A Social-Cognitive Approach to Whistleblowing: The Effects of Lay Theories

Running Head: A Social-Cognitive Approach to Whistleblowing

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ABSTRACT

Although whistleblowing often results in positive consequences for the public-at-large, there are sometimes severe negative consequences for the whistleblowers and the firms that employ them. These consequences of whistleblowing, both positive and negative, have led a number of researchers to focus on the circumstances of whistleblowing (Roloff and Paulson, 2001). We extend this stream of research by proposing a model of how people use lay theories to interpret the behavior of others and the extent to which this interpretation leads them to blow-the-whistle. Additionally, we offer a set of research propositions for future research to test our model.

Whistleblowing involves the disclosure of perceived wrongdoing to persons inside or outside the firm (Trevino and Victor, 1992). In either case, the decision to blow the whistle is a moral choice (Bouville, 2008). While whistleblowing often serves the public interest by exposing harmful, illegal or unjust activities in an organization, it also has negative consequences for the firm and often for the whistleblower (Dandekar, 1990; Lachman, 2008; Street, 1995; Wilmont, 2000). Because of these effects of whistleblowing, the study of its antecedents is an important area of ethics research (Street, 1995).

Whistleblowing in both the public and private sector is often necessary to expose massive corruption, insufficient patient care, job discrimination, unsafe products, and widespread sexual harassment (Dandekar, 1990; Lachman, 2008; Miceli, Near, and Schwenk, 1991). Despite the positive aspects of whistleblowing, few whistleblowers are highly regarded by the public and many suffer negative consequences with the firms they have exposed (HR Focus, 2006, Lachman 2008; Rehg, Miceli, Near, and Van Scotter 2008, van Es and Smit, 2003). In fact, managers often view whistleblowers as either disgruntled employees or loners who are not team players. To others, whistleblowers are heroes (Schooner, 2002).

External whistleblowing also has far-reaching effects for the firm. These include damage to the reputation of the firm, legal action against the firm (Laczniak and Murphy, 1991), lessened confidence in management by stockholders, and reduced market capitalization (Davidson and Worrell, 1988). Additionally, the actions of a whistleblower may disclose proprietary information about the firm. As observed with Enron and WorldCom, whistleblowing can result in civil and criminal penalties for management and eventual collapse of the firm (Rufus, 2004).

When one considers that a single act of whistleblowing can have far reaching effects for individuals, organizations, and the public at large, it stands to reason that researchers in organizational studies are interested in the circumstances that lead to whistleblowing. Thus, even before Sherron Watkins of Enron and Cynthia Cooper of WorldCom blew the whistle on their respective organizations, researchers showed interest what conditions are necessary for whistleblowers to take action. What factors lead one person to tell on his or her firm while another person, observing the same behavior, does not (Miceli, 2004)? This question has practical significance for organizations. In a 2006 survey by *HR Focus*, fifty-two percent of employees surveyed who witnessed an unethical act in the workplace did not report it. Thirty-six percent of those who witnessed an unethical act witnessed more than one (HR Focus, 2006).

In spite of likely negative consequences, there are those who report wrongdoing within the organization and not all appear to be simply disgruntled or angry employees (Heisler, 2002). Reasons to blow the whistle may be because of a response to professional standards (Shawver and Clements, 2008; Wilmont, 2008), issues concerning organizational justice (Gundlach, Douglas and Martinko, 2003), or a belief that one’s life is better lived if one places virtue above the pursuit of wealth (Bragues, 2006).

To address the question of why some report unethical acts and others do not, researchers have studied a variety of possible causes of whistleblowing. This paper extends this line of research by examining the effect of lay theories, also known as implicit personality theories, on the circumstances necessary for some to blow the whistle.

Research concerning the causes of whistleblowing is divided between organizational/contextual and individual factors. Organizational/contextual factors include organizational structure (King, 1999), perceived responsiveness of the organization to complaint (Barnett, Cochran and Taylor 1993), culture (Zhuang, Thomas, and Miller, 2005) and the influence of group norms (Trevino and Victor, 1992), while individual factors studied include locus of control (Miceli and Near, 1985), religious values (Barnett, Bass, and Brown, 2000), cognitive moral development and organizational commitment (Street, 1995), personality traits (Miceli, Van Scotter, Near, and Rehg, 2001), and mood (Curtis, 2006). Despite this wealth of research, the ability to consistently predict whistleblowing remains elusive (Miceli and Near, 1985).

Another interesting area of research on why people choose to blow the whistle involves the cognitive processes involved in the decision (e.g., Gundlach et al., 2003). More recently, Henik (2008) proposed that whistleblowing involves both “hot” and “cold” cognitions. Hot cognitions are value conflicts and emotions while cold cognitions are similar to a cost-benefit analysis. Building on this tradition, our model proposes that it is the individual’s interpretation of the behavioral context that determines the tendency to blow the whistle. This social-cognitive approach has a rich history in the social psychology literature as will be outlined below.

As noted above, many more people observe unethical acts in the workplace than report them. Thus, this paper outlines a research agenda to examine the different cognitive processes of those who blow the whistle and those who choose not to blow the whistle when observing the same unethical act. Specifically, we propose to examine how people interpret the behavior of others in a social-moral context, and how this interpretation may lead one individual to take action while another individual does not. Additionally, we will propose that different social-cognitive processes affect the sanctions desired for the perceived unethical behavior.

The paper is organized as follows: First, we will define whistleblowing for purposes of our model and discuss the whistleblowing process. Second, we will outline the concept of lay theories, citing the relevant literature. Third, we will explain how lay theories are related to moral judgment. Fourth, we will demonstrate the application of lay theories to whistleblowing. Finally, we will propose a set of research propositions that can be used to empirically test our model.

**Whistleblowing**

Ethical dilemmas for managers often arise when different stakeholder groups have conflicting interests. Similarly, whistle-blowers are faced with the dilemma of maintaining the firm’s confidentiality or exposing action that could affect others (e.g., stockholders, communities, government entities and/or other employees). Whistleblowing may be internal or external (Trevino and Victor, 1992). That is, the whistle-blower may go outside the firm (e.g., to the press) to report wrongdoing or may report to someone inside the firm who is in a position to halt the practice. In either case, the whistle-blower is acting outside of his or her group and reports on people whose trust he or she has gained. As Jubb (1999) states, “Whistle-blowers disclose information that others seek to keep private” (p. 78). For the purposes of this paper, we define whistleblowing as the act of going outside one’s group to report another group member’s misconduct (Trevino and Victor, 1992).

Whistleblowing consists of five stages. First, there is a trigger event: the potential whistle-blower observes behavior he or she considers transgressive. Second, the individual decides if the trigger event warrants reporting the observed behavior either internally or externally. Third, the whistle-blower takes action. Fourth the organization responds. Fifth and finally, the whistle-blower assesses the firm’s response (Henik, 2008). Our analysis focuses on stages one, two, and five – the motivation to blow the whistle, the cognitive processes involved in the decision, and the assessment of the imposed sanction on the wrongdoer by the organization.

**Lay Theories**

The idea that people have a personally constructed world has a rich history in the psychology literature (Kelly, 1955; Osgood, 1962). In the latter half of the last century, the study of social cognition added to our understanding of how individuals interact with their environment and with others based on how they assign meaning to the events they experience (Bandura, 1986; Dweck and Leggett, 1988; Markus, 1977). A sub-set of this research led by Carol Dweck and her colleagues (e.g., Dweck and Leggett, 1988; Levy and Dweck, 1998; Molden and Dweck, 2006) concerns the meanings single individuals give to their experiences and how these meanings determine feelings, cognition, and behavior (Molden and Dweck, 2006). We argue that this social-cognitive approach determines, at least in part, one’s decision to blow the whistle.

The concept employed here is that of *lay theories*, which are basic assumptions people hold about themselves and others. Lay theories determine whether people believe that certain personal attributes (e.g., intelligence or morality) are fixed and unchangeable or dynamic and malleable (Molden and Dweck, 2006). An assumption of fixed traits is known as an *entity* theory, while the belief that traits are malleable and changeable is referred to as an *incremental* theory (Dweck and Leggett, 1988; Levy and Dweck, 1998).

This concept can be illustrated with an example. Lay theories are mechanisms used by people to make sense of the behaviors and actions of themselves and others. Thus, suppose John makes a statement that is not true. People with an entity theory will assign the trait of ‘liar’ to John and will be skeptical of anything else said by him. It is important to note what has happened here. That John has said something untrue is concrete and undisputed. However, the label of ‘liar’ is abstract and transforms John into the object of judgment (Dweck, Hong, and Chiu, 1993). Three changes in cognitive processes take place when people move from the concrete to the abstract. First, the observed behavior is decontextualized; that is, the situation is not relevant, and future contextual information will be ignored or discounted. Second, the decision to move to the abstract term ‘liar’ is to base subsequent judgments about John on that particular dispositional trait. Finally, the label of ‘liar’ helps the entity theorist to predict John’s future behavior (Dweck et al., 1993).

In contrast, people with an incremental lay theory will not be as quick to judge and will wait for further evidence before applying any labels (Chiu, Hong, and Dweck 1997). Thus, the incremental theorist accepts the concrete fact of a false statement but is unwilling to move to the abstract without more evidence (Gervey, Chiu, Hong and Dweck, 1999). As subsequent statements prove to be true, the incremental theorist will believe that the other person has quit lying, did not understand that the first statement was false, or chose the best alternative in a bad situation. In all of these instances, the incremental theorist has attributed the change to the person and/or the context while the entity theorist ignores the situational context and focuses on the person’s dispositional traits. Thus, one’s lay theory is an important aspect of one’s ability to make sense of the social world and to determine our action toward others (Dweck and Leggett, 1988).

Lay theories are implicit in the sense that they are not articulated by individuals. This is in spite of their sophistication and importance to individuals as frameworks for predicting and understanding the social environment. Thus, while most people employ lay theories in social situations, they are not consciously aware of the process (Dweck, Chiu, and Hong, 1995; Kelly 1955; Miller, Burgoon, and Hall, 2007).

To summarize, people with an entity theory have a trait focus and assess what they believe to be stable, predictable, and measurable personality traits. On the other hand, people with an incremental theory have more of a process focus and judge people’s actions in terms of effort and social context (Levy and Dweck, 1998).

It is important to note that people’s lay theories fall along a continuum that reflects the degree to which people believe human traits are variable. Yet, lay theory researchers have parsimoniously dichotomized people as either entity or incremental theorists (e.g., Dweck and Leggett, 1988; Dweck, et al., 1995). That is, much of the research on lay theories has divided the sample respondents into two groups holding relatively strong polar positions on the lay theory continuum. However, at least two empirical studies have treated lay theory as a continuous variable (Button, Mathieu, and Zajac 1996; Gervey, et al., 1999) with significant results.

In any discussion of lay theories, several features of the concept need to be noted. First, most people hold either an entity or incremental theory. Second, people hold different theories in different situations. For example, a person may be an entity theorist in regard to intelligence but an incremental theorist in regard to morality. Third, while strongly held, lay theories can be induced (Dweck, 1999). That is, people can be primed to accept either an entity or incremental theory in a particular situation. For example, in a study of performance evaluations by Heslin, Latham and VandeWalle (2005), entity theorist managers were assigned a training program designed to help them adopt an incremental theory in a work situation. After training these managers became more incremental in their evaluation process and maintained the incremental theory for a six-week period.

Finally, lay theories are not associated with other factors that may affect the way people interpret their environment. In a report of the discriminant validity of the lay theories scale, Dweck et al., (1993) report that the measurement is “unrelated to measures of cognitive ability, confidence in intellectual ability, self-esteem, optimism or confidence in other people and the world, social-political attitudes such as authoritarianism, and political conservatism or liberalism” (p. 273). Molden and Dweck (2006) also report that lay theories are not related to age, sex, or educational level.

There is also adequate empirical evidence of the differences in perception of people who hold entity and incremental theories. Levy, Stroessner, and Dweck (1998) found that people who held an entity theory were more likely to use stereotypical trait judgments of ethnic and occupational groups. Further, entity theorists were more likely than incremental theorists to make extreme trait judgments of these groups.

Wren and Maurer (2004) found that older workers with an entity theory believed they could not control their decline in intelligence, whereas older workers with an incremental theory did not believe that age-related decline in intelligence and ability was inevitable.

In a study that applied lay theories directly to a business environment, Heslin et al., (2005) found that entity managers were more likely than incremental managers to base employee evaluations on initial observations of behavior while discounting subsequent performance. This was true for both good and bad performance. It was empirically confirmed in a field study that entity theorists are more likely to make trait judgments based on limited information than are incremental theorists (Chiu, Dweck, Tong, and Fu, 1997). Further, Heslin, VandeWalle, and Latham (2006) found that incremental theorists, believing people can change, were more inclined to invest time and effort to help others improve their behavior than were incremental theorists.

This willingness to make trait judgments based on limited information is a key aspect of lay dispositionism or the use of use of traits to predict the behavior of others in a social situation (Chiu, et al., 1997). Specifically, entity theorists believe that traits predict the future behavior of individuals regardless of the situation while incremental theorists believe traits are less predictive of behavior than are situational factors and the actor’s goals and intentions. Particularly relevant to this paper, Chiu, et al., (1997) found that entity theorists were willing to determine a person’s moral character from a single observed behavior. Interestingly, according to entity theorists in this study, the observed behavior predicted the person’s character whether the behavior was “clearly positive, clearly negative, or only weakly valenced” (p. 25). That is, behavior does not have to be extreme for entity theorists to use is as a basis for predicting future behavior.

Building on the concept that entity theorists are more likely than incremental theorists to make global moral inferences from limited information, Gervey, et al., (1999) studied the extent to which entity and incremental theorists considered dispositional information in determining the guilt or innocence of someone accused of murder. Specifically, the “respectability” of the defendant (manipulated in the study) determined, in part, the guilt or innocence of the defendant for entity theorists but not for incremental theorists. When asking for more information before reaching a verdict, entity theorists evidenced lay dispositionism by requesting dispositional information significantly more than did incremental theorists.

Next, we will discuss the relationship of lay theories to morality.

Specifically, we will cite experimental support for different interpretations by entity and incremental theorists of the moral character of others.

**Lay Theories and Conceptions of Moral Character**

People are the agents of moral action. When we observe the moral actions of others, our beliefs about these people and their actions have implications. Entity theorists see people as agents of moral action with fixed natures, while incremental theorists believe character can be shaped.

Erdley and Dweck (1993) studied the role of lay theories and attributions of moral character in children. They found that children with an entity theory were more likely to see traits as more indicative of a person’s moral character than were incremental theorists. These moral traits were predictive of future behavior for entity theorists while children with an incremental theory were less likely to use initially observed behavior to commit themselves to a position on the person’s character. Further, children with an entity theory desired more severe punishment for someone who committed a transgression than were children with an incremental theory.

In a series of experiments, Chiu et al. (1997) studied the differences between the moral belief systems of adult entity and incremental theorists. They also studied the differences between the two groups’ tolerance for deviant behavior, the severity of the sanctions they imposed for such behavior, and the differences between entity and incremental theorists in their moral beliefs. Specifically, they examined differences in the moral belief systems of the two groups, their tolerance for deviant behavior, and the severity of sanctions they imposed for undesirable behavior. Their findings are discussed below and are directly applicable to whistleblowing.

In their first study, Chiu et al. (1997) found that people who are entity theorists are more concerned about following rules and performing duties than are incremental theorists. That is, in judging the morality of others, the entity theorist is concerned that the moral agent has carried out “the duties prescribed by the existing moral order” (p. 924).

In contrast, incremental theorists see moral character as more malleable and do not see the authority of the existing moral order as absolute. Thus, for the incremental theorist, moral character is based on human rights (Chiu et al., 1997). Further, incremental theorists do not see the existing social-moral order as having authority over individual moral agents. Unlike the entity theorist who defends the social-moral order as necessary for preserving correct behavior, incremental theorists are more concerned about whether current codes of conduct “foster and protect individual rights” (Chiu, et al., 1997, p. 938).

Empirical research also indicates that entity theorists have a more negative response to offensive social situations than do incremental theorists. Miller, et al. (2007), in an experimental setting, found that entity theorists responded to the transgressive behavior of others with much more negative emotion than did incremental theorists. They concluded that people with an entity theory of moral character “should be more likely to experience and express greater levels of negative affect in problematic social situations than those primed to rely more on situational clues” (p. 828).

Conceptually, this conclusion makes sense. When an entity theorists observe the behavior of someone, they attribute the behavior to dispositional traits of the actor, and, therefore, as internal and controllable. Incremental theorists, in contrast, will likely attribute an initial unethical act to the situation. Thus, entity theorists will express more anger because they hold the actor responsible. Incremental theorists will express less anger because they take the situation into account (Miller et al., 2007).

To summarize, entity theorists judge the moral character of others to the extent that they perform their duties as prescribed by moral authority. Incremental theorists, on the other hand, judge moral character on one’s willingness to adhere to universally acceptable human rights principles (e.g., equal employment opportunity).

In additional experiments, Chiu et al. (1997) found that entity theorists were less tolerant of behavior that deviated from one’s duties than were incremental theorists. Entity theorists were also more prepared to sanction undesirable behavior, were more likely to enforce their concept of morality with punishment, and did not view the performance of one’s duties as deserving of reward. Incremental theorists were less concerned about duties and evaluated the existing code of conduct in terms of its ability to protect individual rights.

Other studies have supported the conclusions of Chiu et al. (1997). For example, Miller et al., (2007) found that entity theorists responded to the transgressive behavior of others with much more negative emotion than did incremental theorists. Further, they found that entity theorists believed the deviant behavior to be a trait or personality characteristic of the moral agent, while incremental theorists assigned more importance to situational factors.

Entity and incremental theorists also differ in their approach to dealing with those who participate in deviant behavior. Research indicates that entity theorists are interested in punishment or retribution while incremental theorists place more emphasis on education and rehabilitation (Dweck 1999; Gervey, et al. 1999). Even when the behavior is not deviant but merely fails to meet an acceptable standard, entity theorists are less forgiving than incremental theorists.

Thus, according to several studies, entity theorists are less tolerant of behavior that deviates from performing one’s duties than are incremental theorists. Further, they react more negatively, believe the behavior is a fixed characteristic of the actor, and desire more punishment than do incremental theorists. In the following section, we will apply these findings to whistleblowing and develop a set of research propositions that can be used to test our theory.

**Lay Theories and Whistleblowing**

The central question of this paper is the one asked by Miceli (2004) and implied in the 2006 *HR Focus* survey: what factors lead one person report wrongdoing within the firm while another person, observing the same behavior, does not? While many factors appear to interact to influence whistleblowing, we propose that lay theories are, at least in part, influence the actions of the whistleblower.

The discussion of lay theories noted the differences between the social-moral judgment processes of entity and incremental theorists. It was also pointed out that although each may interpret the world in a different manner, both entity and incremental theorists are equally sensitive to procedural and distributive justice (Chiu, et al., 1997) and are capable of making evidence-based socially desirable decisions (Gervey, et al., 1999). Therefore, it is logical to assume that both entity and incremental theorists may find it necessary to report wrongdoing within the firm.

However, the differences between the two may moderate the likelihood of blowing the whistle. For example, entity theorists are less tolerant of deviance while incremental theorists believe people’s individual morality continually develops (Chiu, et al., 1997). Specifically, entity theorists are more concerned with violations of duty than are incremental theorists whose concerns focus on individual rights.

Additionally, as previously noted, entity theorists attribute unethical acts to the actors and, thus, consider the acts controllable and intentional. Incremental theorists are more likely to attribute unethical acts to the situation and hold the actor less accountable for the behavior (Miller, et al., 2007). Finally, entity theorists are more likely to impose punishment for transgressions in order to restore the moral order than are incremental theorists who believe people can be improved through education and rehabilitation (Chiu, et al. 1997; Gervey, et al., 1999).

Thus, because entity theorists are more concerned about violations of duty and incremental theorists are more concerned about violations of human rights, we propose:

P1: Entity theorists are more likely to blow-the-whistle than incremental theorist when the observed unethical behavior is a violation of duty.

P2: Incremental theorists are more likely to blow-the whistle than entity theorists when the observed unethical behavior violate human rights.

As previously noted, entity theorists often attribute behavior to the dispositional trait of the actor. That is, the actor is judged responsible for the act. It is proposed that, to the extent to which this attribution is true, it moderates the decision to blow the whistle. Thus,

P3: Entity theorists are more likely to blow-the-whistle if they attribute the unethical behavior of others to internal and controllable factors.

Incremental theorists, in contrast, will likely consider the commission of an unethical act within the situational context of the act. Therefore,

P4: Incremental theorists are less likely to blow-the-whistle if they attribute the unethical behavior to the situation or the context in which the behavior takes place.

As explained above, stage 5 of the whistleblowing process involves the whistleblower’s assessment of the organizations response to the unethical act (Henik 2008). Previous empirical work has shown that entity theorists are more interested in vengeance and punishment for transgressive behavior, while incremental theorists emphasize education and rehabilitation (Chiu et al., 1997; Miller et al., 2007). Therefore, we propose the following:

P5: Entity theorists who blow the whistle desire stronger punishment for the wrongdoer

than do incremental theorists.

P6: Incremental theorists who blow the whistle desire more education and rehabilitation

than do entity theorists.

**Discussion**

The purpose of this paper was to address Miceli’s (2004) question about why, when two people observe the same unethical behavior, does one report the wrongdoing while the other does not? Greenberg and Weithoff (2001) ask a similar question: “Are some individuals more sensitive to justice than others?” (p. 276). The contribution of this paper has been to introduce lay theories as a possible element in the whistleblowing process. Specifically, we propose that one’s lay theory influences both the circumstances for blowing-the-whistle and the desired consequences for the person who committed the unethical act.

The question posed by Miceli (2004) generated a large amount of research on organizational, cultural, and individual antecedents to whistleblowing. As noted by Roloff and Paulson (2001), the focus of whistleblowing research is on the antecedents and consequences of the whistleblowing act. We do not propose that lay theories are the only factors affecting whistleblowing but one of many factors that interact to cause a person to report wrongdoing. This paper takes the first step by proposing how lay theories work in isolation. Future researchers, in addition to empirically testing our assumptions, may wish to concentrate more on how other individual and organizational factors interact to influence whistleblowing.

The interaction of organizational justice with individual factors is also of interest to academics (Greenberg and Weithoff, 2001; Wilmont, 2008). If, as noted by Plaks, et al. (2005), entity and incremental theorists have the same beliefs about procedural and distributive justice, is there another justice component such as interactional justice or trust that interacts with lay theories to encourage or discourage whistleblowing?

Further, Greenberg and Weithoff (2001) note that while individual differences play a role in how people assess organizational justice, it is a complex process as to how people perceive and respond to their social environment. Lay theory research may provide part of the answer about how the process evolves.

This exploration of the lay theory concept and whistleblowing has practical implications as well. Heslin et al. (2005; 2006) have shown that lay theories affect the perceptions of individual managers and that lay theories can be manipulated. Thus, managers are capable of using this tool to aid in understanding the motivations and behavior of employees. For example, structuring of a firm’s corporate culture so that expected duties and obligations support individual rights should help put entity and incremental theorists in the same frame of mind concerning unethical acts.

The rich tradition of the social-cognitive approach to motivation has a great deal to offer the ethics literature, and this paper is intended as a step in that direction.

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