

On Whistleblowing: The Need for Research into its Secondary Effects

The primary end of whistleblowing is of course safeguarding public interest. Whistleblowers can foster a return to equity within both public and private institutions whenever such equity is lacking, and they often forge avenues by which the members of an institution can come to understand how said inequities affect them directly. But understanding the secondary ends of whistleblowing¹ may allow researchers a wider net of analysis than studies that simply attend to whistleblowing's primary ends.

A cursory search through Google Scholar² suggests that much of the literature on whistleblowing often focuses on pre-whistleblowing considerations. It answers questions about when, if ever, whistleblowing is ethical and how a potential whistleblower is to determine when an inequity is serious enough to warrant sounding the alarm. Similarly, research that does consider the resulting impact of an act of whistleblowing often takes a narrow view and evaluates the impact the event has on the whistleblower herself or on the immediate workings of her institution. Secondary outcomes, however, seem to receive relatively limited scholarly attention.

But wouldn't observing the degree of continued customer loyalty following a company's being outed for skimping on product safety standards prove enlightening? The same could go for engaging stakeholder reactions to a local school administrator who's been accused of using bully management tactics with subordinates. And what about when allegations surface regarding how a long-established, beloved, family-owned business has been defrauding customers for over a decade?

¹ For the purposes of this essay, I define secondary effects as any effect the act of whistleblowing may have on groups with no formal relationship to the institution (i.e. customers of a business, citizens of a community, etc.).

² Since I'm not currently enrolled at an institution of higher learning, my access to scholarly databases is limited. Therefore, Google Scholar.

The final scenario in the above paragraph hits close to home, and it's the reason why I welcome research into the secondary effects of whistleblowing. In 2014, my friend Kimble³ worked for a funeral home whose local directors—who were established community business leaders that had at that point only recently sold their funeral home to an out of town corporation—were licensed by an insurance company to sell pre-need burial insurance policies. Kimble began to notice in the firm's financials that the premiums for the pre-needs were not being paid to the insurance company, and after careful consideration he decided to blow the whistle to corporate executives. Soon enough, the Department of Banking sparked an investigation into the directors' alleged fraud, which, according to the Department's consent order, amounted to nearly \$400,000 in unpaid premiums.

Yet strangely, when the local press broke the news of the investigation, an obvious majority of community members rushed to support the local funeral home directors and decried whoever would levy such accusations against some of the community's most prominent business leaders. And when the investigation's final report returned no suggestion for criminal charges and assessed arguably nominal penalties, the community more or less erupted into cheers. Kimble, however, had to quit his job and move his family to another town.

Given the research trends discussed above, a typical whistleblower study into Kimble's situation would likely focus on a) the immediate effect Kimble's actions had on the inner workings of the funeral home, or b) the immediate effect Kimble's actions had on Kimble himself. However, the secondary effect—the movement of the community's support toward the directors rather than toward Kimble's allegations—may be worth exploring because it ventures beyond the ethical and professional implications of whistleblowing and opens the door to a number of sociological approaches that may

³ I've chosen to change a few items of identifying material, including my friend's name.

help to inform other potential whistleblowers. For starters, the community's action reveals what had been latent biases associated with insider loyalty and trust. Before the investigation, I would bet folks expressed relatively neutral opinions concerning the funeral home and its local directors, but once the allegations were levied they dug in their heels in what seemed to be a near-unanimous show of support for the directors. Similarly, the degree of community loyalty here highlights the barrier that Kimble would have had to overcome for the act to have been truly effective. It may have been worthwhile for Kimble to have found a means to gauge the climate of the community before deciding to blow the whistle since communal support for the directors was ultimately a vote of no confidence for his cause. And if he had not been able to properly gauge community support, it would be interesting to know if there would have been any fruitful way for him to first engage the community with his cause before blowing the whistle.⁴

Such questions would likely foster fresh scholarly approaches to whistleblowing. Keeping potential whistleblowers informed about strategies and best-practices for carrying out such acts will not only prove profitable for the systems they serve, but also for the public interest.

⁴ This assumes he could have known beforehand how community support would otherwise follow the directors. Perhaps this is mooted by the Department of Banking's ultimate lack of solid findings, but switching the outcome would certainly beg the same questions.