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Work and Occupations 1999; 26; 107

DOI: 10.1177/0730888499026001006

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Based on nationwide data the authors collected on whistle-blowers and on silent observers, this article reports, that (a) whistle-blowing is more frequent in the public sector than in the private; (b) there are almost no sociodemographic characteristics that distinguish the whistle-blower from the silent observer; (c) whistle-blowers suffer severe retaliation from management, especially when their information proves significant; and (d) no special method of disclosure or personal characteristics can insulate the whistle-blower from such retaliation. Furthermore, the authors found that retaliation was most certain and severe when the reported misconduct was systematic and significant—when the practices exposed were part of the regular, profit accumulation process of the organization. The authors conclude from their interviews that the journey to exoneration that follows a whistle-blower's disclosures often alters the whistle-blower's identity, leading them to see themselves as people who resist hurtful or criminal conduct in the workplace.

Whistle-Blower Disclosures and Management Retaliation

The Battle to Control Information About Organization Corruption

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Ever since Karl Marx's original analysis of the relationship between an economy and a society and how that relationship is defined by class struggle, social scientists from many disciplines have attempted to illuminate the class struggles that shape the contemporary workplace. Histories of work in the 20th century have described how a never-finer division of labor gave rise to a deskilling of the labor force. This finer division served to accumulate profit more than it did industrial efficiency (Braverman, 1974). Although contemporary scholars and researchers have recognized the workplace as a site of contention—often there is intense contestation between capital and

Authors' Note: *The authors gratefully acknowledge the Aspen Institute for its support in the collection of this data set on whistle-blowers in the United States.*



WORK AND OCCUPATIONS, Vol. 26 No. 1, February 1999 107-128
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labor—their focus tends to emphasize organized, collective expressions of this struggle, such as union-led labor resistance (Buroway, 1979; Cornfield, 1989; Edwards, 1979; Kimeldorf, 1988). However, recently scholars have begun to recognize less formal, more individual forms of worker resistance (Brower & Abolafia, 1995; Hodson, 1995; Jermier, 1988).

At the same time, commentators on our society describe the shift taking place from an economy based on manufacturing to an economy based on information processing. Most citizens of our society are aware of some of the dimensions of this shift and its implications (e.g., the downsizing of certain occupational categories and the burgeoning of others). It is recognized by many that for this shift in the nature of our economy to be successful, educational and skill levels of the work force have to rise.

It is our contention that the information-intensive and information-driven economy—given the higher education and skill levels that it requires—has a significant consequence that has yet to be noticed by the experts or the public: That unanticipated outcome is the increasingly widespread use of “whistle-blowing.” We argue that this type of disclosure represents a new and fast-growing form of worker resistance, albeit individual, that can be enormously effective at inhibiting the accumulation of profit by corporations. For example, when leaked information by a whistle-blower ended profit being made off of young people in the U.S. tobacco industry. Similar to this, in the public sector leaked information by a whistle-blower revealed the routine dynamics at work at National Aeronautics Space Administration (NASA) that underlaid the Challenger disaster. Although the business press provides frequent case examples of the power of new ideas and information in the process of production, and in the production of profits, what has been largely neglected by social scientists is workers’ use of previously secret information to resist and oppose managerial directives.

Although we are not the only social scientists to write about whistle-blowers from a sympathetic perspective (see Glazer & Glazer, 1989), nor the only ones to see in their exposés of bureaucratic corruption the potential for workers to oppose bureaucratic or managerial authority (Weinstein, 1979; Perrucci, Anderson, Schendel, & Tractman, 1989), we present comprehensive, nationwide empirical data in this article that will support this perspective.

SAMPLE DESCRIPTION

Various approaches to the study of whistle-blowers have been taken. Previous researchers have identified a small number of high-profile whistle-

blowers from media sources and performed case studies (see Glazer and Glazer 1989). Others (see Jos, Tompkins, & Hays, 1989) have derived samples of whistle-blowers from support agencies (e.g., Government Accountability Project), and still others have drawn a sample from a single occupation (Miceli & Near, 1990). Unfortunately, however, these strategies are limited because they tend to yield atypical samples (e.g., high-profile cases) and are unable to compare different types of whistle-blowers (e.g., internal versus external whistle-blowers) with other types of employees (e.g., non-observers and silent observers).

For our purposes, we needed a unique data set. We needed to survey whistle-blowers from all walks of life and from every region of the country to yield the validity we sought. We needed to interview them in considerable depth so that we would be able to draw richly grained conclusions about the meaning of this phenomenon. Our choice of selecting multiple samples from a diverse range of employees across a variety of work settings was based on the nature of our research questions and the practical and economic constraints on drawing a large random sample of all U.S. workers.

Survey data were collected and analyzed from several sources. First, we targeted and surveyed employees in specific professions or organizations. This included workers in a petro-chemical plant ($n = 66$), employees in a high-security defense related manufacturing company ($n = 148$), employees at a large bookstore ($n = 27$), personnel in an administrative unit within a university ($n = 18$), employees in nonprofit organizations in two states ($n = 108$), and nurses in the state of Nevada ($n = 116$). Second, we conducted intensive telephone interviews with whistle-blowers and silent observers from every kind of workplace across the country ($n = 292$). Our complete sample involves 761 individuals in one of four groups: (a) nonobservers of misconduct ($n = 149$), (b) observers of misconduct who remained silent to officials within and outside their organization ($n = 218$ silent observers), (c) individuals who reported observed misconduct to officials within their employing organization ($n = 147$ internal whistle-blowers), and (d) individuals who reported misconduct to authorities outside their organization ($n = 247$ external whistle-blowers). Third, we reanalyzed data from the U.S. Merit System Protection Board (1993) on more than 13,000 federal employees.

Because whistle-blowing is a relatively rare event, it would be prohibitively expensive to gather enough cases to study it using a random sample of the full U.S. labor force. Thus, we constructed a conglomerated sample from a diverse range of employees and organizations, as described above. A complete description of the sample and our answers to the five major research questions that organize this study follow.

PARADE MAGAZINE SAMPLE

The primary data source for our interviewed sample of whistle-blowers involved persons who asked for additional information about an article that appeared in *Parade Magazine* in August of 1991. The one-page article was about whistle-blowing and Integrity International—a support group for whistle-blowers. The founder of that support group provided us access to almost 1,000 persons who contacted him about their whistle-blowing experiences. The fact that this magazine is distributed every week in Sunday newspapers across the country made it extremely valuable for gaining a cross-section of whistle-blowers in various work settings. We can think of no other way to efficiently draw a national sample of self-defined whistle-blowers.

Of the phone numbers or postal addresses provided, we discovered that about one third were either outdated or disconnected. For 300 of the potential whistle-blowers who provided a postal address, we sent a self-addressed mail survey for reporting their experiences and attitudes. Of these 300 mail surveys, 83 were completed and returned. An additional 210 individuals were interviewed by telephone. The average telephone interview lasted about 90 minutes (1.5 hours).

Our in-depth telephone interviews and surveys led us to several conclusions about the appropriate methods for studying whistle-blowers. First, although many whistle-blowers had initial reservations about talking with us, this hesitancy was overcome once they realized that we were not company spies. By the end of the interviews, most expressed gratitude for this opportunity to speak openly and at length about their experience. Second, we discovered that well-designed and anonymous mail surveys could be used to study whistle-blowers. Compared to telephone interviews, mail surveys are more cost efficient and also provide anonymity. Third, we planned to study silent observers by getting the names of other employees from the whistle-blowers themselves. However, we found that whistle-blowers were generally unwilling to provide the names of others and, when they did, these other persons were typically their friends. As a result, we conducted industry-based surveys to compile a sample of silent observers.

INDUSTRY-BASED SURVEYS

For purposes of studying the correlates of whistle-blowing and identifying demographic, attitudinal, and organizational differences between whistle-blowers and nonwhistle-blowers, it is important to examine employees in similar work environments. Accordingly, we designed a mail survey that was administered to employees in several work settings.

Surveys were given to several specific groups of employees. First, 400 self-administered surveys and return envelopes were provided at the entrance and exits of a high-security manufacturing firm. A box specifying "Employee survey: Please take one" was placed at these locations. Usable surveys were returned to us directly from 148 of these employees. Second, using a similar research protocol, 66 of a possible 200 surveys were completed and returned from employees at a large, petro-chemical plant. Third, two thirds of the staff personnel (18 of 30 people) in an administrative unit within a major university completed and returned the survey instrument. Fourth, over two thirds of the workers at a large bookstore (27 of 40 people) completed the same survey. Fifth, a total of 600 mail surveys were distributed to a sample of registered nurses in Nevada and 116 usable surveys were returned.

Both the nurse sample and our interviews with whistle-blowers yielded some employees in non-profit organizations; however, additional procedures were needed to achieve a comprehensive sample of nonprofit employees. In particular, nonprofit agencies in North Carolina and in Nevada were contacted and asked to participate in our study. Participating organizations included the following: The United Way, American Cancer Society, YMCA, United Cerebral Palsy, Boys and Girls Club, Community Counseling Services, Big Brother/Big Sister, Family Religious Services, and Catholic Community Services. Across these organizations, 280 surveys were distributed. A total of 108 surveys were returned.

Compared to general labor force statistics in the U.S. (see Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1994), our industry-based sample tends to underestimate the prevalence of male workers, nonsupervisors, and young employees. There are several possible reasons why nonresponse rates might affect our yielded sample. Specifically, we expect survey respondents across all samples to be individuals with either greater personal interest or more direct experience with whistle-blowing than nonrespondents. Under these conditions, the sampling of more concerned employees would inflate overall estimates of the prevalence of observing misconduct and whistle-blowing. However, this potential sampling bias did not have any impact on our ability to accurately characterize whistle-blowers nor to compare them to other types of employees. We used a national telephone survey conducted for another project (see part 3 below) to provide us with additional data that is better able to yield accurate estimates of national rates of observing misconduct and whistle-blowing.

EXTENT OF WHISTLE-BLOWING

For purposes of estimating the true extent of whistle-blowing in the United States, the best sampling procedure involves drawing a random sample of employees across the country. There is no substitute for this approach for population estimations, but it is very expensive selecting such a sample (given the number of contacts necessary to find employed adults who have observed misconduct and reported it). Fortunately, we were able to accomplish the goal of estimating the national rate of whistle-blowing by "piggy-backing" several questions on a national telephone survey of 1004 adults' experiences with the legal system (for details of the sample see Miethe, 1995). Through the assistance of the Center of Survey Research at Virginia Tech, we also incorporated several questions about whistle-blowing in a statewide survey of 326 adult employees in Virginia.

The specific questions about whistle-blowing in the national survey asked whether the respondent had ever observed illegal or unethical activity at work, and, if so, whether they reported it. Our national survey responses revealed that 37% of the employed adults had observed some type of misconduct at work and that 62% of those reported it. The vast majority of whistle-blowers (84%) reported the misconduct to someone within the company rather than to external authorities. By comparison, the statewide survey in Virginia indicated considerably lower rates of observing misconduct (17%) and higher levels of remaining silent (52% were silent observers) and external whistle-blowing (25% of whistle-blowers reported misconduct to persons outside the company). When combined with the results from other large-scale surveys of federal and private employees (for review see Miethe & Rothschild, 1994), our best overall estimate is that about one third of U.S. employees have observed conduct they consider to be unethical or illegal in their workplace. Over one half of these observers remain silent, whereas less than one fourth of whistle-blowers are external informants.

These findings on the extent of whistle-blowing have significant implications. First, the fact that a sizeable minority of workers observe organizational misconduct suggests that workers themselves have enormous potential to detect and control waste, fraud, and crime in the American workplace. Given the low public visibility and high technical complexity of much illegal activity in the workplace, the successful monitoring and prevention of organizational abuse rests in large part on the willingness of employees to become whistle-blowers. Second, two groups of employees (i.e., silent observers and external whistle-blowers) are especially important to study so we can gather data regarding both the resistance to and/or the inhibition of organizational misconduct. Specifically, systematic comparisons of external whistle-

blowers with other types of employees enable us to identify the particular demographic, attitudinal, and organizational factors that enhance or inhibit the full disclosure of misconduct. Comparisons between silent observers and whistle-blowers provide us with a means of identifying the major individual and organizational impediments to whistle-blowing. The relatively low rates of external whistle-blowing and the high proportion of silent observers makes it all the more important to study and compare the experiences of these people.

INDIVIDUAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL CORRELATES OF WHISTLE-BLOWING

Previous studies have searched for a whistle-blower profile (Miceli & Near, 1990) that could lead managers to avoid hiring persons prone to whistle-blowing. We, too, looked for correlates that might mark those prone to blowing the whistle. Table 1 summarizes some of the quantitative results of our analyses.

One of our most important and striking findings is that almost no sociodemographic characteristics can distinguish the whistle-blower from the silent observer. Put another way, we find that there is no empirical basis for asserting that any demographic profile of the "typical" whistle-blower exists. Past research that has made claims for a demographic profile failed to include a sufficient number of whistle-blowers and silent observers to make valid comparisons (Miceli & Near, 1990). The current sample covers a large number of employees from a wide-range of occupations and organizations and, therefore, is better suited for addressing possible differences.

When comparisons are made between nonobservers, silent observers, internal whistle-blowers, and external whistle-blowers (see Table 1), several findings emerge. First, there are no significant gender differences between whistle-blowers and nonwhistle-blowers. Internal whistle-blowers were far more likely to be women than men (65% vs. 35%), but an opposite trend was found for external whistle-blowers (45% vs. 55%). Second, external whistle-blowers are somewhat older (i.e., a higher proportion are older than 40), earn less income, and have shorter employment histories with the company than other employees. However, and most importantly, there are no substantial differences across the four groups in terms of their marital status, educational attainment, religiosity, number of promotions, and whether they occupied a supervisory position within the organization. Our supplemental analysis of data on 13,000 federal employees in the merit board survey also reveals few demographic differences between whistle-blowers and silent observers. The

TABLE 1: Comparison of Average Ratings

	Nonobservers	Silent Observers	Internal Whistle-Blowers	External Whistle-Blowers	Private Organizations	Public Organizations	Nonprofit Organizations
Demographic							
Female (%)	51	55	65	45	44	54	73
Less than 40 years old (%)	39	47	38	21	39	20	54
Married (%)	70	70	65	66	74	63	57
Education ^a (\bar{x})	4.46	4.58	4.64	4.70	4.46	4.79	4.76
Religious ^b (\bar{x})	2.17	2.13	2.14	2.16	2.19	2.09	2.15
Income ^c (\bar{x})	3.39	3.50	3.48	3.06	3.48	3.17	3.22
Years employed at company (\bar{x})	6.78	6.25	5.74	4.49	6.44	5.12	4.26
Supervisor position (%)	50	45	53	47	45	50	58
Promotions (0 to 3+) (\bar{x})	1.49	1.37	1.37	1.37	1.49	1.38	1.10
General attitudes and/or values							
Decisions should be made on case-by-case basis (%)	73	77	73	63	77	63	72
I'm a person of worth (%)	99	97	99	98	98	98	99
What happens to me due to luck (%)	10	5	11	11	9	12	4
People should sacrifice for greater good (%)	83	77	84	80	79	78	86
People should prevent harm to others if they can (%)	98	99	96	97	99	96	97
Organizational characteristics							
Code of ethics for type of work (%)	85	82	84	71	81	77	84
Does employer have strong moral values (%)	83	62	57	29	60	31	82
Democratic decision making (%)	60	35	38	13	39	15	53
Personal opportunity to participate in decisions (%)	71	49	49	22	52	24	67

TABLE 1: Comparison of Average Ratings

	Nonobservers	Silent Observers	Internal Whistle-Blowers	External Whistle-Blowers	Private Organizations	Public Organizations	Nonprofit Organizations
Type of misconduct observed							
Fraud (%)	0	14	22	43	15	33	16
Health and/or safety violations (%)	0	21	34	30	21	27	15
Poor production and/or service (%)	0	11	20	34	16	26	9
Total number of types of misconduct (%)	0	1.13	2.11	2.56	1.24	2.13	1.30
Sample size	149	218	147	247	385	253	150

a. 1 = some high school, to 6 = graduate school.

b. 1 = not religious, to 3 = very religious.

c. 1 ≤ \$1,000, to 6 ≥ 100,000.

overall pattern of these results supports the conclusion that individual socio-demographic attributes do not explain differences in individuals' exposure to occupational deviance very well, nor do they explain their response to this deviance.

ATTITUDE AND VALUE DIFFERENCES

There has been much speculation and little empirical data on whether a whistle-blowing personality exists. Previous studies using small samples, case studies, and anecdotal reports suggest that whistle-blowers are strong-willed, opinionated individuals with universalistic values and high levels of self-esteem and self-efficacy (Jos et al., 1989).

As shown in Table 1, there are some differences across groups of employees in their general attitudes and values, but these differences are not significant enough to qualify as support for a presumed whistle-blowing personality. The largest difference across groups involves "whether decisions should be made according to general rules or on a case-by-case basis" (cf. text of survey). Whistle-blowers held slightly more universalistic values than nonwhistle-blowers. This was most apparent when external reporters are compared to silent observers. Regardless of their group membership, nearly all employees had high self-esteem (i.e., agreed with the statement "I am a person of worth") and high social responsibility (i.e., "people should prevent harm to others"). There are also no major differences across employees in their perceptions of self-efficacy (i.e., "what happens to me is a matter of luck") and beliefs about altruism (i.e., "people should make sacrifices for the greater good").

ORGANIZATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

Whistle-blowing occurs within an organizational context, and we believe that any adequate theory of its prevalence and correlates must examine this context.

Concerning organizational structure, we hypothesized that more participatory work environments should have lower levels of organizational misconduct and lower levels of external whistle-blowing. We expected these patterns because such organizations tend to have more group cohesion and agreement on goals, more cultivated norms of trust and openness in working relationships, and more personal investment in organizational success. Two patterns of results in Table 1 clearly support this hypothesis about whistle-blowing and its organizational structure. First, internal whistle-blowers are about three times more likely than external whistle-blowers to view their

company as democratic in terms of its decision making. Almost two thirds (60%) of the nonobservers of misconduct thought their company was democratic compared to only 13% among external whistle-blowers. Second, external whistle-blowers were far less likely than other employees to believe that they had enough personal opportunity to participate in company decisions. Thus, more democratic and less bureaucratic organizations seem more likely to have the open channels of communication that are necessary to deal with misconduct informally.

The moral and ethical climate of the organization and the individual's specific type of job are also important correlates of whistle-blowing. For example, about 83% of the nonobservers thought their employer had strong moral values compared to only 29% of the external whistle-blowers. Although codes of ethics tended to characterize the work conducted by most employees in our sample, external whistle-blowers were less likely than other groups to report that their work activities were regulated by professional ethics.

In terms of whistle-blowing experiences, rates of external disclosure were highest among employees of public agencies and/or institutions (involving 70% of these employees), followed by workers in nonprofit organizations (18%), and an even smaller proportion of employees in private businesses (13%). Separate analysis of the nurse sample also revealed the highest level of external whistle-blowing among those working in public agencies (14% of these employees), but there were no major differences in the likelihood of external whistle-blowing for nurses in private businesses versus nonprofit organizations. The much higher rate of whistle-blowing (especially external reporting) in public institutions persists even after controlling for differences between public, private, and nonprofit organizations on other characteristics (e.g., level of occupational deviance in these organizations and perceived ethical standards of company).

To understand this finding, we looked for other important patterns. For instance, we found that nonprofit workers are far more likely than other types of workers to think their employer has strong moral values, is democratic in their decision-making processes, and provides opportunities for all employees to participate in decision making. Nonprofit employees also indicate greater feelings of self-efficacy as indicated by a lower percentage of their workers agreeing with the statement that "what happens to me is due to chance."

Overall, these findings indicate that the opportunity for whistle-blowing varies dramatically across occupational groupings and organizational structures. We attribute the higher level of whistle-blowing in public institutions to the following factors: (a) public institutions tend to be larger, more bureaucratic, and perceived as less responsive to workers' comments and

suggestions; (b) private employees have less legal protection than public employees from “at will firing” and, therefore, are more prone to remain silent about observed misconduct; and (c) federal employees and employees of many state agencies are aware of special hotlines that have been set up to encourage their reporting of waste, fraud, or abuse. Employees in nonprofit organizations hold the most positive views of management; thus, they may be more likely than private employees to report infractions internally to protect their employer from future possible disgrace while still staying within the confines of their organization.

Although our investigation of the correlates of whistle-blowing has focused on organizational determinants, theories of deviance may also help to explain demographic, attitudinal, and organizational differences in whistle-blowing experiences. For example, a rational choice perspective would explain the relatively low rate of external whistle-blowing in terms of its high risks and limited benefits to the whistle-blower. In contrast, differential association theory would argue that the norms of loyalty held by management in an organizational climate that is generally antagonistic toward exposing misconduct would increase the likelihood of silence or, at most, it would increase the incidence of internal whistle-blowing while reducing the likelihood of external whistle-blowing. As we have noted elsewhere (Miethe & Rothschild, 1994), several other theories of deviance are also directly relevant to understanding the extent and distribution of whistle-blowing.

MOTIVATIONS FOR WHISTLE-BLOWING

Mass media presentations of whistle-blowers frequently speculate about their underlying motivations. Many present whistle-blowers as selfless and altruistic; they allegedly undertake this task only at extraordinary personal cost. Others consider whistle-blowers egoistic and spiteful, motivated solely by greed and self-interest. Our detailed interviews with whistle-blowers from a variety of work settings suggest that neither of these images adequately captures a whistle-blower's set of motivations.

To better understand why employees report wrongful or illegal acts at work, in our telephone interviews with whistle-blowers ($N = 210$) we asked, “What was the main thing that compelled or persuaded you to report this violation?” We studied and codified their sometimes long and qualitative answers to this question. We learned that at times their motivation stemmed from their job requiring them to report their observation (for example, social workers are required in many states to report abuse of patients; engineers are paid to find and report defects in the integrity of projects; accountants are supposed to report financial fraud or embezzlement). In addition, whistle-

blowers in our study often cited professional norms and values as setting the stage for their disclosure. Many said that their own personal values, grounded in their religious or humane traditions, moved them. Of the sample, 79% of our interview respondents spoke of the personally held values that drove them to act. Whether these values stemmed from their job, their profession, their religion, their community, their family, or some combination of these, it was their belief that the reported behavior was wrong, harmful, or illegal. Thus, based on that belief they were moved to report. In another 11% of these cases, their motivations would have to be classified as chiefly defensive, in the sense that they feared that if they did not report and the malfeasance was eventually discovered, that it would be blamed on them. In only 2% (4 cases) did the whistle-blowers receive a promotion or raise as a result of their report. Finally, in a scant 3% of our interview sample (7 cases) the whistle-blowers said that resentment of management fueled their report.

Many individuals in our sample came to their whistle-blowing almost by accident. Typically, they witnessed something at work that troubled them. If their boss appeared to be the perpetrator of the problem, they took it to their boss's boss believing that if upper management knew what was going on, they would surely step in to correct the situation. They expected that higher officials would be grateful for the information. Only when senior officials showed that they were inert or complicit in the wrongdoing did the employee consider going to authorities outside the organization. In almost no case did the individual accurately anticipate the retaliation and severe personal consequences that would follow their report. In this sense, it would be more accurate to depict the prototypical whistle-blower as organizationally naïve; in other words, they truly believe that the organization wants its practices to be in line with its mission, rather than particularly altruistic or vengeful. As we will show, the ordeal that follows their disclosure brings an end to their illusions.

Overall, it became increasingly clear through the interviews that whistle-blowers are in the ultimate no-win situation. By speaking out they face the wrath of managers for being a squealer, but inaction makes them potentially culpable and/or easy scapegoats when and if the misconduct is discovered. In this sense, many whistle-blowers can be characterized as reluctant dissenters, moved neither by altruistic nor selfish concerns, but rather by a tide of events over which they feel they have little control.

Further, one of the most important findings from our study involves the crucial importance of the organization's response to the employee's initial concerns. It is management's response that shapes the potential whistle-blower's subsequent actions. Specifically, our interviews revealed a common pattern in which management's efforts to discredit or retaliate against the

claimant become the major catalyst for the political transformation of the concerned employee into a “persistent resister” (see also Glazer & Glazer, 1989). In fact, it appears that most whistle-blowers go public with their information only after their companies begin to cover up the wrongdoing and intensify their level of retaliation against the whistle-blower. It is by virtue of the organization’s retaliatory response that whistle-blowers become convinced of the moral correctness of their actions and strengthened in their conviction to fight—both to exonerate themselves and to correct the organization’s wrong.

CONSEQUENCES OF WHISTLE-BLOWING FOR THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE ORGANIZATION

By all indications, whistle-blowing has enormous consequences for both the individual and the organization. From the point of view of management, internal whistle-blowing may be applauded when it identifies *bad apples* within the company and allows for their removal before they cost the organization financial loss, scathing publicity, and/or litigation. On the other hand, external whistle-blowing is often condemned by management because the exposure of wrongdoing often brings adverse publicity. Also, it can bring financial ruin if the wrongdoing is far-reaching and if the company is liable for the harm involved. In contrast, whistle-blowers—even where their disclosures are found to be true and of great benefit to the employer—still face significant risk of various types of organizational retaliation, such as ostracism by coworkers, long-term economic harm, and psychological injury.

Based on data from our nationwide interviews of whistle-blowers from all occupational categories, organizational retaliation against whistle-blowers (both internal and external reporters) is severe and common. About two thirds of the whistle-blowers in our study experienced each of the following forms of retaliation from their employer or coworkers as a result of their disclosures:

- lost their job or were forced to retire (69%).
- received negative job performance evaluations (64%).
- had work more closely monitored by supervisors (68%).
- were criticized or avoided by coworkers (69%).
- were blacklisted from getting another job in their field (64%).

Retaliation against external reporters was even more common than retaliation against internal whistle-blowers. For each of the items above, the rate of retaliation was generally 10 to 15% points higher among external whistle-blowers.

As a consequence of their whistle-blowing experience, the majority of the whistle-blowers in our sample suffered intensely. The most common fallout from their whistle-blowing involved: (a) severe depression or anxiety (84%), (b) feelings of isolation or powerlessness (84%), (c) distrust of others (78%), (d) declining physical health (69%), (e) severe financial decline (66%), and (f) problems with family relations (53%). Repeatedly, respondents mentioned that whistle-blowing undermined their trust in others. These numbers are extremely high; however, the numbers cannot convey the emotional distress that we heard from so many of our respondents.

When the forms of organizational retaliation and the personal declines in the whistle-blowers' lives were considered together, it became clear to us that for many of these individuals the act of whistle-blowing had become what sociologists refer to as a "master status." One's master status is the critical bedrock of one's personal identity; it is how we first label ourselves and are recognized by others. For most of our whistle-blowers, the experience of whistle-blowing and its aftermath have been so traumatic that their "master status" is now defined by their act of whistle-blowing. Their new identity—one based on the act of whistle-blowing—defines and engulfs nearly everything in their lives. Other experiences become selectively interpreted to be consistent with the master status, and the whistle-blowing experience is repeatedly discussed. Embattled and embittered, the typical external whistle-blower becomes viewed by management and coworkers as a loose cannon and a social outcast, thereby reinforcing the salience of the whistle-blowing ordeal in the formation of the whistle-blower's personal identity and future life chances. Given the personal and financial devastation that we heard from so many whistle-blowers, it may surprise one to learn that 90% of the whistle-blowers in our sample said that they would still report misconduct if they had a chance to do things all over again. Through the suffering they have endured—but never anticipated before their disclosure—they have come to see themselves as exceedingly moral. They have distanced themselves from what they now see as the corruption of their former employer, and many begin to see themselves as possessing extraordinary integrity that they now bring to their endeavors.

CAN THE INDIVIDUAL BE INSULATED FROM MANAGEMENT RETALIATION?

Some of our most recent research involves examining which factors contribute most to the likelihood and severity of management retaliation and which factors, if any, may help to insulate the individual whistle-blower from

reprisals. For this project, we have united our in-depth qualitative interviews with secondary analysis of survey data on federal employees conducted by the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (1993).

Given the ample discussions in the sociological literature that finds race, gender, age, and class are related to almost every form of discriminatory behavior, we wanted to test how these variables related to the severity and extent of retaliation. Many hypotheses seemed plausible. For example, African Americans and women might be more prone to reprisals because these groups are less likely to hold positions of power within contemporary U.S. work organizations. Similar to this, managers, high-level supervisors, and veteran employees might be expected to be insulated from retaliation for whistle-blowing because either they have the power to avoid negative reactions or they have cultivated strong interpersonal relationships with upper management that might protect them from reprisals. In contrast, the same type of high-level employees might actually be more susceptible to organizational retaliation because their reportage could be seen as a more serious violation of company loyalty norms. Also, their information and criticism often may be seen as more costly to the organization.

The most comprehensive data for examining this insulation hypothesis involves the 1992 survey of federal employees conducted by the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB, 1993). Of the over 13,000 federal workers who responded to this survey, slightly over 1,100 of them were either internal or external whistle-blowers. About one fourth of these whistle-blowers had personally experienced some type of reprisal—or threat of reprisal—by management for having reported misconduct. Factors associated with the likelihood of retaliation in this sample are summarized in Table 2.

Analysis of the MSPB survey data indicates that the likelihood of retaliation by management does not necessarily vary in the expected ways. As shown in Table 2, retaliation was less likely for supervisors than for nonsupervisors, but there were no major differences in the likelihood of reprisals based on the workers' gender, age, educational attainment, or years of employment in their current job. However, African American workers were nearly twice as likely as White employees to suffer organizational retaliation for whistle-blowing. Retaliation by management was also significantly more common for external whistle-blowers and when the misconduct was systemic (i.e., frequently occurring within the organization). Whistle-blowing on organizational misconduct that was both severe and frequent elicited the highest risk of retaliation in comparison to less severe or less frequent types of wrongdoing. In sum, regardless of the employee's gender, age or education, whistle-blowers who report on systemic organizational corruption or

TABLE 2: Differences in the Likelihood of Organizational Retaliation for Whistle-Blowing Related to Personal Characteristics of the Whistle-Blower and Situational Factors (N = 1,102).

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>Percentage Retaliated Against</i>
Personal characteristics	
Gender	
Male	24
Female	26
Age	
Less than 40 years old	25
40 years old or older	25
Race	
African American	40**
White	22
Education level	
Less than college graduate	22*
College graduate	26
Work position	
Nonsupervisor	27**
Supervisor	19
Length of employment at current job	
Less than 4 years	24
4 years or longer	25
Vested employee (supervisor and > 4 years at work)	
No	26*
Yes	20
Situational Factors	
Type of whistle-blowing	
Internal reporting	22**
External reporting	30
Dollar value loss from the observed misconduct	
More than \$100,000	27
Less than \$100,000; can't place \$ value	24
Frequency of occurrence of this misconduct	
Once or rarely	11
Occasionally	19
Frequently	32
Major activity (frequent and > \$100,000)	
No	24**
Yes	32

* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$.

major activity (i.e., misconduct involving over \$100,000 in losses and that frequently occurs) are most likely to experience organizational reprisals.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Several major findings emerge from our data that suggest that whistle-blowing can and should be understood as a new form of worker resistance; that is, as a form of worker assertion and dissent in the unending battle between labor and management to control the workplace. We believe it is a method that is especially well suited to an information-based economy that depends more than ever on proprietary information and organizational secrets for profit accumulation.

First, we saw that in 79% of our cases whistle-blowers were moved to report and dissent only after repeatedly witnessing some organizational behavior that, from the vantage point of the ethics or values that imbue their profession, their religion, their community or their family, they see as criminal or wrong. They feel they are doing the “right” thing by bringing information forward that they believe will help to correct a situation that has gone awry. In almost no case did they anticipate the retaliation that was to follow. It is only as management begins to “circle the wagons” to discredit and fire the whistle-blower that the whistle-blower turns to defense. In an arduous process of vindication, they find themselves in countless organizational skirmishes and, often, in the courtroom. Thus, it is the management-induced ordeal of reprisals and character assassination that is the catalyst for whistle-blower activism. Even the whistle-blowers who told us that they were apolitical before this event felt that being the recipient of this reign of reprisals forever changed their consciousness. They now saw this management (and often managements everywhere) as the point men for organizational cover-ups and corruption in the interest of profits. Whistle-blowers in the United States and Australia have recently formed social movement organizations that reflect their new found insights and activism. Although we cannot say from our study the effect these whistle-blower ordeals have on the many bystanders (i.e., on other employees who are not part of the whistle-blower event but who are in the workplace and observing the organizational fall-out), we speculate that there is also the potential to alter subsequent labor-management struggles. This group needs to be studied also.

Second, we have found that when the organization is seen as open—as permissive of employee voice in the decision-making process—and as essentially ethical, employees with critical observations to make will keep them internal. Employees go to external authorities with their claims only once they come to believe that internal channels are closed to them, that the organization is not moral, and that senior management is inert or complicit in the wrongdoing. This evidence tells us that employees who go to external aids (to the media, to prosecutors, etc.) with their evidence, are using their whistle-

blowing as a weapon—perhaps their weapon of last resort—to make management stop engaging in whatever misconduct they see and to return to the legitimate purpose of the organization. The casual observer may not see this as worker resistance because the exposure and dissent is often individual and it is not aimed at raising the wages paid to the employees. However, the chief issue to the whistle-blower is almost always one of dignity or pride in one's work. This, our whistle-blower respondents told us, is the chief reason they want the organization to cease and desist their misconduct; they want the organization to return to what the employee sees as the reason they joined the organization in the first place: its legitimate purpose.

Third, we found in our analysis that retaliation against whistle-blowers is most likely and most severe when the observed wrongdoing is most systemic and most central to the operation of the agency (i.e., misconduct that involves losses over \$100,000 and that occurs on a frequent basis generally evokes the greatest managerial retaliation). In other words, organizations are more likely to self-correct (and not to retaliate against the whistle-blower) when the misconduct that the whistle-blower has disclosed involves an isolated bad apple. However, when the misconduct in question is systemic—part of the regular way that this organization does business—management denial and retaliation are quick and, as we have found, virtually certain.

Fourth, almost no sociodemographic characteristics distinguished the whistle-blower from the silent observer. One of the qualitative themes that emerges from our in-depth telephone interviews is that our culture is in conflict as to how it views whistle-blowers. Some see them as traitorous violators of organizational loyalty norms; others see them as heroic defenders of values considered to be more important than company loyalty (e.g., the public health, truth-in-advertising, environmental respect). From the deviance point of view, this means that whistle-blowing can be viewed as either conformity or as deviance, which may help us to understand the reasons for so few sociodemographic predictors.

Lastly, and one of our most important findings, neither gender, age, race, educational attainment, nor years in the job can save you from retaliation. Indeed, even people in supervisory positions and in their current position for over four years garner only a modest amount of insulation, and this is only true if they report on less severe, nonsystemic abuses. The bottom line is that the larger and more systemic the abuse that is being exposed, the more intense will be the managerial effort to discredit and to punish the whistle-blower. Our findings in this regard squarely support a class analysis of the workplace because they show that the organization reserves its most explicit discrimination and punishment for those who block the profit accumulation process by exposing the practices that undergird this process.

As we have shown, most of the whistle-blowers in our study suffered enormously as a result of their disclosures and, as Clegg (1994) has pointed out, it is too easy for management to outflank the lone-employee whistle-blower. However, we would be remiss if we did not notice that this is not always the case. Indeed, a sizeable minority of the whistle-blowers that we interviewed—27% of the internal whistle-blowers and 44% of the external whistle-blowers—thought that their organization had changed its practices as a result of their disclosure.

Recently, the Government Accountability Project (GAP), a non-profit group intended to track and support legitimate whistle-blower claims, has published a how-to book intended to help would be whistle-blowers around the country make more effective disclosures of waste and abuse without having to suffer (GAP, 1997). In addition, whistle-blower hotlines have been enacted for many federal and state agencies. The U.S. Department of Defense states that their fraud hotline has saved taxpayers over \$150 million.

Public confidence in business and public institutions is declining as the public becomes increasingly aware that organizations sometimes make defective products, falsify claims, pollute the environment, subject their workers to hazardous conditions, and/or abuse clients. With the recent revelations of wrongdoing at the national office of the United Way, even the non-profit sector has aroused public suspicion that an organization's practices are not always in keeping with its purposes.

Yet, because of low public visibility, technical complexity, and explicit cover-ups of much misconduct that goes on in organizations, we would have little chance of learning about organizational wrongdoings were it not for conscientious employees who are in the best position to observe the wrongdoings firsthand. In fact, often the only people who are in a position to detect when the organization's practices have gone awry (e.g., when it produces a defective product or does something that might endanger or defraud the public) are the employees themselves. Without their aid in bringing to light abuses of law or public trust, we would have little hope of learning or controlling what goes on inside most work organizations. Despite the public need for information of this kind and despite a number of federal and state laws that have been enacted to protect whistle-blowers, our data on reprisals suggest strongly that the laws as written are insufficient.

Our own numbers, presented earlier in this article, indicate that the extent of whistle-blowing is burgeoning. If our estimate is correct that approximately one third of U.S. employees observe workplace practices that trouble them and that they consider to be unethical or illegal, then whistle-blowing would seem to have an almost limitless future in an information-based economy. For this reason, we find it a surprising oversight that even so compre-

hensive a review of the history of contention between workers and management as that by Tilly & Tilly (1998) fails to notice whistle-blowing as a new weapon in the arsenal available to workers. Similar to this, Coleman's (1998) thorough review of white-collar crime fails to mention whistle-blowing as a way to identify and expose such crimes. As the burden of our study and the experience of the whistle-blowers amply show, whistle-blowing by employees who are in position to observe misconduct may be the most immediate and effective way of exposing and controlling organizational crime. In addition, the experience of the whistle-blowers points the way to an often-overlooked weapon that workers can use—observation and hard evidence of wrongdoing by management—to bring more leverage to their position and more pride to their work.

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