

Silence Is Golden? The Case of two Whistleblowers in a Norwegian Municipality

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ABSTRACT

Characteristics and experiences of whistleblowers are an important field of research for work and organizational psychology. Detection and prevention of misconduct and crime is dependent on people internally who are not afraid to speak up and tell about their observations. Two key employees in the municipality of Grimstad in Norway reported separately about critical financial incidents in procurement of health services. They were ignored by the perceived power elite in the municipality. At the time of writing this research article, both whistleblowers are on sick leave. This article presents two whistleblowers who – despite perceived retaliation and reprisals - are willing to do it again. They simply define it as part of their job.

Key Words: Deviant behavior, organizational opportunity, white-collar crime, convenience theory, whistleblowing, retaliation.

1. Introduction

Two key employees in the municipality of Grimstad in Norway reported separately about critical financial incidents in procurement of health services. They were ignored by the perceived power elite in the municipality. At the time of writing this research article, both whistleblowers are on sick leave (Berg, 2017).

Fortunately, there was a courageous control committee in the municipality that, after some ambiguity, addressed the case and continues to investigate procurement of health services.

An internal investigation by global accounting firm BDO (2016) of health services in Grimstad municipality had already been conducted. The 64-page review report for the control committee is dated December 7, 2016. The examiner did not get to the bottom of the case, partly because “almost all documentation relating to the procurement” is missing, and because there are “unusually many” of the persons that the examiner interviewed “who cannot remember important events” (quotes from the investigation report).

For half a year, further investigation was hampered by the perceived power elite in the municipality in an attempt to bring the matter to silence. Due to the thorough work of the control committee and considerable local media attention (e.g., Berg, 2016, 2017; Karlsen, 2017), it was decided at the municipal council meeting that the control committee should be provided sufficient funding to continue its internal investigation by hiring an external examiner. The examiner should focus on the contents of employees’ e-mails concerning health service purchases, to which the BDO (2016) examiner had no access.

The case of two whistleblowers in the Norwegian municipality is interesting in light of research by Bjørkelo et al. (2011), who studied characteristics and experiences of self-reported whistleblowers in Norway. They found that whistleblowers reported low levels of retaliation at the same time as they reported less job satisfaction and more bullying at work than their non-reporting colleagues (Eriksen, 2017).

This article addresses the following research question: *What whistleblowing experiences can be derived from the case of two whistleblowers in a Norwegian municipality?* Empirical evidence was collected through interviews with whistleblowers, media reports, and municipality

documents.

This research is important since “public procurement is extremely vulnerable to instances of fraud, corruption or waste due to the amount of money circulating between the public and the private sector” (Nesti, 2014: 62).

The article starts by defining internal investigations, as fraud examiners were hired by the municipality to investigate allegations by the whistleblowers. Next, a short description is presented of white-collar crime, which is at the core of whistleblowing allegations. Then, we return to the whistleblowing case in Grimstad municipality and present whistleblowing theories in the literature review. Finally, the Grimstad case is discussed based on the literature reviewed.

2. Internal Investigations

An internal investigation is about reconstructing events and sequence of events. The investigator is to find out what happened or did not happen, how it happened or did not happen, and who did what to make it happen or not happen (Brooks and Button, 2011; Button and Gee, 2013; Button et al., 2007; Schneider, 2006; Williams, 2005). An internal investigation is conducted by fraud examiners from law firms and auditing firms, and it is similar to a police investigation.

An investigation starts with a choice of knowledge strategy (categories of required expertise), information strategy (preferred information sources), method strategy (open or closed communication), configuration strategy (sequential or iterative procedure), and system strategy (digital search and selection). Knowledge strategy is about who will conduct the investigation. In the case of Grimstad where the main focus is on e-mails, the examiner must be an expert in digital search, content analysis, interviewing techniques and white-collar crime, rather than the law or municipal administration (Gottschalk, 2016).

The investigator’s task is to describe actual circumstances within a particular topic or mandate. The investigation is intended to determine what actually happened in a particular case. An investigation is about revealing relevant facts. The objective is to provide actual and relevant information and describe them in such a way that responsible persons can make the best

decisions on the consequences that the matter will have. The investigator must work at least as vigorously to prove innocence and lack of guilt as evidence of guilt. There should be no blame game unless it is rightfully detected (Lee and Robinson, 2000).

At the time of writing this article, the control committee in Grimstad municipality was to hire an external examiner to investigate e-mails concerning procurement of health services. However, e-mail is only one of many sources of information in an internal investigation. Other information sources include tips, interviews, and documents. The examiner must analyze e-mails by linking other sources of information to interpret text in emails. Many people in the municipality seemed to have useful information for the following investigation. Therefore, the perceived power elite in the municipality should facilitate the examiner's information collection and analysis.

The perceived power elite in the municipality believed that the most important thing was to get the case closed. However, a skilled investigator might reveal fraud, corruption or other forms of financial crime, which the local government would have to address after investigation completion and do something about. Therefore, a discussion occurred whether the councilor should be granted temporary leave of absence until the investigation was completed. It was also discussed whether the mayor should temporarily leave the helm to the deputy mayor (Berg, 2017).

3. White-Collar Crime

Economic crime committed by the elite in society through abuse of trust-based positions of power is called white-collar crime (Gottschalk, 2017; Sutherland, 1939, 1949, 1983). By misuse of their trusted positions in business, government and politics, white-collar criminals enrich themselves or the business to which they are affiliated. In an organizational context, white-collar criminals have the opportunity to commit financial crime and to conceal crime. White-collar criminals carry out embezzlement, tax evasion, corruption and other forms of economic crime.

White-collar crime is a unique area of criminology due to its atypical association with societal influence compared to other types of criminal offenses. White-collar crime is defined in its relationship to status, opportunity, and access. This is the offender-based perspective. In contrast, offense-based approaches to white-collar crime emphasize the actions and nature of the illegal act

as the defining agent. In their comparison of the two approaches, Benson and Simpson (2015) discuss how offender-based definitions emphasize societal characteristics such as high social status, power, and respectability of the actor. Because status is not included in the definition of offense-based approaches and status is free to vary independently from the definition in most legislation, an offense-based approach allows measures of status to become external explanatory variables.

Benson and Simpson (2015) approach white-collar crime utilizing the opportunity perspective. They stress the idea that individuals with more opportunities to offend, with access to resources to offend, and that hold organizational positions of power are more likely to commit white-collar crime. Opportunities for crime are shaped and distributed according to the nature of economic and productive activities of various business and government sectors within society.

Benson and Simpson (2015) do not limit their opportunity perspective to activities in organizations. But they emphasize that opportunities are normally greater in an organizational context. Convenience theory, however, assumes that crime is committed in an organizational context to be labelled white-collar crime (Gottschalk, 2017). This is in line with Sutherland's (1939) original work, where he emphasized profession and position as key characteristics of offenders.

Gottschalk (2017) introduced convenience theory as an integrated explanation of white-collar crime, based on a number of theories from criminology and organizational behavior. Convenience is a concept that was theoretically mainly associated with efficiency in timesaving. Today, convenience is associated with a number of other characteristics, such as reduced effort and reduced pain. Convenience is associated with terms such as fast, easy, and safe. Convenience says something about attractiveness and accessibility (Sundström and Radon, 2015).

Public procurement corruption is one form of white-collar crime that involves a breach of trust or an abuse of position by federal, state or local government officials (Nestli, 2014). Elite public criminals can use the power and apparent legitimacy of their office to extort bribes or direct procurement to entities they control or from which they benefit. They can shape the environment by organizing procurement processes and formulating regulatory requirements. Private elites can indirectly achieve the same profitable results by suborning public officials to modify the

environment to benefit the private party, for example by going to a non-bid, sole-source market (Gottschalk and Smith, 2016).

4. Case Study

This article presents a case study of whistleblowing intentions and experiences in a Norwegian municipality. Sources of information include fraud investigation reports (e.g., BDO, 2016), media coverage (e.g., Berg, 2016, 2017; Karlsen, 2017) as well as interviews with both whistleblowers. Elements from the literature review on whistleblowing (e.g., Bjørkelo, 2011; Eriksen, 2017; Mpho, 2017) are compared to case information.

Content analysis (Patrucco et al., 2017) is the research methodology applied in this study of various documents concerned with suspicion of white-collar crime in public procurement (Nestli, 2014). Content analysis is a procedure that identifies specific characteristics within texts attempting to make valid inferences (McClelland et al., 2010: 1259):

Content analysis assumes that language reflects how people understand their surroundings and reflects their cognitive processes.

This case study research is exploratory in its perspectives as it wonders whether or not silence is golden, or whistleblowing is the preferred option when wrongdoing and misconduct is observed.

The case study design in this research has the individual whistleblower as the unit of analysis. The case study as a research strategy is used to contribute to our knowledge of individual whistleblowing and to the whistleblowing literature. As indicated by Yin (2003: 2), the case study has long been a common research strategy in psychology and organizational behavior, and “the distinctive need for case studies arises out of the desire to understand complex social phenomena”. Creswell (2003: 15) stresses that the researcher in case studies “explores in depth” one or more individuals.

5. Grimstad Case

In addition to suspected white-collar crime in the procurement of health care services, the municipal management in Grimstad also had to handle the whistleblowers. One of the notifiers engaged the country's leading whistleblowing expert as his attorney. In a sixteen-page letter, the lawyer takes a settlement of how the notifier had been treated. The lawyer makes a concrete claim for three hundred thousand Norwegian kroner (US 50.000 dollars) and announces that compensation may also be claimed (Berg, 2017).

A notifier or whistleblower is a person who believes to have discovered or uncovered and therefore notifies of critical circumstances or illegal activities in an organization in which he or she is employed or otherwise involved. A whistleblower was originally a person who witnessed a robbery and called attention by blowing a whistle. Today, the term is used of a person who calls attention to unacceptable conditions related to his or her own organization.

The other notifier hired an attorney who pointed out all the mistakes that the law firm working for the municipality should have made (Kluge, 2017). The law firm seems to have ended up with conclusions that the client preferred, such as denying access to e-mails and criticizing the whistleblower. Currently, the other notifier has not sued his employer.

The perceived power elite in Grimstad was suspected of systematic expulsion and retaliation (Berg, 2017; Eriksen, 2017), which is punishable in the criminal justice system in Norway. Local police and the central economic crime unit were considering a police investigation into both the health services procurement case as possible corruption and the expulsion and retaliation accusations.

There was suspicion of corruption, and the whistleblowers in favor of more investigation were hoping for answers. It would not come as a surprise to Grimstad inhabitants if corruption was detected. In a representative survey by the local newspaper, 3 out of 4 inhabitants suspected corruption in the municipality (Strand, 2017). As suggested by Nesti (2014), public procurement is extremely vulnerable to instances of fraud, corruption or waste due to the amount of money circulating between the public and the private sector.

A whistleblower is a person-based information source that can refer investigators to location-

based, archive-based, and technology-based information sources in a case. A notifier is a person who notices something blameworthy, and who tells it to someone who can do something about the critical issue. A person is not a whistleblower if negatively affected by the critical issue as a victim.

In Norway, the government extended the protection of whistleblowers on July 1, 2017. Now temporary employees can also report about critical conditions. All businesses with five employees or more are obliged to prepare procedures for whistleblowing and protection of whistleblowers. Retaliation prevention as well as position security are further strengthened.

Whistleblowers are protected in Norway from reprisals in the Working Environment Act from 2005: “Employees have the right to notify about critical circumstances in the employer’s business”; “Retaliation against an employee is prohibited”; and “If an employee discloses information that gives reason to believe that retribution has occurred; then it shall be assumed that such retaliation has actually taken place”.

The notifier who later sued the municipality for retaliation in the summer of 2017 (Eriksen, 2017), started by sending a message of 1874 words to all members of the municipality board in Grimstad on February 12, 2017, where he blew the whistle. Among others, he wrote:

Of course, at this time, I have thought a lot about how it was possible for this organization to commit so extensive breach of legislation, own procurement rules, and ethical guidelines as this case has revealed. How was this possible on the basis of the audit’s documentation in 2009 of major breaches of procurement legislation, the great erosion of this in 2010-2012, and the marketing of Grimstad municipality as a pioneer municipality in procurement? Why has nobody apparently put down the foot? Why did nobody blow the whistle before? There has been no lack of courses and knowledge about public procurement among executives in Grimstad municipality. And why has this happened so secretly? In a municipality that has not been reluctant to market itself with transparency? And what does it mean when so many executives apparently thought it appropriate to keep this case hidden from politicians elected and the public? That in an acute situation concerning placement of a user an action not according to the book can occur (in 2012) is understandable, but not that in 2017 similar services are purchased in complete conflict with laws and regulations.

Later in this article, the notifier who sued his employer is labeled B, while the other notifier is labeled A.

6. Literature Review

Whistleblowing involves revealing or exposing perceived negative secrets that an organization is involved in. Whistleblowing is an action by employees who believe that their business or colleague(s) are involved in activities of misconduct and financial crime, cause unnecessary harm, violate human rights or contribute to otherwise immoral offenses. Whistleblowing includes informing superiors, professional organizations, the public or some government agency of these activities (Mpho, 2017).

Ethical theories are concerned with egoism, deontology, and utilitarianism. According to Mpho (2017), the traditional ethical theory is that individuals aim to pursue their own self welfare. Individuals always act in their own self-interest. This theory might be rejected at whistleblowing because self-interest promotes selfishness. Many individuals think that being selfish is wrong, especially if it means that you are not considerate of others' wants and needs. Since egoism is based on the fundamentals of self-interest, and since there usually are no benefits to whistleblowing in most cases, there is no motive to reveal unethical or illegal acts by others. Only when there is something in it for the egoist, then whistleblowing can be an attractive action.

Deontology is an approach to ethics that focuses on the rightness or wrongness of actions themselves, as opposed to the rightness or wrongness of the consequences of those actions. Whistleblowing is carried out if it is considered the right thing to do.

Utilitarianism is only concerned with the outcome, while deontology is based on universalizing ones actions. In utilitarianism, the theme is to do an action which will benefit the greatest good for the greatest number of people. Whistleblowing may be supported by utilitarianism if it will benefit a significant number of people (Mpho, 2017).

Pittroff (2014: 124) applied legitimacy theory to explain the motivation to implement whistleblowing systems:

“By understanding whistle-blowing systems as an instrument that is desired by society, the legitimacy theory could be transferred to the whistle-blowing concept”.

Central to legitimacy theory is a social contract, which implies that the existence of an organization depends on the boundaries and norms of the society. The social contract contains specific expectations of the society about the optimal behavior of an organization.

Rothwell and Baldwin (2007) applied ethical climate theory to study police whistleblowing versus the code of silence. Ethical climate is what organizational members perceive to be the ethical norms and identity of the organization. Study findings suggest that developing a friendly, team-interest ethical climate might enhance willingness to blow the whistle.

The case of two whistleblowers in the Norwegian municipality Grimstad is interesting in light of research by Bjørkelo et al. (2011), who studied characteristics and experiences of self-reported whistleblowers in Norway. They found that whistleblowers reported low levels of retaliation at the same time as they reported less job satisfaction and more bullying at work than their non-reporting colleagues. They asked the rhetorical question “Silence is golden?” that is repeated here, without any clear answer.

Uhl-Bien and Carsten (2007: 188) explain silence by obedience:

“All too often, hierarchical role expectations cause employees to assume they should not speak up for fear of being blamed and attacked for problems or issues they raise (e.g., “kill the messenger”)”.

Bjørkelo et al. (2011) studied whistleblower characteristics in terms of tenure, job level, job satisfaction, gender and age. Experiences related to whistleblowing were measured with nine questions, such as nature of whistleblowing, how long it was since they had blown the whistle, types of wrongdoing, who the wrongdoers were, whistleblowing channels, blown the whistle alone or in collaboration with others, effects on the reported wrongdoing, reactions to the wrongdoers, and what happened to them personally after they had blown the whistle.

Average tenure was 11 years, average age was 44 years, and job satisfaction was 4.1 on a multiple item scale from 1 (satisfied) to 7 (dissatisfied). Whistleblowers were more often a man

(52%), a leader (25%) or a union or personnel safety representative (24%), compared to non-whistleblowers.

Whistleblowers mainly used internal channels, either by only reporting internally or by first blowing the whistle inside the organization and later reporting to recipients outside the organization. Very few whistleblowers reported only to external sources or to someone outside the organization before they reported internally. The overall majority of whistleblowers had blown the whistle in their current job, and these were the only whistleblowers included in further analysis by Bjørkelo et al. (2011). Harassment was the most frequently reported type of wrongdoing. Seven percent of the responding whistleblowers reported serious financial irregularities, which is the main focus of this article.

The wrongdoer was predominantly a colleague in Bjørkelo et al.'s (2011) study, and the wrongdoing was most often instantly stopped or reduced. Whistleblowers reported that wrongdoers received mixed reactions including just as much "no reaction" as "reprimand".

Whistleblowers reported to be met with both high levels of "no response" and low levels of "reward". Nothing happened to most of them. However, more whistleblowers than non-whistleblowers reported to be exposed to workplace bullying.

Bjørkelo et al.'s (2011) results in Norway might be compared to the UK, where Jones (2016) found that despite organizations encouraging employees to speak up about misconduct, organizations struggle to engage their staff to do so. Overall, it seems that Norway has a better record of responding to and protecting whistleblowers.

7. Two Whistleblowers

The two whistleblowers are compared in Tables 1 and 2. A and B blew the whistle independent of each other. Whistleblower A is 52 years old, and he has been employed in Grimstad municipality for 7 years. Whistleblower B is 61 years, and he has been employed in the municipality for 20 years. They both hired defense attorneys when they experienced reprisals.

Whistleblower A told in the interview that he has a reputation of being a critical finance manager.

He has always been open-minded when detecting misconduct. Within the health and care sector, there have been several negative deviations earlier. He considers himself to be an open and skilled person who tries to get hold of episodes as soon as they occur. His goal is to improve attitudes and routines. He reacts strongly to abuse of privileged positions.

Table 1.

Comparison of whistleblowers in Grimstad municipality (1:2)

| Issue | Whistleblower A | Whistleblower B | Comparison |
|--|---|---|--|
| <i>Position in organization</i> | Chief Financial Officer (CFO) in Grimstad municipality. | Special advisor to the councilor in Grimstad municipality. | At levels 3 (A) and 2 (B) in the hierarchy respectively. |
| <i>Contents of warning</i> | Assistant municipal manager for health and care services favors her sister-in-law as provider of health services without proper procurement process and incapacity. | Illegal direct purchases of NOK 50-100 million from 2012 to 2016, possibly corruption. | B formulates more specific allegations than A. |
| <i>Point in time</i> | April 2016. | February 2017. (Notice earlier). | More specific warning later by both A and B. |
| <i>Recipients of warning</i> | Acting councilor and municipal manager who is the CFO's superior. | All members of municipal council. (Notice to a few). | B distributed more widely than A. |
| <i>Reaction to warning</i> | First, no reaction, denied receipt. Normal management. Next, auditing report confirms warning. | First, ignorance and rejection. Next, whistleblowing letter not processed. Then, public harassment. | Public support for B after media attention. |
| <i>Media first time</i> | December 2016. | February 2017. | B more open to media than A. |
| <i>Reprisals from employer</i> | Disregard, deprived responsibility for work tasks, called on the carpet, hung out in report. | Lost assignments, criticized publicly by the mayor, breach of confidentiality. | Tougher treatment of B than A. |
| <i>Defense lawyer response</i> | Criticism of internal investigation, legal process, lack of independence, and lack of objectivity. Claim for retaliation. | Claim for redemption of NOK 300.000 and possible compensation claim in the future. | B sued his employer, A did not so far. |
| <i>Status for</i> | Sick leave because of | Sick leave because of | B does some |

| | | | |
|--------------------------------|------------|------------|--------------------------------|
| <i>whistleblower June 2017</i> | reprisals. | reprisals. | municipality work, A does not. |
|--------------------------------|------------|------------|--------------------------------|

Table 2.

Comparison of whistleblowers in Grimstad municipality (2:2)

| Issue | Whistleblower A | Whistleblower B | Comparison |
|--|--|--|---|
| <i>Silence is golden?</i> | Must raise voice when misconduct occurs in the organization. | Never considered not to blow the whistle | No regrets and would both do it again. |
| <i>Blown the whistle before?</i> | No, but in the case of more unreasonable decisions. | As children's ombudsman blew the whistle in 2003. | B more exposed than A. |
| <i>Conspiracy theory?</i> | Financial motive when sister-in-law gets contracts for services not required. Link between religious leaders in the community. | Link between health services procurement and foreign aid in Africa. Link between religious leaders in the community. | Agree on links to religious organizations involved in Africa mission. |
| <i>Who are friends?</i> | Some politicians, the audit, employees who have been taken over. | Inhabitants, media, some politicians, and a very few colleagues. | Similar friends. |
| <i>Who are enemies?</i> | Executives, to whom the criticism is addressed, police management, as well as administrative senior personnel. | Previous and current political and bureaucratic top level people in the municipality. | Similar enemies. |
| <i>Trade union support?</i> | No, union leaders loyal to executive management rather than members. | Some support from local union. | B more independent of union leaders than A. |
| <i>Professional information handling?</i> | No, information about whistleblower leaked in the town hall. | More open to information sharing. | A more discomfort at public attention than B. |

When A blew the whistle, he experienced ignorance and lack of responsibility and accountability from his superiors. When the BDO (2016) report became publicly available, his name was often mentioned in a negative context. In January 2017, he contacted a lawyer and claimed retaliation (Eriksen, 2017), and provided several examples of reprisals. He then experienced strong expulsion from union officials, as well as employees and managers. He felt he was stabbed in the

back. Many looked away, went another way and did not say hello.

When whistleblower B emerged, whistleblower A experienced that the pressure on himself was reduced. Instead, he was completely ignored. After a while on sick leave, he was called in on the carpet to be told that his CFO position was to disappear because of reorganization.

Whistleblower A expressed his frustration in an e-mail saying (Kluge, 2017: 7):

“I feel that I am banned from the inter-municipal ERP project. Throughout the autumn, I have asked the local executive of business management if it would be appropriate for me to participate. This is because ERP is the core system of my area of responsibility. The system includes accounting, reporting, and budgeting”.

In the whistleblowing case A, Grimstad’s law firm partner concluded that no retaliation had occurred (Kluge, 2017: 66):

“Based on our investigations, it is our opinion that the chief financial officer has not been subject to retaliation on the basis of his notice”.

The 66-pages report by Kluge (2017) discusses a series of incidents where A was treated badly, but each episode does not in itself represent retaliation according to the law firm. However taken together, both the number of incidents and the kind of incidents seem to represent retaliation and reprisals from his superiors (Olsen, 2017).

Whistleblower A is convinced that retaliation occurred because of his statements in the BDO (2016) investigation report on health service purchases. In the report, A describes the climate for negative expressions and alerts as really bad in Grimstad municipality:

Whistleblower B was much more exposed in the media, and some quotes illustrate his attitude (Skår and Andersen, 2017):

“It is absolutely unacceptable to leave the case”.

He is called whistleblower, but actually he just did his job. He simply told about illegal purchases in Grimstad municipality.

He became aware of the misconduct in the spring of 2016. He realized that there were direct acquisitions without framework agreements. These should be in the order of one hundred million Norwegian kroner.

He also discovered that the malpractice had been going on for several years, and that there were more people in the municipality who knew about it. Despite that, he was the first to take action, as far as he knew at the time.

“For my part, I reacted strongly that no one had informed the Control Committee in a proper manner. This is a very serious violation of very basic standards”, he says.

B blew the whistle twice concerning illegal procurement of health care services. He did it first time to the chairman of the control committee and to the leader of the auditing service in April 2016. That started the case rolling. They promised confidentiality. But they did not keep their promise. The second time was open whistleblowing to the entire municipality council.

B has been employed in Grimstad municipality for 27 years. He perceives retaliation from both the councilor and the mayor of the town (Eriksen, 2017).

The police showed little interest neither in the case of possible law violation in terms of corruption at public procurement or in the case of possible law violations by reprisals and retaliation (Berg, 2017).

8. Discussion

This article explores the experiences of two whistleblowers in the context of a municipality. Exploring the individual and contextual drivers of unethical behavior is an important line of inquiry within occupational and organizational psychology, and case studies can be helpful in providing new insights.

An interesting observation in the Grimstad case is that very many people have left their positions in the municipality in recent years. For example, one of the suspects, the deputy manager for health and care, whose sister-in-law is running the health care businesses, resigned in June 2017

to take on a similar position in a neighboring municipality. It seemed that many saw a potential crisis coming if the Control Committee with the help of an external investigator would get to the bottom of the health service procurement case and the whistleblower handling case.

The whistleblowers received massive support in the community as local newspapers (e.g., Berg, 2016, 2017; Karlsen, 2017) presented more facts about their case. For example, Schieldrop (2017: 18) expressed his support by stating that the whistleblowers deserve respect:

“Whistleblowers are to me honorary men who dare stand up and say hello, here is something that is not correct, something that must and should withstand the light of day”.

In July 2017, another act of retaliation occurred from the councilman on whistleblower A. The councilman presented to him an organization map where he was no longer included (Ellingsen, 2017; Eriksen, 2017).

The experience of whistleblowers A and B can be discussed in terms of general findings from research on whistleblowing in local government in Norway. Skivenes and Trygstad (2016) conducted such an empirical study of contact patterns and whistleblowing in 20 Norwegian municipalities. They found that a lower degree of contact between politicians and administrative employees is correlated with negative perceptions of whistleblowing and destructive handling of wrongdoing reports by the politicians.

Skivenes and Trygstad (2016) applied institutional theory as a platform to understand how tensions between and within regulative environments in local governments can affect the contact patterns between politicians and employees in the municipality. The two main findings of their study are that contact between politicians and administrative employees is common and that the degree of contact between politicians and administrative employees is positively correlated with politicians who take action to address whistleblowing cases.

In the Grimstad case, there seems to be a substantial extent of contact between politicians and administrative employees. Nevertheless, the whistleblowing from A and B has not really been addressed. One reason might be that the communication challenge cannot be found between administration and politics, but rather within the administration itself.

There are several avenues for future research. While there is a depth that the presented Grimstad case offers, including the use of interviews and text documents from our inquiry, the focus on two cases of individual whistleblowers in one particular setting provides only a narrow and limited account. Next, there is a need to embed and contribute to psychological theory. There are a number of research studies on unethical behavior, and they should be included in future research. Studies by Morrison (2014) and Trevino et al. (2014) are two examples.

9. Conclusion

Characteristics and experiences of whistleblowers is an important field of research for work and organizational psychology. Detection and prevention of misconduct and crime is dependent on people internally who are not afraid to speak up and tell about their observations. This article has presented two whistleblowers who – despite perceived retaliation and reprisals – are willing to do it again. They simply define it as part of their job.

This article discussed an example of how local workplace and organizational cultures as well as local societal cultures (family bonds, religious bonds) are often stronger than, and therefore overpowering of legal and policy frameworks. The example emphasized suspicion of white-collar crime, as the whistleblowers pointed upwards in the organization concerning misconduct and potential financial crime. While Norway has been traditionally regarded as a country that is more positively disposed towards whistleblowers than some other countries, the Grimstad case illustrates that also Norway may have a long way to go.

It is obviously too soon to reach final conclusions, given that some aspects of the case are still to be determined. For example, neither internal e-mail investigation nor police investigation is decided at this point in time. It may be that it will be easier to make sense of all of this when some of the remaining issues have been resolved. However, it is interesting and relevant to present research of a phenomenon where the final outcome is not known. It is important that this research is not influential or even prejudicial to ongoing investigations, as everyone is innocent until the opposite is convincingly proven.

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