

2021

Constructing the Heroic Whistleblower: A Social Scientific Approach

Brian K. Richardson
University of North Texas, richardson@unt.edu

Joseph McGlynn
University of North Texas, Joseph.Mcglynn@unt.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.richmond.edu/heroism-science>



Part of the [Leadership Studies Commons](#), and the [Psychology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Richardson, Brian K. and McGlynn, Joseph (2021) "Constructing the Heroic Whistleblower: A Social Scientific Approach," *Heroism Science*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 2 , Article 1.

DOI: 10.26736/hs.2021.02.01

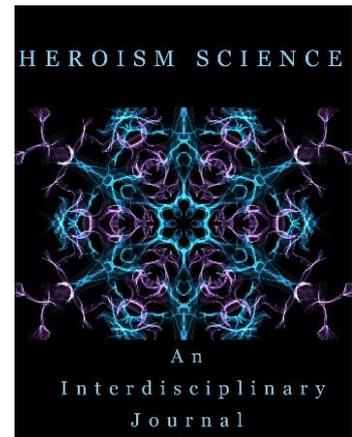
Available at: <https://scholarship.richmond.edu/heroism-science/vol6/iss2/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Heroism Science* by an authorized editor of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact scholarshipprepository@richmond.edu.

Heroism Science: An Interdisciplinary Journal (ISSN 2573-7120) <https://scholarship.richmond.edu/heroism-science/>

Vol. 6 No. 2 (2021) pp. 1-28

Constructing the Heroic Whistleblower: A Social Scientific Approach



BRIAN K. RICHARDSON¹

JOSEPH MCGLYNN

University of North Texas

richardson@unt.edu

The authors report no competing interests associated with this research.

Brian K. Richardson: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7613-0707>

Joseph McGlynn: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8869-0629>

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Brian K. Richardson, University of North Texas, 1155 Union Circle, #305268, Denton, TX 76203-5268.

KEYWORDS: *whistleblowing; heroism; organizational wrongdoing; stakeholders; attribution theory*

Article history

Received: September 30, 2020

Received in revised form: May 10, 2021

Accepted: May 20, 2021

Available online: June 30, 2021

¹ Copyright 2021 Heroism Science

DOI 10.26736/hs.2021.02.01

ISSN: 2573-7120 | Licensed under the Creative Commons, Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs (CC By-NC-ND)

ABSTRACT: Many whistleblowers perform heroic acts, but not all whistleblowers are heroes. Motivation, method, and risk vary across whistleblower contexts. Although many whistleblowers portray aspects of archetypal heroism, research is needed to specify the qualities of heroic whistleblowers from non-heroic whistleblowers. The present study aims to develop an archetype of heroic whistleblowers. We identify five dimensions of whistleblowing heroism and then draw upon data from interviews that we conducted with 32 actual whistleblowers to provide examples of each element. We argue there are five dimensions of the whistleblowing process that distinguish heroic whistleblowers. The five dimensions include 1) motivation for blowing the whistle (altruistic vs. selfish), 2) complicity in the wrongdoing (bystander vs. complicit), 3) level of risk for exposing the wrongdoing (high risk vs. low risk), 4) whistleblower effect (efforts led to positive change vs. efforts produced little or no change), and 5) whistleblower willingness (they would blow the whistle again vs. they would not blow the whistle again). We argue whistleblowers exemplify heroism when they expose wrongdoing for altruistic reasons, are not complicit in the unethical behavior, they assume a high level of risk to their safety, reputation, or career, when their efforts lead to constructive changes, and when the whistleblower remains vigilant in their willingness to combat wrongdoing. We conclude by offering propositions, limitations, and future research possibilities.

1 CONSTRUCTING THE HEROIC WHISTLEBLOWER: A SOCIAL SCIENTIFIC APPROACH

Individuals who blow the whistle against corruption, wrongdoing, or illegal behavior typically do so at great risk. Whistleblowing violates group norms (Richardson et al., 2008), is perceived as an act of disloyalty to the organization (Kenny et al., 2019), and transgresses organizational norms of silence. In such situations, stakeholders attempt to make sense of this anomalous behavior (Richardson & Garner, 2019), a process which can involve labelling the whistleblower (Taarup-Esbensen, 2019). Too often, these labels characterize whistleblowers in negative fashion, as “snitches,” “traitors,” or “tattletales.”

One important label stakeholders may affix to a whistleblower is that of “hero” (Park et al., 2014, p. 121). The “hero” moniker is a significant one for a number of reasons. First, key stakeholders are more likely to support whistleblowers motivated by altruism over those motivated by selfish gain (Heumann et al., 2016). Such support is critical considering stakeholders often determine outcomes of whistleblowing cases, and that whistleblowers frequently fail when stakeholders do not become involved in their efforts (Sawyer et al., 2010). Further, heroic whistleblowers are more likely to generate positive media coverage than non-heroic whistleblowers. In some cases, their stories are mythologized in films, books, and documentaries. These dramatized accounts can serve to teach citizens what is whistleblowing (Olesen, 2020), and may inspire action from individuals who have observed unethical behavior in their own organizations (Macey, 2007). Finally, the “hero” whistleblower may face less direct retaliation over time due to protections this label offers them (Brown, 2017).

Of course, not all whistleblowers are heroes in the eyes of the public (Brown, 2017). Some individuals who report wrongdoing encounter little risk, report actual but innocuous wrongdoing, suffer minimally or not at all for their reports, or were themselves guilty of the very wrongdoing they are now reporting. Indeed, Brown (2017) suggests treating all whistleblowers as heroes is problematic, as this practice makes it “easier for those negatively affected by wrongdoing disclosures

to discredit (the whistleblower) by drawing attention to possible evidence of the opposite (e.g., possible self-interest)” (p. 360). Thus, the label matters; the non-heroic whistleblower may experience the whistleblowing process much differently than their heroic counterparts. They may not be able to marshal the same number and types of resources as those with the “hero” label.

Considering the distinct advantages for whistleblowers labelled as heroes, it is important to consider what attributes lead to that distinction. Olesen (2020) argues popular culture (e.g., cinema) is quick to recognize whistleblowers as heroes though this demarcation is “surprisingly rare in the (research) literature” (p. 2). He describes the cinematic whistleblower as one who traverses several thresholds along their whistleblowing journey. Of course, most whistleblowers’ stories are not portrayed in high-profile films. Rather, we may have to rely on different factors in determining whether stakeholders confer “hero” status on them. Thus, the present analysis aims to develop an archetype of heroic whistleblowers from a social scientific perspective. We identify five dimensions of whistleblowing heroism and then draw upon interviews of 32 actual whistleblowers to provide examples of each element. To conclude, we offer a set of propositions, qualifications, and future research possibilities.

2 THE WHISTLEBLOWER AS COURAGEOUS, HEROIC

The notion of whistleblowers as heroic or especially courageous has existed for some time and is increasingly picking up momentum (Brown, 2017; Franco et al., 2011; Glazer & Glazer, 1999; Olesen, 2020). Glazer and Glazer (1999) typified “courageous” whistleblowers as perceiving they are responsible for the well-being of others, possessing a strong commitment to the efficacy of action, taking determined action, and overcoming fear and intimidation. Other scholars describe whistleblowing as particularly courageous, labelling the behavior as a form of radical truth-telling (Mansbach, 2009) and whistleblowers as akin to religious prophets (Avakian & Roberts, 2012). Franco et al. (2011) found whistleblowers were generally considered heroic by the public-at-large. However, over one-fourth of their sample found whistleblowing neither heroic nor altruistic, suggesting other factors may come into play in making this determination. More recently, Olesen

(2020) used dramatic films to construct a hero profile of whistleblowers as individuals whose journeys include the crossing of a series of challenging thresholds: encountering wrongdoing, internal rectification, retaliation, shifting loyalties, and public disclosure. Finally, Brown (2017) argues it is imprudent to label all whistleblowers as heroes. He argues for a more nuanced approach to distinguishing heroic vs. non-heroic whistleblowers, and recognizes the public, as a key stakeholder, will make different judgments about whistleblowers depending upon context-specific factors of their cases. Indeed, when considering whether whistleblowers are heroes, we must ask the question “to whom?”

Organizational stakeholders ultimately decide whether whistleblowers are heroes. Sawyer et al. (2010) positioned stakeholders, including the news media, regulatory agencies, politicians, and the focal¹ organization’s employees, as critical constituents in whistleblowing cases, particularly those that are drawn out and involve retaliation. Stakeholders can offer support to whistleblowers, including advocating their cause, telling their stories to the public, offering social support in person or on social media, and offering legal advice (Johnson et al., 2004; Sawyer et al., 2010). Questions remain about whether and why they will offer such support; research indicates stakeholders make *attributions* about whistleblowers’ behaviors, motives, and efforts in considering whether to hold them in high regard or low esteem.

2.1 ATTRIBUTION THEORY AND WHISTLEBLOWING

Attribution theory argues that people observe events and then seek explanations for why the event occurred (Heider; 1958; Weiner, 2006). The explanations may be rooted in perceptions of the person, the context, or what actions an individual might have taken if they were in the same situation. In particular, attribution theory argues we seek to ascertain responsibility for issues, problems, and outcomes of events. Weiner (2006) argues people’s beliefs about responsibility affect their behavior and actions toward those involved in the situation. Attributions can affect willingness to help others, support for public policies (Niederdeppe et al., 2011), and judgments of responsibility for societal issues (McGlynn & McGlone, 2019). For the whistleblower, particular factors that affect attributions

of responsibility include how the whistleblowing was carried out, the motives of the actor for exposing the wrongdoing, and the actor's complicity in the wrongdoing (Richardson & Garner, 2019).

Research indicates stakeholders are more supportive of whistleblowers who used internal channels, were altruistic, and not complicit in wrongdoing. Heumann et al. (2016) found public support for whistleblowers trended downward when their reports shift from internal to external targets. Brown (2017) replicated this result, finding the public viewed reporting via internal channels to designated authorities more favorably compared to reporting to external targets such as the news media. Stakeholders' attributions of whistleblowers can affect their perceptions of whistleblowers' credibility and legitimacy, two important currencies for affecting change (Johnson et al., 2004; Sawyer et al., 2010). Stakeholders' assessments of whistleblowers' legitimacy and credibility may be tied to their perceptions of whistleblowers' motives, whether they are focused on fulfilling a greater good or serving their own interests (Near & Miceli, 1995).

Richardson and Garner (2019) employed attribution theory in investigating whether stakeholders (e.g., university alumni and fraternity/sorority members) held different perceptions of whistleblowers' likeability, legitimacy, and credibility based on whistleblowers' motives and involvement (complicity or bystander) in wrongdoing. Results from both samples indicated bystander whistleblowers were more likeable and credible than their complicit counterparts, while the fraternity/sorority sample found altruistic whistleblowers more likeable, legitimate, and credible than selfish whistleblowers. These results indicate stakeholders will make different judgments about whistleblowers depending upon their motivations and their involvement in wrongdoing. It seems reasonable stakeholders find some whistleblowers more or less heroic based upon these and other important factors, such as level of risk endured by individuals throughout the whistleblowing process.

Whistleblowers report encountering many risks, including personal, professional, and reputation risks, which lead to their experiencing high levels of stress and anxiety (Rothschild & Miethe, 1999). They face retaliatory threats in many forms once they expose unethical behavior. The possibility of retaliation influences the decision to blow the whistle (Miceli et al., 2008), with some individuals opting not to blow the whistle due to risks involved. Researchers found many

whistleblowers receive limited public support from friends and colleagues, even when those same colleagues express support privately (McGlynn & Richardson, 2014).

Risk perceptions are influenced by two primary factors: risk likelihood and risk magnitude (Slovic, 1987). That is, risk perceptions are affected by the perceived probability of a risk occurring, and the size of the impact if the risk happens. Slovic (2004) describes these decision inputs as *risk as analysis* (likelihood) and *risk as feelings* (magnitude). Together, whistleblowers must weigh the logical pros and cons of blowing the whistle, while concurrently evaluating the likelihood of those positive and negative outcomes, and the consequence they would feel if the risk occurred. If whistleblowers feared losing their job because they exposed wrongdoing, they must assess the likelihood of that occurrence, along with the extent of how dire of a financial situation that might put them in. If the person has a high-profile job that would be difficult to replace, that factor may override the consideration of risk likelihood, as the magnitude of loss would be great and the position irreplaceable. Whistleblowers must also contrast the risks of blowing the whistle against the risks of choosing to remain silent (McGlynn, 2021). For example, whistleblowers may worry they will be implicated in the wrongdoing if they do not take a stand and separate themselves from the unethical behavior.

To summarize, we agree with Franco et al.'s (2011) contention that "heroism is a social attribution," (p. 99) and we suggest organizational stakeholders are in position to confer hero status on whistleblowers. We argue they will make attributions about how and why an individual has engaged the whistleblowing process. Determining what factors are most critical as part of this attribution process can inform which whistleblowers are considered heroic, reaping the advantages associated with this status. Thus, we formulated the following research question:

RQ: What characteristics distinguish heroic whistleblowers and non-heroic whistleblowers?

3 DEVELOPMENT OF KEY DIMENSIONS

Attribution theory informed selection and assessment of dimensions we believed would add to or detract from stakeholders perceiving a whistleblower as heroic. Further, we reviewed the

literature reviewed above in combination with three data sets we used for prior research projects, including 13 whistleblowers in the collegiate sport industry (Richardson & McGlynn, 2015), 11 interviews in public education (Gravley et al., 2014), and data collected from eight additional whistleblowers in a variety of industries. While not specifically designed to assess each whistleblower as heroic (or not), the interviews did provide narrative accounts of whistleblowers' motivations, decision-making processes, behaviors, perceptions of social support, and perceptions of organizational and stakeholder responses to their claims.

We employed a closed coding process for data analysis. Closed coding is useful for researchers who know what the interesting phenomena are a priori, and understand in advance what is relevant to one's research questions (Carpendale et al. 2017; Tory, N.D.). With closed coding, researchers develop their codes using previous research, based upon the researcher's analysis of "why what is occurring in the data might be happening" (Tory). Our previous research on whistleblowing, combined with the research reviewed above, informed our development of an initial set of eight dimensions we considered integral to stakeholders' judgments about whistleblowers' heroism. These dimensions included the individual's motivation for blowing the whistle (altruistic vs. selfish), intentionality of disclosure (purposeful vs. accidental), mode of disclosure (public vs. anonymous), complicity in the wrongdoing (bystander vs. complicit), level of risk for exposing the wrongdoing (low to high risk), disclosure mode (internal or external), outcomes (whistleblowing led to constructive changes vs. little changed), and whether the whistleblower would "do it again" (yes or no).

We then reviewed the dimensions against our data set, playing devil's advocate with each one to determine if enough data supported the dimension and whether stakeholders would be able to make judgments about dimensions. This process led to a number of refinements. First, we eliminated the dimension "intentionality of disclosure," as just one participant in our dataset accidentally blew the whistle, such as letting information about wrongdoing "slip out." Next, we eliminated the mode of disclosure (anonymous or public) dimension because stakeholders are not able to identify motives and complicity of anonymous whistleblowers. Further, it is difficult to ascribe "hero" status to an

anonymous person. Finally, we folded the mode factor (internal or external) into level of risk, arguing whistleblowers who report externally encounter greater risk.

This process left us with five dimensions (see Table 1) we argue are central to determining whether stakeholders would perceive a whistleblower as a hero. These included motivation for blowing the whistle, complicity in the wrongdoing, level of risk for exposing the wrongdoing, outcomes affected by the disclosure, and whether the whistleblower would “do it again.”

Table 1

Dimensions associated with heroic whistleblowing

Heroic whistleblowing	Non-heroic whistleblowing
Altruistic motivation	Mixed/Selfish motivation
Bystander to wrongdoing	Complicit in wrongdoing
High risk associated with whistleblowing	Low risk associated with whistleblowing
Efforts led to constructive change	Efforts produced little to no change
Willing to blow the whistle again	Not willing to blow the whistle again

4 DIMENSIONS OF WHISTLEBLOWER HEROISM

This analysis describes five core dimensions of whistleblower heroism. We identify the dimensions, describe the binary poles that distinguish each dimension, and provide examples from the dataset to illustrate the characteristics of heroic whistleblowers.

4.1 WHISTLEBLOWER MOTIVATION: ALTRUISTIC MOTIVATION VS. MIXED MOTIVATION/SELFISH MOTIVATION

Individuals' motives for blowing the whistle can vary from simplistic to complex. Many whistleblowers are motivated by altruism, desiring to correct a wrong; others blow the whistle for selfish reasons, while some possess mixed motives for reporting wrongdoing (Richardson, 2021). We propose whistleblowers with altruistic motives will be perceived as more heroic than those with mixed motives, who will be viewed as more heroic than those motivated purely by selfish reasons (Heumann et al., 2016). In our sample, altruistic motivations for whistleblowers included a desire to contribute to a positive outcome, a prioritization of ethical workplace practices above financial gain, and wanting to set an example for their children. As whistleblower Leah noted,

I have this really strong justice strength. So you partner that justice strength with the way I care for my associates. I take responsibility for my associates. Sometimes the right thing for them is not what they perceive as the right thing. But I take it very seriously and so I knew that was not an environment I wanted my staff to be in.

Other whistleblowers noted they were willing to put themselves in harm's way to set an example for their family. Whistleblower Glen stated,

I have a daughter with a disability. I have a real problem with abusive power and authority. When I see things that are just painfully unjust, it gets under my skin in ways that may be more than necessary I guess you could say.

Despite adverse consequences to Glen's career for his whistleblowing, including being passed over for promotion, he contended "it's a basic fairness issue" that motivated him to report wrongdoing.

Some whistleblowers' motives appeared to be mixed, combining a desire for the individual's self-preservation with the more noble cause of protecting society-at-large or the organization from reputation harm. Whistleblower Gordon, an assistant football coach at a major university, reported illegal recruiting practices to his athletic director primarily to keep the school from incurring an NCAA investigation. He said,

... there were things going on within our football program that alarmed me. I felt they needed to be taken care of or the whole situation was going to blow up. But when I went to the

Athletic Director to talk to him ... I knew that he knew about other wrongdoings that had gone on in the past and that he would fix this without it becoming an NCAA violation—without it turning into an investigation.

Gordon added, "... for me to be the 'whistleblower' who went to fix all the right things and to make everything 'hunky-dory' and pure and all that—that's not true. That's not what I did. I didn't do it for that reason." On one hand, Gordon was concerned his coaching career was not derailed by unethical behavior occurring in his athletic program; still, he also desired to protect the university from embarrassment of an investigation. We argue his motives, while not purely altruistic, would be perceived as more honorable, or heroic, than someone with purely selfish motives.

Selfish motivations reflect reasons for blowing the whistle incentivized solely by personal gain. For example, selfish motivations for blowing the whistle in our sample included financial gain, wanting to gain popularity in their company by exposing a secret, and whistleblowers who were not offended by the wrongdoing but blew the whistle internally for self-preservation. As whistleblower George noted, "I knew I had a story to tell and it feels good when you're the guy who knows something—like I know something you don't and you're a reporter. I just wanted to tell it." Whistleblowers with selfish motivations are more interested in personal or financial gain, rather than serving the greater good, and will be judged accordingly.

4.2 COMPLICITY IN THE WRONGDOING: COMPLICIT IN WRONGDOING VS. BYSTANDER TO WRONGDOING

To be considered a hero, whistleblowers should not be involved in wrongdoing (Richardson & Garner, 2019). Such involvement may take the form of direct complicity or can take the form of benefits received as a result of the wrongdoing. For example, the wrongdoing may have increased company profits, which benefited the whistleblower through exorbitant bonuses on their year-end check. Or, a coach at a college athletics program may benefit from academic misconduct by having their players remain eligible or by strengthening the quality of their recruiting class. In those cases, even when a person chooses to expose the wrongdoing, their heroism perception may be tainted due

to either their direct involvement with the unethical behavior or through their receipt of indirect benefits stemming from it.

George exemplified the complicit whistleblower; he worked as a mid-level administrator for a high-profile basketball program at a mid-size state university. He admitted to writing papers for players to help them retain eligibility before being asked to take his unethical behavior to another level. He said,

The rule-breaking was rampant. [Name redacted] was the coach. It was an eye opener for me. I wrote papers during the season for players and then in the summer I got a phone call from (the tutor) to write a special paper that was top secret. I wasn't supposed to know who it was for. ... I write this last paper for this kid and it turns out it's for a recruit.

Later, George spontaneously reported the program's illicit behavior, including his own participation in academic fraud, to a local media member. The news media mentioned George's complicit behavior in subsequent stories about the basketball program's university and NCAA violations, factors which likely detracted from his likeability, legitimacy, and credibility per extant research (Richardson & Garner, 2019).

It is important to note a potential exception to this proposition. Some scholars recognize redemption as an attribute favorable to hero constructions (Barbour, 1999); this possibility suggests a complicit whistleblower could be perceived as heroic if their narrative reveals a redemptive quality. We leave open the possibility a complicit wrongdoer could be redeemed by society through the act of whistleblowing, leading them to receive heroism status. Indeed, guilt over one's involvement in wrongdoing, a first step toward redemption, can be a motivator for whistleblowing (Anvari et al., 2019). However, we suggest that severity, or harmfulness, of wrongdoing would play a key role in this determination. Some individuals are beyond redemption due to the egregiousness of their behavior (Loyd, 2011), and we would expect whistleblowers who were complicit in wrongdoing that harmed vulnerable populations, caused extensive environmental damage, and so forth, would not be perceived as heroic by most stakeholders. Though the preponderance of evidence suggests bystander

whistleblowers will be perceived as more heroic than those who are complicit, we leave open the possibility that the complicit and redeemed whistleblower may reach heroic status.

4.3 LEVEL OF RISK FOR EXPOSING THE WRONGDOING: LOW RISK VS. HIGH RISK

Upon exposing wrongdoing in their organization, whistleblowers encounter risks. However, not all whistleblowers face the same degree or likelihood of risk. We argue whistleblowers who expose wrongdoing in the face of heavy risk are more likely to be perceived as heroes. A variety of factors influence a whistleblower's risk level, including the size/scope of the wrongdoing, the presence of external stakeholders that may be hurt by the information, and the irreplaceableness of their current job position in the event they are terminated (Richardson & McGlynn, 2011). The risks faced by whistleblowers in our sample included death threats, family infighting, social ostracism, false accusations of child abuse to Child Protective Services, loss of friends, loss of jobs, and smear campaigns through media. Craig, a whistleblower, noted,

I expected hostility, pressure and other kinds of things. I even sort of did a rough calculation that I might be giving up 2 years of life expectancy doing this but one of the things, my life work was in [this academic program] and here these guys are turning it into a jock major and in effect destroying what amounts to my life's work.

Other participants in our sample, such as Laura, described the family tension that resulted from their blowing the whistle, saying,

Some of the most disparaging comments have come from my own children who feel I caused them to be ostracized at school and in public. Many say I should have put self before conscience; however, a self without a soul is nothing. I can only hope my children will learn something important from this whole ordeal.

Describing the physical risk she encountered after exposing the wrongdoing, whistleblower Zoey said,

When I was traveling from [city] to [city] somebody followed me and when I got out of the car to go into a McDonald's, we were slammed into the wall by the door and threatened to drop the case. I had received warnings in the days before that. ... Even when I went to the grocery store, people would say, 'Oh, that's the lying bitch that's causing all this trouble'.

An additional risk factor concerns whether whistleblowers reported their concerns internal or external to the organization. Whistleblowers whose reports remain internal tend to face less risk and retaliation than those who initially or eventually report to external groups, such as news media, regulatory agencies, or public officials (Near & Miceli, 1986). Such was the case for our sample. Whistleblowers who reported to external targets received more severe retaliation like death threats and physical intimidation, suggesting external reports increase risk.

Conversely, some whistleblowers in our sample encountered little risk or retaliation. These whistleblowers were more likely to use internal reporting only, reported wrongdoers who were generally disliked, or threatened lawsuits, all factors which diminished retaliation they faced. Julie reported receiving little retaliation because the manager she blew the whistle on was generally disliked. She said, "There was sort of a common consensus that she was bad for our organization and [corporate] had a number of other issues with her. Like truancy issues. She was absent a lot, she was gone a lot." Had this manager been very popular or a valuable asset for the company, Julie might have encountered more retaliation for her report. Norman, who blew the whistle on corruption in an athletic department, made it obvious he would file a lawsuit against the university if he encountered retaliation. He said, "I made it ... clear the type of litigious person I was and ... if they responded against me ... all these issues would be brought up in a lawsuit. I let them know ... I had sued people before." In such cases, the whistleblower is less likely to be perceived as heroic considering they did not have to endure the hardships that typically mark the hero's journey.

4.4 WHISTLEBLOWER EFFECT: EFFORTS LED TO POSITIVE CHANGE VS. EFFORTS PRODUCED LITTLE OR NO CHANGE

When whistleblowers' efforts produce positive change at the organizational level, the whistleblower increases the likelihood they will be perceived as a hero. The positive change produced may take many forms, such as stopping the unethical behavior, being the impetus for administrative reform, or raising public awareness for the extent of wrongdoing. Although a hero's journey may have effects on how that person perceives and experiences the world (Allison, 2019), the focus for this dimension is on external changes that occur as a result of the whistleblower's actions. For example, Leah's whistleblowing efforts led to significant changes around the issue of sexual harassment at her company. She said,

I felt like (this type of sexual harassment) needed to be talked about, we needed to have a plan moving forward, and we've changed a lot of policies after that. And that's probably a good thing is that we actually have it on the books. It never happened again.

Organizational changes are outside the direct control of whistleblowers. However, if a person exposes themselves to severe risk by blowing the whistle but their efforts have no impact on the wrongdoing, they may be regarded negatively for risking so much for so little. We argue the heroic whistleblower must size up their ability to affect change at the organizational level. Similar to a hero jumping between rooftops on adjacent buildings, if the whistleblower leaps but falls well short of their goal, the audience is unlikely to regard them as heroic. Rather, in this case, we argue the whistleblower would receive a "tragic" frame, rather than a heroic one, from media and public. Such was the case with Vicky who suffered ostracism and whose position was re-assigned after she reported academic fraud committed by the athletic department. It appears as if her efforts were in vain, as she recounted negligible impact of her efforts. She said, "There were no negative consequences for the unethical behaviors. The situation ... continues. Anything I've complained about since, also went unattended to. People (now) see me with less credibility. They beat me into submission. After so long, you just quit." Stakeholders may view this sort of whistleblower as non-

heroic, and rather as a “fool for having risked so much” (Franco et al., 2011, p. 104) without affecting change.

4.5 WHISTLEBLOWER WILLINGNESS: WOULD BLOW THE WHISTLE AGAIN VS. WOULD NOT BLOW THE WHISTLE AGAIN

Stakeholders will perceive those whistleblowers who would blow the whistle again if given the chance as more heroic than those who would not engage the same behavior. After experiencing retaliation for exposing wrongdoing, whistleblowers may regret their actions and indicate that, if given the choice, they wish they had not initially blown the whistle. Understanding severe risks whistleblowers experience, people may find it entirely reasonable some whistleblowers would not make the same choice. However, we argue whistleblowers exemplify heroism when they remain vigilant in their motivation to reduce corruption or expose wrongdoing.

Most whistleblowers in our sample quickly affirmed they would take the same action “if they had it to do over again.” Despite encountering death threats, physical intimidation, becoming estranged from her family, and having to locate to another part of the country, whistleblower Laura affirmed she would blow the whistle again. “I wouldn’t have any choice. I refuse to sacrifice others for my own survival.” Similarly, whistleblower Cynthia, who was ostracized by her children’s school and her community, said, she would blow the whistle again “in a heartbeat.” She continued, “What I discovered was ... they were dishonest, they were manipulating the numbers for the community, ... they were using tactics that bordered on being bullies. ... I can’t fix it (but) I can find peace in knowing I’m right.” With regard to public perception, it is possible that whistleblowers will be viewed as even *more* heroic when they illustrate a willingness to blow the whistle again, despite the odds of success being stacked against them and their efforts seemingly hopeless or futile.

While most whistleblowers in our sample reported they would blow the whistle again, a few were adamant they would not. When asked if she would blow the whistle again if given the chance, Vicky quickly replied, “No, absolutely not, I would have packed and up and left.” We contend whistleblowers who express their experience was so painful they would not endure the process again

will be perceived as less committed, and thus less heroic, than those individuals who indicate they would persevere through the trials and tribulations of the whistleblowing process again. As Heumann et al. (2016) suggest, we want our “saints” to suffer, and when they admit they do not want to endure the suffering, we detract from their heroic status.

5 THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

We contend stakeholders’ perceptions of whistleblowers as heroes will be affected by these five characteristics: motivation for whistleblowing, complicity in the wrongdoing, level of risk encountered, willingness to blow the whistle again, and degree of affected change. Specifically, we propose the more a whistleblower is perceived as possessing altruistic motives, encountered great risk, was a bystander to (rather than complicit in) wrongdoing, affected constructive change, and indicated they would blow the whistle again if given the chance, the greater their hero ascription. This leads to our first proposition:

Proposition 1a: The more stakeholders perceive a whistleblower had altruistic motivations, was not complicit in wrongdoing, encountered great risk, is willing to blow the whistle again, and affected constructive change, the greater the extent they will perceive the whistleblower as heroic.

As mentioned above, we do recognize complicit whistleblowers whose wrongdoing was not especially severe or harmful, could be perceived by stakeholders as redeemed, and thus particularly heroic. Thus, we offer the following alternative hypothesis:

Proposition 1b: The more stakeholders perceive a whistleblower had altruistic motivations, was complicit in wrongdoing that was not particularly harmful (redeemed), encountered great risk, is willing to blow the whistle again, and affected constructive change, the greater the extent they will perceive the whistleblower as heroic.

Of course, perceptions about such matters are more complicated than the checklist nature of the list above. Traditional communication models generally include the following components: the

source, message, channel, context, and receiver, or audience (Berlo, 1960). Thus far, in this analysis, we have focused primarily on the source, or whistleblower. Next, we offer some key distinctions to address the complexity typically present in whistleblower cases, focusing on the audience and message components of communication models.

Stakeholders as audience. When whistleblowers' allegations become public, many key stakeholders represent potential audiences for their reports (Richardson & McGlynn, 2011). Considering the diverse nature of relationships between stakeholders and the focal organization, it makes sense stakeholders are likely to view whistleblowers in distinct ways. In our own research, we have noted stakeholders perceiving and responding differently to the same whistleblower. For example, one collegiate sport whistleblower noted how the local media was quite adversarial with her while national media representatives were supportive of her account.

An organization's environment includes dozens of internal and external stakeholders. In considering how stakeholders will perceive whistleblowers, we suggest at least two factors will come into play: stakeholders' level of involvement and outcomes associated with the whistleblowing. Scholars suggest individuals' level of involvement in cases involving reporting of unethical behavior affects their perceptions of the "moral rebel," or whistleblower (Monin et al., 2008). Specifically, participants were more supportive of moral rebels when they merely read about their cases compared to those who were involved in the situation but did nothing. Monin et al. claimed this resentment toward the moral rebel "is a defensive reaction to the perception that rebels are implicitly rejecting those who do not question the situation" (p. 89). Thus, we can expect stakeholders who merely read or heard about a whistleblowing case (low involvement) to be more sympathetic to the whistleblower than those highly involved in the case, such as the leaders of organizations where wrongdoing has allegedly occurred. Thus, we offer the following proposition:

Proposition 2: Level of involvement will affect whether and how stakeholders will perceive a whistleblower as heroic, such that uninvolved stakeholders will be more likely to ascribe hero status than involved stakeholders.

Next, we suggest the outcomes of whistleblowing efforts on stakeholders will influence whether they perceive the whistleblower as heroic (or not). Sawyer et al. (2011) argue whistleblowers threaten the legitimacy of key stakeholders, particularly the focal organization and regulators. Whistleblowers' reports typically hold negative effects for the focal organization, which comes under scrutiny by the news media and politicians, and for regulators who may be perceived as not doing their job as monitors of organizational activity. Conversely, effects of whistleblowing on other stakeholders is generally positive. They alert the public-at-large to safety and security concerns, while providing the media with click-worthy news content. For these reasons, we propose the following:

Proposition 3: The outcomes of a whistleblower's reports will affect whether and how stakeholders will perceive a whistleblower as heroic, such that positively affected stakeholders will be more likely to ascribe hero status than negatively-affected stakeholders.

Narrative matters. Message represents another key element of the communication model, and one that is tantamount to whether stakeholders will ascribe hero status to a whistleblower. For the whistleblower, the message is not solely their official report of wrongdoing but also includes the narrative, or story, that emerges about them and their efforts. This narrative is especially salient for determining how stakeholders will make sense of the whistleblower's account. Feldman (1990) contends narratives are beneficial in interpreting others' behaviors and in supporting or denying one's feelings about a particular activity or issue. Furthermore, narratives are influential in changing one's views about a topic, particularly those of a controversial nature.

The narrative or metaphor that emerges from the whistleblower's activities carries a great deal of weight in determining responses to them. There will likely be several narratives early in the whistleblowing process, as told from the perspectives of the whistleblower, the wrongdoer, management, and the work group (Brown, 2017). Still, it is external stakeholders that typically shape and initiate distribution of the whistleblower's narrative. Generally, these external agents are journalists, political figures, documentarians, or filmmakers, who have taken interest in the whistleblower's story (Waters, 2020). In effect, the whistleblower's story shifts from their ownership to that of a "sponsor" or advocate, who shapes a narrative that typically positions the whistleblower as

the “primary protagonist” (p. 190) in a struggle for justice. Without assistance from this sort of third-party advocate, the whistleblower’s full story may never reach key stakeholder groups. This perspective leads to the following proposition:

Proposition 4: Whistleblowers whose narratives are constructed and distributed by third-party advocates, including journalists, documentarians, politicians, and film-makers, are more likely to reach heroic status from key stakeholders.

It is important we acknowledge the criticality of time in determining whether and how the narrative that emerges about a whistleblower lends to their status as hero. Whistleblowing is typically a process that plays out over months, sometimes years (Richardson & McGlynn, 2015). A whistleblower may initially be viewed as a villain, before perceptions change and people begin to see them as a hero. Several years can pass before the public catches up to a hero’s way of thinking, a phenomenon described by Goethals and Allison (2019) as “heroic lag” (p. 146). Whistleblowing, in early stages, promotes controversy, in part, because it creates a “divided loyalties dilemma” (Jubb, 1999, p. 82), where coworkers and peers must wrestle with their comfort in exposing company secrets to public audiences. Initial attitudes toward whistleblowers are frequently polarized (Brown, 2017). Key audiences probably do not know the whistleblower’s motives early in a case, as the whistleblower may not have had a chance to tell their story. Further, unlike traditional heroes, stakeholders may not learn about risks and retaliation experienced by whistleblowers until a definitive narrative about the whistleblower can be told, written, broadcast, and/or shared. For these reasons, we suggest most whistleblowers who reach “hero” status will do so later in their whistleblowing experiences, after their whole stories reach key stakeholders.

Proposition 5: Whistleblowers will be more likely to reach hero status later in their experiences, when their full stories can be shared via media to key audiences.

6 QUALIFICATIONS & FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Heroism is not a binary category, where whistleblowers either are or are not heroic. Rather, degree of heroism perceived may vary according to the strength of each factor. For example,

whistleblower motivations can range from extremely altruistic, to mixed, to extremely selfish. Also worthy of discussion is the level of each dimension required to influence perceptions of heroism. It may be that a “tipping point” exists for each dimension, such that a whistleblower must be at least a certain level of each dimension to be considered a hero. Mildly altruistic motives may not be enough to affect heroism perceptions. There may be a prerequisite level of risk needed before people will perceive the whistleblower as heroic, as a medium experience of risk or retaliation is unlikely to adjust public perceptions of heroism toward the whistleblower. Furthermore, there may be a level of involvement with the wrongdoing that is deemed “acceptable” by audiences. Examining the specific levels of each factor needed for heroic perceptions is a topic of interest to future research. Investigations could focus on the relative influence of each factor, as well as the minimum and maximum thresholds for each dimension to matter in the perception of heroism for those who blow the whistle.

The identified dimensions of heroism are dynamic and may affect the relative influence of the other factors. For example, a whistleblowers’ involvement in wrongdoing could be offset by highly altruistic motives or an extreme level of retaliation endured. Even if a whistleblower was responsible for the wrongdoing themselves, but they exposed the wrongdoing at great personal cost to promote positive change and eradicate the wrongdoing, people may perceive them as heroic for risking so much and putting themselves in harm’s way to correct illicit behavior. The interactive qualities of the five identified dimensions remains an interest for future research.

Individual and situational variables affect organizational response and whistleblower experience (Richardson & McGlynn, 2015). A whistleblower’s gender, political affiliation, and industry context may all affect heroism perceptions. Whistleblowers in competitive industries with invested stakeholders face greater retaliation and external pressure to not disclose. Organizational response may also affect external perceptions of the whistleblower. If the whistleblower is smeared by the company, it may be more difficult for the whistleblower to be perceived as heroic. If the organization reacts positively (i.e., they take action to resolve the wrongdoing), the whistleblower’s actions may not gain the notoriety or public attention needed to raise to the level of hero. We must

also consider the content of whistleblower's claims, particularly whether they contest sacred values within a society. Edward Snowden, despite meeting many of our proposed dimensions, was viewed favorably by only 40% of respondents (unfavorably by 39%) in a 2013 national survey (Waters, 2020). Snowden's allegations created dichotomies between patriotism, freedom, and national security, all sacred American values. When whistleblowers' claims invite stakeholders to choose between these types of core values, it will be very challenging for them to reach "hero" status from a consensus of stakeholders. Finally, we recognize stakeholders can simply be "wrong" in their determinations of heroic (or not) whistleblowers. Their attributions of whistleblowers' behaviors can change with historical context. Indeed, as we learn more about an individual's motivations, and as society's mores change, "today's hero may be tomorrow's villain" (Pfister & Gems, 2015, p. 139).

7 CONCLUSION

This research provides a framework for identifying qualities and behaviors of whistleblowers likely to be labeled as heroes. Heroism is affected by factors within and outside of whistleblower control. We argue whistleblowers will be perceived as heroic when motivated by altruism, were bystanders to wrongdoing, reported wrongdoing despite high levels of risk, affected positive change through their disclosure, and demonstrate a willingness to blow the whistle again. In addition, organizational response, stakeholder involvement, and media narratives influence public perceptions of whistleblower behavior. Examining the dynamic nature of these factors remains a priority for improving whistleblower outcomes and understanding the criteria most vital to constructing the whistleblower as hero.

Notes

1. We use the term "focal organization" as a placeholder for the organization where wrongdoing was alleged to occur by the whistleblower.

8 REFERENCES

- Allison, S. T. (2019). Heroic consciousness. *Heroism Science*, 4(2), 1–43.
<https://doi.org/10.26736/hs.2019.02.06>
- Anvari, F., Wenzel, M., Woodyatt, L., & Haslam, S. A. (2019). The social psychology of whistleblowing: An integrated model. *Organizational Psychology Review*, 9(1), 41–67.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/2041386619849085>
- Avakian, S., & Roberts, J. (2012). Whistleblowers in organisations: Prophets at work? *Journal of Business Ethics*, 110(1), 71–84. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-011-1148-7>
- Barbour, D. H. (1999). Heroism and redemption in the “Mad Max” trilogy. *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 27(3), 28–35. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01956059909602806>
- Berlo, D. K. (1960). *The process of communication*. Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.
- Brown, A. J. (2017). Whistleblowers as heroes: Fostering ‘quiet’ heroism in place of the heroic whistleblower stereotype. In S. T. Allison, G. R. Goethals, & R. M. Kramer (Eds.), *Handbook of heroism and heroic leadership* (pp. 356–375). Routledge.
- Carpendale, S., Knudsen, S., Thudt, A., & Hinrichs, U. (2017). Analyzing qualitative data. *Proceedings of the 2017 ACM International Conference on Interactive Surfaces and Spaces*, 477–481. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3132272.3135087>
- Feldman, C. F., Bruner, J., Renderer, B., & Spitzer, S. (1990). *Narrative comprehension*. In B. K. Britton & A. D. Pellegrini (Eds.), *Narrative thought and narrative language* (pp. 1–78). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Franco, Z. E., Blau, K., & Zimbardo, P. G. (2011). Heroism: A conceptual analysis and differentiation between action and altruism. *Review of General Psychology*, 15(2), 99–113.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/a0022672>

- Glazer, M. P., & Glazer, P. M. (1999). On the trail of courageous behavior. *Sociological Inquiry*, 69(2), 276–295. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-682X.1999.tb00503.x>
- Goethals, G. R., & Allison, S. T. (2019). *The romance of heroism and heroic leadership*. Emerald.
- Gravley, D., Richardson, B. K., & Allison, J. M. (2015). Navigating the narrative “abyss”: Using narrative analysis to explore relationships among whistle-blowing, retaliation, and identity. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 29(2), 171–197. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0893318914567666>
- Heider, F. (1958). *The psychology of interpersonal relations*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Heumann, M., Friedes, A., Redlawsk, D., Cassak, L., & Kesari, A. (2016). Public perceptions of whistleblowing. *Public Integrity*, 18(1), 6–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10999922.2015.1093397>
- Johnson, C. E., Sellnow, T. L., Seeger, M. W., Barrett, M. S., & Hasbargen, K. C. (2004). Blowing the whistle on Fen-Phen: An exploration of MeritCare’s Reporting of Linkages between Fen-Phen and valvular heart disease. *Journal of Business Communication*, 41(4), 350–370. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0021943604265608>
- Jubb, P. B. (1999). Whistleblowing: A restrictive definition and interpretation. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 21(1), 77–94. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1005922701763>
- Kenny, K., Fotaki, M., & Scriver, S. (2019). Mental health as a weapon: Whistleblowing retaliation and normative violence. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 160(3), 801–815. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-018-3868-4>
- Loyd, C. (2011). In the service of the enemy: The traitor in French occupation narratives. *French Cultural Studies*, 22(3), 239–249. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957155811408828>

- Macey, J. (2007). Getting the word out about fraud: A theoretical analysis of whistleblowing and insider trading. *Michigan Law Review*, *105*(8), 1899–1940.
<https://repository.law.umich.edu/mlr/vol105/iss8/9>
- Mansbach, A. (2009). Keeping democracy vibrant: Whistleblowing as truth-telling in the workplace. *Constellations*, *16*(3), 363–376.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8675.2009.00547.x>
- McGlynn, J. (2021). Blowing the whistle is laden with risk. In P. J. Svenkerud, J. T. Sørnes, & L. Browning (Eds.), *Whistleblowing, communication and consequences: Lessons from the Norwegian national lottery*. Routledge.
- McGlynn, J., & McGlone, M. S. (2019). Desire or disease? Framing obesity to influence attributions of responsibility and policy support. *Health Communication*, *34*(7), 689–701. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10410236.2018.1431025>
- McGlynn, J., & Richardson, B. K. (2014). Public support, private alienation: Whistle-blowers and the paradox of social support. *Western Journal of Communication*, *78*(2), 213–237. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10570314.2013.807436>
- Miceli, M. P., Near, J. P., & Dworkin, T. M. (2008). *Whistle-blowing in organizations*. Routledge.
- Monin, B., Sawyer, P. J., & Marquez, M. J. (2008). Rejection of moral rebels: Resenting those who do the right thing. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *95*(1), 76–93.
<https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/0022-3514.95.1.76>
- Near, J. P., & Miceli, M. P. (1986). Retaliation against whistle blowers: Predictors and effects. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *71*(1), 137–145. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/0021-9010.71.1.137>
- Near, J. P., & Miceli, M. P. (1995). Effective whistle-blowing. *Academy of Management Review*,

20(3), 679–708. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/258791>

Niederdeppe, J., Shapiro, M. A., & Porticella, N. (2011). Attributions of responsibility for obesity: Narrative communication reduces reactive counterarguing among liberals. *Human Communication Research*, 37(3), 734–753. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2958.2011.01409.x>

Olesen, T. (2020). The whistleblower hero in cinematic dramatization. *The Sociological Review*, 69(2), 414–433. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038026120928880>

Park, H., Blenkinsopp, J., & Park, M. (2014). The influence of an observer's value orientation and personality type on attitudes toward whistleblowing. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 120(1), 121–129. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1007/s10551-013-1908-7>

Pfister, G., & Gems, G. (2015). Fairy tales? Marion Jones, C.J. Hunter, and the framing of doping in American newspapers. *Sport in Society*, 18, 136–154.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2013.854443>

Richardson, B. K. (2021). Hero or “prince of darkness”? Locating Peer Jacob Svenkerud in an attributions-based typology of whistleblowers. In P. J. Svenkerud, J. T. Sørnes, & L. Browning (Eds.), *Whistleblowing, communication and consequences: Lessons from the Norwegian national lottery*. Routledge.

Richardson, B. K., & Garner, J. (2019). Stakeholders' attributions of whistleblowers: The effects of complicity and motives on perceptions of likeability, credibility, & legitimacy. *The International Journal of Business Communication*.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/2F2329488419863096>

Richardson, B. K., & McGlynn, J. (2011). Rabid fans, death threats, and dysfunctional stakeholders: The influence of organizational and industry contexts on whistle-blowing cases. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 25(1), 121–150.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0893318910380344>

- Richardson, B. K., & McGlynn, J. (2015). Blowing the whistle off the field of play: An empirical model of whistle-blower experiences in the intercollegiate sport industry. *Communication & Sport*, 3(1), 57–80. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F2167479513517490>
- Richardson, B. K., Wheelless, L. R., & Cunningham, C. (2008). Tattling on the teacher: A study of factors influencing peer reporting of teachers who violate standardized testing protocol. *Communication Studies*, 59(3), 202–219. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F105678790901800103>
- Rothschild, J. & Miethe, T. D. (1999). Whistle-blower disclosures and management retaliation: The battle to control information about organization corruption. *Work and Occupations*, 26(1), 107–128. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1177/0730888499026001006>
- Sawyer, K., Johnson, J., & Holub, M. (2010). The necessary illegitimacy of the whistleblower. *Business & Professional Ethics Journal*, 29(1–4), 85–107. <https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.917316>
- Slovic, P. (1987). Perception of risk. *Science*, 236(4799), 280–285. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.3563507>
- Slovic, P. (2004). Risk as analysis and risk as feelings: Some thoughts about affect, reason, risk, and rationality. *Risk Analysis*, 24(2), 311–322. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0272-4332.2004.00433.x>
- Taarup-Esbensen, J. (2019). Making sense of risk – A sociological perspective on the management of risk. *Risk Analysis*, 39(4), 749–760. <https://doi.org/10.1111/risa.13211>
- Tory, M. (N.D.). Closed coding: Analyzing qualitative data. Retrieved on 9.15.2020 from

<https://innovis.cpsc.ucalgary.ca/qualitativeanalysis-vis-tutorial/slides/IEEEVIS2017.Tutorial-Closed.Coding.pdf>

Waters, S. (2020). The ethical algorithm: Journalist/whistleblower relationships explored through the lens of social exchange. *Journalism & Communication Monographs*, 22(3), 172–245.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1522637920947719>

Weiner, B. (2006). *Social motivation, justice, and the moral emotions: An attributional approach*. Erlbaum.

9 CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.