

Interview Analysis Report: Whistleblower Interviews

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1. Background to study

Speaking out in contemporary organizations: What makes it possible?

This research project examined the issue of ‘speaking out’ in contemporary organizations from a comparative perspective. Focusing primarily on Ireland and the UK, its aims were: 1) To gather and critically interpret empirical evidence from selected organizations in two countries, 2) To determine how institutional factors and organizational cultures (e.g. leadership style, job security, openness, tolerance of corruption) facilitate individuals’ disclosures of unethical behaviour and wrongdoing; and 3) To expand the explanatory power of current theoretical and analytic perspectives. Analyzing the data, a unique approach incorporating psychosocial perspectives on identity with analyses of macro and meso level factors was adopted, with the aim of yielding valuable contributions for both policy and practice while increasing theoretical knowledge on the issue of speaking out in organizations. The project is a pilot study into this vital issue. The research was conducted in three stages involving (a) desk study of relevant policy documents and secondary data on speaking out, from the media and professional publications, (b) semi-structured interviews, and (c) observational field notes from meetings, seminars and workshops recording insights into events as they occur. Cross-case comparison identified common threads and topics.

About us:

The project leaders are Professor Marianna Fotaki, Warwick Business School, University of Warwick, U.K. and Dr Kate Kenny, Queen’s University Belfast Management School, Northern Ireland. We are experienced researchers and have

carried out other, similar studies of healthcare organizations, nonprofit organizations, banking and finance firms, and the construction sector. In these, we adopted the kind of in-depth approach described here, and found it extremely helpful in understanding peoples' experiences in their work organizations. To date, we have published books, journal articles and policy reports in these areas.

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2. Methods

Interviews were conducted with 14 whistleblowers and one key informant (a counsellor/psychologist that works with whistleblowers). The fourteen whistleblower interviews were analysed by a third party who was not involved in conducting the interviews. They were first read through completely with a list of emergent thoughts, themes and key words recorded. These 'first order themes' were then analysed and grouped to form 'second order' themes. The interview transcripts were then uploaded to a qualitative software analysis programme (MaxQDA) and transcripts were coded under second order and first order themes. Coded texts were then exported and analysed to develop a deeper understanding of the themes, presented below.

3. Self-Perception

Whistleblowers engage in an activity that is at odds with the behaviour of the majority of individuals. It is an activity that may also expose them to a range of risks. The self-perception of whistleblowers prior to, during and after a whistleblowing incident as well as their perception of whistleblowers generally may provide a better understanding of why some people chose to expose wrongdoing, even at a personal risk.

2.1 Self-perception prior to whistleblowing

A number of the whistleblowers who took part in the interviews noted that they were always somewhat different to the average or in some way 'outsiders'. Most commonly they noted a level of persistence or stubbornness that was in excess of most of those around them.

I was one of those unique individuals who did say, "There's something wrong here..." (Gary1)

I'm the type of person; if you knock me down I will get up. I will get up and I will... I'm a glass half full. I will find another way. I will not go down (Richard1)

I'm very persistent. I mean that's just who I am. I think it's a personality defect, actually, you have to know when things aren't working and cut your losses and I am unable to do that (Anita1)

Other whistleblowers described their 'fighting' spirit or their unwillingness to simply be told what to

do by others. Of interest, two whistle blowers described their ability to speak out and question others as being products of their previous experience – in education, training or in their job.

I don't intimidate; I don't back down. When somebody threatens me, I simply go one step up, which nearly landed me in gaol many times (Anita1)

So, I was educated through like a lot of service kids privately at boarding schools...basically, you are left on your own and your parents are a long, long way away and you are living in a very sort of brutal environment... you become quite strong, outspoken, and you don't like adults and you don't like being told, you don't like authority (Tom)

Several whistleblowers also described themselves as naive or innocent prior to whistleblowing, often believing that their disclosures would be welcomed by the organisation which they saw themselves as helping or by the regulators. For some, the behaviours they encountered were all the more disturbing to them because of their innocence.

I believed in people's good nature. Sorry, I believed people were honest like me. I mean, the way these solicitors have behaved is just unbelievable. (Mark)

Decisions to report externally appeared to have been motivated in some cases by the disappointment experienced through internal whistleblowing, in part, an outcome of the 'innocence' of the whistleblower who expected a positive reaction from the organisation.

2.2 As a whistleblower

For a number of the whistleblowers, their self-perception as a whistle-blower was a late development. They saw themselves as providing a service to the organisation primarily and often described some surprise at being described, particularly in the media, as a whistleblower. Nevertheless, all those in the interviews accepted this label as accurately describing their activities.

I think in fact the first time I ever knew I was a whistleblower was when I read it [in a newspaper article].... I saw it in the paper ...I saw it the night before it appeared, but I didn't know what I did was whistleblowing. I thought I just was doing my job. (Edward3)

I didn't think of myself as a whistle blower until about nine months in. I read a book by an author called Margaret Heffernan called Wilful Blindness so it was about all of the things that cause people to blow the whistle ...And I think by the end of the book, which was at the end of the summer of 2011, so about nine months after I'd blown the whistle, I realised, "Yes, I'm one of these," (Robert 1)

Whistleblowers largely understand their decision to whistleblow as either a necessary action to protect the public interest or as an outcome of the desire to improve the organisation for which they worked. Many indicated that they did not feel it was ever a 'choice', but rather they were compelled to disclose wrongdoing through personal conviction or values.

Truthfully, I kind of felt a bit of a fraud because I felt like I was being made out to be this big hero which I wasn't a hero. Do you know what I mean? It wasn't a hero thing to do; it was just something I felt I had to do. So it wasn't like I had a choice. (Claire)

Sometimes you do things you don't want to do; you just instinctively do what you're doing. If you think about it ... well, if you really analysed it, you wouldn't necessarily do it, because,

actually, I can't sit in front of people and hold myself out to be some kind of super moral crusader. I don't see myself as that. I constantly question why I did what I did and also challenge would I do it again? And I don't know the answer to that (Gary)

2.3 After whistleblowing

Following whistleblowing, interviewees described their perception of themselves as somewhat in flux. Many mentioned questioning themselves and feeling uncertain about their decision to whistleblow. Others described their actions and current existence almost along the lines of martyrdom. In general, whistleblowers felt unrewarded for their actions; that despite having acted in the public interest many experienced severe consequences to their well-being and quality of life.

Because whistleblowers, as you know, we're kind of a rare breed. More plentiful than people realize, but we are a rare breed. And it's a very lonely journey. Very lonely. Especially when you have people who used to be very productive every day and no one will hire them to do anything. (Edward3)

This is the thing that in these situations there are no winners here. We're all losers, and, you know, if we can recognise that whistle blowers speak up not for themselves, they speak up for everybody. (Eve)

The experience and impact of whistleblowing led a large number of the interviewees to engage in activist activities and whistleblowing networks with a view to ensuring mutual support for others going through similar experiences.

I understand what I'm doing now. It's not about me, it's about the next generation...it's about my daughter and it's about their generation what I'm doing and that makes sense to me and that is worthwhile going through that struggle and that's worthwhile not to give up.. I'm more an activist anyway today. (Max)

2.4 General perception of whistleblowers

Despite the often negative initial impact of whistleblowing, all interviewees perceived whistleblowers as selfless moral defenders of the public interest and as unique individuals.

In my experiences, whistle blowers are people who make a moral choice and it probably never occurs to them to make any other choice because this is the right thing to do and therefore I will do it (George)

4. Personal Factors

Individual factors including values, family background, religious background and attachment to the organisation all featured as influencing the decision to report wrongdoing within organisations. Of note, political affiliations appeared to have no impact on whistleblowing.

3.1 Values

Among the personal factors that interviewees described as in some way impacting their decision to blow the whistle, values were most commonly mentioned. All the interviewees had a strong sense of right and wrong and a well developed sense of justice.

They are wrong and they should recognise that and answer for it but I don't hate them. I don't even hate the company because of what it is but I do want to rectify it. I do want it to be held to account. I'm not vindictive about it, I just want the right thing to be done and I want the country to do the right thing by the government department and by the politicians. I want the politicians to do the right thing. (Richard)

It is partly this idea of accountability again, that people have done something wrong should be held accountable, it's as simple as that (George)

I also got a bit annoyed with the system because this wasn't just a little organisation, this involved ministers, involved the system, it involved the civil service and I just saw like a microcosm across the country and thought this is the reason this country is the way it is. This level of indifference, inaction, fear, laziness, secrecy, conservatism, all these things, I could see them and the more people lied, that really got my back up. (Barry)

I didn't do it to make a difference to the world; it was straightforward right or wrong (Gary1)

Some whistleblowers felt a sense of moral responsibility to challenge those who were engaging in wrong-doing. Some felt that whistleblowing was also part of preserving their own sense of self and personal pride.

Somebody had to do it. I was chosen from above, I don't know...but somebody had to do it and at least, do you know, I would personally say like stand up and be counted...I don't want to be going in twenty years' time, thirty years' time, look back and wish I had done something (Mary)

I would've paid another price if I had kept my mouth quiet. That's the point. I would've had to pay a price in a different sense. (Claire)

While whistleblowers' personal values were clearly strongly associated with the decision to report wrong-doing, where and how these values were developed is somewhat less clear. However, religion and family background were both mentioned by interviewees as having a role in the formation of the values that facilitated whistleblowing.

3.2 Religious background

Religion was mentioned by a significant minority of interviewees as having an indirect impact on their decision to report, primarily through establishing a morality that required redressing wrongs. Among those who mentioned religion, interviewees were primarily Catholic.

When I look in the mirror there's only me and my God. He's the one looking back at me through my own reflection. You can't hide from him. How do I ever look myself in the mirror

again and know that I did the right thing? How can I ... I can't do it. How do you ever explain it to yourself? I'm not a saint. I've sinned...But on this test, and I do truly believe it was a "night of Gethsemane" it was a "you can escape if you want to. You cannot do it if you want to. You can leave. You can go. You can find something else... Or, you can do what you know you ought to do". And I chose that. (Richard)

I was brought up as a Catholic – I've long time left the flock – but the kind of ... the upbringing and the change, you know, you are conditioned from a young age. It's not a cult but you understand something of right and wrong, in my view (Gary)

3.3 Family Background

Several interviewees mentioned their family background as a factor in becoming a whistleblower. However the direction of this influence was not always clear – while for some there was a desire to uphold the household name and follow through on what was perceived as a family tradition of honour, for others, the desire to 'do the right thing' was as a response, in part, to correct or counter what they perceived as failures within their family.

My father was convicted of corruption. ...I'm not about to have people saying "oh, it's genetic, it's in the family. You know, he did it, his sons do it, they're all dirty", no way! ...so there is a kind of bit of reparation, this is the family name. I want it to be known for being good not rotten. I do not want me and my children, and my children's children to be known as a bad lot, a bunch of crooks, no, that's not what we are about. (Richard)

I can only say, you know, it was my upbringing, you know, I'm not particularly religious; my parents weren't particularly religious, you know? I had a ... they didn't have a lot of money but we weren't poor. My parents always did their best for me. I had a good education, a good start in life, you know, it was a loving home. I had a very happy childhood and my parents taught me the difference of right and wrong. So my moral compass comes from them and my upbringing. It's as simple as that. It was there from day one (Robert1)

My mam would've been, she's dead now, but she would've been involved in mental disability advocacy just on a voluntary basis, and she would've spoken up on things like that and she would've never cared what trouble she got herself into. So she would always speak up...and my dad was the most amoral person in the world...I definitely never want to end up like him so I don't have any contact with him or anything to do with him. (Claire)

3.4 Attachment to the organisation

Personal attachment to the organisation appeared to have a notable influence on an individual's decision to whistle blow. Many whistleblowers described being committed to values which they believed the organisation represented or to the work that the organisation did. The interviews draw out a sense of being disappointed by the organisations when they failed to live up to expectations. Some whistleblowers discussed blowing the whistle with the desire to rehabilitate the organisation.

I think it's the people who are most loyal [that whistleblow] and say, "Look, we want to preserve, protect, and defend the reputation of the place, and we don't want you to compromise the reputation. We think we can build a better company." Yeah, it's not—the

*people who are traitorous are the ones who use the company for their own advantage.
(Edward3)*

See, the point about the <my organization> is that I was bound and determined to work at the <my organization> because I believed in its mission on paper; and you know how when a woman gets involved with a man and, you know, refuses to see that person for the way they are, they've fallen in love with their idea of that person, that was my relationship with the <my organization>. (Anita)

I was so disappointed because ...I was so looking forward. I had done my Masters on this organization. I thought these were just like my heroes. (Claire)

However, for one whistleblower, lack of attachment to the organisation was put forward as a facilitating factor in making a report on wrongdoing. For Tom, his attachment to activities outside his career appeared to reduce the stress experienced in the decision to report experienced by others. Another whistleblower, a woman in a very male dominated environment, felt that being female created a level of distance to the organisation that facilitated whistleblowing.

It [being a woman] gave me permission to say what I needed to say because I didn't have this sort of investment as in—I did have an emotional investment. I didn't have sort of masculine investment. I think men, the dynamic between men and men was quite different, you know, back slapping, talking about rugby and cricket, you know, that kind of thing. And I was outside that circle, so I was already different... [Eve].

For some whistleblowers, their attachment was not only to the organisation but also to the individuals working in the organisation. Such a personal connection to the wrong-doers appeared to make the decision to whistleblow even more difficult.

So when I discovered this, you know, I was really met with a dilemma because, you know, I had been there for a long time. I saw my career trajectory going forward in the company. I saw myself retiring there. They were friends of mine so, you know, how do I approach this? (Eve)

5. Structural factors

The structure and set-up of an organisation may facilitate or impede internal and/or external reporting of wrongdoing. Furthermore, the individual's role within the organisation can also impact on their sense of responsibility in disclosing information about illegal activities.

4.1 Role in Organisation

The majority of whistleblowers who took part in the interviews were in a high-level role within the organisation where they worked. Many also held roles involved with compliance or other regulatory function. For some, disclosing perceived wrong-doing was largely an outcome of their role within the company. They followed expected regulations in reporting the actions, but were met with resistance or refusal to act on the information. For those in such roles it was usually at this stage that they reported externally – only after failed attempts to initiate change internally.

It's my job to tell people where there's a better way to do it; a higher quality way; a lower cost way; a more ethical way. That's my job... Whistleblowers seem to have unfortunately lucked into being in companies that are just intolerant of a dissenting word, even if it's a true

word. (Edward2)

Well, initially, by just doing my job ... so let me rephrase that. I'm in charge of anti-money laundering and the law requires that you must report suspicious transactions to the authorities. (Gary)

Some whistleblowers felt compelled to report discovered wrongdoing to ensure that they were not accused or suspected of being involved, particularly where their role in the organisation involved compliance or similar activities. As one compliance officer explains,

Yeah, you can be prohibited from banking ... I was afraid I would be taken out of banking, not be allowed to be in banking anymore. I was afraid of FBI thinking I did something, or I brought these customers in, or my innocent co-workers. (Sarah)

I remember expressing that I certainly wasn't comfortable doing those transactions because as the treasurer I would've been the authority doing that, and I expressed and articulated that this was not correct and reminded them of their legal commitments (Eve)

For one whistleblower who was in a low-level role in the organisation, her role as an advocate appeared to strongly influence her decision to blow the whistle on mistreatment of patients.

I said [after noting wrong-doing], "But surely the point of having advocates in there is to make sure that the public are aware of what's going on." And [the manager] said, "Well, if we start doing that, we wouldn't get in again." And I just thought, "Oh God, this is just too bizarre." If my family member was in there, and I saw there was an advocate visiting every week I'd feel a bit safe thinking there was somebody doing something. But she was like, "No, you keep quiet."

4.2 Reporting structures

Most whistleblowers attempted initially to report wrongdoing through internal structures. Some proceeded through such reporting structures up to a point where it became clear to them that no actions would be taken to correct the wrong doing.

Once I found out they had poker I went to the President because who I reported to I said "we can't be processing poker, it's illegal". He came out, there was extra guidance, this, that and the other thing. And the guy I reported to said "let's have a weekly meeting with the President to ease your mind". Okay? So, I went up and I wanted to talk about the third party processor but John who was the President completely went to the poker and I said "we need to file suspicious activity reports on this" and he said "no" kind of thing. And I'm like "uh oh!" that's when it kind of dawned on me there was complicity going on. (Sarah)

My direct line manager and we had a discussion one evening and I basically told him what they were doing on this specific incident. I then raised all my other concerns; I documented them in a three page dossier, memo. There were eight particular points that I felt that needed investigation and he basically sat there and said to me, "I absolutely understand. I get your moral dilemma and I congratulate you for your ...[integrity]...However ...I'm not going to do anything about it and you've got two choices; you can either resign and leave the bank or I'm going to move you onto another project." (Robert1)

Some also noted that the reporting process they encountered is inherently flawed, such as the vertical reporting structure described below:

When you blow the whistle, ordinarily you're blowing the whistle to say something's wrong, otherwise you're not blowing the whistle and if it's wrong adjacent to you, that means it's wrong underneath your supervisor and he or she sees a negative impact upon his or her bonus, right? So when it's within a vertical ... when your management's vertical and the whistle blowing process is vertical, it's ineffective and it's very, very ... it's not in the public interest because it's in the interest of the manager to contain the situation, to control it and not allow it to get above him or her. If it goes above him or her, then they become the problem; they are the issue. (Gary)

Others also expressed concerns about complicity among those tasked with reviewing complaints.

SFO allowed the company to do an internal investigation and they got in a company of auditors called Price Waterhouse Coopers. Now, the normal auditors of the company are KPMG. ...I wrote to the director of the SFO and said "are you aware that the previous auditors of the company were Price Waterhouse Coopers before KPMG? Are you aware that we have now traced the payments back over 30 years to when Price Waterhouse Coopers were the auditors during that period and therefore do you think that the conclusions you are going to be given by the so called independent investigation are going to be truly independent and truly objective because, effectively, they will be rubber stamping their own mis-auditing over the previous years". (Richard)

[At this] point I had voiced my dissent one-on-one with the CEOs. I just said "I'm not happy with this". I then voiced it to the financial director and the group legal officer who then closed the door on me and then the externals would've been the Deloittes, the external auditors, and I didn't feel that I could trust them either. (Eve)

Whistleblowers in Ireland particularly noted that the existing structures for reporting, both internal and external, were so weak as to be entirely ineffective.

The decision to report externally, through regulators or through the media, appears as an outcome of the failure of internal reporting structures. Given that the primary motivation for the interviewees in blowing the whistle was to change the illegal or unethical behaviour, had such changes been made when first brought to the organisation's attention it is unlikely the report would have been made externally.

4.3 Response to reporting

All whistleblowers in the study experienced negative reactions towards them by the organisations. However, the organisations response to reporting varied at the point of initially receiving information. In some cases they were initially positive towards the whistleblower and only as the complaint proceeded did relationships deteriorate, in other cases whistleblowers were threatened or warned not to pursue the complaint, were fobbed off and told their complaint was incorrect, while in others the response was very harsh and immediate.

So it was very clear in the organisation that if you questioned the staff at all you would risk your job. And it was no compunction or – what's the word- fear or care[...it was gladly sack you. (Barry)

, it wasn't the response I was expecting, certainly not the, "If you feel you want to resign." I'm

like, "Whoa! Why would I resign a very well paid job when I've ..." (Robert1)

[A]fter the authorities took action against some of the clients of <my organization> and to an extent, some issue for <my organization>, my management in London, my CEO said I'd done a good job and somebody said it had impacted me negatively and they were trying to sack me. (Gary)

So here I am going to the Regulators to say, "Here's the issue." The very first thing the Regulator said to me is, "You'll never work for that bank again." So the Regulator rewards them because they [the wrong-doers] keep their jobs, they go onto better jobs and the Regulator attacked me and tried to stop me doing it again.(Gary)

The issue of retaliation was very clearly discussed by all interviewees and is discussed in detail in the section six.

6. Facilitating Factors

Certain factors may facilitate reporting of wrong-doing within organisations. Knowledge and financial stability were both found to be considerations in whistleblowing and being able to cope with the outcome of whistleblowing. In some cases anonymity was also perceived as a facilitating factor.

5.1 Knowledge

Knowledge expressed an interesting relationship to whistleblowing within the interviews. Clearly all whistleblowers have a level of knowledge relating to wrong-doing or they would not be whistleblowers. However, knowledge also relates to knowledge about the reporting or legal system, and knowledge relating to preserving evidence. Several whistleblowers noted that they were relatively new to an organisation or a role within the organisation and that as a result they began asking a lot of questions. Their desire to gather knowledge actually led to their discoveries of wrong-doing.

I asked a lot of questions because I was the newcomer, and I wanted to find out how the place worked. And when I ultimately learned the answers, I thought, "Well, it can't work this way. This is against the law, so I tried to fix it." So it was all quite innocent from my... (Edward3)

For some, knowledge related to negotiating legal processes. One whistleblower explains that her background in law facilitated her whistleblowing actions,

[I was] lucky enough to have had an elite training. I went to Yale Law School so that gave me – I wouldn't say an arrogance – but that gave me a feeling of entitlement. (Anita)

While another notes his army background that required the production of reports as facilitating his whistleblowing,

I went to the MoD here in England and I wrote a paper, a proper staff paper, a military paper, not an academic paper...And I was a colonel in the army, a staff officer in the MoD, so I know how to write a military report. I took it to the MoD and said "read that and do something about it." (Richard)

Still others noted their ability to recognise the need to preserve evidence and prepare for potential retaliation or negative outcomes.

We then knew that the writing was on the wall, so we started to download our own stuff. We started to take copies of suspicious activity within the building society and we built up our own portfolio. (Mary)

5.2 Material Resources

Many of the whistleblowers were in well-paid jobs at the time they blew the whistle. Most also had some savings or other resources which could be drawn on to support them, at least in the initial period, while they pursued legal cases. One whistleblower was insured to cover legal expenses. Although most have experienced significant negative financial consequences through whistleblowing, having some material resources does appear to provide something of a cushion which facilitates whistleblowing.

Resources, money, food, health, all of the things that keep you happy as an individual, it's got to be sustainable. And if you don't have those things, you can't be – it's logical – you can't be out there as a warrior. It's almost like waging a war. You have to have the supplies and the materiel for the battle (Anita)

I was being paid so, you know, economically, things hadn't changed really. It changed after about eight months when I went down to zero pay. So I didn't really have the economic pressure that some people have...I could issue proceedings because I was insured for legal protection. So when you're not insured, it's David against Goliath ... (Gary)

5.3 Anonymity

For some, anonymity offered a safe space from which to report wrong-doing. However, anonymity was often short-lived and of little help to the whistleblower, as Eve discovered:

So anyway, I made an anonymous call. They invited me in for a meeting. I said, "No, thank you. I'd rather not. This was just an exploratory telephone conversation." And I told them as much as I was aware of and put the phone down. ...and about a week later there was an inquiry—an inquiry began on the sort of financials on <my organization>. And a group of attorneys ... came in and they simply fired the senior executive team. Now, again, completely illegal. But it wouldn't happen here [in the UK]. But they just got rid of us, and they said, "Don't take any files. Leave your laptop, your phone, everything, and just leave the premises now because an inquiry is beginning and you're being dismissed because we feel that you would be prohibitive in terms of our investigation." So that was that really. And then you know the rest of the story and the sort of death threats and whatnot that followed. (Eve)

On the other hand Sarah was able to avail of the help of the FBI in maintaining anonymity to assist their investigation.

I said "please I want to stay anonymous; I do not want the bank to know I told on them." He said "okay." So, he said the FBI would be reaching out to me... So, the FBI was looking into a whistle blower trying to protect me but the only way they could think of to protect me, to keep me anonymous was for me to get my own lawyer. So, they had to remove me from the lawyers that the bank hired for me. (Sarah)

A number of whistleblowers chose to waive anonymity as they felt that the report would have more legitimacy or impact if their name was attached.

I wanted them to know it's ["my name"] the guy who sees you every day and whose office is 20 feet away from many of you so that they would stop. It didn't work. All they did was thump me harder. ...I thought anonymity is comfortable for the whistleblower but is not going to prompt any behaviour change which after all that was my sole intent.(Edward)

If you don't want to go through that sort of thing or if you are not ready or being prepared or have the personality to handle what is said, then it might be better not to disclose your name. That's an option, I'm not saying...I made an ultimate decision, I felt my name has to be there...Because it's about credibility (Max)

7. Retaliation

Retaliation was a common experience for whistleblowers. Loss of employment, either through direct or constructive dismissal, was the form of retaliation most often mentioned by whistleblowers. For some, though, retaliation included threats and intimidation and attempts to impugn their character, in some cases through accusations of mental instability.

6.1 Loss of employment

None of the whistleblowers who participated in the interviews were currently employed in the organisation on which they blew the whistle. All were either dismissed or were constructively dismissed. Interviews described a variety of tactics used to encourage the whistleblower to leave their employment, including delayed pay or non-payment and removal of duties.

They tried to sack me while I was on annual leave. I got a letter to say they were restructuring, and I was to be made redundant, on annual leave. It was like they were trying everything. I was asked to leave, advised to leave, and then the department cut my travel. It was complete harassment. Severe. (Barry)

[After I] had made my revelations I was fired and then I was rehired after public outcry and talk ...and all of that happened. But when I was rehired they completely changed the contract, so I changed from an employment contract to a training contract. So it meant I didn't do anything but train, so just basically sat in a room for six months with no hope. ... it was a very good way for them to dismiss me because their response to it when I got fired [the second time]and when everything was, "Well, she's a trainee. She didn't know what she was doing." (Claire)

When I got back, I went into this big room, half the size of this where we all worked open plan and it was now being used as a storage room with boxes in and there was just my desk in the corner. So I sat there, on my own, this huge room, surrounded by boxes with no work to do. (Mark)

6.2 Threats and intimidation

Whistleblowers commonly experienced threats. Some threats were of a legal nature – threatening to sue the whistleblower for libel for instance.

[They] threatened to sue me in a libel, defamation case, so it was all this sort of harassment from early on, not to mention the Treasurer threatened to take legal action. They actually threatened to sue me. (Barry)

Other threats were of a physical nature or intimidation was used to suggest physical threat, such as 'messengers' arriving to a female whistleblowers house during the night, carrying baseball bats. Some whistleblowers were genuinely fearful for their lives or those of their families.

When you are threatened in Riyadh by the managing director and the HR director and the HR director is called Princess Noura Al Saud with a direct line, she is in the royal family, she is the niece of the king and a direct line to the police, threatens you with arrest and gaol in Riyadh, what do you do? (Richard)

But then these were the people that would come to me with the letters to me...previous... They used this thuggish outfit to send up with a baseball bat to our house. (Thomas)

The threat of being excluded from working in the industry again was omnipresent and for most whistleblowers has proven to be true.

6.3 Character attacks

Public attacks on a whistleblowers character, their mental health status or other personal characteristics were mentioned by several whistleblowers. For one whistleblower this included having an issue of bedwetting at the age of six raised in court.

The tactic of the other side is simply to destroy your character and you know, you are sitting there on sixty quid a week and you can't even afford the rail fare to get to court and you are facing a barrister on, I don't know... 250,000...1,200,000 a year and all he wants to do is destroy your character. (George)

8. Impact

All whistleblowers experienced a significant impact on the quality of their life due to whistleblowing. The impacts affected their personal lives, including relationships, their financial status, their ability to socialise, their physical health and perhaps most notably, their emotional or psychological health.

<Comment from our Research Assistant: I don't have good evidence to say this for sure, but my general sense from the interviews is that the women appear to be more resilient than the men. I.e. they are all likely to experience depression and stress, but the women seem to recover from this faster and have a generally more positive outlook. Just an observation... not entirely clear if this is the case.>

7.1 Psychological Health

Along with the financial impact, psychological health consequences were the most common impact on whistleblowers wellbeing following whistleblowing. Serious stress, including PTSD, and depression were both issues noted by whistleblowers as developing following blowing the whistle while a couple interviewees also mentioned experiencing suicidal thoughts.

[M]y mental health is now completely shot, you know? I have very serious depression. I spend most of my time in bed. I mean, a tweet, 140 characters is about as much as I can manage at the moment. (Mark)

Some of the interviewees also noted that they experienced emotional difficulties arising from the impact of their whistle-blowing on others, such as colleagues or family members.

I felt guilty about my colleagues having to go through the punishment for me. I really do feel guilty about that, but they were very good at pointing out, "You didn't do this to us. This is the management who are not handling it properly." So they were very good at accepting it. But I also felt guilty that my children have paid a price for it, that financially they're suffering because of me. That still is a conflict for me that my children suffer because of me, but then I wouldn't have been comfortable thinking the women were suffering because of me (Claire)

For one whistleblower, stress had a serious negative impact after reporting when he was moved to another project in the same company:

I actually took the easy way out, which was take the other job just simply because by now my health was beginning to suffer so I'm starting to have anxiety problems, stress related issues, not sleeping, psoriasis, abdominal problems and I just wanted out. I just didn't want to deal with it anymore. (Robert1)

As with Robert, other whistleblowers noted the relationship between psychological health and physical health symptoms.

I fainted in the shower and it was a shower in a bath so I fell, this bit here fell against the bath wall, two ribs broke, went into the lung, the lung collapsed, rushed into hospital. I got pneumonia, this lung filled with fluid, so I got pneumonia, basically because I was so stressed out and so weak. No fitness. I was put in intensive care and was kept alive by technology, intubation. And there were all sorts of vasovagal syndromes afterwards when I was recovering, and the cardio consultant came in and said "we think that you fainted in the shower because of stress." (Tom)

Such health consequences contributed to the difficulties in finding and/or sustaining work and consequently to their financial security, compounding the negative impact of whistleblowing.

7.2 Personal

The majority of whistleblowers described their families and partners as a source of support. Nevertheless, the impact of whistleblowing was also felt in their personal lives. A number of whistleblowers discussed their fears about how whistleblowing would affect their children and/or partner/spouse, which contributed also to stress.

One of the most serious effects of whistle blowing can be on a person's family, because you know, invariably the whistle blower is the family bread winner. You know, the whole, the house....the whole family way of life, going to school, afford petrol for the car, put food on the table depends on probably the whistle blower...And if things get tough, your family will suffer (George).

[I]n my life we lost the work very quickly. This is true of most whistle blowers actually. So, you

lose the job first. You then wear down the wealth very quickly because you can't get another job and you go through the savings. You are under tremendous stress which gets greater as you can't get a job and the savings go down. And what happens is that it puts tremendous stress not only on your marriage but your personal health as well. (Richard)

A minority of interviewees provided specific examples of how their personal life was negatively impacted by whistleblowing:

We had eleven private detectives following my wife, my daughter, me and you get emotional about it and that's normal (Max)

Several whistleblowers also noted encountering some resistance to whistleblowing from family and close friends. In most of these cases it would appear that the resistance was due to concern for the whistleblower, however, it often left the whistleblower feeling more alone or under greater pressure.

Even my family were unsupportive.... I understand their pain at seeing my pain. And they desire to see me not in pain. I mean, as a parent, you don't want to see your child, you know, no matter how old they are in such pain. So they, you know, they would come up with very unprincipled suggestions to me or suggestions that I should've bribed them for money and my life would've been easier if I had just kept quiet; all these things that kind of made it worse for me but better for them. (Eve)

7.3 Financial and career prospects

All interviewees suffered negative impacts on their financial status and most felt that their careers were seriously stalled or dismantled. Few of the whistleblowers are currently in gainful employment. Whistleblowers often lost out on income while their claims were investigated as well as on future income as they felt that being known as a whistleblower created a level of stigma towards them that prejudiced potential employers against them.

"How is it that I who did everything right for the entirety of my career—how am I unemployable when I was so eminently employable? How could this be regarded as a bad thing?" I still don't get it. (Edward3)

I'm finding it very difficult to get a job. I'm still not fully working. I'm doing a FAS course which is a level five FETAC course when I've got a Masters and I'm learning how to photocopy and file which is something I've had years of experience of working in an office and doing this is quite heartbreaking. I've applied for loads of jobs; I just don't get called for interviews. I feel my name is blacklisted. I don't have a career when I was starting to build a career. But from a financial aspect it's been really horrendous (Claire)

Financial strain was also experienced by whistleblowers who pursued civil cases against those on whom they blew the whistle.

That cost us all our savings. And then you are in the problem, not only have you got the stress of what you've been through, you can't get another job because when you go and see people and say "hey, I've just come out of here" they say "why?" And then they go "ooh..." (Richard)

Nobody's ever asked us, how did we find the court case. Nobody's ever asked us those hard questions and say how did you get by? There are days we couldn't get out of bed because we had nothing to do, we had no money, we'd lost every.....cut the dole off! (Thomas)

Some of the interviewees had savings prior to whistleblowing or have received settlements or awards due to wrongful dismissal or other breach in employment regulations. For those with settlements or savings, the financial reward has eased the stresses of unemployment and poverty and provided a basis for pursuing other interests, activities and education.

I haven't had any income for four years. I have been able to survive by using savings. I'm not on benefits, I'm not claiming. It's a choice, this, it's a choice because the [whistleblower advocacy group] takes up 60% of my time. The reason why the [whistleblower advocacy group] is successful is because of me and about three or four other people who are giving their own time free of charge. (Tom)

I went back to college but now I'm unemployed again. I'm unemployed at the moment, I have finished college but... so, yeah, I'm anxious to move on from it, going back to college was a real help, made a difference, different people...But, yeah, it's a chance, you know, I'm living off the package, basically. (Barry)

7.4 Social

Whistleblowers commonly described a sense of aloneness following whistleblowing. They were often cut off from colleagues and for some, friends distanced themselves from the situation.

I had to take myself through, nobody lifted the phone to me and asked me, how are you getting on now Ben and how is this taking....or how are you feeling now as a result of doing what you have done and coming through all the court case now...I had to go through this myself. (Thomas)

It was a complete shutdown and that, you know, at the time I was unbelievably traumatised by that. I remember weeping, you know, really broken-hearted. It was like a loss. It was a bereavement that I had lost all these people [former colleagues] and, again, in a very odd fashion. It didn't make sense to me that doing the right thing should receive such sort of vilification (Eve)

9. Support Systems

While whistleblowers clearly suffered a great many negative impacts as a consequence of disclosing wrong-doing, all whistleblowers were able to identify individuals who offered them support and assisted them through difficult periods. For some, it was their child or children, for many it was their spouse/partner while for still others it was a parent.

[My wife] has been brilliant. I couldn't have done this without her. The reason that I'm so strong is because I have a fantastic home base (Richard)

She's [wife] been my rock, you know, in terms of support. She thinks at the moment that I should fight this to the end because I've been wronged and it's an injustice and they've behaved appallingly towards me. (Robert1)

my youngest daughter actually told me the other week how proud she was that I'd stood up for myself and stood up to the organisation and that I was fighting them and not rolling over... (Tom)

Most whistleblowers noted a contraction in the number of friends who were supportive after whistleblowing, but noted that the friendships that survived the experience were much deeper because of it.

I don't have good family support network, but I do have a great friends' network and I have the most amazing friends. And they've been very good. (Claire)

In addition to family members and friends, social groups, such as sports teams, provided a source of support to some whistleblowers.

Hurling is my main first love, I suppose. I have been involved there. That's my pastime, stopped me going totally bonkers... I mean, from the point of view it would have been, some people would have been aware, other people wouldn't have been, a lot of the players and that, you know, young lads. So, for me it was a total escape, like. (Barry)

Mentors were also noted by some interviewees as assisting them through the process by providing both practical guidance and emotional support.

I had a former boss that helped me get my lawyer. He almost called me nightly to see how I was doing and checking in. (Sarah)

Some mentors were former whistleblowers. These individuals were particularly helpful because of their personal knowledge about what the interviewee was going through.

She has carried me along and especially when I first left the bank... and when I was about to make mistakes, she would warn me about them and I knew that she's an incredibly insightful person and I would take just about anything that she would tell me on faith, even though I didn't understand it, I would just figure that she had a better grip on reality than I did. And as time went by, I could then go back and see how she had helped me avoid problems. (Anita)

Finally, whistleblowing networks were mentioned by several interviewees as a source of ongoing support.

We've shared information, we've helped each other, we picked each other up when various forces attacked us (Anita)

Several of the UK whistleblowers have been active in creating networks for whistleblowers. They discuss these actions as responding to a need which for them was unmet. Through involvement in these networks they are receiving support from others, but are also able to assist whistleblowers who are struggling to cope emotionally or practically.

so it's been from about 2011 where, yeah, there's this kind of tribal growth of outliers, of people that have been very alone indeed and have been sort of rejected from mainstream society, who have said, "Hey, hang on; let's create our own tribe," which is fantastic and then also what I've felt in the last year or two, I'd say in the last 18 months, a whistle blower or potential whistle blowers internationally that see me on LinkedIn or somewhere, I don't know where, but they actually connect with me... And these people come from all over the world, so it's very gratifying to me to be able to help those people ... I can't help them more than being an encouragement and sort of emotional support. But it's great that they have someone to reach out to because no one for me for maybe 11 years.

The existence of support systems was clearly important in the decision to report wrongdoing, acting as a facilitating factor to reporting.

And I had decided what's the worst that can happen? I have parents and siblings; I'm not going to starve. (Barry)

However, supporters were also influential in decisions to settle out of court or to pursue actions against an organisation, as described below:

My wife ... she's fond of saying, "Let it go, move on and don't you dare do anything like it again." She was very supportive but, you know, there came a point when my in-laws said, "Look, if you could settle this, it would be good for everybody's health, if you would just settle the case." So when we went for the mediation hearing, we settled it. (Gary)

10. Conclusion

[Comments from our Research Assistant]. The interviews present a group of people who perceive themselves as unique or in some other way different than others. This self-assessment is largely correct – the whistleblowers appear to be individuals with a strong sense of morality or ethics, who are persistent, even stubborn, and who have the personal strength to maintain their stance even in the face of severe negative consequences, including loss of employment and physical threat. Whistleblowers' ethics appeared to be derived largely from their experience of socialisation – for some this occurred through religion, while for others it was based on observation of their parents, grandparents and families. For a minority, their strong ethical stance was a form of resistance against parents who were not ethical. Of note, whistleblowers are also individuals with very positive views of whistleblowing in general, as a means of protecting the public and ensuring justice.

The action of whistleblowing resulted in a wide-range of negative impacts on both the whistleblower and their families. Careers were dismantled with some whistleblowers previously employed in very well-paid, powerful positions, reduced to long-term unemployment, surviving on benefits or, in one case, begging. Relationships suffered through the stress of whistleblowing and whistleblowers themselves commonly experienced mental health and physical health consequences.

Retaliation from organisations involved in wrong-doing was common. While this may take the form of dismissal there is also indications of attempts to undermine the whistleblowers character, to threaten them with violence and to destroy their career prospects. As described by one whistleblower, organisations and their legal teams employ the techniques of 'delay, deny, destroy' to avoid recognition of their wrong-doings.

However, whistleblowers were also in receipt of support primarily from family, but also from friends, social groups, mentors and networks. The presence of this support appears to be a significant factor in their capacity to pursue claims of wrongdoing in the face of such harsh consequences.

Despite the hardships encountered the majority of whistleblowers continued to feel that they had done, not just the right thing, but the necessary thing.

It's worth working for, and you know what? There's hope. You know, a lot of people said, "Oh, really, why do you bother? We are as a species we're evil, wicked, corrupt, greedy individuals," and I don't agree. I think there are those people, but I think as a species we are flexible and we can change. We've done it over the course of history and we can do it again.

And we just need nudges from all directions. Nudges from reform, nudges from policy, nudges from behaviour. And together, we will shift and change this arena. (Eve)

I'm very glad I did it. I mean, it's still the ripple effect is still there in my career. My own life has changed dramatically but no, Jesus, no, I can live with myself. I am proud of what I did. The way I did it. (Barry)