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Whistleblowing in financial organizations: towards an identity work perspective.

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How can we understand more about peoples' experiences of blowing the whistle in financial sector organizations? In this paper, instead of following existing research and focusing on generalizable traits and experiences, I adopt an identity work perspective. Identity work refers to peoples' struggles to craft a narrative of self amid competing resources. Scholars have shown how identity work is particularly salient at moments of crisis, and how it can help us to understand the operation of discourse in more detail.

Whistleblowing is an important topic for organizational scholars. In many cases, people who have spoken up about perceived wrongdoing in their work contexts represent the only way for problems to come to light. Today, whistleblowing is ever more vital; as work practices become more complex through the use of opaque technology systems in, for example, banking and finance, fewer and fewer people are in a position to understand these practices fully. This means that we depend now more than ever on whistleblowers who have inside knowledge to alert us to problems (Rothschild and Miethe, 1999).

To date, research is limited, and tends to fall roughly into two categories. The first involves studying the 'factors' that influence experiences of whistleblowing- the structural circumstances that surround instances including whether the organization in question is in the public or private sector (Vinten, 1994), the country context (Skivenes and Trygstad, 2010), the hierarchical structure in place (Rothwell and Baldwin, 2006) and the position of the whistleblower (Bjorkelo et al., 2011). Researchers examine how such factors affect both the likelihood of whistleblowing occurring and the kinds of retaliation that results (Near and Miceli, 1996; Rothschild and Miethe, 1999). A second approach has been to gather experiences of whistleblowers themselves through relatively unstructured interviews (Alford, 2001; Glazer and Glazer, 1989). The idea is that through this method, the lived experiences of whistleblowers can emerge. Collections of stories from across a range of sectoral settings have emerged. Having presented this rich and nuanced data, authors tend to draw commonalities across the data, identifying similarities in whistleblowers' experiences. An example involves C. Fred Alford's identification of 'narcissism moralized' as a psychological tendency (2001: 13).

Existing approaches leave gaps in our understanding. There is little theoretical development around the relation between practices of whistleblowing and forms of power in society and within organizations. Notable exceptions include Rothschild and Miethe's (1999) framing of whistleblowing as instance of employee resistance, and Perry's (1998) argument that whistleblowers exist between competing discursive logics that persist within organizations: the need for secrecy in order to return a profit, and a cultural valorization of truth-telling in contemporary life (see also Goffman, 1959; Grant, 2002). Beyond such studies, the complex intersection of whistleblower practice and power has not, to date, been theorized in depth.

In this paper, I propose an identity work lens in order to enhance our understanding of organizational whistleblowing. Identity work comes from the idea that human

existence involves ongoing engagement with the question of ‘who am I?’ (Alvesson et al., 2008: 6). In response to this perennial question: in order to understand our place in the world and to be able to communicate this to other people, we continually attempt to construct and reconstruct a somewhat coherent account that is valued, or at least recognized, by other people within a social context (ibid: 15). Analytically, identity work is seen as an ongoing process, one’s ‘self-identity’ is never attained in some final way; we are more or less continually involved in developing and maintaining something of a stable sense of self. For this reason, identity work can be seen as a weaving together, or ‘crafting’ of accounts of self from the diverse resources available to us (Kondo, 1990; Thomas and Davies, 2005; Watson, 2008). Identity therefore is multiple in nature; one’s gender, class, professional identity, sexuality, race and other ‘nodes’ can intersect in and through each other at any given time (Leonard, 2010). These positions can often be contradictory; there is little coherence to identity work, despite our best efforts to achieve this.

Identity work appears particularly suitable for the study of whistleblowers; certain experiences can disrupt a relatively stable sense of self and trigger periods of intense identity work (Collinson, 2003; Ibarra, 1999; Knights and Willmott, 1989; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008; Watson, 2008). In addition, an identity work perspective lends the promise of a critical edge to studies of organizations; if we can see how micro processes of identity draw on for example powerful discourses and influences, this can help us to understand how power comes to be reproduced (Knights and Willmott, 1989; Thomas and Davies, 2005). Overall, therefore, identity work involves a complex, ongoing struggle involving many aspects of ‘self, work and organization’ (Alvesson et al., 2008: 9). The study of identity work can shift the spotlight to the role of discursive regimes in employees’ processes of self-constitution and in doing so, shed light on the political and material implications of this.

To explore this in the context of whistleblowing, I draw on interview data from recent whistleblowers in financial sector organizations in Ireland, the UK and the U.S., analysing this from an identity work perspective. By showing how people are variably attached to, reject or maintain particular aspects of self, which are inseparable from discourses within the organization and in wider society, this promises a fresh perspective on whistleblowing, and organizational ‘truth telling’ more generally.

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