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Perceptions of Whistleblowing: A Pilot Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

Whistleblowing is often positioned as a critical mechanism for organizational accountability, yet individuals' perceptions of whistleblowing frequently shape whether ethical concerns are reported. This pilot phenomenological study explores how state government employees who have never served as whistleblowers perceive whistleblowing and the factors that influence their decisions not to engage in disclosure. Using semi-structured interviews with two state-funded employees, the study examines participants' knowledge of whistleblower protections, perceived risks of retaliation, and the sociocultural contexts that inform their decision-making. Findings suggest that fear of retaliation, stigma associated with "snitching," power and privilege dynamics, and limited trust in organizational processes significantly influence whistleblowing perceptions. Participants also emphasized the roles played by organizational culture and leadership in shaping whether whistleblowing is viewed as an ethical responsibility or a personal risk. Although exploratory, this study highlights the need for organizations to strengthen education, transparency, and support systems surrounding whistleblowing, particularly for employees from marginalized groups.

Keywords**:** Whistleblowing Perceptions, Organizational Culture and Leadership, Retaliation and Stigma, Power, Privilege, and Marginalization, Phenomenological Inquiry.

Introduction

Today, individuals often observe and experience complex dynamics that unfold within organizations. Industry demands continue to grow, requiring organizations both the private and public sectors to be increasingly competitive, innovative, and effective. Even in the public sector, where direct competition may be limited, organizations still strive to be leaders in their field. As

they pursue their goals, organizations may encounter ethical dilemmas or questionable practices that undermine their integrity. While they seek to uphold their mission and vision and be viewed as assets to the public they serve, they can fall victim to poor management practices that place the organization in a precarious position. Moreover, even in the absence of market pressure, unethical or illegal actions may still occur. When employees become aware of such actions, they must grapple with their own perceptions of the wrongdoing and decide whether, and how, to act on the knowledge. At this point, individuals must determine whether to assume the role of whistleblower and confront the personal, professional, and social consequences that accompany that decision.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to understand the perception of whistleblowing among state government employees who have never served as a whistleblower. The study explored why those who know about whistleblowing have not served as whistleblowers. Therefore, this study helped explain why those who thought about whistleblowing never engaged in it and what perceptions they may have about whistleblowing.

Three research questions guided this study: (1) what personal, professional, cultural, societal, organizational or other factors contribute to a person's decision on whether or not they will act as a whistleblower; (2) what level of knowledge do non-whistleblowers have regarding whistleblower laws; (3) what entity(ies) do non-whistleblower believe is responsible for whistleblower protection laws? The study focused on employees who work in a state government role. For the purpose of this study, a state government role was defined to encompass any position, whether full-time or part-time, that was directly connected to a state-funded position.

This included but was not limited to positions within state-funded universities and colleges, state government agencies, and other organizations that were directly funded by the state.

Significance of Study

Despite there being whistleblower protections in all 50 states across the United States (West & Bowman, 2020), the laws and acts are vastly different in each state. In addition, many states are at-will, which gives an employer the ability to relieve someone of their job duties without cause or justification (Bhargava & Young, 2022). While some states offer whistleblower protections to everyone, some states have whistleblower laws that only protect certain categories of employment (Bhargava & Young, 2022). Therefore, this study is significant in that it seeks to learn what people know about whistleblowing and how it is perceived among those who have never engaged in it. More broadly, those who have engaged in or considered whistleblowing need to understand that whistleblower protections are there despite their employment status. By studying whistleblower perceptions, researchers seek to understand what those perceptions are, thus shining a light on what is believed about whistleblowing.

This study is also significant in that it will help organizations better understand perceptions of whistleblowing and what role, if any, they play in developing the narrative surrounding those views. If employee perceptions determine how much employees engage at work, and that engagement predicts their performance (Shaikh & Nawar, 2018), this research study is needed to translate whistleblower perceptions into meaningful data for organizations. Furthermore, this study could have broader implications for ethical culture changes within organizations. By studying whistleblower perceptions, organizations can better understand their role in creating an environment that celebrates good, ethical practices rather than diminish it.

Literature Review

The following literature review situates this study within existing scholarship related to the topic.

Whistleblowing in Organizations

Fischer and Gollwitzer (2023) define whistleblowing as the disclosure of an "observable wrongdoing" (p. 3) by someone who has membership within the organization, whether past or present. The researchers studied which whistleblowing paradigms were suitable for their study. They categorized the paradigms into four types: "scenario studies, autobiographical recall studies, immersive behavioral paradigms, and economic games" (Fischer & Gollwitzer, 2023, p.3). In order for the whistleblower paradigms to be credible, the act of whistleblowing must be "a response to an observable wrongdoing," there must be a "common organizational membership" where both the wrongdoing and the whistleblower are in the organization, and the "act of information disclosure" (Fischer & Gollwitzer, 2023, p. 3) will be to a party that can affect, seek, or take action. What they found was that different paradigms will give different outcomes and that multiple paradigms should be used (Fischer & Gollwitzer, 2023). They also found there is a gap between whistleblower intent and whistleblower behavior that needs to be addressed. They also note that future research should consider individual feelings surrounding the acts and consequences of whistleblowing.

Olusegun (2024) explores how organizational culture affects whistleblower perceptions. More specifically, the study investigates how mid-level managers create good, ethical climates within their teams. By creating an environment that encourages whistleblowing without the fear of retaliation, managers can build trust and create an environment that promotes trust (Olusegun, 2024). He interviewed 10 mid-level managers from the public sector and found that managers

are motivated to create workplace environments that build trust. Openness and transparency are key to their ability to create such environments (Olusegun, 2024). They also saw whistleblowing as an opportunity to respond positively. Whistleblowing in general has carried a negative connotation; therefore, the managers felt it was important to change that. This study also found that personal factors such as individual morals, values, and beliefs influence managers' decisions about how they function on the job (Olusegun, 2024). However, organizational challenges such as resistance to changing organizational culture and the negative stigma whistleblowing brings made it difficult for these managers to encourage whistleblowing.

Whistleblowing within Higher Education

Within the higher education sector, Devlin (2021) studies whistleblower cases in public universities. There were two cases studied where limited resources and retaliation played key roles in the cases. One of the cases Devlin (2021) reviewed was *Bradley vs. West University* where a director dealt with retaliation for disclosing altered financial documents. The other case was *Khatri vs. Ohio State University* where a researcher was fired after reporting safety concerns and violations (Devlin, 2021). In both cases, Devlin noted the inconsistencies within whistleblower laws, discrepancies among university policies, and conflicts of interest between academia and financial priorities. Whereas faculty were thought to have academic freedom and freedom of speech under the 1st Amendment, institutional policies that do not align with these made it difficult for the whistleblowers to find resolve.

Schmidt (2017) explores whistleblowing from a different perspective. The study looks at how universities perceive whistleblowing claims as an opportunity to improve policy and prevent wrongdoings. What Schmidt (2017) found was that whistleblowing mechanisms in higher education are different across the United States, just as West and Bowman (2020) noted

regarding whistleblower laws. In addition, institutions with a formalized process aimed at managing whistleblower claims seemed to be more effective (Schmidt, 2017). However, fear of retaliation as well as lack of training played roles in whether or not misconduct was disclosed.

Iwai et al (2021) explore individual whistleblower intentions of undergraduate students. This study is significant in that it captures whistleblower intentions of those who will one day be in the workforce. Iwai et al (2021) found peer behavior, individual morals and values, and fairness perceptions positively affected whistleblower intentions. Consistent with other research studies, fear or retaliation played a role in this study in that it lessened these relationships. Thus, psychological and social factors should be explored to gain a more in-depth perception.

Theoretical Framework

Social Identity Theory, Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development, and Institutional Rational Choice Theory are used as theoretical frameworks for this study. According to King (1997), individuals develop their social identity from the groups they are in, even in the workplace. What group the individual associates with may determine how they view whistleblowing. As King (1997) discovered, people were less likely to whistleblow on their own social groups and were less hesitant to report those outside of the group.

Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development deals with the stages of moral reasoning within three levels, preconventional, conventional, and post-conventional (Kohlberg, 1981). The stages of moral development are obedience and punishment, self-interest, interpersonal accord and conformity, authority and social order, social contract, and universal ethical principles (Kohlberg, 1981). By reviewing the moral stages of development, the researcher may be able to ascertain if whistleblower actions are influenced by moral development.

Institutional Rational Choice Theory is a framework that helps practitioners to understand how individuals and groups interact in professional, institutionalized settings (Ostrom, 1990). These institutions are not necessarily physical spaces but rather policies, governance, and other structured tenets. It looks at how well individuals and teams can manage what they share. This theory is important in that it posits that individuals are rational and capable of making good decisions, but organizational constraints may cause them to stray from those decisions. (Ostrom, 1990). In addition, it lays out recommendations on how to improve institutions and make them more effective.

Method

To examine this phenomenon in greater depth, a qualitative methodology was employed. The next section describes the research design, participants, and procedures that guided this inquiry.

Target population

Adults between the ages of 18 and 75 who have worked or are currently working in a state-funded position were the target population for this phenomenological study. These individuals were required to not have served in a whistleblower capacity during their professional career. There were no discriminating factors based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability, or religion affiliation. The target population was captured in the southern part of the United States.

Research Design and Procedures

Participants were recruited through business connections. They were given the purpose of the study, the research design as a semi-structured thirty-to-forty-five-minute interview virtually. They were told that no harm would be down and that they could withdraw at any given time.

They were also told that their identity would be kept confidential. If they agreed to participate, they signed an informed consent agreement detailing what was discussed in the recruitment phase.

The informed consent agreement outlined the nature of the study, their role in the study, the researchers' roles in the study, the use of pseudonyms, transcription, and data storage. Once the informed consent agreement was completed, the interview was conducted. The researchers used a semi-structured interview as the main research design for this pilot study. The semi-structured research design allowed the researchers to ask structured questions but left room for follow-up questions depending on how participants respond. This helped to ensure that thick, rich details were given throughout the interview process. Additionally, the interviews were recorded to ensure the researchers transcribed the data verbatim as the participants stated. The participants were assured their real names would not be used and that the recordings would be safely stored in a secure location. Once the individual interviews were completed, the researchers asked if the participants could be contacted if clarification was needed to improve the study.

After the interviews were conducted, each interview was transcribed verbatim and read multiple times to ensure accuracy and familiarity with the data. Reflective notes and initial observations were documented in journals. Each interview was analyzed individually and collectively. Participants were invited to review summaries or interpretations of their interviews to ensure accuracy. The analysis consisted of coding each interview, finding common themes among all interviews, and identifying the answers to the research questions.

The researchers began the coding process by highlighting meaningful phrases, sentences, or statements relevant to the research. Codes were grouped into broader categories based on their conceptual similarity (e.g., "fear of retaliation," "organizational support," "moral responsibility,"

"privilege"). Once the manual coding was completed, major themes were identified from these categories. Once the analysis phase was completed, the researchers shared their findings.

Findings

Two semi-structured interviews were conducted for this phenomenological study. The first interview was with "Sarah," a middle-aged, African American woman who has served in various roles within state government. Sarah was very aware of whistleblower laws having served as an administrator who dealt with grievances and other employee concerns. While Sarah had never engaged in whistleblowing, she was able to define whistleblowing from her own perspective as well as how the law in the state she resides defines it. She describes whistleblowing as "reporting an unethical, illegal, or discriminatory act of an organizational or representative of an organization." Sarah talked about snitching and other cultural contexts that are associated with whistleblowing as well. She discussed internal and external factors that influence whistleblowing decisions. Internal factors included moral responsibility, fear and hesitation, and ethical dilemmas. Sarah stated that some people feel a sense of duty to report injustices as if they must intervene for the greater good. Fear and hesitation are factors Sarah feels deter individuals from engaging in whistleblowing. Ethical dilemmas such as weighing personal risks against disclosing also influence whistleblowing decisions.

External factors included perceived retaliation, anonymity challenges, and sociocultural contexts. Retaliation was heavily discussed in that Sarah believes fear of retaliation is one of the main external factors. Sarah also believes retaliation is more than just what the organization may do but also involves the loss of workplace relationships. Anonymity challenges were heavily discussed as the participant posits that she and others are not convinced there is a level of complete anonymity. Lastly, marginalized groups have a harder time navigating systemic

challenges, thus creating barriers for certain groups to participate without retaliation, regardless of whistleblower protection laws.

Sarah believes that whistleblowing intentions stem from various vantage points. She stated that many people do not engage in whistleblowing because they are unaware of the protections surrounding disclosure. Many organizations do not explain, mention, or make it easy for employees to understand whistleblowing on any level. Sarah has not worked at an organization that encourages internal whistleblowing. She believes that organizations should educate their employees about whistleblowing and encourage them to engage. She also believes organizations should adopt their own policies so they can send clear messages on their stance.

More people would participate if they understood whistleblower laws and if they were guaranteed retaliation would not occur. Sarah also believes people consider whistleblowing based on what they must lose or gain from disclosure. She stated that those who are new to their role or have less experience in their career are less likely to engage in whistleblowing. On the contrary, those who are more seasoned in their careers or may have a supervisory role may be more willing to engage in whistleblowing.

The second participant, "Matthew," identifies as a middle-aged African American male who has worked primarily in higher education within state government. Matthew was also able to define whistleblowing from his personal perspective and as a governing policy. For Matthew, whistleblowing is defined as "a formal process of reporting unethical or harmful acts." The term snitching came up in this interview similarly as it did in the previous one. Matthew believes that whistleblowing is akin to "snitching," and that connotations such as "nobody likes a snitch" and "snitches get stitches" make people less likely to engage in whistleblowing, particularly people of color.

Three main influences of whistleblower behavior were identified, namely cost-benefit analysis, privilege and power, and sociocultural contexts. Matthew believes that individuals weigh the costs against the benefits in deciding whether to engage in whistleblowing. Privilege and power were heavily discussed during the second interview. He believes that privilege affords individuals the opportunity to engage in whistleblower activity without the fear of retaliation. He talked about how people with power can afford to assert more power by engaging in whistleblowing. The sociocultural constraints he mentioned were like Sarah's perception in that marginalized groups face barriers that make it harder to act as whistleblowers. He also added that women are oftentimes taken less seriously than men.

Matthew gave his perspective on emotional and psychological trauma that whistleblowing triggers, whether or not the person acts or considers doing so. Emotions such as fear, anger, sadness, moral conviction, and even confusion are what his colleagues have expressed to him regarding whistleblowing. He mentioned that for people to finally act and engage in whistleblowing, something must "tip the scale" in that direction to make it impossible to ignore the wrongdoing.

Matthew also discussed perceived barriers to whistleblowing as Sarah. Fear of retaliation was mentioned as well as distrust in the whistleblowing process. He discussed how people who need their jobs more fear losing their jobs more. Matthew expressed that lack of trust in the reporting process deters people from engaging because there is a lack of transparency as to what happens after disclosing the wrongdoing. Lastly, a person's social status is a barrier in that people in vulnerable positions such as low socioeconomic status will not engage in something they feel negatively affects them or their communities.

Matthew gave his perception of how organizations need to be more involved in supporting whistleblowing. Consistent with the other participant, there is a strong belief that organizations have a responsibility to educate their employees about whistleblowing. He, too, believes organizations need to do a better job of promoting good, ethical behavior. There should be transparency in whistleblowing processes, and organizations should work to diminish retaliation fears.

Matthew indicated whistleblower perspectives have broader political and social implications. He feels that whistleblowing intersects with political dynamics, particularly more in the south than other parts of the United States. He stated that the roll back on diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts across various organizations make whistleblower education more valuable than ever. He feels that organizations should create spaces where their employees feel empowered to share their thoughts, opinions, and the freedom to report wrongdoings.

Discussion

This pilot phenomenological study offers insight into how non-whistleblowers in state-funded roles perceive whistleblowing and the factors influencing their decisions not to engage in disclosure. Across both interviews, whistleblowing was consistently associated with negative connotations, including fear, stigma, and anticipated retaliation. These perceptions shaped both Sarah's and Matthew's cost–benefit analyses and reinforces hesitation, even when wrongdoing was recognized. The findings highlight the persistent gap between ethical awareness and action, a dynamic documented in prior whistleblowing research (Fischer & Gollwitzer, 2023).

Fear of retaliation emerged as a dominant theme, extending beyond formal organizational consequences to include relational and social losses, such as damaged workplace relationships and reputational harm. Both Sarah's and Matthew's skepticism regarding anonymity further

intensified these concerns, suggesting that formal whistleblower protections alone are insufficient when trust in reporting mechanisms is limited. This aligns with existing research identifying retaliation and perceived lack of protection as primary deterrents to whistleblowing (Schmidt, 2017; West & Bowman, 2020).

Power, privilege, and sociocultural context also shaped whistleblowing perceptions. Both Sarah and Matthew emphasized that individuals with greater positional authority or professional security may be more willing to report wrongdoing, whereas marginalized groups face heightened personal and professional risk. These findings are consistent with research indicating that social identity and institutional positioning influence ethical decision-making (Iwai et al., 2021; King, 1997). For Sarah and Matthew, whistleblowing was not simply an individual moral choice, but a decision embedded within broader systems of inequality and organizational culture.

These findings can be interpreted through the study's theoretical frameworks. Social Identity Theory helps explain reluctance to report wrongdoing within one's own group, Kohlberg's stages of moral development illuminate how ethical reasoning may conflict with perceived consequences, and Institutional Rational Choice Theory highlights how organizational constraints shape individuals' decisions even when wrongdoing is recognized (King, 1997; Kohlberg, 1981; Ostrom, 1990). Sarah and Matthew also emphasized organizational responsibility in shaping whistleblowing perceptions. A lack of education, transparency, and visible leadership support contributed to distrust and disengagement. When whistleblowing is framed through stigmatizing narratives rather than ethical accountability, organizational silence is reinforced. Research on organizational culture and engagement suggests that trust-building, culturally responsive communication, and narrative framing play a central role in shaping how employees interpret institutional values and risks (Williams et al., 2014).Bottom of Form

Taken together, these findings suggest that whistleblowing perceptions are produced through the interaction of moral reasoning, organizational culture, and structural power dynamics. In particular, these findings speak directly to the American Association of Blacks in Higher Education (AABHE) conference theme by highlighting how ethical leadership, organizational accountability, and the protection of marginalized voices are central to advancing equity and justice within higher education and public-sector institutions. In alignment with the mission of the AABHE, this study underscores the importance of equity-minded leadership and organizational accountability in creating environments where ethical action is supported rather than penalized. Although exploratory, the findings highlight the need for institutions to move beyond compliance-based approaches and intentionally cultivate cultures of trust, transparency, and justice—particularly for employees from historically marginalized groups.

Recommendations for Future Research

More research is needed to change whistleblowing perceptions. Future research should focus on identifying more people to interview to give even more robust data and help shape where the researchers should focus for future studies. It is also recommended that researchers interview a diverse group of people where privilege and power dynamics can be discussed firsthand. Lastly, future research should also focus on interviewing leaders at the executive level within these organizations to gain their perspectives on whistleblowing. Their perspective will be important as change in organizational culture will require their support.

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