Cognitive Moral Development and Organizational Commitment: Two Potential Predictors of Whistle-blowing

Mr. Marc D. Street, Ph.D. Student, Florida State University

Abstract

The recent popularity of whistle-blowing as a research topic has resulted in numerous publications attempting to identify the variables and antecedent conditions related to an individual act of whistle-blowing. Following suit, this paper proposes that two individual characteristics, cognitive moral development and organizational commitment, will affect the likelihood of an individual engaging in whistle-blowing behavior.

Introduction

Whistle-blowing, the act of disclosing prohibited, immoral, or illegal practices by one's employer to persons or organizations with the authority to engage in corrective action (Miceli & Near, 1984) has enjoyed considerable recent popularity as a research topic (Barnett, 1992; Miceli, Dozier, & Near, 1991). This is due in part to widely publicized cases of whistle-blowing (e.g. the movie *Silkwood*) as well as research indicating that the frequency of the phenomenon is increasing (Miceli et al., 1991). Business organizations are aware of this fact, as is attested to by the increase in the number of organizations adopting whistle-blowing policies recently (Barnett, Cochran, & Taylor, 1993). Organizations that do not effectively deal with the issue can expect to incur considerable costs, usually as a result of the negative publicity that accompanies public disclosure of corporate illegalities or unethical actions (Laczniak & Murphy, 1991). However, until the antecedents and consequences of whistle-blowing are understood, it will be impracticable for researchers to recommend specific management strategies to deal with the issue (Greenberger, Miceli, & Cohen, 1987). This paper will contribute to the existing research by arguing that two individual level characteristics, organizational commitment and cognitive moral development, can be potential predictors of whistle-blowing by individuals.

Much of the research on this topic has been focused on identifying the antecedent conditions and individual characteristics that might be useful in predicting which organizational members will be inclined to whistle-blow and which will not. Research findings at the individual

level include: empirical evidence of a positive correlation between cognitive moral development and whistle-blowing (Brabeck, 1984); findings indicating men are more likely to blow the whistle than women (Miceli et al., 1991) and, whistle-blowing is more likely to occur when the observer of the wrong-doing holds a professional position (Miceli and Near, 1988). At the situation and organizational level evidence has been found for the effects of variables such as the degree of severity associated with the wrongdoing (Miceli & Near, 1985), the availability of whistle-blowing channels (Miceli & Near, 1984; Barnett et al., 1993), and the perceived likelihood of retaliation for whistle-blowing by the organization (Near & Miceli, 1986).

The purpose of this paper is to examine the whistle-blowing process at the individual level, focusing on two individual characteristics. The first of these, organizational commitment, has been the subject of little *direct* empirical or theoretical research vis-a-vis whistle-blowing. This paper will extend previous work by relating it to a second variable, cognitive moral development (CMD), that has been the subject of previous research (Brabeck, 1984; Miceli et al., 1991). This variable will be predicted to influence the likelihood of whistle-blowing directly as well as in conjunction with organizational commitment, thereby answering the call (Miceli et al., 1991) for identification of conditions under which moral development increases/decreases the likelihood of whistle-blowing. Additionally, this paper will adopt the position that all three variables—CMD, organizational commitment,

and whistle-blowing, can be interpreted as forms of prosocial behavior. It is from this perspective that the above relationships will be presented.

Prosocial Behavior

Brief and Motowidlo(1986) define prosocial behavior within the organizational setting as:

behavior which is (a) performed by a member of an organization, (b) directed toward an individual, group, or organization with whom he or she interacts while carrying out his or her organizational role, and (c) performed with the intention of promoting the welfare of the individual, group, or organization toward which it is directed (p.711).

While this definition of prosocial behavior seems to indicate that the actor receives no benefit from his/her actions, Staub offers room for self-interest. Prosocial behavior is positive social behavior that is intended to benefit others, but actors can gain from their actions as well(Staub, 1978). In their earlier study of whistle-blowing as a form of prosocial behavior, Dozier and Miceli(1985), accepted these views, arguing that it is more realistic to view prosocial behavior as having selfish and unselfish components. Similarly, a person could intend that his/her actions benefit both an individual as well as the organization(Brief & Motowidlo, 1986). With this brief discussion on prosocial behavior as a backdrop, the idea that whistle-blowing can be interpreted as prosocial behavior can be undertaken.

Whistle-blowing as Prosocial Behavior

There seem to be two schools of thought as how best to view whistle-blowers. The first views the whistle-blower as a disgruntled employee who vents his/her frustrations and anger by accusing targeted individuals (usually superiors) of impropriety as a way of achieving some measure of satisfaction or revenge (Barnett, 1992). While this type of whistle-blower no doubt exists, it is probably safe to assume that he/she represents the vast minority of cases of whistle-blowing. Indeed, Graham (1986) indicates that this type of whistle-blower is clearly atypical and Near and Miceli(1985) contend that the majority of corporate whistle-blowers generally considered themselves to be highly loyal employees.

The second school of thought views the whistle-blower as an individual who has the organization and/or society's interest at heart when the whistle is blown. Clearly there are negative effects associated with whistle-blowing. But just as clearly, there can be positive effects as well. Donaldson(1982), concluded that a more realistic perspective of whistle-blowing would be to recognize it as

an instrument for organizational change and well-being. Whistle-blowers can alert leaders to the need for corrective measures by calling to their attention dubious actions they might not have been aware of (Dozier & Miceli, 1985). Using the above mentioned definition of prosocial behavior as a guide, it seems reasonable to interpret whistle-blowing (of the second school) as a type of prosocial behavior (Dozier & Miceli, 1985; Brief & Motowidlo, 1986).

Dozier and Miceli (1985) proposed a theoretical framework for the study of whistle-blowing, interpreting the concept as a form of prosocial organizational behavior.

Consistent with both Brief and Motowidlo(1986) and Staub's (1978) definitions, Dozier and Miceli view whistle-blowing as prosocial behavior because it will usually prove beneficial to persons (or organizations) other than the whistle-blower him/her self(Dozier and Miceli, 1985).

Empirical evidence consistent with predictions based on this model of whistle-blowing as prosocial behavior have lent strength to the model (Brief & Motowidlo, 1986; Miceli & Near, 1988). Consequently, for the purposes of this paper, whistle-blowing will be considered to be a type of prosocial behavior.

Figure 1 illustrates the various proposed relationships between cognitive moral development (CMD), organizational commitment, and whistle-blowing. The key point is that the framework in which these relationships function is the prosocial behavior theory. The next section of the paper will discuss the organizational commitment component of the model and its relationship to the other two variables.

Organizational Commitment

Figure 1 indicates that there will be a direct relationship between the level of the observer's organizational commitment and the likelihood he/she will engage in whistle-blowing. This simple proposition represents a unique contribution to the study of whistle-blowing in that it is the first attempt to *directly* link the concept of organizational commitment to the likelihood of whistle-blowing. The idea that organizational commitment might influence an individual's decision to whistle-blow is not unique to this paper, however. Theoretical models of whistle-blowing (e.g. Near & Miceli, 1985; Dozier & Miceli, 1985; Graham, 1986; Near & Miceli, 1987) as well as empirical studies (Micheli & Near, 1988) have acknowledged the potential influence of organizational commitment (used somewhat interchangeably in the literature with employee loyalty). None of this research, however, proposed or hypothesized that this variable has a direct effect on whistle-blowing. Miceli and Near, for example, stated that loyalty to the organization might impact the decision to whistle-blow. They chose, however,

to include this idea in a more general proposition that effectively operationalized the variable as being a "positive job response" (1988: 269). This paper argues that organizational commitment can be perceived as directly influencing the propensity to whistle-blow. The basic underlying process allowing this to occur is the fact that individuals shown to be high in organizational commitment are more likely to display behaviors consistent with prosocial behavior than are those who are not high in organizational commitment (Brief & Motowidlo, 1986).

Organizational Commitment as Prosocial Behavior

Brief and Motowidlo (1986) point out that organizational commitment:

"concerns behavioral patterns that are related closely to prosocial behavior directed toward the organization. According to Mowday et al. (1982), organizational commitment consists of "(a) a strong belief in and acceptance of the organization's goals and values; (b) a willingness to exert considerable effort on behalf of the organization; and (c) a strong desire to maintain membership in the organization" (p. 27). These components of organizational commitment indicate dispositions toward prosocial behavior; organizationally committed individuals "are willing to give something of themselves in order to contribute to the organization's well-being" (p. 27)."

Given the above definition of organizational commitment, and the earlier discussion of whistle-blowing as a form of prosocial behavior intended to benefit the company (at least from the whistle-blowers viewpoint), making the connection between level of organizational commitment and whistle-blowing seems straight forward. Recent research on organizational commitment, however, has muddled the picture somewhat.

Early theoretical frameworks and discussions on the definitions (e.g., the one above), antecedents, outcomes, and measurements of organizational commitment (Steers, 1977; Mowday, Steers, & Porter, 1979) have recently been criticized as being too simplistic (Becker, 1992; Becker & Billings, 1993; O'Reilly III & Chatman, 1986). The basic criticism of the older research is its failure to recognize that organizational commitment has multiple dimensions (Becker, 1992; O'Reilly III & Chatman, 1986; Reichers, 1985) and is not unidimensional as is assumed by the OCQ (Becker). Indeed, Becker argued that the Organizational Commitment Questionnaire, should not be used as often as is currently the case. This recent research has attempted to identify and define new concepts for the organizational commitment literature (Becker & Billings, 1993).

O'Reilly and Chatman (1986) found evidence for the existence of three types of psychological components in organizational commitment; compliance, identification,

and internalization. They also found support for the proposition that organizational commitment based on identification and internalization is related to prosocial behaviors whereas commitment based on compliance is not. The implication is that individuals committed to the organization through the mechanisms of identification and internalization are more committed to the organization than are individuals committed by compliance. This is made evident by the former's willingness to engage in prosocial behaviors for the good of the firm whereas the latter is not. This finding is consistent with Becker and Billings' (1993) empirical study that found support for the existence of organizational commitment profiles, one of which exhibited prosocial behavior more than the others.

This profile, termed "committed " was basically defined as being the profile consistent with the highest level of organizational commitment. These findings allow for the assertion that individuals high in organizational commitment are, therefore, more likely to engage in prosocial behavior. This statement, coupled with the previous definition of whistle-blowing as a form of prosocial behavior, lead directly to the first proposition:

P1: Individuals high in organizational commitment are more likely to engage in whistle-blowing behaviors than are individuals not high in organizational commitment.

This relationship is indicated in Figure 1 by the path between the organizational commitment and whistle-blowing constructs.

The model also suggests that organizational commitment can affect the likelihood of whistle-blowing in another manner. In order to show how this occurs, the concept of cognitive moral development needs to be examined. The next section of this paper will discuss this variable.

Cognitive Moral Development

Unlike the organizational commitment variable, the concept of CMD has received both theoretical and empirical attention in the whistle-blowing literature. Most of the research involving this construct has utilized Kohlberg's stage model of cognitive moral development (1969) as a basis for assessing an individual's particular level of moral development (Brabeck, 1984; Trevino & Youngblood, 1990). One of the major reasons for this is that there is a commonly accepted measurement tool designed on Kohlberg's work. This tool, the Defining Issues Test (DIT) (Rest, 1979), has allowed researchers to classify individuals as to their level of moral development based on the six stages in Kohlberg's model.

Locke (1981) gives a concise description of Kohlberg's six stages (in increasing order of moral development):

1. The punishment and obedience orientation - right is blind obedience to rules and authority, avoiding punishment, and not doing harm.
2. The instrumental relativist orientation- right is serving one's own or others' needs and making fair deals in terms of concrete exchange.
3. The 'good boy-nice girl' orientation- right is playing a good(nice) role, being concerned about other people and their feelings, keeping loyalty and trust with partners, and being motivated to follow rules and expectations.
4. The "law and order" orientation- right is doing one's duty in society, upholding the social order and the welfare of the society or group.
5. The social-contract legalistic orientation- right is upholding the basic rights, values and legal contracts of a society, even when they conflict with the concrete rules and laws of a group.
6. The universal ethical principle orientation- guidance by universal ethical principles which all humanity should follow.

Individuals, as they grow into adulthood, will exhibit moral development, moving sequentially through the six stages of the model. As the individual moves through each stage, he/she moves from a self-centered interpretation of what is morally correct to a more socially conscious and responsible perspective (Trevino & Youngblood, 1990). It is important to note that conceptually, considerably fewer people are likely to reach the highest two stages than any of the other four stages(Kohlberg, 1984).

The research on whistle-blowing that has used this model has generally argued that stages 5 and 6 represent cognitive moral development consistent with prosocial behavior (Brabeck, 1984; Miceli et al., 1991; Graham, 1986; Near & Miceli, 1987). Clearly, the type of moral framework characteristic of individuals at either stage 5 or 6 is consistent with the previous discussion of prosocial behavior in this paper. Consistent with previous research, this paper agrees that high levels CMD are associated with prosocial behaviors.

Cognitive Moral Development and Prosocial Behavior

The view that individuals with high CMD are more likely to engage in prosocial behavior is widely accepted in the whistle-blowing literature (Brabeck, 1984; Brief & Motowidlo, 1986; Graham, 1986; Miceli et al., 1991; Near & Miceli, 1987; Trevino & Youngblood, 1990). Brief and Motowidlo (1986) point out that individuals with strong prosocial tendencies apparently have higher levels of moral development as reflected by their standards of

justice and social responsibility. Graham (1986) echoed this, indicating that cognitive moral development often results in the unfolding within the individual of a sense of responsibility for society and its welfare.

After establishing the relationship between CMD and prosocial behavior, researchers have generally proposed that higher levels of CMD will result in a greater likelihood of whistle-blowing since whistle-blowing has already been defined as a prosocial action. To date, only two empirical studies testing this relationship have been published. Brabeck (1984) found evidence that this is indeed the case. Due to several methodological considerations, however, her results, while very important, cannot be considered to be definitive (Miceli et al., 1991). Because of this, Miceli et al. (1991) tested the relationship between CMD and whistle-blowing and did not find support for the predicted relationship. The authors, however, offer a variety of reasons for reconciling their findings with prior empirical research and existing theory.

Because previous theory seems to be virtually unanimous in its support for the relationship between high CMD and whistle-blowing, and because there is at least one piece of research lending empirical support for the relationship, this paper will remain faithful and propose that:

P2: Individuals high in cognitive moral development are more likely to engage in whistle-blowing behaviors than are individuals not high in cognitive moral development.

This relationship is indicated in the model by the path between the CMD and whistle-blowing constructs.

As indicated by the model, there are two other relationships between the variables that need to be addressed. Both of the relationships are a function of the interaction between organizational commitment and cognitive moral development. The first of these two relationships is indicated by the path between CMD and organizational commitment. Basically this path suggests that individuals high in CMD are likely to be high in organizational commitment as well. Basically this paper has argued that high levels of CMD result in a moral framework conducive to engaging in prosocial behaviors. Further, the paper has argued that individuals high in organizational commitment are likely to actually engage in prosocial behavior. Consequently, it seems reasonable to conclude that:

P3: Individuals high in cognitive moral development are more likely to be high in organizational commitment

than are individuals low in cognitive moral development.

The last relationship in the model is indicated by the two dashed lines intersecting at the high commitment/high CMD component and then leading to the whistle-blowing variable. This relationship is purely a logical one. If both organizational commitment and CMD are each predicted to be positively associated with whistle-blowing independent of each other, then it seems reasonable to conclude that:

P4: Individuals high in both CMD and organizational commitment will be more likely to engage in whistle-blowing behaviors than individuals high in only one.

The last section of this paper discusses possible implications relevant to the above propositions as well as offering some concluding remarks.

Conclusion

The subject of whistle-blowing has received much attention in recent decades in the popular press, in business and government, and in academic circles. Part of the reason for this popularity is the potential negative outcomes that can result from whistle-blowing. Loss of product sales, legal actions (Laczniak & Murphy, 1991), reduced equity market capitalization value (Davidson & Worrell, 1988), lower employee morale, and decrease in organizational goodwill are all examples of the costs firms can expect to incur if they do not have an effective whistle-blowing program in place. Research that can identify predictors of whistle-blowing may be able to suggest methods by which organizations can minimize the damage and/or increase the benefits associated with whistle-blowing actions (Miceli & Near, 1988).

From an academic perspective, interest in this subject has been toward identifying the antecedent conditions and relationships among various individual characteristics that may be used as predictors of potential whistle-blowing behavior. To this end, this paper has proposed a theoretical relationship between whistle-blowing and two individual attributes, organizational commitment and cognitive moral development. It is argued that both of these variables, independent of each other, will positively affect the likelihood of whistle-blowing behavior by individuals. Further, it is suggested that individuals who are both highly developed in terms of organizational commitment and cognitive development are strong candidates for engaging in whistle-blowing behavior. Identification of individual predictors of whistle-blowing behavior would represent a major contribution to the

academic literature as well as providing needed groundwork for the development of effective whistle-blowing programs for organizations.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research should be directed toward the development of an empirical study designed to test the veracity of the four propositions presented in this paper. Such a study would contribute to the whistle-blowing literature in at least two ways: 1) by providing much needed empirical information about the nature of the cognitive moral development/whistle-blowing behavior relationship. This is particularly important given the rather ambiguous results of the few empirical studies (Brabeck, 1984; Micheli et al., 1991) examining this relationship; 2) by providing the field with a first attempt at empirically linking organizational commitment to both cognitive moral development and whistle-blowing behaviors.

Another area for future research would be the possible development of a "whistle-blowing profile", a tool that would aid companies in the identification of individuals most likely to engage in whistle-blowing. Development of such a tool would help organizations establish and maintain whistle-blowing programs as a proactive means of maximizing the potential positive outcomes associated with whistle-blowing (Miceli & Near, 1988) while striving to minimize the damage to corporate image that invariably accompanies such actions (Davidson & Worrell, 1988).

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