An exploratory empirical study of whistleblowing and whistleblowers

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to develop a profile of whistleblowers and to determine whether whistleblowing legislation would encourage those individuals to bring to light some illegal or unethical behaviour that otherwise would remain in the shadows.

Design/methodology/approach – Having identified whistleblowing correlation, a survey was carried out in Cyprus of actual whistleblowers and could-have-been whistleblowers.

Findings – Males between 46 and 55 years of age, regardless of whether they have dependents or hold senior positions in organizations are significantly more likely to blow the whistle. However, could-have-been whistleblowers did not go ahead because they felt that the authorities would not act on their information.

Research limitations/implications – Because of the sensitive nature of the research topic and the fact that only whistleblowers or intended whistleblowers could participate in the study, the sample size is limited as a result. This, in turn, limits both the number of respondents in each category (actual and intended) as well as constrains the statistical analysis that could be carried out on the data.

Practical implications – It remains to be seen whether EU Member States shall implement the European Directive 2019/1937 on the protection of persons who report breaches of Union Law, in its entirety by the due date, namely December 2021.

Originality/value – This study provides a literature review of whistleblowing and reports an original survey against the backdrop of the European Directive.

Keywords Whistleblowing, European Directive, Profile of Whistleblowers

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Blowing the whistle on secretive information concerning some act that one considers illegal, unethical or not correct within a private or public organization has existed since time immemorial. In ancient times, the Greeks pretended they had stopped their siege of Troy and left Ulysses’ a “gift horse” behind in which soldiers were concealed. The Trojans took the “gift” into their city. However, a Trojan by the name of Laocoon was not fooled, he blew the whistle, was not believed by his compatriots and Troy fell to the Greeks [1]. Of course, a whistleblower may well face serious consequences. To illustrate, in Egypt, a former lawyer, police officer and auditor by the name of Hisham Genena stated he had access to documents that proved the army was involved in stirring bloody violence following the 2011 uprising; he was detained by the authorities ahead of general elections [2]. The whistleblowing phenomenon has historical, sociological, psychological and legal aspects. In response to it, governments have legislated to protect whistle-blowers, and corporations have issued guidance and codes of practice to their employees.

In England and Wales, the guidance for whistleblowing of the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (2015) in England and Wales defines “whistleblowing” as “the term
used when a worker passes on information concerning wrongdoing”, it is termed in the guidance “making a disclosure” or “blowing the whistle” usually about something they have witnessed at work. Furthermore, to be covered by whistleblowing law [3], a worker who makes a disclosure must reasonably believe:

- that he/she is acting in the public interest; and
- that the disclosure tends to show past, present or likely future wrongdoing falling into one or more of the following categories: criminal offences, failure to comply with a legal obligation, miscarriages of justice, placing someone’s health and safety into danger, damage to the environment and finally covering up wrongdoing in the categories mentioned.

Whistleblowing is a measure in addressing unethical and/or illegal wrongdoings, but it is essential in the fight against corruption. It has been advocated that whistleblowers protection legislation can be an effective anti-corruption mechanism and a powerful tool that helps in deterring fraud, violations and malpractices within organizations, corporations and the public sector. Moreover, through its use, an entity’s top management can correct and eliminate specific wrongdoings by certain members/employees, thus enabling them to develop and implement the correct ethical culture and work environment. Goel and Nelson (2013:16) illustrated that “greater whistle-blower awareness results in more observed corruption coming to light and being successfully prosecuted.” Furthermore, the same authors argue that “internet awareness about corruption seems relatively more effective at exposing corruption than the quantity and quality of whistle-blower laws themselves” (p. 17). The same authors found that government resources allocated to controlling corruption and legislative measures in preventing whistleblowers are complementary.

Since two-thirds of companies in the USA are both affected by fraud and lose approximately 1.2% of revenue each year and have reputational damage and other costs associated with the investigation and remediation of the fraudulent or corrupt activity, Libit (2014) proposed the use of whistleblowing hotlines.

Research in the field of whistleblowing has concentrated on the reasons for whistleblowing (Vandekerckhove and Commers, 2004); financial bounties (Pope and Lee, 2013); effectiveness of whistleblowing (Near and Miceli, 1995); whistleblowing being a prosocial behaviour (Gundlach et al., 2008) with a psychological perspective (Heyes and Kapur, 2008) and consequences (Miceli et al., 2009); protecting shareholder interest (Dasgupta and Kesharwani, 2010), fairness vs loyalty, Vandekerckhove and Commers, 2004; Dungan et al., 2015; Waytz et al., 2013) and that it can save lives and billions of dollars of public funds (Worth, 2013). However, what is meant by “whistleblowing”?

Whistleblowing is largely conceived of as “the process by which insiders “go public” with their claims of malpractices by, or within, powerful organizations” (Perry, 1998:235). However, various definitions have been put forward in the literature. Near and Miceli (1985) defined it as “the disclosure by organizational members (former or current) of illegal, immoral, or illegitimate practices under the control of their employers, to persons or organisations that may be able to effect action” (Near and Miceli, 1985; Cited by Johnson, 2002). They describe the act of whistleblowing as having four elements:

1. the whistleblower;
2. the whistleblowing act;
3. the person to whom the complaint is made; and
4. the organisation against whom the complaint is made.
Jubb (1999:78) proposed that whistleblowing is a “deliberate, non-obligatory act of disclosure, which gets onto public record and is made by a person who has or had privileged access to data or information of an organization, about non-trivial illegality or other wrongdoing whether actual, suspected or anticipated which implicates and is under the control of that organization, to an external entity having the potential to rectify the wrongdoing.” (Jubb, 1999:78). Ravishankar (2003:1) defines whistleblowing as “employees who bring wrongdoing at their own organizations to the attention of superiors”. Other definitions include “a heroic act of virtuous individuals” (Grant, 2002; Alford, 2001); an act assessable from the viewpoint of professional morality (Bouville, 2008) and a “fulfilment of one’s duties” (Vandekerckhove 2010- cited by Weiskopf, 2013:470).

In most instances, a whistle-blower will step forward and release information regarding illegalities and/or unethical activities of other members within the organization because of their personal morals and ethical values. While many executives advocate the active participation of their employees, Hirigoyen (2004:68) found that in reality executives demand “submissiveness and obedience”, and “don’t want to hear any more bad news” (Davis, 2005:558). There may be whistleblowing policies (Tsahuridu and Vandekerckhove, 2008); however, their effectiveness depends on whether “employees know about them and believe that upper management stands behind them” (Vega and Comer, 2005:107).

However, whistleblowing has a negative side. While Hersch (2002) has researched whistleblowing in the context of ethical issues and conflicts, Reckers-Sauciuc and Lowe (2010) have argued that sadness, fear, arousal and happiness influence one’s decision to blow or not to blow the whistle. Furthermore, whistleblowers remain “burdened with negative stereotypes and derogatory labels such as “informer” and “snitch” that prevent them from being recognised for taking personal risks to help the common good” (Worth, 2013:7). Blowing the whistle is directly related to one’s ethics, values, loyalty and commitment towards the principles upon which the organization’s operations depend. It is certainly not easy to do, irrespective of whether an employee comes from the public or private sector because it often results in retaliation and reprisals such as being dismissed, transferred, ostracized and bullied (Bjørkelo (2013). However, blowing the whistle often has dire consequences for the employee disclosing information on the organisation’s wrongdoing and, as such, the decision of whether or not to blow the whistle and to whom to blow the whistle to, is a very difficult one to make. As noted by a number of researchers such as Brotheridge and Lee (2010) and Bjørkelo (2013), the retaliation against whistleblowers in many cases can have detrimental health, psychological and personal effects. They may face depression (Bechtoldt and Schmitt, 2010), anxiety (Nolfe et al., 2010), post-traumatic stress (Kreiner et al., 2008) and personal life threats (Lumumba, 2020).

Furthermore, if an employee is dismissed from work as retaliation for blowing the whistle against his/her employer, the employee may well fail to find justice in the courts. Having reviewed retaliation cases filed in the UK, Worth (2020) found that only 17% of employees who sought interim relief won their case in court and no one employee was reinstated to their job. The reason for this being that the “law grants judges vast leeway to reject retaliation claims [...] denying the connection between whistleblowing and dismissal” (p. 3). Thus, one may argue that, in protecting whistleblowers, legislative measures “alone” are ineffective by virtue of being dogs that bark but do not bite.

Some researchers (Waytz et al. (2013) and Dungan et al. (2015)) argue that reporting an illegal or unethical behaviour involves a “tradeoff” the whistleblower or intended
whistleblower makes between fairness and loyalty. On the one hand, the person may feel he/she is “serving to right a wrong” (p. 129) and on the other he/she is making a “grave betrayal.” Dungan et al. (2015) have identified three factors contributing to solving the above dilemma:

- the personal factors relating to whether one is an extravert or has a non-conformity personality;
- the situational factor facilitating “disobedience to authority” or encouraging whistleblowing through safety measures protecting against retaliation; and
- one’s cultural or “individual’s perceived interdependence with their group” (p. 131) so that, if one feels part of the collective group he/she is likely to “overlook” an unethical or illegal wrongdoing.

Regarding the question who would be more likely to blow the whistle, Henik (2015) advocated that an organization’s response to wrongdoings “are critical contributors to whistleblowing decisions” (p. 449) and she classified whistleblowers into three categories: the “strategic moral guardians” who focus on accountability and are not driven by fear or retaliation and, thus, they blow the whistle, the “fed up vigilants” who are motivated by anger and revenge and blow the whistle, and the “servants of two masters” who struggle to uphold commitments and conflicts of value but choose to remain silent even though they may at times feel post-decisional shame. Reckers-Sauciuc and Lowe (2010) argued that people with the following characteristics are possibly blow the whistle on unethical and or illegal behaviour:

- with low level of happiness;
- high levels of arousal;
- low level of sadness; and
- low level of fear.

For Chao and Song (2015), however, whether one will blow the whistle or not is influenced by individual factors (such as perceived costs and motive for the act), organisational culture and social factors such as social values on transparency. Let us next consider correlates of the decision to blow the whistle.

Correlates of the decision to blow the whistle

As illustrated by Reckers-Sauciuc and Lowe (2010) and Dungan et al. (2015), a number of factors can influence one’s state of mind if he/she ought to blow the whistle. However, a comprehensive examination on whistleblowing should inevitably include the development of a profile of whistleblowers in an effort to know who they are and whether having the legal protection will encourage them to put fairness above loyalty. The present author agrees with Delmas (2015) that a complete legislative and regulatory framework is a determining factor and cannot be ignored, although legislation is often limited on its scope (i.e. who is covered and how far one is protected).

Lavena (2016:116) advocates that whistleblowing is considered a behaviour “occurring in public organizations that is linked to an organization’s environment, structure, culture, processes […] and people.” Lavena reported that public servants in the USA with a sense of norm-based and affective work motives are more likely to formally report wrongdoing, while those with an organisational culture characterised by an environment that is seen as open and respectful to employee voice, encourages cooperation, friendship and team-interest, fair treatment and trust in their supervisor were less likely to blow the whistle on a
wrongdoing (p. 128). Lavenna maintains, however, that professional values together with personal values and ethics will shape one’s actions and will overwrite the organisational characteristics.

Extensive research has been conducted to examine whether factors such as gender (Glaser, 2008; Miceli and Near, 1984), age (Bartels et al., 2014; Brennan and Kelly, 2007; Keenan, 2000) and tenure (Dworkin and Baucus, 1998; Near and Miceli, 1995) are associated with the decision to blow the whistle while Brink et al. (2017) have studied the personality traits and ethical position of whistleblowers.

Gender as a determining factor in whistle-blowing

Studies have established that men and women differ in terms of ethics, beliefs, values and behaviours (Ahmad et al., 2012:1633). Pomeroy (2005:12) suggests that women approach ethical concerns in a different manner than men. The differences are largely attributed to the conditioning learnt as children; thus, women are more likely to be whistleblowers because of the lessons they have learnt during childhood as men and women are brought up with different value systems (Hunt, 2010:4). Miceli and Near (1984) reported that men are more likely than women to blow the whistle, whereas Dworkin and Baucus (1998) concluded that women were more likely to be whistleblowers. One could argue that less women had senior or tenure positions in the early 1980s when Miceli and Near’s study was conducted; this explains the difference in the findings with Dworkin and Baucus. In 2002, three women, Cynthia Cooper of WorldCom, Colleen Rowley of the FBI and Sherron Watkins of Enron were selected as persons of the year for risking their jobs and their privacy, doing what they believed was morally and ethically correct and reporting corporate wrongdoing (Hunt, 2010). Despite their bravery, women often have a lot of fear and anxiety about whistleblowing, which may be as a result of gender differences or because they are not considered to be part of the informal men’s club and when a woman blows the whistle, she is often seen as insubordinate, whereas men are commended for the same action (Rappeport, 2008 cited by Hunt, 2010:4). However, there may be other reasons for the gender differences.

According to Alford (2001 cited by Hunt, 2010:4), women place their families over organizations. He submits that women are often more attached to family than to their organization and that as women often do not feel part of the men’s network, their outsider status gives them less to risk. This makes it easier for them to step forward and expose wrongdoing. This view is supported by Lacayo and Ripley (2002) who argued that gender does play a role and that women are more likely to blow the whistle because they are not as entrenched in the organization as men and because women are viewed as outsiders and feel less loyalty to the organisation. Furthermore, one could argue that if women feel more loyalty to their family than their organisation, they may fear losing their job and wish to avoid causing financial difficulties to their family members. Thus, they would not be willing to blow the whistle and one needs to look at whether this would change if there are dependents or other relevant variables such as financial rewards.

The preceding discussion shows that there is no conclusive evidence that one gender is more likely to be found among whistleblowers. This is perhaps not surprising because the studies concerned have failed to match whistleblowers on a number of variables when examining the relationship between two characteristics.

Because one’s age usually correlates with one’s seniority in an organization and the kind of family responsibilities one has, let us examine how these factors are associated with the decision to blow the whistle.
Relationship between whistleblowing and one’s age, seniority in an organization and whether tenured

Dworkin and Baucus (1998) put forward the view that age is not a determining factor in the decision to blow the whistle, while other researchers have reported that senior members in the organisation are said to have a greater understanding of the authority and control systems within their organisations and have minimal restraints to blowing the whistle compared to new members (Keenan, 2000). Older employees, of course, are usually in higher positions with tenure and greater prestige and more rights; thus, they have less risk of experiencing any retaliation. As Lee, Heilmann, and Near (2004:304) put it, “more powerful employees who observed wrongdoing have less to fear from their organization than do less powerful employees and are therefore more likely to blow the whistle”. It also worth noting that age provides that power.

An employee’s position in the organisation is another factor that impacts on the decision on where to blow the whistle. Employees who are fairly new may not be familiar with internal channels for reporting, they may not have established loyalty to the organisation, may have limited knowledge of the corporate culture, have less to lose as a result of their short tenure and therefore are more likely to opt for external channels. Tenure is another factor that may influence the decision to blow the whistle. According to Ahmad et al. (2012) “senior employees are said to be more likely to blow the whistle, because they are closer to retirement, and possess high levels of power and organisational commitment” (p. 1634). Tenured employees who have established strong ties with the organisation more often rely on internal channels for reporting wrongdoing (Dworkin and Baucus, 1998: 1284). Moreover, the employee’s level of education and training often determine whether a person will rely on internal reporting channels or external ones. Highly educated employees will more likely select internal reporting channels while employees of lower educational status often select external ones (Dworkin and Baucus, 1998:1283/4).

One thus could argue that the older one is, the more likely to have a senior or tenure position and the more likely they would be to blow the whistle than a younger employee who may not have tenure or may be at the middle or lower ranks of an organisation. Dungan et al. (2015:130) reported that the profile of whistleblowers is of a male, in tenure positions and increased education, who are extraverts, have a “proactive personality, who seek to influence and control their environment” and “possess personality traits that support non-conformity”.

Blowing the whistle externally or internally?

Employees report wrongdoing more often when they feel they are morally obliged to do so because of the nature of the wrongdoing (Dworkin and Baucus, 1998:1285). Collins (1989) suggested that the nature of the harm involved in the wrongful activity may influence the decision whether to report to internal or external channels. He goes on to argue that wrongdoing that involves physical harm involving health and safety may have serious consequences, be morally compelling to report and are thus more frequently reported. External channels of reporting are often used for blowing the whistle for serious harms. The least serious harm would include economic harm such as price fixing and loss or damage to property, while wrongdoing and psychological harm such as discrimination and sexual harassment, creating emotional stress or damage, are considered moderately serious harm. Reporters of wrongdoing resulting in less serious harm would more likely rely on internal reporting (Collins, 1989:8). Whistleblowers seem to be relying more on external channels when the harm from the wrongful activity results in harming the public (Dworkin and Baucus, 1998). In cases where the organisation does not deal with the disclosure or when the
whistleblower does not want to use internal channels for fear of reprisals or from a belief that
the organisation will not do anything, the probability of using external channels increases with
the type of harm stemming from the wrongful activity and the seriousness of the wrongdoing
the opportunity to report internally; however, if the whistleblower feels reporting externally is
warranted, he/she may proceed.

Gao and Brink (2017) concluded after having synthesised available research regarding
the determinants of whistleblowing intentions that there is a need for “future research to
promote reporting unethical behaviour” (p. 12). Focusing on the whistleblower profile issue
in terms of gender, age, seniority, family status, educational level and legal status of the
employer would enable the author to answer whether it is legislative protection that is the
solution one needs to blow the whistle or if there are exogenous factors impacting on this
decision. Note that, in this context, the public consultation report of the European
Commission (2017b) contains a study of whistleblowers but it did not develop a profile of
whistleblowers. Because whistle-blowing has been the subject of a European Directive to all
Member States, let us consider it.

European directive on whistleblowing
According to the European Commission (2017a) Special Eurobarometer on corruption and the
Commission's' 2017b public consultation, the vast majority of the respondents did not
report corruption despite having experienced or witnessed it. Responding to those findings,
impetus for the European Parliament to enact in September 2019 a European Directive to
protect those who blow the whistle was provided by:

- major wrongdoing inside corporations and the public sector, which caused not only
  financial catastrophes but also placed human life in danger; and
- the lack of cohesion amongst member States to legislate and protect the
  whistleblowers.

Article 26 of the Directive is asking European Union Member States to establish the
regulative and administrative provisions necessary to comply with the Directive by the 17
December 2021.

In fact, many nations have enacted legislation to protect the whistle-blower otherwise
they would not report incidents if they feel there will be retaliation or other consequences to
them or their working arrangements. While some countries (Australia, the UK, the USA)
have had a whistleblowing protection legislation for decades now, there are still recent cases
(Gobo case, Wahlquist, 2019) where protection applies only in theory but not in practice.

Interestingly, though the European Directive dropped the word ‘whistleblowing’ from its
title, it does not define the word, although it is used 58 times throughout the Directive and
the word was in the 2016 draft (European Parliament, 2016). Perhaps, the reason for this
omission is that “nobody likes a rat” (Reuben and Stephenson, 2013) or informers who
“betray colleagues and the organisations they work for” (Hersh, 2002:244). The Directive
applies to persons working in the private or public sector but is not limited to workers,
contractors, shareholders, members of the Board or suppliers. The Directive, as per Article 4,
applies to those who may disclose information on breaches acquired in a work-based
relationship that has been completed, has yet to commence; to volunteers, trainees, third
persons who are connected with the reporting person; and legal entities that the reporting
person owns or is connected with. Note that, in this context, according to Rustiarini and
Sunarsih (2017), legislative measures taken by mature markets do not necessarily apply to
developing or small countries. In such markets, whistleblowers may face serious repercussions, and there may be cases where they may even be threatened with a gun to keep quiet (Lumumba, 2020).

Likely effectiveness of the European directive: Legislative measures for European member states

At the time of writing this article, only nine EU countries provide comprehensive legal protection: France, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Malta, The Netherlands, Slovakia and Sweden. The European Directive appears to have addressed the issue of retaliation by asking the Member States to:

- provide legal advice, remedial action and protection in judicial proceedings to the whistleblower and his family;
- to revert the burden of proof so that it is up to the person taking action against a whistleblower to prove that they are not retaliated against the act of whistleblowing;
- for Member States to raise awareness of the whistleblower’s protection rules;
- establish internal channels and procedures for reporting and follow-up of reports;
- establish external reporting channels and to follow up on reports within in three months; and
- prohibit any form of retaliation and to provide for effective, proportionate and dissuasive penalties against those who take retaliation measures against whistleblowers.

In theory all these measures are sound and the European Council has done well to raise the bar. However, the issue remaining is whether Member States will act upon these allegations and what are the consequences for them if they do not. Furthermore, one may then ask what would be the judiciary’s stand in this.

While the Directive provides guidance to the person intending to disclose the wrongdoing, internally or externally, it expects the Member States to set up the reporting mechanism. Ironically, the European Parliament and Commission have not done so for the EU. It is expected from Member States to ensure that whistleblowers are protected against retaliation and are provided with legal advice, protection in judicial proceedings and remedial measures. Such measures are extended not only to the whistleblower but also to his/her family members who may have been retaliated against. It is apparent, therefore, that the Directive is expecting Member States to set up not only the legal but also the regulatory framework to ensure:

- whistleblowers are protected;
- reports are followed up timely within three months; and
- such entities are staffed with dedicated, trained staff.

However, what do we know about the process of deciding to blow the whistle in an EU Member State and the importance, if at all, of gender and age and legal protection – factors suggested in the literature? In view of the lack of research addressing this very question, the current author carried out an exploratory study in Cyprus to map out the whistleblowing decision making process and thus identify the whistle-blower profile.
Who would blow the whistle in Cyprus and with what preconditions?

At the time of writing, Cyprus does not have a whistleblower's protection legislation nor does it have a regulatory framework to protect whistleblowers but a Bill is pending in the parliament. Cyprus is an EU Member State that has been adversely affected by the financial crisis to the extent that two of its banks closed down in the last seven years and has had two major tragedies that has resulted in the loss of many human lives. Both those two calamities:

1. the Helios Plane Crash [4]; and
2. the Naval Base Mari Explosion [5] could have been averted if someone had blown the whistle.

The study focused on the dilemma that posed and how the survey participants responded or would have responded to the dilemma whether to blow the whistle or not and with what preconditions if any.

Study methodology

The literature review has revealed that there is a lack of research into actual or intended whistleblowers and findings reported concern primarily perceptions of what students or others believe are the determinants or are characteristics of whistleblowers. Similarly, the importance of legal protection for one’s decision to blow the whistle has not been addressed in relation to other relevant characteristics of people identified in the literature. Finally, there is no conclusive evidence that if there is legislation that protects those who report wrongdoings they will be protected against retaliation.

Unlike other researchers who have surveyed either MBA students (Pope and Lee, 2013) or employees (Chao and Song, 205, Lavena, 2016) and drew conclusions about the characteristics of or concerning whistleblowers, the original exploratory survey reported has focused on people in Cyprus who had blown the whistle or who, in hindsight, had information but chose not to disclose it even though it may have concerned specific illegal and unethical activities that have caused the death of innocent people and/or the financial catastrophe of the country.

The survey data was analysed to test the following four predictions suggested by the literature review that people are more likely to decide to blow the whistle:

- if they know they will have legal protection from retaliation;
- if they are males;
- if they are over 40 years of age; and
- if they hold a senior position in their organization.

Data collection and statistical analysis

Following media coverage and seminars organized on whistleblower’s protection, the present author set up a questionnaire on SurveyMonkey and invited members of the public to complete it if they had information on illegal or unethical behaviour and had disclosed it or had chosen not to disclose it. A total of 74 people responded to the survey. Thus, the researcher assumed that all those who made an effort to voluntarily complete the questionnaire by visiting the website following the publicity in the media belonged to the category of people invited to participate in the study.

Descriptive and inferential analysis are performed. To measure the association between for categorical variables (i.e. Gender and Blowing the whistle), $X^2$ tests were used when the
number of levels were more than 2 (i.e. Education level) and Fisher’s test was used when both of the variables under examination had only 2 levels (i.e. Employer legal Status (Private vs Public) and “Gender”).

The strength of the association is measured using the $\varphi$ coefficient (in the case of a $2 \times 2$ association) and Cramer’s V $[6]$ (in the case of more levels). $\Phi$ or Cramer’s V levels of around 0.2 is considered a low effect size, around 0.5 as a moderate effect and around 0.7 as a strong effect David and Sutton (2011).

The assumption of minimum expected cell values ($n = 5$) for $X^2$ tests were considered; when violated, the effect size statistic ($\varphi$ or Cramer’s V) was given the focus. When no significant results occurred, violation of the assumption was not considered. Nevertheless, all the associations explored are reported with the associated effect size because of the low sample size.

A logistic regression was carried out to assess how the demographics of the respondents differentiate the way they answered question 20 (whether information from whistle blowers would have been used by the authorities during the major scandals involving the financial/banking crash, Helios Plane Crash and Mari Naval explosion).

Findings
Of those surveyed ($N = 74$), two thirds (65%) admitted to having had some illegal or unethical information to disclose and as many (65%) felt the need to blow the whistle. Of those who felt the need, only about half (48%) went ahead and blew the whistle. The whistleblowers were likely to be:

- male (82 %) (in agreement with Miceli and Near, 1984);
- who hold a senior position in their organization (50 %), (Ahmad et al., 2012); and
- aged 46–55 years (in disagreement with Dworkin and Baucus, 1998 but providing support for Keenan, 2000 and Lee et al., 2004).

The survey also reported that whistleblowers were more likely to be working in the private rather than the public sector and to hold a professional qualification (normally obtained after a bachelor’s degree), i.e. to be highly educated, in support of Dworkin and Baucus, 1998). The results of the survey confirm the predictions (b), (c) and (d) noted above, i.e. that whistleblowers are more likely to be males, over 40 years of age and to hold a senior position in their organization.

Regarding the likely gender of whistleblowers, it was found that married males were more likely to blow the whistle irrespective of whether they had dependents (minor children (36.4%), adult children (31.8%)) or no dependents (22.7%). The last finding contradicts Alford (2001) and Lacayo and Ripley (2002). The findings obtained regarding the gender of the likely whistle-blower in Cyprus may well be attributable to such males having less fear and anxiety about blowing the whistle and worry less about retaliation than females and/or whether, in contrast to Alford (2001), such males put their organization over their families. Future research could throw light on this issue.

Interestingly, most (71%) of those that did not blow the whistle felt that even if they had blown the whistle, nothing would have come of it simply because the authorities would not have acted upon the information, an issue raised by Worth (2013). Surprisingly, in hindsight and knowing that the non-disclosure caused the death of some people or the financial catastrophe in the country, 65% admitted that they still would not disclose the information if the clock was turned back. The respondents were asked if a financial incentive of some sort would have “encouraged” them to report; however, the vast majority (81%) answered in
the negative. However, confirming prediction that one is more likely to blow the whistle if they know they will enjoy legal protection from retaliation, for 75% immunity from prosecution and protection provided for by legislation would have encouraged them to report. Interestingly, the majority (89%) admitted that if there had been a legal obligation to disclose an unethical or illegal act and failure to do so would have rendered them criminally liable, then they would have blown the whistle. Thus, the findings have confirmed the importance of there being legislation criminalizing failure to blow the whistle and to protect whistleblowers.

The survey comprised both respondents who had actually blown the whistle and others could have been whistleblowers. The profile of those who have actually blown the whistle is a male (especially a married male), highly educated, aged 46-55 years holding a senior position in their organization and working in the private sector.

When the researcher explored the demographic characteristics of the persons who had felt the need but did not blow the whistle, a moderate effect was found for the type of dependents one has ($p = 0.2; \varphi = 0.365$). Those who had “adult children” or “no dependents,” even in hindsight when they realized the dire consequences of their inaction at the time, were less likely to want to report the illegal or unethical act leading to corruption. The same applies ($p = 0.5; \varphi = 0.327$) for most respondents (8 out 10) in the lower levels of hierarchy (employee or lower management). Thus, one could argue that those with dependents and holding a low position in their organization would be unlikely to blow the whistle.

Further analysis of the data involving respondents who had felt the need to blow the whistle, revealed significant differences between some demographic characteristics of those who said they would have gone ahead and blown the whistle and those who said they would have refrained. More specifically, a moderate effect ($p = 0.101; \text{Cramer's } \varphi = 0.36$) was found for age insofar as those younger than 36 years of age who felt the need to blow the whistle, did not proceed to report it (82%) whereas the older ones eventually blew the whistle. Moreover, females who had felt the need to blow the whistle on a wrong doing were more likely (71%) to proceed and do so than males (47%) ($p = 0.11; \varphi = 0.22$). It is noted, however, that what was measured with those respondents was a statement of intention and one needs to be aware of the possibility of someone saying they would have gone ahead and blown the whistle because it is a socially desirable thing to do.

Conclusions and discussion

The survey reported found that male employees who are married, are highly educated, are aged 46-55 years hold senior positions in their organizations and work in the private sector were significantly more likely to have actually blown the whistle and were not motivated by financial rewards in so doing. The study has documented the need for the existence of legislation, making it a criminal offence not to blow the whistle and also legislative measures that protect whistleblowers from retaliation such as being dismissed by their employer. However, as Worth (2013) has rightly argued, it is not enough to legislate and protect whistleblowers unless people believe that the authorities shall act upon the information they receive from a whistle-blower.

One limitation of the study is the sample size. Future research should try to replicate the findings with a large sample of respondents. However, to some extent, the small size of the sample is compensated by the fact the respondents included both actual whistleblowers and individuals who had information and had considered blowing the whistle and were thus able to reflect on their dilemma. Finally, future research should also investigate the effectiveness of the reporting mechanisms expected to be set up by European Union Member States in the wake of the European Directive as well as whether the existence of
financial rewards would significantly impact on people’s decision to blow the whistle in different cases involving different degrees of harm.

Notes


3. In England it is the Employment Rights Act 1996 (as amended by the Public Interest disclosure Act 1998) which provides the right for a worker to take a case to an employment tribunal if they have been victimised at work or they have lost their job because they have ‘blown the whistle’.

4. On the 14th of August, 2005 a Helios Airways Boeing 737-300 which departed from Larnaca, Cyprus, scheduled to fly to Prague via Athens, crashed in the area of Grammatikos, Attika, Greece, resulting in the death of the 121 people on board the aircraft. This tragic accident was the deadliest aviation disaster in Greece to date, and the death of 121 persons from a very small community had a devastating impact on everyone in Cyprus and Greece. There was a great demand from both the public and the media to identify those responsible and to hold them accountable, particularly in light of the general feeling that there would be a cover-up as there were economic and political interests at stake (Michaelides-Mateou & Mateou, 2010: 87; Parikiaki; 2013)

5. On July 11, 2011, 98 containers containing dangerous explosive which were confiscated by Cyprus from Iran en route to Syria in January 2009 and kept at the Mari Naval base for two and a half years exploded resulting in the tragic loss of life with the death of 13 persons and tremendous economic damage. Many neighbouring buildings were damaged and the island’s largest power station which was located next to the military base was severely damaged resulting in power cuts and a steep increase in the price of electricity. Experts’ testimony showed that the containers should have been stored in military warehouses with a distance of 60 to 70 meters between each container, in an area in which they were not exposed to sun or humidity and not packed on top of one another, in an open area under the sun as they had been. The manner in which the containers were kept in storage in the military base did not conform to the General Department of the National Guard’s (FEF4) required standards and safety regulation, and this was a key factor that contributed to the explosion. One question remaining to be answered is why didn’t anyone blow the whistle? Psilides C (2014) Two sentenced for Mari released from jail. http://cyprus-mail.com/2014/12/15/two-sentenced-for-mari-released-from-jail/ (accessed 24/1/ 2015); Cyprus Criminal court decision: case 24627/08, 21 Dec 2011 for the Naval explosion.


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Further reading


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