

The Psychology of Whistleblowing

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ABSTRACT: *Whistleblowing, its antecedents, and its aftermath are complex and varied phenomena. Motivational factors in the perception of alleged misconduct and in the response to such allegations by the accused and the institution are examined. Understanding the psychological processes that underlie some of the surprising behavior surrounding whistleblowing will enable those who perceive wrongdoing, as well as the professional societies and work organizations which voice their concern, to better respond to apparent wrongdoing, while preserving the reputation and mental health of all parties to such cases.*

Introduction

A prominent committee of the National Academy of Sciences advises beginning researchers that, if they suspect a colleague of violating the ethical standards of the scientific community, they have an unmistakable obligation to act, that is, to blow the whistle on the misconduct. Currently, most scientific and professional societies have similar ethical requirements. They neglect to add that the other side has a right to due process. When the other side is powerful, the whistleblower hardly stands a chance of surviving the conflict unscathed, unless great sophistication or institutional wisdom and fairness accompany the process. Unfortunately, most whistleblowers are naïve about the precautions they should take, the amount of evidence they must bring forth, and about the fact that virtually no one will be on their side when the case gets underway, though many fair weather friends will encourage them to go forth. Worse, many organizations lack the rules, administrative structure and culture required to foster constructive examination of apparent wrongdoing, and some whistleblowers are mistaken in their accusations.

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Whistleblowers may be sophisticated or naïve, morally justified or vengeful; objective or mistaken. They may have a cause others in society will rally behind, or they may stand alone. Some are blessed with family and friends whose strength and principles enable them to endure the ostracism and life-threatening harm that may come their way; others are not so fortunate. Some are acquainted with the requirements for responsible whistleblowing (such as those set forth by Norman Bowie, see p. 76 in 'Preventing the Need for Whistleblowing: Practical Advice for University Administrators',¹ and with such good advice to incipient whistleblowers as that offered by the Government Accountability Project² or by Gunsalus, pp. 58-63.³) Others are not. In any case, the psychological principles described herein are at work; the difference between prudent and imprudent handling of concerns about scientific misconduct lies in whether there are processes in place to constrain irrational or impulsive aspects of human behavior.

Before bringing psychological concepts to bear on understanding whistleblowing behavior, it is useful to grasp some of the complexities that typically surround whistleblowing.

A Few Words from Others

Whistleblowing is like entering adolescence or moving to a foreign land in that there typically are inexorable forces impelling one to do so, as well as shocks and surprises for which one is unprepared. Hence the psychology of whistleblowing addresses the antecedents, and the shocks that are typically in store for the whistleblower, as well as the ways in which he or she might effectively cope with the stresses and traumas that ensue. Some are better prepared for these shocks and traumas than others, but in any case, if one survives the experience intact, one is forever changed. Whistleblowing involves many complex social, cognitive, cultural and maturational processes. The following quotes taken from *The Whistleblowers*⁴ enable one to glimpse the conflicting forces and psychological processes this article seeks to explain:

“I know it may sound like a hackneyed phrase today, but I believe it: The only thing necessary for evil to prevail is for good men to do nothing.” (p. vii) —Dr. Mary McAnaw, Veterans Administration (VA) whistleblower

“My advice to potential whistleblowers can be summarized in two words: ”Forget it.“ But if you can’t forget it, then leak the information—making sure that your name isn’t associated with it. Finally, if you can’t do the above, then at least find out what it takes to be a successful whistleblower and the possible consequences. Be prepared to be ostracized, your career coming to a screeching halt, and perhaps even being driven into bankruptcy.” (p. 206) —Al Louis Ripskis, Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) whistleblower

“Don’t make the mistake of thinking that someone in authority, who, if he only knew what was going on, would straighten the whole thing out. If you have God, the law, the press, and the facts on your side, you have a fifty-fifty chance of defeating the bureaucracy.” (p. 207) —William Sanjour, EPA whistleblower

“ (1) You never go around your boss. (2) You tell your boss what he wants to hear, even when you boss claims that he wants dissenting views. (3) If your boss wants something dropped, you drop it. (4) You are sensitive to your boss’s wishes so that you anticipate what he wants, you don’t force him, in other words, to act as boss. (5) Your job is not to report something that your boss does not want reported, but rather to cover it up. You do what your job requires, and you keep your mouth shut.” (p. 111)—Robert Jackall, researcher of the ethics of organizations, describing the apparent rules one should follow to remain in the favor of others in the workplace

“I had no idea that they were not through with my husband when he was fired. It never would have occurred to me that there would have been the effort that was made to absolutely squash his career. I could not, did not, imagine the vindictiveness.” (p. 134) —Linda Rose, wife of Joseph Rose, a bright young attorney employed by the American Milk Producers, who reported illegal political payments made to the Nixon re-election campaign in return for a commitment to retain price supports for milk producers. Linda and Joseph Rose had firm ethical and religious views, and accepted the commitment made by many in the 1960s to change the nation’s moral climate. Linda Rose went on to say:

“I honestly thought that it was in Joe’s power and his capability to end the illegal activity simply by reason and by his demand that it be shut down. When Jack Kennedy was running for office, he said the individual could make a difference. Well, I bought it hook, line, and sinker. I thought you could.” (p. 139)

Whistleblowing in Perspective

The bizarre twists and turns of whistleblowing cases, and the research literature that bears on the irrational behavior that accompanies whistleblowing, become more understandable when we recall our own personal experiences of whistleblowing and recognize that these phenomena are ancient and found in everyday life and literature.

Most of us can recall a childhood experience when we reported wrongdoing to an authority who simply gave us a weary look and took no action, or worse—took action that resulted in our being called a tattler and perhaps even being ostracized by our peers.

Mutiny on the Bounty is an account of a true event in which Officer Christian led a mutiny against the murderous Captain Bligh. As a result, the King of England changed laws governing behavior on the high seas, ensuring more humane treatment of

seamen. But Mr. Christian and his fellow mutineers were never treated as heroes in their time. Some returned to England, expecting to be welcomed, only to be hanged. Mr. Christian and a few others knew better; they spent the rest of their lives in hiding on a South Sea island.

Some modern whistleblowers have been as successful in influencing history as Mr. Christian, and their story is similar. For example, recently Jeffrey Wigand, ex-Research Chief at Brown & Williamson Tobacco Co, charged that the Company shut down research to make cigarettes safer and lied about the addictive nature of nicotine. He began by leaking a crate full of Brown & Williamson research papers to a prestigious medical researcher, an anti-smoking advocate, who placed those files on the Internet for the world to see. Wigand did not emerge as the source of the leak until the papers had been disseminated worldwide, and scientists had presented their analyses to the press and to scientific publications. He has played out his role with admirable sophistication, and set into motion worldwide concern to limit the advertising or sale of tobacco. However, Wigand has been fired and sued, and he and his family have endured much harassment. Just what his efforts will accomplish against such a mighty force probably cannot be assessed for many years to come.

While the concepts and principles governing whistleblowing are ancient, the term “whistleblower” entered our vocabulary only about two decades ago, following the rise of successful social movements in America. In the 1970s, it became widely recognized that scientists can and do commit harmful acts, that honesty and trust are fragile and important virtues in science, and that looking the other way when a colleague misbehaves undermines scientific and moral values that we all need to uphold.

The Legal and Organizational Environment of the Whistleblower

Obviously, whistleblowing and the behavior of others in response to the whistleblower does not occur in a vacuum. In addition to the perceiver of wrongdoing, the alleged perpetrator, and the immediate context in which the action occurred (e.g., a scientific lab), there are other forces at work. There are the leaders of the organization within which the alleged misconduct took place, and the leaders of other organizations which may be responsive to the allegation, e.g., a funding agency. These individuals, from lab chiefs and agency representatives to the heads of these organizations, operate within a culture which might have as its core value the importance of honesty, integrity and ethical standard, or the importance of maintaining a prestigious public image at almost any cost. They may have a thoughtful procedure for responding to allegations of wrongdoing (such as that described on pp. 75-94)¹ or they may engage in denial of any wrongdoing such as happened to Robert Sprague, as described in his article on pp. 33-44.⁵

Robert Sprague, in his description of his whistleblowing experience with the administrations of the University of Pittsburgh, the National Institutes of Health, and

the Office of Scientific Integrity, offers a stark example of the way in which institutions may defend themselves from the truth. Administrators of these prestigious organizations ignored and denied the wrongdoing of a confessed perpetrator of very serious and consequential scientific fraud, and, in effect, placed the whistleblower on trial. Sprague was fortunate to be employed at the University of Illinois and hence was not in a position to be fired for his attempts to right a wrong. Yet he still suffered greatly for his actions. What organizational structures are in place to bring about more equitable and constructive behavior towards the whistleblower?

Protective legislation has been enacted to legitimize the role of whistleblower, establish procedures for investigating complaints, and prohibit firing of whistleblowers. Typically, however, the entire legal muscle of the accused organization is used to fight the allegation that the firing was because of whistleblowing. In the ensuing legal battles, the whistleblower, rather than the persons or organization alleged to have done wrong, is put on trial, as happened to Sprague.

In the early 1970's, the Government Accountability Project (GAP)² was organized by a group of young attorneys to assist ethical resisters. GAP's staff understands the tremendous pressures that are brought to bear, respects the decision to become a whistleblower, but are realistic in counseling whistleblowers and deciding whether to take a case. Among other things, they evaluate the significance of the allegation, the possibility that whistleblowing will lead to reform, whether it is worth risking the whistleblower's career, whether reporters or a Congressional committee will bring the whistleblower's case to the public's attention and continue to promote the whistleblower's cause, and the emotional status of the individual. They advise whistleblowers to expect to be ostracized, fired and professionally blackballed; intimidated, defamed, falsely accused, deserted by friends and divorced; to suffer diseases such as hypertension and post-traumatic stress, and to experience dramatic mood swings and require extensive psychotherapy. They repeatedly emphasize the negative consequence of public disclosure to the whistleblower and to family and friends. They then consider taking the case if GAP's limited resources can carry the case, and if the information available is adequate to building an effective case.

In short, the whistleblower typically operates in a hostile environment. Why? What human tendencies make successful whistleblowing so difficult? What skills of coping give one the strength required to carry out this role effectively and to emerge whole? What organizational factors can turn destructive behavior into constructive and rational behavior?

Psychological Processes Involved

We turn now to some psychological processes that underlie the experience of whistleblowing. First we focus on sources of bias that cause the whistleblower, the accused and the organization to behave with a lack of objectivity, and indicate the corresponding corrective steps discussed elsewhere in this issue by Gunsalus.^{1,3} We

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then examine some factors that can give the whistleblower the courage to act and the strength to endure, and can give the organization the processes that nurture reasonable behavior.

Attribution Processes

The first step towards the act of whistleblowing is to perceive that someone has engaged in a *willful* act of fraud or harm. One does not see willfulness; one sees acts or evidence of acts and *attributes* willfulness to the actor. The psychological study of *attribution* shows us that this process may be fraught with error and bias. (It is not surprising, then, that much of the advice that Gonsalus and GAP have for incipient whistleblowers amounts to establishing the objectivity of their perceptions, including discovering whether independent observers and persons in authority agree with those perceptions.) Many aspects of attribution processes have implications for understanding whistleblowing phenomena. Here we will consider the fundamental attribution error; false consensus' self-serving bias; various self presentational concerns, motivational concerns and need for self control; and belief in a just world. As we will see, biased attributional processes can affect the thinking of all parties to the whistleblowing: the accuser, the accused and any administrators who may be called upon to respond to the allegations. Wise practice on the part of whistleblowers and administrators involves extreme mindfulness of these likely biases and employment of processes that will help to control and correct such biases.

The Fundamental Attribution Error. Throughout our lives, we draw inferences and attribute qualities to others. The old saw that "there are two sides to every story" refers to the fact that different people draw differing inferences and attribute fault or virtue differently. A psychological principle underlying these differences is the *fundamental attribution error*.⁶

We tend to explain the behavior of others as resulting from their general personality traits or attitudes, while overlooking the importance of context. Thus when data appear possibly to have been falsified, or a passage appears to have been plagiarized, it is "natural" (though not necessarily rational) to attribute this to deliberate acts of dishonesty rather than to other equally plausible processes. Curiously, perceivers tend to make *internal* attributions even when the other person obviously had no choice in the matter, and even when the perceivers have, themselves, been through the same procedure and know *they* had no choice in the matter.⁷ Such attributions of personality qualities to others is often made spontaneously without awareness.⁸ Thus, the process of qualifying dispositional inferences with information about the context is a less spontaneous, more thoughtful process; it involves correcting the initial dispositional inference. In many cases, the perceiver never gets to that second stage of correction.⁹ This is especially true when the behavior to be explained is ambiguous or difficult to comprehend.¹⁰

However, we do not make the same attributions to ourselves. When we act, we tend to over-emphasize the role of external factors in explaining our own behavior. Thus, a whistleblower might explain that he is impelled by the requirements of the National Academy of Sciences to report what he believes is scientific misconduct. But the accused, who feels that he was only deleting data according to accepted rules of data cleaning, may be truly horrified at what he perceives as unscrupulous and vicious tattling by the whistleblower.

This so-called *actor-observer bias*¹¹ has been widely researched. People tend to see the behavior of others as fixed, consistent, and stemming from character and personality, but perceive their own behavior as much more flexible and based on objective external conditions.¹² How is this explained? One explanation is that the two parties have access to different information. We have much more historical information about our own behavior in different contexts than does the usual observer, and know how our own behavior has varied across situations. We do not have this perspective on the other person.¹³ Another explanation is that the observer is focused on the actor, whereas the actor is focused on the context, the place, the other people, their expectations, the constraints on behavior imposed by the environment.¹⁴

There are exceptions. When people feel empathy for someone they are observing, they tend to adopt an empathic attitude and see things the way the other person sees them.¹⁵ Thus, close colleagues or lab partners are less likely to see certain data manipulations as dishonest and more likely to see them as “the way things are done under these circumstances, standard practice.” People whom we like and with whom we have established close ties are typically not seen as culpable unless they commit an unambiguously egregious act.

Because of these aspects of human nature, it is important that the culture of scientific institutions, through its administrative offices, welcomes the confidential discussion of perceptions of wrongdoing, and fosters the careful and objective examination of the facts, along the lines of the procedures discussed by Gunsalus (pp.75-94).¹

False consensus. When learning of conflicts between others, we are quick to expect that there will be two sides to the story. Yet we do not apply the same insight to ourselves. Rather, we tend to see our own behavior as typical, normal, or correct and we tend to assume a false consensus, i.e. that most others would agree with us.¹⁶ (This is the “everyone knows” perception that Gunsalus warns against on pp. 87-88.)¹ How can this be explained? One possibility is that we seek out others who share our beliefs,¹⁷ and our false belief that there is a consensus is based on our biased sample. There are other explanations as well: (a) people agree with us out of tact rather than honesty, (b) our own opinions are so salient in our mind that we overestimate how much external support we have for them, (c) when we are unsure how others feel, we resolve the uncertainty to agree with our own views, and (d) we wish to see our own beliefs as good and typical and attribute them to others to maintain high self esteem.¹⁸

The *false consensus phenomenon* can support the actions of perpetrators as well as those who allege wrongdoing. For example, discarding outliers to support one's hypothesis may be done with great confidence that "everybody considers it standard statistical procedure," while the incipient whistleblower's decision to go public with an accusation may be based on the mistaken view that "everyone would agree that he was cheating." Thus, both parties may be acting in good faith, but if the allegations are not examined judiciously and confidentially, much damage may be done to all parties involved.

The self serving bias. People tend to attribute internal or dispositional causes to their own *positive* behavior, but to attribute external causes to their own negative behavior. Thus the perpetrator of research fraud may be more than happy to take credit for all the publications that have led to funding and prestige of his laboratory, but does not wish to take responsibility for the fact that some of these publications were based on procedures that biased results to support his hypotheses. Groups are also capable of self serving biases or ethnocentrism. They may happily take credit for the group's praiseworthy contributions, but not for its blameworthy actions.¹⁹ Such ethnocentrism paired with empathy for co-workers, leads co-workers to take up for their accused compatriot, and seek ways to discredit the whistleblower, even if the evidence presented by the whistleblower would seem credible to an unbiased observer. The self serving bias is also at work when the heads of institutions want to ignore allegations against their star performers, their Nobel Laureates, or simply those who bring in much grant money.

Robert Sprague's account of his whistleblowing experience is unusually clearcut. Sprague was not part of the organization in which wrongdoing occurred, and he had no ulterior motives. Moreover, the accused confessed to falsifying data and the evidence Sprague brought forth was quite clear cut.⁵ Such a lack of ambiguity about the actions and motives of the persons involved is unusual, as Gunsalus indicates. Where ambiguity is involved, Gunsalus suggest following other related explanations of the attribution processes discussed above:

Self presentational concerns. Most people want to create a good impression in the minds of others. The accused is highly motivated to be perceived in a positive light and to persuade others that she is innocent of wrongdoing or at least of intentional wrong doing. The accuser is likely to find himself in trouble and seek to recoup lost ground by making attributions that favor himself, even if the evidence for the accusation turns out to be shaky or nonexistent.

Motivational concerns. Most whistleblowing concerns a set of relationships within an organization, with all the feelings and emotions attendant upon having co-workers and competitors. It is virtually inevitable in such contexts for the whistleblower, the accused, their co-workers, and the administration to whom they report, to hold views

about the situation that are biased in one direction or the other due to myriad factors such as need for love, revenge, material advantage, prestige, and so on.

Need for a sense of control. Cognitive factors operate to help one deal with ambiguity, and also to give one a sense of control over one's own life. The sense of control achieved through biased perception is illusory, yet it can sustain one against adverse odds. Feeling that a co-worker has garnered glory by cheating science or cheating oneself is likely to be threatening to one's sense of the security of one's professional environment. One is likely to want to *do something about it*. Similarly, the accused will want to seek security from impending threat. It is easy, under such emotion laden circumstances to act impulsively, mindless of the precautions that GAP or Gunsalus would offer.

Individuals vary with respect to their tendency to seek cognitive control. Rather than rush impulsively to the most comforting (though perhaps illusory) conclusions, the individual (accuser, accused or administrator) may respond with confidence that useful information can be generated. The act of believing that one can control one's fate is energizing and leads to information search and the development and execution of behavioral strategies. Persons who take such an approach are less likely to become sick or depressed and are better able to mobilize their efforts to seek effective solutions or at least to survive.²⁰ Thus, the illusion of control is sometimes adaptive, and may lead to actual control. Even the individual who becomes embroiled in conflict that is life threatening — and who adopts constructive ways of controlling his or her life—is likely to find effective ways to reduce the stress and misery that has ensued, and to grow and change in healthy ways, as we shall see in a subsequent section of this article.

Belief in a just world.²¹ This is an irrational belief that the world is fair, and that ultimately everyone gets what they deserve. This belief is often exercised from a very subjective, egocentric viewpoint. Belief in a just world has implications for how people think about whistleblowing phenomena.

From the perspective of members of the organization who are stung by allegations of wrong-doing, the whistleblower who is fired, bankrupted, divorced and commits suicide has proven that he was a trouble maker; trouble makers get what they deserve in the end. From the perspective of the whistleblower who is caught up in the “just world” mentality, it may seem that the alleged perpetrator personally deserves to be caught, publicly humiliated, and severely punished, and that it is only right that the whistleblower work to bring about such “justice”. Thus, we see why Gunsalus recommends that administrators ask the complainant “What action do you wish me to take?” By uncovering likely “just world” thinking, the administrator can begin to mold a more reasonable set of expectations, such as showing the accused the error of his or her ways, returning certain outliers to the data, and improving the lab procedures.

As this discussion of attributional bias suggests, the dynamics of destruction of self and others may get underway as soon as the whistleblowing episode begins. By the time the first round of allegations and counter-allegations is finished, a new round of biased attributions probably is being prepared by each side. Before long, the conflict has taken on a life of its own. From this analysis, we can appreciate the extreme wisdom of any intervention that operates to investigate the allegation in an objective, businesslike way, while perhaps suggesting to both sides that they obtain whatever personal guidance they need to keep their sanity and their objectivity.

Ethnocentrism, Bonding and Organizational Culture

The term “attributional bias” is used to refer to the biases of individuals, while the term “ethnocentrism” is used to refer to the self-serving biases of groups. Ethnocentrism is the belief that one’s own group is superior and that others are in some sense marginal or not as good. Ethnocentrism nourishes one’s own sense of pride and belonging. It is the glue that holds groups together and gives them an *esprit de corps*. Ethnocentrism does not depend on one’s ethnic heritage, or even on long-term relationships. In a series of experiments, Tajfel²² showed that students assigned to groups in which they had no face to face contact with other members still preferred their assigned group to the other available groups, and a change of groups caused them to change their preferences immediately! Among professionals, the belief that one’s group is superior to all others may form the day one receives an appointment to a prestigious lab or department. It predisposes one to like and respect one’s colleagues, and to defend one’s institution against those who would criticize or harm it. The power of a sense of belonging on one’s sense of ethnocentrism is immense.

What, then, might we expect from a group under attack by a whistleblower? To many, the workplace is as cherished a primary group as the home and family. Thus, there are many pressures on group members not to raise concerns about one another and above all not to go outside the group with allegations. When a group member does become a whistleblower within his own group, he or she will be perceived by co-workers as disloyal. For the dedicated scientist or engineer, the workplace is perhaps the main source of identity, status, and opportunity to contribute to society; it is sacrosanct. The whistleblower threatens this sanctuary by attacking it and seeking to defame this source of one’s prestige, security, and friendships. To side with the whistleblower, irrespective of whether his allegations seem correct, may create conflict that forever destroys the trust and rapport essential to democratic decision making and cooperative work. It is easy for the members of a professional team to bias their perception to minimize the value of the whistleblower’s concerns and to maximize the importance of circling the wagons to protect their cherished organization and its members.

As some of the other articles in this volume attest, however, this is not an inevitable outcome of the voiced concerns of one co-worker about another. All

organizations develop a culture with certain key values. If the key values that are emphasized by the leadership and modeled by its members include such attributes as high ethical standards, decency, confidential and objective handling of problems, and a willingness of people to help one another, processes such as those described by Gunsalus are more likely to be developed, to be trusted, and to be relied upon. Indeed, the group's "circling of the wagons" might have an entirely different focus if the overriding goal is to solve problems in a kind and honest way, rather than to gang up on the perceived "trouble maker".

Given the competitive nature of academic and scientific appointments, an organization cannot depend simply on the inherent decency of individual members to create a culture that handles allegations of wrongdoing in a constructive manner. Rather, organizations must make a conscious effort to build and nurture an ethical culture. Culture is the shared values and beliefs that determine the behavior common to groups of people. Culture is the shared language, events, symbols, rituals and value systems of its members. It evolves from past members' behavior and is reconstituted by current members.²³ More specifically, culture is "A system of shared values (what is important) and beliefs (how things work) that interact with ... people, organizational structures, and control systems to produce behavioral norms (the way we do things around here).²⁴ An organization that seeks to establish such decent, constructive practices needs to do more than establish rules governing response to allegations of misconduct by its members. Its values and its procedures for reporting internal problems may be published in many places—its web sites, its catalogues and brochures, its employment manual, its directives to its administrators, and so on. The leaders of the organization must exemplify those values. Stories that illustrate those values need to be told by the leaders when they speak in public. Members who exemplify those values should be recognized and rewarded publicly. While leaders must exemplify ethical values, this ideal must be shared throughout the organization, open communication must prevail, and interpersonal relations should have a mutually respectful, horizontal, rather than hierarchical, orientation.²⁵

Ecological Factors

How does location within the professional network affect whistleblowing? For example, some lab chiefs are cited as an author of every paper coming out of their lab, whether they worked on that research or not. If research fraud is alleged, a lab chief may honestly (or otherwise) claim to have had no knowledge of the wrong doing. In any case, however, the lab chief is rarely accused. The accuser can more readily attribute fraud to the junior person who typically is concerned to publish and obtain a secure appointment. (The lab chief does not have such needs.) If the accuser does not work closely with the junior person and feels no empathy, it is easier still to accuse that person.²⁶ In contrast, the lab chief may have hired and promoted the accuser, or if from another institution, may serve on boards that review the accuser's manuscripts or grant

proposals. Perhaps the junior person cheated at the lab chief's behest, but if the blame is convincingly laid on the person, the lab chief can fire him or her and thus clear the reputation of the lab.

Powerful members of the organization are not always in a position to wash their hands of the situation, however. Even if they can sidestep blame, their authority has been threatened by the whistleblower, and this threat must be countered by swift action. From their perspective, the whistleblower has greater loyalty to principles than to management. He has no gratitude for his job, his salary, or the trappings of status provided to him. He has raised an issue that may trouble others as well and may cause management's power and authority to begin to unravel. Management may make a firm public response, totally rejecting the allegations, and using all available power to undermine the credibility of the whistleblower. Top management may resort to such harsh measures as blacklisting, dismissal, transfer and personal harassment, measures far in excess of anything the whistleblower or any objective observer would expect.²⁵ Or, in an organization committed to an ethical and sensitive approach to such allegations, management may act swiftly to evaluate the claim and, if valid, to expose and fire the wrong-doer, and to undo the harm to the degree possible.

Irrespective of the ethical orientation of the organization's leaders, we see vast differences between the accuser and management, in perspective and attribution. The whistleblower sees himself as trying to right a wrong. The manager sees himself trying to save the organization. Management, and perhaps many others allied with the organization, see themselves and society as having an immense investment in the organization and needing to protect it from embarrassment or destruction. Not surprisingly, then, we note that Gunsalus points to the role of the ethical administrator as an investigator and decision maker who gets to the truth of the matter and takes appropriate action, not as one who sides with the accused or the accuser.

The Courage to Act

What gives the whistleblower the courage of convictions? Social and personality psychologists, observing the circumstances of those who have the ability to endure under punishing circumstances, have pointed to the importance of social support,^{26,27} identification with others who have behaved courageously, and a cultural (including religious) context that supports acting on one's ideals and seeking to make a difference in society. For example, Martin Seligman, in discussing the emotional well-springs of the ability to cope with seeming defeat has observed:

“Human beings require a context of meaning and hope. We used to have ample context, and when we encountered failure, we would pause and take our rest in that setting—our spiritual furniture—and revive our sense of who we were. I call the larger setting the commons. It consists of a belief in the nation, in God, in one's family, or in a purpose that transcends our lives.” (p. 284).²⁸

The experimental literature on rebellion against unjust forces within one's organization is congruent with these contentions. One benefits from having strong allies who have had experience with similar situations with whom to discuss the perceived problem, and from having time to think and consult.²⁹

The history of whistleblowing supports this contention. We see that many recent instances of whistleblowing are an outgrowth of social movements of the '60s or of subsequent major social and political concerns. A large percentage of whistleblowers have a strong religious background and have the support of family and friends who believe in taking a strong moral stand on matters of importance in society.⁴ Many whistleblowers and their supporters identify with heroes from the past whom they perceive as standing for the good and the right against powerful odds. Among those whistleblowers who survive the onslaught of persecution that is in store for them are persons who have enjoyed many kinds of social, economic and legal support.⁴ In short, the whistleblower does not act without social and cultural influences, and cannot survive without highly supportive social, legal, public interest, and cultural institutions.

Moral Dilemmas, Traumas, and Moral Development

A moral dilemma is characterized by two or more possible courses of action, each of which will cause a good and a bad outcome. Whistleblowers always face a dilemma; they may satisfy their consciences and risk the wrath of others in doing so; or satisfy the security needs by failing to criticize wrongdoers but suffer from feelings of cowardice and corruption. How does one weigh this dilemma? Developmental psychologists would answer that this depends on the stage of moral development of the whistleblower.

According to Kohlbergian characterizations of stages of moral development, the morally immature individual perceives right and wrong in simplistic terms with no shades or gray, no complexity, and no thought that good intentions and honest behavior might not be rewarded by powerful authority figures.^{30,31} Unfortunately, professional societies may foster this view by exhorting their members to speak out, as though that's all it takes to right a wrong. Or, as one whistleblower (quoted at the beginning of this paper) observed:

“Don't make the mistake of thinking that someone in authority, who, if he only knew what was going on, would straighten the whole thing out. If you have God, the law, the press, and the facts on your side, you have a fifty-fifty chance of defeating the bureaucracy.” (in: Glazer & Glazer, p. 207)⁴—William Sanjour, EPA whistleblower.

As individuals mature, morally and socially, they recognize that there is not always a benevolent authority figure who will respond constructively to a complaint, that people vary in their perspective on events, and that people are neither all good nor

all bad. They recognize that one must weigh whether to act on one's conscience, and if so, how to do so prudently. Successful whistleblowers recognize the dynamics of the situation they are about to enter and act to maximize their effectiveness. Advice such as that offered by Gunsalus in this volume,³ can be readily assimilated and used by those who are prepared to understand the complexity of the moral and interpersonal conflict they are entering.

Whether one begins with simple ideas about telling someone important and finding a responsive ear, or with realistic expectations, the ensuing traumas tend to result in hardened resolve, polarization of values and usually considerable cynicism. Ultimately, this process may either destroy or strengthen one. Therein we find one of the final chapters of the psychology of whistleblowing. Like persons who have survived traumas such as cancer or the abduction of a child, many whistleblowers find strength and rebuild a meaningful life by aiding other whistleblowers. But that is not the whole story of the psychology of coping and rebuilding one's life after whistleblowing. The literature on stress and coping offers much more on how to nourish one's inner life with optimism and fresh perspectives, how to restore health and vigor, and how to turn to more rewarding environments and to new challenges and opportunities.

It may sound pointless to ask what it is about the experience of whistleblowing that diminishes us, for we have already seen how horrendous that experience can be. However, writers as early as the Roman philosopher Enchiridion, 2000 years ago, have understood the point of such a question: "Men are disturbed not by things, but by the views they take of things."³² Illustrations of the truth of this assertion can be found in success stories of those who overcame great adversity, and in the failures of those who chose to wallow in their troubles. Various psychologists within the last two decades have offered theories confirmed by empirical research about ways to rise above a sense of defeat.

In their examination of decision-making under horrendous conditions (such as those of the whistleblower whose professional, personal and financial life has been devastated), Janis and Mann stressed the importance of appraising the situation and answering these questions: Are the risks serious if I don't change? Are the risks serious if I do change? Is it realistic to hope to find a better solution? Is there sufficient time to search and deliberate? (p.70)³³ These questions frame the problem as one that can be tackled somehow and focuses attention on what changes might make a difference and how to explore those possibilities.

Seligman (1990) has shown that experiences of defeat or failure can leave us with unconscious conclusions about ourselves such as "I am a failure," or "I will never be able to rebuild my life," or "No one will ever respect me." Based on such powerful unconscious conclusions about oneself, it is easy to become depressed and to accept these as truths about one's life. In a large number of studies, Seligman has demonstrated the role of such beliefs in the creation of depression and actual failure. He has also shown that individuals can learn to recognize such harmful internal self-

talk, dispute it, and set about creating positive explanations and opportunities for themselves, thereby turning around vicious spirals of depression, ill health and ineffectiveness and getting their lives started in new directions. In the final chapter of his book *Learned Optimism*,²⁸ Seligman offers many suggestions of ways to create nourishing, positive new directions in a life that has seemed empty.

The literature on stress and coping is replete with approaches to reframing problems so that they become a challenge that one can successfully undertake. This literature offers many important insights into reducing stress and anxiety, regaining physical and mental health, and establishing nourishing human relationships. Individuals who find constructive ways to cope with stress, such as taking direct action to solve problems, or finding meaning in their experience are, in essence, creating a new, positive experience for themselves. Another important aspect of coping with the aftermath of experiences such as whistleblowing has to do with seeking healthy, rather than addictive, approaches to feeling well. Healthy approaches are ones that create lasting well being, such as eating nutritious food, exercising moderately, enjoying reading, friendship, pets and other gentle pleasures, finding tranquility in nature, music or spirituality, and so on. Unhealthy or addictive approaches to feeling good are those which yield only very short-term “highs” such as drinking alcohol, overeating, escaping into sleep or TV, using drugs, smoking, taking one’s unhappiness out on others through hostility or aggression, or even exercising or praying compulsively and unceasingly.³⁴ It is beyond the purview of this article to review this extensive literature on stress and coping. A few representative references are offered, however.^{35,36}

Another quite different maladaptive style of coping with the stressful and unhappy aftermath of events such as whistleblowing include suppression and denial of internal states such as fatigue and emotional distress. This pattern of denial is characterized by elevations of stress-related physiological arousal that are not accompanied by self-reports of negative affect, and by aggressiveness and pressured drive in an effort to preempt or overcome uncontrollable situations. There is evidence that both predispose the individual to ill health, and especially to coronary disease.^{37,38}

Conclusion

This article examined some of the remarkable phenomena of whistleblowing from a psychological perspective. This perspective was useful in several respects: While accounts of destructive activities associated with whistleblowing may seem surprising, an examination of attribution processes shows that irrational behavior may be expected when allegations of wrongdoing occur within organizations. The literature on attribution processes and organizational cultures also reinforces the vital importance of processes such as Gunsalus recommends. Indeed, a psychological analysis of whistleblowing reinforces the normative positions such as those of Bowie³⁹ and Gunsalus (in her articles in this publication)^{1,3} that whistleblowing calls for highly mature, and self-controlled behavior, careful investigation, and extreme mindfulness of the ease with which impulsive behavior can result in harm to all concerned.

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