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 nonconformity.

Situational factors that predict whistleblowing

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

Figure 1
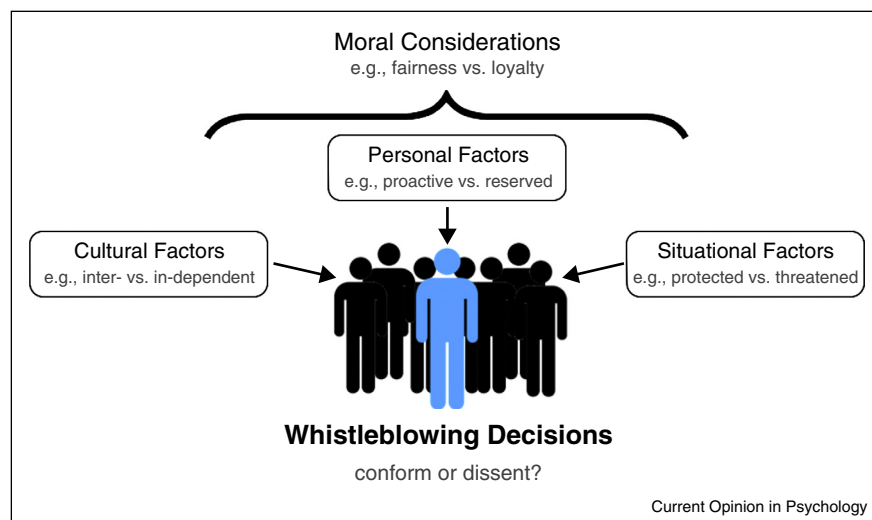
Factors influencing the decision of whether or not to blow the whistle, which are ultimately related to the trade-off between fairness and loyalty.

ideologically, also increase whistleblowing. Many strong predictors of whether a worker will decide to blow the whistle or not are determined by the worker's organization, including organizational support and encouragement for whistleblowing, dissemination of knowledge about the proper avenues for reporting unethical behavior, and clear safety measures to protect whistleblowers from retaliation [16,21,22]. In addition, situational factors that increase the salience of the act's severity facilitate blowing the whistle — people are more likely to voice disapproval of others' behavior when that behavior becomes unethical abruptly rather than slowly over time [23]. By contrast, the more immediate and noticeable the act of whistleblowing feels, the more difficult whistleblowing becomes. Evidence for this link comes from a study in which experimenters examined university students' willingness to comply with an unethical request to (dishonestly) endorse a potentially harmful sensory deprivation study to the university's research review board [24]. Some participants were asked to *imagine* what they would do hypothetically if faced with a request, and a significant majority said that they would blow the whistle on the experimenter. Another group *actually* faced the unethical request in reality, and less than 10 percent blew the whistle. These findings point to psychological closeness as an important factor driving whistleblowing — when evaluating the act in the abstract, blowing the whistle seems like the right and easy thing to do, but in the face of an actual opportunity to blow the whistle in the moment, norms favoring obedience to authority and maintaining group loyalty become more difficult to subvert (cf. [25]).

Cultural factors that predict whistleblowing

Finally, variability in cultural norms that emphasize or de-emphasize loyalty affects the likelihood of whistleblowing. For example, individuals from many Asian cultures, including Japan [26], China [17], and Taiwan [27], view whistleblowing less favorably than individuals from America. This cultural difference often relates to a culture's degree of collectivism, or the degree to which individuals perceive interdependence with their group [27,28], with more collectivist groups expressing more negative feelings toward whistleblowing. Similarly, the degree of collectivism in a culture is positively related to the likelihood of that culture's propensity to engage in bribery [29], and the perception that collectives, rather than individuals, are responsible for personal conduct. These patterns are consistent with the general finding that loyalty — a much more dominant norm within collectivist cultures than individualist cultures — increases willingness to overlook individual unethical acts and decreases whistleblowing.

Conclusions

If whistleblowing represents a tradeoff between fairness and loyalty, then going forward, it will be crucial to explore the kinds of groups that, in a sense, minimize this tradeoff in the service of promoting constructive behavior. Since loyalty and group cohesiveness represent core values to employees and individuals more broadly [13,14,30], people are unlikely to sacrifice these values altogether [31•]. As a result, attempts to encourage whistleblowing solely by prioritizing the need to root out criminal activity or organizational injustice may only encourage employees who are low in loyalty at baseline to blow the whistle [18,32–34,35•,36]. To motivate a broader swath of individuals toward whistleblowing, organizations might focus on building the kind of community that values constructive dissent while maintaining group loyalty [37]. In such environments, even people who are highly committed to their group may express their dissent when they feel that some behavior or a group norm is harmful to the group's interests [34]. Moreover, in contrast to the backlash that whistleblowers face for their actions, people who have dissenting opinions that benefit the group may be rewarded and viewed as effective leaders [38].

In developing a culture that prioritizes group cohesion alongside constructive group criticism, collectives would do well to teach group members the practical advantages of dissent. Expressing deviant opinions can, for example, benefit group-based decision-making, increasing innovation and better overall group performance, particularly when groups can adaptively reflect upon their overall objectives [39–41]. Similarly, rather than blind acceptance of group norms, critical consideration of a group's ideas (as opposed to the group itself) can result in greater problem-solving and group effectiveness [42,43]. Thus, overcoming some level of conflict can actually strengthen team cohesiveness [42,44,45]. The challenge for organizations will be in promoting the kind of constructive criticism among committed group members that will lead to positive outcomes for individuals and the group alike [46•]. By encouraging individuals to engage in open and, if necessary, critical discussion about the group's collective interests, those who observe organizational wrongdoing may no longer feel they are sacrificing group loyalty for justice in reporting wrongdoing. Instead, in a culture of constructive dissent, people might come to view whistleblowing as an essential part of what it means to be a loyal and productive group member with an eye toward advancing collective goals to act appropriately and ethically and to follow broader societal norms.

Conflict of interest

None declared.

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