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The stigma of reporting wrongdoing at work: When doing right is perceived as wrong

The act of reporting unethical, illegal and illegitimate practices at work, whistleblowing, can be associated with a stigma for the individual in question (Banja, 1985). This article presents the stigmatizing position of reporting wrongdoing at work, types of wrongdoing and individual antecedents. Since empirical studies have shown very few systematic results regarding individual differences, one way to decrease societal stigma can be to relate the act of reporting to other known acts that are perceived upon as more positive within society. We therefore also discuss similarities and differences between the idea of whistleblowing and other concepts such as Organizational Citizenship Behaviour (OCB), in-role, and extra-role behaviour before we make some concluding remarks.

Keywords: stigma, acts, reporting, whistleblowing, wrongdoing, Organizational Citizenship Behaviour (OCB), in-role, extra-role behaviour

To report wrongdoing such as corruption, unethical treatment of patients or clients and instances of harassment, or whistleblowing, is gradually growing in attention as an important social control mechanism. Still, the general attitude towards whistleblowers seems to be negative and hostile (Hersh, 2002; Mathews, 1987; Wojciechowska-Nowak, 2011). This article presents the stigmatizing position of reporting wrongdoing at work, types of wrongdoing and individual antecedents. As empirical studies have shown that there are few systematic results regarding individual differences in relation to whistleblowing, one way to decrease this societal stigma is to relate the act of reporting wrongdoing to other known acts that are perceived upon as more positive within society. We therefore also discuss similarities and differences between the idea of whistleblowing and other concepts such as OCB, in-role and extra-role behaviour before we make some concluding remarks.

Stigma and the stigmatizing position of reporting wrongdoing at work

The concept of social stigma can take on many meanings and can be seen as both a constructive and

threatening tool of relational fine-tuning in any society or workgroup. Outcomes of becoming “whipping boy” when held responsible of minor or major norm breaches, can assume both correctional and scapegoating properties depending on the quality of social perception and accuracy for attributions of responsibility and guilt. For instance it can be attached to being “blind, left-handed, or schizophrenic, just as it may to being pregnant out of wedlock, overweight, a child molester, an alcoholic, or a convicted felon” (Manstead et al., 1996, p. 181). Social stigma can be defined as “membership in a devalued group and may correspond to what is generally understood as ‘minority status’ in our society” (Ferree & Smith, 1979, p. 87). One of the most common organisational situations seen as stigmatization is when an organisation punishes its members for going against what has been labelled “theories-in-use” (see e.g., Argyris & Schön, 1978, 1996). It is clearly observable in rare instances when workers dare to expose internal inconsistencies in how the organisation declares its mission, high moral standards and key values and how it acts conversely in actual situations. Due to the concern with how other organization members may react, Schein (1992) argues that workers can be hesitant to report such

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Table 1
An overall view of potential antecedents and consequences of whistleblowing.

Influence of wrongdoing	Frequency of wrongdoing	Direction of whistleblowing	Type of disclosure	Whistleblowing channel	Severity of wrongdoing	Whistleblowing function	Target of wrongdoing	Consequences of whistleblowing
Direct (happens to the whistleblower, whistleblower as a participant, self-interest bias)	Single event (single negative encounter or inter-action)	Formal (organizational or external officials and authorities)	Anonymous	Internal -control structure representatives -immediate supervisor -coworkers -unions -circumvention	Minor (system irregularities)	Improvements and innovations (development/change)	Organization (economic performance or well-being of members)	Recognition (Dissent is welcomed and appreciated)
Indirect (happens to others, whistleblower as an active observer, pro-social or altruistic behavior)	Ongoing process (repeated negative behaviors, negative practices and policies, injustices)	Informal (friends, allies, acquaintances, associates, important others)	Identified	External -state-owned agencies -non-profit organizations -mass media	Major (system threats)	Prevention (protection/integration)	General public (stakeholders', citizens health, safety and well-being)	Retaliation (Dissent is unwelcomed and prosecuted; possible reprisal)

internal inconsistencies even though organisational cultures are in dire need of being re-examined. Thus, stigma does not necessarily “reside in the stigmatizing condition itself, but in others’ reactions to that condition” (Manstead, et al., 1996, p. 633). This implies, it does not necessarily have to be the characteristic of the person in question that elicits stigmatization. The stigma lies in the reaction that others respond with in such situations. For instance, reactions as denial, dismay, social exclusion or punishment place the stigma on the person or persons in question. One example of such reactions can be found in the context of reporting wrongdoing (e.g., corruption, unethical treatment of patients or sexual harassment) at work. One whistleblower stated: “I realised I was treated as if I was contagious or radioactive (...) People stiffened and some were lip talkers. Some were scared (...) I guess somebody had told them, that if you hang around him, he will report you, and you will get in trouble! (...) It is very unpleasant. Because you do not know what people have heard and you can not pick people randomly and say: listen! I will tell you what this is really about” (Bjørkelo, Ryberg, Matthiesen, & Einarsen, 2008, p. 28).

The label “whistleblower” could in this way be related to the concept of stigma, as introduced by Goffman (1963/1990) in his seminal work. The act of reporting wrongdoing can be associated with perceptions of the individual performing these acts, in a way that he or she is perceived as displaying an undesired social characteristic or deviation from the norm. This can develop from social to individual stigma as individuals performing the act of reporting can be perceived as possessing “single discrediting” attributes (Ferree & Smith, 1979). Within the police formation the social norm may for instance be a “code of silence” (Prenzler, 2009). The code ensures that officers “act in accordance with their *collective well-being* rather than their personal self-interest” (Crank, 1998, p. 226, in Rothwell & Baldwin, 2007). A culture of authoritarianism and conservatism may enhance strong resistance towards deviation from the norms as “code of silence”.

Confronted with a working life including human, material, information, and financial wrongdoing that harm others, some have argued that employees who perform self-initiated, change oriented, and proactive behaviour can be “more important than ever before” in order to stop wrongdoing at work (Grant & Ashford, 2008, p. 5). The proactive behaviour of whistleblowing, sometimes referred to as ethical resistance (Uys, 2008), unlike regular informative reporting or even providing negative feedback, has an obvious ultimate goal, namely to terminate the initial wrongdoing (Graham, 1986; Near & Miceli, 1996). The act of reporting wrongdoing at work can be defined as “the disclosure by organization members (former or current) of illegal, immoral or illegitimate practices under the control of their employers, to persons or organizations that may be

Table 2
Potential types of wrongdoing.

Type	Description
Financial irregularities	“embezzlement amounting to hundreds of thousands of dollars” (Mansbach, 2007, p. 125). “political parties handed out excess donations receipts in a 1:5 ration and used charity organizations for money laundering” (Strack, 2011, p. 111).
Safety threats	“serious design problem in the L-1011” (Gellert, 1981, p. 17). “unsafe windshield and a gas tank that might explode on impact (Glazer, 1983, p. 36). “inadequate custodial supervision of known violent patients” (MacNamara, 1991, p. 126).
Ill treatment	“repeated abuse of patients by the ward’s Charge Nurse (CN). Patients were slapped, hit and overdosed with tranquilizers” (Beardshaw, 1981, p. 25)

able to effect action” (Near & Miceli, 1985, p. 4). Across six models (Bjørkelo, 2010), whistleblowing can be described as a process along a time-line that includes different stages such as discovery or observation, evaluation, blowing the whistle or not, and some type of reaction that may or may not be repeated (Graham, 1986; McLain & Keenan, 1999; Miceli & Near, 1992; O’Day, 1974; Rosecrance, 1988; Soeken, 1986). An overview of different factors that may play a part in whistleblowing cases illustrated in table 1.

Another element is what constitutes a wrongdoing. The term wrongdoing is traditionally applied to denote the content of the whistleblowing that the whistleblower in question perceives as unethical, illegal or illegitimate. This term may have different interpretations across national legal systems, among laymen and to researchers. This presentation of the term will take research definitions as its point of departure. Conceptually wrongdoing may be defined as ‘illegal, immoral, or illegitimate practices’ (Miceli, Near, & Dworkin, 2008, p. 4). According to Bok (1981) wrongdoing may concern neglect, wilful concealment of hazards and ‘outright abuse on the part of colleagues or superiors’ (p. 208). Other examples are pollution and selling dangerous products such as for instance badly manufactured drugs and food (Mathews, 1987). Wrongdoing may be directed toward *single individuals*, for instance in cases of sexual harassment (Knapp, Faley, Ekeberg, & Dubois, 1997) and workplace bullying (van Heugten, 2009), toward *groups of people* such as hospitalised patients (Beardshaw, 1981), toward *local communities* as in cases of corruption (Mansbach & Bachner, 2009) or at a certain *markets* such as the drug industry (Rost, 2006). Some have applied the term *insidious workplace behaviour* to denote wrongdoing that often is ambiguous and difficult to detect (Blenkinsopp & Edwards, 2008). Wrongdoing can further be divided into activities that are discrete and personal in that they are not supported by the organisation and may be performed for individual gain (occupational wrongdoing) and situations where groups of individuals or the entire corporation or institution is enmeshed in fraud or mistreatment practice that is supported and even encouraged (i.e. organisational wrongdoing, Miethe, 1999; Miethe & Rothschild, 1994). Even though wrongdoing is defined as something that is “illegal, immoral, or illegitimate”, the term can take on different interpretations across situations and nations. One example is that Norwegian businesses until 1995 could get

tax reductions for having paid money or other services (i.e., corruption) in nations where this was seen as necessary to do business¹. This may be one of the reasons why the typology of potential types of wrongdoing can be rather rich. For an illustration of the variety of types of wrongdoing see table 2 presented above.

There seem to be cross-national negative connotations and hostile attitudes attached to how individuals that report are met by un-stigmatized others or “normals” which implies that the act of reporting wrongdoing itself is associated with stigma in the words of Goffman (1963/1990). Negative connotations again exclude these individuals from “full social acceptance” (Goffman, 1963/1990, p. 9). But are these assumptions based on empirical evidence? Are individuals that report wrongdoing systematically different from others?

Prevention of stigmatization in whistleblowing cases

Despite the fact that the act of whistleblowing seems to be attached to negative attitudes and public stigma (e.g., societal negative reactions), the pursuit for detecting those potential systematic individual characteristics of whistleblowing has been both long and difficult. So who are these individuals that dear telling that ‘the emperor, or in this case the CEO, lacks clothes’? (Morrison & Milliken, 2000, p. 706), to paraphrase the Hans Christian Andersen’s fairytale (Andersen, 1837).

The most consistent personal characteristic associated with actual whistleblowing seems to be job position, which may indicate some level of formal and social power within organisation’s higher hierarchy (cf. Mesmer-Magnus & Viswesvaran, 2005; Near & Miceli, 1996). In a representative study of Norwegian working life, whistleblowing was unrelated to gender, but job position, such as being a leader or a personnel safety representative, as well as job satisfaction predicted group membership as a self-reported whistleblower (Bjørkelo, Einarsen, Nielsen, & Matthiesen, 2011). In fact, employees holding a formal position as a union or personnel safety representative were over two times (OR=2.37) more likely to be a whistleblower than employees without such positions.

Some studies have also investigated the relationship between personality and whistleblowing. While some of these have found that (1) none of the measures applied

¹ <http://www.transparency.no/index.php?c=17&kat=Historikk>

to assess personality (i.e. compliance with supervisors' wishes, submissiveness to organisational authority and self righteousness) were associated with the intent to report wrongdoing at work (McCutcheon, 2000), other have found that (2) that there is a positive link between proactive personality (i.e., a higher level of conscientiousness and extraversion) and whistleblowing (Miceli, Van Scotter, Near & Rehg, 2001b, cited in Miceli & Near, 2005) and that (3) personality in the form of high extraversion, low agreeableness and high domineering in interpersonal interaction predicts proactive behaviour in the form of whistleblowing (Bjørkelo, Matthiesen, & Einarsen, 2010). Thus, results on the role of the individual whistleblower are *"mixed and incomplete concerning the ways in which whistleblowers have personalities or dispositions that differ from those of workers who observe but do not report wrongdoing"* (Miceli & Near, 2010, p. 84). This can indicate that other explanatory factors such as the act of reporting wrongdoing at work itself, or the type of wrongdoing and the reaction from others can be seen as the crucial factors that generate the stigma. This further implies that the stigma just as likely is attached to how others react towards the violation of social norms in organisations.

Empirical evidence has shown that whistleblowing predominantly is effective when performed by applying internal channels of reporting (Bjørkelo, 2010; Miceli & Near, 2010). As a result, there is now attention towards securing legislation so that the stigma attached to reporting wrongdoing can be approached. This includes emphasising the potential positive effects of whistleblowing, providing protection for those who decide to blow the whistle on wrongdoing and in so doing decrease possible societal stigma (Jones, 2002; Lewis, 2010). This is highly valued, because stigma can inflict "negative consequences for individuals' economic well-being, and aspects of psychological well-being such as depression and hopelessness" (Manstead, et al., 1996, p. 634), consequences which have been shown to be the case in the stigmatizing condition of whistleblowing (Bjørkelo, et al., 2008; Faulkner, 1998; Rothschild & Miethe, 1999). One way to decrease societal stigma is to relate the act of reporting to other known acts that are commonly perceived as more positive within society. In the following we will therefore discuss similarities and differences between whistleblowing and other concepts such as OCB, in-role, and extra-role behaviour.

Whistleblowing, OCB, in-role and extra-role behaviour

Organizational Citizenship Behaviour is defined as "individual behaviour that is discretionary, not directly or explicitly recognized by the formal reward system, and that in the aggregate promotes effective functioning of the organization" (Organ, 1988, p. 4). According to Rioux and Penner (2001), OCB consists of three underlying motives: prosocial values, organisational concern, and impression

management. To date, scholars and researchers have identified quite a number of dimensions of OCBs to explain higher- or lower-order groups of positive behaviours (e.g., helping, sportsmanship, civic virtue, altruism, courtesy, cheerleading, peacekeeping, forbearance, loyalty, organisational spontaneity and conscientiousness). For instance in one study, the positive behaviours among Polish employees differed less according to their behavioural constituents and more to the fact of who was their direct beneficiary (Macko, 2009). Relationships between perceived organisational justice and its positive behavioural effects (OCBs) showed the mixed pattern of both strong positive outcomes and the lack thereof. This finding implies that employees use precise psychological mechanisms allowing for cognitive alignment between some social entity's being perceived as justice source and being targeted as beneficiary of increased positive actions. Promotive and protective OCBs (i.e. spontaneous and intrinsically motivated behaviours as whistleblowing) showed significant and strong relationships with organisational justice. Weaker correlations had been found for agreeable and reactive OCBs (e.g., forbearance; Markóczy, Vora, & Xin, 2009) where initiative needed on behalf of an employee also is weaker. Interestingly enough, there were no correlations between employer's fairness and both person-focused and group-focused OCBs in Polish organisations. Furthermore, organisations seen as unjust encounter far more particular counterproductive behaviours as: "I do not want to report important problems because I wish things will get even worse for my employer". This again suggests existing strong social partition between "us", namely employee in-groups and "them" including institutional employer and its representatives. Employees who see organisational procedures or behaviours as dysfunctional, and fear being mistreated by formal and informal rules (i.e. unjustly punished, stigmatized or criticized) will not report wrongdoing wishing negative consequences be further inflicted on "them" (usually supervisors). At the same time, "their" being unfair does not contradict to acting helpfully and prosocially towards "us" – other employees whether other individuals or group of co-workers. In the study previously mentioned by Macko (2009) the general importance of establishing proper organisational justice management practices was demonstrated. A very important facet of a just organisation is maintaining a well functioning whistleblowing policy.

While each label among OCBs has its own unique character, they are not, in fact, that conceptually distinct. All OCBs seem to encompass Barnard's (1938) notion that organisations ought to build participants' "willingness to contribute efforts to the cooperative system" (p. 84). Thus, additional employee participation, as principled organisational dissent (Graham, 1986) can be a sign of a healthy organisation. Furthermore to blow the whistle

on organisational wrongdoing also meets Kahn's (1964) suggestion that effective organisations are those whose members show motivation to remain within the system and exert innovative and spontaneous activity that goes beyond initial role prescriptions. Organisational citizens always go an extra mile volunteering for an extra task; put an extra effort into minimizing the time needed for completing assigned tasks, take care for their company and their co-workers, and provide suggestions for improvement. All this in sum constitutes "the good soldier syndrome" (cf. Organ, 1988). Revising research findings, we hold the opinion, that good soldiers might need institutional help from healthy formal and informal procedures. In this regard, whistleblowing policy can serve as internal security valve (Bjørkelo & Taraldset, 2010).

Another way to integrate the act of whistleblowing and decrease societal stigma can be to relate it to in-role and extra-role behaviour (cf. Van Dyne, Cummings, & Parks, 1995). In-Role Behaviour (IRB) is required or expected from an employee as part of performing the duties and responsibilities of an assigned role. Extra-role behaviour (ERB) is discretionary and profits the organisation when personnel exceed day-to-day role expectations. Apart from its positive organisational outcomes or benefits and its voluntary nature, ERBs are also intentional by requiring active decision to engage in the behaviour. Even though it may be argued that disclosures of organisational wrongdoing, mismanagement and malpractices by members on formal IRB-positions should not be taken into account as OCB, research on internal auditors has shown that reporting is prevalent, even though not all seem to follow their role-prescribed reporting behaviour (see e.g., Miceli, Near, & Schwenk, 1991). Thus, interpreting whistleblowing as OCB, in- or extra-role behaviour, which are perceived as more positive by the organisation, can be one way to proceed in order to decrease the stigma attached to the stigmatizing position of reporting wrongdoing at work.

Concluding remarks

The act of reporting wrongdoing at work or whistleblowing can be associated with negative connotations, hostile attitudes and social stigma. As a result, the individual or groups performing these acts can be perceived as displaying undesired social characteristics or deviations from social norms, such as for instance the "code of silence" within the police. Empirical studies have however shown that there is little systematic evidence that support the assumption that individuals who report wrongdoing are very different from others. One way to decrease societal stigma can be to relate the act of reporting to other known acts that are perceived upon as more positive within society. The discussion of similarities and differences between the idea of whistleblowing and other concepts such as OCB, in- and extra-role behaviour, showed

that whistleblowing can be associated with these concepts. The act of reporting wrongdoing at work has shown to be an effective way to improve services, products and procedures. The hope is therefore that the stigma attached to the act gradually can change. In order to achieve this, "managers, employees and members of society need to undergo a cultural transformation such that whistle-blowing is viewed as potentially positive for those involved. Only with this changed view of whistle-blowing will it prove more effective as a mechanism for corporate and societal change" (Miceli & Near, 2005, p. 98). Providing ground for not viewing the act itself as negative, hostile and stigmatic may be one way to proceed.

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