

“WHISTLE BLOWING” – WHAT ARE THE TENDENCIES BEHIND? : A STUDY OF THAI EMPLOYEES

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ABSTRACT

This is a study attempting to attention on an aspect of ethical behaviours among Thai employees, and promote “whistle blowing” as a tool to raising concerns of wrongdoing and corruption in Thai organisations. There were six participants including in this study, they were from different industrial setting consisting of military, public, state enterprise, and private sectors. A semi-structured interview was the method to provide an insightful understanding of the Thai employees. A priori data analysis used to present the effect of most pre-existing 13 heuristics and biases that have influence on individuals’ decision-making process whether to perform whistle blowing. Positive perceived consequences were also taken into account in terms of analysing unethical behaviours they found in their organisations. This leads to their intention whether to report wrongdoing for the participants. The findings indicated that most of Thai employees would perform whistle blowing if the outcomes of unethical actions in their organisations have a negative impact on them and organisations directly, as well as the consequences of report wrongdoing would be positive. The key factors to encourage the participants to engage in whistle blowing such were leader and group support, and organisational culture. Future directions, and anticipated whistle blowing decision making of Thai employees are also discussed in the light of these findings.

Keywords: whistle blowing, ethics, Thai employees, ethical behaviours, decision making, Thai organisations

INTRODUCTION

Whistle blowing has become an issue that gets attention globally in past several decades, as it is a weapon to fight and control corruption (Ahmad, Smith & Ismail, 2012). In Thailand since 2006, it shows in the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) that corruption in the country has increased continuously (Thai PBS, 2013). Office of the National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC), therefore, emphasize on this issue, which they had been run a lot of the activities to support and create whistle blowing in Thailand (NACC, N.D.)

It would be very challenging for Thais to perform such action, which could harm to themselves and the organization. Hence, it is necessary to understand what the tendencies for Thais to make their decision to perform whistle blowing. The purpose of this study is to give a picture of Thai employees' perceptions on ethical issues and shed lights to promote such action in Thai organizations, which this research aims to answer the research question "What are tendencies affecting Thais in decision making to perform whistle blowing?"

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review begins with an examination of the definition of whistle blowing and describing factors that influence the reporting of wrongdoing.

Whistle Blowing Definition

Whistle blowing means employees report suspected wrongdoing at work to an outsider such as government regulatory agencies or media. It can also refer to internal reporting of

misconduct activities to management level (Ferrell, Fraefrich, & Ferrell, 2011). According to Johnson (2003), the definition of whistle blowing has four component parts as (a) the action of individual aims to make information public; (b) the information conveyed to parties outside the organization who make it public; (c) the information has to do with possible wrongdoing in the organization; and (d) the person who is reporting to agencies is a member or formal member of the organization.

Prentice (2004) proposed thirteen heuristics and biases that systematically influence individuals ethical decision making. These include: (a) obedience to authority, (b) social proof, (c) false consensus effect, (d) overoptimism, (e) self-serving bias, (f) framing, (g) process, (h) cognitive dissonance, (i) sunk cost, (j) loss aversion, (k) the tangible, (l) the abstract, and (m) the time delay traps. However, Gentile (2010) adapted the information and discussed in a way that these tendencies could be used for individuals in order to voice their values when they face ethical issues. These tendencies could be constructed in factors influencing individuals to blow the whistle (Gentile, 2010). However, Gentile (2010) adapted the information and discussed in a way that these tendencies could be used for individuals in order to voice their values when they face ethical issues. These tendencies could be constructed in factors influencing individuals to blow the whistle (Gentile, 2010).

Factors Influencing Tendency to Report Wrongdoing.

The following are factors that could influence employees for attempting to make a decision to blow the whistle.

Evidences of wrongdoing. Miceli and Near (1985) pointed out that the witness of wrongdoing will be more likely to blow the whistle when they have strong evidence of

misconduct. This finding supported their previous work in 1985 regarding to their prediction of whistle blowing that they were predicted that the witness who have unambiguous evidence will be more likely to perform whistle blowing rather than observers who have ambiguous evidence of wrongdoing. (Miceli & Near, 1985)

Group/supervisor support. It would be dangerous to disclose wrongdoing alone or without any support. Thus, supportive climate can be led to tendency in decision making to report misconduct activities. Miceli and Near (1985) showed the results from their work that whistle blowing happened more commonly in large workgroups than small workgroups.

Sims and Keenan (1998) also pointed out that support from supervisor and group would be an essential factor that the witness who perceived such support will be more likely to blow the whistle. Moreover, a study by Near, Parmerlee, White, and Jensen (1981), in Miceli & Near 1993) showed that most whistle blowers had received emotional support from family and friends, so this support could lead to the tendency to blow the whistle. However, this support factor can have an opposite effect if the observer perceives a negative perception of higher management with respect to reporting wrongdoing or perceives low support from others; thus, the observer will remain silent. (Blackburn, 1988)

Professional status. According to the research by Miceli and Near (1988), employees who hold higher or professional status will be more likely to perform whistle blowing as they have “sense of social responsibility” or “a service ethic” (Perrucci et al., 1980, p. 150). Furthermore, the individual who is in a job position that formally requires them to report wrongdoing will be more likely to blow the whistle due to their authority and

position. They will be more likely to have less fear of the retaliation (Miceli & Near, 1995; Dozier & Miceli, 1985). On the other hand, the individual that does not have authority to report wrongdoing could face difficulty to blow the whistle that could lead them to ignore unethical activities (Miceli & Near, 2002; Miceli, Near, & Schwenk, 1991).

Perceived Consequences. Indeed, the impact from such action as whistle blowing could lead whistle blower to suffer; they could have more to lose to gain. Lewis (2001) suggested if the costs for whistle blowing outweigh the benefit then observer of wrongdoing will be more likely to keep silent.

A study that was conducted by researchers at University of Pennsylvania found that 69 percent of some 300 whistle blowers lost their job or were forced to retire after disclose their organization's misdeed (Ferrell et al., 2011). Moreover, Ethics Resource Center (ERC) reported that employees who blow the whistle received various kinds of retaliation such as silent treatment, no opportunity for promotion, demotion, and so on (ERC, 2010).

Therefore, the fear of retaliation might influence decision making of witnesses and might lead to low support from coworker or supervisor. If witness perceived low level of protection from retaliation then they will be more likely to keep silent, but the reverse outcome would occur if they perceived high level of protection (Miceli & Near, 1985; Sims & Keenan, 1998; Magnus & Viswesvaran, 2005). Moreover, the consequences of whistle blowing, such as results in the larger society, would have affected decision making. Thus, if witnesses of wrongdoing expected for the result to lead to maximum good for society then they would blow the whistle (Lewis, 2001).

Individual value. The degree for individual to blow the whistle could be predicted by individual value as Sherrill (2008) suggested that individuals who hold specific values and beliefs could be influenced to decision-making. This can be related to professional status as MacGregor and Stuebs (2013) pointed out that moral incentive involves individuals avoiding doing something that could be considered as wrong or against their belief, which leads them to be more likely to focus on job responsibility and obligation.

Therefore, individuals who valued in benefits to the society or fairness would be more likely to blow the whistle as they believed that they have moral obligation to prevent harm to others (DeGeorge, 2014). In contrast, individuals who place less value in the problem that they observed will be more likely to ignore that wrongdoing (Lee, Heilmann & Near, 2004).

Organizational commitment and job satisfaction. Researchers suggested that whistle blower could be more likely to have high commitment to their organization (Powell, 1990, in Sims & Keenan, 1998; Street, 1995, in Ahmad et al., 2002). As they believed that they are acting in a manner of loyalty to alert top management regarding wrongdoing in the organization, so they can prevent further damage that could harm to the company (Sims & Keenan, 1998). Research by Sims and Keenan (1998) was confirmed that organizational commitment was proposed to be a significant factor in the tendency to externally whistle blow.

DATA COLLECTION

6 participants were selected by using the purposive sampling for this study so that they all must hold at least Master degree and have Ethics class experience. They were all full-time employed, consist of 2 females and 4 males with various ages of one 27 years old,

two 28 years old, two 37 years old, and one 38 years old. Moreover, they were from various working backgrounds including military, public, state enterprise, and private sectors.

METHODOLOGY AND METHOD

The data were collected by face-to-face semi-structured interview, which was approximately 45 – 60 minutes for each interview. The participants were asked to have a sound recording during the interview. The samples of interview questions are as follows, (a) can you rate your organization ethics based on a scale of 1 – 10?; (b) how do you define your own moral standard?; (c) how do you feel when you see or involve unethical actions in your organization?; (d) will you blow the whistle? Why? How?

The interview was conducted in Thai for a better understanding. The participants were asked for a permission to conduct this research from the authority and ensure all information collected would be kept confidentially and destroyed within a certain time. However, the participants were allowed to refuse to answer any question if they felt uncomfortable.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data gained from the interview were transcribed into textual form. All the transcripts were read several times so as to assure understanding of the content. All the meaning unites were identified by reading sentence by sentence of the descriptive transcription in order to see if they could match with the codes properly. However, as the research was based on the deductive literature (a priori), 13 tendencies of Gentile, adjusted from Prentice's (2004) research were adopted to use in this study.

FINDINGS

After analyzing the data gained from the in-depth interview from 6 participants, it was found that all the participants could express their feelings either why they decided to report wrongdoings in the organization or why they did not. And all those feelings regarding the individual decision-making were matched with some of the tendencies below.

Obedience to Authority

This tendency explains the characteristic of individuals who comply with the authority of an organization. Either supervisors or authority in an organization, which refers to supervisor supports, code of conduct, and/or regulations established by the organization, can influence individuals. It was found that two of the participants chose not to report wrongdoings because they were afraid of the authority of the organization. As one of the participants noted,

I will choose not to report because my boss asked me not to do. I will never know what will happen to me if I report wrongdoings I see in the organization.

However, there was one of the participants selected to do the whistle blowing because of the supervisor's suggestion as noted,

My boss always asks me to tell her everything and tells me to report fact if there is anything unethical and making me feel bad to work. So, we both can help each other to solve that problem.

In conclusion, the participants would make a decision whether blowing or not blowing the whistle, based on what they were influenced by the supervisor or the authorized person in the organization.

Social proof

The tendency explains that individuals can be shaped by the community or environment they stay. It can be considered as the effect of social influence on the way of individual think and act, which can be referred to “group think” (Janis, 1971, p. 8, as cited in Gentile, 2010). It was found that one of the participants tended to make a decision to blow the whistle based on the social proof. The participant stated,

I can report whatever I know that it is unethical to my supervisor because it is the culture of the organization that everyone has a task to make everything correct. If anyone see any unethical issues in the organization, they have a task to tell off or warn people who behave unethically.

Therefore, it can be implied that the participant made the decision to blow a whistle because the participant believed in the core value of the organization that was integrity thus it shaped employees to behave ethically and feel accustomed to reporting an unethical issues.

False Consensus Effect

This tendency describes individuals who tend to think or believe that others will have the same perception as their existing propositions. From the findings, it was found that two of the participants were fallen on this tendency and they would report unethical issues. As one of them noted,

I will keep reporting because I believe that there are lots of people understand the reason why I do like this. Even though there are some people keep blaming me that I am stupid to do like this, I still believe that I do it for a better future in the

organization, so there will be a lot of people who agree with what I do but they are not brave enough to do so.

In conclusion, people would tend to make a decision to report the wrongdoings in the organization if they believed that other people in the organization would think in the same way as they did.

Overoptimism

This tendency illustrates that individuals tend to optimistically believe and overestimate the final consequences of an event that bad things will not be happened. It was found in the study that two of the participants made the decision to report unethical issues based on this tendency. After probing to see why the participants made the decision to blow the whistle, one of the participants stated that,

I am not afraid of being terminated. I am willing and ready to resign by myself if reporting unethical issues brings me in trouble. I do not care if other people will think that I am a snob. I am fine with that.

It can be concluded that people might decide to blow the whistle if they could accept the unexpected consequences after blowing. If they optimistically thought that the consequences would not that bad, they would tend to be willing to do it.

Self-Serving Bias

This tendency explains that people tend to make a decision to act by finding the existing evidence or supportive information to confirm their belief or thought with respect to the particular action. From the findings, it was found that one of the participants was fallen on this tendency. The participant noted,

I believed that the director of the company did something unethical about the tax at that time and I did not agree. So, I reported this issue to the secretary. However, the secretary seemed to ignore. I believed that was wrong, therefore, I tried to find some information about the law to insist my belief to the secretary.

In conclusion, people would tend to report wrongdoings by finding the supportive evidence if they were sure that what they believed was right. This group of people would reject other beliefs, which were contrast to their personal beliefs.

Framing

This tendency explains that individuals tend to react differently depending on the calculation of loss and gain of the situation. It was found that all of the participants would report unethical issues if those issues affected them directly and it subsequently caused them a personal loss. For instance, one of the participants noted,

I should get the position allowance according to the regulation but the organization did not give me. And I saw the detail in the receipt that I should get paid. So I reported to the director that I had been cheated.

Therefore, it can be implied that the individual decision would be based on the expected outcomes. If people perceived that they had lost something they should gain because of any unethical actions or they should gain something but still have not gained, people would tend to react by complaining and reporting the facts.

Process

This tendency illustrates that people will tend to make a decision to deal with matters systematically based on their personal ability. It was found from the findings that one of

the participants would tend to start solving the unethical problem from the small point as the participant noted,

I firstly talked to a friend of a person who behaved unethically about the royal institution in order to let his friend warn that unethical person. If that person still behaved unethically after being warned, that person would be reported to the director.

In conclusion, people would tend to make a decision about reporting the unethical problems if they knew that the problem could be solved by their personal ability. Then people would start breaking down the problem into small pieces and select to use the easiest way to do the whistle blowing.

Cognitive Dissonance

This tendency explains that people tend to make a decision to avoid their uncomfortable feelings of inconsistency. From the findings, it was found that most of the participants experienced cognitive dissonance after seeing unethical issues, however, there was only one participant decided to report the issue as noted,

I will report because I feel frustrated when seeing something unethical. Cheating! It is not the right thing to do. I do not care if cheating will affect my work, my organization or my students but it is opposed to my feeling.

One of the participants, who chose not to blow the whistle note,

I know that the unethical thing is not right but I do not know what to do. The person who behaved unethically is my boss. If my boss can handle what he has done, it is fine. Sometime I have to think that it is not a big problem, so I just let it go.

Therefore, it can be concluded that when people have the feeling of uncomfortable tension, which involves self-contradiction and personal attitudes at the same time, people will tend to find way to avoid that feeling either blowing the whistle or ignoring.

Sunk Costs

This tendency explains the characteristic of individuals who tend to make a decision based on what they have invested. From the findings, it was found that two participants chose not to report wrongdoings because both of them thought that they had been working in the organization and doing lots of things for the organization for a long time. Therefore, they were afraid of losing their positions. As one of the participants noted,

I have been working here for a long time. And this work is my life. I love this job as well. I do not want to lose my job because of my whistle blowing.

In conclusion, people would make a decision to blow the whistle based on worthy investment. They would not do anything if they saw that it was not worth to lose what they have invested for a long time.

Loss Aversion

This tendency illustrates that people tend to maintain what they own in order not to lose them. If people know that they are going to lose something in their possession, they will tend to make a decision to protect their assets, as they feel that those assets will become more valuable when they are going to lose them. For instance, if an employee knows that they are going to lose his/her job because of the unethical issue, which is created by others, he/she will blow the whistle in order to protect him/herself. However, no participant was fallen on this tendency after analyzing the data.

The Tangible

This tendency explains that people will make a decision based on what they are close to or what can be visibly seen. From the findings, it was found that one of the participants chose to report the unethical issues because the participant was impacted by bad management system in the organization. After being probed, the participant noted,

It was because the organization violated my right. The organization cheated on me first. Salary is important to me. I have a right to report.

In conclusion, people would do the whistle blow if they were affected by the tangible surroundings or if they could see the tangible consequences.

The Abstract

This tendency illustrates that an individual decision-making can be impacted by what people are far away from or what people cannot visibly see. It was found that one of the participants chose not to blow the whistle because the participant did not feel any usefulness. The participant noted,

I do not feel like blowing if the same problem is replicated because I cannot see any better outcome. It is useless doing that, so I should forget about it. Anyway, it does not affect me so much.

Therefore, it can be concluded that if people do not see any benefit or if that particular problem is too distant, people will tend to decide not to blow the whistle.

Time-Delay Traps

This tendency shows the characteristic of people that people tend to make a decision by considering short-term and long-term consequence. It will be good if both short-term and long-term consequences are good. However, if people do not know what will be

better between short-term and long-term consequence, people will tend to decide to choose what can make them immediately satisfied. From the findings, no participant was fallen on this tendency.

DISCUSSION

Although this study involved with only six participants, it showed the varieties of heuristics and biases constructed in the participants when they made a decision to blow the whistle. In our finding, the power of authority had an effect on some participants' intention to report wrongdoing in their organizations. Even though support from leaders found to be one important factor to push individuals to blow the whistle (Sims & Keenan, 2004), without such support may affect in an opposite way. The participants who reported that they chose not to blow the whistle, it was mainly because they were fear to their superior and didn't have enough power to take any action. It may be because they perceived that they had lower professional status to report unethical acts (Miceli & Near, 2002). Consequently, it could urge them to undertake unethically actions by a supervisor than to do it for their own interest. (Latane & Darley, 1968). In contrast, for one participant who reported wrongdoing, this participant reflected the view toward authority differently. The participant chose to start the whistle blowing process from where professional status held high enough authority to perform whistle blowing. The participant would then move to another stage of the whistle blowing action process, which was more complex and required more support. By analyzing ethical situations systematically, we see the potential to enable to blow the whistle as well as other people's support once ethical decisions become complex.

Furthermore, Latane and Darley (1968) suggested that people are more likely to blow whistle on unethical activity in workplace if their peers are engaging in similar behaviors and receiving support from their group (Near et, al., 1981) because most people's behavior is caused externally by situation rather than internally by their own (Sabini, Siepman, & Stein., 2001). Such effect was discovered in this study too. The participant, who blew the whistle, stated firmly that the organization highly promoted integrity as a core value; thus, it directly shaped the way employees think and behave ethically. Moreover, the organization also encouraged all the employees to report suspected actions. Therefore, organizations holding strong ethical values and provide supportive environment for employees to report wrongdoing may have a high potential to engage employees to act ethically and blow the whistle.

In addition, Prentice (2004) suggested that overoptimism might lead individual to be overconfident. We found a similar pattern from participants who blew the whistle that they were overconfidently estimated the consequences of the whistle blowing action. One of them pointed out that the worst consequence would be just "firing" which couldn't intimidate the participant to blow the whistle, while the other was confident because the organizational policy stating firmly that no one could be fired without causing serious damage to the organization. Therefore, they decided to report wrongdoing of their organizations. However, negative consequences such as silent treatment, no opportunity for promotion, and demoted may occur (ERC, 2010). It is essential to consider an appropriate approach to blow the whistle.

Additionally, those participants had a similar shared view that the way they thought toward unethical behaviors must be similar to others in their organizations, so to perform

whistle blowing, others should subsequently support it too. We regard such bias as false consensus effect, the participants showed the tendency to believe that other employees think the same way they do (Ross, Greene, & House, 1977). Further, Kirby and Herrnstein (1995) advocated that people change their performances dramatically depending on how options are framed in terms of potential loss and gain. The effect of this bias has been found in this study that every participant took “personal and family” impact as their priority to decide whether they wanted to blow the whistle. Although those who reported us that they had a whistle blowing experience, when the questions were framed into a different situation, particularly involving direct impact on their family, they changed their mind to not blow the whistle. It appears clearly to us that distance between individual relationships may prevent employees to perform whistle blowing. Besides, some of the participants indicated that they didn’t want to blow the whistle because they avoided conflicts, which might damage their current position in the organizations. They also emphasized that they had invested their time and afford to the organizations, thus, disadvantages of whistle blowing were far outweigh for them to perform. For this finding, it can be assumed that sunk cost heuristic might influence employees to be reluctant when they need to make a decision whether not to blow the whistle.

Darley (1996) pointed out that people naturally make a decision that impacted more by vivid, tangible contemporaneous factors. Similarly, our findings suggested that some participants blew the whistle because they were driven by tangible outcome. They experienced unethical behaviors of payroll departments, which affecting their overall salary and bonus, hence, they decided to challenge that particular action by blowing the

whistle. The participants expected to receive their money in return as well as alarmed the organizations to pay attention on fairness treatment among employees. From this aspect, it can be seen that people may be encouraged to blow the whistle if they see tangible consequences as the outcome of the action.

Individual value has shown as a major factor of the participants' intention to blow the whistle. One participant expressed the core value, which was fairness, so when he faced unethical behavior of his supervisor, which presented unfair treatment, the participant therefore decided to blow the whistle. This finding confirmed the argument saying that those individuals who valued fairness, they were more likely to blow the whistle, as it was part of their obligation (DeGeorge, 2014). This participant also presented the self-serving bias tendency as he collected evidence to support his argument for wrongdoing actions prior to perform whistle blowing. Further, there were participants who described their uncomfortable feeling when facing unethical behaviors or situations in their organization; therefore, they decided to blow the whistle. However, the uncomfortable feeling also appeared to those who didn't blow the whistle. This finding was compatible to cognitive dissonance tendency, and we can see the likelihood of the effect of cognitive dissonance on individuals' ethical decision making in the future and the possibility of employees to blow the whistle (Umphress & Bingham, 2011).

Although some participants decided not to blow the whistle previously, there was one participant raised his interest to take the action if unethical acts were relatively high in potential severity, which caused a damage to his organization's reputation. We see the potential of being committed to the organization that can enable employees to blow the whistle as committed employees are normally act in a manner of loyalty in order to

prevent negative impacts for their organizations (Ahmad et al., 2002; Sims & Keenan, 1998).

LIMITATION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Certainly, this study contained small numbers of participants, thus collecting more data may be required in order to increase transferability. It is also important to note the problem of language translation between Thai and English, especially the term “whistle blowing” which wasn’t widely recognized, it might therefore affected the participants interpretation and understanding. Moreover, Ethics theories are suggested to use for explaining individuals’ justification of ethical decision making with the respect of engaging in whistle blowing action.

CONCLUSION

The intention to engage in whistle blowing of the participants was from analyzing ethical situations through their cognitive biases, which resulted in their decisions differently. Group support and estimated consequences were taken into account for individuals when they decide to engage in whistle blowing action. This study sheds the light for organizations to pay attention in setting up an ethical value as well as promoting supportive environments for employees in order to perform whistle blowing.

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