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## The Whistle-Blower's Quandary



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IMAGINE you're thinking about blowing the whistle on your employer. As the impassioned responses to the actions of whistle-blowers like Edward J. Snowden have reminded us, you face a moral quandary: Is reporting misdeeds an act of heroism or betrayal?

In a series of studies, we investigated how would-be whistle-blowers make this decision. Our findings, to be published in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, not only shed light on the moral psychology of whistle-blowing but also reveal ways to encourage or discourage the practice.

In one study, we asked a group of 74 research participants to write a paragraph about an occasion when they witnessed unethical behavior and reported it (and why), and we asked another group, of 61 participants, to write about an occasion when they witnessed unethical behavior and kept their mouths shut. We found that the whistle-blowers used 10 times as many terms related to *fairness* and *justice*, whereas non-whistle-blowers used twice as many terms related to *loyalty*.

It makes sense that whistle-blowing brings these two moral values, fairness and loyalty, into conflict. Doing what is fair or just (e.g., promoting an employee based on talent alone) often conflicts with showing loyalty (e.g., promoting a longstanding but unskilled employee).

Although fairness and loyalty are both basic moral values, some people prioritize one over the other. Studies show that American liberals tend to focus more on fairness, while American conservatives tend to focus more on loyalty, which may help explain differing responses to Mr. Snowden. To some he was defending the rights of all Americans; to

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others he was a traitor to his country.

Does such variation in moral values predict whether someone will decide to blow the whistle? In another study, we gave 83 research participants a questionnaire. Some questions probed their concern for fairness (e.g., "whether or not someone was denied his or her rights"), whereas others probed their concern for loyalty (e.g., "whether or not someone did something to betray his or her group"). We computed a "fairness score" and a "loyalty score" for each participant. We also asked questions about how likely they would be to report a stranger, an acquaintance, a friend and a family member for crimes of varying severity (from petty theft to murder).

We found that neither fairness nor loyalty alone predicted whistle-blowing. However, the way people traded one value against another — the difference between people's fairness and loyalty scores — did. People who valued fairness more than loyalty expressed greater willingness to blow the whistle, whereas people who valued loyalty more than fairness were more hesitant.

To test whether such whistle-blowing decisions are susceptible to manipulation, we asked 293 participants across two experiments about their willingness to blow the whistle, but first we had them write short essays on the importance of fairness or the importance of loyalty. We compared whistle-blowing scores between these two groups and found that participants who wrote about fairness were more willing to blow the whistle than those who wrote about loyalty.

In our final study, we sought to determine whether this writing exercise could be used to influence people's behavior in a nonhypothetical situation. For our real-world test, we focused on Amazon's Mechanical Turk, an online marketplace where users ("requesters") post tasks like proofreading and evaluating advertisements, to be completed by other users ("workers") in exchange for money. Reputation is paramount on Mechanical Turk, and users can publicly evaluate and even blacklist one another.

In our study, involving 142 users of Mechanical Turk, we first asked the participants to write a short essay about the importance of fairness or loyalty. Then we made sure that all of the participants at some point during the study witnessed the substandard work of a fellow Mechanical Turk user. At the end of the study, we surprised the participants by creating a whistle-blowing quandary: we asked whether the user whose shoddy work they witnessed had violated any rules and whether we should block that user from future tasks. When we compared the responses from our two groups, we found that those who had written about the importance of fairness were significantly more willing to report a fellow worker than those who had written about loyalty. Even a nudge can affect people's whistle-blowing behavior.

This does not mean that a five-minute writing task will cause government contractors to leak confidential information. But our studies suggest that if, for instance, you want to encourage whistle-blowing, you might emphasize fairness in mission statements, codes of ethics, honor codes or even ad campaigns. And to sway those who prize loyalty at all costs, you could reframe whistle-blowing, as many have done in discussing Mr. Snowden's actions, as an act of "larger loyalty" to the greater good. In this way, our moral values need not be in conflict.

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