



Overcoming stigma: Whistleblowers as ‘supranormal’ members of society?

Ian Foxley

abstract

Stigma originated in Classical Greece as a social mechanism marking specific individuals as blemished, ritually polluted and to be avoided, especially in public places and designed to expose something unusual and bad about the moral status of the bearer. Such practices occur today, especially to those willing to step forward to expose immorality, illegality, or abuse in all sectors of society often at great personal and professional expense to themselves and their families. This research note explores ethical-political dimensions of whistleblowing through the lens of stigma, documenting the experience of current UK whistleblowers and the ways in which stigma is applied to them. Taking Goffman’s delineation of social normality and abnormality, it contributes to a greater understanding of whistleblowing in general by questioning if they suffered stigma as a result of their disclosures and proposes that Goffman’s compartmentalisation of society could be expanded to incorporate a new definition of *supranormal* as a core segment of normality covering whistleblowers.

Introduction

Pity therefore the messengers who are marked and stigmatised for their unfortunate role rather than their message. (Sophocles, 441 BC/2013)

Stigma is a Classical Greek term referring to bodily signs (e.g. branding, tattooing, cutting) designed to expose something unusual and bad about the moral status of the bearer. The signs were burned, marked or cut, into an exposed part of the body (stigmatisation) to mark them as a blemished person, ritually polluted and to be avoided, especially in public places. The secondary purpose was to actively deter others from following their example (Goffman,

1963). Inflicting harm on those who are the bearers of bad news has long been a means of sending a clear negative response both to the originator and to all who observe its reception.

This research note explores the ethical-political dimensions of whistleblowing through the lens of stigma, documenting the experience of current UK whistleblowers. It is based on empirical research conducted in 2017 for a Master's dissertation (Foxley, 2017) at the *Centre of Applied Human Rights (CAHR)*, University of York, and is currently being developed as doctoral research. Taking Goffman's delineation of social normality and abnormality, it attempts to contribute to a greater understanding of whistleblowing in general by questioning if and how they were stigmatised as a result of their disclosures, and further proposes an extension of Goffman's binary delineation of normality to incorporate a notion of whistleblowers as 'supranormal', as opposed to a stigmatised categorisation of 'abnormal' members of an ethical society.

The status of the whistleblower

The standard definition of whistleblowing is: 'the disclosure by organization members (former or current) of illegal, immoral and illegitimate practices under the control of their employers to persons and organizations that may be able to effect action' (Miceli and Near, 1985: 2). Whistleblowers are commonly defined as individuals acting to prevent harm in others, trying first to rectify the situation within the framework of their organisation, and in possession of evidence that would convince a reasonable person (Glazer and Glazer, 1989) that wrongdoing has occurred. But whistleblowers are frequently charged with subversion or labelled as otherwise socially and professionally undesirable in order to isolate them from their own population (Bjørkelo and Macko, 2012). 'Naming and shaming' has become a modern technique as a form of public punishment made popular, and easier, through the advent of social media (Ronson, 2016). This 'stigmatisation' is used as a weapon to restrict their activities, reduce their voice and remove popular support for the messages they speak (Ash, 2016). Organisations appear to use systematic destruction of the individual's reputation through stigmatisation as a primary defensive mechanism: the credibility of the disclosure and the witness versus the organisation's credibility in explaining the disputed issue is a key factor in a reputational battle (Alford, 2001; Devine and Maassarani, 2011).

The efficacy of whistleblowing relies upon credibility, which in turn is founded on the validity of the evidence and the trustworthiness of the discloser (Paul and Townsend, 1996). Whilst organisations or regimes might not easily refute

documented evidence, they can more easily damage or destroy a reputation, and thus the credibility of the individual. Indeed, if the character and evidence of the whistleblower are believed then the perpetrators and their organisation stand to have their personal, professional and corporate reputations damaged with potentially enormous commercial, political and economic losses ensuing (Dasgupta and Kesharwani, 2010). Thus, the issue of disclosure of wrong-doing rapidly escalates into a war of reputations as a matter of survival and stigmatisation of the individual, or the organisation, becomes a key weapon in this war for public credibility. This conflict therefore becomes, politically, a matter of organisational transgression versus individual transgression (Alford, 2001). As the sovereign or corporate entity utilises the full range of its soft and hard resources to diminish the threat, it frequently reduces the credibility of the witness, and therefore of his/her evidence, and deters others from following a similar path. Thus, stigmatisation of the individual becomes an essential element of the organisation's defensive strategy.

There is an oft-voiced organisational 'concern' that whistleblowers are 'snitches' or 'telltails', mere informers acting out of grudge or profit driven self-interest rather than a sense of duty or citizenship (Armstrong et al., 2015; Oakley and Myers, 2004; Skivenes and Trygstad, 2010). Thus, in the public eye, this labelling subtly induces a paradoxical skepticism about the true motives of whistleblowers set against the valuable insights and knowledge that they bring regarding illegal, immoral or abusive behaviour (Vinten, 1994).

It is this ethical paradox that is most interesting: why does society seemingly turn against people who are trying to do good and honest things? Is it a gullible society reacting to a protectionist message framed by vested interests wishing to safeguard the status quo, or is there a much more deep-seated emotion (fear) that views loyalty to the local group over the higher principle of wider civic citizenship (Hay and Payne, 2015; Vinten, 1994)? The core of the ethico-political problem is that in order for society to be integrated, it must not only give the impression of being honest, coherent and continuous, it must appear to be integrated with a transcendent moral order (Shils, 1975). Thus, for an individual to question this appearance, and produce proof that it is at fault or is failing in one of its essential duties, goes to the very heart of what that society, regime or organisation is trying to portray and places the individual at odds with it (Alford, 2001). Ethically, it should follow honest practices; politically, it might not be expedient to do so, and brave is the individual who stands up to publicly say that they do otherwise.

It is not the message or the messenger that is at fault. It is rather the inability of the society or organisation to accept that it can be at fault and is thus less than the honest, coherent and ethical entity it endeavours to portray. But for society to

improve it must know what, when, where and how things go wrong within it and it is important that individuals feel that they can speak up, honestly and without fear of recrimination or stigma, when they observe wrong-doing or abuse. We need therefore to know what happens to them when they speak up, how they respond to the reaction they receive and, therefore, how we might develop greater protection for others who might do so in future. So, what can we learn from whistleblowers' experience of stigma and how they cope with it?

Stigma

Stigma is the designation of an attribute that is deeply discrediting which will lead to the rejection or isolation of an individual by his/her society (Goffman, 1963). It exists when elements of labelling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination occur together in a power situation that allows them (Link and Phelan, 2001). Link and Phelan's description accurately describes the experience that most whistleblowers undergo (Alford, 2001; Ash, 2016; Glazer and Glazer, 1989; Harding, 2015; Miceli et al., 2008) and thus it is reasonable to accept that the underlying process is systematically applied and is not particular to any specific individual.

The purpose of stigmatisation

Stigmatization is a humbling experience. Essentially, it seeks to isolate, degrade in status, and publicly mark and ostracise the incumbent. It produces a confusion in the mind where, what should be a source of pride, becomes a source of shame and humility, producing pain not pleasure. Shame, in its turn, leads to a lowering of self-esteem and a reduction in self-confidence: equally, self-respect and public respect stand and fall together. Stigma denigrates: it attacks the individual's sense of worth and self-respect undermining one's sense of value to others where public esteem is deemed to be the greatest good and to be ill-spoken of is the greatest evil. Public esteem for the individual, or lack of it, depends on that individual's success or failure judged on the basis of some code which embodies that society's values. Thus, to be stigmatised unfairly appears to the 'victim' to be not only unfair but unjust, and to an individual motivated by honest intent acting to do good for others, such labelling is abhorrent (Taylor, 1985). This strategic framing as the 'Mad or bad' (UK) (or 'Nuts and sluts' (US)), offers the organisation/regime the opportunity to distract attention through deflection of blame and transform the process from one of ethical disclosure into one of personal wrong-doing and thus discipline (Alford, 2001). In the corporate world, it is often expressed as employee underperformance, personal troublemaking, or even theft of company information; in the

societal/governmental world it manifests in misrepresented intelligence data, accusations of subversion, traitor status, organised revolution and even terrorism (Bennett et al., 2015; UN General Assembly, 2015).

Stigma as a means of social control

In extremis, we have the spectre of an Orwellian world where, in a parallel to Winston Smith, the dissenter's mental health is questioned for daring to question the established order and is in need therefore of re-education – a world that became all too real in the 'cultural revolution' of Maoist China and the Gulag era of Stalinist Russia (Orwell, 1949). 'Social controls' refer to the processes and structures used to prevent or reduce deviance (Cohen, 1985). Thus, stigmatisation becomes a political weapon wielded surreptitiously as a form of social control by organisations in order to punish the instigator, whilst deterring and pre-emptively disciplining others. Notably though, when societies allow, or at least do not object, to the use of stigma against those who act to blow the whistle on acts of immorality, illegality, injustice or abuse, they implicitly endorse such organisational behaviour which then becomes the accepted 'norm'.

But the sacrifice of the whistleblower on the altar of organisational or societal political necessity cannot be acknowledged: it must remain private and hidden (Alford, 2001). Alford's premise on societal power needs extending to add that the act of stigmatisation *must* remain unrecognised by that power, because to do otherwise obliges it, if it wishes to remain regarded as a transcendent ethical entity, to take action to rectify the situation. This is why, despite the overwhelming evidence of violations against whistleblowers there is an organisational inertia to respond, effectively protect and compensate those who dare to 'speak truth to power'. To do so would invite others to follow their path and thus the political takes priority over the ethical.

Deviance or abnormality?

Alford introduces the idea of the individual who steps outside his or her society as a deviant, even if it is accomplished for the most noble of reasons. Thus, we are forced to consider the purposeful sub-liminal labelling of whistleblowers as outsiders to be ostracised by the organisation or society and cast 'beyond the pale' (Alford, 2001: 23). Lakoff bridges the conceptual gap between Goffman and Alford recognising that actions which are characterised metaphorically as 'deviant' are those which threaten the identity of *normal* people, because they call into question their most common and sacred values (Lakoff, 1996). But 'deviant' actions, as enacted by whistleblowers, are particularly threatening through their potential to affect other members of the organisation or society by 'pioneering' a new path which questions an accepted practice and which others may then feel

safe to travel if the pathfinder is not suppressed. The danger perceived by the organisation or regime of course is that once the dam is broken, the deluge will overcome those who live safely in the hinterland below. Alford goes further to declare that the purpose of 'sacrificing' the whistleblower is to prevent the outbreak of an epidemic of ethical responsibility that would 'threaten to engulf the organization (and existing structures of the local society/regime or government), destroying its ability (or so its members fear) to maintain its boundless autonomy in a hostile world' (Alford, 2001: 130).¹

Becker's 'labelling theory' incorporates the concept of stigma noting that the majority in a society negatively label a minority or those believed to deviate from the standard accepted cultural norm (Becker, 1963). But it does not appear to address the paradox of the exponent of norms disclosing an abnormality, and thereby being 'labelled' as deviant for breaking a 'secret norm' against confidential disclosure. I describe this as 'the whistleblowing paradox' whereby we are faced with the contradictory proposition of Society publicly declaring support for the honest disclosure of wrongdoing and then penalising those who practice it by stigmatising them. Few, if any, whistleblowers would consider themselves as deviants, even though by definition their behaviour could be considered to deviate from the accepted status quo in their immediate socio-political environment. Neither though do they consider themselves as 'rule creators' or 'enforcers' in Becker's sense, but more in the role of rule notifiers, informing the creators and enforcers that a deviation has occurred and reminding them of their obligations to note, investigate and act to correct the issue. Cohen (1966) observes that where there are rules there is deviance but he also notes that it can serve as a warning signal to the organisation or society that there is a systemic or procedural failing that needs attention and rectification. The basis of the deviant or abnormal behaviour is founded on its validity and propriety and thus may be considered to be non-conformist rather than aberrant. The non-conformer 'aims to change the norms he is denying in practice ... he wants to replace what he believes to be morally suspect norms with ones having a sound moral base' (Cohen, 1966: 19). This reflects very well with the motivational reasoning of whistleblowers whom Becker (1963) termed 'moral entrepreneurs', those with a strong enough personal interest in the enactment of the law to take the initiative and press for its passage. The problem for the organisation/regime is that whistleblowers upset 'the moral order' by pointing out its deficiencies and immorality or lack of integrity (Lakoff, 1996).

1 The additions in brackets here are my extensions to Alford's quotes.

Imposed or participative?

Goffman (1963) expands on the original overt signs of 'stigma' to describe clearly their categorisation in the physical, moral/ethical and tribal spheres and thus brings us to the core concept of acceptance, or rejection, within society. But his description of 'actual' and 'virtual identity' is incomplete: he offers us the concept of an imposed virtual identity but does not appear to recognise the ability of the individual to influence such an image projection to create their own 'acceptable' version of it (Goffman, 1963). Thus, stigma is imposed upon its victims as if they are incapable of resisting or fighting back. Stigma might be created by society, but it does not need to be accepted by the individual: indeed, by the end of his treatise, Goffman recognises that it is *not* a simple two-part process but a participative process and thus, implicitly, it can be moulded.

Normal versus abnormal

Central to Goffman's thesis is the idea of societal normality with the obvious creation of 'the normals', and thus the corollary of 'the ab-normals' who are designated as 'the stigmatised', but he also creates an interpretative social element of 'the wise' as those who understand, normally through some form of personal experience or interaction with the stigmatised, and who thus, to a greater degree, accept them within their social range (Goffman, 1963). Whilst formative and pioneering, his work needs updating to include the advent of modern communications and how it has affected the creation and propagation of stigma, including the ability of the individual to affect change to wider perceptions of an imposed virtual identity and the use of social media to stigmatise and publicly shame those who are deemed to offend modern sensibilities.

Research design

In 2017, I conducted a study which qualitatively investigated primary case studies of fourteen UK based whistleblowers, regardless of their age, disability, ethnicity, or gender and across the widest possible range of occupations (Foxley, 2017). It sought to determine common factors in their experience of stigma and the coping strategies they had developed in order to survive it. Further interviews were conducted to determine whether UK national policymakers and the media were aware of the stigmatisation of whistleblowers and how they responded to it.

Population, sample and sampling techniques

Interviewees were recruited using purposive sampling (Bryman, 2008), based on my prior knowledge of possible participants who were whistleblowers, and therefore relevant to the research questions, and associated populations in national policymaking and the media, and virtual snowball sampling techniques (*ibid.*) based on the *Whistleblowers UK* virtual social network. This was supported by empirical evidence gained through research interviews and direct personal experience/observation.² All interviewees were independent of each other and did not collaborate in giving their personal contributions.

Conduct of interviews

Interviews were conducted mid-2017 in a place of the interviewees' choosing in order to allow them to feel as relaxed and comfortable as possible. Interviews lasted about an hour and were audio recorded, with complementary contemporaneous notes. Interviewees were invited to identify themselves and their occupation and then recollect their whistleblowing experience and the effect it had upon them. They were then questioned as to how they had coped and what strategies they had developed or recognised in order to manage the additional stresses and pressures in their personal and professional lives.³ Interviews followed a semi-structured format with an interview schedule of detailed questions and standard definitions of stigma (Goffman, 1963) and Human Rights Defenders (HRD) (OHCHR, 2004). This format enabled sufficient structure to facilitate data analysis and provided a consistent approach across all research interviews, but retained sufficient flexibility for participants to respond fluently and in context (Whittaker, 2009).

As an original whistleblower, I was already aware of the profound effects of stigma and found this had therefore three important considerations: comparison with personal experience and observations, consequential effect on whistleblower interviewees, and a requirement to remove bias. The output of the interviews was compared with my own personal experience as an independently interviewed whistleblower to observe how closely interviewee responses concurred or differed

2 The author was the inaugural chairman of Whistleblowers UK from 2012 - 2015, an NGO founded to campaign and support whistleblowers.

3 Interviews were allowed to flow freely within the outline structure presented in the interview schedule. Policymakers and media representatives were asked to offer observations from their particular perspectives and experience of contact with whistleblowers.

with my own experience.⁴ Primary interviewees remarked that, as ‘fellow whistleblowers’, they could relax, open up and reveal more of their deeper emotions because they felt that they were understood by an interviewer who had endured the same experience. This freedom extended to both policymakers and representatives of the media who were aware of my experience and who afforded me a deeper and more qualified view than I might otherwise have been allowed. However, I was very self-aware that I needed to minimise any active or passive bias brought about by my own experience. Therefore, I had to exercise considerable restraint during the interview process in order not to actively participate, qualify or endorse their statements, which might have skewed the results of the interviews (Payne and Payne, 2004). I recognise also that only UK based, English-speaking whistleblowers were interviewed and that this might have limited the variety of opinions given as they were sourced from the same society where social and cultural influences are, inevitably, similar. Further research might compare whether other social or cultural factors affect the treatment, and therefore coping strategies, of whistleblowers.

Findings: The whistleblower’s experience of stigma

The primary factor in surviving the stresses of whistleblowing is the support of the ‘spouse’ or partner, the family and close friends. This accords wholly with earlier findings by Glazer and Glazer (1989) and Alford (2001).

Many interviewees used physical exercise as a counter to stress and found telling or writing their story was cathartic. Counselling or direct psychiatric support was helpful but most interviewees stated that group support from people who understand, is most helpful and very therapeutic:

Friends and family have been biggest thing to help me cope.⁵ (Peter)

My wife has been my rock. Utterly. I doubt I could have survived without her. (Ian)

Personal and public esteem was enhanced through the process of group support, and most whistleblowers either were removed or removed themselves from the environment, which greatly lowered stress levels. Media support was noted as very important in the fight for credibility and reputations: having a major

4 Noting that I already had a history of whistleblowing, and associated stigma, to reduce any risk of bias I was interviewed independently by two experienced Financial Times investigative journalists and the recorded interview forms part of the research interviews since it covered the same ground and format as the other whistleblower research interviews.

5 All quotes cited are referenced in Foxley (2017), Appendix C: Research Findings.

respected media organisation report disclosures is a key factor in coping and helps to independently validate the disclosures and counter the concept of both self-induced (an 'I am not *mad*' mentality) and organisationally imposed ('He/she *must* be mad') mental instability.

You lose your identity. The person you thought you were, (upstanding, committed, professional), has become somebody who has been cast in the gutter by people in power who have decided what my fate is to be ... the nastiness to finish you off is unbelievable. (Kim)

Most interviewees in the study experienced great detriment and a residual stigma that was keenly felt. Interestingly though, there was no sense of personal shame or guilt and certainly no expression of deviance (Lemert, 1969; Taylor, 1985), but there was counterfactual thinking as part of a post-stigmatisation internal analysis (Niedenthal et al., 1994). Nobody offered an immediate 'I'm proud of what I did' as their first offering. Most stated that they had no choice but to act to 'do the right thing', and responses were stated in a very humble way: there was no sense of bragging at all:

Was it worth it? I would definitely do it again: it's the right thing to do. But I thought I'd be treated honourably – I wasn't. (Peter)

There was great emphasis on personal values and staying true to them especially where there was a perception of life-threatening situations (Alford, 2001). The effects of whistleblowing and ensuing stigma are most profound in the professional area where the great majority of whistleblower interviewees were (1) dismissed, (2) made redundant or (3) had their contracts terminated and were moved on very soon after their disclosures. There were only three examples where the whistleblower did not lose their job: (1) (UN) safeguarded by identity protection, (2) (NHS/Social care) suspended for 4 years on full pay while case was investigated and is now used as a reference source for cases of disclosure/whistleblower enquiries, and (3) (Police) resigned 13 years prior to disclosure. It is very clear that job loss is the major risk of making a disclosure with the consequent financial implications for loss of income and problems for future employment. Most whistleblowers found it almost impossible to find work in their own occupational sector and those that did could only find work at a much lower level or in a different field.

All whistleblowers experienced the undermining of professional relationships, including in the UN where close friendships were used to monitor her activities. Almost all whistleblowers appeared to have sustained grievous damage to their professional reputations which has significantly impacted on their future career and employment opportunities. It appeared that Festinger (1962) was right and

that the more an organisation felt it had riding on an issue, the more likely it was to re-frame the evidence, reframing the whistleblower as a traitor in order to make it morally permissible to punish them.

Having support from a major respected media organisation is a key factor in coping: if they believe me then it must be OK – the I AM NOT MAD mentality. Group support from people who understand is very helpful and therapeutic. (Martin)

Half of the interviewees noted that whilst they were publicly recognised they were not generally acclaimed or formally recognised for what they had done or any benefit they had brought to the organisation. The whistleblowing experience appears to have sparked the dormant ‘activist’ in most of the interviewees, initiating a volunteer campaigning ‘career’ in ensuring better protection for others (patients, employees and whistleblowers).⁶ This accords well with the finding of Glazer and Glazer (1989) suggesting that retaliation against whistleblowers ironically may have the opposite effect to which it was initially intended and serves only to intensify ethical resisters’ commitment to press forward. It appears to transform an initial act of disclosure into a mission to prove to the world that they are right and that they have been unfairly treated. Furthermore, their strong sense of justice is reinforced by a need for personal vindication.

Discussion

The theme of whistleblower credibility, founded on the validity of the evidence and the validity of the disclosure, along with organisational defensive efforts to denigrate the individual, was recurrent throughout the study (Paul and Townsend, 1996). Whilst no formal blacklist was found in any occupational sector, all interviewees believed that they were/are blacklisted informally or unofficially and that they have sustained grievous damage to their professional reputations which has impacted on their current and future employment opportunities. Furthermore, all believed that they are viewed as a risk to the business, including new businesses they are applying to work at.

6 The remainder were too damaged by the experience to commit themselves further to campaigning. Indeed, it might well exacerbate their current situations through ‘revisiting’ the experience and it is far more important that personal recovery takes priority.

Contested reputation and its effects

Individual interviewees believed that their reputations were much diminished and they were stigmatised within each organisation, but that their public reputations were much enhanced. Regardless of occupational sector, there were repeated organisational attempts to harm personal reputation, thereby stigmatising the individual, mainly through organisational questions about integrity, competence or mental stability and health in line with Moore's (2015) findings. This last factor was particularly noted as a pattern of behaviour within the NHS with a noticeable 'keying' *modus operandi* for initiating sick leave/suspension and a cause for terminating a contract (Goffman, 1975). The subsequent stigmatisation was key to their inability to secure further employment at an equivalent level within the organisation.

Whistleblowers were viewed by media interviewees as 'ordinary (normal) people in abnormal circumstances' and there was a clear sense of interviewees 'knowing' that they acted ethically and lawfully and had a clear conscience about what they had done. There was also a clear sense of injustice and anger at organisational keying attempts to re-frame them as 'the villains in the piece' and resentment at their efforts to stigmatise the individual. Most whistleblowers displayed a spirited, 'fighting' attitude, wholly ready to justify their actions, confront their opponents and battle back against those who would stigmatise them further. They displayed a high degree of personal integrity and appeared to be very values-driven people with a very strong sense of right and wrong. Moreover, all stated an inability and unwillingness to stand by and allow wrongdoing or abuse to continue. Opposing organisational stances were assessed as due to a difference in ethical values and priorities, but interviewees were quite firm in their personal ethical position and the righteousness of their action in speaking up whilst stating great disappointment at systems which did not appear to have changed as a result of their action. Interviewees displayed a modest pride in their own actions, but it was definitely not a bragging form of pride – more a sense of having passed a vital test well. Strong religious faith was mentioned as a formative factor in why people acted and how they managed to cope thereafter. It was noted that more research was required to document the effects of whistleblowing on the individual and that a firm base of evidence was still required in order to gain the necessary political support needed for any serious change. Such research could be enhanced by a complementary investigation into

a cost/benefit analysis of reputational damage incurred by organisations who do or do not respond to whistleblower disclosures properly.⁷

Organisational versus individual credibility

Personal and professional credibility emerged as the key aspect of protection, especially important in the reputational battle between the individual and the organisation/regime. Organisations were perceived as ruthless in their need to undermine the personal and professional integrity of the whistleblower through 'keying' accusations of incompetence or mental instability that re-framed the individual as, literally, incredible. Once the individual's credibility was questioned, the foundation of his/her disclosure was undermined and the evidence could be sidelined as irrelevant. The strain of blowing the whistle under intense social, professional, personal and economic pressures adds considerably to mental stress and inevitably assist the organisation/regime in this devious mechanism. Great personal resilience is required, along with training and practical advice, on how best to cope; provide effective documented evidence in a safe manner and use media support to rebalance otherwise overwhelming odds.

Societal and cultural changes

There was wide acknowledgement that social change in the UK has been successfully managed with examples cited as public attitudes to slavery, female emancipation, gender/disability/racial/sexual discrimination, seat belts, drinking and driving and most recently, paedophilia. Making whistleblowing work in real terms requires a shift in culture (Oakley and Myers, 2004). The cultural norms for business and disclosures of wrong-doing are changing but the detriments still remain as deterrents and need to be overcome and balanced by incentives to induce others to speak out in future. This will only occur if sufficient political and board level support can be gained to drive through measures that offer better protection and compensation for detriment incurred. The initiative to encourage members of the public to speak out against organised crime and domestic terrorism might well be the catalytic imperatives that initiate these vital changes.

'Normals', 'abnormals' and 'supernormals'

None of the whistleblowers regarded themselves as either traitors or heroes and inference of the former epithet was treated with emphatic indignation whilst the

7 An Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) project was initiated in the UK in mid-2017 to examine how whistleblowers survive post-disclosure both financially and personally and what can be done to assist them (ESRC, 2017). I contribute to the Research Advisory Panel for this research. Initial project findings can be found in Kenny and Fotaki (2018).

latter was met with a shy embarrassment. Many admitted that others viewed their actions as courageously heroic but almost every whistleblower regarded themselves as an 'ordinary' person committing an ordinary, ethical, action (in their mind). Indeed, two clear ideas emerged across all interviews: (1) that they were doing something quite natural (to themselves) and that (2) they were 'not mad', as often questioned by themselves during the disclosure process and as frequently inferred by their organisations. The predominant view was that whistleblowers are not quite Normal but definitely *not* 'abnormal', according to Goffman's definitions (Goffman, 1963). I propose that Goffman's rather binary definition of normality is in need of extension to include a grouping of 'supranormals' at the other end of the scale to 'abnormals' and furthermore, that it is into this grouping that whistleblowers fall. By stepping out of the 'local norm' to remind the organisation or regime of its agreed 'societal ethical norms', these people have not become abnormal, but *more* normal than the normal. Indeed, they remind the 'normals' of the norms and act as a conscience to the organisation or society from which they emerge. Whistleblower interviewees recognised that they were 'different' and there was a general acceptance of the new categorisation of *supranormal* as a third option once it was explained. None asked for special status – but all recognised, retrospectively, that what they had done was unusual and 'not the norm'. There was agreement that the 'whistleblowing paradox' needs more publicity to show people that it IS irrational: one should *not* be persecuted (stigmatised as 'abnormal') for reminding 'normal society' of instances where the agreed ethical norms are not being obeyed. Whistleblowers inadvertently act as examples to others to act properly and appear to suffer disproportionate accumulative detriments for so doing, not least of which is politically based stigmatisation for having 'stepped outside' of the local norm in order to speak up about a societal ethical norm. Reframing whistleblowers as 'supranormals' changes the subliminal image from questionably benevolent to definitely benevolent and thus, in line with Becker's (1963) labelling theory, assists in the viewing of whistleblowers as agents for social and ethical improvement not political degradation.

Conclusion: Overcoming stigma through introducing the notion of 'supranormality'

Reducing stigma is about acceptance and re-incorporation into the majority (Schneier, 2012) and whistleblowers need to persuade society that they have not stepped outside it, into abnormality, but that they are, as is the conscience to the character, at the very core of its normality: in supranormality. The credibility of the individual is essential to the core argument and fundamental to the protection of reputation and position as core members of the 'normal' part of

society. Stigma is about branding in more senses than one: the human rights sector might well look to common marketing strategies to re-frame whistleblowers as human rights defenders in order to create a more receptive wider audience, incorporating mental images (guardian, protector, defender) that naturally induce positive attitudes and a re-connection with the ‘normals’ in society. If there is a discrimination in the ‘supranormal’ definition across the spectrum of normality, then it is a core set rather than an elevated hierarchical set and the wider public needs reminding that whistleblowers are the ethical conscience of society which, like the human conscience, is an eternal flame that cannot be extinguished or ignored. Perhaps the introduction and use of a term such as supranormality might help to change the public perception of the whistleblower from that of a stigmatised ‘abnormal’ person, into that of an exemplar of social behaviour to be admired and, if necessary, followed.

references

- Alford, F. (2001) *Whistleblowers: Broken lives and organizational power*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Armstrong, A.F., I. Foxley and R.D. Francis (2015) ‘Whistleblowing: a three-part view’, *Journal of Financial Crime*, 22(2): 208-218.
- Ash, A. (2016) *Whistleblowing and ethics in health and social care*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Becker, H. (1963) *Outsiders – studies in social deviance*. New York: Free Press.
- Bennett, K., D. Ingleton, A. Nah and J. Savage (2015) ‘Critical perspectives on the security and protection of human rights defenders’, *The International Journal of Human Rights*, 19(7): 883-895.
- Bjørkelo, B. and M. Macko (2012) ‘The stigma of reporting wrongdoing at work: when doing right is perceived as wrong’, *Polish Psychological Bulletin*, 43(2):70-75.
- Bryman, A. (2008) *Social research methods*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cohen, A. (1966) *Deviance and control*. Englewood Cliffs N.J.: Prentice-Hall Inc.
- Cohen, S. (1985) *Visions of social control*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Dasgupta, S. and A. Kesharwani (2010) ‘Whistleblowing: a survey of literature’, *The IUP Journal of Corporate Governance*, 9(4): 1-14.
- Devine, T. and T.F. Maassarani (2011) *The corporate whistleblower’s survival guide*, San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers Inc, in association with the Government Accountability Project.

- ESRC (2017) 'ESRC research making an impact', *Society Now*: 27, Winter 2017.
- Festinger, L. (1962) 'Cognitive dissonance', *Scientific American*, 207(4): 93-107.
- Foxley, I. (2017) *Overcoming stigma: applying whistleblowers' experiences to human rights defenders*, Centre of Applied Human Rights, University of York [unpublished thesis].
- Glazer, M. and P. Glaze (1989) *The whistleblowers*. New York: Basic Books.
- Goffman, E. (1963) *Stigma: notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.
- Goffman, E. (1975) *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience*. Boston: Northeastern University Press.
- Harding, L. (2015) *Protecting human rights, humanitarian and development actors*. Centre for Applied Human Rights: Human Rights Defender Hub, Working Paper No. 1. [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/58a1a2bb9f745664e6b41612/t/58c000b046c3c4deecof689/1488978105698/HRD+Hub+Working+Paper+No.+1+July+2015_final.pdf]
- Hay, C. and A. Payne (2015) *Civic capitalism*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Kenny, K. and M. Fotaki (2018) *Post-disclosure survival strategies: Transforming whistleblower experiences*. [<https://www.whistleblowingimpact.org/post-disclosure-survival-strategies/>]
- Lakoff, G. (1996) *Moral politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lemert, E. (1969) 'Primary and secondary deviation,' in D.R. Cressey and D.A. Ward (eds.) *Delinquency, crime and the social process*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Link, B.G. and J.C. Phelan (2001) 'Conceptualizing stigma', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 27: 363-385.
- Miceli, M.P. and J.P. Near (1985) 'Organizational dissidence: The case of whistleblowing', *Journal of Business Ethics*, 4(1): 1-16.
- Miceli, M.P., J.P. Near and T.M. Dworkin (2008) *Whistleblowing in organisations*. New York: Routledge.
- Moore, P. (2015) *Crash Bank Wallop*. York: New Wilberforce Media.
- Niedenthal, P., J. Tangney and I. Gavanski (1994) "If only I weren't" versus "if only I hadn't": Distinguishing shame and guilt in counterfactual thinking', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 67(4): 585-595.

- Oakley, E. and A. Myers (2004) 'The UK: Public Concern at Work', in R. Calland and G. Dehn (eds.) *Whistleblowing around the world, law, culture and practice*. London: The Open Democracy Advice Centre.
- Orwell, G. (1949) *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, New York: Signet Books.
- Paul, R. and J. Townsend (1996) 'Don't kill the messenger! Whistleblowing in America – a review with recommendations', *Employee Responsibilities and Rights Journal*, 9(2): 149-161.
- Payne, G. and J. Payne (2004) *Key concepts in social research*. London: Sage.
- Ronson, J. (2016) *So, you've been publicly shamed?* New York: Riverhead Books, Penguin Group (USA).
- Schneier, B. (2012) *Liars and outliers: enabling the trust that society needs to thrive*. New York: John Wiley and Sons.
- Shils, E. (1975) *Charisma, order and status. From center and periphery*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Skivenes, M. and S. Trygstad (2010) 'When whistleblowing works: The Norwegian case', *Human Relations*, 63(7): 1071-1097.
- Sophocles (441 BC/2013) *Antigone*. Translated by Timberlake Wertenbaker, Faber Drama, London: Bloomsbury.
- Taylor, G. (1985) *Pride, shame and guilt: emotions of self-assessment*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- OHCHR (2004) *Human rights defenders: Protecting the right to defend human rights*. Fact Sheet No. 29. United Nations, Geneva.
- UN General Assembly (2015) *Global trends in risks and threats facing human rights defenders*. 70th Session, UN Doc A/70/217, 30 July.
- Vinten, G. (1994) *Whistleblowing, subversion or corporate citizenship?* London: Paul Chapman Publishing Ltd.
- Whittaker, A. (2009) *Research skills for social work*. Exeter: Learning Matters Ltd.

the author

Ian Foxley is a retired Lieutenant Colonel in the British Army. He completed a MA in Applied Human Rights in 2017 and is currently researching a PhD at the University of York with the interim title of: 'The whistleblower dilemma: an examination of the factors shaping the decision to blow the whistle or not – a case study of the Saudi Arabian National Guard Communications Project'. He was the Founding Chairman of Whistleblowers UK in 2012, contributed to the NHS Freedom to speak up review, the

Parliamentary commission on banking standards, and the Public concern at work's whistleblowing commission. He lectures internationally on topics of business ethics, compliance and risk management, politics and current affairs and, of course, whistleblowing. He has featured on radio, webinars and television, most recently in BBC1's The big questions and BBC2's documentary House of Saud.
Email: if577@york.ac.uk