The Conceptualisation and Measurement of Whistle-Blowing: A New Way Forward

Marissa S. Edwards*
UQ Business School
The University of Queensland
Brisbane QLD Australia
E-mail: m.edwards@business.uq.edu.au
Abstract

In this paper I argue that the time has come for a fundamental shift in how we view whistle-blowing and how researchers investigate this behaviour in empirical studies. Specifically, I contend that rather than viewing whistle-blowing as a singular event, we should conceptualise whistle-blowing as a phenomenon shaped by context and sensemaking processes. In turn, I suggest that traditional methods such as experiments and surveys are not sufficient to measure this behaviour. Instead, I propose that researchers use semi-structured interviews and diary methods to gain a deeper, more comprehensive understanding of the psychological processes underlying decision-making, and to examine the temporal sequences of events and employees’ reactions over time.

Keywords: survey, qualitative methods, ethical decision-making, business ethics
THE CONCEPTUALISATION AND MEASUREMENT OF WHISTLE-BLOWING:
A NEW WAY FORWARD

The topic of whistle-blowing has attracted interest from organisational researchers since the early 1980s. In recent times, numerous scandals in both corporate and non-corporate settings (e.g., Enron, WorldCom, Abu Grahib) have demonstrated that whistle-blowing is a prevalent and important phenomenon in the contemporary workplace, yet empirical research in this field has virtually stopped. In 2005, two of the most eminent researchers in the whistle-blowing field, Marcia Miceli and Janet Near, observed that no empirical studies had been published in top journals since they reviewed the field almost a decade earlier. They expressed serious concerns about the lack of research in this area, arguing that research is needed now more than at any time in history.

Building on Miceli and Near’s argument, I argue here that traditional approaches to studying whistle-blowing, particularly the experimental method, have serious flaws that compromise the validity and generalisability of the obtained results. While I agree that these methods have helped to increase our knowledge of when people will speak up, they have provided little insight into how people make the decision to report wrongdoing in organisational settings. As a result, we have a limited understanding of the psychological processes (e.g., appraisals and emotions) underlying employees’ responses to wrongdoing in the workplace, and how complex variables such as organisational climate and social relationships influence people’s decision-making over time.

In this paper, I argue that the time has come for a fundamental reappraisal of how we view the behaviour of whistle-blowing and how we investigate this phenomenon in empirical studies. Specifically, I argue that rather than focusing solely on the individual and contextual predictors of the decision to speak up, we must turn our attention to examining the nature of the decision-making process. I argue further that we must recognise that, in the majority of cases, the ‘decision’ to whistle-blow is not a singular event but rather a series of choices and trade-offs made over an extended period. In recognizing the importance of context and employee sensemaking in shaping whistle-blowing, I suggest that we must consider whether our current methodological approaches are sufficient to capture the essence of this complex phenomenon,
and argue that the increased use of qualitative methods can provide us with a more complete understanding of when, why and how people will engage in whistle-blowing.

I begin with a review of some of the major studies into whistle-blowing conducted over the last 20 years, and discuss how whistle-blowing has been defined and measured in previous investigations. Next, I present evidence for why we should conceptualise whistle-blowing as a phenomenon shaped by context and sensemaking processes, and consider here some of the recent qualitative work in the field of silence and voice. Following this, I discuss how two methods in particular—semi-structured interviews and the diary method—can help to overcome some of the challenges associated with traditional experimental and survey studies and represent useful methodological approaches for researchers working in this area. I conclude with a discussion of some of the major challenges and opportunities for future research in the field.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

Janet Near and Marcia Miceli (1985: 4) were among the first researchers to provide a specific definition of the term ‘whistle-blowing’, and described the behaviour as, “the disclosure by organisation members (former or current) of illegal, immoral or illegitimate practices under the control of their employers, to persons or organisations that may be able to effect action”. Their definition is quite precise such that they specify that an employee (actor) must speak up about specific types of behaviour (content) to individuals or organisations that are able to instigate effective change (targets). Over 20 years of empirical research into whistle-blowing has revealed that multiple variables influence employees’ decisions to speak up about wrongdoing in the workplace, such as the nature of the wrongdoing in question, organizational ethical climate, and national culture, as well as characteristics of the whistle-blower themselves (for a review, see Miceli & Near, 2005). In recent times, legislation has been implemented in several countries to protect whistle-blowers from retaliation and encourage employees to engage in greater reporting behaviour (see Hersh, 2002 for a review), although the effectiveness of these legal measures in offering genuine protection is a matter of debate.
While it is clear that the research to date has offered us valuable insights into the conditions under which employees are likely to blow the whistle, I contend that these studies present an incomplete picture of what is a very complex and multifaceted phenomenon. Here, I discuss how two methods—namely, experiments and surveys—have been used to study whistle-blowing, and discuss the limitations of both.

**Experimental research**

In one of the first empirical studies to examine when people will report wrongdoing, Miceli, Dozier and Near (1991) conducted a controlled field experiment to investigate how individual and contextual factors influenced students’ decisions to report cheating behaviour. In the study, 295 students observed a research assistant appear to manipulate experimental data and were provided with the chance to report it to the relevant authority. The results revealed that female students were less likely than male students to engage in reporting behaviour, and that people were more likely to speak up in the presence of more, rather than less, observers. Interestingly, lower levels of moral judgment predicted whistle-blowing behaviour. Over a decade later, Miceli and Near (2005: 127) argued against using such a method to study whistle-blowing, stating that, “Ethical considerations obviously prevent laboratory researchers from creating the kinds of retaliatory conditions that would realistically be faced by actual would-be whistle-blowers…[and] college students likely cannot judge wrongdoing and weigh the kinds of career considerations that are crucial to understanding whistle-blowing decisions”.

Recent qualitative work in the area of employee silence provides support for the idea that employees’ responses to wrongdoing involve an evaluation of the potential consequences of speaking up, an influence on speaking up behaviour that is not easily captured in laboratory experiments. Milliken, Morrison and Hewlin (2003), for example, conducted semi-structured interviews with 40 employees working across a range of industries. Over half of all interviewees reported a least one experience when they felt unable to speak up to a supervisor about a work-related issue, such as problems with organisational processes or performance, and concerns about employee misconduct. The most frequent reasons for remaining silent were fear of being labelled or viewed negatively, fear of damaging a relationship, and general feelings of hopelessness and futility. Other reasons included concerns about not
wanting to get someone into trouble, and fear of retaliation or punishment. Although it would be possible to develop scenarios or field experiments designed to create and measure these perceptions, I argue that it is very difficult to re-create the dynamics of the organisational context to a degree such that the true nature of the situation is sufficiently replicated.

Surveys

Perhaps partially in recognition of the weaknesses of the experimental method, the majority of recent studies into whistle-blowing have used anonymous surveys to gather data from employees who have observed wrongdoing in the workplace, and have added greatly to our knowledge of the factors that influence employees’ behaviour, including organisational culture, climate, reward systems, and individual-level variables (e.g., Keenan, 1999; 2002). Although I acknowledge that surveys have some advantages over experiments or scenario studies, retrospective surveys are obviously limited to the variables that can be measured in a particular study, and the decay of memories and re-appraisal of events can affect the accuracy of the obtained results. Furthermore, surveys are only representative of those whistle-blowers who are willing to disclose their experiences using this method. Other weaknesses of surveys into whistle-blowing include the social desirability bias—which may be particularly strong when self-reporting responses to unethical behaviour—and post-decision rationalisations (Hersh, 2002).

The practical relevance of some of the studies, furthermore, must be questioned. For example, MacNab and Worthley (2008) examined self-efficacy as a predictor of internal whistle-blowing in a cross-national sample of over 900 employees, and found that higher levels of employee self-efficacy were related to an increased propensity to use internal channels to whistle-blow. Despite its theoretical implications, it is hard to see how the results of this study contribute to our practical understanding of whistle-blowing. Indeed, a review of the literature reveals that while researchers have speculated upon the potential antecedents and consequences of reporting behaviour in a multitude of theoretical papers (e.g., Near & Miceli, 1995; Near & Miceli, 1996), fewer researchers have examined the nature of whistle-blowing itself: what it means to engage in whistle-blowing, how the speaking up process changes over time; and how shifting perceptions and interpretations of organisational phenomena influence the
decision-making process. Thus it appears that while researchers are quite content to develop theoretical models to explain this behaviour and examine the effect of a variety of factors using survey methods, they are less willing to investigate this behaviour as it unfolds in practice. Although I acknowledge that this can be difficult to do, frequently because of ethical constraints and employees’ reluctance to participate in such studies, I argue that these methodological challenges should not deter researchers from conducting empirical work of this kind.

Partly as result of our reluctance to use alternative methods to study employees’ speaking up behaviour, rather than obtaining rich and detailed data about the process of whistle-blowing, we are at a point where we have data from dozens of whistle-blowing studies that have produced an incomplete and messy picture of who will engage in whistle-blowing and the circumstances in which they will do so. Many survey studies have restricted their sample to a very specific context (e.g., healthcare, law enforcement), and subsequent researchers have failed to examine how these predictors generalise to the wider population. It is worth pointing out, furthermore, that individual and contextual variables generally explain only a small amount of variance in whistle-blowing (see Miceli & Near, 2005).

For the past two decades, researchers have measured whistle-blowing as a single event, and assumed that this can be predicted by a combination of factors. In reality, I suggest that whistle-blowing involves an ongoing decision-making process that is shaped by social interactions, organisational events, and other contextual influences, all of which interact to affect how employees ultimately respond to the wrongdoing. Furthermore, I contend that deciding to report wrongdoing is a qualitatively different experience from other types of decision-making in the workplace, involving cognitive dissonance, ethical and moral conflict, and often considerable personal risk. In this respect, Jensen (1987) has observed that whistle-blowers are confronted with key “tension points” and questions when deciding to speak up, including, “How ethical is it to assume the role of a judge?”, “How fully am I living up to my moral obligations to my organization and my colleagues?” In the next section of this paper, I review the results of recent theoretical and empirical work in the areas of whistle-blowing and silence in organisational
settings, and argue that we need to change the way that we view whistle-blowing if we are to gain a deeper, more accurate understanding of this behaviour.

**A NEW CONCEPTUALISATION OF WHISTLE-BLOWING**

Recently, Blenkinsopp and Edwards (in press) have argued that conceptualising whistle-blowing as the single outcome of a rational decision-making process is a flawed approach to studying this phenomenon. Specifically, the authors argued that, “[Whistle-blowing] cannot be understood as an isolated act of sensemaking but instead must be placed in the context of an ongoing process of sensemaking in which the current event is understood by the individual against the backdrop of many preceding events”. They argued further that “the ‘decision’ about how to respond to wrongdoing is actually best understood as a series of decisions” and emphasized the highly emotional nature of making the choice to speak up about wrongdoing in organisational settings. I adopt this position in the current paper, and review the results of recent studies that support this conclusion.

This view of whistle-blowing as an unfolding process involving a series of choices is consistent with the findings of Blatt, Christianson, Sutcliffe and Rosenthal (2006), who conducted a qualitative study to explore how medical residents responded to lapses in the reliability of patient care. These included incidents when: (1) residents were not aware that a lapse was occurring (i.e., the medical problem was only apparent in retrospect or when certain tests were completed); (2) incidents when residents were aware that a lapse was currently unfolding but there was nothing that they could do (e.g., when a critical care patient crashed after routine surgery, with no apparent reason for the adverse outcome); and (3) incidents where residents were aware that a lapse was occurring and were able to intervene before the situation reached crisis point. The semi-structured interviews with doctors revealed that, during these serious incidents, they were continuously faced with the opportunity to speak up about their concerns, and made each decision based on the information available to them at the time, as well as the contextual dynamics of the situation. Indeed, the authors noted that, “Voicing or remaining silent during critical moments are part of a sensemaking process that is shaped by identity as well as social and relational dynamics” (p. 908). They observed that residents’ sensemaking about voice seemed to be
influenced by two major considerations: their own degree of confidence in the issue, and an assessment of how the target to whom they planned to voice would likely respond to their concerns. Thus the decision-making process appears to be shaped by employees’ own responses in real-time as well as their anticipated outcomes about various courses of action. This finding is in line with the findings of Milliken et al. (2003) and Weick’s (2005) argument that sensemaking involves considering the possible consequences of different responses to a given situation, and engaging in a process of mentally imagining and ‘trying out’ potential behaviours.

Morrison and Milliken (2000) also suggested that employees’ shared perceptions about the safety and utility of speaking up about organisational problems or concerns play a key role in how determining how employees respond when confronted with the choice to remain silent or voice. Specifically, they proposed that a process of collective sensemaking amongst employees gives rise to what they termed a ‘climate of silence’ in organisations, a phenomenon characterized by the beliefs that speaking up is dangerous and not worth the risk. Organisational events, managerial practices, cues and perceptions all influence this sensemaking process. Implicit in this argument is the notion that silence and speaking up—including the behavioural response of whistle-blowing—are non-static phenomena that are influenced by employees’ beliefs about whether it is safe to express one’s concerns or not, and that these behaviours are not single decision-points in time. Milliken et al. (2003), furthermore, found that many employees learnt to withhold their ideas, opinions and concerns by observing the responses of management to other employees’ attempts to speak up and from their own experiences.

To this point in this paper, I have reviewed selected studies into whistle-blowing and argued that surveys and experimental methods fail to measure the construct of whistle-blowing accurately. Rather than viewing the reporting of wrongdoing as an extended series of decisions, unfolding over time in a dynamic organisational context, previous researchers have conceptualised “whistle-blowing” as a discrete behaviour that can be replicated and measured in a highly artificial environment. Furthermore, the surveys and experimental studies conducted to date have been unable to take into account the complexity of the variables involved, particularly how social and relational considerations can shape how employees
choose to respond, and how employees’ concerns about how voice might be received (i.e., the anticipated consequences of voice) can encourage or stifle whistle-blowing.

With these issues in mind, in the following part of the paper I propose that we must change our approach to how we study whistle-blowing and adopt qualitative methods in order to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of how people make the decision to report wrongdoing in organisations. Although I agree that gathering information about the effect of contextual variables is important, I contend that the time has come to gain a deeper understanding of the psychological processes underlying decision-making, particularly the appraisals and emotions involved. I now discuss two methods that will likely help to facilitate such research.

**PROPOSED METHODS FOR STUDYING WHISTLE-BLOWING**

In line with my central argument, I suggest as follows that semi-structured interviews and diary studies are useful tools with which to study whistle-blowing and discuss the advantages and disadvantages of these methods in turn. I have selected these methods because I believe that they offer advantages over other qualitative approaches. For example, given that discussing one’s whistle-blowing experience can be embarrassing and potentially very distressing, it is unlikely that people would be unwilling to share their experiences in a focus group setting. In contrast, discussing one’s experience with a sympathetic and skilled interviewer can help to elicit rich and detailed information about the nature of decision-making, underlying motives and the psychological processes influences on behaviour (Edwards & Gardner, 2007), and diary studies allow for deep reflection and anonymity in disclosing one’s experience.

**The semi-structured interview**

According to Kvale (1996), the research interview offers considerable advantages when compared with quantitative data collection methods. Specifically, the interview allows the researcher to gather multiple, rich perspectives about a phenomenon, which may result in new insights and understandings; to ask detailed questions of participants in order to explore topics in depth; and to explain or clarify questions for participants, increasing the likelihood of useful responses. Despite these
advantages, researchers studying silence and whistle-blowing have generally failed to capitalise upon the utility of the interview method as a means of understanding how people make the decision to speak up about wrongdoing. Although Rothschild and Miethe (1999) conducted an extensive interview study (N = 210) to accompany their nationwide survey, they did not consider explicitly how whistle-blowers made the decision to speak up, or how their perceptions and appraisals of the situation changed over time.

I suggest that the use of semi-structured interviews can allow researchers to overcome some of the difficulties inherent in using quantitative methods and represent a useful methodological tool for future researchers. First and foremost, researchers can question participants explicitly with respect to how their appraisals of the situation changed over time, and how contextual influences such as organisational events and social relationships with colleagues influenced their decisions to engage in whistle-blowing. The interviewer can identify specific incidents that can be explored in greater depth, and employees’ reactions at specific time points can be discussed in detail to identify their key antecedents and consequences. Importantly, interviews allow researchers to determine the accuracy of the whistle-blower’s allegation of wrongdoing. Surveys that ask participants, “Was the allegation substantiated by a formal investigation?” can present an inaccurate picture of the situation, such that some employees whose complaints are dismissed by their organisations may have had a genuine grievance.

The interview method also has some disadvantages, including the fact that the accuracy of the data can be affected by retrospective biases and forgetting. Here, researchers could use specific techniques such as the Day Reconstruction Method (DRM; Kahneman et al., 2004) to facilitate more precise recall of key events, perceptions and behaviours. Based upon the experience sampling method, the DRM involves eliciting the context of a particular day by asking participants to think of their day as a series of continuous episodes or scenes in a film. Participants are asked to recall the context of each episode or event in particular detail in a manner designed to elicit specific and recent memories, which consequently reduces errors and biases of recall (Kahneman et al., 2004). Despite this and other limitations (e.g., self-selection bias), I suggest that the increased use of interviews will facilitate a deeper understanding of the whistle-blowing process than traditional methods.
The diary method

Although the diary method has been used successfully to study various aspects of organisational behaviour (e.g., leadership, responses to affective events), to date it has not been utilised to examine the experiences of whistle-blowers. Breakwell (2006) notes in her comprehensive analysis of the diary method that diary studies can use accounts that people have generated spontaneously, or narratives that have been elicited specifically for the purposes of the study. Since wrongdoing in organisations is generally hidden from researchers unless it becomes public knowledge, it seems likely that researchers will need to approach whistle-blowers to gain access to those who have kept diaries of their experiences, which means that the entries will likely vary considerably in content, length, etc. Given the advantages of the diary method, however, I argue that it could help to enrich our understanding of the whistle-blowing process and provide us with a deeper understanding of the phenomenon than other qualitative methods.

For example, diary entries often contain personally sensitive information, including facts that an individual may feel uncomfortable revealing in an interview, and provide a cost-effective way of gaining (in some cases) access to a large volume of detailed information. Additionally, entries are often recorded in real time or within a few days of key events, reducing problems of bias that can occur due to retrospective recall. Perhaps the most significant advantage of the diary method is that it allows researchers to examine the sequence of events over time, which is of significant value to researchers studying whistle-blowing. As Breakwell (2006) observes, this can be particularly useful when researchers are interested in the psychological processes underlying behaviour.

Some of the disadvantages of the diary method include the self-selection of content and thus the researcher’s lack of control over the obtained data. It could be difficult, furthermore, convincing some whistle-blowers to allow the researcher—a complete stranger—access to their private entries. Nevertheless, the diary method offers considerable advantages over other methods of data collection, specifically because it provides insights into perceptions, emotions and observations generated over time, and could represent a useful tool for future studies.
CONCLUSION AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In this paper I have suggested that the time has come for us to re-evaluate how we view whistle-blowing and to begin to use different methodological approaches to investigate this behaviour. The fact remains that although instances of wrongdoing are common in organizations today, we know little about how people make the decision to engage in whistle-blowing and their reasons for doing so, and the models proposed to date explain only a small amount of variance in whistle-blowing behaviour.

Specifically, I have suggested that rather than conceptualising and measuring whistle-blowing as a discrete outcome, we should consider the speaking up process as a series of decisions made over a period of time and shaped by the organisational context. I have argued that experimental methods and surveys are not sufficient to capture this complex phenomenon, which is reflected in the lack of empirical research conducted into whistle-blowing over the last decade. Although the two qualitative methods outlined in this paper have their own challenges and limitations, they offer significant advantages (e.g., reduced recall bias) over surveys and allow researchers to gather rich and detailed information within a real (versus artificially reconstructed) organisational setting.

Clearly, the challenge ahead for researchers is to adopt qualitative methods to study whistle-blowing, including those identified in this paper. I suggest also that there may be ways of modifying traditional methods to investigate whistle-blowing more rigorously, although this could be quite challenging. For example, surveys measuring whistle-blowers appraisals and emotional responses to wrongdoing could ask participants to recall their responses at specific time points, such as immediately following an episode of wrongdoing, and immediately prior to taking action to gain some insight into how their responses may change over time. Additionally, Greenberg and Tomlinson (2004) proposed the idea of a ‘situated experiment’, an experimental approach that involves taking advantage of natural variations in an independent variable to examine complex phenomena in the field. Overall though, I suggest that qualitative methods offer the most promising approach to studying whistle-blowing, and hope that the conceptualisation and methods proposed in this paper help to inspire such research in this field.
References


Edwards, MS & Gardner, J (2007, August) The role of emotions in employees’ decisions to report or remain silent about serious wrongdoing. In J. Greenberg & MS Edwards (Chairs) *The role of emotion in individual decision-making*. Symposium presented at the annual meeting of the Academy of Management, Philadelphia, PA.


