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Reference to this paper in APA (6<sup>th</sup>):

Bjørkelo, B. (2013). Workplace bullying after whistleblowing: Future research and implications. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 28(3), 306-323.

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Paper submission for Journal of Managerial Psychology special issue on *Workplace Aggression and Bullying at the Cross-Roads: State of the Art in Theory and Research* with Special Guest Editors Raymond T. Lee, University of Manitoba (Canada) and Céleste M. Brotheridge, Université du Québec à Montréal (Canada)

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**Brief professional biography:**

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### **Structured abstract**

**Purpose:** This viewpoint paper presents directions for future research by linking the academic fields of workplace bullying and whistleblowing together. This article also suggests implications as to how to deal with the health consequences that can develop after such workplace experiences.

**Design/methodology/approach:** The paper describes empirical research on the link between whistleblowing and workplace bullying and suggests how to deal with the health consequences that develop in relation to workplace bullying after whistleblowing.

**Findings:** Empirical research has documented the link between whistleblowing and workplace bullying and the devastating effects on health that may follow (e.g., depression and symptoms analogue to post traumatic stress). Implications for practice are; (1) to provide clear examples of unwanted workplace behavior and; (2) to help clinicians to gain a balance between the client's need to re-tell and the need for psychological treatment.

**Research limitations/implications:** Future studies on workplace bullying are encouraged to; (1) be aware of the link to potential previous whistleblowing and; (2) study therapeutic interventions for employees exposed to bullying and who also have reported wrongdoing at work.

**Practical implications:** Practical implications are to; (1) provide clear examples of unwanted workplace behavior and; (2) balance the need for re-telling against the need for treatment for possible depression and trauma.

**Originality/value:** This paper provides valuable information for researchers, practitioners and clinicians in the field of workplace behavior in general and in the field of managerial psychology in particular.

**Keywords:** Workplace bullying, whistleblowing, health, implications, practice, clinicians

## **Workplace bullying after whistleblowing:**

### **Future research and implications**

*Martin Luther King Jr.: 'Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter', note from Enron note pads, cited in Lacayo and Ripley (2002).*

Whistleblowing is a situation in which an employee reports mismanagement or mistreatment to an organizational member that is able to do something about it (cf. Near & Miceli, 1985). Studies have shown that reporting misconduct can be followed by retaliation (e.g., ostracism and selective downsizing, Near & Miceli, 1986) as well as workplace bullying (Bjørkelo, Ryberg, Matthiesen, & Einarsen, 2008). This viewpoint paper presents directions for future research by linking the academic fields of workplace bullying and whistleblowing together. The paper also reports both practical and clinical implications in terms of dealing with the health consequences that sometimes arise in the wake of such workplace experiences.

### **Workplace bullying**

The European tradition of studying workplace bullying grew out of the work of Heinemann (1973), Olweus (1973)<sup>1</sup>, Pikas (1976), Leymann (1986), and Thylefors (1987). In research on bullying at school, and the US tradition of studies on workplace bullying, the definition includes intent, which links the concept to aggressive behavior and abuse (see e.g., Olweus, 1994). The European conceptualization of workplace bullying, however, does not include intent as a prerequisite of a negative action being labeled as bullying. Nevertheless, there are many similarities between workplace bullying and aggressive behavior, as both phenomena are described by (1) the factor of time (repeatedly); (2) an imbalance in strength, and; (3) being unable to defend oneself from negative acts that can be direct (e.g., verbal abuse) and indirect (such as social isolation, see e.g., Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2011). Workplace bullying concerns actions different from that of a conflict where two persons of equal strength are in disagreement at work. Different terms are applied to denote repeated negative actions at work as described above (see e.g., Einarsen, 2000). In the current article such negative acts will be labeled workplace bullying.

### **Whistleblowing and retaliation**

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<sup>1</sup> [http://olweus.org/public/bullying\\_research.page](http://olweus.org/public/bullying_research.page)

The act when an employee reports wrongdoing to someone who is able to stop it is often described as a process along a time-line that includes stages such as discovery or observation, evaluation, decision of whether to blow the whistle or not and some type of reaction to the whistleblowing (Bjørkelo, 2010). Negative consequences following whistleblowing (i.e., *retaliation*) can be defined as ‘taking an undesirable action against a whistleblower – in direct response to the whistle-blowing - who reported wrongdoing internally or externally, outside the organization’ (Rehg, Miceli, Near & Van Scotter, 2008, p. 222). Retaliation can be informal and unofficial (De Maria & Jan, 1997) and can take the form of, for instance, ostracism (Faulkner, 1998) or being treated as a ‘leper’ (Peters & Branch, 1972). Retaliation can also be of a formal or official type (Cortina & Magley, 2003) in the form of selective downsizing (i.e., the employee who reported wrongdoing is the only employee to be fired as was the case with the Norwegian whistleblower Per-Yngve Monsen), unfavorable job evaluations (Lennane, 1993; Lennane & De Maria, 1998) or expulsion from work (Baucus & Dworkin, 1994).

Retaliatory acts after whistleblowing can be singular, in that they occur one time only, or repeated. When informal or formal types of retaliatory acts are repeated, these acts have been shown to have clear similarities with negative acts, as described in the workplace bullying literature (Bjørkelo et al., 2008). The link between whistleblowing and workplace bullying has been shown with respect to the *nature of the acts* that can follow whistleblowing at work. For instance can employees be repeatedly socially isolated and involuntarily removed from work tasks after whistleblowing. The link between whistleblowing and workplace bullying has also been shown in respect to the *direction of the relationship*. For instance are employees who have reported wrongdoing at work twice as likely to report workplace bullying than other employees over time (Bjørkelo, Matthiesen, Einarsen, & Een, 2009). Whether these results primarily are due to the nature of the reaction (formal or informal character) or due to the source of the negative reactions (e.g., CEO, supervisor or colleague) is unknown. What *is* known is, nevertheless, that repeated negative and retaliatory acts after whistleblowing can be both formal *and* informal and can be performed by both managers and colleagues (Bjørkelo, Einarsen, Nielsen, & Matthiesen, 2011; Bjørkelo et al., 2008).

Presumably, there are differences in relation to whether singular or repeated retaliation comes from colleagues, an immediate supervisor or a CEO. One of the reasons for this is that a supervisor or CEO has the right and power to formally alter an employee’s position, work tasks and work location. In line with this, one can assume that formal retaliatory acts are

performed more frequently by a supervisor than a colleague. A colleague, on the other hand, can perform a high number of informal types of negative or retaliatory acts. Informal types of retaliation can be performed by workers both high as well as low in the organizational hierarchy. However, it may be more likely that informal acts are performed by a colleague or several colleagues. This is because these employees are more likely to socialize within the colleagues' work group than a supervisor or CEO with his or her subordinates. Still, whether informal negative and retaliatory acts are perceived as more *severe and harmful* depending on the characteristics of the performer is another question. If an informal negative or retaliatory act is performed by a supervisor or a CEO, it can be perceived by a subordinate as a threat of potential future formal sanctions. This can be more harmful than when one or several colleague(s) perform(s) similar informal negative and retaliatory acts, as their acts can not pose the same type of potential future threat. Still, it is plausible that informal negative and retaliatory acts performed by one or several colleague(s) occur more *frequently* and as a result can be just as harmful as when performed as a threat by a supervisor or a CEO.

In relation to the definition of workplace bullying, one part of the definition states that the employee comes into a position where he or she is unable to defend him or herself. If we then consider whether it is more difficult to protect someone from informal rather than formal types of retaliation, there may be different answers depending on the position of the performer. As an employee, it is not obvious that one can contest that one's work tasks have been altered by one's supervisor or CEO even in a normal situation where such changes are not necessarily perceived as harmful. However, in the case of workplace bullying, such changes occur in a context where an employee is being repeatedly met with formal types of negative and retaliatory acts, actions which in many nations are considered illegal (Yamada, 2003). When being on the receiving end of such acts is where an employee develops the perception that he or she is unable to protect against harm. The same argument can be made for the perceived ability to protect oneself from repeated informal negative and retaliatory acts from one or several colleague(s). A situation where an employee feels that a colleague has talked about him or her in a negative way can occur without it being labeled as workplace bullying. However, if the employee on the receiving end is frequently exposed to undermining and personally offensive behaviors and he or she as a result feels helpless and unable to cope or fight back, this is a completely different scenario. Analogue to a learned helplessness situation, an employee can experience such a situation as stable and uncontrollable (Nielsen, Matthiesen, & Einarsen, 2008). Stress theory has shown how appraisal of the stressor can

have an impact on the experienced level of strain (Lazarus, 1993). In relation to workplace bullying, an experience of not being able to do anything to stop the stressor has been shown to impair health (Zapf, 2007).

Studies conducted among selected samples of whistleblowers have further found that retaliation rates are high, whereas studies applying more randomly selected samples of employees have found low rates of retaliation (see e.g., Near & Miceli, 1996). There can be several explanations for this gap between results on retaliation after whistleblowing. There can be sample differences. Some studies have been conducted with participants in- and others outside working life (Bjørkelo, 2010). An employee who holds the same job as before the whistleblowing can have reported less serious forms of wrongdoing and been exposed to less severe forms of retaliation than an unemployed whistleblower. An unemployed whistleblower may, on the other hand, have reported more serious types of wrongdoing at work, been exposed to more retaliation and workplace bullying and have left or been fired from his or her workplace as a result of impaired health.

Differences related to organizational culture and management style may also influence the outcome of a whistleblowing process. In other words, organizational culture and management style *can* create a context in which the content of the report is investigated and protection of the whistleblower is ensured. Berry (2004) argued that factors within organizational culture, such as vigilance, engagement, credibility, accountability, empowerment, courage and options all influence how an employee decides whether or not to report wrongdoing in the first place. Further, Miceli and colleagues (2009) argued that successful and ethical managers 'take corrective action' before problems become crises when they are informed about potential wrongdoing (p. 379). Still, few, if any, have investigated the relationship between organizational culture, management style and actual whistleblowing. To understand this link, studies that investigate workplaces where actual whistleblowing takes place over time are needed. Only such studies will give firm knowledge about the relationship between organizational culture, management style and later outcome of the reported wrongdoing as well as the reactions directed at the whistleblower. Thus, more research on the relationship between organizational culture, management style and actual whistleblowing over time is needed.

## **Cultural context**

Another question of interest is the role of cultural background in relation to negative and retaliatory acts after whistleblowing. In the US, the legal protection of retaliation against whistleblowers is built on the employment at will doctrine (Dworkin & Near, 1987). After financial scandals such as Enron and WorldCom, the Sarbanes-Oxley Act (SOX) was introduced (Dworkin, 2007). Despite optimism for the effect of the SOX in protecting whistleblowers from retaliation (Moberly, 2006), in the North American context, employees are first and foremost unprotected even though some protection exists such as in the case of uncovering corruption. Legal cases have only to a small extent been successful for the whistleblowers involved (Miceli, Near, & Dworkin, 2009).

In Norway, all organizations have had to develop and apply health, safety, and work environment (HSE) reporting systems since 1977 (Bull, Riise, & Moen, 2002). The aim of this general (private and public sector) HSE internal system of reporting is to report general mistakes or deviation from established standards of operation. Such reporting is subject to governmental regulation and control. In addition, employment rights and labor unions are strong (Directorate of Labour Inspection, 2007; Bjørkelo & Matthiesen, 2011). As a result, some have argued that employees, to a greater extent, are heard and not retaliated against in Norway (Skivenes & Trygstad, 2010). Still, studies in the same context have found that employees who have reported wrongdoing at work are exposed to more retaliation and bullying at work than other employees (Bjørkelo et al., 2011). Few employees also seem to have won their cases in court after whistleblowing protection procedures were introduced, at least according to the cases that have been described in the media. Although the Northern European and Scandinavian context in many cases is assumed to support whistleblowing activities, it has been documented that organizations still need to have an organizational climate that supports such activities in order for employees to dare to report and then experience being protected against retaliation (Trygstad, 2010). Thus, legal and societal context seems to be a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for the protection of employees who report wrongdoing at work.

## **Theoretical frameworks and perspectives**

There are many approaches to understanding why an organization would allow and tolerate a CEO, supervisor or subordinate sanctioning one or several employees who have blown the whistle. One such approach is provided by power theory (Near & Jensen, 1983), such as the



classic texts on resource dependence theory (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978), minority influence theory (Moscovici, 1976) and social power theory (French & Raven, 1959). In line with such perspectives and frameworks on power, whistleblowing can be understood as a two-way process, where the reporting act represents a power attempt that may be overrun, accepted or retaliated against by the dominant coalition in the organization in question (cf. Near, Dworkin, & Miceli, 1993). Thus, if whistleblowing is perceived as an unwanted power attempt, singular and repeated negative and retaliatory acts can be the organization's way of reacting negatively to the initiative.

Negative consequences after whistleblowing can also be a result of an organization's need to protect its public appearance, or its so-called front region (cf. the work by Erving Goffman, 1959). According to Goffman (1959), any social establishment has a front region, which is a place where 'performance is presented' and a back region where 'performance of a routine is prepared' (p. 231). Goffman described how protective performance practices such as loyalty, discipline and circumspection hinder back stage information from being shared. As an example, group solidarity inside an organization can apply back stage derogation of its audience (e.g., patients, clients or customers) to 'maintain the morale of the team' (Goffman, p. 173). Applied to whistleblowing, an organization's negative reaction towards a whistleblowing act can serve as a way of controlling the back region information. According to Near and Jensen (1983), in a situation 'in which organizational authority is challenged, an event that normally occurs "backstage" in organizations,' suddenly is brought front stage, 'the potential loss of face is greater for all involved' (p. 6). Thus, negative reactions in the form of singular or repeated retaliation (for example, workplace bullying) can also be a way to stop the content of the whistleblowing and thereby prevent the cost of a 'loss of public face' for the organization.

An organization's negative reaction to suggested changes in the form of whistleblowing can also be influenced by whether the report is perceived as having intent to improve current status or as dissent (cf. Near & Miceli, 1987). In the latter situation, the organization's reaction in the form of singular or repeated retaliation can be understood as a way to prevent future opposition. Reactions from the organization to whistleblowing acts, such as the drop or elimination of communication with the organization members in question, can also be understood as a way to handle non-normative viewpoints (Graziano & Eisenberg, 1997). According to Graziano and Eisenberg, non-communication is a way to impose group consensus on perceived 'deviant' organization members. This is in accordance with management and

society's image of whistleblowers as troublemakers and of the repugnance against organizational members who are perceived as 'rocking the boat' (Rothschild & Miethe, 1994).

According to the spiral of incivility, wrongdoing and subsequent actions may 'escalate into a spiral of conflict' (Andersson & Pearson, 1999, p. 458). One scenario in this regard can be that an employee reports a perceived wrongdoing, the wrongdoer(s) retaliate(s), the whistleblower counters this perceived negative reaction by continuing to report to other complaint recipients, which again can be perceived as disloyalty by the organization. The spiral can further broaden into including a growing number of involved parties (i.e., secondary incivility spirals) such as external complaint recipients (e.g., health authorities or the media). In other words, when an employee or employer is accused of wrongdoing, he or she can perceive the report as workplace incivility and be provoked into engaging in retaliatory acts directed at the person or persons who reported his or her actions to a complaint recipient.

### **Health consequences after retaliation and workplace bullying**

Several studies have documented the detrimental health effects that exposure to workplace bullying can have for the individuals involved (see e.g., Brotheridge & Lee, 2010; Hansen & Nordic bullying network group, 2011). Reported symptoms includes depression (Bechtoldt & Schmitt, 2010), sleep difficulties (Niedhammer, David, Degioanni, Drummond, & Philip, 2009), anxiety (Nolfe, Petrella, Zontini, Uttieri, & Nolfe, 2010), as well as symptoms analogue to the formal diagnosis of post traumatic stress (PTSD, Kreiner, Sulyok, & Rothenhäusler, 2008). Among employees who have reported wrongdoing at work, similar symptoms have been reported (see e.g., Jackson et al., 2010; Peters et al., 2011; Rothschild & Miethe, 1999; Soeken & Soeken, 1987).

Whistleblowers can also report feeling ignored (Glazer & Glazer, 1989). In a study by McDonald and Ahern (2002), it was shown that both whistleblowers (70 %) and non-whistleblowers (64 %) reported stress-induced physical problems associated with involvement in a whistleblowing situation. According to the authors, all whistleblowers received some form of official reprisal in the form of 'demotion, transfer, reprimand, referral to a psychiatrist, as well as many unofficial reprisals such as social isolation, threats, ostracism as well as pressure to resign' (McDonald & Ahern, 2002, p. 22). It can be implied that

consequences on health after whistleblowing can be associated with the outcome of the whistleblowing process in itself (i.e., more health problems as a result of more negative reactions after whistleblowing).

### **Implications for practice**

A troublesome finding from studies on the link between whistleblowing and workplace bullying has been that wrongdoing related to unethical medical care is often left unchanged (see e.g., Bjørkelo et al., 2011). This *may* indicate that economical ‘numbers’ (i.e., corruption, embezzlement) are more easily agreed upon and therefore these issues easier to resolve than psychologically oriented ‘experiences,’ such as a group of patients being treated unethically. It can be challenging to achieve mutual perceptions about wrongdoing when it comes to non-financial types of wrongdoing, such as, for instance, unethical treatment. One way to enhance the probability that non-economic matters are effectively dealt with when reported by whistleblowers, and to reduce the probability of retaliation and workplace bullying, is for the organization to provide *clear examples* of unwanted workplace behavior. A clear understanding of what constitutes wrongdoing is the key to effective whistleblowing (Miceli, Near, & Dworkin, 2008). Another way to increase effective internal whistleblowing and reduce the probability of retaliation and workplace bullying is by *providing feedback* to the parties involved about the actions taken regarding the reported wrongdoing.

As shown in several studies, whistleblowing is infrequent (Miceli et al., 2009). Management should therefore focus on increasing the number of employees who are willing to inform about wrongdoing such as misbehavior at work. This may be accomplished by encouraging and rewarding employees who are willing to act proactively and report wrongdoing at work. Proactive workplace behavior concerns the way employees, through intent and action, change an existing social or non-social situation (Bateman & Crant, 1993). Observing successful whistleblowing can decrease the probability of retaliation and workplace bullying and increase the probability that employees without formal status positions are willing to report wrongdoing. The latter is vital, as lower level employees may possess important information about organizational misconduct, including bullying and abusive supervision (Tepper et al., 2009).

There are several ways to increase proactive workplace behavior in the form of whistleblowing. One approach that has been applied in other fields is proactivity *learning and*

*training* (Kirby, Kirby, & Lewis, 2002). In relation to whistleblowing, this may include raising awareness about the phenomenon of whistleblowing (see e.g., Matthiesen & Bjørkelo, 2011, p. 171). This can improve the level of proactive behavior among employees in general, as well as address potentially negative perceptions of employees who initiate change and report wrongdoing. Another implication for practice is to match employer and employee *expectations* about what range of workplace proactivity and initiative is wanted. Even though some hold that there ‘seems to be little downside risk regarding proactivity’ (Miceli & Near, 2005, p. 98), being able to refer to the organization’s explicit expectations could help in situations where an employee is regarded as ‘too critical’ (see also Grant, et al., 2009).

Proactive workplace behavior can also be increased by actively employing persons who are receptive to such initiatives (see e.g., Kim, Hon, & Crant, 2009). Organizations that value and aim at creating proactive workplaces associated with creativity and initiative may thus actively search for personnel who portray personality characteristics associated with proactivity to reduce wrongdoing, as well as the probability of retaliation and workplace bullying. Preliminary evidence suggests that ‘positive’ organizational climates (Near et al., 1993) and ‘cultures of communication’ (Skivenes & Trygstad, 2010) can encourage whistleblowing and hinder retaliation against whistleblowers. One potential challenge for practitioners who are employed to select personnel who display personal dispositions associated with proactive behavior in the form of whistleblowing is to what extent the organization is willing to give leeway for ‘devil’s advocates’ (Sims, 1992). In addition to recruitment, organizations therefore need to inform and guide their workers about how to display as well as handle proactive initiatives, including whistleblowing (Bjørkelo, Matthiesen, & Einarsen, 2010). Even though executives ‘talk about autonomy and initiative’ they still demand ‘submissiveness and obedience’ (Hirigoyen, 2004, p. 68). Thus, work should be aimed at dealing with the fact that even “experienced managers can find themselves telling subordinates, ‘I don’t want to hear any more bad news’” (Davis, 2005, p. 558), even though they at the same time want to stop corruption and unethical treatment of patients. In line with Hollanders idiosyncrasy model (1958), if an organization member becomes too deviant, he or she can lose credit balance and be exposed to efforts to get him or her out of the group. A managerial challenge is therefore to avoid too much or too little proactivity and avoid applying too much or too little control, as both of these means can lead to an end of less whistleblowing and more retaliation and workplace bullying.

There are many advantages of developing workplace bullying and whistleblowing policies, but there are also some challenges (see e.g., Greene & Latting, 2004; Tsahuridu & Vandekerckhove, 2008). One is the difficult issue of deciding upon what type of behavior is ethical or unethical. These evaluations ultimately concern the eternal question relating to what constitutes good and bad. Indirectly, procedures can make the judicial process easier as both the whistleblower and the employer are able to provide ‘proof’ and ‘evidence’ about the process. This should, however, not lead us astray into thinking that the difficulty of gaining mutual perceptions of what constitutes wrongdoing is resolved. The judicial system can still agree or disagree with the employer and the whistleblower in; (1) the perception of the wrongdoing, and in; (2) whether the actions (e.g., retaliation and workplace bullying) the whistleblower was exposed to afterwards were related to the reporting or not. According to Vega and Comer (2005), written documents are only effective ‘insofar as employees know about them and believe that upper management stands behind them’ (p. 107). Whistleblowing is one way executives can get direct information about wrongdoing (Miceli et al., 2009). If employees provide such vital information, managers are encouraged to investigate the reported wrongdoing and protect the person(s) in question from retaliation and workplace bullying.

### **Implications for clinicians**

Whistleblowing that has been followed by retaliation and bullying at work is associated with consequences on health and wellbeing in the form of psychological problems (e.g., depression, anxiety, and PTSD analogue symptoms, sleep problems), physical problems (e.g., muscular problems), as well as financial problems (e.g., in need of disability benefit), and impaired social functioning (e.g., withdrawal from friends and problems with family relations, Bjørkelo, 2010). In the following, the emphasis will be on psychological consequences. Studies have shown that whistleblowers exposed to retaliation and bullying at work can report symptoms analogue to those of a diagnosis of PTSD (Bjørkelo et al., 2008), including intrusive memories, flashbacks, dreams and nightmares of the traumatic event. However, according to criterion A1 in the DSM-IV-TR (American Psychiatric Association, 2000), ‘in order to be diagnosed with PTSD the person must have been exposed to a traumatic event that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury to his or her physical integrity’ (Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2002, p. 89). According to criterion A2, the individual in question must also ‘have experienced intense fear, helplessness, or horror while being victimized’

(Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2002, p. 89 continues). Since retaliation and workplace bullying mostly consists of non-physical behaviors by other adults, this has been seen as a limitation in relation to fulfilling the A1 criterion (Bonafons, Jehel, & Corroller-Béquet, 2009; Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2004; Tehrani, 2004).

Still, due to clear similarities in symptoms, researchers and clinicians are working towards including workplace trauma into the A1 criteria in the revised version of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM see e.g.,<sup>2</sup> and <sup>3</sup>). It has been argued that the experience that causes a trauma no longer needs to be ‘outside the range of normal human experience’<sup>4</sup> as trauma is not defined by its cause but by its symptoms. In the judicial system, it has usually only been possible to seek compensation for involvement in a catastrophic event, and not for what is labeled slow burn stress, even though some legal cases have extended employers’ liability to include the latter (see e.g., Barrett, 2010). The litmus test of how symptoms analogue to PTSD are recognized could be to investigate how employees who previously have been exposed to retaliation and workplace bullying after whistleblowing and who display such symptoms are met by health professionals and the judicial system.

As employees previously exposed to retaliation and workplace can develop symptoms analogue to PTSD, the treatment implications described in the following will be based on treatment suggested for individuals with a formal PTSD diagnosis. According to Bende and Philpott (1994) secondary and presenting symptoms should be treated first. Depression is one of the most frequent mental health problems associated with previous exposure to bullying at work and can be successfully treated with medication and group based cognitive behavioral and interpersonal therapy (Bechtoldt & Schmitt, 2010; Schwickerath & Zapf, 2011). Studies have also shown that cognitive behavioral therapy with focus on trauma (TF-CBT) can be effective for PTSD with recent onset (Ehlers et al., 2003).

One challenge in psychological treatment in whistleblowing and workplace bullying cases is building a working or therapeutic alliance (cf. Johnson & Chope, 2005; Sandler, Holder, & Dare, 1992 for an introduction to the concept of therapeutic alliance). This is because one of the most recurring needs of a whistleblower is to feel that he or she is heard (see e.g., Alford, 2000). One suggestion can therefore be to include trauma narrative processing (see e.g., Litz & Maguen, 2007) or narrative completion (see e.g., Wigren, 1994). Re-telling is, however,

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.dsm5.org/proposedrevision/pages/proposedrevision.aspx?rid=165>

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.iawbh.org/therapeutic\\_practitioners](http://www.iawbh.org/therapeutic_practitioners)

<sup>4</sup> Reviewer comment

delicate as the need to 'be heard' can take on multiple meanings. It may signify gaining recognition for the nature of the reported wrongdoing as well as a need for validation of the unethical, illegal or illegitimate character of the reported wrongdoing. 'Being heard' can also imply that the therapist is anticipated to be active in helping to stop the wrongdoing as well as taking part in a legal trial.

As in workplace bullying cases (Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2002), whistleblowers may also have had their basic assumptions about the world shattered (Alford, 2001). One of the main aims of the recovery process can therefore be to make sense and to come to terms with what has happened to him or her (see e.g., Soeken, 1986). To illustrate the time line of a typical whistleblower common narrative, many talk 'about events that happened five to ten years ago, and often longer than that. It is not as if nothing happens in the intervening years, but what happens is organized strictly by chronology. First this happened, then that, then that' (Alford, 2007, p. 230). According to Alford, it is as if life has lost its meaning and chronology has become a type of defense to make structure in the developed chaos of experiences.

Another challenge in psychotherapy is therefore to balance the client's need to re-tell and his or her need for validation with the need to develop a complete narrative (Bjørkelo, Magerøy, & Magerøy, 2011). Wigren (1994) described how a traumatic event can persevere due to the fact that the complete narrative can include an intolerable conclusion. Such 'rumination' contributes to focus on symptoms, causes and consequences (cf. Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991) that can influence the benefit of treatment as well as the duration of a depressive episode (Nolen-Hoeksema, Parker, & Larson, 1994). In whistleblowing cases, the analogy may be that 'the storyteller cannot bear to bring the story to an end and so finally know its meaning' (Alford, 2007, p. 235). There can therefore be resistance towards ending the incomplete narrative or story because this implies taking in and forsaking common narratives such as 'law and justice can be relied upon,' that 'it makes sense to stand up and do the right thing,' and that 'someone, somewhere who is in charge knows, cares, and will do the right thing' (see Alford, 1999, p. 271). According to Wigren (1994), a prerequisite for change is that the helper is a 'sympathetic witness' that is attentive to the story and to what is being told.

A further relevant issue in psychological treatment is that whistleblowing can be associated with the development of a master status identity (cf. Rothschild & Miethe, 1999), which denotes how we label ourselves and are recognized by others. Interpreting new events through the lens of a 'whistleblower master identity' may elicit responses from leaders and colleagues

that again may reinforce this identity. In a study by Bechtoldt and Schmitt (2010), individuals who previously had been bullied at work and who were later diagnosed with clinical depression made more external attributions to explain the social conflicts they had been part-takers of at work and in private, than individuals with similar levels of depression but no experience of workplace bullying. In this study, six weeks of a group based cognitive behavioral and interpersonal in-patient therapeutic program did not alter this explanatory style. There may be several reasons for developing a master status or an external explanatory style. One may be to hinder traumatic events from continuing to have an impact.

Treatment studies of employees previously exposed to bullying at work have shown promising results for the combination of group based cognitive therapy, combined with trauma therapy, when this is needed (Bechtoldt & Schmitt, 2010; Schwickerath & Zapf, 2011). To this author's knowledge, few if any treatment studies of the same type have approached employees who have blown the whistle and been exposed to retaliation and workplace bullying afterwards. Hopefully, this will be a topic of future research, as these individuals may suffer greatly from their experiences (Rothschild, 2008). Intrusive memories can be treated with eye-movement desensitization and reprocessing therapy (EMDR, Joseph, Yule, & Williams, 1997). EMDR includes doing quick simultaneous coordinated eye movement with both eyes in the same direction while imagining the most traumatic memory (Shapiro, 1989). One of the best treatment approaches available for PTSD is also prolonged exposure (PE) of traumatic imagery (Rothbaum, Astin, & Marsteller, 2005), which consists of exposure to images of the traumatic event, describing the event, and re-listening to the traumatic experience (Foa, Rothbaum, Riggs, & Murdock, 1991). Clients who otherwise do not respond well to PE or more verbal interventions such as CBT are also recommended Imagery Rescripting (IR) and Imagery Rescripting Reprocessing Therapy (IRRT, Schmucker & Dancu, 1999; Welch & Rothbaum, 2007).

It is important not to separate individual psychological treatments from the work group, organization or society in which the individual lives as these often are essential in order to understand individual whistleblowing cases. If not, one whistleblowing case can draw our attention away from widespread organizational wrongdoing that potentially may be occurring outside the individual psychological treatment. Future studies could therefore ask whether workplace bullying after whistleblowing is more likely to occur in certain types of organizations than in others. Although few studies have explicitly investigated this empirically, it can be the case that organizations with more explicit over-conforming social



norms negatively shape their employees to submission through active application of workplace bullying. Examples of such organizational or managerial features could be officially known and utilized to denigrate rookie procedures, as can be observed in certain health care and (para) military organizations (Archer, 1999; Bairy et al., 2007; Levett-Jones & Lathlean, 2009). However, whether the association between actual whistleblowing, retaliation and workplace bullying is stronger in organizations with such known practices is uncertain.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this paper has been to present directions for future research and to bring the academic fields of workplace bullying and whistleblowing together. To accomplish this, research that has documented the link between whistleblowing and workplace bullying has been presented and some ways in which the health consequences that can develop can be dealt with in practice and by clinicians has been suggested. Whistleblowing can be effective in stopping wrongdoing at work. Still, research has shown how consequences after whistleblowing potentially can influence immense professional, social, psychological, and financial harm for the individual in question. Practical implications for organizations and institutions are to provide information and training for employees in general and to complaint recipients and superiors in particular. In-house counseling may be offered to potential and actual whistleblowers while in-house and external clinical therapists are encouraged to acknowledge that these employees both can have a need to re-tell as well as a need for psychological treatment (e.g., depression or trauma). In 1983 Ewing wrote that whistleblowing 'will increase in future years' (Miceli & Near, 1984, p. 704). Since then, it has become apparent that whistleblowing can be an important way to stop mismanagement at work (Near & Miceli, 2008) in many nations of the world (Calland & Dehn, 2004). Employees' efforts to stop wrongdoing come with a responsibility to protect them against retaliation and workplace bullying. It is a humble and sincere hope that increased awareness about the severe consequences of retaliation and workplace bullying that can follow whistleblowing can reduce these harmful reactions from happening and enhance the probability that organizational wrongdoing is effectively stopped.

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