The social psychology of whistleblowing: An integrated model

(Accepted for publication, pending minor changes, at Organizational Psychology Review)

Farid Anvari1&2
Michael Wenzel1
Lydia Woodyatt1
S. Alexander Haslam3

1 School of Psychology, Flinders University, GPO Box 2100, Adelaide, SA 5001, Australia
2 Strategic Organization Design, University of Southern Denmark, Campusvej 55, Odense M 5230, Denmark
3 School of Psychology, University of Queensland, St Lucia, QLD 4072, Australia

Correspondence

Farid Anvari E: faridanvari.phd@gmail.com; P: +45 50300795

Authors’ Note

The authors declare that there are no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to the first author. Work on this paper was supported by funding from the Australian Research Council (FL110100199), and Australian Postgraduate Awards.
Abstract

Whistleblowing is the disclosure of ingroup wrongdoing to an external agency and can have important functions for the regulation of moral and legal conduct. Organizational research has focused largely on the impact of individual and organizational factors, while overlooking the role of group memberships and associated social identities. Further, social psychologists have so far paid little attention to this phenomenon, or else have tended to subsume it within analysis of dissent. To address these lacunae, we present a psychological model of whistleblowing that draws on social identity theorizing (after Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This model describes when and how social identities and different forms of power motivate group members to respond to ingroup wrongdoing by engaging in whistleblowing. Our review of the literature points to the model’s ability to integrate existing evidence while providing direction for future research. We also discuss the model’s capacity to inform whistleblowing policy and procedures.
The social psychology of whistleblowing: An integrated model

In 2013 Edward Snowden leaked thousands of classified documents to the public while working as a subcontractor for the United States National Security Agency (NSA). Through this act of whistleblowing Snowden knowingly risked retaliation, and effectively sentenced himself to exile away from his home country. Whistleblowing was therefore not an easy or cost-free way for him to protest against organizational wrongdoing. It is generally the case that whistleblowers who voice opposition to observed wrongdoing take on considerable risks for themselves, including loss of income and career opportunities, and even imprisonment. For example, in 2015 the Australian government passed anti-whistleblowing laws that threaten 10 years in prison for those who reveal governmental wrongdoing when the government considers the disclosed material to be classified (“Fact check”, 2014). At the same time, legislation was enacted that made it illegal for health professionals to report on problematic conditions and abuses in detention centres holding asylum seekers who reach Australian borders by boat. Nevertheless, as an act of defiance, on the very day that these laws came into effect, over 40 health workers and humanitarian staff publicly disclosed abuses occurring at one of the detention centres (Farrell, 2015).

Indeed, despite the considerable costs that it often entails, whistleblowing appears to be on the rise. High-profile whistleblowers such as Snowden, Chelsea Manning, and Julian Assange—the most visible of cases in recent years—have been referred to as “the first arrivals of the wave still to come” (Watson, 2013). This observation appears to be borne out by the fact that in 1980, 26% of federal employees who observed wrongdoing reported it, but 40% did so in 1983, and 48% in 1992 (Miceli, Rehg, Near, & Ryan, 1999). More recently, the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission reported a consistent upward trajectory of

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1 As of October 2016, these restrictions on health professionals have been removed (Hall, 2016).

Given the potential for high personal costs, this evidence raises one obvious question: What motivates people to engage in whistleblowing? To answer this, over the past 30 years, organizational researchers have examined the structural antecedents of whistleblowing, but in the process provided only a limited examination of its psychological underpinnings (Waytz, Dungan, & Young, 2013), in so far as they focus largely on characteristics and motivations of individuals as individuals. Nevertheless, it seems likely that group memberships and associated processes have some role to play in whistleblowing decisions (see Dozier & Miceli, 1985; Near & Miceli, 1987). As yet though, these factors have not been integrated into formal models of the process.

The present paper addresses this lacuna by using the social identity perspective (after Tajfel & Turner, 1979) to explore the impact of group memberships and related group processes on the dynamics of whistleblowing. The theoretical analysis of social identity and group processes in whistleblowing provides a deeper understanding of this phenomenon, thereby enriching debate about public policy and organizational management processes. In addition, our analysis expands upon current models of normative conflict—defined as “a perceived discrepancy between the current norms of a group and another standard for behavior” (Packer, 2008, p. 4)—by including whistleblowing as a potential response to ingroup wrongdoing. We argue that whistleblowing is a response available to ingroup members that has hitherto been neglected in the normative conflict (and more broadly in the social identity) literature. Accordingly, the inclusion of whistleblowing as a distinct response to perceived ingroup wrongdoing, alongside dissent expressed within the group, paints a more complete picture of how people can challenge what they see as problematic group behavior.
The Importance of Whistleblowing

There are several compelling reasons for wanting to advance a theoretical understanding of whistleblowing. First and foremost, whistleblowing is a critical instrument for a group, organization, or society to promote and uphold its moral standards. This is because it is an important mechanism for preventing and detecting organizational wrongdoing (Brown, Mazurski, & Olsen, 2008; Dyck, Morse, & Zingales, 2010; Lavena, 2014; Miceli & Near, 1988; Miethe, 1999), whether in the public or private sector (Proost, Pavlinska, Baillien, Brebels, & Van Den Broeck, 2013). This is particularly important in the context of the increasing complexity and reduced public visibility of many organizational practices (Miethe, 1999).

The importance of whistleblowing is underlined by evidence that early in the 21st century it was responsible for the detection of almost 20% of major corporate fraud cases in the U.S. (Dyck et al., 2010). Moreover, a 2009 PricewaterhouseCoopers study of over 3,000 companies around the world revealed that 34% of incidents of economic crime were detected through whistleblowing, a figure that rose to 48% in the U.S. (Fredin, 2012). In science, the website Retraction Watch (www.retractionwatch.com) shows that whistleblowers have been responsible for uncovering several high-profile cases of data fabrication and scientific fraud (e.g., Stokes, 2012). Indeed, whistleblowing may be the primary mechanism for fraud detection in scientific communities (Gross, 2016; Stroebe, Postmes, & Spears, 2012).

Whistleblowing (like other forms of defiance; e.g., Haslam & Reicher, 2012) can help to correct ethical breaches that are sometimes costly to society. Without it, unreported organizational wrongdoing may continue, fester, and even become the organizational norm with the result that any potentially negative consequences go unchecked. Certainly, whistleblowing may create instability for an organization in the short term, but it can also help to reduce organizational costs in the long term (Miceli & Near, 1985, 1988). In some
cases, whistleblowing can prove critical for an organization’s prosperity or its very survival. Not least, this is because a whistleblower’s report of wrongdoing by their workgroup to an oversight unit in the same organization can help avoid negative publicity and legal issues associated with public reporting, if the report is dealt with effectively so that the organization itself does not become complicit in the wrongdoing (Miceli & Near, 1985, 1988). Furthermore, the high percentage (approximately 50%; Fredin, 2012) of observed wrongdoing that goes unreported may be reduced by processes that foster whistleblowing.

This is not to say that whistleblowing is necessarily or inherently a moral act. Acts of whistleblowing can be immoral, even criminal; either inadvertently or by intent. Some whistleblowing may be designed to harm the organization against which it is directed, for example, where it arises out of disgruntlement. Indeed, under such circumstances it may be based on misinformation. At the same time, the actions of whistleblowers can be subjectively motivated by moral concerns, but be ill-considered and have immoral (or at least problematic) side-effects (e.g., by placing people’s lives at risk; Savage, 2017). As an example, WikiLeaks, an organization responsible for publishing leaks from various sources, has engaged in activities that may benefit Russia at the expense of the West (Becker, Erlanger, & Schmitt, 2016). In the present paper, we do not consider whistleblowing that primarily serves the whistleblower’s own interests, or which takes the form of a vendetta against an organization. We also do not consider whistleblowing that involves deliberately passing on misleading or inaccurate information. Our analysis starts from a point where a group actually has engaged in wrongdoing (or is actually suspected of having done so). Following this, our interest is in how members of that group, knowing about the wrongdoing, then respond.
A Psychological Definition of Whistleblowing

To explore the psychological underpinnings of whistleblowing, it is useful to unpack existing definitions of the phenomenon from a psychological perspective. For this purpose, we draw on two existing definitions. Of these, probably the most influential is that provided by Near and Miceli (1985; see also King, 1997) which defines whistleblowing as “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” (p. 4; see also Miceli & Near, 1985). In more legal terms, Jubb (1999) defines whistleblowing as:

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 potential to rectify the wrongdoing. (p. 78)

There are six components of these definitions that are important for our present purposes. First, the disclosure must be made by someone from within the offending group; in other words, a whistleblower cannot be an outsider. Near and Miceli’s (1985) definition requires the whistleblower to be a (former or current) member of the organization, while Jubb (1999) implies insider status by arguing that a whistleblower needs to have privileged access to information. Accordingly, consistent with both definitions but broader in scope, we suggest that the disclosure must be of ingroup wrongdoing. Whistleblowing thus involves reporting illegal or immoral behavior on the part of the ingroup or its members, bringing with

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2 Note that we will use “wrongdoing” throughout this paper to refer to any illegal, immoral, or illegitimate act (or omission), as judged to be so by the perceiver. Indeed, something that is perceived as immoral by one person may not be seen as such by another, and, as will be discussed in detail, a violation of norms or values of a group (e.g., based on shared values of feminism) may constitute a wrongdoing for someone who identifies with that group but not for someone who does not identify with it.
it the possibility of loyalty conflicts. By way of illustration, a customer of a business who
tells senior management that a shop manager is syphoning off goods is not a whistleblower.
In contrast, an employee who tells senior management that the manager is syphoning off
goods is a whistleblower. This distinction speaks to the important psychological feature of
whistleblowing as an act of reporting on one’s own group.

Second, from a psychological perspective, group membership is subjectively defined
(Turner, 1982; Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994). Therefore, while whistleblowing
concerns “ingroup wrongdoing”, the definition of this ingroup is potentially variable
(Millward & Haslam, 2013). Indeed, in psychological terms, Haslam (2004) suggests that
organizations can be broadly defined as “any internally differentiated and purposeful social
group that has a psychological impact on its members” (p. 2). For instance, Edward Snowden
was never an employee of the NSA; he was employed by the subcontractor Booz Allen.
However, he was sufficiently involved with NSA operations—having worked there for four
years—to consider it to be an ingroup (even if, through the act of whistleblowing, he may
have been distancing himself from that ingroup). Note here that a whistleblower need not
formally be a member or employee of an organization; it is enough that the group being
reported on is a psychological ingroup—that is, a group with which the whistleblower has (or
has had) some degree of social identification.

Third, the psychological nature of group membership means that the group engaged in
wrongdoing can also be variously construed—more exclusively or more inclusively (Turner,
1985). Thus, the offending ingroup can be identified as a workgroup within a department of
an organization or, increasingly inclusively as a department within an organization, an
organization, or an entire industry or profession. In this context, some researchers distinguish
between internal and external whistleblowing—reporting through channels that are internal
versus external to a given organization (see Dworkin & Baucus, 1998; Miceli & Near, 1984,
1985). However, the predictors of internal and external whistleblowing tend to overlap (Miceli & Near, 2005; Near & Miceli, 1987), and both are structurally equivalent. That is, while whistleblowers may use either internal or external organizational channels, the channels are, by definition, external to the group that commits the wrongdoing. Whether whistleblowers need to go outside the organization is determined by how expansive the offending ingroup is understood to be. When the ingroup engaged in the wrongdoing is perceived to include only a workgroup or department within an organization, internal organizational channels may be used. However, when the whole organization is perceived to be complicit in the wrongdoing (e.g., through inaction) then whistleblowing requires the use of external channels. Although it is possible that there is a qualitative difference between whistleblowing within an organization and whistleblowing externally, the fact that they share the same predictors suggests similarities in the psychological processes involved.

Fourth, it follows that a further defining quality of whistleblowing is that the disclosure of the psychological ingroup’s wrongdoing must be made to a reporting agency (a person or group who receives the disclosure) that is psychologically external (i.e., an outgroup) in relation to the offending ingroup. Thus, the level of inclusiveness at which the offending ingroup is defined has implications for who the wrongdoing is reported to. Whistleblowing requires the report be made to an outgroup (or its representative agent) at a higher level of inclusiveness than the ingroup which is implicated in the wrongdoing. This distinction is important because it differentiates whistleblowing from intragroup dissent which is the expression of discontent made within the group about the group’s behavior and aimed at seeking to change the group from within (Jetten & Hornsey, 2014; Packer, 2008, 2009). The point here is that defining groups in psychological terms alerts us to the fact that both the offending ingroup and reporting agency are subjectively defined and dynamic.
Fifth, appreciation of this dynamism also allows us to anticipate and explain the trajectory through which whistleblowing escalates (see Figure 1). We propose that if a whistleblower discloses wrongdoing to a reporting agency at a higher level than the offending ingroup but fails to secure the desired outcome, then that outgroup (as represented by the reporting agency) will be recategorized as part of the offending ingroup and further appeals may be made to another outgroup at a higher level of inclusiveness. This trajectory is illustrated in Stewart’s (1980) analysis of 51 whistleblowing cases which observed that when they first became aware of wrongdoing, whistleblowers typically reported their concerns to their immediate supervisors. When their supervisors had failed to act appropriately on this report, they escalated their concerns to people higher up the organizational chain. If (and only if) those people were perceived as having failed to respond adequately, whistleblowers then reported the wrongdoing to relevant regulatory bodies or to the media. However, Stewart’s (1980) analysis provides no explanation of the psychology behind this whistleblowing trajectory. One explanation may be that reporting to each successively higher-level category is simply required by organizational protocols. That is, an employee is required to first report wrongdoing to their supervisor, then to their departmental head, and so on. We argue that when a reporting agency fails to act on the report, then it and the group it represents may come to be perceived as complicit in the wrongdoing, expanding the perceived boundary of the offending ingroup. Hence, even while the whistleblower may be following the chain of command as required by organizational norms, the psychological process is likely to be one of recategorization, whereby s/he comes to perceive each higher-level category as part of the offending ingroup, requiring disclosure to the next higher-level category.

A concrete example that illustrates the dynamic nature of the perceived boundaries of the offending ingroup and relevant reporting agency is provided by the case of Thomas Drake. Drake was a former senior executive of the NSA who blew the whistle on the failings
of intelligence-related information technology within the organization. He first reported perceived wrongdoing to higher-level management within the NSA—an organization-level reporting agency. When nothing was done about his report, he perceived the NSA to be complicit in the wrongdoing and escalated his concerns to the Department of Defence and other representative government officials—industry-level reporting agencies. When, again, nothing was done he came to perceive the industry itself (that is, the Government) as complicit in the wrongdoing, and it was at this point that he blew the whistle to the media—a public-level reporting agency. We can observe that as the inclusiveness of the offending ingroup expanded, there was a corresponding expansion of the boundary of the reporting agency. In line with the principles of self-categorization theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987; Turner et al., 1994), these shifting boundaries can be seen to reflect a process of social categorization whereby the would-be whistleblower iteratively comes to define (and redefine): (1) the group that is responsible for, or implicated in, the wrongdoing; and (2) the wider group whose standards, rules, or values have been violated and which the whistleblower seeks to engage with in order to enforce these standards (whether through regulatory powers or external pressures).

Finally, sixth, whistleblowing is said to involve non-obligatory unsolicited disclosure (Jubb, 1999). This sets whistleblowing apart from informing and role-prescribed reporting due to the distinctive ethical and moral dilemma that it poses for the would-be whistleblower (Jubb, 1999). However, the distinction between role-prescribed and unsolicited reporting may not be so clear-cut, since even an individual whose role it is to identify or report wrongdoing may decide not to do so (thereby concealing or colluding in the wrongdoing), and hence can be seen to exercise a degree of choice (Haslam & Reicher, 2011). Moreover, even though reporting may be prescribed by their role, those who reveal ingroup wrongdoing can still face the same risks as whistleblowers, such as backlash from their ingroup and denunciation as
traitors (Near & Miceli, 1987). Nonetheless, we can say that whistleblowing typically involves voluntarily reporting an ingroup’s (or its members’) problematic behavior.

Putting these various elements together, we define whistleblowing as a voluntary disclosure of ingroup wrongdoing (including omissions) to a reporting agency (person or group) outside of an offending ingroup with a view to that agency taking action to curtail the wrongdoing. This definition has obvious points of contact with those offered by other researchers (e.g., Jubb, 1999; Near & Miceli, 1985) but, critically, it stresses the importance of shared (and non-shared) group memberships for the process.

The Social Identity Approach

From the foregoing discussion, it is apparent that people’s group memberships are implicated in the motivation to engage in whistleblowing (see also Vadera, Aguilera, & Caza, 2009). Because it is concerned with the ways in which psychology and behavior are shaped by group membership, a psychological framework that might be well positioned to inform understanding of the dynamics of whistleblowing is the social identity approach—comprised of social identity and self-categorization theories (after Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, 1985).

Social identity theory asserts that in a range of social and organizational contexts people’s sense of self—and hence their cognition and behavior—is determined as much (if not more) by their internalized group memberships (their social identity as ‘we’ and ‘us’; Tajfel, 1978) as it is by their idiosyncratic qualities (their personal identity as “I” and “me”; Turner, 1982). Much of organizational theory has focused on the psychology of individuals as individuals (reflecting their personal identities), but social identity theorizing suggests that a lot can be gained by considering how people’s behavior may be structured, at a higher level of self-abstraction, by their sense of shared social identity (Haslam, 2004; Haslam & Ellemers, 2005). Indeed, research has shown that social identity is a major determinant of several organizationally relevant outcomes, including (a) effective communication (Morton,
Wright, Peters, Reynolds, & Haslam, 2012), (b) workplace motivation (Ellemers, De Gilder, & Haslam, 2004), (c) organizational citizenship behavior (Van Dick, Grojean, Christ, & Wieseke, 2006), and (d) social support and stress (Van Dick & Haslam, 2012). Importantly, social identities can form on the basis of any attribute, including values and opinions, that are believed to be shared with other people; they may thus be based not only on physical groups or broad collectives, but also on abstract ideas (e.g., being a libertarian) or specific opinions (Bliuc, McGarty, Reynolds, & Muntele, 2007).

Self-categorization theory (Turner et al., 1987) argues that the level of abstraction at which the self is defined varies as a function of comparative and normative features of the prevailing social context and of the individual (Turner et al., 1994). At higher levels of abstraction, the self is defined in terms of more inclusive social identities that represent the self as part of an ingroup membership shared with other members of this group, and that distinguish that ingroup from comparison outgroups (Turner, 1985; Turner et al., 1987). For example, in a context where it is fitting to do so (e.g., at work) a person, Jane, may self-categorize as a tax accountant, and thereby see herself as relatively similar to other tax accountants but also as different from auditors who review the work of accountants (e.g., in terms of her interests and commitments). Nevertheless, in a different context it may be more fitting for her to self-categorize as an accountant (a more inclusive self-categorization that includes auditors) or as a personal income tax accountant (a less inclusive self-categorization), and hence be attuned to different patterns of similarity and difference. Likewise, depending on the context, an employee of an organization may self-categorize at the level of their workgroup, department, organization, or profession, with each successive higher-level category subsuming the preceding ones (e.g., Ellemers et al., 2004; Millward & Haslam, 2013).
Self-categorization theory argues that when, and to the extent that, people self-categorize as members of a particular group they will tend (a) to see themselves as interchangeable with other ingroup members, (b) to internalize the group’s norms and values, and (c) to act in accord with its interests (Haslam, 2004; Terry & Hogg, 1996). At the same time, though, the self-categorization process is context-sensitive (e.g., Haslam & Turner, 1992); accordingly, in different contexts people will understand the self through the lens of different group-based standards. For example, in her daily work Jane may define herself as a tax accountant committed to achieving the best outcome for her clients, but at an accountancy conference (attended by accountants and auditors alike) she may define herself as a member of her profession dedicated to upholding professional values and standards.

Dynamics of this form clearly have the capacity to create situations in which different groups’ values and goals come into conflict (normative conflict; Packer, 2008). This might be seen in the workplace, for example, if the wrongdoing of one ingroup (e.g., one’s workgroup) violates the values of another (e.g., the organization, which is a superordinate group in this context).

Speaking to this dilemma, Packer’s (2008) normative conflict model details members’ potential responses when their group’s conduct is perceived to conflict with relevant norms and values. It argues that the severity of such perceived normative conflict and people’s strength of identification with the offending ingroup are likely to influence whether they conform, leave the group, or engage in intragroup change efforts (Crane & Platow, 2010; Packer, 2008, 2011; Packer & Chasteen, 2009). Specifically, when perceived normative conflict is low, people who identify strongly with the offending ingroup are more likely to conform (Packer, 2008, 2011). However, under circumstances of high normative conflict (e.g., serious wrongdoing), the group’s behavior may be seen as dangerous, harmful, or immoral, in which case strongly identified group members are more likely to try to change
group behavior through intragroup dissent (Packer, 2008, 2011). On the other hand, group members may lack the motivation to promote intragroup change. Here, the normative conflict model suggests that people who perceive high normative conflict and who identify weakly with the group will be more likely to disengage from the group or leave, rather than attempting to change the group from within. Further, even those who identify strongly with the group and who perceive serious wrongdoing may sometimes engage in “uneasy conformity” (where they disagree but comply; Packer, 2008) instead of dissent—especially if they expect intragroup change efforts to be unsuccessful (Hirschman, 1970) or if they perceive themselves to have little capacity to influence other group members and change group functioning (Packer, 2008).

However, we argue that for ingroup members who lack either motivation or the power to bring about intragroup change there is another potential avenue through which they can change group behavior. When the actions of the ingroup violate the values of another salient social identity, both those who identify weakly with the offending ingroup and those who lack power within it may engage in whistleblowing for the benefit of the group whose values have been violated. On this basis we seek to apply and extend the model of normative conflict in order to advance a social identity model of the psychology of whistleblowing.

**A Social Identity Model of Whistleblowing**

Based on the normative conflict model, people can respond to perceived ingroup wrongdoing by conforming and remaining silent, disengaging and exiting from the group, or they can attempt to change ingroup behavior via internal means, using intragroup action such as dissent (Crane & Platow, 2010; Packer, 2008, 2011) and voice (Morrison, 2011, 2014; Morrison, See, & Pan, 2015; Morrison et al., 2011). Alternatively, as we have argued, they can attempt change via external means, through intergroup action such as whistleblowing.
We suggest that what people are motivated to do will depend on how much they identify with the relevant social identities, and perceptions of power in the given context.

**The importance of Social Identification either with an Offending Ingroup or a Superordinate Group**

People can identify with social identities at different levels of inclusiveness and thus be motivated to act in line with the norms and values corresponding to the group with which they identify. When an ingroup or its members commits a transgression, other group members may perceive this as a violation of group values. Moreover, strongly identified ingroup members may perceive themselves as responsible for such offences, feeling group-based shame or guilt, and thus be motivated to take corrective action (e.g., Brown & Cehajic, 2008; Brown, Gonzalez, Zagefka, Manzi, & Cehajic, 2008; Lickel, Steele, & Schmader, 2011; Roccas, Klar, & Liviatan, 2006). Hence, the more strongly people identify with an offending ingroup, the more motivated they will be to address the ingroup’s wrongdoing, particularly when they perceive the wrongdoing to be in violation of the group’s own values (Crane & Platow, 2010).

However, group members can also identify with a social identity at the superordinate level. What may constitute the relevant superordinate group depends on the context. For example, in certain contexts, a profession or the public will constitute superordinate groups of which the offending ingroup (e.g., an organization) is a subcategory. In other contexts, an organization will be a superordinate group, as might be the case when the offending ingroup is a workgroup within that organization. The more strongly people identify with (and are loyal and committed to) a superordinate group the more they would endorse its values and thus the more motivated they would be to act against an ingroup’s wrongdoing when the superordinate group’s values have been violated.
To illustrate this more clearly, imagine that members of an auditing accountant’s team (an offending ingroup) accept gifts from a company they are auditing. This behavior clearly violates the code of conduct and core values of the accounting profession (the superordinate group). Accordingly, if this accountant identifies strongly with the profession’s values and/or the accounting profession itself, they will be likely to be motivated to act against the violation. Similarly, if an auditor identifies strongly with their team and perceives that the receiving of gifts violates the team’s own values, they will be likely to feel responsible for the wrongdoing, desiring the group to uphold its values. Here, then, ingroup wrongdoing could undermine the values of a superordinate identity and/or it could undermine the values of the offending ingroup and making one feel responsible for the offence. Each level of identification (ingroup and superordinate) is likely to be a motivating factor for efforts to change the offending ingroup’s behavior.

In some circumstances one could argue that ingroup wrongdoing does not violate the values of a superordinate group but, rather, it violates other values (derived from another social identity) that people project onto the superordinate group, with a view to having these values validated and upheld (Mummendey & Wenzel, 1999; Wenzel, Waldzus, & Steffens, 2017). For example, an employee who identifies strongly with their organization may project values associated with their feminist identity onto the organization and look for it to uphold those feminist values (even if the organization has no particular commitment to them). If the employee’s workgroup displays sexist behaviors then that employee will be likely to be motivated to act against it. This corresponds to the analysis we presented above where the perceived violation is to the values of a superordinate group (the organization in this example), albeit projected from the perspective of another social identity.
In sum, social identity theorizing leads us to expect that whether an individual acts to change ingroup wrongdoing depends partly on the degree to which they identify with a social identity, at one of the aforementioned levels, whose values have been violated.\(^3\)

**The importance of Power to Effect Change either Internally or Externally**

Once an individual is motivated to act against ingroup wrongdoing, the form of that action will further be determined by perceptions of power. But what do we mean by power in this context? Turner (2005) explains that power is the capacity to impact, change, or influence things in the physical or social world. He divides social power into two sub-categories: power through *persuasion*; and power through *control* (both described below). In the context of responding to ingroup wrongdoing we refer to power as an individual’s capacity to influence the ingroup’s behavior. To influence ingroup behavior there are two broad sources of power that a person can draw upon.

**Intragroup power.** The first source of power relates to the capacity for group members to influence group behavior *internally*. This power to directly influence group behavior differs between individual group members (e.g., Hogg, 2001). Group members may perceive themselves to have power through their ability to persuade other ingroup members that their behavior is immoral or inappropriate and that changing their behavior is the right or moral thing to do (Turner, 2005). Here, a person’s power to persuade can emerge from a range of factors including: (a) their capacity to exert leadership by virtue of being someone who represents the group’s goals and values (Haslam, Reicher, & Platow, 2011); (b) their

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\(^3\) It should be noted that although we have limited our analysis to social identities, a wrongdoing can also violate the core values of an individual’s personal identity. However, in such cases, the personal values would arguably be projected onto the relevant superordinate group so that the individual believes they can or should recruit an outside agent, through whistleblowing, to uphold the values.
informal position or status within the group (Packer, 2008);\(^4\) (c) their general communicative and social skills and capacity to form social networks and alliances; as well as (d) the degree to which the group has open communication practices (e.g., Kassing, 2000). Alternatively, power may arise from a person’s perceived ability to control the ingroup’s behavior by wielding legitimate authority (Turner, 2005). In both instances (persuasion and control), perceived influence over ingroup behavior is direct—that is, persuasion attempts require a person to communicate directly with ingroup members and control attempts require the person to have direct authority over them. We refer to this direct source of power, the power to internally influence group behavior, as *intragroup power*.

**Vicarious intergroup power.** The second source of power is the capacity to influence the ingroup’s behavior through the influence of an outside agency. We refer to this less direct source as *vicarious intergroup power*, this being the perceived ability to prevent or change the ingroup’s wrongdoing through the influence of a person or group external to the offending ingroup, enlisted via whistleblowing. Research into whistleblowing is yet to consider the concept of *power through* (e.g., power through a collective or through the influence of an outside agency) as a psychological construct. With intergroup power, the perceived capacity for influence resides less in the individual and more in the outside agency and its willingness and ability to prevent or stop the wrongdoing. Intergroup power therefore encompasses the perceived effectiveness of whistleblowing to stop, prevent, or minimize the

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\(^4\) We suggest, as Packer (2008) argues, that status may have a complex relationship with perceptions of power. High-status members may have achieved their status by not challenging the status quo and thus they may perceive they have low power to effect change. Moreover, high-status members may be less likely than low-status members to perceive a threat if they gained their status by conforming to the current group norms and/or they have an interest in maintaining the status quo. On the other hand, intragroup action by high-status ingroup members may incur fewer costs than for lower-status members making intragroup action more likely for the former.
wrongdoing and/or its consequences. We further propose that perceptions of intergroup power include the perceived costs of whistleblowing such as the potential for retaliation, social ostracism, income loss, imprisonment, and physical harm. This is because when perceived costs are high they are likely to contribute to a sense of powerlessness to effect change. Conversely, a person may feel empowered to the extent that there is protection from retaliation or from other forms of adverse repercussion. Although we propose that perceptions of both efficacy and costs (of whistleblowing) can be subsumed under the construct of power, they are different facets; researchers and policy-makers may want to consider also the unique effects that each may have on whistleblowing behavior.

The concepts of intragroup and vicarious intergroup power represent a critical differentiation of the power construct (as we will show below), as well as a differentiation of, or from, related concepts, such as self-efficacy. Self-efficacy refers to a person’s perceived ability to successfully achieve their goals (Chen, Gully, & Eden, 2001). Such confidence in one’s abilities and resourcefulness resides in the individual and is measured as an individual difference. In contrast, in the case of intragroup and vicarious intergroup power, perceived efficacy (as one element, next to costs) is a contextual assessment of one’s impact within or through a group, and thus also involves an assessment of the relative power of the group as well as self. In this way, the concepts of intragroup and vicarious intergroup power point to previously unconsidered (contextual and personal) factors that contribute to each and advance our understanding of what an individual will do in response to ingroup wrongdoing.

Response to Ingroup Wrongdoing as an Outcome of Social Identification and Power

The arguments presented in the previous section suggest that people’s response to wrongdoing will be an outcome of two dimensions: social identification and power. In what follows, we unpack the implications of this analysis in more detail. Table 1 presents an overview.
Conformity and silence. The above reasoning suggests that group members are most likely to conform and/or remain silent in the face of problematic ingroup behavior when there is no (or low) motivation to act such as when they identify weakly with the group whose values are violated. On the other hand, they could also conform or remain silent when they identify strongly with a superordinate group whose values have been violated but feel powerless to influence the offending ingroup’s behavior either internally or through whistleblowing.

In line with these arguments, research suggests that powerlessness, and the perception that organizational change is unlikely, serve to inhibit voice and therefore predict silence (Morrison, 2011, 2014; Morrison et al., 2015). Indeed, even when group members are motivated to act by their social identities, to the extent that they perceive themselves to be powerless to effect change they are likely to remain silent. This silence may also be accompanied by some form of legitimization—in the form of neutralization (Sykes & Matza, 1957), moral disengagement (Moore, Detert, Treviño, Baker, & Mayer, 2012), rationalization and justification (Van Der Toorn et al, 2015), or socialization (Near & Miceli, 2011)—which could act as a self-protective mechanism without needing to change or repair the wrongdoing behavior (Tarrant, Branscombe, Warner, & Weston, 2012; Van Der Toorn et al., 2015).

Together, conformity and silence will be more likely when there is weak identification with the group whose values have been violated, and/or when there is low perceived (intragroup and intergroup) power.

Exit. Another potential response to ingroup wrongdoing is for a group member to disidentify from the offending ingroup and subsequently leave (Glasford, Pratto, & Dovidio, 2008). Such exit strategies are more likely to be considered by members who are weakly identified with the offending ingroup but who identify strongly with a superordinate group whose values have been violated. In addition, exit is more likely to occur when the associated
costs are low, but it is often the case that exit costs will be high, such as when a person (a) has a strong sense of loyalty to the group or is strongly identified with it, (b) is materially reliant on the group (e.g., for income), or (c) fears retaliation (Hirschman, 1970). High exit-cost situations can lead to silence and conformity (Hirschman, 1970; Packer, 2008) with rationalization again likely to be used to reduce the sense of responsibility (Near & Miceli, 2011; Van Der Toorn et al., 2015). Hence a combination of being strongly identified with the superordinate group and weakly identified with the offending ingroup makes exit more likely when exit costs are low.

**Intragroup action.** When members of an offending ingroup, who feel responsible for its behavior (such as through group-based guilt or shame, as discussed earlier), perceive possibility for positive change to the status quo they will generally be motivated to act (Haslam, 2004) because they are most concerned about the group and are keen to restore their sense of positive ingroup identity when there is an opportunity for doing so (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999; Johnson & Fujita, 2012; Van Der Toorn et al., 2015). Those who are strongly identified with the ingroup will tend to look first at changing the ingroup behavior via intragroup action, including intragroup dissent or creating/joining an intragroup movement (Crane & Platow, 2010; Packer, 2008). This is consistent with the view that those who identify more strongly with a group will be more likely to go to the effort of exerting voice (e.g., speaking up with ideas and suggestions) to improve the group’s functioning (Morrison, Wheeler-Smith, & Kamdar, 2011) even if acting for the benefit of the group comes at personal cost (e.g., Jetten, Branscombe, Spears, & McKimmie, 2003; Packer, 2008, 2011, 2014). We would therefore expect that the more strongly a person identifies with the offending ingroup the more likely they will be to express intragroup dissent. However, even those who identify weakly with the offending ingroup may express dissent to the extent that they identify strongly (vs. weakly) with the superordinate group and perceive a threat to its
values. That is, people who identify strongly with a superordinate social identity whose values have been violated may also be motivated to engage in intragroup change efforts.

Furthermore, whether a person takes intragroup action is likely to depend on their perceived capacity to directly influence other group members and group behavior (Packer, 2008)—that is, their perceived intragroup power. Dissent is more likely to be expressed when people perceive themselves to have high intragroup power. For instance, in a survey of 232 employees (intragroup) dissent was more likely for those who perceived there to be greater freedom of speech within the workplace (Kassing, 2000). In this way, those who perceived themselves to have high intragroup power (an ability to voice their concerns internally) were more likely to express dissent. Accordingly, it appears that having power within a group can make a person more likely to engage in intragroup change efforts through dissent and voice (Morrison, 2011; Packer, 2008, 2011).

This further suggests that intragroup power will interact with identity, such that group members who identify strongly with the offending ingroup (experiencing group-based guilt or shame, a sense of responsibility for the offence), and/or those who identify strongly with the superordinate group, will be most likely to express dissent when they perceive themselves to have high intragroup power.

**Intergroup action: Whistleblowing.** The Social Identity Model of Whistleblowing is represented schematically in Figure 2 and identifies four proposed pathways to whistleblowing. Whether an individual is motivated to engage in whistleblowing is seen to depend first on whether they identify strongly with the offending ingroup or with the superordinate group. Central to the act of whistleblowing is a question of loyalty and commitment. Although some researchers argue that commitment and social identification are distinct constructs (see Meyer, Becker, & van Dick, 2006), others have considered commitment to be a facet of social identification (e.g., Ellemers, Kortekaas, & Ouwerkerk,
Identification with offending ingroup. People can have a sense of loyalty and commitment toward a group engaged in wrongdoing due to being (or feeling) close to it and its members. Such identification and closeness with the wrongdoers should reduce the likelihood of whistleblowing because (a) it would foster greater tolerance for ingroup wrongdoing (see also Packer, 2008), (b) the offending group’s norms increase social pressure on ingroup members to conform and thereby to become complicit in wrongdoing (Miceli & Near, 1992), and (c) feelings of loyalty and closeness with the offender(s) are likely to increase concerns about the negative consequences that whistleblowing will have for them and their ingroup (De Graaf, 2010). Notably, when the ingroup has norms of loyalty then the individual strongly identified with the group will be more strongly bound by those norms. Hence, although strong identification with the offending ingroup, and other relational ties with the offenders, would increase intragroup dissent (as discussed earlier), it should reduce the likelihood of whistleblowing (Path 1, Figure 2).

De Graaf’s (2010) interviews with twenty-five whistleblowers indicated that, during their deliberations about whether they would whistleblow, an important factor (against whistleblowing) was the possibility of negative consequences for the offenders. Consistent with this point, relational closeness and loyalty to the wrongdoer have both been shown to reduce whistleblowing intentions (King, 1997; Waytz et al., 2013) and, in a study on dissent, those who were strongly identified with the ingroup were less willing to express concerns about ingroup behavior to outgroup members than to other ingroup members (Packer, 2014).

People may also desire to not whistleblow for fear of damaging their own personal moral image in the eyes of their ingroup peers. Indeed, interviews with 40 employees revealed that fear of being labelled negatively, such as tattletale or troublemaker, was the most popular reason to not voice one’s concerns to a supervisor (Milliken, Morrison, & Hewlin, 2003).
Furthermore, in a survey of accounting staff from organizations in Barbados, whistleblowing intentions were lower when wrongdoers were friends with the would-be whistleblower than when they were not (Alleyne, Weekes-Marshall, & Arthur, 2013). Focus-group discussions with medical students revealed that camaraderie was a key reason for them not blowing the whistle on their colleagues (Rennie & Crosby, 2002). Survey data also indicates that smaller workgroups tend to be associated with less whistleblowing (Miceli & Near, 1988) presumably because these are associated with greater psychological closeness—and hence loyalty—to the offending ingroup (Haslam, 2004; Van Knippenberg & Van Schie, 2000). All this suggests that the likelihood of whistleblowing is reduced when people have a sense of commitment and loyalty to the person or group engaged in wrongdoing.

Although our theorizing integrates literature on whistleblowing and dissent, future research is required to test the model’s proposition that closeness and identification with an offending ingroup can increase intragroup dissent but simultaneously decrease the likelihood of whistleblowing. This would also serve to address the model’s critical distinction between intragroup dissent and whistleblowing as they correspond to the two groups implicated in the whistleblowing decision (the offending ingroup and the superordinate group).

**Identification with superordinate group.** However, people can be loyal and committed to other groups, too, such as their organization, their profession, or indeed their society as a whole. Loyalty to or identification with such a superordinate group whose values have been violated by an ingroup’s wrongdoing should increase the likelihood of whistleblowing (Path 2, Figure 2). In line with this logic, a survey of Directors of Internal Auditing in North America revealed that those with higher organizational commitment were more likely to have engaged in (internal and external) whistleblowing about observed wrongdoing, whereas those with lower organizational commitment were more likely to have remained silent (Miceli, Near, & Schwenk, 1991). Likewise, a vignette study involving
questionable practices by a supervisor found that participants with higher organizational commitment (including identification and loyalty) had greater (internal) whistleblowing intentions than those with lower organizational commitment (Chen & Lai, 2014). We note, though, that these studies did not explicitly indicate whether the wrongdoing violated organizational values. However, in another vignette study in which reporting was said to be of benefit to the organization, organizational commitment positively predicted internal whistleblowing intentions among a sample of public accountants (Taylor & Curtis, 2016). While not all studies have found a significant relationship between organizational commitment and whistleblowing (e.g., Mesmer-Magnus & Viswesvaran, 2005; Sims & Keenan, 1998), the evidence nevertheless points to social identities (and strength of identification) as a motivating factor.

Moreover, as suggested above, people can identify with and be committed and loyal to an even more inclusive superordinate group, such as their profession or the wider society and its citizens. People may be motivated to speak out because to remain silent would be perceived as a violation of societal values (see also Pliskin, Goldenberg, Amber, & Bar-Tal, 2017). In this vein, Henik (2008) maintained that conflicting loyalties or values can emanate from allegiances to “extra-organizational” principles—that is, principles derived from sources external to an organization—such as a professional code or the public welfare. This was confirmed when Henik (2015) interviewed 50 whistleblowers and inactive observers and found that strong allegiance or loyalty to extra-organizational principles was an important motivating factor in whistleblowing. Consistent with this observation, a study with practicing auditors from an international accounting firm found that strength of identification with their profession (i.e., the superordinate identity) positively predicted whistleblowing intentions in response to a hypothetical vignette in which the accounting profession’s code of conduct was violated (Taylor & Curtis, 2010; cf. Kaplan & Whitecotton, 2001).
Others have also argued that whistleblowing may be the act of someone who perceives the public interest as overriding other interests (Andrade, 2015; Culiberg & Mihelic, 2016; Nader, Petkas, & Blackwell, 1972). Indeed, Edward Snowden has said that his motive in whistleblowing was “to inform the public as to that which is done in their name and that which is done against them” (Greenwald, MacAskill, & Poitras, 2013). Furthermore, after analysing survey data from U.S. federal civil service employees, Brewer and Selden (1998) concluded that (a) compared to inactive observers, whistleblowers had a higher regard for the public interest and (b) when the public interest was threatened whistleblowing was more likely. Critically, a large survey of over 42,000 full-time federal employees revealed that the motivation to serve the public interest was positively associated with whistleblowing intentions (Cho & Song, 2015). These findings therefore suggest that when an offending ingroup’s wrongdoing violates a profession’s values or threatens the public interest, group members are likely to whistleblow to the extent that they identify with that profession or wider public.

Moreover, people can self-categorize at even more abstract superordinate levels, such as the human identity, perceiving humankind as the ingroup (Allport, 1954; Turner, 1982). Research suggests that the more strongly an individual identifies with the human identity, the more they would be concerned about human rights and humanitarian needs (McFarland, Brown, & Webb, 2013; McFarland, Webb, & Brown, 2013). We would therefore expect that strength of identification with the human identity (or humankind) would motivate people to speak out in dissent or engage in whistleblowing when an ingroup’s wrongdoing violates basic human values.

In summary, past research on whistleblowing has tended to examine how personal attributes such as level of education and status, cognitive processes such as psychological or relationship closeness, and organizational structure such as workgroup size and
organizational position can influence whistleblowing. Nevertheless, in line with suggestions that group memberships and group processes are important here (e.g., Miceli & Near, 1992; Near & Miceli, 1987), we contend that a social identity analysis provides a meaningful way of integrating and making sense of these various findings. Extant research provides reasonably consistent evidence for our hypothesis that whistleblowing will be more likely when loyalty and commitment—and hence identification—are to a superordinate group (e.g., the organization, profession, or public) rather than to an offending ingroup. Specifically, it appears that being strongly identified with a social identity whose values are violated by an offending ingroup’s wrongdoing generally increases the likelihood of whistleblowing, whereas being strongly identified with the wrongdoer(s) generally reduces the likelihood of whistleblowing.

Nevertheless, future research is required to test this core proposition of the model. We have cited research showing that organizational commitment and professional identification (e.g., with the accounting profession) are associated with whistleblowing, although these findings have often been correlational. More importantly, we have argued that they reflect a more general psychological principle—namely, that identifying strongly with a superordinate social identity whose values have been violated by an ingroup’s wrongdoing will positively predict the likelihood of whistleblowing (and intragroup dissent). Future research can test whether identification with the offending ingroup and identification with the superordinate group, at varying levels of inclusiveness do indeed have opposing effects on whistleblowing, but effects in the same direction (perhaps even cumulatively so) on intragroup dissent. For example, research may examine these propositions in contexts where the workgroup is the ingroup and the organization the superordinate group, and also where the organization is the offending ingroup and the profession (or other supra-organizational categories) the superordinate group.
**Intragroup and vicarious intergroup power.** Perceived power will also have an impact on the likelihood of whistleblowing. As Alford (2001) notes, power is heavily implicated in the dynamics of whistleblowing. If people perceive themselves to have low intragroup power (e.g., because they have had their dissenting voice rebuffed in the past), they may look to other sources of influence (Packer, 2008). Therefore, individuals who perceive themselves to have low intragroup power would be more likely to whistleblow as an alternative source of influence (Path 3, Figure 2). In line with this proposition, existing literature suggests that whistleblowers tend to be people who feel responsible for changing ingroup wrongdoing but who lack intragroup power to do so (e.g., Callahan & Dworkin, 1994; Dozier & Miceli, 1985; Jackson et al., 2010; Miceli & Near, 1992; Near & Miceli, 1985, 1987). Moreover, because they lack the power or authority to change organizational behavior themselves they must necessarily rely on other forms of power. Supporting this view, interviews with 11 nurses who had become whistleblowers indicated that they had taken this course because they were unable to gain support for their concerns within the organization (Jackson et al., 2010)—in other words because they lacked intragroup power. Survey data from a large sample of 8,500 employees revealed that whistleblowers who used reporting channels external to the organization were less likely to be in supervisory positions (Miceli & Near, 1984). As argued elsewhere, those who blow the whistle outside an organization (e.g., to the media) are likely to be those who lack intra-organizational power, such as that which derives from holding supervisory responsibility (Callahan & Dworkin, 1994). We argue that people who perceive themselves to have adequate intragroup power to stop the wrongdoing will use the path of intragroup dissent identified by Packer (2008, 2011).

When they have low intragroup power, however, whistleblowing becomes a viable option for those who seek to change ingroup behavior, at least to the extent that it is perceived as likely to be effective (Miceli & Near, 1984, 1992; Near & Miceli, 1987; Park &
Blenkinsopp, 2009; Watts & Buckley, 2015; Wortley, Cassematis, & Donkin, 2008). In other words, an individual who perceives high vicarious intergroup power will be more likely to engage in whistleblowing (Path 4, Figure 2). Consistent with this point, a survey of employees in the Australian public sector found that they reported being more likely to whistleblow when they believed that the wrongdoing would be corrected (Wortley et al., 2008). Similarly, a vignette study in which the accounting profession’s code of conduct was violated showed that accounting auditors had greater whistleblowing intentions when they trusted that their reporting would be acted upon and investigated (Curtis & Taylor, 2009; see also Taylor & Curtis, 2016). In another vignette study where participants were told about a lecturer who revealed exam questions to students prior to an exam, the perceived efficacy of whistleblowing was one of the strongest predictors of people’s willingness to use this strategy (Jones, Spraakman, & Sanchez-Rodriguez, 2014). Other similar findings also speak to the importance of whistleblowing efficacy among IT project managers (Keil, Tiwana, Sainsbury, & Sneha, 2010), employees of U.S. organizations (Kaptein, 2011), Korean police officers (Park & Blenkinsopp, 2009), and internal auditors and management accountants (Seifert, Sweeney, Joireman, & Thornton, 2010). Unsurprisingly, these studies all show that whistleblowing is more likely to occur when it is perceived as being likely to effect desired forms of change.

However, working against this, the perceived costs of whistleblowing can reduce the likelihood of people pursuing this strategy. Fear of retaliation was cited as an important reason against whistleblowing in both an interview study with former whistleblowers (De Graaf, 2010) and a survey of accountants (Alleyne et al., 2013). Likewise, perceived personal costs have been found to be a negative predictor of whistleblowing intentions (Ayers & Kaplan, 2005; see also Cho & Song, 2015). Conversely, a survey of employees found that
whistleblowing was more likely to be considered to the extent that respondents thought whistleblowers would be supported or protected from retaliation (Wortley et al., 2008).

Although some literature suggests that people may become whistleblowers despite the potential costs and retaliation for doing so (e.g., Brown et al., 2008; Miceli & Near, 1985; Near & Miceli, 1987), we argue that the costs associated with whistleblowing are likely to factor into perceptions of intergroup power. This is because when whistleblowing is perceived to be costly, people will be less willing to take the associated risks, making whistleblowing seem like a less viable option. They would therefore perceive themselves as having less power to effect change. In contrast, when whistleblowing costs are low or when there is protection from retaliation, a would-be whistleblower may feel emboldened to report wrongdoing because whistleblowing protections are, in effect, a means of empowering them. In these ways, the potential costs associated with whistleblowing, and the likelihood of protection from them, should contribute to perceptions of vicarious intergroup power and, in turn, the likelihood of whistleblowing.

Importantly, the conceptual distinction between perceptions of intragroup and vicarious intergroup power needs to be empirically tested. Scales to measure the two constructs should be developed and their psychometric properties and (convergent and discriminant) validities assessed. Hence, although we have made a case for a more complex view of power in the context of ingroup wrongdoing and presented past research that supports this view, empirical research specifically designed to address this proposition is needed. Moreover, research would then need to be conducted to test whether intragroup power and vicarious intergroup power distinctly predict intragroup dissent and whistleblowing, respectively (as the paths in Figure 1 suggest).

**Identity and power.** Intragroup and vicarious intergroup power are likely to interact with identity. Whistleblowing can be seen by highly identified ingroup members who
perceive themselves to have low intragroup power as another opportunity to improve the moral standing of the group, especially when the group is perceived as having steered away from its goals or lost its moral compass (Crane & Platow, 2010; Near & Miceli, 1987), even though they may be reluctant to engage in whistleblowing because of the potential costs it has for the group. Therefore, perceiving oneself to have high intragroup power can accentuate the effect of ingroup identification and closeness on whistleblowing, such that strong ingroup identification would decrease the likelihood of whistleblowing even more when intragroup power is perceived to be high (Path 5, Figure 2). In contrast, intragroup power and vicarious intergroup power would respectively attenuate and accentuate the effect of superordinate identification on whistleblowing. With high intragroup power dissent may be sufficient for change and thus superordinate identification will be less likely to lead to whistleblowing. And, once individuals are motivated to whistleblow, perceiving themselves to have vicarious intergroup power will further increase the likelihood of them doing so. Accordingly, group members who identify strongly with a superordinate social identity whose values have been violated will be more likely to resort to whistleblowing, particularly when they perceive themselves to have low intragroup power (Path 6, Figure 2) and/or high intergroup power (Path 7, Figure 2).

Strength of identification with the offending ingroup and the superordinate social identity may also interact with one another in their effects on the likelihood of whistleblowing. The specific pattern of the interaction is likely to depend on whether loyalty to one’s ingroup or commitment to a superordinate group’s values dominates (i.e., whether ingroup identification is higher or lower than superordinate identification). Specifically, being strongly identified with a superordinate social identity whose values are perceived to have been violated is predicted to increase whistleblowing, but this effect is likely to be attenuated for those who are also strongly identified (or have relationship closeness and/or a sense of
loyalty) with the offending ingroup—that is, loyalty and/or the ingroup’s moral image may trump superordinate values. In this case, whistleblowing would be most likely when there is strong identification with the superordinate group and weak identification with the offending ingroup. Conversely, being loyal or strongly identified with the offending ingroup, members should be protective of the group’s moral image and less inclined to whistleblow, but this might be attenuated, and members might still be willing to blow the whistle, when they are strongly identified with the superordinate group whose values are violated—so that superordinate values trump ingroup loyalty. In this case, whistleblowing would be least likely when there is strong identification with the offending ingroup and weak identification with the superordinate group.\(^6\)

Given the novelty of the model we present, we are not aware of any research testing the various interaction effects between the power constructs and the identity factors proposed in the preceding paragraphs. This provides ample opportunity for future researchers to conduct empirical tests of the proposed social identity model of whistleblowing.

**Conclusion**

The social identity model of whistleblowing points to the importance of two fundamental issues: social identity and power. Regarding identity, the psychological definition of whistleblowing implicates two groups: the group (or its members) who commit the wrongdoing, and the group represented by the agency to which the wrongdoing is reported. The whistleblower is notionally a member of both, and certainly both memberships have the capacity to form part of their identity. The second point implied in the definition is that a whistleblower recruits an agent external to the offending ingroup because of the agent’s

\(^6\) Note that individuals can use both intragroup and intergroup action in attempting to change ingroup behavior. For example, Crane and Platow (2010) found that some people expressed concern within the group (intragroup dissent) as well as reporting the violation to the experimenter (whistleblowing).
position of power to regulate, influence, or put pressure on the ingroup. The act thus becomes an instrument of vicarious power for the whistleblower. In this way the model hypothesizes that being identified strongly with, and loyal to, the offending ingroup should increase the likelihood of intragroup dissent but reduce the likelihood of whistleblowing. On the other hand, being strongly identified with the superordinate group whose values have been violated will increase the likelihood of dissent and whistleblowing. Furthermore, once motivated by social identification to engage in whistleblowing, the likelihood of whistleblowing is increased when intragroup power is perceived to be low and/or vicarious intergroup power high.

On the basis of this theorizing we have argued that identification with the superordinate social identity whose values have been violated will motivate people to engage in whistleblowing (and dissent) because of their commitment to upholding the group’s values. However, people may also blow the whistle to signal their commitment to group values and may thus be striving for acceptance into the group. Although there may be complexities regarding exactly how superordinate identification motivates people to whistleblow, our analysis is limited to the proposition that it is the commitment—existent and/or to be demonstrated—to a superordinate identity and its values which drives their actions. Future theoretical and empirical work can examine the various ways that this may be evidenced.

As briefly discussed earlier in this paper, other factors such as personal identity are also likely to play an important role in the motivation to whistleblow. Indeed, an individual’s self-concept is derived from their social identities but also from their personal identity. Given that one’s personal identity can be conceptualised as a less inclusive self-categorization, with the individual being the only member of the category, what one is motivated to do in response to an ingroup wrongdoing will depend on the content of this self-categorization. In
particular, relatively enduring beliefs or theories about one’s personal identity, such as the centrality of morality, could become motivating factors in the whistleblowing decision (e.g., Proost et al. 2013). On the other hand, the moral foundations of loyalty and/or authority (e.g., Moral Foundations Theory; Graham et al., 2013) may be of critical importance to an individual and likely to work against any motivation for whistleblowing or dissent. Nevertheless, in line with the basic tenets of self-categorization theory (e.g., Turner et al., 29994), we would propose that it is the identity that is most salient in the situation or that is most important to the individual that will play the most decisive role in shaping the whistleblowing decision.

In the same way, personality may impact the motivation for whistleblowing. For example, extraversion has previously been found to be positively correlated with whistleblowing (Bjørkelo, Einarsen, & Matthiesen, 2010). Such personality factors may moderate the expression of social identity factors. For example, because extraverts tend to be more persuasive (Watson & Clark, 1997) they may be more likely to perceive themselves to have intragroup and vicarious intergroup power. These factors may play a direct motivating role as well. It is plausible, for example, that those who are higher on agreeableness would be less motivated to express disagreements, via either dissent or whistleblowing.

Furthermore, motivation to act against a transgression may arise because the offending ingroup’s behavior directly victimizes the ingroup member or another person or group with whom the ingroup member identifies (see also Curtis & Taylor, 2009). In line with this proposition, a survey of 3,232 employees from 118 Australian public-sector organizations found that personal victimization was one of the strongest predictors of whistleblowing (Cassematis & Wortley, 2013; see also De Graaf, 2010). Similarly, another survey of employees randomly selected from 15 organizations, found that whistleblowers were more likely than inactive observers (those who had observed but not reported
wrongdoing) to have been directly affected by the wrongdoing (Miceli & Near, 1985; see also Miceli & Near, 2005). Victimization is thus another factor that may motivate people for whistleblowing and may be implicated in social identity processes (e.g., when people think they have been marginalized or discriminated against; Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002). However, there are other reasons that victimization may motivate people to whistleblow. For example, people who are victimized may be motivated by a desire to seek retribution for a perceived wrong that they have suffered.

Another factor that may facilitate whistleblowing is the severity of the observed wrongdoing (Dungan, Waytz, & Young, 2015). Indeed, a study of public-sector employees found that observed wrongdoing was rated as more serious by those who had blown the whistle than by those who had not (Cassematis & Wortley, 2013). How harmful or wrong (i.e., how serious) a wrongdoing is perceived to be may be influenced by one’s personal values but also by shared values (see also Cassematis & Wortley, 2013). In other words, one’s social identity can influence the perception of the seriousness of a wrongdoing such that the more strongly the individual identifies with the superordinate group whose values have been violated the more seriously they perceive that wrongdoing to be. However, the objective severity of wrongdoing is also likely to play a moderating role. For example, identifying strongly with the superordinate group whose values have been violated will motivate people to whistleblow, but this motivation is likely to be stronger the more serious the wrongdoing is (e.g., the more it is perceived to deviate from superordinate group values). Alternatively, or in addition, given that seriousness may be strongly related to whistleblowing, a wrongdoing that is perceived to be serious may cause even the less powerful (i.e., those who perceive themselves to have low vicarious intergroup power) to blow the whistle, suggesting an interaction between perceived seriousness of the wrongdoing and vicarious intergroup power. These are yet further matters for future research to pursue.
The conceptual distinction between intragroup and vicarious intergroup power can also help make sense of inconsistencies in the whistleblowing literature. For example, while some studies have found whistleblowers to be higher performers, more educated, and to hold higher-level positions and status within the organization than other employees (Brewer & Selden, 1998; Mesmer-Magnus & Viswesvaran, 2005; Miceli & Near, 1988; Miceli et al., 1991) other research suggests whistleblowers and silent observers may not be distinguishable with respect to education levels, organisational position, or performance such as number of promotions (see Rothschild & Miethe, 1999; Sims & Keenan, 1998). Critically, this inconsistency may speak to the conceptual distinction between intragroup and vicarious intergroup power. These concepts of power refer to different groups in different situations, corresponding to the expanding boundary of the offending ingroup and relevant superordinate group discussed previously. For example, if the offending ingroup is the workgroup and the superordinate group the organization, it makes sense that higher performers, more educated individuals, and higher status/position employees would perceive greater vicarious intergroup power within the organization. However, high-performers and people in higher positions may also have lower exit costs—with greater ability than others to leave and join another group or organization—and thus perceive there to be greater safety in whistleblowing. Hence, although they may perceive themselves to have higher intragroup power, which would increase the likelihood of dissent, because they also perceive themselves to have higher vicarious intergroup power, they would also be more likely to blow the whistle.

Given that we are concerned with perceptions of power, it is not always the case that people who would seem to have power will be more or less likely to blow the whistle. Indeed, a person may have structural power such as that derived from high status, rank, or position within an organization, and yet not perceive themselves to have any real influence (Anderson, John, & Keltner, 2012; Fast & Chen, 2009; Tost, 2015; see also Miceli, Near,
Rehg, & Van Scotter, 2012 discussing “situational leverage”). It is thus important to attend to individuals’ perceptions, as structural or personal variables that may be related to power are likely to predict dissent and whistleblowing only to the extent that they impact perceptions of intragroup and vicarious intergroup power.

Notwithstanding the fact that our analysis is largely derived from theorizing and research in predominantly Western cultures and should therefore be applied cautiously in other contexts, our model makes three distinct but interrelated novel contributions to theory. First, it addresses the failure of existing organizational theory to fully explain how group memberships and associated social identities are implicated in whistleblowing behavior. Second, we extend psychological theory by remedying the social identity literature’s neglect of whistleblowing as a distinct option for people faced with ingroup wrongdoing. In this way, third, the model advances theorising and research on whistleblowing by taking it beyond a consideration of structural antecedents to also consider its social psychological underpinnings. Yet while the social identity model of whistleblowing integrates many existing findings in the literature, it is clearly the case that further research is needed to test its specific propositions directly. Our hope here is that the model will excite research interest in this important phenomenon and provide a testable framework for future examination.

Yet aside from its value for researchers, the model we have outlined also has implications for practice and policy in applied settings. On the basis of the preceding review, it would appear that any social group, organization, or institution that desires its members to speak out against behaviors that violate institutional values would be well advised to consider the different loyalties that may inspire or inhibit an observer to act in this way. An observer’s most proximal loyalty is likely to arise from their relational closeness and/or social identification with the offender(s). While this may inhibit whistleblowing, it may promote intragroup dissent if group members feel responsible for the offence or if the group has acted
against its own values. However, when a superordinate institution’s values are violated, an individual’s sense of loyalty to that superordinate social identity may inspire them to engage in dissent and/or whistleblowing. These observations have one common critical implication for policy-makers that speaks to the need to encourage social identification, and hence loyalty, to superordinate values.

Therefore, in addition to making their core values explicit and clear, institutions should shape policy and practice to increase and maintain their members’ shared superordinate social identity. One approach that may prove helpful in this regard is the ASPIRe (Actualizing Social and Personal Identity Resources) model (see Haslam, Eggins, & Reynolds, 2003). This seeks to build superordinate identification in a four-phase process that starts by identifying individual employees’ important social identities and concludes by developing shared goals and values that provide a framework for organizational activity (e.g., Peters, Haslam, Ryan, & Fonseca, 2012). In this way, a sense of shared superordinate social identity is arrived at through participative processes that increase the likelihood that employees share common values and speak out when they are violated.

Further, organizations and regulatory institutions may be interested in ensuring that their members feel empowered to draw attention to any wrongs they perceive within their group, so that moral failings can be addressed as much as possible in-house, limiting negative public image fall-out. Regulatory superordinate bodies need to be aware that their policies and actions are a source of vicarious power, particularly for those who lack power within their groups. It is vital for the encouragement of whistleblowing that individuals believe doing so is safe and effective; that they are listened to, respected, and protected from negative repercussions; and that their concerns are responded to swiftly and decisively.

Importantly too, the dynamic nature of perceived power (and social identification) suggests that organizations should take regular stock of their employees’ perceptions in this
regard. For insofar as motivations for whistleblowing derive from social identities and perceived violations of their norms, it is critical to know both what those identities and norms are, and when they are being violated. Clearly, this will often be difficult information both to obtain and to action, but as many celebrated cases of whistleblowing attest, the cost of doing otherwise can be crippling.
References


Tost, L. P. (2015). When, why, and how do powerholders “feel the power”? Examining the links between structural and psychological power and reviving the connection


Figure 1. The hierarchical structure of whistleblowing.

Note: Whistleblowing escalates as the boundaries of the offending group are extended (e.g., due to inaction or collusion). The dotted lines indicate that when whistleblowing fails, the definition of the offending ingroup becomes more inclusive and hence whistleblowing involves reporting to an outgroup that is defined at a higher (more inclusive) level of abstraction.
Figure 2. The Social Identity Model of Whistleblowing.

Note: Path 1 suggests that the likelihood of whistleblowing is reduced by strong identification with the offending ingroup. Path 2 suggests that it is increased by strong identification with the superordinate group whose values have been violated by the offending ingroup’s wrongdoing. Path 3 suggests that whistleblowing is more likely if people perceive themselves to have low intragroup power. Path 4 suggests that it is also more likely if they perceive themselves to have vicarious intergroup power to shape ingroup behavior through the influence of an external agency.
SOCIAL IDENTITY AND WHISTLEBLOWING

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response option</th>
<th>Ingroup identification</th>
<th>Superordinate identification</th>
<th>Intragroup power</th>
<th>Intergroup power</th>
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<td>Conformity and silence</td>
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<td>Intergroup action: whistleblowing</td>
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Note. Positive symbol (+) indicates a positive relationship (e.g., increasing identification with the ingroup will increase the likelihood of intragroup action, and negative symbol (−) indicates a negative relationship (e.g., increasing identification with the superordinate group will decrease conformity and silence). The referenced papers provide indirect support for these propositions and the reader should refer to the main text for a full description of this.