

THE EFFECT OF LAW ENFORCEMENT'S SOCIALIZATION PROCESS ON THE WHISTLE- BLOWING BEHAVIOR OF POLICE OFFICERS

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ABSTRACT

As we read our newspapers or listen to our televised evening news we become astonished by stories of employees who seem to have knowledge of illegal, immoral or illegitimate activities in their organizations but choose to keep silent about these activities. While researchers are providing new information concerning the organizational whistle-blowing process and how to properly manage that process, there seems to be a void in research that examines the perception and/or definition of what constitutes wrong-doing. The current article addresses that void by proposing that an individual's lack of whistle blowing behavior may not be based on a conscience choice to act unethically or illegally in an effort to cover up wrong-doing, but instead may be a result of a strong socialization process that internalizes a shared meaning and perceptions of accepted activities or behaviors. It has been suggested in research that law enforcement organizations have one of the strongest socialization processes of any organization. For that reason this article will focus on how law enforcement's strong socialization process affects the police officer's perspective of what constitutes an illegal and/or unethical act.

INTRODUCTION

As we read our newspapers or listen to our televised evening news we become astonished by stories of employees who seem to have knowledge of illegal, immoral or illegitimate activities in their organizations but choose to keep silent about these activities. The lack of reporting and covering up of acts of sexual abuse at Penn State university, the lack of reporting by Bernie Madoff's employees in reference to his Ponzi scheme, the failure to properly report information during the U.S. government's handling of the Benghazi situation and the almost endless reports of police and military officers not reporting the wrong-doing of fellow officers are just a few of the type stories that seem to be reported daily by our news media. It was reported in a workplace ethics survey (Hudson Employment Index, 2005) that 31% of U.S. employees stated they witnessed their company and/or their co-workers engaging in illegal and/or unethical behavior but only 52% of those employees reported that wrong-doing to authorities. As more and more of these situations and statistics are brought to the public's attention, the answer to the following question has continued to elude organizational researchers, management practitioners and society in general:

Why do so many seemingly normal people in organizations observe questionable activity but continue to allow the obvious wrong-doing to persist instead of simply blowing the whistle on the perpetrators?

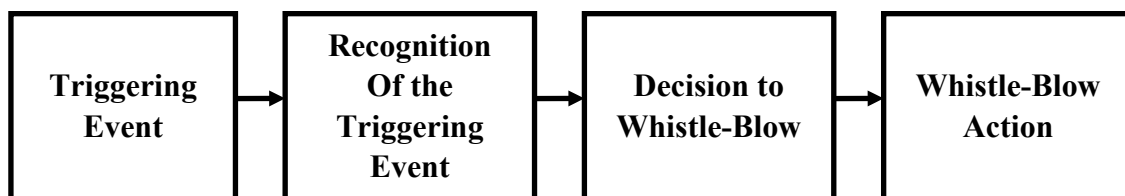
Researchers are starting to realize the importance of whistle-blowing as a form of governance in organizational operations. Miceli and Near (2005) stated that the most effective means for reducing the occurrence of unethical behavior in organizations is for the employees of the organization to step up and report witnessed unethical behavior to authorities. While researchers are starting to provide new information concerning organizational whistle-blowing behaviors and how to properly manage the whistle-blowing process (c.f., Miceli, Near, & Dworkin, 2008; Vadera, Aquilera & Caza, 2009) there seems to be a void in the research which focuses on understanding the intricate and complex individual cognitive process involved in the individual's recognition and/or identification of a wrong-doing, described by Miceli and Near (1992) as the first stage of the whistle-blowing process.

The present article addresses this gap in the literature by proposing that an individual's lack of whistle blowing behavior may not be based on a conscience cognitive choice to act unethically or illegally in an effort to cover up wrong-doing, but instead may be a result of a strong socialization process that internalizes a shared meaning and perceptions of accepted activities or behaviors.

It has been suggested in research that law enforcement organizations have one of the strongest socialization processes of any organization (Ashforth & Saks, 1996; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979) and also one of the most infamous reputations of not blowing the whistle (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979; Trautman, 2001; Rothwell & Baldwin, 2006). "The Brotherhood", "The Blue Curtain", and "The Code of Silence" are just a few of the descriptive titles that we commonly see in movies, news reports, books or magazines that allude to police officers' reputation of not reporting organizational wrong-doing. For that reason this article will focus on how law enforcement's strong socialization process affects the first stage of the police officer's whistle-blowing process (i.e. the recognition of illegal and/or unethical acts.)

WHISTLE-BLOWING PROCESS

To help in understanding this process, Miceli and Near (1992) offered a seminal model depicting the basic stages of the whistle-blowing process.



Model of the Stages of Whistle-blowing. Adopted from Miceli & Near (1992)

Miceli and Near (1992) state that the whistle-blowing process begins when a triggering event, defined as an illegal, immoral, or illegitimate act of commission or omission by an organization or organizational member, is recognized by an organizational member and a decision

is made on the part of the observer as to what to do about it. Agreeing with Miceli and Near's earlier work, Henik (2007) states that the first stage of the whistle-blowing process consists of four distinct judgments: 1) Judgment that the observed activity is problematic;

2) Judgment of whether the activity is deserving of action; 3) Judgment that the observer is personally responsible to act; 4) Judgment of what action is possible and appropriate.

In ethical research it has long been accepted that factors exist that affect individuals' perspectives of ethical and unethical activity (c.f., Barnett & Vaicys, 2000; Paolillo & Vitell, 2002). In stark contrast to this theoretical foundation of differences in ethical perspectives, it appears that the whistle-blowing literature mostly rejects the premise of idiosyncrasy in perceptions of ethical judgment. Instead, the whistle-blowing research seems to accept a more universal perception of ethical judgment wherein each observer of a questionable activity is assumed to have the same right/wrong perception (c.f., Dworkin & Baucus, 1998; King, 1999; Miceli & Near, 1992) and therefore, the only real ethical decision is whether or not to blow the whistle. No consideration is given for the possibility that some individuals might see an activity as illegal, immoral or illegitimate, thereby, constituting a "triggering event", while others see the same activity as a legal, moral and a legitimate activity. If the observer makes a judgment that the activity in question is not problematic, then the observer does not continue to the other three judgments suggested by Henik (2007). If the observer doesn't recognize the activity as a wrongdoing there will be no decision of whether or not to blow the whistle (Arnett & Hunt, 2002; Miceli & Near, 1992; Miceli & Near, 1985). In this case "perception becomes reality" to the observer; meaning, even if in reality the act is illegal or unethical, the observer will not treat it as such unless he/she perceives the act to be illegal or unethical.

Often this seems to be a strange occurrence to individuals who are not part of an organization where the activity in question takes place. Dalton (1959) described such a situation where an American company experienced a 15% loss of the firm's materials due to what was later described as "employee theft". When Dalton questioned the workers as to why they participated in the taking of the materials or did not report the individuals who took the materials, they stated that they felt the taking of the materials was a 'legitimate activity' within the organization; therefore, no one considered reporting it to authorities. A much more sinister example can be found in the history of the Nazi bureaucracy of World War II. Hitler's followers participated in the genocide of scores of innocent people without hesitation or remorse. While the outside world considered these followers to be evil inhuman monsters, the followers in later interviews described themselves as compliant, ambitious, patriotic members of a particular form of social organization to which they were blindly or mindlessly devoted (Bauman, 1989; De Mildt, 1996). The Nazi followers stated they never considered not participating in the activities, nor did they consider reporting the questionable activity, because to them, it was deemed to be normal activities inside the Nazi organization (Bauman, 1989; De Mildt, 1996).

ORGANIZATIONAL SOCIALIZATION

When an individual enters an organization he/she begins to experience the organization's distinct way of life complete with its own rhythms, rewards, relationships, demands, languages and potentials (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). The individual entering the organization for the

first time is naive and begins searching for ways to make sense of the new environment and a means of relieving the stress associated with the ambiguity of the situation. The key to understanding this new environment, and thus becoming an effective member of the organization, lies in the acquisition of a variety of information and behaviors (Fisher, 1986; Weick, 1995). This learning process is referred to as “organizational socialization”.

The value system of an individual is a product of personal, societal and cultural experiences. The more specific values are developed in later life as the individual joins social institutions and work organizations (Meglino & Ravlin, 1998). Organizational socialization can be defined as the newcomer’s internalization of an organizational value system which standardizes which behaviors and perspectives are acceptable, customary and desirable, and which behaviors and perspectives are considered deviant, taboo and unacceptable (Ashforth & Saks, 1996). During the socialization process newcomers will begin to interpret their experiences within the context of the organization’s milieu (Fisher, 1986; Van Maanen, 1976). Van Maanen and Schein (1979) state that the behaviors, values, and beliefs socialized by the individual will become just a “natural” response to the problematic environment encountered as a member of the organization, just as the Nazi followers behaviors seemed to suggest.

The more unique an organization’s mission, identity, and culture, the more effort the organization devotes to changing the newcomer by divesting them of their incoming attributes and predispositions (Dyer, 1985). No organization receives more attention for devoting time and resources into making this type of personal change in the newcomer than do law enforcement organizations (Ashforth & Saks, 1996; Jones, 1986; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). During initial training, law enforcement organizations use a type of “institutional” socialization process where they locate the new officers in a police academy environment which is isolated from the outside world. During these early days of the socialization process the officer is subjected to rules and regulations that disparage individuality and encourage conformity and internalization of organizational sanctioned behaviors, beliefs and values (Ashforth & Saks, 1996). Van Maanen (1975) refers to this internalization as “gaining the organizational perspective.”

Upon successful completion of the police academy, the recruit will then be placed in the true work environment where he will experience firsthand the difference in the environment in which he works and the environment in which he lives as a civilian, thereby, reinforcing the belief that the internalization of the organizational culture is a survival decision (Van Maanen, 1973). The recruit has now entered into the “police brotherhood” (Van Maanen, 1975).

Theoretical and empirical evidence exists that suggests that at the completion of the socialization process, the police officer will share value patterns with others in their occupational group; while the police officer’s value patterns will differ significantly from the value patterns of individuals in other occupations (Bjerregaard & Lord, 2004; Conser & Russell, 2000; Klockars, Ivkovich, Harver, & Haberfeld, 2000).

Therefore, the law enforcement socialization process may be said to manipulate the value systems of the recruits in order to create the new organizationally sanctioned value system which exists within the police environment- a value system that is distinctively different from the value systems of individuals in other occupational groups in the American society and likewise, different

from the value system the police officers have outside of the police environment (Rokeach, Miller, & Snyder, 1971).

The current article posits that this is possibly the reason that issues such as excessive force, individual rights violations, and profiling of individuals are viewed differently between police and non-police individuals. Often such situations are brought to the police organization's attention by concerned citizens but seldom does internal investigations by police departments find merit for these types of complaints; a finding that often astonishes complainants and the public at large. On April 29, 1992, the world got a glimpse of this phenomenon when four police officers were acquitted of any wrong-doing in the beating of Los Angeles resident Rodney King which was videotaped and viewed by millions. The police administration investigation concluded, and a criminal court jury later agreed, that the police officers were just following law enforcement procedures used in the apprehensive of aggressive suspects in the dangerous environment in which the police officers operate.

While members of the law enforcement's internal investigation team may see this type of aggressive behavior as wrong or even illegal outside of the police environment, they, like other socialized law enforcement officers have internalized a kind of "being in the same boat", or "us vs. them" paradigm. The socialized officers view themselves as individuals who perform society's dirty work in an environment like no other (Van Maanen 1975). Socialized law enforcement officers perceive their work environment as a setting where previously accepted values and behaviors are dangerously unacceptable and the internalization of the organizational culture is not just an option, but a means for survival (Van Maanen, 1973).

This current article suggests that the socialized police officers' perception of a questionable activity outside of the socialized police context is similar to individuals who are not socialized police officers; however, when the questionable activity occurs within the socialized police context the police officer's perception of the activity may significantly differ. This theoretical foundation seems to suggest that law enforcement's strong "institutional" socialization process will provide, instill and maintain guidelines for how a police officer distinguishes between right and wrong within the police context. The individuals outside the law enforcement context are not exposed to the same volatile environment or socialization process as the police officer and therefore, will not perceive the ethical situations in the same way. Therefore we posit the following propositions:

P1: Socialized police officers' perceptions of what constitutes right and wrong within the law enforcement context are significantly different than non-socialized individuals.

P2: Socialized police officers' perceptions of what constitutes right and wrong outside of the law enforcement context are not significantly different from the judgments of individuals who are not socialized police officers.

Ethical behavior research suggests that an inverse correlation exists between the perceived ethicalness of an activity and the propensity to report that activity to authorities capable of stopping the unethical behavior (Arnett & Hunt, 2002; Miceli & Near, 1992; Miceli & Near, 1985). Simply

stated, the desire to report an unethical behavior is dependent on the degree to which the individual sees the situation as an illegal or unethical behavior.

Since the socialized police officer shares similar judgments about the ethicalness of questionable activities outside of the police context with individuals who are not socialized police officers, the current article posits that they should share reporting behaviors as well. When the activities occur within the police context, where the officer has internalized the “police perception” of what constitutes a wrong-doing, different from the perception of a non-socialized individual, then the reporting behaviors should differ.

Based on this foundation the following propositions are given:

P3: Socialized police officer's reporting of questionable activity as unethical is not significantly different than individuals who are not socialized police officers when the questionable activity occurs outside the law enforcement context.

P4: Socialized police officer's reporting of questionable activity as unethical is significantly less than individuals who are not socialized police officers when the questionable activity occurs within the law enforcement context.

STUDY IMPLICATIONS

The present article will contribute to the body of research literature in many areas. First, if the study reveals that socialized police officers do indeed, perceive questionable activity differently than do non-police individuals, then this information can help law enforcement administrators understand the importance of socialization of the police officer. The administration should design their organization so the officers are being socialized to the values, beliefs, and perspectives that are sanctioned by the organization. Values, beliefs, and perceptions that are contrary to the policies and procedures of the organization should be eliminated from the socialization process when possible. With this knowledge, administrations and trainers can design more effective policies to manage police activities and develop training programs that would help officers and non-officers to understand the problems and situations which may occur as a result of these differences in perspectives.

Secondly, this research would add to the body of knowledge in the field of socialization research. This study will demonstrate that strong socialization processes can cause socialized individuals to have a homogeneous perspective of what constitutes wrong doing. A perspective that is often different from the perspectives of non-socialized individuals. This finding helps non-organizational members to understand why individuals inside an organization may share perspectives that are very diverse from the perspectives of non-organizational members.

Finally, this study leads to a greater understanding of the whistle-blowing phenomena by introducing a new concept to the whistle-blowing literature. The new concept is the suggestion that more attention should be given to the individual's perspective of what constitutes wrongdoing in an organization. Contrary to previous whistle-blowing literature, the whistle-blowing decisions

do not start once a wrong-doing has occurred, but instead, starts with the perception of what constitutes a wrong-doing. With this understanding, the researcher and practitioner have a better theoretical foundation from which to continue their research or develop better management practices.

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