

Whistleblowing: Antecedents and consequences

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Whistleblowing is a phenomenon and a behaviour that seemingly is full of paradoxes. On one hand you can have workers who in good faith report wrongdoing. On the other hand whistleblowing can be associated with severe consequences on health. This situation exists while most societies probably would agree that they would like to end corruption and mismanagement at work. In order to disentangle this paradox and the phenomenon of whistleblowing, this article will introduce the research field and topic of whistleblowing by first (1) outlining the historical background for whistleblowing. Then (2) the term will be defined. Further (3), theoretical ways of understanding the whistleblowing phenomenon will be presented, before (4) empirical findings will be described. Finally (5) some implications for future research and practice will be delineated.

Keywords: *whistleblowing, bullying, antecedents, consequences*

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The phenomenon of a person alarming about a perceived threat, wrongdoing or injustice, which later has become known as whistleblowing, is of ancient origin (cf. Bok, 1981). According to Confucian ethics (Confucius, 552–479 B.C.), ‘a noble man is one with virtue and courage, a man who speaks up for righteousness’ (Park, Rehg, & Lee, 2005, p. 388). While Socrates dealt with societal issues and spoke up about them to the people of Greece (470–399 B.C., Plato, 395 BC/2003). According to Mansbach (2011), ancient Greece also had a practice of a protected position of fearless speech or truth-telling. In the modern era the phenomenon of alerting society about perceived dangers has for instance been attended to in Henrik Ibsen’s (1882) theatre play ‘An enemy of the people’. In this play, the town’s medical director Dr. Stockman spoke publicly about the contamination of the newly installed public mineral bath.

Thus, while the phenomenon of speaking up about perceived danger, wrongdoing or injustice is old, the concept of ‘whistleblowing’ is of more modern origin.

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It has been suggested that this concept originally was derived from the action of the ‘bulbous-cheeked English Bobby wheezing away on his whistle when the maiden cries “stop thief”’ (Johnson, 2003, p. 4). The first time the concept of whistleblowing was allegedly officially used was when it was applied to describe the behaviour of U.S. State Department official Otto F. Otepka in 1963 (C. Peters & Branch, 1972). Otepka leaked information about persons he perceived as potential risks to national security (e.g., individuals assumed to be communists) to the Senate Subcommittee on Internal Security (Applbaum, 1992; Bok, 1981). Since the 1960s, the whistleblowing phenomenon has gradually become known also outside North American borders and today seems to have entered colloquial and legal speech in North America and elsewhere (see e.g., Adler & Daniels, 1992; Arszulowicz & Gasparski, 2011; Calland & Dehn, 2004; Gong, 2000; Uys, 2008; Von Hippel, 1993; Wojciechowska-Nowak, 2011). As a result, the term can be interpreted differently depending on arena of application (e.g., media, laymen, researchers and in law). The following section will therefore clarify and define the term.

DEFINITION OF THE TERM

After 25 years, a definition of whistleblowing by Near and Miceli from 1985 is still considered the state of art description of the construct (cf. King III, 1997). Near and Miceli (1985) define whistleblowing as:

'the disclosure by organization members (former or current) of illegal, immoral or illegitimate practices under the control of their employers, to persons or organizations that may be able to effect action' (p. 5).

This definition relates whistleblowing to a situation where one or several employees observe or acquire knowledge about wrongdoing (e.g., corruption) in the organisation. The employee then reports his or her observation to a complaint recipient within (e.g., to the immediate supervisor) or outside of the organisation (e.g., to the Health Authorities). Elliston and colleagues (1985) further argue that an act is regarded as whistleblowing if and only if the:

- (1) intent of the actor is to make the content of the report public, the
- (2) information becomes a part of an official record, the
- (3) content of the report includes possible or actual non-trivial types of wrongdoing and
- (4) the employee is a former or current organisation member.

Thus in this definition only reports *intended* for public awareness are defined as whistleblowing. Further, Jubb (1999) argues that whistleblowing is:

'a deliberate non-obligatory act of disclosure, which gets onto public record and is made by a person who has or had privileged access to data or information of an organisation, about non-trivial illegality or other wrongdoing whether actual, suspected or anticipated which implicates and is under the control of that organisation, to an external entity having potential to rectify the wrongdoing' (p. 78).

In line with the definitions proposed by Near and Miceli (1985) and Elliston (1985), Jubb classifies a report as whistleblowing only when it concerns *non-trivial and possibly illegal* issues. Both the Jubb and Near and Miceli definition consider that a part of the definition implies that the reported wrongdoing needs to be *under the control of the employer*.

While the three theoretical definitions of whistleblowing presented above seem to be relatively unanimous in relation to *who* may be labelled a whistleblower (e.g., a former or current organisation member) and in relation to *what* type of action or wrongdoing (e.g., potentially illegal and non-trivial) the employee must report in order for the act to be considered as whistleblowing. They do however disagree in relation to the emphasis put on *how* the perceived wrongdoing is to be reported (e.g., to internal or to external parties) in order to be considered as whistleblowing. For instance, both Elliston (1985) and Jubb (1999) argue that *only* reporting to external recipients should be regarded as whistleblowing. There are several arguments for not

classifying internal reporting as whistleblowing (cf. Elliston, et al., 1985).

One is that internal reporting is not assumed to involve the level of *violation of confidence* (e.g., between the organisation and its employee) and level of moral conflict that is assumed to be at play in an act of whistleblowing (cf. Jubb, 1999). According to Jubb, whistleblowing is 'an ethical dilemma because it necessitates a *breach* of trust'¹ which may involve disobedience that again may add 'weight to the dilemma' (p. 91). Jubb argues that only external and not internal reporting includes such serious moral conflict and breach of trust.

As a result, an internal report about a perceived wrongdoing made by a concerned employee who aims at effecting change and protecting the reputation of the corporation is excluded from Jubb's definition of whistleblowing. This implies that, the case of Enron where Sherron Watkins made an internal report about considerable widespread irregularities in relation to accounting practices approved by top management would be excluded from the Jubb definition (cf. Swartz & Watkins, 2003). This is in stark contrast to the media opinion who labelled Watkins together with Cynthia Cooper and Coleen Rowley Persons of the Year of 2002 in Time Magazine for their proactive approach of disclosing mismanagement and misconduct at Enron, WorldCom and the FBI (Colvin, 2002; Lacayo & Ripley, December 22, 2002). The exclusion of internal reports is problematic in relation to the nature of the whistleblowing phenomenon, although in another way than proposed by Jubb (1999). Further, empirical findings have systematically shown that the majority of employees attempt to stop wrongdoing from within and that extremely few employees report to external complaint recipients first or only (Bjørkelo, Einarsen, Nielsen, & Matthiesen, 2011; Brown, 2008; Miceli & Near, 2005b; Near & Miceli, 1987). If only external reporting was regarded as whistleblowing, this would exclude the majority of the population of employees that report wrongdoing per se and would, in fact, only include a small part of how research has described that a potential whistleblowing process may develop. As an exclusion of internal reporting can distance the theoretical definition from the phenomenon as it unfolds in practice, this and other arguments are in support of keeping internal reporting within the theoretical definition of whistleblowing. Thus, to exclude internal reports from a definition of whistleblowing is problematic as it can 'lead us to ignore information that might be helpful in understanding the process' (Miceli & Near, 2005a, p. 88).

¹ Italics added by the current author.

Operational definitions

Even though whistleblowing has been defined theoretically in several ways, there are no standard across nations validated screening measurement instruments for whistleblowing. What does exist is rather a dominant tradition or a most widely applied approach that we can call the *behavioural approach*. This way to operationalise the theoretical definition of whistleblowing has been applied in the large scale studies conducted by the Merit System Protection Board (MSPB) studies in the US since the 1980ies (see e.g., Near & Miceli, 2008). In articles that have published secondary analyses of MSPB data, whistleblowing has been measured by asking questions about the:

- *observation* of different types of wrongdoing such as fraud, mismanagement, waste
- *potential reporting* of this and
- *whom* the wrongdoing was reported to.

Afterwards respondents are coded into groups such as non-observers, observers and whistleblowers according to their previous answers (see e.g., Miceli & Near, 1984; Miceli, Rehg, Near, & Ryan, 1999; Near & Miceli, 1986; Near, Rehg, Van Scotter, & Miceli, 2004). This procedure leaves out a definition and gives overall information about the *how much* wrongdoing is observed and makes it possible to calculate a ratio of *how many* employees that have blown the whistle according to the number of observations of wrongdoing made. This approach also gives information about types of reported wrongdoing and complaint recipients. To be equivalent to the theoretical definition, this approach assumes that the employees that report are former or current organizational members, that the categories of wrongdoing are illegal, immoral, or illegitimate in the place where the questions are applied, that the wrongdoing practices are under the control of the reporters employer, and that the persons or organizations that the employee reported to are able to do something about the wrongdoing in the nation in question (Near & Miceli, 1985, p. 4). One of the strengths of the behavioural approach is that it in addition to giving information about whistleblowers², yields information about whether respondents are aware or unaware of a wrongdoing, coded as observers and non-observers respectively, as well as respondents who do not report the misconduct they have witnessed, namely inactive or silent observers.

Another way to study whistleblowing is by the *operational definition approach*. This implies presenting participants with a definition of whistleblowing and afterwards asking participants whether they would call themselves whistleblowers according to this definition or not. The

² These are employees who report that they have observed wrongdoing and reported it to someone inside or outside the organisation.

operational definition approach is widely applied in the workplace bullying field (see e.g., Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2011) and has also been applied in whistleblowing studies (see e.g., Bjørkelo, 2010; Bjørkelo, et al., 2011; Bjørkelo, Matthiesen, & Einarsen, 2010). One example of a modification of Near and Miceli's theoretical definition into an operational definition reads as follows:

'Whistleblowing describes situations where an employee (former or current) reports an unethical, illegal or illegitimate practice at work. The person reports to a person or a body that has the ability to change the practice. The person or body that receives the report may be internal to the organisation (for example a leader, safety deputy, elected employee representative), but may also be an external body (for example the police or other public authorities, media, environmental organisation). Whistleblowing concerns actions that affect others (individuals, organisations, society). It is not whistleblowing if one reports injustice towards oneself, if it is done anonymously, in order to gain personal profit, or if it is conducted through established internal procedures' (Bjørkelo, et al., 2011, p. 214).

In line with the theoretical definition by Near and Miceli (1985) presented earlier, the first part of this operational definition are in harmony. For instance should the:

- (1) employee be a current or former organisation member, the
- (2) nature of the wrongdoing must be perceived as illegal, unethical or illegitimate, and
- (3) the complaint recipient must have the ability to stop the wrongdoing.

The second part of the definition is however different in order to meet several concerns. Firstly, whistleblowing is generally regarded as a prosocial organisational behaviour (cf. Miceli & Near, 2005b). It is therefore important that an operational definition focuses on reports that are made to help rather than to harm others. Secondly, anonymous employees cannot suffer from retaliation or benefit from reward as long as their identity is unknown to the complaint recipient and other members of the organisation (cf. Near & Miceli, 1986). As a result, it is crucial that an operational definition focuses on workers who openly have reported about perceived wrongdoing³. Thirdly, as whistleblowing

³ This does however not imply that employees that report anonymously in general not should be regarded as whistleblowers. As in the case of internal versus external reporting being a part of the definition, actual whistleblowing cases have often showed that an anonymous whistleblower's unknown identity often becomes known against his or her will. This was for instance shown in the case of Wendy Addison who first made an anonymous call about widespread corruption to the South African Revenue Services about the South African company LeisureNet. Addison's identity later became known

studies are conducted across cultures, it is vital that an operational definition is culture-specific (see e.g., Ryan, Chan, Ployhart, & Slade, 1999). In Norway, all organisations have since 1992 been obligated to establish and employ systems for internal control and to document factors relating to health and safety (cf. Bull, Riise, & Moen, 2002). The Norwegian Work Environment Act (2007), which was established in 1977 and revised in 2005 (Act of 17th June 2005, No. 62), introduced three new sections (§2-4, 2-5, 3-6) which regulate whistleblowing or 'notification' at work. One of these sections (§3-6) encourage organisations to include whistleblowing guidelines into the standard internal control system. At the time of data collection of many whistleblowing studies undertaken in Norway (Bjørkelo, et al., 2011; Bjørkelo, Matthiesen, & Einarsen, 2007; Bjørkelo, Ryberg, Matthiesen, & Einarsen, 2008; Skivenes & Trygstad, 2010), none of these three sections of the Work Environment Act were legally active. According to several Norwegian researchers, few employees were in 2008 and 2010 well acquainted with these newly established internal whistleblowing guidelines (cf. Matthiesen, Bjørkelo, & Nielsen, 2008; Trygstad, 2010). Conducting whistleblowing after the onset of the whistleblowing legislation will therefore demand elaborations to the presented operational definition across settings, as will the conduction of studies in nations with no legislation, such as for instance Poland (Arszulowicz, 2007; Lewicka-Strzalecka, 2002; Wojciechowska-Nowak, 2011).

THEORETICAL WAYS OF UNDERSTANDING THE WHISTLEBLOWING PHENOMENON

Models

A range of models has been developed to illuminate the question of *how* the whistleblowing phenomenon manifests itself. Table 1 (see page 9) presents a summary of six models from the whistleblowing literature. The *first column* in Table 1 presents a model developed by *McLain and Keenan* (1999) and describes how an employee can come to the conclusion to report a perceived wrongdoing at work. According to this three staged model, whistleblowing is initiated by an *observation* of an act or practice that is perceived as wrong. Then the wrongdoing and the potential motivation to act is *assessed* (stage 2; judgement). Depending on how the wrongdoing is *evaluated* and the employee's *level of motivation* (existing or non-existing), the further process can lead to one of five decisions. One of these decisions

involves doing nothing (inaction), whilst another involves *joining in on* or supporting the wrongdoing. The three remaining decisions all involve taking some type of action (e.g., direct, procedural). Direct action involves that the observer him or herself stops the wrongdoing, while the two other types of action involves reporting in accordance with or outside existing procedures.

The *O'Day* (1974) model, which is presented in the *second column* outlines the two phases or reactions that may follow *after* an action (i.e., whistleblowing) is made. According to the O'Day model, the first reaction phase consists of *indirect nullification and isolation*. Nullification implies that the employee is told that the complaint is invalid, while social isolation entails that the whistleblower is hindered from mobilising support by separating him or her from their respective colleagues. The second reaction phase consists of two formal types of reactions; *defamation and expulsion*. Defamation is when the whistleblower is personally attacked. Expulsion means that the whistleblower is fired.

The third model, presented in the *third column* was developed by *Rosecrance* (1988) after fifteen years of experience as a probation officer. According to Rosecrance, whistleblowing is a process that takes place across five stages. The first stage, *internal criticism*, concerns how a perceived wrongdoing is acted on within the organisation. The second stage, *intransigency*, concerns how the whistleblower and the complaint recipient(s) hold dissimilar opinions about the reported wrongdoing and negative perceptions about one another. The third stage, *external disclosure*, is when the employee reports to someone outside the organisation because previous internal reports have been unsuccessful. The next stage concerns *reactions from the organisation* which often seem to aim at isolating the whistleblower. This fourth stage bears resemblance to the indirect stage of isolation in the O'Day (1974) model. However, opposed to the latter model, Rosecrance argues that whistleblowing cases, from his point of view, ends with *aftermath* (stage 5). This fifth stage in the Rosecrance model is when the whistleblower is involuntary transferred or potentially develops health problems and eventually may become unemployed.

The *Graham* (1986) model, which is presented in the *fourth column* bears clear resemblance to the *McLain and Keenan* (1999) model in that the whistleblowing phenomenon is assumed to start off with an evaluation process that consists of three stages; awareness, attribution and a decision (i.e., whistleblowing or not). According to Graham, the next and fourth step is the *magnitude and nature* of the report made (e.g., internal or external). The last and fifth stage of the Graham model concerns the *reaction from*

in relation to the judicial process which resulted in the two former chief executives being convicted and sentenced to seven years of imprisonment (See e.g., <http://london.thesouthafrican.com/community/The-risks-of-exposing-corruption>).

the organisation. This stage is similar to the descriptions of potential reactions that may follow after the report in the models by O'Day (1974) and Rosecrance (1988). What distinguishes the last stage in Graham's model from the others is that it may be directed both at the whistleblower and the reported wrongdoing.

In the *fifth column* an outline of the comprehensive 'preliminary model of whistleblowing and its consequences', developed by Miceli and Near (1992), is presented. According to this model, whistleblowing takes place along a sequence of *five main stages*:

- (1) the triggering event (e.g., consisting of illegitimate, immoral or illegal acts or omissions),
- (2) the decision making process (e.g., whether or not to blow the whistle),
- (3) the whistleblowing or not,
- (4) the reactions from others (e.g., members of the organisation and external parties), and
- (5) the evaluation of the outcome (i.e., the actions taken in regards to the wrongdoing and the whistleblower).

The Miceli and Near model shares the fifth stage, which describes how the whistleblower evaluates the reactions he or she has received, with the Graham (1986) model. According to Miceli and Near, the whistleblowing process is dynamic, as stages 1 to 5 can be repeated if the outcome of the report is not perceived as satisfactory by the employee in question. This *dynamic loop* is assumed to be particularly dependent on the outcome of the fifth stage, which concerns how the whistleblower evaluates the experienced reactions that succeeded the whistleblowing.

The next model in Table 1 is developed by Soeken (1986, see column six)⁴ after therapy with over a hundred whistleblowers. The model contains seven stages that were present in most of the cases Soeken dealt with. Together these stages are assumed to illustrate an underlying process. The first three stages, which consists of *discovery*, *reflection* and *confrontation*, are rather similar to the stages described in several of the previously presented models (e.g., Graham, 1986; McLain & Keenan, 1999). The 'confrontation' stage in the Soeken model also bears similarities with stages (internal criticism and magnitude of the report) in the models by Rosecrance (1988) and Graham (1986). Like several of the other models (e.g., Graham, 1986; O'Day, 1974; Rosecrance, 1988), the next stage in the Soeken model concerns the *reaction from the organisation*. This fourth stage is labelled *retaliation*, emphasising the possibility of

experiencing negative reactions. The three last stages (5-7) of the Soeken model, resembles the final stage previously described by Rosecrance. Soeken however outlines the potential aftermath in more detail. This is probably due to that Soeken developed his model based on counselling and therapy with actual whistleblowers. The last stages of his model include the duration of time between the whistleblowing and the end of the whole process (*the long haul*), the point in time when a potential judicial process ends or the employee stops pursuing the case (*closure*) and the point in time when the employee potentially feels healed or like him- or herself again (*resolution*). Among the whistleblowers Soeken worked with, those reaching this final resolution stage seemed more often to have been able to re-enter working life and also to have been granted economical compensation.

While some of the models in Table 1 explicitly state that their models are based on experiences from their respective occupational fields (e.g., Rosecrance, 1988; D. R. Soeken, 1986), other models are predominantly developed from a theoretical point of view (e.g., Graham, 1986). The aforementioned six models also describe whistleblowing with somewhat different foci. The McLain and Keenan (1999) model mainly focuses on how an employee *comes to the conclusion* to report wrongdoing at work or not, while the O'Day (1974) model emphasises *how employees are met* (i.e., reactions) when they attempt to stop wrongdoing at work. The rest of the models describe whistleblowing as *a process* from the initial awareness of wrongdoing to the reaction from others, including the evaluation of the process (e.g., Graham, 1986; Miceli & Near, 1992) and the potential *aftermath* (e.g., Rosecrance, 1988; D. R. Soeken, 1986). Overall the models in Table 1 share one or several of the same core stages namely:

- (1) the awareness of a triggering event,
- (2) the decision making process,
- (3) the choice of action (e.g., whistleblowing or not) and
- (4) a reaction.

In sum, whistleblowing may be followed by positive as well as negative consequences. Hence, it is important to know which factors that are assumed to influence a potential whistleblowing process. The following section will therefore present some of the main explanatory frameworks we can utilise to understand not only *how* but also *why* the whistleblowing phenomenon can develop differently across individual cases.

Frameworks

The *motivation to help and prevent harm* is the starting point for understanding whistleblowing behaviour (cf. Dozier & Miceli, 1985; Near & Miceli, 1987). In

⁴ See also <http://whistleblowing.us/about-us/contacts/> and Nugent, T. (2003). Witness for the whistleblowers Soeken '64 heals those who fight for right. *Valpo. The magazine of Valparaiso University*. Retrieved 1st of July 2011 from: <http://whistleblowing.us/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/A-Witness-for-the-Whistleblowers.html>.

addition to a general motivation to help and prevent harm, a whistleblower is an employee who acts when confronted with problems at work. A theoretical concept that specifically addresses an employee's willingness to take charge and effect change is proactivity at work (cf. Grant & Ashford, 2008).

In addition to that *proactive behaviour* in the form of whistleblowing can be motivated by a wish to help and to prevent potential harm; it may also be influenced by personality (see e.g., Crant, 2000; Frese & Fay, 2001). Two of the main models of personality are the Five Factor model and the Interpersonal model of personality (cf. Sullivan, 1953; Wiggins & Trapnell, 1997). According to the Five Factor Model, an individual's personality consists of deep-rooted traits that affect behaviour and performance across situations (cf. Costa, Terracciano, & McCrae, 2001), while the interpersonal theory of personality concerns what people do to each other and argues that an individual's interpersonal style is likely to vary in terms of severity and breadth in both clinical and non-clinical populations (cf. Alden, Wiggins, & Pincus, 1990). An employee who acts when confronted with wrongdoing at work can therefore be described by a general prosocial motivation of helping others as well as by a tendency towards being proactive. It is also assumed that whistleblowers are relatively confident in their own ability to effect change when they approach others about wrongdoing at work.

In order to be motivated to act and being proactive, an employee however also needs to *perceive a situation as critical and as in a state of emergency*. It is therefore likely that an employee's level of ethical reasoning and development can influence the first three core stages of a whistleblowing process; namely whether an employee discovers wrongdoing (i.e., stage 1), assesses it (i.e., stage 2) and decides whether to act or not (i.e., stage 3, see e.g., Brabeck, 1984; Miceli, Dozier, & Near, 1991; Ponemon, 1994).

One of the models that try to explain how individuals make choices concerning moral issues is the *Four Component Model* (cf. Bebeau, Rest, & Narváez, 1999; Rest & Narváez, 1994) which concerns an employee's:

- (1) moral sensitivity (e.g., the ability to perceive actions that may be problematic),
- (2) judgement (e.g., the ability to evaluate the actions as wrongdoing),
- (3) motivation (e.g., being motivated to act) and
- (4) character (e.g., the ability to act).

In addition to *moral development*, the judgement and decision making stage (i.e. core stage 2) can be influenced by how an employee evaluates the pros and cons of reporting or not. This concurs with *rational choice theory* which views human behaviour as 'produced by the relative weighting

of the probabilities and magnitudes of both rewards and punishment' (Miethe & Rothschild, 1994, p. 326). For an employee evaluating what to do, this can concern evaluating the negative aspects of risk associated with getting involved in wrongdoing up against the positive aspects of risk associated with 'staying clean' of the wrongdoing and in relation to one's own personal moral.

In a case of bribery and corruption in the New York police, Frank Serpico chose to report after he personally received a \$300 payoff (cf. Maas, 1973). In this situation, the perceived positive risk associated with staying out of personal involvement in the wrongdoing was presumably perceived as greater than the perceived negative risk associated with reporting the malpractice. In a case of unsafe drug production, Dr. Console decided to report that untested drugs were certified even though he himself had taken an active part, and even pressured subordinates into being involved in the wrongdoing, in order to be 'able to live with himself' (cf. Glazer, 1983). In this situation, the perceived positive risk associated with getting out of personal involvement in the wrongdoing and coming clean with his personal conscience was presumably perceived as greater than the perceived negative risk associated with reporting the malpractice.

In both these cases, the decision to report seems to have been influenced by a growing feeling of being 'compelled to act' (Alford, 2001). This feeling can have been influenced by an emerging *cognitive dissonance* between what these employees believed in (e.g., that the police should not be corrupt and that consumers should get safe drugs) and what they were taking part in (e.g., taking a bribe and not testing drugs properly). The theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) proposes that people in general want their thoughts, beliefs and attitudes to be consistent or consonant with each other (Bernstein, Alison, Roy, & Wickens, 1997) and studies have found that inconsistent cognitions (i.e., cognitive dissonance) are associated with psychological discomfort (Elliot & Devne, 1994). According to Moser (1988), when an employee experiences cognitive dissonance, he or she 'has two choices – eliminate the dissonance or do nothing' (p. 385).

In addition to cognitive dissonance, the '*presence of others*' is also assumed to influence whether or not an employee reports wrongdoing (cf. Miceli & Near, 1988). According to the *Idiosyncrasy credit model*, how an employee perceives his or her interpersonal standing influences how he or she acts (cf. Hollander, 1958). An employee perceived to be a *contributor*, meeting the aims of the organisation earns credits, which again can provide him or her with 'leeway to deviate from the group' (Mesmer-Magnus & Viswesvaran, 2005, p. 280). How many '*available credits*' the individual

perceives that he or she holds in the eyes of the work group is again related to the level of deviation, idiosyncratic or atypical behaviour he or she may portray (Hollander, 1958, p. 124). In whistleblowing cases, high performing employees that hold characteristics that are perceived as attractive may therefore assess their possibility of success in reporting a perceived wrongdoing as more likely than employees without such attributes. Therefore, attractive employees, in organisational terms, may be more likely to report wrongdoing than employees without interpersonal bonuses or idiosyncrasy credits (cf. Mesmer-Magnus & Viswesvaran, 2005; Near & Miceli, 1987).

An employee's level of credits may also represent a form of *social power*. According to French and Raven (1959), social power is utilised to control behaviour and an employee's level of social power depends on the system where he or she works. An employee's decision about whether to report or not, may therefore also depend upon the *characteristics of the organisation* and the *professional power* of the individual in question. According to *resource dependency theory* (cf. Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978), there are three main factors that distinguish the general level of power held by an organisation member;

- (1) the hierarchical structure of the organisation,
- (2) the specialisation of labour and
- (3) the difference in supply and demand of knowledge, skill and abilities (cf. Miceli & Near, 2006; Miceli, Near, & Dworkin, 2008).

Thus, an employee's level of power can be seen as a function of his or her position within the *structure of an organisation* (cf. Perry, 1992). In highly hierarchical organisations (e.g., the military or the police), power may be a function of the very structure itself, because most of the organisations resources are controlled from positions at higher levels in the organisation (cf. Van Scotter, Miceli, Near, & Rehg, 2005; Weinstein, 1979). An organisation member's power is also associated with the *specialisation of labour* and his or her level of *expert competence and knowledge*. Thus organisation members who know that the organisation depends on his or her professional skill can feel powerful enough to report wrongdoing. Members that are more dependent on the organisation may choose *not* to report (cf. Near & Miceli, 1987). In the whistleblowing case of Enron, hierarchical position (i.e., being a vice president) and professional skill (i.e., being an accountant) may have influenced Sherron Watkins to make the decision to report the ongoing book-keeping malpractice (cf. Swartz & Watkins, 2003).

The act of whistleblowing can also represent one side of a two-way process where the report constitutes a type of *power attempt to effect change* (cf. Near, Dworkin, &

Miceli, 1993). According to Near and colleagues, this power attempt may be ignored, accepted or retaliated against by the *dominant coalition* in the organisation in question. If the employee's report is confronted with attempts to block or decrease their *personal control*, it is likely that he or she 'will attempt to achieve greater control or to restore' their loss of control (Greenberger, Porter, Miceli, & Strasser, 1991, p. 113). One way to re-gain power is by continuing the attempt to stop wrongdoing from going on (cf. the loop in the model by Miceli & Near, 1992) and for instance report to external *complaint recipients*.

One way to understand how an employee may evaluate the personal and other outcomes of the whistleblowing is *justice theory* and the concepts of procedural and distributive justice (e.g., stage 5 in the models by Graham, 1986, and; Miceli & Near, 1992). Procedural justice denotes whether an employee finds that procedures have been administered fairly or not and is related to their satisfaction with the organisation in general as well as with their own job satisfaction (see e.g., Greenberg, 1987; Greenberg, 1990; Near, et al., 1993). Thus one explanation as to why an employee continues reporting (i.e. the loop in the model by Miceli & Near, 1992) about the same wrongdoing to new complaint recipients is that the employee perceives that procedures have been unfairly administered (e.g., no attention to the reported wrongdoing and a chase for the reporter). In contrast to procedural justice, which concerns the fairness of the means applied to achieve an outcome, distributive justice focuses on the fairness of the achieved end outcome itself (cf. Greenberg, 1990). In line with this, an employee can evaluate the outcome of their wrongdoing report as 'fair' and successful when the wrongdoing is stopped as a result of his or her efforts (cf. Near, et al., 1993). An important aspect of such perceptions of distributive fairness is feedback about actions taken regarding the wrongdoing provided to the whistleblower and others involved in the process.

Even though the perception of having sufficient power may influence an employee to report wrongdoing, such felt power may not necessarily protect against later *retribution*. In a case of unsafe egg production, Dr. Verrett a senior biochemist went public to alert about these potential dangers (cf. Branch, 1979). As a result Dr. Verrett was criticised by management and banned from giving interviews or answering her own office phone. Hence, despite *expert power*, Dr. Verrett was punished for her actions. The reaction from the organisation may partly have been influenced by the fact that Dr. Verrett represented a minority in terms of gender. According to *minority influence theories*, an employee is most influential in making a dominant group reassess and potentially change its predetermined position

Table 1
Whistleblowing models

Column	1	2	3	4	5	6
Illustrative stages	McLain & Keenan (1999)	O'Day (1974)	Rosecrance (1988)	Graham (1986)	Miceli & Near (1992)	Soeken (1986)
I Observation	1. Awareness			1. Awareness of an issue of principle	1. The triggering event	1. Discovery
II Evaluation	2. Judgement			2. Attribution of personal responsibility	2. The decision making process	2. Reflection
III Decision	3. Choice		1. Internal criticism 2. State of intransigency 3. External disclosure	3. Decision to blow the whistle 4. Magnitude of behavioural response	3. The whistleblowing act	3. Confrontation
IV Reaction		1. Indirect intimidation: Nullification & isolation 2. Direct intimidation: Defamation & expulsion	4. Organisation reaction	5. Perceived organisational response to behaviour	4. Reactions from others towards the wrongdoing and whistleblower 5. Assessment of the reactions	4. Retaliation
V Consequences on health and employment			5. Aftermath			5. The long haul
VI Judicial						6. Closure
VI Health						7. Resolution

when he or she is perceived as similar, credible and confident (cf. Greenberger, Miceli, & Cohen, 1987; Miceli & Near, 2002; Near & Miceli, 1987, 1995). As Dr. Verrett worked in a profession that traditionally has had an overrepresentation of men, it can be that belonging to a gender minority overruled the influence of her hierarchical position and professional background in relation to being exposed to retaliation.

In line with these theoretical frameworks, actual whistleblowing can be understood as a proactive behaviour motivated by a wish to help and prevent harm, which again may be influenced by personality. How employees come to the conclusion of whether or not to report wrongdoing can be influenced by how an employee reasons concerning moral issues, how an employee makes their choices (i.e., rational pro and cons or feeling compelled to act), how an employee evaluates his or her social and professional power and how the hierarchical structure at his or her working place is (such as hierarchical structures). Further, how an employee evaluates the outcome of his or her report can also be influenced by the perceived 'fairness' of the procedure and outcome in relation to the reaction to the wrongdoing. How a complaint recipient or organisation reacts to a whistleblowing report can also depend on whether the employee in question is perceived as similar, credible and confident by the majority group at their workplace (cf. theories of minority influence).

The previous section has presented how whistleblowing in general may be understood theoretically in relation to:

- (1) how an employee can come to conclusion about reporting wrongdoing and
- (2) how an employee evaluates the outcome of the report and the reaction against him or her personally.

In addition to this, it is vital to acquire knowledge about which factors empirical studies have found to be consistently related to whistleblowing. The following sections on antecedents and consequences will therefore present empirical findings about the factors that influence whistleblowing and the reactions that may follow.

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

Antecedents of whistleblowing

Several negative terms, such as 'company traitors' (cf. Hersh, 2002), 'informers' (cf. Drucker, 1981) 'rats and moles' (cf. Mieth, 1999), 'licensed spies' (cf. Vinten, 1994) and 'internal muckrakers' (cf. C. Peters & Branch, 1972) have been applied to describe workers that have reported wrongdoing at work. Still, there is little empirical support for a relationship between *personality and whistleblowing* (cf. Near & Miceli, 1996). While some have found that no personality measures (i.e., compliance with supervisors'

wishes, submissiveness to organisational authority and self righteousness) were associated with whistleblowing intent (see McCutcheon, 2000), other studies have found some support for a link between proactive personality and whistleblowing (Miceli, Van Scotter, Near & Rehg, 2001b, Bjørkelo, et al., 2010; Miceli & Near, 2005b).

In line with previously presented theory, it is assumed that some level of *moral reasoning* can influence whether or not an employee reports wrongdoing (cf. e.g., Brabeck, 1984; Miceli, Dozier, et al., 1991; Ponemon, 1994). However, according to the previously mentioned review of the whistleblowing literature by Near and Miceli (1996), none of the included studies found a consistent relationship between measures of moral (i.e., values and motivation) and whistleblowing. Correspondingly, a later meta study did also not find a consistent relationship between ethical judgement and whistleblowing in the included studies of investigation (cf. Mesmer-Magnus & Viswesvaran, 2005). Thus, despite the small amount of studies conducted on the relationship between moral reasoning and actual whistleblowing, empirical findings seem to suggest that this link between moral reasoning and the act of whistleblowing is not as clear cut as it appears theoretically.

According to the *power theories* presented in the previous section on theoretical frameworks, an employee's social and professional power is assumed to influence whether an employee decides to report wrongdoing or not (cf. e.g., Near, et al., 1993). Findings from the literature review conducted by Near and Miceli (1996) partly supported this assumption by showing that whistleblowers predominantly were older male professionals with high pay. This finding was however only partly supported by the meta study (cf. Mesmer-Magnus & Viswesvaran, 2005). According to Mesmer-Magnus and Viswesvaran, actual whistleblowing was predominantly associated with personal characteristics such as job level, organisational tenure and gender (i.e., being female). One study has also found that job position (i.e., being a leader, a union or personnel safety representative) is significantly associated with reporting wrongdoing at work (Bjørkelo, et al., 2011). Thus, one of the most consistent *personal characteristics* associated with actual whistleblowing seems to be job position.

Consequences of whistleblowing

In relation to stage 5 in the models by Graham (1986) and Miceli and Near (1992), an employee evaluates the outcome of his or her report before deciding whether to proceed or not. *Positive outcomes* are for instance that the wrongdoing is reduced, that the whistleblower is credited and/or that he or she receives feedback from their employer regarding the actions taken in relation to the reported wrongdoing

(Ethics Resource Center, 2005; MSPB, 1993; Skivenes & Trygstad, 2010). Another clearly positive consequence is that the wrongdoing is corrected (De Maria & Jan, 1996). Whistleblowing is characterised as effective when 'the questionable or wrongful practice (or omission) is terminated at least partly because of whistleblowing and within a reasonable time frame' (Near & Miceli, 1995, p. 681). Studies conducted among employees have found that the frequency of positive consequences range from 13 to almost 50 percent (Ethics Resource Center, 2005; MSPB, 1993). In contrast, positive consequences are almost non-existent in studies among whistleblowers only (Jos, Tompkins, & Hays, 1989; K. L. Soeken & Soeken, 1987).

Negative outcomes and consequences that may follow after whistleblowing are commonly labelled retaliation (cf. Parmerlee, Near, & Jensen, 1982). According to Rehg and colleagues (2008), retaliation may be defined as 'taking an undesirable action against a whistleblower – in direct response to the whistle-blowing' (p. 222). *Informal and unofficial* types of retaliation may be such as ostracism (Faulkner, 1998), being treated as 'persona non grata' (Tucker, 1995), as a 'leper' (C. Peters & Branch, 1972) and being verbally threatened (Solano & Kleiner, 2003). According to Williams (2007), silent treatment or ostracism happens when someone is 'being ignored and excluded, and it often occurs without excessive explanation or explicit negative attention' (p. 429). *Formal and official* types of retaliation are such as plain notice, selective downsizing and unfavourable job evaluations (cf. Cortina & Magley, 2003; De Maria & Jan, 1997; Lubalin & Matheson, 1999). The ultimate retaliation act is expulsion from work (Baucus & Dworkin, 1994; Bjørkelo, et al., 2008). In line with the Soeken model (1986) described in Table 1, retaliation may also be secondary, such as not being believed in court. A possible negative outcome and consequence is also that the wrongdoing goes uncorrected. In accordance with justice theory, it is likely that an employee proceeds with reporting if the wrongdoing continues after their initial report has been made.

As was found regarding positive outcomes, the frequency of retaliation varies across samples (cf. Miceli & Near, 1992). In one study as many as 82 percent had been harassed by supervisors after they reported wrongdoing (K. L. Soeken & Soeken, 1987) and in another study, retaliation was found to be common amongst both internal and external whistleblowers (Rothschild & Miethe, 1999). Yet, according to the review by Near and Miceli (1996), 'the conception that retaliation is inevitable appears to be a myth' (Near & Miceli, 1996, p. 517). According to Near and Miceli, one of the reasons for the belief that whistleblowing necessarily leads to retaliation may be

that findings conducted among non-representative samples have been interpreted as representative. While case studies and convenient samples of whistleblowers have found that almost all whistleblowers are exposed to retaliation, more randomly selected employee samples have found that retaliation is infrequent (see e.g., Jos, et al., 1989; Miceli, Near, & Schwenk, 1991). Still, one study has found that reward among employed whistleblowers is almost non-existent and that even though they are not retaliated against to high extent, they report higher levels of exposure to workplace bullying and lower levels of job satisfaction than other employees (Bjørkelo, et al., 2011). Undisputedly, *any* retaliation after whistleblowing is strongly dissuaded. For one may lead employees to remain passive when confronted with wrongdoing (see e.g., Argyris & Schön, 1978 regarding organisational learning). In such cases the wrongdoing can proceed at the expense of a third party (e.g., patients or customers). Secondly, several studies have documented how retaliation may have detrimental effects on whistleblowers' mental health, finances and relationships with family and friends (cf. Bjørkelo, et al., 2008; Jackson et al., 2010; K. Peters et al., 2011; Rothschild & Miethe, 1999; K. L. Soeken & Soeken, 1987).

One way to explain why some employees suffer extensively after whistleblowing whereas others do not is that retaliation can consist of different *levels of severity* (Bjørkelo, 2010). It has been suggested and empirically shown that retaliation that has become repetitive, long lasting and leaves an employee in a unsafe position where he or she feels unable to defend him or herself shares clear similarities with the concept of workplace bullying (Bjørkelo, et al., 2011; Bjørkelo, et al., 2008; Einarsen, 1996; Matthiesen, 2004; Matthiesen & Bjørkelo, 2011; Matthiesen, Bjørkelo, & Burke, 2011). According to Leymann (1996) *a typical workplace bullying process* starts off due to a:

- (1) critical incident (e.g., whistleblowing), then
- (2) bullying and stigmatisation evolves when the target is exposed to long lasting exposure of negative behaviours (e.g., informal and/or formal). This second stage is followed by
- (3) the involvement of higher superiors or management, a stage which Leymann (1996) labelled 'personnel management'. This stage may again lead to
- (4) expulsion which potentially is the final stage of a workplace bullying process. This implies that there can be different levels of retaliation severity and a link between whistleblowing and workplace bullying.

Numerous studies have documented that exposure to workplace bullying is associated with *physical and psychological health problems*, including symptoms analogue to post traumatic stress (Bonafons, Jehel, &

Corroller-Béquet, 2009; Kreiner, Sulyok, & Rothenhäusler, 2008; Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2004; Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2002; K. Peters, et al., 2011; Tehrani, 2004). Rothschild and Miethe (1999) found that severe *depression* or *anxiety* (84%) were the two most common consequences on health among whistleblowers, along with feelings of *isolation* and *powerlessness* (84%). These findings clearly resemble some of the most common psychological symptoms reported in studies on workplace bullying (cf. Bechtoldt & Schmitt, 2010; Schwickerath, 2001; Schwickerath, Riedel, & Kneip, 2006; Schwickerath & Zapf, 2011). One whistleblowing study (Bjørkelo, et al., 2008) has documented that there is an association between whistleblowing and health outcomes assessed with formal *psychological tests* such as for instance the *Minnesota Multiphasic Personality inventory* (MMPI-2, Butcher, Graham, Williams, & Yossef, 1990) and the *posttraumatic stress diagnostic scale* (PDS, Foa, 1995). However, as accurate knowledge about the risks associated with whistleblowing is fundamental in the development of practical implications for employees, employers and health personnel, more longitudinal studies among whistleblowers both in- and outside working life are needed.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

Empirical research has documented how:

- (1) whistleblowing and workplace bullying are related, how
- (2) retaliation potentially can develop into workplace bullying and how
- (3) retaliation and bullying can be devastating to the individual in questions health.

The *gap* in results on retaliation across samples (cf. Bjørkelo, 2010; Near & Miceli, 1996) can be a result of different severities of retaliation. Workplace bullying, which is strongly associated with impaired health (Hauge, Skogstad, & Einarsen, 2010; Kreiner, et al., 2008; Niedhammer, David, Degioanni, Drummond, & Philip, 2009), can constitute a severe form of retaliation (e.g., single acts of short term duration). More devastating forms of retaliation (i.e., workplace bullying) can be associated with more damaging consequences on health, than are less severe forms. Impaired health may subsequently potentially increase the probability that employed whistleblowers that are exposed to retaliation and workplace bullying leave the organisation (i.e., turnover) as a result of their impaired health (see e.g., Bjørkelo, et al., 2008). The gap between results on retaliation can therefore also be a function of the fact that whistleblowers still employed where they reported wrongdoing, have been exposed to less severe forms of retaliation than have unemployed whistleblowers. The latter

may on the other hand have experienced more workplace bullying with elevated levels of health problems, which in turn can have influenced their exit from working life.

Although, preliminary *longitudinal* results have shown that whistleblowers are more likely to be exposed to bullying at work than are other employees (Bjørkelo, Matthiesen, Einarsen, & Een, 2009), whether or not this direction of effects is the case also in relation to effects on health needs to be examined. Thus, investigations into the relationships between whistleblowing, retaliation, workplace bullying and health with participants both in- and outside working life and over time are needed. To learn more about the gap between results regarding retaliation and whistleblowing, it is also important to test these associations with established measures of consequences on health. A *systematic investigation* of the association between these variables can lead us further to an explanation as to *why* consequences after whistleblowing (e.g., retaliation, workplace bullying and not being listened to) potentially can have such encompassing effects on health.

In relation to practice, *management* should encourage, rather than discourage whistleblowing. This is due to the fact that whistleblowers predominantly report to internal recipients and are relatively effective (Bjørkelo, et al., 2011; Miceli, et al., 2008; Skivenes & Trygstad, 2010). Increased whistleblowing can be accomplished by:

- (1) rewarding whistleblowers, by
- (2) developing clear policies and by
- (3) providing feedback to whistleblowers and other employees about the outcome of the reported wrongdoing.

These three strategies can increase the probability that employees in general perceive that the organisation appreciates whistleblowing and that reporting actually has an effect (i.e. stops wrongdoing at work). The outlined strategies can also increase effective internal whistleblowing and reduce the need for and probability of retaliation and workplace bullying against whistleblowers.

Organisations can also:

- (1) actively search for personnel that portray personality characteristics associated with proactive behaviour and
- (2) stimulate proactivity with training.

If an organisation decides to recruit proactive employees, recruiters are first encouraged to screen the organisations expectations regarding proactive behaviour in the form of whistleblowing. This is because employers can react negatively towards proactive initiatives (Bateman & Crant, 1993). If an organisation decides to stimulate proactivity through learning and training (cf. Kirby, Kirby, & Lewis, 2002), exercises on assumptions and expectations of proactivity at work can be useful. This is due to the fact that proactive behaviours can be perceived as both unconventional and challenging (cf. Grant, Parker, & Collins,

2009). Calibrated expectations with regard to proactivity in the form of whistleblowing should also be at the basis of the organisation's whistleblowing policy. Such a policy can include the:

- (1) scope
- (2) expectations about types of wrongdoing that should be reported
- (3) information about complaint recipients
- (4) formalities
- (5) confidentiality
- (6) protection from retaliation and
- (7) details regarding the investigation (see e.g., Hassink, de Vries, & Bollen, 2007).

Organisational practitioners employed inside the organisation should work towards increasing effective whistleblowing with regard to:

- (1) stopping wrongdoing at work and
- (2) protecting whistleblowers from retaliation and workplace bullying.

Individual counselling work with potential or actual whistleblowers can consist of counsel with regard to reporting skills. This is likely to increase the probability that wrongdoing is reported in a credible and consistent manner and can increase the likelihood of effective whistleblowing. Practitioners working on an *organisational level* should ensure that clear policies are developed. It is assumed that policies that include explicit examples of unwanted behaviour can increase the probability that reported wrongdoing is corrected, which again potentially can decrease the likelihood of external whistleblowing. Clear policies that ensure mutual understanding about unwanted types of wrongdoing can also potentially decrease the likelihood that the whistleblower continues to report to new complaint recipients, which can prevent retaliation and workplace bullying after whistleblowing.

Even though most employees who are employed after they reported wrongdoing do not report about exposure to retaliation (Bjørkelo, et al., 2011; Brown, 2008; Miceli, et al., 2008; Skivenes & Trygstad, 2010), potential negative health outcomes after whistleblowing should not be underestimated. *Health professionals* are therefore encouraged to not disconnect the presented symptoms from the experiences of the individual in question. Consequences on health portrayed in relation to whistleblowing can as previously mentioned include such as depression, anxiety, sleeping problems and symptoms analogue to post traumatic stress (Bjørkelo, et al., 2008; Jackson, et al., 2010; K. Peters, et al., 2011; Rothschild, 2008; Rothschild & Miethe, 1999).

Psychological treatment of trauma related mental health problems should first address potential secondary and presenting symptoms 'but without ignoring the underlying

stress' (Bende & Philpott, 1994, p. 527). In whistleblowing cases, employees may repeatedly have experienced that 'no one understands or listens' (Alford, 2000; Bjørkelo, et al., 2008). The detailed story about the whistleblowing experience or 'narrative' can therefore persist years after a whistleblowing process formally has been finished (Alford, 2001). Starting treatment without attending to the 'narrative' can therefore confirm previous experiences of not being listened to. According to Wigren (1994), a trauma narrative can be prevented from becoming complete because bringing the narrative to an end includes an intolerable conclusion. In whistleblowing cases, the analogy can be that 'the storyteller cannot bear to bring the story to an end' (Alford, 2007, p. 235), because this implies that he or she has to 'come to terms with what they have learned about the world' (Alford, 2000, p. 279). Narrative completion (cf. Wigren, 1994) is a treatment approach that explicitly concerns how re-telling that has become 'stuck in static time' (cf. Alford, 2000) can be treated. In line with this treatment approach, a therapeutic intervention with regard to whistleblowing can include:

- (1) assessing and interpreting the symptoms in accordance with the described experiences
- (2) being attentive to the narrative
- (3) being attentive to other presented symptoms (e.g., depression and trauma).

CONCLUSION

According to Kisselburgh and Dutta (2009):

'Ethical scandals like Enron's demonstrate the important role that whistleblowers and other radicals play in righting the wrong when leaders begin to stray' (p. 125).

In an attempt to disentangle the phenomenon and behaviour whistleblowing, this chapter has outlined the (1) historical background for whistleblowing, (2) defined the term, (3) presented theoretical ways of understanding the whistleblowing, presented (4) empirical findings as well as (5) implications for future research and practice. In some modest way, this chapter can hopefully increase awareness so that whistleblowing may be perceived as a valued organisational behaviour and decrease the probability that employees are being punished for proactively attempting to stop wrongdoing such as corruption and malpractice at work.

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Donosicielstwo. Przyczyny i konsekwencje

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STRESZCZENIE

Donoszenie to zjawisko i zachowanie, które jest paradoksalne. Z jednej strony istnieją pracownicy, którzy w dobrej wierze informują o zachowaniach nagannych innych osób. Z drugiej strony donoszenie na kogoś może prowadzić do poważnych konsekwencji zdrowotnych. Jest tak choć większość ludzi pewnie zgodzi się, że należałoby skończyć z korupcją i ze złym zarządzaniem. Aby rozwikłać ten paradoks i zrozumieć zjawisko donosicielstwa, obecny artykuł prezentuje obszar badań nad donoszeniem: (1) zarysowuje historyczne tło badań, (2) definiuje pojęcie, (3) prezentuje teoretyczne podejścia do zjawiska donosicielstwa, (4) opisuje wyniki badań. Na koniec (5) zaproponowano implikacje dla dalszych badań.

Słowa kluczowe: *donosicielstwo, przyczyny, konsekwencje*

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