

Factors Influencing Whistleblowing Intention and Psychology in Public Sector: Which Drivers Matters?

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Abstract

Purpose: This article shall examine the drivers influencing whistleblowing intention among public sector employees. It shall also provide a preliminary view on the extent to which factors influencing whistleblowing intention amongst public sector employees.

Theoretical framework: There are two levels of variables included in the conceptual framework of the current study, which are the antecedent variables of individual and contextual factors (i.e., training, responsiveness of management, trust in leader, seriousness level of wrongdoing) and whistleblowing intention. The model has a direct relationship between individual and contextual factors and whistleblowing intention. Theory of prosocial behaviour shall form the basis of the conceptual framework for this study.

Design/methodology/approach: We plan to investigate the key attributes in individual and contextual determinants in influencing whistleblowing intention among public sector employees.

Findings: This study illustrates that all the variables are vital in influencing whistleblowing intention among public sector employees. Based on the theory of prosocial behaviour, individual and contextual factors are the two categories of antecedent factors that make up the prosocial behaviour. Hence, both antecedent factors need to be taken into consideration which will influence whistleblowing intention among public sector employees.

Research, Practical & Social implications: Due to the differences in values, cultures, and norms of each country, future research should examine the antecedent factors influencing whistleblowing intention among public sector employees in Malaysia.

Originality/value: The proposed of four antecedent factors can be used as a strategic tool to encourage whistleblowing intention among public sector employees in Malaysia. This is in accordance with the research conducted by previous researchers, which implied that to increase the whistleblowing intention. It is vital for the regulatory authorities to carry out the proper rules and initiatives related to whistleblowing in order to reduce the issue of misconduct behavior such as corruption among public sector employees in Malaysia

Keywords: Whistleblowing, Whistleblowing Intention, Public Sector, Malaysia, Training, responsiveness of Management, Trust, Seriousness Level of Wrongdoing

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Corruption is the continuous worldwide issue faced by organizations both in the private and public sector. As the public sector is the executive body that manages and uses the public funds, they have always been related with

the issues of corruption, integrity, and other unethical behaviour. Globally, Corruption Perception Index (CPI) is the most widely used global corruption ranking in the world to measure perceived levels of public sector corruption. In 2022, Malaysia's CPI was ranked 61st place out of 180 countries, with a score of 47 on a scale ranging from 0 (highly corrupt) to 100 (very clean) (Transparency International, n.d.). This shows that the public sector in Malaysia is not efficiently curbing corruption and malpractices. Thus, it will damage the credibility of the government's organization (Nawawi and Salin, 2018). Therefore, it is suggested that one of the methods to fight wrongdoings such corruption is through whistleblowing (Md Lazim et al., 2022). Whistleblowing can be referred to as the disclosure behaviour made by members of an organization related to illegal practices of the organization (Tyas and Utami, 2020). This is supported by Zakaria et al. (2021), which shows that any unethical conduct that could put the public interest in risk or damage should be shown and reported. Thus, the public sector organizations should encourage and promote the whistleblowing environment within their workplace to end wrongdoings activities. Furthermore, researchers suggest that whistle blowing can be mitigated by encouraging more employees to whistle blow through internal channel allowing employers to prepare and plan for any adverse effects (Alwi, Razak, Aslam, Basir & Salleh, 2019).

However, not everyone has the confidence to come forward as a whistleblower because doing so involves taking risks. People who disclose the wrongdoing activities or whistleblowers, sometimes not welcome in an organization. They will be labeled as troublemakers and exposed to various threats and risks. This is due to the fact that becoming a whistleblower may result in the whistleblower being sacked, blacklisted, arrested, sued, or, if things go really bad, it may result in assault or homicide (Zainol et al., 2018). When deciding whether to blow the whistle, a person is effectively performing a cost-benefit analysis (Miceli and Near, 1992). People will make an assessment of the possible positive consequences and negative consequences before they make a decision to blow the whistle. During the process, the factors such individual and situational factors will have an impact on the decision-making process (Dozier and Miceli, 1985). Therefore, there are many possible factors that may influence whistleblowing intention among the public sector employees (Abdullah Sani et al., 2022) such as training, responsiveness of management and trust.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

This section discussed related variables that will be proposed by researchers including whistleblowing intention, training, responsiveness of management, trust in leader and seriousness level of wrongdoing.

2.1 WHISTLEBLOWING INTENTION

The intention should take place before performing actual behaviour or actual action, therefore, the intention will influence the actual behaviour (Indriani et al., 2019). In terms of whistleblowing, Goldsmith (2015) defines it as the act of reporting an illegal (or unethical) act by an observer who possesses inside information of the wrongdoing. Thus, the whistleblowing intention should take place before engaging with the actual whistleblowing behaviour. Therefore, whistleblowing intention is referred to as the probability that someone will decide to come forward based on the situation (Rustiarini and Sunarsih (2017). As the difficulties to access the information of actual whistleblower (Chiu, 2003; Alleyne et al., 2013) due to sensitive and strictly confidential information, many of previous researchers focused on the whistleblowing intention as the best proxy to actual behaviour (Alleyne et al., 2017).

The misconduct such as corruption and any other unethical behaviour is one of the challenging issues faced by the organization in achieving their organization's goals and objectives. In managing this misbehaviour, the information from the internal employee is considered valuable tips and information for the management to be aware of the issues and wrongdoing that happen within their organization. The employee who provides the information on the malpractices happening within the workplace is referred to as whistleblower. Therefore, Md Lazim et al. (2022) claimed that whistleblowing is one of the best methods to eliminate the wrongdoing activities in an organization. As the whistleblowing is a complex decision making and vulnerable to threat and risk, many studies have been conducted to understand the motivating factors such as training (Previtali and Cerchiello, 2022),

responsiveness of management (Kaptein, 2022 and Baljija and Rustemi, 2021) and trust in leader (Tyas and Utami, 2020) that may persuade and attract the potential whistleblower to come forward.

2.2 CONTRIBUTING FACTORS OF WHISTLEBLOWING INTENTION

2.2.1 TRAINING

Despite enhancing the employee's performance, training plays a vital role in improving the organization's performance. Organizations invest billions of dollars annually in staff training (Brown, 2013). This illustrates the importance of training in organization. Basically, training is defined as the systematic process of gathering knowledge, principles, beliefs, or behaviours that improve performance (Goldstein, 1993). The knowledge they have gained from the training will help them in the ethical decision making in future. Whistleblowing is a complex situation because the potential whistleblower might face potential threat and a variety of retaliation (Al-Haidar, 2020). Thus, it is important to provide training to reduce the pressures and constraints related to the natural discomfort felt by whistleblower (Previtali and Cerchiello, 2022).

On the other hand, training is one of the methods for the organization to communicate the values of their policy and procedures to employees (Zarefar et al., 2020). Once the whistleblowing system which comprises the organizational expectation and values has been developed, training will take place to ensure the objective and goal will be achieved. In other words, organizations will deliver their expectations toward their members through training. Thus, if the management wants to promote the whistleblowing environment, they should conduct training programs that will strengthen the implementation of whistleblowing systems in preventing and combating corruption in an effective way (Previtali and Cerchiello, 2022). This is supported by a study conducted by Okafor et al. (2020) which indicates that lack of training is the barrier to creating a climate that encourages whistleblowing.

The relationship between training and whistleblowing intention has been studied earlier and many researchers concluded that training provided by the organization as a determinant influencing whistleblowing intention (Previtali and Cerchiello, 2022; Kwon et al., 2021; Ismail et al., 2018). In the study conducted by Previtali and Cerchiello (2022), they found that actual reporting is positively correlated with the presence of specific whistleblowing procedures as well as training and education programs. Furthermore, it is found that improving training of employees on code of ethics and code of conduct would encourage a proactive whistleblowing environment Rajeevan (2020). This is supported by a study conducted by Ismail et al. (2018) which revealed that organizational structure that consists of whistleblowing training has a significant positive relationship towards external auditor whistleblowing practice.

2.2.2 RESPONSIVENESS OF MANAGEMENT

Based on the experience and belief, employees have their own expectations towards their management. These expectations include that their company will take allegations of wrongdoing seriously and respond firmly to such reports (Scheetz, 2016). When the employees are serious about doing something that will benefit the organization, they will expect the same seriousness from the management. The positive response from the management in handling the reports illustrate that the management are serious in combating corruption and unethical conduct within the organization. Organizations need to thoroughly investigate the problem once they receive the report. The issue should then be resolved, and the whistleblowers must be informed of the results of the process (Mrowiec, 2022). Previous studies found that factor that affecting whistleblowing intention is how management handling the reports (Kaptein, 2022 ; Alleyne et al., 2017 ; Goldsmith, 2015) and management seriousness (Baljija and Rustemi, 2021 ; Naufal et al., 2019)

The decision of others in similar situations will surely be influenced by one employee's experience exposing unethical behaviour (Scheetz, 2016). If the previous whistleblowing is experienced with a negative outcome (i.e, non-serious approach), people tend to be reluctant in disclosing any information again in future because they feel that the management will not be serious in resolving the issue (Scheetz, 2016). If the previous whistleblowing is experienced with a positive outcome (i.e, satisfactory in handling the reports), people tend to be motivated in

disclosing again any observed wrongdoing that happen within the organization (Alleyne et al., 2017) as they believe that the management will handle well their reports (Kaptein, 2022). This explained that how the management handles the previous reporting practices and whistleblowing will determine the employee's reaction in the future (Goldsmith, 2015).

2.2.3 TRUST IN LEADER

Janasz et al. (2014) define trust as confidence in the integrity or dependability of another person. Decision making of a person's behaviour is influenced by their judgments of a leader's trustworthiness (Simpson et al., 2013). The employee will feel free and safe to speak up on any issue and thought when they trust their leader. This is supported by Tyas and Utami (2020), which indicate that trust in leadership will create positive results on attitudes, such as commitment towards a company and good performance of employees. Geng (2017) indicates that trust is important in a leader-subordinate relationship and is particularly vital for a subordinate's willingness to whistleblow. As whistleblowing is a very risky behaviour, trust will reduce the discomfort feeling and reduce the potential retaliation threat. This is because trust increases one's confidence that the leader will behave cooperatively and helpfully in resolving the report (Geng, 2017).

The relationship between trust and whistleblowing has been studied earlier and most of them found that trust in leader will influence the likelihood of whistleblowing. Tyas and Utami (2020) found that trust in the leadership showed a significant influence on whistleblowing intentions. Furthermore, Yang and Xu (2020) concluded that supervisor trust significantly predicted the impact of internal whistleblowing. This is supported by a study conducted by Geng (2017) which reveals that a subordinate's perceived trust in the leader is positively related to the subordinate's intention to whistleblow to the leader. Therefore, organizations need to develop trust in leader as a strong link to tie positive organizational perceptions about justice and ethics to the intention of reporting misconduct and should nurture internal whistleblowing motivation of the employees as an early warning mechanism to prevent possible ethical scandals to occur (Alpkan et al., 2021). In addition, organizations should train their managers to be more responsible so that they can build trustworthy relationships both inside and outside the organizations which enhance trust in leader (Akhtar et al., 2021).

2.2.4 SERIOUSNESS LEVEL OF WRONGDOING

Seriousness level of wrongdoing refers to a person's evaluation of the gravity of a suspicious behaviour they have witnessed based on the issue's characteristics (Graham, 1986). This is supported by Curtis (2006), the evaluation and assessment on the seriousness of the wrongdoing is determined based on the characteristics of the issue, possible harm and negative outcomes. Therefore, Jones (1991) indicated that seriousness of the issue influences employee's judgement in decision-making. In whistleblowing context, people will assess and measure the seriousness level of witnessed wrongdoing before they proceed to blow the whistle. Many of previous researchers found that seriousness level of wrongdoing will influence the whistleblowing intention (Khan et al., 2022 ; Naufal et al., 2020 ; Zamzami et al., 2019). The likelihood of whistleblowing among employee will increase if they feel that the wrongdoing will lead to huge impact while on the other hand, if they feel that fraud has minimal impact and is not repeated, the person will choose to leave it alone (Naufal et al., 2020).

The measurement on the seriousness level of wrongdoing can be assessed in several ways. Due to the anticipated greater damages the organization would incur if it is not reported, a person is more inclined to disclose a serious issue than a non-serious one. (Hanif & Odiatma, 2017). Despite of the monetary value of the act, some behaviours like sexual harassment, racial discrimination, or age discrimination could be considered serious matters (Brink et al., 2015). On the other hand, Graham (1986) find that in measuring the fraud seriousness level, a person should objectively evaluate the characteristics, frequency, and how other employees in the organization can be impacted by the unethical behaviour. Therefore, the perception on the seriousness level of wrongdoing will be differ from one another and this will influence their decision-making process either to report or remain silent.

2.3 GAP IN THE LITERATURE

Although previous studies have been conducted to determine the antecedent factors that may influencing the whistleblowing intention, due to the differences in values, cultures, and norms of each country, previous scholars agree that there is still a literature gap in understanding variables and whistleblowing intention, and there is a need to re-examine several variables related to whistleblowing in non-western countries (Suyatno, 2018). In Malaysia, studies on the issue arise regarding the whistleblowing activities in organization is still limited (Zainol et al., 2018). As the Malaysia's performance on CPI is worrying, research on the whistleblowing intention in Malaysia is urgently required and should be focused on. The future result can be use for the regulatory bodies in implementing whistleblowing practices in order to combat misconduct behaviour such as corruption.

2.4 UNDERPINNING THEORIES

Whistleblowing is considered as one of the prosocial behaviours (Miceli, 2008) where the ultimate goal of this behaviour is to stop the wrongdoing within the organization with the intention to promote the wellbeing for individual and organization (Ahmad, 2011). Thus, this study intents to apply theory of prosocial behaviour to assess the proposed theoretical framework.

2.4.1 THEORY OF PROSOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

To determine the factors influencing whistleblowing intention, it is suggested to use theory of prosocial behaviour which consist of individual determinants and contextual determinants (Nur'aini and Pujiningsih, 2021). Prosocial behaviour is defined by Brief and Motowidlo (1986) as a behaviour or action carried out by the member toward the people or organization of which he or she is attached to with the good intention to fostering well-being. Many previous researchers utilizing the theory of prosocial as whistleblowing behavior is a form of prosocial behaviour where the act involves both selfish (egoistic) and unselfish (altruistic) motives on the part of whistleblowers (Dozier and Miceli, 1985). The intention of the behavior is to satisfy the individual's motive and to provide benefit to others. According to Brief and Motowidlo (1986), the individual determinants and contextual determinants are the two categories of antecedent factors that make up the theory of prosocial behaviour. The aspect originating from an individual is known as individual determinants. While the institutional, organizational, and environmental determinants are categorized as the contextual determinants (Brief and Motowidlo, 1986). Therefore, trust in leader is categorized as individual determinants while training, responsiveness of management and seriousness level of wrongdoings is categorized as contextual determinants.

3.0 PROPOSED RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

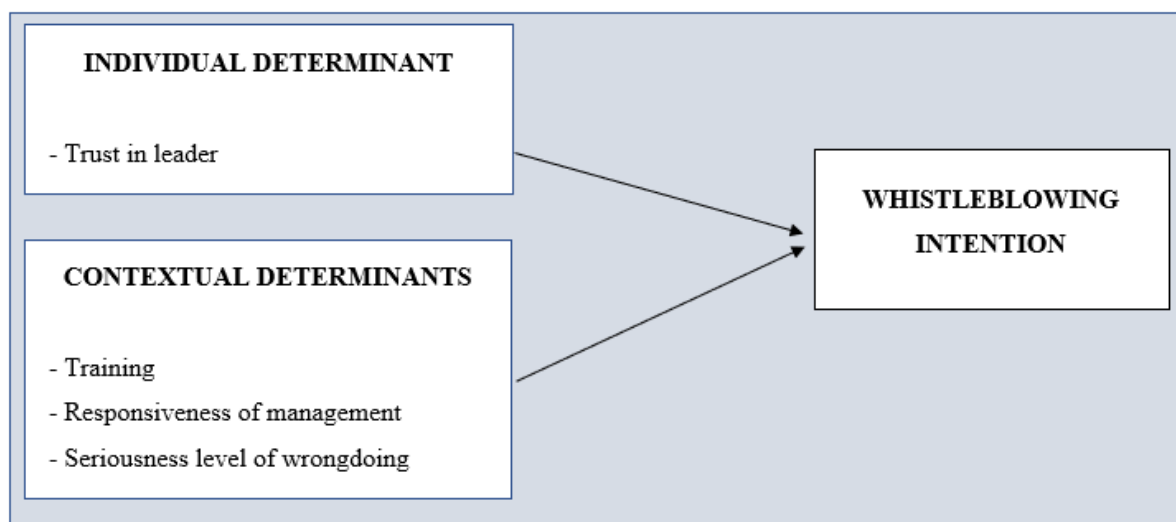


Figure 3.1: Conceptual framework

The research framework is developed in this current study because it can provide the basis for aim of this study. There are two levels of variables included in the conceptual framework of the current study, which are the individual and contextual antecedent factors (i.e., training, responsiveness of management, trust in leader, seriousness level of wrongdoing) and whistleblowing intention. The model has a direct relationship between individual and contextual factors, and whistleblowing intention. Theory of prosocial behaviour shall form the basis of the conceptual framework for this study.

A graphical representation of the conceptual framework in the Figure 3.1 illustrates the independent and dependent variables of the current study. There are individual determinant (trust in leader) and contextual determinants (training, responsiveness of management, seriousness level of wrongdoing). Moreover, the arrows illustrate that the current study intends to evaluate the aspects if the antecedents factors influence the whistleblowing intention. There have been many studies that see whistleblowing intention as a dependent variable, but there is much work to be done in different spheres of this construct.

4.0 CONCLUSIONS

Worldwide, corruption is the enemy for organizations in either the private or public sector to achieve their mission and objective. Malaysia's performance in CPI illustrates that there is still a need to do something in combating corruption and unethical conduct within the public sector. To ensure that the activities of corrupt individuals do not undermine society's confidence in the entire system of governance, it is crucial to develop strong and effective integrity systems in the public sector (Moreira, 2019). Response to this issue, the Malaysian government has developed a National Anti-Corruption Plan (NACP) in 2019, with three specific goals: Accountability and Credibility of Judiciary, Prosecution and Law Enforcement Agencies; Efficiency and Responsiveness in Public Service Delivery, and Integrity in Business. In this plan, whistleblowing is included as one of the strategies to combat corruption and unethical behaviour. This is supported by Md Lazim et al. (2022) which claimed that whistleblowing is one of the best methods to eliminate the wrongdoing activities in an organization. Governments have plenty of strategies in place to combat corruption, what is lacking is their constant and efficient implementation (Transparency International, n.d.). The internal employee is the one who is surrounded with potential misbehavior in the workplace. Thus, it is important for the government to find a strategy that may attract public sector employees to disclose observed wrongdoing that is happening in public sector organizations. Researchers (Alwi et al., 2019) also said that it is important for public sector employees to follow a code of ethics that includes disciplinary actions for breaking the code of conduct and governance.

Many researchers suggested that training provided by the organization as a determinant influencing whistleblowing intention (Previtali and Cerchiello, 2022; Kwon et al., 2021; Ismail et al., 2018). Additionally, previous studies found that one of the factors that affect whistleblowing intention is responsiveness of management toward report (Baljija and Rustemi, 2021 ; Kaptein, 2022 ; Naufal et al., 2019 ; Alleyne et al., 2017). On the other hand, many researchers found that trust will influence the likelihood of whistleblowing (Tyas and Utami, 2020 ; Yang and Xu, 2020). In addition, previous researchers found that seriousness level of wrongdoing will influence the whistleblowing intention (Khan et al., 2022 ; Naufal et al., 2020 ; Zamzami et al., 2019). Abdullah Sani et al. (2022) stated that research that examines the influencing antecedents of whistleblowing requires ongoing exploration. Therefore, further studies and research should be carried out in order to confirm which drivers influence whistleblowing intention among public sector employees in Malaysia. The result of future studies can be included in the whistleblowing strategy to combat corruption and unethical behaviour in public sector organizations. Furthermore, this also can improve Malaysia's performance in CPI for the future.

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