

Whistleblowers fan winds of change in society

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OVER the past 20 years, I have studied hundreds of cases in which individuals have spoken out about a social issue or alleged wrongdoing and, as a consequence, come under attack. For many years my special interest was scientists who spoke out, for example about the hazards of pesticides, nuclear power or fluoridation. Many were penalised, for example, by being ostracised, harassed, having research grants withdrawn, reprimanded, demoted, transferred, dismissed and blacklisted.

Investigating such cases soon opens the door to similar cases of suppression of dissent in other fields. In the past several years, as president of Whistleblowers Australia, I've talked to whistleblowers in the public service, police, health system, education, private enterprise, media and churches, among others.

I've learned an enormous amount from others in Whistleblowers Australia, such as Cynthia Kardell, Jean Lennane, Isla MacGregor and Lesley Pinson. However, as an academic, I sometimes think it would be nice if our shared insights could be tested in scholarly fashion.

Let me give one example. Talking to whistleblowers, it becomes clear that they frequently feel let down by official channels, whether it is internal grievance procedures, ombudsmen, professional associations, anticorruption bodies, courts or parliament.

Whistleblowers typically are conscientious employees who believe in the system. That's why they speak out, after all: they expect the problem to be dealt with. They are thus deeply shocked when the response of managers is to attack them rather than investigate their complaints. Still believing in the system, they turn to other official channels, only to find, in most cases, that they are not helped and sometimes are made worse off. Jean Lennane says the only thing you can rely on about official channels is that they almost never work.

If true, this is a vital insight. Many whistleblowers spend years of effort and tens of thousands of dollars pursuing their cases through official channels. Might they be wiser to try something else?

But is there social science backing for this point? Not much. The best work in Australia, and perhaps anywhere else, dealing with the effectiveness of official channels is by Dr William De Maria of the University of Queensland. In his careful survey, whistleblowers reported on the consequences of trying various official channels. The result: whistleblowers reported being helped less than one out of ten times, and in many cases they said they were worse off. This is an important finding that deserves further testing.

But which types of agencies are most helpful? Which kinds of cases are most likely to gain official support? What sorts of approaches to

official bodies are best? Does whistleblower legislation ever help?

It is a common experience that publicity is advantageous to whistleblowers, but to my knowledge, no one has tested this in a rigorous way.

Research on whistleblowing is fraught with difficulties. First, methodological problems abound. Defining whistleblowing is a major task in itself. How, for example, is it to be distinguished from routine reporting on the job or from social activism?

Then there's the problem of finding whistleblowers and documenting their cases. Is it enough to rely on self-reports, as in De Maria's study, or is it necessary to hear both sides and obtain evidence?

Second, there are ethical issues. Cases often involve allegations of poor performance, corruption and discrimination. Gaining access to information and reporting it can raise ethical challenges due to issues of privacy, confidentiality and potential obligations on the researcher to report or keep quiet about wrongdoing.

Third, many whistleblowing cases are incredibly complicated, with mounds of material and all sorts of side issues. A comprehensive treatment of a single case may require book-length treatment, and indeed there are quite a few such books. The complexities can be daunting to investigators.

Fourth, there are legal obstacles. Defamation threats abound in many

whistleblowing cases. Researchers and publishers can easily be inhibited.

Fifth, there are epistemological problems. Even to label a case as "whistleblowing" is to impose a theoretical framework with an associated value judgement, and can be seen as a form of advocacy. Similarly, to interpret behaviour as ostracism, harassment or dismissal may appear to endorse a particular framework, something that is contrary to the postmodernist sensibility.

Certainly I have found that many referees of a constructivist orientation are quite critical of my framework dealing with "suppression of dissent", demanding a "thick" description and a symmetrical approach. High standards are expected – so high that constructivists themselves seem never to deal with these sorts of cases.

Sixth is the problem that whistleblowers often challenge powerful individuals and institutions. They may be exposing corruption, or toleration of corruption, among top managers, politicians or leading professionals.

Academics who don't want to offend potential research patrons may decide that certain cases are too risky to study. The upshot is that relatively few academics study whistleblowing.

One way to redress this research gap is for legislators to mandate independent research on the effectiveness of official bodies, such as police, ombudsmen or anti-corruption

commissions, whenever they are established or reviewed. How should those interested in researching whistleblowing proceed?

One way to start is to read about whistleblowing cases and talk to whistleblowers (and their employers), and then analyse this information using one's own theoretical framework – taken from history, linguistics, education, professional ethics or whatever – to see what insights result. This may suggest strategies for further investigation. Until there is more research, though, I need to give advice to whistleblowers.

For the time being, I will continue to rely on the judgement of those with experience.

Perhaps the research doesn't matter anyway. Many academic studies have little to say to whistleblowers themselves. Furthermore, many whistleblowers are intent on using official channels whatever anyone may say, and De Maria's findings are unlikely to sway them. In Whistleblowers Australia, we've found that the most helpful thing for whistleblowers, along with publicity, is talking to other whistleblowers. Research findings may provide at best a weak substitute for talking to those who've been there.

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