

The psychology of whistleblowing

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Whistleblowing — reporting another person's unethical behavior to a third party — represents an ethical quandary. In some cases whistleblowing appears heroic whereas in other cases it appears reprehensible. This article describes how the decision to blow the whistle rests on the tradeoff that people make between fairness and loyalty. When fairness increases in value, whistleblowing is more likely whereas when loyalty increases in value, whistleblowing is less likely. Furthermore, we describe systematic personal, situational, and cultural factors stemming from the fairness-loyalty tradeoff that drive whistleblowing. Finally, we describe how minimizing this tradeoff and prioritizing constructive dissent can encourage whistleblowing and strengthen collectives.

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Whistleblowing, reporting another person's unethical behavior to a third party, represents an ethicist's version of optical illusion. From one perspective, whistleblowing is the ultimate act of justice, serving to right a wrong. From another perspective, whistleblowing is the ultimate breach, a grave betrayal. Consistent with the first perspective, in 2002, *Time Magazine* named 'The Whistleblower' its *Person of The Year* and featured on its cover three prominent whistle-blowers: Sherron Watkins of Enron, Coleen Rowley of the FBI and Cynthia Cooper of WorldCom. More recently, prominent liberals (such as filmmaker, Michael Moore) and conservatives (such as commentator, Glenn Beck) called National Security Agency whistleblower, Edward Snowden, a hero. Consistent with the second perspective, whistle-blowers face considerable backlash and retaliation. According to one analysis of all cases of corporate fraud from 1996 to 2004, in '82% of cases with named employees, the individual alleges that they were

fired, quit under duress, or had significantly altered responsibilities as a result of bringing the fraud to light' ([1], p. 2240). Likewise, a United Kingdom report analyzing whistleblowing cases from 1999 to 2009 found that, over this time period, the number of employees claiming to be mistreated, fired, or bullied for exposing workplace corruption increased tenfold [2]. These dismal consequences are consistent with popular rhetoric surrounding the whistleblower, a term often synonymous with derogatory labels such as *rat*, *snitch* [3], and *tattletale* [4,5].

Experimental data reveal the double-edged nature of whistleblowing. Experiments have compared settings where it is possible or not possible for individuals to voice information about another person's unethical behavior (similar to whistleblowing), looking in particular at whether individuals then choose to exchange goods in a competitive, self-interested fashion or in a cooperative, prosocial fashion. Giving individuals an opportunity to blow the whistle increases cooperation and decreases selfishness within collectives [6*,7]. These results point to the positive consequences of whistleblowing for groups. By contrast, other studies that have examined people's responses to those who speak out against morally questionable behavior (i.e. whistleblowers); dissenting individuals are often denigrated by the ones who themselves engaged in morally questionable behavior [8–11]. These studies again show that whistleblowing can be to the detriment of group harmony.

The whistleblower's dilemma: the fairness-loyalty tradeoff

The ethical ambiguity surrounding whistleblowing, and the negative outcomes that whistleblowers often face raises the question: What leads people to blow the whistle in the first place? Research we conducted sheds some initial light on this question by suggesting that whistleblowing represents a tradeoff between two fundamental moral values — fairness and loyalty [12*]. Relying on moral foundations theory [13,14], which identifies five basic moral values — harm, fairness, loyalty, authority, and purity — that people take into account when deciding whether a behavior is right or wrong, we proposed that fairness and loyalty are brought into direct conflict by situations that allow for the possibility of whistleblowing. In five studies, we tested the hypothesis that when norms for fairness dominate norms for loyalty, whistleblowing will increase, whereas when norms for loyalty dominate norms for fairness, whistleblowing will decrease.

In a first study, we measured people's endorsement of the importance of fairness and loyalty, computing a

fairness-versus-loyalty score measuring how much people's valuation of one versus the other. We also asked people to indicate how likely they would be to blow the whistle on varying targets (e.g. stranger, acquaintance, close friend, family member) for crimes of varying severity, from stealing \$1 out of a restaurant tip jar to fatally stabbing a convenience store owner. Across targets and crimes, people who endorsed fairness more than loyalty reported greater willingness to blow the whistle. Two follow-up studies indicated that experimentally inducing people to endorse fairness or loyalty by instructing them to write essays in support of one value over the other similarly affected willingness to blow the whistle in these scenarios. People induced to endorse fairness reported greater willingness to blow the whistle than people induced to endorse loyalty. Next, when asking people to write about real-life incidents in which they witnessed an unethical incident and either (a) *did* or (b) *did not* blow the whistle, we found that people who reported blowing the whistle reported their decision was driven by fairness more than loyalty, and furthermore, these people used more fairness-related terms than loyalty-related terms to describe the incident. Meanwhile, people who reported *not* blowing the whistle reported being driven by loyalty more than fairness and used more loyalty-related terms than fairness-related terms. A final study again induced people to endorse fairness or loyalty through an essay manipulation and afforded people the opportunity to report a co-worker in an online marketplace for shirking work responsibilities. People primed to endorse fairness blew the whistle on the co-worker more than people primed to endorse loyalty.

The tradeoff that people make between fairness and loyalty represents a fundamental factor driving the

decision of whether or not to blow the whistle. Nevertheless, other factors, both internal and external to the potential whistleblower, have been documented as well. Notably, many of these factors, discussed below, are related to the tradeoff between fairness and loyalty (see Figure 1).

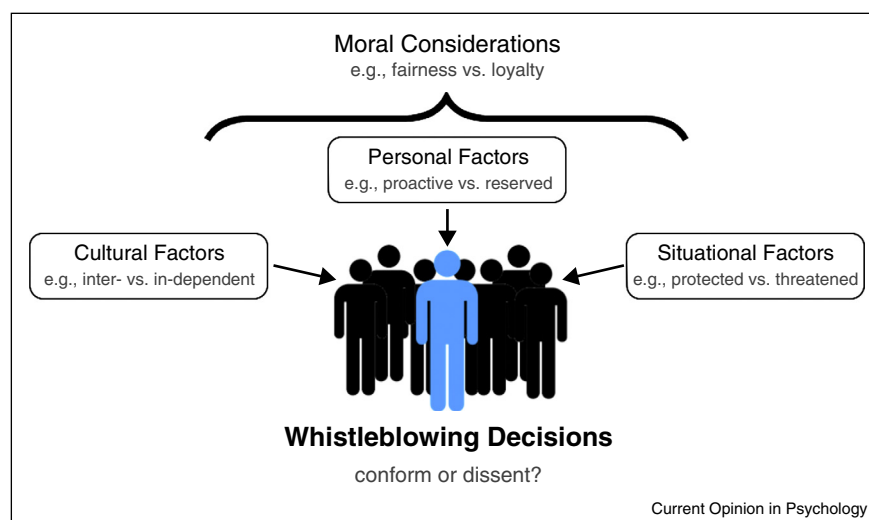
Personal factors that predict whistleblowing

Related to the idea that norms for loyalty inhibit whistleblowing, studies investigating the personal factors that positively predict whistleblowing reveal the importance of overcoming conformity to the collective. The few employee demographic factors that correlate with higher rates of whistleblowing include increased tenure of employment at the company, increased pay, increased education, and being male [15,16]. These correlational patterns suggest that people with greater occupational power are more likely to dissent (perhaps because they face reduced threat of punishment for violating group cohesion). Moreover, people who feel an internal locus of control, thereby taking on more responsibility for their behaviors, are more likely to report positive intentions to blow the whistle [17]. Among personality traits, people who are high in extraversion are more likely to blow the whistle [18]. Finally, people with a proactive personality, who seek to influence and control their environment, are less susceptible to situational influences and appear more likely to engage in whistleblowing [18–20]. Together, these findings suggest that whistleblowers are those who possess personality traits that support non-conformity.

Situational factors that predict whistleblowing

In addition to person-based factors, situational factors that facilitate disobedience to authority, both practically and

Figure 1



Factors influencing the decision of whether or not to blow the whistle, which are ultimately related to the trade-off between fairness and loyalty.

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