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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# "I Was Just Doing My Job!" Evolution, Corruption, and Public Relations in Interviews with Government Whistleblowers

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper addresses public sector communication by exploring the role of government whistleblowers. It argues for the need to reconnect voices by creating platforms from which whistleblowers can speak without fear of retribution for the betterment of society. The paper presents 13 in-depth interviews with whistleblowers who worked for governmental entities in the United States or who worked as contractors to U.S. government entities. The goal was to understand their stories, including why they blew the whistle, how they blew the whistle, how whistleblowing affected their relationships with their employers, what role public relations executives and practitioners played in their whistleblowing experience, and how public relations executives and practitioners could interact more productively with whistleblowers. Four of the five theories explained some of the dynamics of whistleblowing: Resource dependence perspective explained the role of upper management in relying on wrongdoing; normalization of corruption theory explained attempts to conscript new employees into corrupt practices; justice theory explained the sense of betrayal felt by employees who tried to correct wrongdoing; and relationship management further explained the negative impact of retaliation on the relationships between whistleblowers and their employers. However, evolutionary theory explained all aspects of whistleblowing in terms of Darwinian natural selection.

**KEYWORDS:** Evolutionary Theory; Justice Theory; Normalization of Corruption; Organization-Public Relationships; Public Relations; Relationship Management; Resource Dependence Perspective; Whistleblower; Whistle-blower; Whistleblowing

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## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The world is in the middle of a global pandemic of a new virus for which there is no vaccine and there is no cure. Eleven million are infected, and more than half a million have died. No one knows what the future holds. And in the midst of the worst manmade catastrophe since World War II and the worst biological catastrophe since the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918, the current leader of the United States government fired the Inspector General of the Intelligence Community (ICIG), a government attorney who was charged with protecting whistleblowers, for taking to Congress the whistleblower complaint that led to the president's impeachment.

Some might say, "There oughta be a law!"

## 2. Background

Actually, there are several. They include the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 (1978a), which encouraged whistleblowing and included protections for whistleblowers; the Inspector General Act of 1978, which established oversight against fraud and abuse (1978b); the Whistleblower Protection Act of 1989 (1989); the Whistleblower Protection Act Amendments of 1994 (1994); the Intelligence Community Whistleblower Protection Act of 1998 (1998); the Whistleblower Protection Enhancement Act of 2012 (2012); and Presidential Policy Directive (PD-19), signed by former President Barack Obama in 2012, which gave federal whistleblowers additional protection from retaliation. Unfortunately, none of those laws protected the ICIG, at least not yet. The attorneys, the U.S. Congress, and the courts eventually will establish the current state of whistleblower protection legislation and the protection provided the fired ICIG.<sup>2</sup>

The history of whistleblowing legislation has been chronicled in many places (see Greenwood Forthcoming, Miceli, Near, and Dworkin 2008, Brown, Lewis, Moberly, and Vandekerckhove 2014), and this article will not repeat those sources more than necessary. The Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 (CSRA) instituted whistleblower protections for federal employees after Watergate and created the U.S. Merit System Protection Board (MSPB) to enforce those protections. As part of that enforcement, the federal government conducted three longitudinal, quantitative surveys of federal employees (Merit Systems Protection Board 1981, 1984, 1993). Those studies became the basis for the current body of research on whistleblowing in the field of management, which has seen the most extensive exploration of whistleblowing. Most of that research has been analyses of the federal data or studies based on the federal surveys and variables (Miceli *et al.* 2008, Greenwood Forthcoming, 2011, 2015).

The definition of whistleblowing most often used by researchers is "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" (Near and Miceli, 1984, p. 4 in Greenwood Forthcoming).

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<sup>1</sup> Some portions of this paper related to the history of whistleblowing and whistleblowing research have been published in slightly different format in publications to which the author retains copyright: Greenwood, C. A. 2011. *Killing the Messenger: A Survey of Public Relations Practitioners and Organizational Response to Whistleblowing after Sarbanes-Oxley*. Doctoral dissertation, Greenwood, C. A. 2015. Whistleblowing in the *Fortune 1000*: What Practitioners Told Us About Wrongdoing in Corporations in a Pilot Study. *Public Relations Review*, 490-500. or has permission of the copyright holder Greenwood, C. A. 2016. Golden Handcuffs in the Fortune 1000? An Employee-Organization Relationship Survey of Public Relations Executives and Practitioners in the Largest Companies. *Communication Research Reports*, 33, 269-274. Other referenced portions related to those topics are included in Greenwood, C. A. (Forthcoming). *Public Relations and Whistleblowing: Golden Handcuffs in Corporate Wrongdoing*. New York,: Routledge.

<sup>2</sup> This was not the only Inspector General fired by this Administration or by prior Administrations.

The purpose of this study was to gather narratives from whistleblowers who were government employees, or employees of government contractors, about their experiences with their government employers. The hope was to understand their motivations for whistleblowing, how their employers responded to their efforts to correct wrongdoing in their organizations, how whistleblowing affected their relationships with their employers, and how whistleblowing affected their lives, then and now. Another key intent of this study was to elicit the suggestions of these government whistleblowers for ways in which public relations practitioners could interact with whistleblowers for the betterment of the organization and the protection of the whistleblower.

A few authors explored whistleblowing in public relations tangentially to other concerns (Berger and Reber 2006, Kang and Berger 2009, Berger 2005, Kang and Berger 2010, Kang, Berger, and Shin 2012). However, the first studies to focus exclusively on the involvement of public relations with whistleblowing were by Greenwood (2011, 2015, Forthcoming, 2016). The current study explored the interaction of government whistleblowers with public relations/public affairs professionals. It elicited the rarely heard stories of governmental whistleblowers and their efforts to correct wrongdoing in their organizations. It also pointed out the limited role that public relations has played in interacting with whistleblowers within government organizations. It contributed to whistleblowing theory by showing the relevance of three theories used by whistleblowing scholars (resource dependence, institutionalization of corruption, and justice) and one theory used by public relations scholars (relationships management theory). It also made the argument for using evolutionary theory as a metatheory to explain more of the reasons behind the other theories (Greenwood 2010, Forthcoming).

### **3. Literature Review**

The research into whistleblowing that has been undertaken by the federal government and in the field of management has been predominantly quantitative (Greenwood Forthcoming, Miceli *et al.* 2008). The primary method has been surveys patterned after the federal surveys (Merit Systems Protection Board 1981, Keenan 1988, Merit Systems Protection Board 1993). However, a few recent studies have used qualitative methods, for example, to identify motives for whistleblowing (Baltacı and Balcı 2017) and to assess the emotional impacts of whistleblowing on nurses (Peters, Luck, Hutchinson, Wilkes, Andrew, and Jackson 2011). Nevertheless, the dominant perspective in whistleblowing research has been the management perspective, and that perspective has cautioned that qualitative studies are too time-consuming to administer and lack generalizability (Miceli *et al.* 2008). That quantitative research has generally tried to identify predictors of wrongdoing, predictors of intent to blow the whistle (because actual whistleblowers are difficult to identify), predictors of whistleblowing, and predictors of retaliation (Miceli *et al.* 2008).

#### **3.1. Theories**

Generally speaking, theories have not been particularly helpful in understanding whistleblowing. “While some scholars feel there is no overall theory that guides research on whistleblowing (Culiberg and Mihelič 2017), researchers have called on a variety of theories to understand whistleblowing, its motivations and its repercussions” (Greenwood Forthcoming: 8). In fact, researchers have used at least two dozen theories to explain whistleblowing, each of which can be seen to explain some aspect of whistleblowing. So far, none of them has been able to explain the entire process of whistleblowing. This study looks at five that appear most relevant from an informed, but purely subjective, evaluation in the context of whistleblowing.

### *Resource dependence perspective*

Resource dependence perspective (RDP) is a management theory that says organizations depend on resources, and their handling of those resources is critical to the organization's future:

A number of researchers, including this author, have turned to a theory from management—resource dependence perspective—alone or in conjunction with other theories to explain at least some of whistleblowing's variables (Greenwood, 2011, 2015, 2016; Miceli & Near, 1985, 1994; Near et al., 1993; Near & Miceli, 1986, 1996; Rehg et al., 2004). (Greenwood Forthcoming)

Those resources include materials, financing, information, transportation, and workforce. Those resources are controlled by other actors who make demands on the organization. Management's handling of those demands will determine the effectiveness and, therefore, the survival of the organization (Pfeffer and Salancik 2003). (Greenwood Forthcoming)

Management researchers have relied heavily on RDP to explain various aspects of whistleblowing. For example, they have used it to explain that some organizations depend on wrongdoing for their survival (Miceli and Near 1994). They have used it to predict retaliation for whistleblowing based on various demographic and situational variables, including dependence on wrongdoing (Mesmer-Magnus and Viswesvaran 2005, Miceli and Near 1985). They have used it to explain the reasons whistleblowers go outside the organization to report wrongdoing after they have been retaliated against for reporting internally, which include the amount of retaliation and the dependence of the organization on wrongdoing (Rehg, Miceli, Near, and Van Scotter 2004). They also have used it to explain why power, which encompasses demographic and situational variables such as gender, age, and position, among others, does not always protect the whistleblower, especially when the wrongdoer is at a high level in the organization and the whistleblower is female (Rehg *et al.* 2004).

### *Normalization of corruption*

Normalization of corruption, a theory from organizational behavior, explains how organizations that depend on wrongdoing perpetuate that wrongdoing, despite the inevitable turnover in staff (Ashforth and Anand 2003, Anand, Ashforth, and Joshi 2005, Anand, Ashforth, and Joshi 2004). Researchers have used normalization of corruption frequently to explain white collar crime (Ashforth and Anand 2003, Miceli *et al.* 2008)}, but they have not used it extensively to explain whistleblowing. Normalization of corruption describes the processes by which wrongdoing is institutionalized in an organization. Those processes include the ways in which organization members are socialized to accept and participate in wrongdoing. Among those are the pressure to adopt the values of the group, which allows them to accept the group activity of criminal behavior as well as the punishment they will receive for not participating (Ashforth and Anand 2003).

### *Justice theory*

Justice theory, or organizational justice theory, has been used in public relations to explain the relationships between individuals and organizations, or organization-public relationships (Kim 2007). Justice theory is generally viewed as having three aspects. Distributive justice refers to whether or not assets are allocated fairly;

procedural justice refers to having internal systems that ensure everyone is treated equally; and interactional justice refers to how upper management carries out organizational decisions (Kim 2007). Procedural injustice is a violation of those internal systems or the lack of those systems. In management studies, procedural justice theory has been used to explain why whistleblowers go outside the organization to blow the whistle after blowing the whistle first internally (Rehg, Miceli, Near, and Van Scotter 2008). In one study, researchers hypothesized that whistleblowers who experienced retaliation for reporting internally would view that retaliation as procedural injustice and be more likely to report externally:

If whistleblowers believe that the reprisal they suffered following internal [whistleblowing] was procedurally unjust, they may be more likely to counter-retaliate against the organization using external channels (Rehg *et al.* 2008: 227).

In that situation, the theory was only partially supported: Women were more likely than men to blow the whistle outside the organization after experiencing retaliation for blowing it inside the organization.

### *Relationship Management*

Relationship management theory is frequently used in public relations research to assess relationships between organizations and their publics, including employees (Yang 2007, Ni 2007, 2009, Gallicano, Curtin, and Matthews 2012, Hon and Grunig 1999, Grunig and Huang 2000, Huang 1997, Men 2012). Variations exist, but this study follows Huang (1997) and Hon and Grunig (1999) in defining the outcomes of relationships as trust, control mutuality, commitment, and satisfaction, and Hon and Grunig (1999) as defining the two types of possible relationships as communal and exchange. Briefly, trust equates to openness to the other party; satisfaction equates to a positive feelings about the relationship; commitment is the intent to continue the relationship; and control mutuality is acceptance of the balance of power within the relationship. In addition:

Relationship types include exchange relationships, in which there is an expected trade of benefits, and communal relationships, in which a benefit is extended but from which no reciprocal benefit is anticipated (Hon and Grunig 1999). Exchange relationships have been identified as the norm for human interaction that has been hard-wired by evolution (Greenwood 2010), while communal relationships have been identified as the higher order of relationships and the type to which public relations should aspire (Hon and Grunig 1999). (Greenwood Forthcoming, 2011: 46)

The type of relationship one has with an employer could potentially suggest the type of response that an employee has to awareness of wrongdoing, to whistleblowing, and to retaliation for whistleblowing.

### *Evolutionary theory*

Prior research proposed using Darwinian evolutionary theory, which is based in biology, as a metatheory for public relations; the proposed mechanism was by linking the two through key concepts found in both fields, including the emphasis on relationships and the skills required to maintain relationships (Greenwood 2010). Among those skills are cheating or deception, known as Machiavellian intelligence (Byrne and Whiten 1997, Whiten and Byrne 1997), the ability to recognize cheating, known as cheater detection (Byrne and Whiten 1988), and the give and take between those two traits which form the foundation on which relationships are

built over time (reciprocity) (Trivers 1971, Greenwood 2010, Byrne and Whiten 1997, Cords 1997). A later study on whistleblowing in corporate public relations demonstrated an association between the benefits that accrue to higher-level employees ("the Golden Handcuffs") and their positive attitudes toward their employers as an example of evolutionary theory (Greenwood 2015, 2011). Another study added support for that concept by identifying Darwin's natural selection as an ultimate, or primary (Scott-Phillips, Dickins, and West 2011), reason for human behavior, with the desire to accumulate wealth and resources a proximate, or secondary, reason by which natural selection is carried out (Greenwood Forthcoming). Subsequent researchers accepted the concept of using evolutionary theory as a foundational theory, or metatheory, for public relations, strategic communication, and other communication fields (Marsh 2013, 2017, 2018, Nothhaft 2016, Seiffert-Brockmann and Thummes 2017, Seiffert-Brockmann 2018, Nothhaft 2017) to the extent that this concept has become, or is becoming, a new sub-discipline in those fields.

### **3.2 Research Objectives**

This study focused on government employees who had blown the whistle. They included employees of government agencies from all branches and all levels of employment, as well as contractors to government agencies. The connection to public relations, or to public affairs as the function is called in government, was also of interest. I wanted to know what, if any, role the public relations or public affairs office played in the whistleblower's decision to blow the whistle or in the aftermath of that decision. I also hoped to get advice from these whistleblowers on how public relations/affairs might be helpful in the future.

I was interested in learning how whistleblowing had affected the whistleblower's relationship with his or her organization and what role, if any, public relations had played either before or after the whistleblowing. These interests led to the development of the following three research questions.

RQ1: Why do government employees blow the whistle?

RQ2: How does whistleblowing affect government employees' relationships with their government employers?

RQ3: How have government whistleblowers interacted with public relations professionals either before or after blowing the whistle?

## **4. Method**

### **4.1 Data Collection**

I conducted thirteen in-depth, semi-structured telephone and in-person interviews. Subjects were current or former government employees or current or former employees of government contractors who had blown the whistle on their employers. I also conducted one interview with a former high-ranking federal employee who had been in a position to blow the whistle if it had been warranted.<sup>3</sup> These interviews lasted one to two hours

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<sup>3</sup> This study was funded by a Faculty Research and Creative Activity Committee grant of \$3,975.00 from Middle Tennessee State University.

and were audio-recorded, either through the phone line or with a hand-held recorder when subjects were physically present. To enlist these whistleblowers, I identified four populations: Individuals who had been identified as whistleblowers in published media accounts, individuals I knew to be whistleblowers, individuals who self-referred, and individuals who were referred to me by others through a snowball technique (Lindlof and Taylor 2002).

I contacted whistleblowers I knew to arrange interviews and asked them to refer me to other whistleblowers they knew. I also posted my recruitment document on a specially designed web page hosted by my university. In addition, I enlisted the help of two national whistleblower organizations, the National Whistleblower Center and GAP, to help recruit whistleblowers. The interviews I conducted were a direct result of a blog posting by a staff member at the National Whistleblower Center. My work email account began receiving messages within half an hour of the blog posting.

**TABLE 1. Demographic Information of Government Whistleblower**

<i>No.</i>	<i>Government/Branch</i>	<i>Organization</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age</i>
1	Federal/Executive	DNK	Regulatory attorney	Male	29
2	Federal/Executive	DOT	Inspector/trainer	Male	66
3	Regional	Transportation	Administrator	Male	51
4	Federal/Executive	VA contractor	Factory worker	Female	23
5	Federal/Executive	White House	Director	Male	DNK
6	Federal/Executive	DOE	Lead security officer	Male	70
7	Federal/Executive	HHS	Contracting officer	Female	57
8	Federal/Executive	DOE	Security specialist	Male	48
9	Federal/Executive	DOD	EEO specialist	Male	69
10	Federal/Executive	DOE	SWAT team member	Male	44
11	Federal/Executive	DOD Contractor	Chief internal auditor	Male	35
12	Federal/Executive	DOD	Military officer	Male	DNK
13	Federal/Executive	DOD	Budget officer	Female	88

## 4.2 Participants

The thirteen subjects of the completed interviews were predominantly former federal employees (see Table 1).

They included a former regulatory attorney for a federal government agency; a former trainer and inspector for a federal government agency; an administrator for a regional transportation agency; a young factory worker employed by a contractor with a federal government agency; a former, longtime career federal employee who went to work as a director for someone who reported to someone in the White House; a former high-level law enforcement official and lead security officer for a federal nuclear facility; a former anti-human trafficking, grants policy, and contracting officer for a federal government agency; the second former security officer for the previously cited federal nuclear facility; a former Equal Employment Opportunities (EEO) Specialist with a federal government agency; a former police officer and Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) team member for a second federal nuclear facility; a former chief internal auditor for a large, non-profit, federal government contractor; an active-duty military officer; and the highest-ranking budget officer for one of the branches of

the military.

I conducted the interviews via phone and in person, and I recorded the interviews using two digital audio recorders. I kept detailed notes on the interviews during the process. A graduate assistant funded by the grant transcribed the interviews. I reviewed the transcripts for accuracy against my notes, the recordings, and my memory to resolve questions. Subjects were not compensated.

### **4.3 Analysis**

In developing the study, I used an exploratory, qualitative approach designed for sociological fieldwork to give whistleblowers an opportunity to tell their own stories (Saldana 2009). By providing both an unstructured and a semi-structured interviewing questionnaire, I hoped to enter the qualitative discussion within the social sciences. I coded 12 of the 13 interviews, even though I had reached saturation after three or four. I first captured the language of the interviewee (In Vivo coding), identified the story line using gerunds (Process coding), grouped the process statements into categories (Initial coding), identified the most frequent initial codes (Focused coding), related the categories to subcategories (Axial coding), and identified the core category or categories (Theoretical coding) as the final element of coding (Saldana 2009). The process involved personal contact with the data over a long period of time, during which I came to know the stories of the whistleblowers intimately and to incorporate those stories into my own framework of whistleblowing.

### **4.4 Researcher reflexivity**

I served in multiple state government agencies over a period of seventeen years. I used my experience as a participant, an observer, a participant-observer, and a participant-activist (Carroll and Shabana 2010) to assist my understanding of the narratives I collected in this study. At one point in my career, I acted as an internal whistleblower by delivering unwanted and potentially damaging news to management about internal operations, and I experienced retaliation for that. This contributed to my having a bias that favored the whistleblower over his or her governmental employer, which I acknowledge. In conducting the interviews, I attempted to maintain an open mind about what I was being told; however, the similarity of the stories, which led to saturation early in my study, convinced me that my experience, while unpleasant, was not unusual.

## **5. Results and Discussion**

### **5.1. In Vivo Coding**

Handling and coding the data six times on more than once occasion led to a deeper understanding of the similarity of the whistleblowing experience. In conducting In Vivo coding, I used the whistleblower's own words in response to the initial Grand Tour question: "Tell me about your career with the employer on whom you blew the whistle." In most cases, this elicited a full recitation of the person's experience with his or her employer. When it did not, I asked additional probing questions. Many of the interviewees' statements contained similar elements.

For example, the former regulatory attorney with a federal agency said:

I was responsible for promulgating regulations...When I first started, for the first two months or so I was excited about the job, but then...I was isolated [at] about month three and four, and then after that I became suspicious.

The former trainer and inspector for a federal government agency said:

I was an inspector. An operations inspector's job is to inspect \_\_\_\_, give \_\_\_\_ tests, oversee \_\_\_\_ companies and \_\_\_\_ operations, and then also investigate...illegal activity...I would investigate accidents...So, when I recorded it as an accident...on occasion, management would call me in and tell me, no, that's an incident, but we are not going to count it as an accident...This happened a few times. So, I started to see a pattern here, something that was going on.

The administrator for a regional transportation agency said:

I was hired about a year after 9/11 as a \_\_\_\_\_. I was not sure that I wanted to work there, but out of...a little bit of patriotism...I thought I could do some good. So, I took the position, and the trouble started maybe three months after I started there.

The young factory worker employed by a contractor with a federal government agency said, "I was a contractor...We worked in the pharmacy, so we packed prescriptions...We were processing a hundred to two hundred thousand a day... It was basically...factory work."

The former, longtime career federal employee who went to work as a director for someone who reported to someone in the White House said:

I only had one person above me... She was the executive director of the entire \_\_\_\_ and reported directly to \_\_\_\_ in the White House. {She} was a lovely lady, but she had a drinking problem and she would frequently show up for work inebriated and unable to do her job. She also had a very protective staff around her. They would actually feed her wine during the day and when she was feeling no pain they could do whatever they want[ed]; they could get anything signed.

## **5.2. Process Coding**

The next step in coding, Process coding, involved picking out key phrases indicating activity from the In Vivo coding. These included "[They] didn't want me to do my job," "seeing a pattern of abuse," and "becoming suspicious." The narrative moved into "refusing to violate the law" and "threatening [them with] legal accountability." The final scene was [they were] "seeking to terminate," "warning through performance evaluation," "looking for something to hang on me," and "brought me up on false charges and removed me from my job." These were all plot turning points in the whistleblowers' stories.

**Table 2. Initial, Focused, Axial, and Theoretical Coding of Interviews**

<i>No.</i>	<i>Initial</i>	<i>Focused</i>	<i>Axial</i>	<i>Theoretical</i>
1	Violations of regulations; prevented from doing job; poor working relationship; reported externally	Doing the right thing: Fired	Organizational corruption	RDP/NC/JT/RMT/ET
2	Violations of regulations; prevented from doing job; poor working relationship; reported externally	Doing the right thing: Fired	Organizational corruption	RDP/NC/JT/RMT/ET
3	Illegal contracting; prevented from doing job; poor working relationship; reported internally	Doing the right thing: Denied promotion, relocated	Organizational corruption	RDP/NC/JT/RMT/ET
4	Unsafe workplace; job made ill; poor working relationship; reported internally/externally	Doing the right thing: Fired	Organizational corruption	RDP/NC/JT/RMT/ET
5	Illegal contracting; prevented from doing job; poor working relationship; reported internally	Doing the right thing: Settlement, re-hired, promoted	Organizational corruption	RDP/NC/JT/RMT/ET
6	Major theft; illegal contracting; forgery; prevented from doing job; poor working relationship; reported internally/externally	Doing the right thing: Fired	Organizational corruption	RDP/NC/JT/RMT/ET
7	Grant fraud; prevented from doing job; poor working relationship; reported internally/externally	Doing the right thing: Fired	Organizational corruption	RDP/NC/JT/RMT/ET
8	Criminal activity; security leaks; prevented from doing job; poor working relationship; reported internally/externally	Doing the right thing: Fired	Organizational corruption	RDP/NC/JT/RMT/ET
9	Discrimination in hiring; prevented from doing job; poor working relationship; reported internally/externally	Doing the right thing: Fired	Organizational corruption	RDP/NC/JT/RMT/ET
10	Criminal activity; security leaks; prevented from doing job; poor working relationship; reported internally/externally	Doing the right thing: Fired	Organizational corruption	RDP/NC/JT/RMT/ET
11	Contracting and financial fraud, prevented from doing job, poor working relationship/reported internally/externally	Doing the right thing: Fired	Organizational corruption	RDP/NC/JT/RMT/ET
12	Discrimination in hiring, prevented from doing job, poor working relationship; reported internally/externally	Doing the right thing: Fired; promotion denied; granted	Organizational corruption	RDP/NC/JT/RMT/ET

13	Excellent working relationships	Retired at highest rank achieved by a woman in that location	Excellent organization	RMT/ET
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Notes: ET = Evolutionary theory, JT = Justice theory, NC = Normalization of corruption, RDP = Resource dependence perspective, RMT = Relationship management theory

### **5.3. Initial Coding**

Because of the similarities among stories, I captured the sentiments in Initial coding as standardized issues (see Table 2).

Most entries read: “Violations of \_\_\_\_ [on the part of the employer]; prevented from doing job; poor working relationship; reported [blew the whistle either internally, externally, or both].” One variation was “Denied promotion; relocated.” Two others showed an initial negative response followed by a more positive one: “Settlement; rehired; promoted,” and “Fired; relieved of duties; promotion denied; promotion granted.” Interviewee 13 was again outside the norm, which was expected. This was someone I knew who had retired at a very high level in government at a different time in history.

### **5.4. Focused coding**

Focused coding was designed to capsulize the recurring story found in Initial coding. I captured this story as, “Doing the right thing: Fired,” or some variation of that. Many of the whistleblowers were hired at the top of their careers, and they were focused on doing the right thing (i.e., doing their job). For all of them, it was a shock to discover the extent of wrongdoing in their organization. Once they had discovered the malfeasance, they were routinely told to “Look the other way,” “Don’t rock the boat,” or “Join the club.” Employees were labeled “Not a good fit” for refusing to participate in illegal activities. Finally, employees experienced retaliation by the organization in similar ways (verbal abuse, isolation, changes in job duties, fallacious performance reviews, demotion, and termination in most cases).

### **5.5. Axial coding**

Axial coding was a consolidation of the prior categories. It categorized the categories uncovered in the prior levels of coding. It was intended to be the umbrella category under which all others would reside. The Axial coding category was “organizational corruption.” In all cases, with the exception of Interview 13, the subjects encountered corruption in their organizations.

### **5.6. Theoretical coding**

The last stage of coding, Theoretical coding, was more of a problem. I found some evidence to support all

five theories (resource dependence, normalization of corruption, organizational justice, relationship management, and evolutionary theory) in 12 of the 13 interviews I conducted. In addition, in coding the interviews, I found repeated evidence that whistleblowing represented the court of last resort for employees with a strong work ethic who faced strong Machiavellian (deceptive) behavior from supervisors, managers, and executive management. As a result of their treatment, employees lost trust, satisfaction, commitment and a sense of mutual control in their relationship with their employer. Because of the overlapping nature of the theories, I felt it important to include them all in the theoretical space.

### *Resource Dependence: Depending on wrongdoing*

The theme of organizational corruption on which the organization depended reverberated throughout this study, from young workers to seasoned government careerists. As the former regulatory attorney phrased it, "I refused to violate the law... Three weeks after that, my supervisor engaged in the conduct that I had warned against... And, in so doing, they violated the law."

The former trainer and inspector for a federal government agency said he was ordered to falsify \_\_\_\_ test records and not report dangerous \_\_\_\_ situations. He claimed [a form of travel] is highly unsafe today due to widespread corruption in oversight agencies. "All of these organizations have very, very low... support of whistleblowers... They want to keep everything quiet. They don't want anybody to know about the problems."

The administrator for a regional transportation agency said, "I found all kinds of questionable behavior that I wasn't expecting. They allowed vendors to write their own purchase orders [which] were padded with extra [materials]."

The young factory worker employed by a contractor with a federal government agency described her working conditions as standing in front of a computer screen and conveyor belt, packaging drugs for shipment. She described having been a healthy eighteen-year-old when she started the job but, subsequently, experiencing a puzzling decline in her health. She and her mother traced that decline to the drugs she was packaging:

There were several times when I fainted on the line... no explanation. So, finally, we... [decided] that it was the pill dust... When we dug a little deeper... we found out that we were dealing with 52 hazardous drugs on the NIOSH list [National Institute for Safety and Health (NIOSH)] List of Hazardous Drugs in Healthcare Settings] that they had never told us about... They conceal hazardous drugs... they lie... they weren't honest.

She knew the research project was not going to help her situation, but she wanted to tell her story anyway.

The former, longtime career federal employee who went to work as a director for someone who reported to someone in the White House described wrongdoing involving [his immediate supervisor], who was a political appointee without federal agency background and whose staff members routinely violated federal contracting regulations:

When I... told her she couldn't do certain things legally, she couldn't understand. For instance, I told her we took 30 [participants in a federal program] to [another country]. At the most they should have flown business class, but she took all of them in first class. Nobody in the federal government gets to ride in first class.

The former high-level law enforcement official and lead security officer for a federal nuclear facility said

that early in his tenure a co-worker, a federal law enforcement official, expressed concern about “major theft” at the facility. Through his job, he was able substantiate that allegation and others going to the highest levels in the organization. Only later, after running afoul of management, did he learn the story behind his hiring. The contractor running the nuclear facility was known to have serious security problems, and it had been forced to hire someone to expose and correct the wrongdoing. If it had not, it would have lost its contract to operate the lab.

The former anti-human trafficking, grants policy, and contracting officer for a federal government agency described a situation in which federal contracts were endangering children. The contracts were being assigned to child welfare subcontractors. However, the federal agency was not following contracting regulations and records retention regulations. The contracts were also being assigned without putting protections in place to safeguard the children under the department’s care. Those protections included background checks of employees of contractors to ferret out child molesters.

The second former security officer for the previously cited federal nuclear facility confirmed the first interviewee’s comments. There was widespread theft at the facility. That person also confirmed the efforts of management to thwart any attempts to identify and correct the theft. That included not cooperating with attempts by outside agencies to investigate the corruption. One of those agencies was the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

The former Equal Employment Opportunities (EEO) specialist with a federal government agency recounted widespread racial discrimination, sexual harassment, and retaliation against complainants in the federal agency for which he worked: “I was the advocate for the...employee population at the...agency. It didn’t really matter because [of] the well-planned discrimination at that agency...you would never believe it unless you had some background in it and saw it for yourself.”

The former police officer and Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) team member from the second nuclear facility described a situation similar to that at the first nuclear facility. He was hired to uncover lapses of security and wrongdoing. He found problems. However, when he tried to report them he was thwarted by management. When he persisted, he was retaliated against.

The former chief internal auditor for a large, non-profit, federal government contractor was hired to perform internal auditing duties after the non-profit suspected inventory fraud. Based on past experience, he knew a normal reporting relationship for his position would be to the non-profit’s board of directors. He was denied that reporting relationship. He subsequently uncovered massive fraud in government contracting for that agency, and he experienced retaliation for reporting it.

The active-duty military officer described a situation in which he tried to increase diversity in hiring within his branch of the service. When his department instituted rules that he thought decreased diversity, he took his concerns up the chain of command. When his concerns were not addressed in that venue, he reported them to the Inspector General for that branch of service in his region. The Inspector General did not maintain the confidentiality he had anticipated, and despite an exemplary performance record, he was fired from his position and denied promotion. Following media reports of his treatment, he was granted promotion, but the delay permanently affected his career trajectory in the service.

### *Normalization of corruption*

“Looking the other way” versus “doing the right thing”

Another recurring theme was the tension between the whistleblower's sense of duty or obligation in the face of pressure to acquiesce to the wrongdoing. This was what researchers into white collar crime called "socializing into corruption" {Ashforth, 2003 #5695@25}. The former trainer and inspector for a federal government agency said, "If I [had done] what they told me to do...lie and look the other way, I would've had a good career, but because I reported the problems, I didn't." The administrator for a regional transportation agency said, "I found all kinds of questionable behavior I wasn't expecting...I noticed the problem, and I was told to look the other way." The young factory worker undertook her own research on how to become a whistleblower after she found out about the hazardous drugs:

[They] made it clear they couldn't protect you if your employers had no idea that you were the whistleblower, so I printed out a piece of paper that said, "I...am the whistleblower. I am the one that called OSHA." I gave it to everybody I could think of.

The former, longtime career federal employee who went to work as a director for someone who reported to someone in the White House told of reporting internally (whistleblowing) to his boss:

When I became aware of it [the wrongdoing], I warned her directly that the White House [was] going to be embarrassed, the President of the United States was going to be embarrassed if this became public. At that point she told me not to worry about it, that she had everything under control.

"Not a good fit"

The message that came down from management to most of the interview subjects after they blew the whistle was that they were "not a good fit" for the organization. In some cases, they were encouraged to leave. That encouragement sometimes came with an incorrect or falsified performance review. In others, the designation "not a good fit" was a preamble to termination. This recurrent theme again supported the socialization aspect of corruption (Ashforth and Anand 2003).

### *Justice (or Injustice) Theory*

A sense of procedural injustice was a common theme running through the interviews. As Whistleblowers have repeatedly told stories of institutionalized corruption in organizations and of attempts by management to rationalize the corruption and socialize employees to it (Ashforth and Anand 2003). When that has failed, management has tried to discredit them by diverting attention away from the whistleblower's message and directing it toward the whistleblower, fabricating a paper trail to document alleged performance deficiencies, threatening the whistleblower, isolating the whistleblower, humiliating the whistleblower in front of peers, creating unreasonable work expectations that guarantee failure, prosecuting the whistleblower legally over manufactured charges, assaulting the whistleblower physically, eliminating the whistleblower's job, stalling the whistleblower's career, and blacklisting the whistleblower (Devine 1997). As the former regulatory attorney with a federal agency characterized it, "I was subject to retaliation and termination for refusing to violate the law and for disclosing violations of law. I was subject to isolation, harassment, threats to be held to discipline, and then,

subsequently, termination.” Throughout the interviews, there were frequent mentions of humiliating and demeaning treatment, physical isolation from information and co-workers, fabrication of performance issues, falsification of paper trails, demotion, transfers, and, ultimately, termination.

### *Relationship Management*

I found repeated evidence that awareness of wrongdoing and retaliation for whistleblowing, whether internal, external or both, negatively impacted the whistleblower’s relationship with his or her employer. This mirrored my findings in previous research on whistleblowing (Greenwood Forthcoming, 2011, 2015). Although everyone appeared to start their employment with excitement, that quickly dissipated as the scope of the corruption became apparent. Most had no positive comments about relationships with their employers. All were clearly damaged by the experience, as evidenced by their eagerness to participate in this study and the pain they still expressed, even though many of them had suffered a number of years ago.

### *Evolutionary theory*

I would like to differ with Culiberg’s (Culiberg and Mihelič 2017) assertion that no one theory encompasses all aspects of whistleblowing. The role of evolutionary theory is evident in all of the other theories explored here. My recent research into the involvement of public relations and communication executives in whistleblowing in large corporations suggests that evolutionary theory might explain the actions of whistleblowers and organizations, as well as the possible reasons for those actions (Greenwood 2010, Forthcoming, 2011, 2016). This study supports that position. In this case, although I included the other theories in the final Theoretical coding, my contention is that they belong in a hierarchy, with evolutionary theory at the apex of that hierarchy.

Evolutionary theory would be the overarching theory or metatheory in the language of public relations or the social sciences (Greenwood 2010, Forthcoming). In the language of evolution, it would be considered the ultimate, or primary, explanation for human behavior (Scott-Phillips *et al.* 2011). The other four theories could be considered mid-level theories in the language of social science research. In the language of evolutionary theory, these mid-level theories would be considered proximate theories, or theories that explain how evolution is accomplished (Scott-Phillips *et al.* 2011). The need for, and lack of, the overarching foundation provided by evolutionary theory could explain why there is no one theory that explains organizational behaviour and human behavior in the context of whistleblowing (Greenwood Forthcoming).

## **6. Role of Public Relations**

The role of public relations in the actions of these whistleblowers is easy to characterize: There was not one. None of the whistleblowers contacted public relations personnel, and no one indicated he or she would have done so. The predominant sentiment they expressed was that public relations professionals were the “tool of management,” that they were only interested in maintaining the image of the organization, and that any contact with one would have had negative consequences for the whistleblower. However, one whistleblower suggested that public relations professionals could help whistleblowers by getting involved to mediate between

the whistleblower and the organization before the problem went to the lawyers, and another suggested clarifying the reporting mechanisms and assisting whistleblowers in identifying the paths to reporting (whistleblowing). Clearly, the public relations/public affairs function was not in any way involved with the process of whistleblowing, and one could argue that it would take legislation on the federal level to make that involvement possible.

## 7. Conclusion

This study involved representatives of administrations from both political parties over decades. The striking result was that all but one of the interviewees told a similar story. There was no difference in themes among organizations, contracted employees, civil service employees, or political appointees. The 12 told a story of being brought into an organization with the expectation of performing the job for which they had been hired and of finding institutionalized corruption (Ashforth and Anand 2003) and organizational dependence on wrongdoing (Rehg *et al.* 2004), being thwarted in their efforts to do their jobs ("Don't rock the boat!"), being invited to participate in and benefit from the corruption as a way to ensure their complicity ("Everyone does it!"), and being retaliated against for attempting to persevere in their jobs ("Not a good fit!").

The whistleblowing literature indicates a wide range of retaliation, from 17 percent to 35 percent. In my study, 92 percent of my respondents reported retaliation. However, that can be attributed to the selection processes I used (convenience sampling and snowball sampling). The responses I received were from whistleblowers who had blown the whistle and who felt they had been treated poorly. With one exception, I did not hear from the millions of government employees or government contract employees who did not blow the whistle or who had blown the whistle and had not experienced retaliation.

In every case, the defining message these whistleblowers communicated was a sense of betrayal. At no time were relationships between the whistleblowers and their organizations improved by the whistleblowing. Further, in not one instance did a whistleblower consult a public relations practitioner before or after the whistleblowing. In every instance, the public relations practitioner, if present, was viewed as a tool of management, and in no case was he or she viewed as someone who could or would have helped the whistleblower. This may reflect the ongoing discussion in public relations about to whom one owes allegiance, the organization or the public:

Most public relations professionals see themselves as advocates for their organization even though they are concerned with the welfare of the publics it affects. Thus, organizations usually are not willing to be completely open in public relations or to reveal all of their motives and plans in a dialogue with a public. (Grunig 1993: 128-129).

If there is any comfort to be derived from this study for public relations professionals, it is that the field appears to have gained its goal, a seat at the management table, at least in the eyes of these whistleblowers. However, that seat may have come at the price of not being viewed as a problem-solver. Much work remains to be done if public relations professionals are to play a positive role in helping to correct wrongdoing in organizations before that wrongdoing creates crises that those professionals are then required to resolve. Pre-emptive action to avert crises, as proposed by Berger and Reber (2006), would appear to be at least one potential motivating factor for public relations professionals to help whistleblowers to "do the right thing."

I am indebted to the individuals who shared their stories with me and allowed me a glimpse into their lives. I look forward to seeing other public relations professionals and scholars continue this research. My hope is that others can identify ways in which public relations professionals are able to play a role in improving the processes of whistleblowing and the protections for whistleblowers. If the current state of federal action against whistleblowers in the U.S. government is any indication of the state of whistleblowing elsewhere, there is an enormous amount of work to do before whistleblowing could be considered a safe public space from which to help governments improve in their delivery of services to their citizens.

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