .032, \eta^2 = .043$. See Table 1 for a summary of ANOVA results.

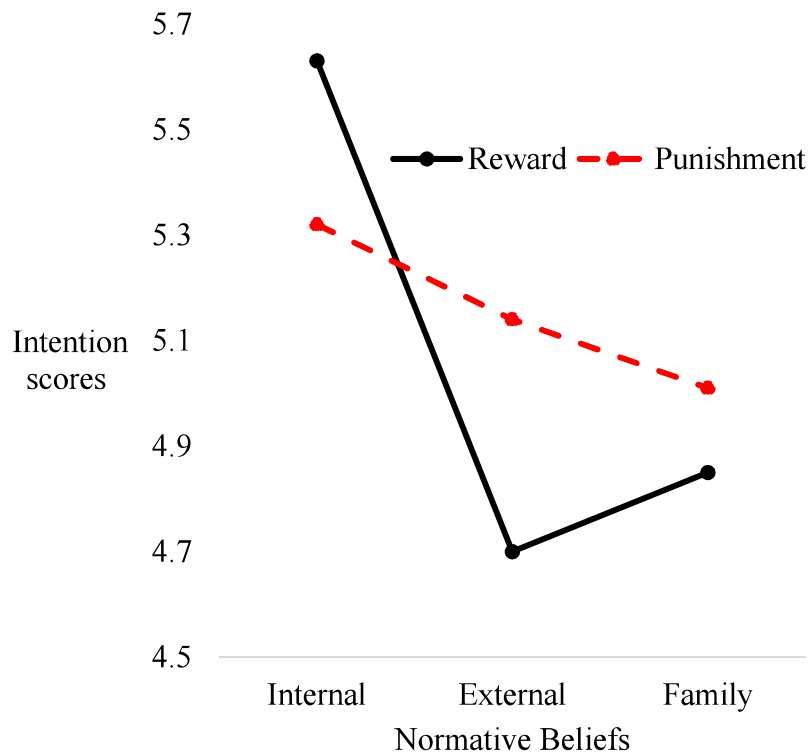
TABLE 1
TEST OF BETWEEN-SUBJECTS EFFECTS ON INTENTION

Source	<i>SS</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>
Normative Beliefs	10.945	2	5.472	10.078***
Motivation Consequences	.375	1	.375	.690
Normative Beliefs x Motivation Consequences	3.834	2	1.917	3.530.*
Error	81.759	156	.524	
Total	4362.233	162		

* $p < .05$, *** $p < .001$

A simple effects test was used to analyze the significant interaction between normative beliefs and motivation consequences. The results show that normative belief levels influenced whistleblowing intention for reward condition, $F(2, 156) = 12.387, p < .001, \eta^2 = .137$. Normative belief levels did not influence whistleblowing intention for punishment condition, $F(2, 156) = 1.221, p = .298, \eta^2 = .015$. The significant main effects of reward condition were further analyzed by pairwise comparisons using Fisher's LSD for multiple comparisons. For participants in the reward condition, whistleblowing intention was only higher at Internal ($M = 5.63, SE = .142$) than External ($M = 4.699, SE = .142, p < .001$), and higher than Family ($M = 4.847, SE = .142, p < .001$). See Figure 1 for a graph of cell means.

FIGURE 1
INTERACTION BETWEEN NORMATIVE BELIEFS AND MOTIVATION ON WHISTLEBLOWING INTENTIONS



DISCUSSION

The goal of this study was to test whether the inherent beliefs of a potential whistleblower will influence the intent to engage in future whistleblowing behavior. The results indicate that normative beliefs do affect intention. In other words, our participants intend to engage in whistleblowing decisions when they believe that they were reporting to an internal reporting channels within the organization than an external reporting channel or their family. These findings support previous assertion on whistleblowing. When respondents believe it is difficult or the process of reporting an unethical behavior in the workplace exerts excessive burden to report unethical behavior, they are more willing to ignore or take the stance of “see no evil,” “hear no evil” even to their close relations. These findings are further collaborated by the rewards or consequence variable in the study. Respondents in this study did not fully process the rewards or punishment consequences in arriving at the determination to report unethical behavior. That notwithstanding, the intent to report unethical behavior in the organization was highest when rewards were promised. These findings add to the mix of results on the prospects of rewards or punishment when an individual is faced with reporting an unethical behavior. The relative value of a reward to an individual in a hypothetical situation is different from the value of the reward in real organizational context.

Limitations

This study is not without its limitations. First, since the scenarios were fictional, participants had no ties to the organizations within the scenarios and may be more inclined to report unethical behaviors since there are no real-world repercussions. Second, the rewards used for the whistleblowing scenarios included a job promotion and monetary incentive. The variation of rewards as either altruistic or for personal gain may have influenced the likelihood of an individual reporting unethical behavior. For example, someone may be more willing to report stealing to gain a promotion (a personal gain) rather than reporting faulty equipment (an altruistic act) that may affect other individuals. This same limitation can also be said for the punishment scenarios which simulated theft accusation and loss of credibility. Third, a majority of participants in this study were females, which may have contributed to lower intention scores overall. According to past research, men were found to be more likely to blow the whistle than women (Gelfand et al., 1973).

Implications

At the institutional level, organizational cultures that accentuate or deemphasize loyalty will influence employees’ willingness to engage in whistleblowing to a greater degree. In individualistic cultures, unlike collectivist cultures, where employees have more negative feelings towards whistleblowing, the response and treatment to individual whistleblowers within the organization in the past becomes the yardstick for individuals confronted with reporting or not reporting an unethical behavior. In the United States, Time Magazine may have celebrated ‘The Whistleblower’ as the person of the year in 2002, but it is still not certain whether Edward Snowden is a hero or a villain. The implication at the individual level is quite certain. The available data (Dyck et al., 2010; Public Concern at Work, 2010) suggests that individual employees that eventually engage in whistleblowing were either fired, resigned, or lived with derogatory labels either in the media, on social media platforms or within their communities.

CONCLUSION

The theory of planned behavior (TPB) has potential in predicting and explaining whistleblowing. Many studies have been isolating the influence of attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavior control on whistleblowing decisions. At best, the correlations among these predictors with the intention of whistleblowing have been well documented. This current study (one of the few that manipulated the predictors in the theory), showed that normative beliefs of the potential whistleblower determine whether the actual behavior will eventually occur. In line with previous findings, the intent to report unethical

behavior to internal reporting channels increases when there are some underlying reward incentives within the organization. Contrary to expectations, participants were least likely to use external reporting channels even when presented with rewarding scenarios. These findings could inform organizations to improve upon internal reporting channels to increase reporting of unethical behaviors at the organizational level. Future studies could focus on the discrepancy between reporting to external channels and family relations under reward or punishment conditions.

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