Whistleblowing at work

Introduction

The human phenomenon of speaking up about issues of critical concern, termed parrhesia, is often dated back to Socrates (Mansbach, 2009). Since the 1960s, this phenomenon has been labelled whistleblowing, when conducted by organizational members from within (Miceli et al., 2008). According to the narrative, the development of the term "whistleblowing" in organizational psychology grew out of the political situation in North America. The term developed in line with a growing political awareness of organizational wrongdoing (e.g., nuclear waste, medical malpractice and misconduct) and was linked to resistance and workers' rights. Employee resistance depends on a variety of factors such as the individual characteristics and power of those involved, the organization and leadership as well as the national context. Reporting on one's own unit or organization could result in various forms of retaliation and, in the worst-case scenario, could lead to threatened or actual death (e.g., Babita Deokaran, a South African whistleblower who blew the whistle on alleged fraud in the Gauteng Health Department during COVID-19). In the global attempt to provide and preserve democratic and sustainable workplaces, whistleblowing is a vital component.

Definition and key conceptualization

The most widely known and used definition of whistleblowing internationally describes the phenomenon as "the disclosure by organization members of illegal, immoral or illegitimate practices under the control of their employers, to persons or organizations that may be able to effect action" (Near & Miceli, 1985, p. 4). The disclosure may be executed anonymously or with the whistleblower identifying themselves, and it can be made informally or formally, to parties within (internal whistleblowing) or outside (external whistleblowing) the organization, or publicly, particularly to the media (public whistleblowing), with internal whistleblowing being more commonly documented (Miceli et al., 2008; Uys, 2022; Vandekerckhove, 2010).

The practices which are disclosed via whistleblowing are termed "wrongdoing", and exist on a continuum ranging from those which affect individual, personal or private interests to those which (potentially) threaten wider organizational and/or public interests. Wrongdoing can be clear or ambiguous, formal or informal; can operate at individual, group, department or workplace levels, with or without workplace support; and can hold outcomes for individuals, groups, the organization and society. Legal violations, financial irregularities, mismanagement, safety issues, theft, waste, discrimination and sexual harassment are some examples of wrongdoings (Miceli et al., 2008).

While the act of whistleblowing may end up being effective in rectifying the wrongdoing it seeks to address, the process itself, often protracted and long-drawn, can be difficult for whistleblowers. This is also the case for the exposed/offender as well as witnesses, employee representatives, leaders and managers. Still, employees who blow the whistle report experiencing more bullying at work than other employees (Bjørkelo, 2013). Ostracism at work, termination of employment, threats to life and property, and even murder, are equally commonly reported (Uys, 2022). Indeed, while whistleblowers display courage and resilience, there is a need for institutional support to protect them legally, financially, physically, materially and emotionally (Kenny & Fotaki, 2023).

The emergence of virtual platforms such as social media (e.g., Facebook, X/Twitter) and public websites (e.g., WikiLeaks) has ushered whistleblowing into the digital age, transforming the channel of disclosure and raising new questions around motives, processes and outcomes. Virtual whistleblowing involves a confluence of people (e.g., whistleblowers, offenders, organizational and political leaders, social media and website providers, and the general public), place (e.g., various online platforms in the public sphere), laws and organizational policies (e.g., on privacy, confidentiality, social media use and terms, and reporting procedures on wrongdoing) and technologies (including both hardware and software), with the interplay among all these components transforming both the process and outcomes of the whistleblowing experience. Besides, while social media has blurred the boundaries between public/private, social/individual, labour/leisure, office/home,

production/consumption, and labour/play, technology does not in itself determine the outcomes of whistleblowing. The impact of virtual whistleblowing emerges through the negotiated power of the various stakeholders involved, who themselves are situated in historical and geographical contexts that impinge on the situation (Lam & Harcourt, 2019).

Since the 1970s, the whistleblowing literature has reported numerous models (see Table 11).

While some models focus on employees' decision-making to report perceived wrongdoing or not and others speak to the outcomes experienced by whistleblowers, most models describe whistleblowing as a process that occurs along a timeline. In this regard, the Miceli and Near model can be considered prototypical of available models due to the scope of its coverage, which includes the pre-whistleblowing, actual whistleblowing and post-whistleblowing phases. Here, Stage I refers to the triggering event comprising wrongdoing. Stage II involves the decision-making process around whether to engage in whistleblowing or not. Stage III covers the act of actually blowing the whistle. Stage IV comprises two parts, namely, the reactions and actions of others within and outside the organization regarding the wrongdoing and the whistleblower, followed by evaluations of the reactions and actions just mentioned. Notwithstanding their insights, available models are usually linear, reflecting sequential stages, without reference to context.

Cultural dynamics

Whistleblowing is a global phenomenon (Brown et al., 2014). Extant studies indicate that engaging in whistleblowing and perceptions of wrongdoing have culturally-linked underpinnings. Available cross-cultural research findings emphasize that whistleblowing and wrongdoing are conceptualized and manifested differently across the globe and warrant different methods and instruments to research these phenomena. Even so, there is a paucity of country- and culture-specific insights, and more inquiries focused on country- and culture-related aspects are needed.

D'Cruz and Bjørkelo's (2016) contextualized process model is a pertinent starting point since it holistically integrates contextual and sociocultural factors with the whistleblowing process, its stages and its outcomes, including stakeholders such as the whistleblower, the offender and the workplace. The model goes beyond country and cultural context to speak to the international setting and the organizational ethos. On the one hand, fine-tuning the model through empirical research will deepen the understanding of the contextual and cultural dimensions of whistleblowing. On the other hand, adapting the model to nomothetically capture particular contexts and cultures through empirical research will help highlight the nuances of the culturalist thesis vis-à-vis a universal phenomenon.

In acknowledgement of wrongdoing being a global rather than a locally situated "problem" (see, for example, Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index), whistleblowing is regulated across supranational agreements (e.g., the European Union directive and ISO 37002:2021 on Whistleblowing Management Systems) and the International Labour Organization (TMWBPS/2022, p. 41), with the latter stating that the "decent work perspective and social dialogue can be helpful for promoting a culture of accountability and transparency and honest public management at all levels, through a comprehensive approach", regardless of the context.

Ethical issues around intervention work

The extensive documentation of the worst-case extreme adverse physical and psychological consequences that whistleblowers could suffer for reporting wrongdoing has highlighted the need for psychosocial and clinical support (Garrick & Buck, 2022). However, as it is the organization, its groups and its individual members (leaders, human resources personnel, trade unionists, employee representatives and colleagues) who bring about these deadly reactions to reports about wrongdoing, organizationally-based interventions are key.

Despite agency theory normatively assuming that an organization will handle and even stop the wrongdoing reported to them through their own procedures, which empirically is not the case, some have found this theory helpful in disentangling how organizations may work with actors that do not necessarily trust each other (Smaili et al., 2022). The

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Table 11   Whistleblowing models

Column/ Illustrative stages	1 McLain and Keenan (1999)	2 O'Day (1974)	3 Rosecrance (1988)	4 Graham (1986)	5 Miceli and Near (1992)	6 Soeken (1986)
I	1. Awareness			1. Awareness of an issue of principle	1. The triggering event	1. Discovery
II	2. Judgement			2. Attribution of personal responsibility of responding	2. The decision-making process	2. Reflection
III	3. Choice		1. Internal criticism 2. State of intransigency 3. External disclosure	3. Decision to blow the whistle 4. Magnitude of behavioural response	3. The whistleblowing act	3. Confrontation
IV		1. Indirect intimidation, nullification and isolation 2. Direct intimidation, defamation and expulsion	4. Organizational reaction	5. Perceived organizational response to behaviour	4. The reactions from others directed at the wrongdoing and the whistleblower 5. The assessment of the reactions previously mentioned	4. Retaliation
V			5. Aftermath			5. The long haul
VI						6. Closure
VII						7. Resolution

Source: Bjørkelo, 2010, p. 24, cited in D'Cruz & Bjørkelo, 2016, p. 146.

call for a combination of formal and informal rules and regulations (e.g., supranational mechanisms via soft and hard law) does, however, rely on the basics of the social and political power at hand. Thus, as long as the loyalty of organizational members, groups and top leaders is channelled to their own safety and earnings over providing safe and decent work, work environments, processes, products and services, even the best-intentioned and best-crafted laws and regulations fall short of stopping wrongdoing and protecting whistleblowers. To overcome this lacuna, there is a need to emphasize the shared responsibility for protecting the legitimate and ethical interests and functioning of the organization.

Critique and future directions

One of the biggest caveats associated with whistleblowing research is the assumption that data from studies of intended whistleblowing equals what happens during actual whistleblowing (Brown et al., 2014). As this is not the case, there is a need for more studies comparing data on actual whistleblowing vis-à-vis the intent to blow the whistle. This will be insightful to highlight overlaps and variations across the two behaviours.

Exploring the whistleblowing–sustainability link is of vital importance. This link operates at two levels. On the one hand, whistleblowing is undertaken to address wrongdoings at the workplace and ensure its sustainability through ethical, moral, legal, financial and social propriety. Research on this front will provide insights into sound governance and responsible management. On the other hand, the worst-case negative consequences that are documented as marking the act of whistleblowing, particularly for whistleblowers but also for witnesses and employees in general due to the vitiation of the work environment, threaten social sustainability. Research on this front will provide insights into the protection of human capital and safeguarding of employee rights (Anlesinya & Susomrith, 2020).

Virtual whistleblowing allows instant transmission of information across the globe. In a global context of digitalization, reporting online, depending on the channel, may, on a positive note, provide employees across the globe with *more* access to worldwide reporting channels. However, on a negative

note, it may increase employee surveillance. The latter may weaken worker rights and freedom of speech, which are prerequisites for a democracy. The boundaryless and viral spread of information can thus both foster positive social change and result in false accusations, unwarranted action and unjustified harm (Lam & Harcourt, 2019). Research on virtual whistleblowing and its essential features, key actors (including the virtual platforms through which it occurs), triggers, course and consequences is nascent.

Conclusion

Whistleblowers ensure the sustainability of workplaces and society since their disclosures of wrongdoing provide protection from health and environmental fallouts, financial loss, failing governance, harassment and discrimination. Yet, in the worst case, whistleblowers end up in precarity since adequate protection and support is lacking, even if global and local rules and regulations are in place. This is a paradox as whistleblowers work towards the interests of their employers and society, but risk being left to fend for their own physical, material, financial, emotional and legal survival, potentially receiving insufficient or no assistance in return for the suffering associated with speaking out (Kenny & Fotaki, 2023). The need to re-narrate whistleblowing from an individual to a collective responsibility cannot be overemphasized.

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