

Why good guys finish last: The role of justification motives, cognition, and emotion in predicting retaliation against whistleblowers

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Abstract

Despite the public's growing dissatisfaction with unethical behavior in modern organizations, research suggests that individuals who blow the whistle in an attempt to stop illicit activity often suffer retaliation at the hands of those who stand to benefit from the wrongdoing. To date, relatively little work has been undertaken exploring the boundary conditions and mechanisms for *when* and *why* retaliation occurs, with perceived differences in power and resource dependence between the whistleblower and retaliator being offered as the primary explanations. In this article, we attempt to build upon this theoretical foundation by introducing cognitive (i.e., moral disengagement) and affective (i.e., moral emotions) mechanisms as underlying drivers of the whistleblowing–retaliation relationship. Additionally, we use the theoretical lens of system justification theory to explore how perceived threats to an individual's ego, group, and/or system heighten cognitive and affective responses that drive an individual to retaliate in seemingly paradoxical ways. Implications for practice and future research directions are discussed.

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In recent years, whistleblowing, 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 able to effect action” (Near & Miceli, 1985, p. 4), has gained greater scholarly attention, as corporate malfeasance has become increasingly common (Anand, Ashforth, & Joshi, 2004; Ashforth & Anand, 2003), and calls for ethical behavior in the workplace have grown louder and more forceful (Ghosh, 2008; Stengel, 2009; Treviño, Weaver, & Reynolds, 2006). Yet, despite the pursuit of greater transparency in the workplace, researchers have found that well-meaning individuals who report unethical behavior are often frowned upon and treated poorly by their bosses, peers, and important others (Mesmer-Magnus & Viswesvaran, 2005; Miceli & Near, 1992; Rehg, 1998). Rather than being applauded for exposing illicit actions that can potentially harm the organization’s financial standing and reputation, whistleblowers are often castigated for attempting to challenge and upset the status quo (Miceli, Near, & Dworkin, 2008; Near & Miceli, 1996; Rehg, 1998; Rehg, Miceli, Near, & van Scotter, 2008). In fact, retaliation against whistleblowers, defined as “undesirable action taken against a whistleblower – and in direct response to the whistleblowing” (Miceli et al., 2008, p. 101), has been shown to take more serious forms, including ostracism, lost status, influence, rewards, and even lost employment (Decker & Calo, 2007; Dworkin & Baucus, 1998; Holden, 1996; Miceli & Near, 1992).

Given these serious negative consequences whistleblowers may experience, scholars have sought to provide greater theoretical insight into why retaliation occurs. To date, much of this work has focused on explanations derived

from the power and status literatures, ranging from how individuals’ lack of status and idiosyncrasy credits (Hollander, 1958) limits their ability to blow the whistle without fear of retaliation (Miceli & Near, 1992; Near & Miceli, 1987), to the degree of resource dependence (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978) between the whistleblower and the organization. Espousing this latter view, Miceli et al. (2008) theorized that when an organization is highly dependent upon wrongdoing for valued resources and rewards, the more it resists heeding the whistleblower and curtailing the unethical behavior. Consequently, whistleblowers who attempt to disrupt an unethical, but organizationally beneficial activity may be more likely to be retaliated against.

Yet, despite the value these power-driven perspectives provide in elucidating the mechanisms of retaliation, important gaps in the whistleblowing literature still remain. For instance, although a wealth of research suggests that individuals may experience strong emotions, such as anger, fear, or shame, when accused of wrongdoing (Fitness, 2000; Nathanson, 1992; Tangney, 1991; Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007; Zhong & Liljenquist, 2006) and cognitively disengage from ethically questionable acts in order to justify unethical behavior (Banaji, Bazerman, & Chugh, 2003; Bandura, 1999; Chugh, Bazerman, & Banaji, 2005; Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004), scholars have yet to fully consider how individuals’ emotions and cognitions impact retaliation. Furthermore, these cognitive and emotive forces may be strongly influenced by the extent to which individuals perceive the whistleblower as a significant threat (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1996; Tomaka & Blascovich, 1994). In developing system justification theory as a way to explain why individuals may support the status quo,

even when it does not personally benefit them, Jost and Banaji (1994) argued that individuals are often motivated to protect their *ego* (i.e., maintain a positive sense of self), *group* (i.e., feel good about the group they belong to), and/or *system* (i.e., uphold the status quo of the social system they are a part of) against threats they view as legitimate and formidable. In light of this work, individuals' motivation to retaliate may not simply be driven by perceptions of power and resource dependence, but rather, more emotive, cognitive, and threat-driven factors.

The purpose of this article is to contribute conceptually to the whistleblowing literature by offering insight into why retaliation against whistleblowers occurs, and how specific individual-, group-, and system-level boundary conditions can increase the likelihood that retaliation will take place. Drawing from well-established literatures on moral disengagement (Bandura, 1999) and moral emotions (Haidt, 2003; Tangney et al., 2007), we argue that retaliation against whistleblowers frequently occurs because whistleblowing stirs up feelings of anger, fear, and shame that would-be retaliators must resolve. Since individuals often work hard to minimize their experience of unpleasant and negative emotions, particularly when they fail to do the right thing (Norgaard, 2006), retaliating against the whistleblower in response to this emotional burden may be seen by individuals as justified behavior. In some cases, however, individuals may also choose to engage in a more elaborate cognitive process, prior to retaliating, and morally disengage from the wrongdoing as a way to shield their self-image from scrutiny and harm.

We begin this discussion by briefly reviewing recent theoretical and empirical work on retaliation against whistleblowers. Next, we introduce the central contribution of our article, by articulating how whistleblowing represents a perceived threat to one's ego, group, and/or system, and how these threats, in turn, activate cognitive and emotional processes. In developing these arguments, we offer theoretical guidance on how specific individual (e.g.,

Machiavellianism, organizational commitment, belief in a just world) and contextual (e.g., ethical climate, group cohesion, legitimacy) forces potentially exacerbate the threat posed by whistleblowers.

Additionally, we place two important constraints upon our model. First, our theory is intended to apply only to those situations where whistleblowers are well intentioned and pro-socially motivated (Grant, 2007) to help their organization do what they believe is the morally right thing to do. In this way, we view whistleblowers as righteous, rather than retributive actors. Second, we take a broad view of who is likely to retaliate against the whistleblower by suggesting that anyone who stands to benefit from the unethical activity is a candidate for administering punishment. In some instances, this may be the individual directly engaged in the wrongdoing, while in others, it may be an individual who knows of the wrongdoing, but is not directly involved. In both cases, however, we argue that a norm of self-interest (Miller, 1999) is likely to encourage the actor to do what is necessary to maintain the status quo. Therefore, we do not specifically discriminate in our model who will specifically be responsible for retaliating against the whistleblower. Rather, we suggest that retaliation may come from a multitude of sources, thereby making the act of whistleblowing even more difficult. Finally, we discuss our theoretical propositions in light of existing theory, note the managerial implications of our work, and propose future directions for researchers to consider. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of our conceptual model.

Current perspectives on retaliation against whistleblowers

Power and resource dependence perspectives on retaliation

Despite the implicit assumption among many that retaliation against whistleblowers is the norm in many organizations, from a scholarly

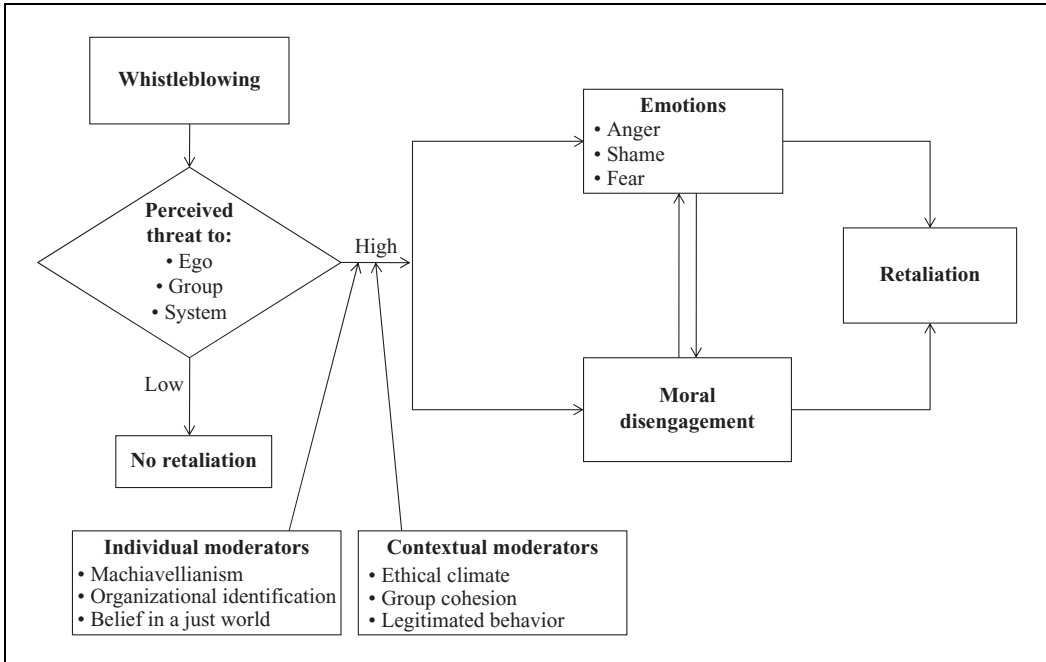


Figure 1. A cognitive-emotional model of retaliation against whistleblowers.

standpoint, surprisingly little is known about the antecedents associated with retaliation. To help the field make sense of equivocal findings across a broad expanse of work on whistleblowing, researchers have begun to use more systematic tools, such as meta-analysis (Mesmer-Magnus & Viswesvaran, 2005) and narrative reviews (Miceli & Near, 1992; Miceli et al., 2008; Near & Miceli, 1996) in an effort to provide sharper insight into how whistleblowing might foster retaliatory behavior.

In their meta-analysis of 193 correlations obtained from 26 samples ($N = 18,781$), Mesmer-Magnus and Viswesvaran (2005) explored how whistleblower characteristics (i.e., education, job level, role responsibility), whistleblower actions (i.e., report via external channels, success in stopping wrongdoing), contextual variables (i.e., supervisor and coworker support), and characteristics (i.e., frequency and seriousness) correlated with retaliation. The researchers found that education, job level, and

role-prescribed responsibility to blow the whistle were essentially unrelated to retaliation against whistleblowers ($r = .04$, $r = .07$, and $r = .07$, respectively), but did find that blowing the whistle on serious transgressions or activities that frequently occurred in the organization were more likely to be met with retaliation, compared to infrequent or less severe wrongdoings ($r = .30$ and $.13$, respectively). In addition, Mesmer-Magnus and Viswesvaran (2005) found that whistleblowers that lacked supervisory support and used external channels to report misdeeds were more likely to be retaliated against.

Building on this work, Miceli et al. (2008, p. 102) put forth a comprehensive model of the predictors of retaliation that also focused on whistleblower characteristics (e.g., gender, pay, race, education), the job situation, situational characteristics related to the wrongdoing and the whistleblowing (e.g., others' support), and characteristics of the group, organization,

and society. In doing so, they found no significant relationships between demographic variables and retaliation, apart from minority race. However, situational characteristics, such as wrongdoer power and status, the seriousness and type of wrongdoing, and the use of external whistleblowing channels were all positively related to retaliation, consistent with prior research. In articulating this new model, Miceli et al. (2008) proposed that concerns over resource dependence and power (e.g., minority influence, bases of social power) serve as the primary mechanisms driving retaliation. That is, “the more powerful the wrongdoer, or the more dependent the organization is on the wrongdoer – all other factors being equal – the more retaliation will be directed toward the whistle-blower . . .” (p. 104).

Although we find considerable merit in the idea that power-based explanations are likely to account for some of the variance associated with retaliation, we believe alternative theoretical explanations exist. Given our knowledge from the broader management and social psychology literatures of various individual and situational forces that shape individuals’ motives, attitudes, and behaviors in the workplace, we seek to build on these foundational perspectives of power and resource dependence. Thus, for the remainder of this article, we turn our attention towards more microlevel explanations, including moral emotions and moral disengagement, as the primary forces driving individuals’ retaliation against whistleblowers. To help us better understand why individuals’ cognitive and affective mechanisms may be activated and potentially heightened, we look to the literature on justification motives (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004).

Justification motives

In their seminal work, Jost and Banaji (1994) identified three justification motives individuals possess. First, the *ego justification* motive

relates to the need to develop a positive sense of self and to be considered a valuable and legitimate individual. Second, the *group justification* motive refers to the desire to develop, maintain, and protect a positive conception of one’s group. Third, the *system justification* motive concerns the goals of viewing the status quo as legitimate and internalizing the established social system as just, desirable, and inevitable. Although Jost and Banaji (1994) note these three motives, they focus primarily on the system component in describing *system justification theory* (SJT). SJT is an important social psychological theory that reconciles seemingly paradoxical findings regarding working-class conservatism, idealized capitalism, minority preferences for the majority group, increased commitment to organizational institutions and meritocratic ideology of poor individuals (Jost & Hunyady, 2005). Just as SJT explains paradoxes that arise from a desire to protect the status quo, we believe that a perceived threat to any of these three justification motives can lead to the counterintuitive behavior of denigrating the whistleblower who seemingly acts in the best interests of others in the organization. In the following sections, we articulate how whistleblowing may be perceived by individuals as a threat to their self, group, or system justification motives, and how these perceived threats heighten emotional and cognitive responses that lead individuals to retaliate.

Whistleblowing as a threat to one’s ego

Although much of the research on retaliation has focused on the threats posed *to* whistleblowers, relatively little work in this domain has explored the threats posed *by* whistleblowers. Although retaliators are commonly thought of as the ones carrying the sticks of punishment and retribution, in many ways, whistleblowers are themselves threatening figures, by virtue of their willingness to disrupt established structures and act courageously in the face of stiff opposition. In many

ways, whistleblowers are *tempered radicals* (Meyerson & Scully, 1995, p. 586) who “identify with and are committed to their organizations [but] also to a cause, community or ideology that is fundamentally different from, and possibly at odds with, the dominant culture of their organization.” Rather than stoop to the level of corruption within their organizations, whistleblowers seek to rise above their peers by cleansing their work environments of unethical activity. Although in theory, such exemplary moral behavior should be rewarded, a host of evidence indicates that whistleblowers set themselves up for greater retaliation by refusing to sacrifice the sacred for the secular (Decker & Calo, 2007; Miceli & Near, 1992; Tetlock, Kristel, Elson, & Lerner, 2000). By holding fast to their ethical principles, whistleblowers implicitly signal to those around them their moral superiority and research demonstrates that others tend to disparage such “moral rebels” (Monin, Sawyer, & Marquez, 2008). In doing so, whistleblowers may be viewed as an ego threat to those who possess looser moral standards and/or succumb to the temptations of unethical activity around them.

Proposition 1: Whistleblowers who are perceived as strong threats to individuals’ egos are likely to be retaliated against.

Whistleblowing as a threat to one’s group

Although threats to one’s ego may clearly motivate a desire for retaliation, individuals’ social identification—a perception of oneness with a group of persons—may also profoundly influence how individuals deal with role conflict, and how they manage intergroup relations (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). In fact, a wealth of research has explored how social identity motives influence work motivation and performance in a variety of organizational contexts and settings (Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004; van Knippenberg, 2000; van Knippenberg & Sleebos, 2006). This stream of work strongly

supports Tajfel and Turner’s (1986) original claims that individuals find great meaning and value in their group memberships (e.g., social, religious, professional groups, etc.) and work hard to preserve them (Lurie & Frenkel, 2002).

When faced with impending threats to these collective identities, individuals typically act to preserve these valued relationships (Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002; van Knippenberg, 1984) in an effort to maintain a sense of shared belonging (Asch, 1951; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). In some cases, this protective stance may be heightened out of a misplaced sense of loyalty to the collective (Uys, 2008). Often what makes it difficult for individuals to oppose the group on ethical or moral grounds is the expectation of reciprocal loyalty between members of a group that view their relationships as special (Fletcher, 1993). That is, individuals who are highly interdependent upon one another for success and have previously fostered strong feelings of solidarity are more prone to demand loyalty from their members, regardless of whether or not such loyalty is appropriate or beneficial.

To illustrate, consider the well-publicized steroids scandal that engulfed Major League Baseball (MLB) in recent years. In their 2009 bestseller, *The Yankee Years*, former New York Yankees manager Joe Torre and Sports Illustrated senior writer Tom Verducci describe how the tight fraternity among former and current baseball players contributed to keeping the steroids scandal from coming to public light for years, despite the fact that many players, managers, doctors, and even baseball officials knew of and witnessed firsthand the illicit use of performance-enhancing drugs in their sport. According to Torre and Verducci (2009, p. 87), the culture of baseball in the 1990s and early 2000s was one where “don’t ask, don’t tell and don’t care was the unwritten code of the day.” Nothing was to disrupt the strong shared identities of the fraternity, and anyone who threatened to do so was demoted in the status hierarchy. Because loyalty to the profession and the baseball fraternity was viewed as *the* highest value,

those who attempted to blow the whistle were relegated to second-tier status and often ignored or ostracized (Torre & Verducci, 2009).

This example illustrates how social identification motives can contribute to a lack of transparency and forthrightness in bringing unethical behavior to light. When group members share strong collective identities, they may feel overly protective of one another, and thus, choose to retaliate against whistleblowers they view as trying to disrupt these strong ties.

Proposition 2: Whistleblowers who are perceived as strong threats to individuals' shared group identity are likely to be retaliated against.

Whistleblowing as a threat to one's system

The third justification motive centers on how individuals are motivated to maintain the status quo and to imbue it with legitimacy so that it is universally regarded as the best course of action, even when it is seemingly not in their best interest and/or potentially violates moral or ethical standards of behavior. When whistleblowers attempt to stop unethical behavior within their organizations, individuals who are connected to the illicit actions in some way are likely to view whistleblowers as threats to their system. This response may be rational, given individuals' natural tendency to protect self-interests, particularly when social norms dictate such behavior (Miller, 1999). Rather than risk losing the benefits they may reap from the unethical behavior, individuals are likely to try to discredit the whistleblower and the allegations in an effort to keep the established system from unraveling. Returning once again to the example of steroid use in MLB, it appears the institution was highly motivated to perpetuate steroid use, in large part because of the significant financial benefits that accrued to everyone:

There was only one way for baseball to react to this kind of whistleblowing: Crank the music back up and keep the party rolling. The union

was having too much fun and making too much money to pay much attention to Helling's warning. It was far easier and financially prudent to ignore the issue, to assume that Helling was an alarmist prone to exaggerating, and to make sure everyone involved knew as little as possible about players injecting hard-core steroids... (Torre & Verducci, 2009, p. 87)

This window into the minds of powerful actors who ran the sport during its heyday illustrates how difficult it can be for a whistleblower to challenge the established system, particularly when that system offers tangible benefits to many. Had baseball not been reaping the financial benefits that came with rampant steroid use, perhaps whistleblowers may not have been viewed as a significant threat. However, as the system continued to grow and players gained financially from the illegal activity, the potential threat of whistleblowers to this house of cards clearly became more dangerous. Extrapolating this logic to other organizations suggests that whistleblowers that challenge a prosperous status quo born out of illicit activity are likely to be viewed as serious threats by those benefitting from the current system.

Proposition 3: Whistleblowers who are perceived as strong threats to a prosperous system are likely to be retaliated against.

Having articulated how whistleblowing might be perceived as an important threat to individuals' ego, group, and system justification motives, we now turn our attention to explaining how these perceived threats can activate individuals' emotional and cognitive responses, which in turn, serve as the fuel for retaliation.

Moral emotions and moral disengagement

Moral emotions

As scholars have become increasingly interested in the reasons why individuals' ethical standards

and beliefs do not necessarily translate into moral behavior in the workplace, research on moral emotions has emerged as a potential answer to this important question (Haidt, 2008; Leary, 2007; Tangney et al., 2007). Although moral emotions can be powerful motivators, providing individuals with the energy and desire to do right, not wrong (Kroll & Egan, 2004), and serving as a potential gateway from good intentions to good actions, much of the research in this domain has focused on negative valence and self-conscious emotions, such as anger, guilt and shame (Eisenberg, 2000; Haidt, 2003; Tangney et al., 2007). Within Western cultures, anger is typically seen as the prototypical moral emotion, given its strong visceral expression and the ease with which it is detected (Haidt, 2003). Although some have argued that anger is a powerful emotional antecedent that motivates individuals to blow the whistle (Gundlach, Martinko, & Douglas, 2008), we believe anger may be better viewed as a double-edged sword that also motivates individuals to retaliate *against* whistleblowers.

One reason why individuals may feel anger and choose to retaliate against a credible whistleblower is because the accusation of organizational wrongdoing implies—correctly or incorrectly—that something is morally amiss with the individual (Folkes & Kamins, 1999; Jones & Ryan, 1997; Treviño et al., 2006). In situations where individuals are unfairly accused by the whistleblower and possess sufficient evidence to refute these claims, they are likely to be angered by the inaccuracy of the allegation, and thus, view retaliation as a logical response to try and restore their good name. In these instances, anger directed at the whistleblower stems from a sense of injustice and the perception that a demeaning personal insult has occurred (Shweder & Haidt, 1993). According to Folger, Cropanzano, and Goldman (2005), when individuals feel that moral principles and perceptions of justice have been violated, this can trigger “deontic anger,” that may prompt

retaliatory behaviors, regardless of whether or not this is the appropriate response at the time.

However, retaliation against whistleblowers may also occur, even when the whistleblower’s claims of wrongdoing are completely accurate and well founded. In such cases, individuals’ anger may arise, not out of righteous indignation for being falsely accused, but rather, out of a desire to protect their self-image by placing blame elsewhere (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996; Paivio, 1999). Research suggests that when individuals have directly engaged in some form of wrongdoing or been tacit observers to it, their immediate and natural response tendency is to deny or minimize the illicit behavior (Campbell, 2001). Such a response emanates from individuals’ dual desires to protect against a loss of status (or face) (Goffman, 1967; Ho, 1976) in the eyes of important others and to insulate themselves from negative emotions, such as guilt. This self-protective behavior is commonly seen in public figures (e.g., politicians, celebrities, etc.) that immediately turn to angry and adamant denials in an effort to uphold their reputation, before confessing to the misdeed after unequivocal evidence connects them to the wrongdoing. In this same way, individuals in the workplace may express anger in an effort to “turn the tables” on their accusers (i.e., whistleblowers) and in doing so, right their own self-concepts (Lewis, 1971).

Proposition 4a: When individuals perceive whistleblowing as a significant threat to their ego, group, or system justification motive, they are likely to experience anger.

Proposition 4b: Individuals’ anger at the whistleblower will mediate the relationship between the threat posed by whistleblowing and retaliation.

Although individuals’ outward expressions of anger may be a genuine response to an unfounded whistleblowing allegation, in some cases, individuals’ expressions of anger may actually be nothing more than a protective

facade erected to hide deeper emotions brought on by significant moral failings (Tangney, Wagner, Fletcher, & Gramzow, 1992; Tracy & Robins, 2006). Although anger may be the most easily understood and observed moral emotion, it is often an outward manifestation of more serious internal psychological strife brought about by deep feelings of shame (Lewis, 1971; Tangney, 1996). As researchers in clinical psychology have shown, feelings of shame and persona failure can frequently motivate strong expressions of anger (Izard, 1991; Tangney, 1991; Tangney et al., 1992). According to Lewis (1971), when individuals experience shame, they initially direct hostility towards themselves for failing to act morally. However, because shame also involves the disapproval and rejection by another, this anger is soon directed towards the disapproving individual as a way of retaliating against him or her for activating these negative emotions and thoughts. In this way, the shifting of blame and anger away from the self to another is a defensive maneuver aimed at repairing the shamed self at the expense of another (cf. Lewis, 1971; Tangney et al., 1992). For these reasons, we suggest that retaliation is likely to occur when individuals experience a great deal of shame for their explicit or tacit involvement in wrongdoing, since whistleblowers provide a convenient and visible target at which to direct these negative emotions.

Proposition 5a: When individuals perceive whistleblowing as a significant threat to their ego, group, or system justification motive, they are likely to experience shame.

Proposition 5b: Individuals' sense of shame for engaging in or tacitly supporting wrongdoing will mediate the relationship between whistleblowing and retaliation.

Although anger and shame are clearly viewed by scholars as pure moral emotions, the discrete emotion of fear (e.g., Ekman, 1992; Ohman & Wiens, 2001; see Plutchik, 2003, for

a review) may also play a role in heightening individuals' retaliation tendencies. In highlighting the critical role that fear plays in employees' unwillingness to speak up at work, Kish-Gephart, Detert, Treviño, and Edmondson (2009) suggest that "fear is often accompanied by feelings of apprehension, foreboding, and helplessness (Rachman, 1990), and represents the body's natural protection against potential threat – whether physical or psychological (Dozier, 1998; MacDonald, Kingsbury, & Shaw, 2005)." Typically, fear is caused by a specific trigger (Grandey, 2008; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996), which for the would-be retaliator, may be the whistleblower. For instance, when whistleblowers threaten to publicly expose those involved in wrongdoing, individuals may be highly fearful of losing psychic (e.g., status/reputation) and/or material rewards. Faced with feelings of apprehension and helplessness caused by the thought of losing resources and benefits, individuals may see retaliation against the whistleblower as a way to prevent this from happening.

Proposition 6a: When individuals perceive whistleblowing as a significant threat to their ego, group, or system justification motive, they are likely to experience fear.

Proposition 6b: Individuals' fear of what the whistleblower may expose will mediate the relationship between the threat posed by whistleblowing and retaliation.

Although individuals may respond emotionally to perceived threats to their ego, group, or system, a wealth of research also suggests that individuals may engage in more effortful and elaborative cognitive processes, particularly when the issue is of personal importance to them (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Street, Douglas, Geiger, & Martinko, 2001). Given that there is still much debate in the literature as to whether or not emotions precede cognitions (or vice versa) (e.g., Schwarz & Clore, 1996; Zajonc, 1980), we do not make specific predictions as to

the causal sequence of these factors, choosing instead to highlight how each of these factors may independently motivate retaliation against whistleblowers. In light of this self-imposed constraint, we now explore why individuals' ability to morally disengage from acts of wrongdoing might influence their willingness to retaliate when they are confronted with threats to their ego, group and/or system.

Moral disengagement

In his classic article exploring the reasons why the perpetration of inhumanities continues even in the modern era, Bandura (1999) posited that the self-regulatory mechanisms that govern individuals' moral conduct do not come into play unless activated, and that individuals have many psychological maneuvers at their disposal to disengage themselves from personal repercussions of inhumane conduct. When confronted with stark and vivid images of wrongdoing and brutality, such as genocide, individuals often turn their gaze elsewhere in an effort to avoid internalizing and having to come to terms with the extent of the wrongdoing (Cohen, 2001; Latané & Darley, 1970). Although such extreme and egregious violations of morality may be rare in modern organizations, individuals may still be prone to disengage from "lesser acts" of unethical behavior that frequently occur in their workplace (e.g., lying or stealing).

One reason why this moral disengagement may take place is individuals' propensity towards self-deception (Elster, 1987; Gur & Sackeim, 1979). According to Messick and Bazerman (1996), self-deception is unawareness of the processes that lead us to form our opinions and judgments. This deception involves the avoidance of truth, by telling lies and keeping secrets from ourselves (Bok, 1989). Individuals often choose to engage in self-deception because it allows them to "behave self-interestedly while, at the same time, falsely believing that one's moral principles were upheld" (Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004, p. 223).

By engaging in this psychological farce, individuals allow the ethical and moral implications of the decision to "fade" into the background (Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004). For example, a manager who hopes to obtain valued rewards from a lucrative negotiation with a high-profile vendor may convince him/herself that the benefits of dishonesty are minuscule and simply part of the "cost of doing business," when compared with the millions of dollars the firm stands to gain from his/her successful negotiating efforts.

Importantly, this cognitive disengagement from the potential consequences of the unethical behavior allows individuals to justify the wrongdoing, and thereby challenge anyone who may disagree with it, such as a whistleblower. Because individuals may convince themselves that the unethical action is no longer morally questionable, they begin to expect others to see the wrongdoing as they do—legitimate, acceptable, and potentially beneficial. As research on the egocentric bias and the false consensus effect suggest, individuals are prone to believe that their behavior is more common and acceptable than it really is (Mullen et al., 1985; Ross, Greene, & House, 1977). As a result of this self-inflicted illusion, morally disengaged individuals may find it threatening and even surprising when whistleblowers challenge them on moral grounds. Rather than adopting the self-reflective view that their actions or the actions of an organizational member are truly improper, individuals may perceive whistleblowers as misguided, naïve, or uninformed for failing to agree with their point of view. Consequently, this lack of support and consensus from whistleblowers may lead individuals to grow frustrated and feel the need to "teach them a lesson" by retaliating against them in some way. Thus, a lack of moral clarity around the action and little consideration of the implications of one's actions may result in greater retaliation against whistleblowers.

Proposition 7: When individuals perceive whistleblowing as a significant threat to their

ego, group, and/or system justification motive, they are likely to justify the unethical action and morally disengage from it.

Proposition 8: Moral disengagement will mediate the relationship between the threat posed by whistleblowing and retaliation.

Individual moderators

Having outlined how justification threats may activate individuals' emotional and cognitive responses, we now turn to identifying individual and contextual boundary conditions that may exacerbate these tendencies. In highlighting these various moderators, we examine how each applies at the specific levels—ego, group and system—described by system justification theory.

Machiavellianism

For many years now, the construct of Machiavellianism, which describes a person's tendency to deceive and manipulate other people for their personal gain, has long been viewed by psychologists as part of the "dark triad" of personality traits, along with narcissism and psychopathy (Christie & Geis, 1970; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). According to researchers, individuals who possess high degrees of Machiavellianism are apt to view the world from a highly self-interested perspective (Sims, 2010). In fact, a broad base of research suggests that unethical corporate activity can sometimes be directly tied to the influence of leaders (Whicker, 1996) who are high in Machiavellianism, and thus, do not have their firm's best interest at heart (see Allio, 2007; Gable & Dangelo, 1994; Paulhus & Williams, 2002; Pech & Slade, 2007). Related empirical work by Penney and Spector (2002) also suggests that individuals high in narcissism tend to be angrier and engage in counterproductive work behaviors, given their tendencies towards aggression and strong ego threat.

In thinking about how these types of individuals might respond to acts of whistleblowing, it seems likely that individuals high in

Machiavellianism will respond viscerally to whistleblowers that they perceive are significant threats to their ego. As established earlier, whistleblowing by definition is a disruptive activity that threatens to strip implicated individuals of their social standing and respect, since being branded as an unethical person carries with it a strong, negative social stigma, particularly in the workplace (Bommer, Gratto, Gravander, & Tuttle, 1987). Since trust is critical to an individual's ability to motivate and inspire higher levels of performance from subordinates (Grant & Sumanth, 2009), this loss of esteem in the eyes of peers, supervisors and key stakeholders can be debilitating for those trying to gain the cooperation of others (De Cremer, 2002; De Cremer & van Knippenberg, 2002). By blowing the whistle on individuals who tend to be primarily self-focused, whistleblowers implicitly label their Machiavellian colleagues as moral failures, which can severely threaten their egos in the process. Since individuals possess a natural desire to be seen by others as morally upright and ethical (e.g., Aquino & Reed, 2002), and are motivated to protect their egos after points of failure (Miller, 1976), individuals with a high propensity towards Machiavellianism may respond with greater hostility when whistleblowers challenge their moral image.

Proposition 9: High levels of Machiavellianism will moderate the relationship between perceived ego threat and emotions and moral disengagement which ultimately lead to retaliation. That is, when there is a strong perceived threat to an individual's ego, high levels of Machiavellianism will increase the likelihood that the individual will experience emotions and/or moral disengagement and thus be more likely to retaliate against the whistleblower.

Social/organizational identification

Just as individuals' personality characteristics may impact their propensity to retaliate against whistleblowers, the extent to which individuals

strongly identify with their organizations may also influence whether or not they choose to retaliate. As Tajfel and Turner (1986) eloquently describe, individuals operate with a variety of professional and personal identities that are highly context dependent. For instance, in a work setting, individuals may adopt an identity that is based upon their job title (e.g., manager), functional affiliation (e.g., marketing guy) or length of tenure with the organization (e.g., “old-timer”). By strongly identifying themselves with various aspects of their organization, individuals gain a deeper sense of community, belonging, and meaning (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). For instance, an individual who has spent 35 years of his/her career at the same company is likely to view the organization as a central part of his/her identity. As a result, he/she may resent a whistleblower who threatens to disrupt the organization’s activities and inner workings, even if he/she fundamentally agrees with the whistleblower’s moral stance. Just as baseball players identified strongly with their fraternity of other players and worked hard to protect one another from being implicated in the steroids scandal, so are employees who care deeply about their organization—viewing it as a central part of “who they are”—more likely to retaliate against whistleblowers. In this way, high levels of organizational identification—typically a good thing from a motivational and citizenship behavior standpoint—may potentially backfire.

Proposition 10: High levels of organizational identification will moderate the relationship between perceived group threat and emotions and moral disengagement which ultimately lead to retaliation. That is, when there is a strong perceived threat to an individual’s group, high levels of organizational identification will increase the experience of emotions and/or moral disengagement and thus the likelihood of retaliating against the whistleblower.

A third individual variable that may heighten the likelihood of retaliation against

whistleblowers is individuals’ psychological tendency to believe that the social system they operate within is fair and legitimate, rather than unfair and illegitimate (e.g., Jost & Banaji, 1994; Kay, Jost, & Young, 2005). Psychology researchers have repeatedly shown that individuals possess a strong tendency to maintain a “belief in a just world,” which often results in the blaming of individuals for their own misfortune (e.g., Furnham & Gunter, 1984; Olson & Hafer, 2001). By derogating society’s “losers” and applauding its “winners,” individuals implicitly support and justify the system within which they operate, rather than considering the role the system may have played in shaping these outcomes. From a whistleblowing standpoint, individuals who possess strong beliefs in a just world may be more likely to assume that the whistleblower is a “troublemaker,” given that the system in which he/she operates (i.e., the organization) is absolvable from blame. Ironically, even in cases where an individual may potentially benefit from the whistleblowing (e.g., a female employee concerned about minimizing sexual harassment), strong beliefs in a just world may make it more likely that the individual will support the status quo and denigrate the whistleblower for raising ethical concerns.

Proposition 11: High levels of a belief in a just world will moderate the relationship between perceived system threat and emotions and moral disengagement which ultimately lead to retaliation. That is, when there is a strong perceived threat to an individual’s system, high levels of belief in a just world will increase the likelihood that the individual will experience emotions and/or moral disengagement and thus will retaliate against the whistleblower.

Contextual moderators

Although individual factors may clearly strengthen the likelihood that individuals will retaliate against whistleblowers, a variety of contextual forces may also shape individuals’

negative behavior towards whistleblowers. Treviño (1986) theorized that individuals' ethical behavior is an interactive function of both their personal characteristics and the context in which they operate. Subsequent empirical work has found strong support for these assertions, with several studies demonstrating the negative impact that highly unethical climates have on ethical behavior (Kish-Gephart, Harrison, & Treviño, 2010). For example, Victor and Cullen (1988) describe one form of ethical climate as an "instrumental ethical climate" in which individuals are out for their own self-interest. This form of ethical climate has been linked to unfavorable job attitudes and increased unethical behavior (Martin & Cullen, 2006). In organizations where unethical behavior is rampant and seen as "the way to get ahead," individuals who are highly sensitive to the threat posed by whistleblowers are more likely to take umbrage at the whistleblower's actions. As a result, whistleblowers who attempt to curtail illicit behavior in these types of unethical work environments are likely to experience punishment and negative repercussions.

Proposition 12: A highly unethical organizational climate will moderate the relationship between perceived ego threat and retaliation. That is, when there is a strong perceived threat to an individual's ego, a highly unethical organizational climate will increase the likelihood that the individual will retaliate against the whistleblower.

Group cohesion

Just as an individual's strong identification with his/her organization might motivate greater retaliation against whistleblowers, so too can highly cohesive groups play a role in fostering punitive action. Groups and teams scholars have argued that the cohesiveness of a group may help to enhance the groups' performance (e.g., Mullen & Copper, 1994). At the same

time, however, a darker side of group cohesion has been offered as a counterbalance to this highly positive perspective. For instance, Hogg and Terry (2000) convincingly argued that in cohesive groups, individuals who typically fit the in-group prototype are more likely to be viewed favorably by their fellow group members, whereas those who are seen as "negative outliers" or "high flyers" may be ostracized for quite different reasons. While negative deviants are theorized to be uniformly rejected by cohesive groups, so-called "high flyers"—those who are considered overachievers—may be viewed sinisterly by others, particularly when group norms of cohesion and solidarity are high. In this way, whistleblowers who assume the role of a moral rebel are likely to be viewed more harshly in groups characterized by high cohesiveness.

Proposition 13: High levels of group cohesiveness will moderate the relationship between perceived group threat and retaliation. That is, when there is a strong perceived threat to an individual's group, a high degree of group cohesiveness will increase the likelihood that the individual will retaliate against the whistleblower.

Legitimated behavior

A third and final important contextual factor that may strengthen the likelihood of retaliation against whistleblowers is the degree to which unethical behavior is sanctioned or considered legitimate by broader organizational systems (e.g., industry norms). When a whistleblower poses a serious threat to the status quo, in addition to gauging organizational culture and climate norms, individuals may look to cues from their broader work context to better understand whether or not retaliation against the whistleblower is considered acceptable. For example, individuals may look to industry norms for guidance on what behaviors are considered appropriate, and use the legitimacy

established by the broader social system as supporting evidence for retaliating against a whistleblower who challenges these norms.

Proposition 14: The perceived legitimacy of unethical behavior will moderate the relationship between perceived system threat and retaliation. That is, when there is a strong perceived threat to an individual's system, unethical behavior that is perceived as highly legitimate will increase the likelihood that the individual will retaliate against the whistleblower.

Discussion

The purpose of this article was to present a theoretical model explaining why organizational members often retaliate against whistleblowers and how certain individual and contextual factors increase the likelihood of retaliatory behavior. In contrast to prior theoretical perspectives that have focused exclusively on power or resource dependence explanations for retaliation (Miceli & Near, 1992; Miceli et al., 2008; Near & Miceli, 1987), we posit that a threat to three justification motives and subsequent emotional and cognitive processes lead to the paradoxical behavior of retaliating against a whistleblower.

Practical implications

We believe our theoretical model has important practical implications for developing an ethical environment in which speaking up regarding wrongdoing is valued. Treviño and Nelson (2011) present a model of the ethical organizational context that highlights the role of several practices such as *recruitment and selection, orientation and training, policy and codes, reward and punishment systems, accountability and responsibility, and decision-making* that serve to enhance or detract from the ethical culture in organizations.

Our theoretical model has implications for many of these organizational practices. For

example, one approach to avoid retaliation against whistleblowers is to recruit and select ethical employees. If organizations use integrity tests and other tools to assess ethicality before individuals enter the organization, there will be less unethical behavior to report and employees will be more likely to champion as oppose to vilify those who speak up if indiscretions do occur. There are also implications for how to orient and train employees once they have joined the organization. Orientation programs should communicate the value organizations place on doing the right thing. Similarly, ethics-training programs that highlight potential justification motive threats that could eventuate in unethical behavior such as retaliating against a whistleblower should be made salient. In addition, employees should be trained on the principles of moral disengagement and should be made cognizant of the likely outcomes of various moral emotions.

It is critical for codes of ethics to be more than window dressing and to actually be implemented in organizational policies. In addition, employees who speak up should be rewarded and anyone who formally or informally punishes a whistleblower should face serious and public repercussions. Employees must be held accountable for their behaviors and one way to do so is to encourage whistleblowing if wrongdoing is witnessed. There should be outlets, such as ethics hotlines, where employees can blow the whistle anonymously without fear of reprisal. Finally, when making decisions that have ethical implications, employees should be aware of how their own motives play into their thinking and should acknowledge that moral disengagement mechanisms could be operating. Indeed, our theoretical model has implications for many aspects of building an ethical organizational environment.

Future research directions

The first and most pressing research implication of this article involves testing the proposed

theoretical model. Does whistleblowing increase the three justification motive threats? Do these three threats increase the occurrence of negative moral emotions and moral disengagement? Do the proposed emotional and cognitive processes lead to retaliation? An interesting extension of testing the model involves exploring the relative weights of the three threats in explaining moral emotions and moral disengagement. Does an ego, group, or system justification motive threat have the largest influence on moral processes? Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) suggests that group threats may be most consequential whereas system justification theory (Jost, et al., 2004) suggests that system threats could be most costly. Further, do emotional reactions or moral disengagement processes exert a stronger effect on retaliatory behavior? These questions would be interesting to explore in future research.

In addition to testing the theoretical model, it would be intriguing to test for boundary conditions not already included in the model. For example, do the different types of threat interact to influence moral disengagement, emotions, and retaliation? In addition, are there factors that moderate the relationship between moral disengagement, emotions, and retaliation? For example, are individuals higher in power more likely to act on their moral disengagement and emotions? Thus, examining additional moderators could help further build the theoretical model we presented.

Finally, although we focused our model on the mechanisms that eventuate in retaliation against whistleblowers, many of the processes are relevant for explaining unethical behavior more generally. We encourage scholars to examine how perceived justification motive threats as well as emotions and moral disengagement can cause several types of unethical behaviors such as stealing, lying, deception, harassing others, etcetera. Applying the mechanisms described in this article to the broader behavioral ethics (Treviño et al., 2006) literature would be fruitful.

Conclusions

Unethical behavior in organizations is an all-too-common occurrence (Ethics Resource Center [ERC], 2007). Complicating this state of affairs is the fact that employees who witness wrongdoing often do not report it, and when they do so, they are frequently subjected to retaliatory actions (Mesmer-Magnus & Viswesvaran, 2005; Miceli et al., 2008). We hope this article will stimulate empirical research on the underlying motivations for retaliation against whistleblowers. We are optimistic that by better understanding the precursors to retaliation, organizations can develop interventions to eliminate or at least reduce this egregious and seemingly paradoxical behavior.

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