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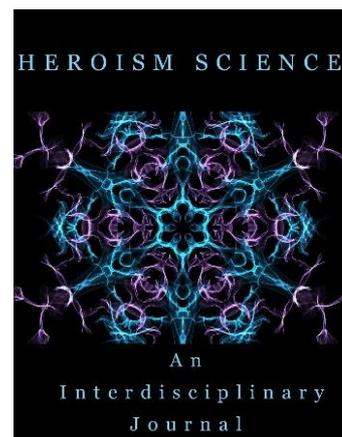
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Understanding Why Some Whistleblowers are Venerated and Others Vilified



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ABSTRACT: Whistleblowers are individuals who witness a moral infraction committed within their organization and report this infraction publicly to hold the group accountable. Whistleblowers often face ridicule, vilification, and exclusion both within their group and sometimes within broader society. Thus, whistleblowers put themselves at personal risk to adhere to their moral code and protect others; these criteria commonly classify someone as a hero. We argue diverse reactions to whistleblowers are influenced by numerous situational factors that influence perceptions of a whistleblower's intentions as well as the expected consequences of their whistleblowing. Whether a whistleblower is viewed as a virtuous reformer (i.e., hero) or a harmful dissident may depend partly on the degree to which individuals believe that there is a discrepancy between an organization's lived values and their stated values. While whistleblowers ostensibly provide evidence that this discrepancy exists, cognitive dissonance processes may forestall acceptance of this evidence in many cases. Believing that one is affiliated with a corrupt organization—while one also believes that they are a good, moral and adequate person—may lead to uncomfortable experiences of dissonance. It may be easier for many to reduce this dissonance by disparaging or discounting whistleblowers, rather than altering their own actions (which may involve becoming a whistleblower themselves) to reflect their personal values.

1 INTRODUCTION

“The same behavior can be interpreted as good or evil depending on which side of the fence the perceiver happens to be on...”

Linda J. Skitka (2012, p. 350)

In 2019, Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Vindman—a Ukraine expert on the National Security Council—raised concerns about a troubling phone call between then-U.S. President Donald Trump and Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelensky. First informing National Security lawyers, superior officers, and finally testifying during Trump’s impeachment inquiry, Vindman alleged that Trump engaged in inappropriate behavior by pressuring the Ukrainian government to investigate Joe Biden, Trump’s main political rival at the time. Vindman expressed optimism during his opening statement,

Dad, I'm sitting here today in the US Capitol talking to our elected professionals is proof that you made the right decision 40 years ago to leave the Soviet Union and come here to the United States of America in search of a better life for our family. Do not worry. I will be fine for telling the truth.

(Faulders et al., 2020)

Despite his optimism, within a year of his testimony Lt. Col. Vindman saw intense retaliation. He was denied a military promotion, was fired from his assignment in the White House National Security Counsel and saw his twin brother also fired from his National Security Council position. After intense bullying and intimidation, Vindman retired from the military because he perceived his future career prospects to be limited (Wamsley, 2020). While some viewed Lt. Col. Vindman as a hero for the risks he took to blow the whistle on corruption, others saw him as a selfish actor and even as a villain, as he was described by some politicians and among right-wing media outlets (Grynbaum & Alba, 2019).

As can be seen from this account of Alexander Vindman, reporting institutional infractions to a third party for purposes of accountability (i.e., whistleblowing; Dungan et al., 2015) can sometimes come at a cost. Because whistleblowers put themselves at personal risk to adhere to their moral code and protect others, in many regards they can be seen as heroes; however, they may also be vilified—experiencing ridicule, retaliation, and social exclusion for their actions. Such divergent reactions to whistleblowers are likely affected by numerous situational factors that influence perceptions of a whistleblower’s intentions as well as the expected consequences of their whistleblowing. Whether a whistleblower is viewed as a virtuous reformer (i.e., hero) or a harmful dissident may depend partly on the degree to which individuals believe that there is a discrepancy between an organization’s lived values and their stated values. Nevertheless, even though whistleblowers provide evidence that an organization has fallen short of its stated values, peoples’ cognitive dissonance processes may often forestall their acceptance of this evidence. For many people, it may be easier to reduce this dissonance by disparaging or discounting whistleblowers, rather than altering their own actions (which may involve becoming a whistleblower themselves) to reflect their moral ideals and personal values.

Therefore, the present paper first argues that whistleblowing can be considered a “heroic” act within the context of heroism science. Then, we discuss the various factors that influence perceptions of whistleblowers as controversial figures in the media and in public consciousness, drawing on research on the psychology of values, moral decision-making, and cognitive dissonance theories. We then close with suggestions on how society might create cultural norms that value whistleblowing as well as how biased rhetoric in media coverage can affect the perceived virtue or villainy of individual whistleblowers.

2 CONCEPTUALIZING WHISTLEBLOWING

The term *whistleblowing*, though used commonly among laypersons, can have diverse definitions among scholars (Smaili & Arroyo, 2019). Regardless of the academic nuances, the consensus is that whistleblowing involves “the disclosure by organization members reporting of illegal, immoral, or illegitimate activities to parties who may be able to take action” (Near & Miceli, 1985, p. 2). Whistleblowing is a necessary mechanism for keeping organizations honest and transparent, safeguarding public trust that these groups are living up to their stated values and contributing to overall societal wellbeing. Thus, whistleblowing is often ostensibly afforded institutional protection because whistleblowers can enact rapid change on an organizational level as well as being responsible for uncovering fraud (Latan et al., 2019; Smaili & Arroyo, 2019).

Early research on whistleblowing was primarily qualitative in nature and focused largely on describing what whistleblowing is, the process by which one becomes a whistleblower, the wrongdoings uncovered, and institutional consequences of the whistleblowing process (Glazer, 1983; Glazer, 1999; Near & Miceli, 1985). Job tenure, job satisfaction, organizational climate, supervisor expectations, informal policies, ideal values, loyalty, job benefits, and concern for others are all relevant factors that influence decisions to become a whistleblower (Dungan et al., 2019; Mesmer-Magnus & Viswesvaran, 2005; Miceli & Near 1988; Sims & Keenan, 1998). One study of 11 cases of corporate fraud found that incentives/pressure, opportunity, and rationalization are the most salient factors in deciding to blow the whistle (Smaili & Arroyo, 2019). Pressures/incentives are considered to be the motivation behind blowing the whistle. These pressures can be a result of one’s personal moral standards being violated by the unethical behavior. There are also financial, professional or reputation pressures that can motivate one to blow the whistle but not to the same extent as moral pressures. Opportunity refers to the means and resources needed to

report unethical behavior. The resources available to the whistleblower may also predict to which channel they report unethical behavior (Smaili & Arroyo, 2019). Rationalization is needed to justify the decision to blow the whistle. Whistleblowers often experience cognitive dissonance when deciding to report the wrongdoing and thus need to rationalize this behavior to reduce this dissonance.

Researchers classify whistleblowers into four categories based on their position in/outside of the organization and to which channel they reported the wrongdoing. The types of whistleblowers who report wrongdoing from inside of their organization are labeled as *skeptical and protective*; *role-prescribed and self-interested* are WBs who report wrongdoings from outside the organization. The categories of protective and skeptical whistleblowers are the most relevant to the purposes of this paper because both require being a member of the organization whereas the others require being outside of the organization. Protecting whistleblowers are those who report wrongdoings inside the organization to prevent any scandal or event which could hurt the organization (Smaili & Arroyo, 2019). Skeptical whistleblowers are those who report wrongdoings externally because they had little opportunity to report internally, or did report internally, but were not satisfied with the actions of the organization. Typically, both protecting and skeptical whistleblowers have ethical pressures and include public benefits in justifying their decisions. This ethical or moral component to whistleblowing is found throughout various categorizations or definitions of whistleblowers which has led some researchers to argue that whistleblowing should be considered a prosocial or moral act (Park & Lewis, 2018).

Unfortunately, these prosocial acts often are met with retaliation or negative repercussions levied against the whistleblower. We opened this article with the case study of Lt. Col. Vindman, who was vilified by many media outlets and ultimately ended his career. Sadly, his case is not an isolated incident; there are many documented instances in which

whistleblowers faced backlash. For example, a researcher who published a study regarding the unacceptable treatment in the military faced a rigorous character assassination campaign and loss of their job (Van Portfliet, 2020). Well known and controversial whistleblowers Edward Snowden, who revealed illegal and immoral electronic surveillance by US intelligence agencies, and Chelsea Manning, who disclosed large amounts of classified and declassified but sensitive military materials, have faced legal backlash from their own government with the former being charged under the espionage act and finding asylum in Russia, while the latter spent seven years in prison (Brown, 2016). Other research has found that whistleblowers are likely to face social exclusion from their colleagues (Brown & Battle, 2020; Curtis et al., 2020; McDonald & Ahern, 2000; Williams, 2001). Indeed, this fear of negative repercussion may be a key reason why people do not whistleblow when they observe wrongdoing by their organization (Ogungbamila, 2014). Anyone who chooses to whistleblow must then have sufficient motivation to overcome this fear, likely because they view it as a moral imperative (Kaptein, 2020; Sims & Keenan, 1998; Watts & Buckley, 2017; Waytz et al., 2013).

3 WHISTLEBLOWERS AS MORAL AGENTS

The idea that whistleblowing is a moral or prosocial act is not new to history or literature (Dozier & Miceli, 1985). Moral concerns have been found to be a significant factor in the decision to blow the whistle (Dungan et al., 2019). Morality has also been shown to increase one's likelihood of becoming a whistleblower and their willingness to report misconduct in subsequent infractions (Park & Lewis, 2018).

Martin Luther may be a prototypical *whistleblower as a moral agent* (Haigh et al., 2012). As a monk who began his religious career dedicated to the monastic ideals of fasting, prayer, and confession—Luther transitioned to whistleblowing in 1517, when his conscience

compelled him to criticize the Roman Catholic Church's fund-raising scheme that involved granting remission from the consequences of a sin (i.e., indulgences) for money. Luther's whistleblowing efforts began when he wrote and widely promoted theological arguments that highlighted corruption in the Roman Catholic Church. His whistleblowing was not received well by the Pope and other Church authorities, but quickly found a broader audience in Europe. Interestingly, it could be argued that Luther's actions diverged from "pure" whistleblowing when he shifted his focus from calling out corruption to broader attempts to undermine the Roman Catholic Church's authority. Of course, Luther's morally motivated whistleblowing ultimately led to a reformation that influenced the entire world, but also left him excommunicated from the very church he attempted to correct (Roper, 2017).

Morality is a complex concept, often involving various components that may vary across both person and culture (Haidt, 2008). Indeed, while Luther's conscience led him to blow the whistle on the Roman Catholic Church, Thomas Moore's conscience led him to defend it (Haigh et al., 2012). Therefore, it is important to know *which* morals and values are more important than others to understand the motivations behind their behavior and the reactions to them. Researchers have found that whether to "blow the whistle" seems to represent competing moral values of *fairness* and *loyalty*. Both values (often referred to as moral *foundations*) are key components in moral systems cross-culturally; various cultural groups may differ in how much emphasis they place on each of them, but most cultures include at least some component in their value systems (Doğruyol et al., 2019; Graham et al., 2009). Concerns of fairness tend to focus on protecting equality and justice for all people, whereas loyalty concerns focus on safeguarding one's attachment to the well-being of established social groups (Graham et al., 2011). Loyalty can be used to justify or rationalize unethical behavior (Dungan et al., 2014; Waytz et al., 2013). For example, an employee may cut corners on safety standards for a product and rationalize it as increasing profits for the

company. Similarly, those who decide not to blow the whistle may rationalize their behavior as staying loyal to their supervisor or organization. In this sense loyalty becomes a norm for the group, allowing the unethical behavior to continue and protecting the organization.

Fairness is often thought to be the value that increases one's likelihood to decide to blow the whistle (Waytz et al., 2013). For example, an employee who reports their organization for unethical behavior may view the behavior as unfair, seeking to remedy that through their actions.

This trade-off between group loyalty and fairness seems to be at the core of the decision to become a whistleblower and has therefore become known as the *Whistle-Blower's Dilemma*. Research has found that emphasizing one or the other affects the decision to report unethical behavior (Waytz et al., 2013). These findings indicate that fairness and loyalty are competing intuition-based moral values when one is deciding to report behavior that illuminates the wrongdoings of their organization. Thus, some authors who argue against models that treat whistleblowing as a logical decision and instead view whistleblowing as an emotional or ethical decision (Watts & Buckley, 2017). Thus, whistleblowers can be defined as those whose moral code prioritizes the fairness value over in-group (i.e., organizational) loyalty.

4 DRAMA AND MIXED PERCEPTIONS OF HEROISM IN WHISTLEBLOWING

The tensions and conflicts present in the whistleblower's decision are often emphasized in fictional depictions of whistleblowers in film and other popular culture narratives, providing both dramatic tension that the viewers may be experiencing vicariously with the main character and themes recognizable in other types of archetypical, idealized hero narratives (Comerford, 2018; Olesen, 2021). Films depicting whistleblowing and its effects

have been present for decades (Olesen, 2019) with one of the more recent examples being *Snowden* (2016), dramatizing the aforementioned case of Edward Snowden.

Although the dramatic aspects of whistleblowing may translate and the aspects of morality and prosocial behaviors can make for archetypal protagonists, there may be some ambiguity regarding which whistleblowing acts are necessarily *heroic* (Brown, 2016). Specifically, Brown argues that the unexceptional nature of whistleblowing, the complex motives that drives it, the modes that impact its recognition such as media and film, create a stereotypical heroic narrative that serves as a hindrance to the societal benefits of whistleblowing, and many whistleblowing instances fall short of hero status. Yet, it could also be argued that a whistleblower's act is often especially heroic because their efforts are often socially punished as acts of villainy (Franco et al., 2011).

It may be reasonable to classify many whistleblowers as “heroes” (for alternative approaches that highlight nuances when whistleblowers may not be clear-cut heroes see Brown, 2016; Richardson et al., 2021).² Heroism is also composed of certain common elements (Franco et al., 2011) that may aptly apply to many whistleblowers. The distinction between heroism and other more general prosocial behavior has been drawn by researchers who argue that heroism is something beyond simply acting altruistically. First, heroes must encounter risk or sacrifice that may not be present in all prosocial acts. As previously discussed, whistleblowers often put themselves at great risk of retaliation from their organization, which can include termination, exclusion, loss of professional opportunities, financial penalties, and even wider damage to their reputation and safety. Second, the hero must be willing to act even despite clear barriers and obvious exit options. Whistleblowers

² When whistleblowers are considered heroes, they may best fit the archetypal category of *social hero*, i.e., civilians who do not face immediate physical peril, but instead they preserve or uphold societal values perceived to be under threat, or attempt to raise the societal standards of ethical behavior (Franco et al., 2011). This is distinguished from *martial heroes* (those who are duty-bound to take physical risks when acting altruistically) and *civil heroes* (those who are not duty bound by their profession, but still incur physical peril).

also face many barriers and have many opportunities to choose *not* to report. While the latter is self-explanatory, the former includes factors that decrease the success of reporting misconduct such as a lack of resources or a lack of a code of ethics (Smaili & Arroyo, 2019). Third, the hero's behaviors are purposeful and require overcoming considerable fear. Indeed, whistleblowers are required to overcome inner conflict and transcend fear when reporting an organization's wrongdoings (Smaili & Arroyo, 2019).

Yet, despite fitting many archetypal characteristics of heroes, five key factors can influence whether a specific whistleblower is perceived as a hero (Richardson & McGlynn, 2021). First, a whistleblower's motivation may influence heroic attributions—with altruistic motives being viewed more positively than selfish or mixed motives. Second, a whistleblower is more likely to be perceived as a hero if they are found to have been a bystander in the wrongdoing than being complicit. Third, whistleblowers who faced higher levels of risk are more likely to be viewed as heroes than those who did not encounter such threats. Fourth, whistleblowers whose actions result in positive changes (i.e., the whistleblower effect) are more likely to be considered heroes than those whose actions result in negligible or negative changes. Finally, whistleblowers who are willing to blow the whistle again are more likely to be considered heroes than those who are unwilling to assume this risk a second time. These five factors serve as the necessary elements to be considered a heroic whistleblower. It is important to note that subsequent arguments for the veneration of whistleblowers assume that these elements are present.

5 INTERNAL REACTIONS TO WHISTLEBLOWERS: COGNITIVE DISSONANCE PROCESSES

When someone notices that their behaviors and attitudes do not align, or that two different attitudes are at odds, they often feel emotional discomfort and a desire to reconcile

these differences. This experience is commonly termed *cognitive dissonance* (Festinger, 1962; Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones, 2007). In general, the more important the dissonant elements are to one's self-concept, the stronger feelings of dissonance become and the desire to remedy the dissonance (or at least reduce it to tolerable levels). Dissonance processes have been studied under a wide range of contexts, from health attitudes and behaviors to complying with an experimenter's request to lie for the purposes of a study's cover story; sometimes these issues are important to a person's self-concept and other times the issues are mundane. Researchers who focus on *moral/ethical dissonance* study these processes in situations most likely to evoke discomfort, even guilt, because they involve beliefs and actions directly related to moral values and one's self-concept (Ayal & Gino, 2012; Janoff-Bulman, 2012; Tangney, 2003). Indeed, dissonance likely will be most intense for people who consider the relevant values as central to their self-concepts, also known as *moral identity* (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Monin & Jordan, 2009). For example, research suggests that one's moral identity promotes prosocial behavior (e.g., charity donations; sharing; Christner et al., 2020; Young et al., 2012), and suppressing aspects of one's moral identity for competing self-interest can lead to feelings of moral dissonance (Cameron & Payne, 2012). Even simply anticipating these dissonant feelings can provide motivation for future prosocial behavior as a preemptive strategy (Christner et al., 2020).

It can be easy to connect moral dissonance with the literature on the decision-making process in whistleblowing. As previously mentioned, potential whistleblowers are caught in a bind between competing moral values. Yet, whistleblowers also provoke feelings of dissonance in others, and specifically by bringing the moral dissonance of organizations into the forefront of public attention. An employee who demonstrates that their organization has violated the company's ethics, or that of society broadly, is making public that organization's dissonance. Even if the wrongdoing is because of one bad agent, such as an executive, the

dissonance may still reflect poorly on other members of the organization – a type of *courtesy stigma* that contaminates any who are affiliated with the group in the eyes of broader society (Goffman, 1963; Pryor et al., 2012). Thus, a whistleblower's actions both present a threat to the public perception of an organization as a broad entity and to each individual member. This threat is still based on *public* perception of a moral discrepancy, and not necessarily the individual organization member's view of a discrepancy. An employee could easily deflect any dissonance by believing they are innocent of any wrongdoing because they were not directly involved and likely had no knowledge of the infraction. Why then would whistleblowers still experience hostility and social exclusion from their innocent co-workers? One reason may be that individuals can experience dissonance vicariously (Monin, et al., 2004; Norton et al., 2003). As such, it may be that when employees learn that their organization has committed a moral infraction, they experience their organization's moral dissonance as their own, at least to some degree. The more employees consider their group membership as important to their overall self-concepts, the more likely they would be to experience vicarious dissonance.

Considerable evidence suggests that individuals bring various relationship targets into their self-concepts, such as romantic partners (Aron et al., 1992; Agnew et al., 1998), religious congregations and leaders (Wesselmann et al., 2016), celebrities (Derrick et al., 2008), political candidates (Young et al., 2009), and even the natural environment (Davis et al., 2009). As such, it is likely that any relationship target, whether individual or entity, that is perceived as violating one's own moral values would elicit some feeling of moral dissonance. Thus, a whistleblower who calls attention to a religious or political figure's moral infraction would likely cause dissonance in individuals who share a group membership with those figures, especially if they are already committed to supporting that person or organization. Thus, a practicing Roman Catholic Christian would be more likely to experience vicarious

dissonance when learning news that a Bishop covered up sexual assault allegations against a clergy member, than would individuals who were raised Roman Catholic but have subsequently left that faith tradition. The same would be true for a U.S. citizen who identified as a Republican or an ardent supporter of former President Trump – whistleblowers such as Lt. Col. Vindman would provoke more dissonance in these individuals than in U.S. citizens who do not identify with the former president or the Republican party.

Indeed, a modern dissonance perspective argues that a key to understanding these processes involve the degree to which being made aware of the dissonance hamstrings planning for future actions (Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones, 2007; Harmon-Jones et al., 2015). Thus, a person who perceives themselves as being a part of a political organization, and supporting that party's candidate, would find the moral inconsistency as most aversive and dissonant. How would those individuals reduce that dissonance? They could decide to remove their support from the candidate or organization entirely, though this may be a difficult path to take if they have invested considerable time, effort, and identity into that relationship. An easier path would be to disparage and discredit the whistleblower as much as possible, perhaps even convincing themselves that the whistleblower is part of a broad conspiracy (Beggan, 2021). Even simply calling a whistleblower's report "fake news" may suffice as a rhetorical strategy to reduce the dissonance and safeguarding protecting one's moral worldview (Zompetti, 2019). If these tactics fail to reduce the dissonance to a tolerable level, one may also convince themselves that there is a reason to persist in the relationship despite the dissonance. For example, one may convince themselves that they can tolerate various immoral behaviors from a political figure if that person acts on specific issues in a way that is consonant with their most important moral values (i.e., their moral *convictions* – beliefs they treat to be self-evident and beyond debate or justification; Skitka, 2012). Such

individuals may reduce dissonance by convincing themselves that tolerating various moral infractions may be the “lesser of the evils” if their core moral convictions are supported.

6 EFFECTS OF MEDIA COVERAGE AND RHETORIC ON REACTIONS TO WHISTLEBLOWING

As previously stated, whistleblowers can be categorized as social heroes due to the sacrifices they make and the moral concerns that motivate their actions. Ascribing the status of hero to whistleblowers will likely aid in reducing the retaliation against them. However, the status of hero is something that must be given by those who witnessed the heroic act and often is not granted until observers contextualize the actions (Franco et al., 2018). This can explain why heroic actions like the ones of whistleblowers are often controversial at first, but upon contextualization become heroic. During this time of controversy, the whistleblower may fall victim to retaliation. Categorizing the *actions* of whistleblowers as culturally valued and *generally* heroic, i.e., something that should be expected from any member of society in the same circumstances, may reduce this period of controversy and decrease the chances of vilification or retaliation. This may be an area in which media coverage, specifically the rhetoric of and framing by the media outlets, can play an important role in the moral judgements individual viewers make toward the whistleblower and their actions (see Brown, 2016, for a discussion of the potential pitfalls of depicting whistleblowers as *extraordinary* heroes, rather than a role to which anyone can aspire).

Recent research (Touchton et al., 2020) has found that terms influence perceptions of a whistleblower: people generally respond to the phrase “blow the whistle” more favorably than “leak” when reading about a whistleblowing event. These data suggest that the language media outlets use to describe the whistleblower likely influences viewer responses. However, and perhaps unsurprisingly, these data also found that this effect was influenced by their

political leanings such that they preferred whistleblowing activity that damages the opposing party rather than their own. Recall that group loyalty is a key foundation of moral belief systems and this cuts across the political spectrum (Graham et al., 2009). Just as group loyalty can provide a hurdle to someone reporting unethical behavior (Waytz et al., 2013), it likely also biases others against the one doing the reporting.

The conflict between the moral foundations of group loyalty and fairness that categorize the *Whistle-Blower's Dilemma* (Waytz et al., 2013) likely also provides a framework for understanding some of the moral dissonance experienced by outsiders. As such, an individual's different endorsement of these values may predict how they ultimately judge the whistleblower. Even though U.S. conservatives and liberals value both group loyalty and fairness, liberals tend to endorse fairness more strongly than group loyalty and conservatives tend to weight them similarly. However, these are broad patterns and individual endorsements of one's moral foundations are more predictive of sociopolitical-relevant attitudes than political affiliation (Koelva et al., 2012). It may be that individuals who are more oriented toward fairness than group loyalty concerns will not respond as negatively to a someone who informs on their group than individuals who are more oriented toward group loyalty. Additionally, perceptions of the morality of whistleblowers may be influenced by other moral foundations. For example, people also make moral decisions based on the degree to which an act (a) *harms* someone (especially a group considered vulnerable to exploitation), (b) supports or disrespects institutional *authority*, (c) contaminates the *purity* of cultural norms, (d) or impacts the *freedom* of others (Iyer et al., 2012).

Just as individuals have their own orientations towards moral foundations such as fairness and loyalty, media outlets (especially partisan-oriented ones) likely have their own biases toward certain moral foundations. The promotion of certain moral foundations may influence how individuals respond to a specific whistleblowing event depending upon which

are most salient in the event's coverage (Graham et al., 2009). At first blush, such systemic moral bias suggests that media presents an "echo chamber" problem; however, media could also provide a solution. Experimental studies have demonstrated that persuasive messages can be tailored to recipients' moral foundations and subsequently change their favorability to issues that would otherwise be rejected because of typical partisan biases (Frimer et al., 2017; Wolsko et al., 2016). Thus, media outlets that wish to provide a more balanced discussion of a whistleblowing event could use rhetoric that discusses the implications of both loyalty and fairness (and other moral foundations) instead of focusing on just one.

Rhetorical classifications of whistleblowers as heroes may also motivate ethical or moral behaviors (cf., Allison & Goethals, 2016; Kinsella et al., 2015). If media outlets describe whistleblowing as an important social duty and only label it heroic when fulfilling the elements described by Richardson and McGlynn (2021), other potential whistleblowers may be encouraged while avoiding the pitfalls of stereotyping all whistleblowing as heroic (Brown, 2016). The impact of heroes on one's values is prevalent in lay perceptions of heroes and the narratives in which they are often encountered in (Allison & Goethals, 2016; Kinsella et al., 2015). Due to the moral motivations behind their actions and the often-severe consequences they face for their behaviors, whistleblowers can also be considered as moral exemplars or those who live a life of moral excellence (Walker, 1999). The more surprising and important the actions of a moral exemplar, the more an observer feels admiration, inspiration, and moral elevation (Aquino et al., 2011; van de Ven et al., 2019). These feelings tend to increase helpful behaviors (Schnall & Roper, 2012), which could increase the likelihood that someone will decide to support a whistleblower by direct means (i.e., preventing retaliation from coworkers) or indirect means (i.e., providing additional information supporting the whistleblower's claim).

7 ENCOURAGING THE VALUE OF WHISTLEBLOWING: SUGGESTIONS FROM THE LITERATURE

Whistleblowers provide a critical service in the uncovering of fraud and preserving communal values and standards of behavior, sometimes at great personal cost. Even if some whistleblowers do not have altruistic motives or fit the archetypal definition of a “hero” (Brown, 2016; Richardson & McGlynn, 2021), we argue that their *actions* should be valued socially if for no other reason than to reinforce support for the concept as culturally necessary so that exposing wrongdoings is seen culturally as a social duty as opposed to an extraordinarily heroic action (i.e., “quiet heroism”, Brown, 2016). Therefore, we propose several suggestions to encourage social norms for valuing whistleblowing. Social psychological theories related to the interplay between self-conceptions and personal values may offer some insight into potential strategies for mitigating negative responses to whistleblowers (Watson et al., 2004). Belief systems theory (Rokeach, 1979) proposes that each person holds multiple beliefs that are dynamically interrelated, with some beliefs being more interconnected to other beliefs (i.e., centrality) and some beliefs being more important; beliefs that are both interrelated and important have greater impact on the belief system and ultimately on behavior. In this conceptualization, self-conceptions are the most central, followed by values, and attitudes are the least central, suggesting that altering self-conceptions may provide the largest changes for a person’s entire belief system (Rokeach, 1979).

Psychological manipulations have experimentally induced self-dissatisfaction—a state where a person is made aware that their actions or expressed opinions fail to meet their own standards—to disrupt a person’s belief system and offer the possibility of change (Grube et al., 1994). Rokeach’s (1973) value self-confrontation technique applied principles of belief systems theory to provide enduring changes in values. This experimental paradigm involved

providing people with negative feedback about the way they prioritized a survey of personal values (e.g., “it seems you prioritize your own self-interests more than honesty”), while also providing information about how another individual (typically one who was attractive, prized, or respected by participants) prioritizes their values. While this approach had some early empirical support (Grube et al., 1994) and offers interesting potential for practical applications (Lyddon et al., 2006), relatively little recent research has examined the effects of value self-confrontation on enduring changes in personal values. Thus, future research in this area should investigate these issues, especially within the context of whistleblowing.

Self-affirmation theory (Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Sherman & Hartson, 2011; Steele, 1988), which is related to belief systems theory, also holds promise both for understanding the psychological processes associated with vilification of whistleblowers, and for suggesting means by which that type of response might be reduced. According to self-affirmation theory, people are motivated to maintain an overall sense of self-worth by holding onto favorable beliefs about themselves that include being competent, adequate, moral, and stable (Steele, 1988). Motivation to maintain a positive self-image influences how people respond to information that threatens this image.

Self-affirmation theory proposes three pathways by which people might satisfy their motivation to maintain a sense of self-worth when exposed to threatening information, such as knowledge that a whistleblower is exposing organizational flaws. By way of illustrating these pathways, consider the example of a person who receives such news. The first pathway corresponds to when a person accepts the threatening information as accurate (Sherman & Cohen, 2006) and accommodates it by changing their beliefs and behavior to address organizational problems, thus reducing the self-image threat. In this case, the person may be fearful that supporting a whistleblower could threaten their future in the organization; however, recognizing that they may need to deal with the current reality, this person may

support the whistleblower despite these fears. This *accommodation pathway* represents a positive response because the person is accommodating threatening information adaptively and changing their beliefs and behavior, rather than distorting reality to safeguard positive self-conceptions.

When people cannot accept and accommodate the threatening self-information, then a second *defensive pathway* may satisfy motivation to maintain positive self-conceptions. Defensiveness can be conceptualized as part of a larger psychological “immune system” that is activated when people experience threats to the self (Gilbert et al., 1998; Sherman & Hartson, 2011), and it entails counteracting or neutralizing the threatening information by ignoring, denying, disputing, or contradicting the information (Sherman & Cohen, 2006). For example, a person perceiving a whistleblower as threatening might respond defensively by downplaying their legitimacy, evaluating them negatively, and justifying immoral organizational practices (Watson et al., 2004). This pathway may provide some immediate protection from negative emotions but at the cost of accepting potentially useful information that whistleblowers provide.

Fortunately, a *self-affirmation pathway* offers a way to forestall defensive responses. This pathway involves bolstering one’s self-worth (i.e., self-affirmation) by reflecting on positive, self-relevant personal values to maintain the perception that they are competent, adequate, and stable (Sherman & Cohen, 2006). Self-affirmation therefore offers preemptive compensation, wherein people prepare for an upcoming threat by bolstering their self-worth, reducing the need to engage in self-protective defensiveness. For example, if a person first reflects on positive and relevant values, such as kindness, and then is presented with a whistleblower’s allegations, that might reduce their defensiveness to the threats associated with that information. In other words, the self-affirming person can retain high self-worth in a global sense by bolstering positive self-evaluations that are not directly being attacked by

threatening information (Sherman & Cohen, 2006). Regarding whistleblowing, bolstering a distressed person's self-worth in an unthreatened domain could potentially reduce the degree to which they perceive whistleblowers as threatening and allowing them to evaluate information more dispassionately than otherwise.

Self-affirmation theory provides a useful theoretical framework for hypothesizing how whistleblowers may be perceived as threatening and why reflecting on personal values may attenuate this threat. The first step in any affirmation intervention should be to elicit positive affirmations, and the most common self-affirmation exercise involves a person rank-ordering values and then writing a brief essay about their most important value (McQueen & Klein, 2006). Other empirically tested self-affirmation interventions include inserting self-defining terms into sentence stems (Schimel et al., 2004), asking participants if they had ever performed kindness-related behaviors (Reed & Aspinwall, 1998), offering positive feedback on their performance (Ben-Ari et al., 1999), encouraging visualization of a person who likes them (De Cremer & Sedikides, 2005), viewing their own Facebook profile page (Toma & Hancock, 2013), and completing surveys about their virtues (Napper et al., 2009).

Despite these various options, self-affirmation effects tend to be small, and interventions generally need to be targeted in a savvy way to elicit the desired effects (Cohen & Sherman, 2014). For example, self-affirmation interventions can backfire when the values that one reflects on are related to threatening information (Blanton et al., 1997), and may be less effective when information has already begun to elicit a defensive response (Critcher et al., 2010). Therefore, implementing self-affirmation interventions in organizations may require creativity and consideration for the specific values, norms, and structure of the organization. While there is some research examining self-affirmation interventions in organizational contexts, this is an area for future research (c.f., Watson et al., 2004; Wiesenfeld et al., 1999).

Another similar line of research suggests that reminding people of specific values increases their endorsement of beliefs and behaviors consistent with those values (Maio, 2017). This idea suggests that being reminded, or primed, to think about values that reflect compassion, fairness, and honesty could likely encourage beliefs and behaviors that align with support for whistleblowers, while suppressing that set of values and corresponding beliefs and behaviors that are related to the motivationally opposed self-enhancement values that emphasize personal success, personal recognition, and prestige.

Outreach initiatives and one-on-one conversations aimed at encouraging organizational norms supporting whistleblowers may benefit from discussing the importance of values that align with whistleblowing, such as benevolence values that include principles such as honesty, forgiveness, responsibility, helpfulness, loyalty, meaning in life, true friendship, a spiritual life, and mature love—and universalism values that include principles such as broadmindedness, a peaceful world, a beautiful world, environmental protection, unity with nature, social justice, wisdom, equality, and inner-harmony (Schwartz et al., 2012). Value-oriented conversations may be most effective when they emphasize underlying other-oriented motivations rather than extrinsic outcomes. For example, a person who values honesty (a benevolent, other-oriented value) may also find it important to be recognized for their honesty, the latter dynamic reflecting extrinsic motivation. Emphasizing a person's concerns about achievement or recognition may steer the conversation away from intrinsic motivation and prompt extrinsic concerns for personal well-being, which may heighten defensiveness.

8 CONCLUSION

Francis Haugen, a former data scientist for Facebook, recently initiated a high-profile whistleblowing case involving their suppression of data suggesting their various platforms

can be harmful psychologically to adolescents and used to stoke sociopolitical division and extremism. This is one of those rare whistleblowing cases that seems to have bipartisan support in U.S. politics (Allyn, 2021), likely because both sides perceive Facebook as violating moral values that they hold important. For example, both Republican and Democrat members of the Senate subcommittee investigating the case have cited the psychological harm and exploitation of minors as primary concerns (Bond & Allyn, 2021); these concerns fit within the moral foundation of harm. Recall that though U.S. liberals often place more emphasis on the harm foundation than U. S. conservatives, both groups still include this foundation in their overall value system (e.g., Graham et al., 2009). It probably also helps that Facebook is a private entity and not directly tied to a specific political group; indeed, it has engaged in several controversial activities that have earned the ire of politicians across the partisan divide (Allyn, 2021; Bond & Allyn, 2021). These likely are reasons why most people outside of Facebook have been lauding Haugen's actions, with little media backlash compared to notable whistleblowers in the past, such as Julian Assange, Chelsea Manning, Edward Snowden, and Alexander Vindman.

While the largely supportive responses to Francis Haugen's whistleblowing are encouraging, they are not the norm. Media backlash, controversy, and divided opinions seem to be much more common reactions to whistleblowers. Such complex and paradoxical social responses can be puzzling given that individuals who bring attention to moral infractions in their organizations and governments provide a valuable prosocial service in a democratic society. Indeed, individuals who learn about whistleblowers in the media may also struggle to resolve competing values of fairness and loyalty, just as individual whistleblowers do (Waytz et al., 2013). Frances Haugen specifically appealed to issues of fairness when arguing that government oversight of Facebook was necessary because without it, "Facebook will continue to make choices that go against the common good" (Bond & Allyn, 2021).

Individuals who are learning about a whistleblowing event may also struggle with moral dissonance and other internal reactions that elicit defensive reactions and justification for vilifying whistleblowing behavior. Whether a whistleblower is perceived as a virtuous reformer may be hindered by cognitive dissonance processes that forestall acceptance of a whistleblower's evidence. While some people can accommodate whistleblowers' information, many may find it easier to reduce cognitive dissonance by disparaging or discounting the whistleblower. To create environments that are likely to support prosocial behaviors such as whistleblowing, organizations may benefit from considering social norms, values, and company climates that emphasize ethics and values such as fairness and equality. Organizations may also consider adopting policies that explicitly value whistleblowing—rewarding them for their behavior rather than punishing or vilifying them.

Media outlets have a key role to play in influencing the social reactions to whistleblowing because they provide the crucial framing for how the event is described to audiences. The information these outlets disseminate, the moral foundations they promote, and their categorizations of whistleblowers as heroes (or villains) shape the biases of individual viewers and may influence cultures to venerate or vilify whistleblowers. As such, individuals, communities, and societies may need to consider not only their individual and collective values and moral foundations, but those of the media outlets that frame the rhetoric around whistleblowing events and disseminate that rhetoric onto millions of screens.

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10 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.