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THE EFFECT OF RACIAL CONFIRMATION BIASES ON WHISTLEBLOWING INTENT

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By

Charlotte M. Jacobson

Spring 2019

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ABSTRACT

THE EFFECT OF RACIAL CONFIRMATION BIASES ON WHISTLEBLOWING
INTENT

by

Charlotte M. Jacobson

Spring 2019

Previous research has demonstrated the negative impact of stereotypes on Black individuals in the workplace, including differential employment rates between races, the influence of race on hiring decisions, and the effect of racial discrimination on job satisfaction and turnover. However, the impact of racial stereotypes on employees' decisions to report a witnessed wrongdoing (i.e., whistleblowing) have not been examined. In this study, I investigated whether racial stereotypes and confirmation biases make an individual more likely to blow the whistle on a Black coworker than a White coworker for the same wrongdoing. I also examined the potential moderating effect of the moral intensity of the issue (i.e., level of harm), given that other stereotypes were shown to be influential in some whistleblowing decisions in past research. In the present study college student participants read a scenario in which a hypothetical coworker committed a wrongdoing. The race of the wrongdoer and the level of harm associated with the wrongdoing were manipulated. Participants indicated their likelihood of reporting the individual and the level of punishment they would recommend. It was predicted that racial confirmation biases would make participants more likely to report their Black versus White coworker for the same wrongdoing, and more likely to recommend a

harsher punishment. It was also predicted that when the level of harm to another was high versus low, the likelihood of reporting the wrongdoing and the suggested punishment severity would also be high, and the race of the coworker would play less of a role given that the situation was less ambiguous. It was hypothesized that when moral intensity of the issue was low and the situation was more ambiguous, confirmation biases would cause participants to see the Black coworker as more culpable—leading them to recommend harsher punishments for the Black coworker than for the White coworker. The study's results demonstrated the hypothesized effect of level of harm on punishment recommendations and reporting likelihood. However, effects of race were not demonstrated. Implications of this study include the implementation of employee training that highlights behaviors to report, regardless of their consequences.

The Effect of Racial Confirmation Biases on Whistleblowing Intent

Research on racial bias and discrimination has expanded to include analyses of how Black individuals are negatively stereotyped in a variety of settings and platforms. Such research includes studies on perceptions of Black politicians (Schneider & Bos, 2011), depictions of fictional media characters (Sanders & Ramasubramanian, 2012), criminal sentencing decisions (Bushway & Piehl, 2001), racist content in YouTube videos made by consumers (i.e., user-generated content) (Guo & Harlow, 2014), hiring processes and social decision-making (Branscombe & Smith, 1990), and more. For the purpose of this study, the term Black will be used inclusively, referring to both Black and African American individuals unless referencing a study that specifically uses the term African American; however, it is important to note that there are many Black people who do not identify as African American.

Although wide in scope, past research has failed to specifically examine the effects of racial stereotypes on whistleblowing, which is the truthful reporting of legal, ethical, or policy-related wrongdoings conducted within an organization. The present study examines how stereotypes and their related racial confirmation biases may impact an individual's intent to blow the whistle on a coworker. Many people hold racial stereotypes that lead them to have warped and often negative views of those perceived to be different than them, whether those stereotypes are held consciously or unconsciously. Because of confirmation bias, which is the human tendency to take greater notice of evidence that supports one's own beliefs (Nickerson, 1998), individuals who hold racial stereotypes against Black people may take note of wrongdoings more quickly or deem

actions as more egregious when observing a Black person versus a White person who makes the same error.

Research on whistleblowing has not examined the effect of racial stereotypes on intent to report. However, studies have shown the influence of other stereotypes, and demonstrated that they may influence actions even when the level of harm to others associated with the wrongdoing is high. Bhal and Dadhich (2011) referred to the level of harm as the 'moral intensity of the issue,' or moral intensity for short. In this study, I will investigate the degree to which racial stereotypes exert influence over intent to report when the wrongdoing is both more or less serious (i.e., when the moral intensity of the issue is high or low).

Whistleblowing and Factors that Influence it

Although we often do not realize it, there are a multitude of factors that may play a part in an individual's decision to blow the whistle on a coworker—many of which are factors that can be controlled and altered by the company or organization. Research has shown that whistleblowing is affected by the ethical culture of an organization, which consists of elements that both obstruct unethical behavior and encourage ethical behavior, such as the clarity of the organization's ethical expectations of employees and the transparency of the occurrence and consequences of wrongdoings (Kaptein, 2011). How committed the employee is to the organization also plays a role in whistleblowing, with commitment increasing the likelihood of reporting a wrongdoing (Bowling & Lyons, 2015). Having leaders that behave ethically in the workplace also promotes reporting, as do high-quality leader-member exchanges, which involve interactions between employees and their leaders that are not purely contractual or required for the job (Bhal &

Dadhich, 2011). Organizational issues, such as whether or not the wrongdoing is in compliance with policies and procedures, may also have an impact on whistleblowing (King & Hermodson, 2000), touching on the importance of having well-outlined policies in place so that employees know when they or others are acting against regulation.

Individual and social factors that can affect whistleblowing include individuals' professional ethics, or the level of morality they feel is appropriate at their place of work, whether reporting will threaten their career, whether they feel their identity as a reporter is protected, and how personally affected they are by the wrongdoing. In one study, 65% of nurses who had reported a wrongdoing believed that the wrongdoing violated their professional code of ethics (King & Scudder, 2013). The same study also found that observer anonymity plays a key role in whistleblowing as well, in that employees are often less likely to report wrongdoings if they fear the 'code of silence' surrounding the report will be broken, and their identity will be revealed, such as through gossip or other more direct means. Employees are also less likely to blow the whistle if they believe that reporting the wrongdoing will be a threat to their own career advancement (Miceli & Near, 1984). They are more likely to below the whistle if they feel personally victimized by the wrongdoing (Cassematis & Wortley, 2013), thus providing further evidence of self-interest guiding their decisions.

Although many factors contribute to whistleblowing, it is—at its core—a decision that is made within a social context, based on our own principles and motivations, and with consideration (whether consciously or automatically) of the people around us, as well as what we know and assume about them. Due to the strong impact stereotypes have on our attention, interpretations, and resulting decisions, I am interested in studying the

effect of racial stereotypes and confirmation biases on an individual's intent to blow the whistle on a coworker.

Racial Stereotypes and Social Decision Making

Stereotypes have been defined in a number of ways, ranging from simply "generalizations based on limited or inaccurate information" (Sue & Sue, 2015, p. 430), to more complex definitions, such as "beliefs about the characteristics, attributes, and behaviors of members of certain groups… also theories about how and why certain attributes go together" (Hilton & von Hippel, 1996, p. 240). In other words, stereotypes are the things we assume, consciously or unconsciously, about other people based on what groups we think they belong to. Stereotypes can be negative in nature, but they may also include positive or neutral characteristics. In any case, individuals may interact with people from stereotyped groups differently due to their preconceived beliefs. Such differential treatment, whether favorable or unfavorable, would be defined as discrimination.

The present focus examines the stereotypes that people hold about African Americans, which have changed over the years. In 1933, Katz and Braly found some agreement among students in describing 'Negroes' as 'superstitious' (84%), 'lazy' (75%), 'ignorant' (38%), 'stupid' (22%), and 'unreliable' (12%). Over 60 years later, African Americans are still being stereotyped negatively. One of the main contributors is the media, which includes radio, print, online platforms, television, and more. In many forms of media, African Americans are portrayed as angry and dangerous—oftentimes painted as criminals and described in more demeaning intellectual terms (Sabo, 1995). The media today may portray racial stereotypes more implicitly, but they are still present. For

example, media contributes to the construction and maintenance of stereotypes by often linking Black people indirectly (but also sometimes directly) with crimes or other dangerous behavior, and by portraying them as poverty-stricken, unintelligent or uneducated (Abraham & Appiah, 2006). An analysis of stereotypes in 445 YouTube videos (mainly user-generated videos) found that 'lawbreaker' was the most common stereotype of African Americans (Guo & Harlow, 2014)

Stereotypes—especially those deeply embedded within a culture—often have important effects on how we make judgments and decisions in social situations. Whereas racial stereotypes and whistleblowing have not been studied together, racial stereotypes and their impact on social decision making have been studied in a variety of contexts. A study on occupational stereotyping (King, Madera, Hebl, Knight & Mendoza, 2006) found that even with strong credentials and a high-quality resumé, Black applicants (with race manipulated through the applicant's name) were evaluated more negatively than Asian American, Hispanic, and Caucasian applicants. They were also rated as more suitable for low-status occupations than Asian Americans and Caucasians. Carpusor and Loges (2006) studied racial stereotypes in the context of housing and found that by simply manipulating the implied race of a male rental applicant based on his name, positive responses from landlords of all rent categories were lower for those with an African American name, as compared to a White name.

Given that stereotypes impact judgments and decisions, it can be reasoned that stereotypes associating Black individuals with low competency and high criminality will have a strong impact on employees' social decision-making, like when reporting workplace errors. For example, an employee may be more likely to report a Black

coworker because they believe he or she is making the error due to incompetence or due to their perceived bad, criminal nature. If the employee witnessing the error has been subjected to negative stereotypes about Black people, seeing a Black person make an error may confirm already-negative perceptions held about Black people.

Berger, Fisek and Norman (1998) suggest in their status characteristics theory that "people form expectations about the competence of others based on inferences from the status value assigned by the society as a whole to their personal characteristics" (as cited in King, Madera, Hebl, Knight & Mendoza, 2006, p. 1146). In other words, individual characteristics signify a person's status or value, which in turn impacts how competent that individual is believed to be. In this study, race is the personal characteristic, and being Black seems to be associated with having lower status value and less competence, as evidenced by stereotypes that Black individuals have lower intelligence, display more criminal behavior, and are of lower socioeconomic status. These stereotypes, in turn, influence our interpretations, decision-making, and behavior in a variety of ways. One mechanism by which these stereotypes may be strengthened and further affect behavior is via confirmation biases.

Confirmation Biases and Racial Stereotypes

Confirmation bias is the human tendency to take greater notice of evidence that supports one's own beliefs (Nickerson, 1998). For example, memory recognition for information supporting an individual's viewpoint is higher than for opposing material (Frost et al., 2015). Following Frost's finding, one can assume that an individual who has been exposed to stereotypes about other groups of people (especially if he or she endorses some or all of them) will be more likely to take note of actions by out-group members

that confirm the stereotype(s). An example would be paying closer attention to any news events involving a crime committed by a man who is Black, and less attention to any news or situations involving good acts done by men who are Black. This will most likely lead the person to more strongly believe that the majority of black men are criminals, regardless of actual probability. Therefore, confirmation biases can cause stereotypes to become self-perpetuating.

Stereotypes also cause people to make unfair judgments of the causes of other people's behavior. Group-serving bias, also known as the 'ultimate attributional error' (Pettigrew, 1979), occurs when we attribute a person's behavior to external (situational) or internal (personal) factors differently depending on what group he or she is perceived to be in. Whereas positive behaviors by outgroup members (members of groups to which we do not belong) are believed to be caused by external factors, positive acts of in-group members (members of our own groups) are attributed to internal factors. When the behavior is negative, out-group members are seen as personally at fault, whereas in-group members are given a more favorable evaluation, such that their negative acts are thought to be due to external factors that were out of their control (Pettigrew, 1979).

As an example of Pettigrew's (1979) group-serving bias, a negative comment made by a Black person may be perceived by a non-Black person to be characteristic of his or her personality (e.g., "he must be a negative person"), while a non-Black person making the same comment may be perceived to be having a bad day (e.g., "he's not a bad person, he just had a bad experience today"). These group-serving biases may lead non-Black employees to give one of their own group members (someone they perceive to be of the same race) the benefit of the doubt, while assuming the worst for out-group

members when they have committed the same wrongdoing. If so, that could differentially affect a non-Black person's whistleblowing decision when the wrongdoer is Black versus White. Note, however, that even if the witnessing employee is Black, his or her interpretation of and reaction to a wrongdoing committed by a Black employee may still be impacted by the negative racial stereotypes about Black and African American people that seem to permeate our society (i.e., making character, rather than situational judgments about the Black wrongdoer because of consciously or unconsciously held racial biases). The potential presence of in-group and out-group biases on whistleblowing decisions and punishment recommendations would simply make negative judgments even stronger by non-Black individuals.

An excellent portrayal of how stereotypes and confirmation biases my lead to attributional errors came from Duncan's (1976) study on the differential social perception of intergroup violence. Believing they were viewing a videotape of an interaction going on in a different room, White participants saw an ambiguous shove occur. Duncan manipulated the race of both the victim and harm-doer. The same shove was interpreted by participants as more violent when the harm-doer was Black than when the harm-doer was White. Moreover, the participants attributed the White harm-doer's behavior more to situational/external factors, but the Black harm-doer's behavior more to his personal attributes (Duncan, 1976).

Thus, people may perceive the exact same behavior very differently depending on the characteristics of the person performing the behavior. This suggests that if employees witness a wrongdoing, their interpretation of the act will be influenced by stereotypes and whether they attribute the person's behavior to internal or external factors. They may then

use the behavior as supporting evidence, strengthening their presuppositions about people within that group (confirming their previous perceptions).

Confirmation biases based in racial stereotypes also may also affect judgments about criminal activity. Jones and Kaplan (2003) used European American students as participants in looking at how juror verdicts are biased by the race of the offender and type of crime committed, supporting the 'race-crime congruency effect.' Specifically, they found that when the race and crime of the defendant were congruent, based on common stereotypes, verdicts and offender attributions were more negative, more confirmatory evidence was pursued, and a more restricted information search was conducted. For example, biases against Black defendants were found for the crimes of grand-theft auto, assaulting a police officer, and soliciting. The study's findings support the idea that racial stereotypes lead to the use of confirmation biases when making decisions, such that when the crime committed fits with preconceived stereotypes about that race, more evidence was gathered to confirm guilt, than to disconfirm it. The same may occur when employees observe a transgression in the workplace. For example, if someone witnessed a fellow employee who is Black commit a wrongdoing in the workplace that could be thought of as violent or aggressive, the observer may ignore evidence to the contrary and only pay attention to cues and information supporting their assumption that the wrongdoing was an act of aggression.

Examples of confirmation biases due to racial stereotypes are also found in real-life courtroom decisions. In 2010, the United States Sentencing Commission observed that, "after controlling for a variety of factors relevant to sentencing…, Black male offenders received longer sentences than white male offenders" (p. 2). For example,

African Americans in Maryland received 20% longer sentences than Whites, on average (Bushway & Piehl, 2001), and Black defendants in North Carolina were more likely to receive a prison versus non-prison sentence for the same crime, and received the most severe sentences (Bloch, Engen, & Parrotta, 2014). This 'sentencing bias' may be due partly to confirmation bias—as jurors see the criminal act as confirming what they knew about people of that race, and may see the defendant (perhaps unconsciously) as more deserving of punishment or as more culpable, even when the situations are exactly the same (The Editorial Board, 2016). Because differential criminal punishments may result from racial biases, the same might be true regarding the level or degree of punishment an employee would recommend for a coworker who committed a wrongdoing. Thus, I propose that people may end up believing that a Black individual is more deserving of punishment for the same wrongdoing in the workplace.

Graham and Lowery (2004) helped demonstrate that racial stereotypes and confirmation biases can impact decision making on an unconscious level. In their study, police officers and juvenile probation officers were subliminally primed with race-neutral words or words related to the category 'Black' in an effort to subtly bring up the stereotypes they hold for Black people. The officers were presented with two vignettes about a hypothetical adolescent committing either a property or interpersonal crime (with race and causes of crime left ambiguous). Those in the racial prime condition reported more negative trait ratings, greater culpability and greater expected recidivism for the adolescent, and they endorsed harsher punishment than those in the neutral condition. The effects of the priming were not moderated by the officers' consciously held attitudes about Black people. As we can see, even though the officers were not told the

adolescent's race, the activation of Black stereotypes still influenced their beliefs about how guilty the adolescent was and how severe of a punishment the adolescent should receive for the crime. This illustrates that stereotypes can operate on an unconscious level to shift judgment of others' transgressions.

Although whistleblowing studies have not looked explicitly at the impact of stereotypes, King and Scudder (2013) researched whistleblowing in a hospital setting, and their findings point to stereotypes and confirmation biases as possible influencers in the decision to blow the whistle. Studying registered nurses working a public teaching hospital, they found that if a close peer made a serious, life-threatening mistake but had a reputation of being a 'competent' nurse, there was a strong tendency for the nurse observing the error to overlook that mistake and not report it. In other words, if the observer stereotyped the nurse as competent, he or she was more likely to see the error as out of character (confirming prior beliefs), and therefore not worth reporting. While it should be noted that the relationship between the observer and the nurse who made the mistake may have influenced the observer's decision to report, stereotypes appear to impact expectations and influence decision-making within the context of whistleblowing. Although this example highlights the impact of positive stereotypes, we can expect that bad expectations or negative stereotypes will also have an impact. If a Black employee makes an error, stereotypes about competence and criminality may be activated in the observer's mind (whether consciously or unconsciously), and the committed wrongdoing may confirm the negative beliefs the individual already held about people that are perceived to be in that racial group.

Moral Intensity of the Issue

One consideration is whether or not racial stereotypes and confirmation biases would lead to even greater whistle-blowing actions when the wrongdoing causes great harm to the victim. Bhal and Dadhich (2011) defined the moral intensity of the issue as the magnitude of consequences, or the level of harm falling upon others. In this case, harm may be physical, financial, psychological, or involving neglect. A number of studies have examined the effect of moral intensity on ethical decision making. Trevino and Victor (1992) found that people are more likely to report peer misconduct if other group members (i.e., coworkers or those within the work group) would suffer negative consequences because of it. Along the same lines, King and Scudder (2013) found that registered nurses who had reported a wrongdoing in the past year tended to report incidents that threatened the well-being of patients.

Knowing the strong influence moral intensity of the issue may have on whistleblowing, I investigated how varying levels of harm associated with the wrongdoing would impact the decision to blow the whistle. Past research has not specifically examined the level of recommended punishment for work-related wrongdoings in association with moral intensity of the issue. However, it was predicted that harsher punishments would be recommended in response to a behavior that causes greater harm to others. Behavior with a higher level of harm associated with it may be more likely to be viewed as morally wrong, and people may feel that it is more important to address the wrongdoing and prevent it from occurring in the future.

If a relationship between punishment recommendations and moral intensity of the issue was shown to exist, it may indicate a disparity in the punishments used to address workplace wrongdoings. Specifically, if employees are punished differently for their

wrongdoings based on the level of harm their behavior caused, it would reason that the system of punishment in a workplace setting may be less related to actual behavior, and more closely tied to the harm to others brought on by the wrongdoing. This would be supported by the theory of correspondence bias. This theory posits that people have the propensity to attribute the cause of observed behaviors to a person's stable personality traits, rather than using situational factors to guide interpretations (Gawronski, 2004). Therefore, those observed committing a harmful wrongdoing may be regarded as bad individuals and therefore more deserving of punishment. Whatever the cause, it is important to determine if this dynamic is in play so that organizations can take steps to ensure their punishments are applied equally, no matter the consequence of the behavior.

King and Scudder's (2013) finding regarding the impact of competency on reporting a fellow nurse brings to light the idea that stereotypes and confirmation biases have the potential to be influential even when moral intensity is high. However, Duncan's study (1976) demonstrated that when a situation is ambiguous, stereotypes may govern interpretations and decision-making. Therefore, it is predicted that the impact of racial stereotypes will be strongest when the level of harm is low. When moral intensity is low, the situation appears more ambiguous because an obvious and serious threat is not present, perhaps facilitating an increased reliance upon stereotypes.

When moral intensity of the issue is high, stereotypes may be less impactful because in an extreme situation, the morally-correct action is more obvious, and fewer factors—such as race—may sway a person's decision to report. If racial stereotypes are at all influential when moral intensity is high, someone may fail to report a serious wrongdoing due to the race of the employee making an error. It is therefore important to

determine whether people are equally or differentially likely to blow the whistle on a Black versus White coworker when level of harm is high. A single failure to report a life-threatening error could lead to a long list of possible consequences with unimaginable impacts on clients, customers, or employees.

Overview of Study and Statement of Hypotheses

In sum, racial stereotypes about Black people may lead to the use of confirmation biases when making the social decision to blow the whistle on a coworker, and harsher punishments may be recommended for the same error when the wrongdoer is Black versus White. In addition, the moral intensity of the issue may influence whistleblowing and punishment recommendations both on its own, and in interaction with the wrongdoer's race. In my study, participants read a scenario in which a man with a Black or White name commits a wrongdoing. The moral intensity of the issue was manipulated in terms of the level of harm to the victim of the action. There were two levels of moral intensity of the issue, high and low. Participants indicated their likelihood of reporting the coworker and the extent to which they believed the individual deserves to be punished.

From the research, theories, and data discussed, six hypotheses were formed:

Hypothesis 1. Participants would be more likely to blow the whistle on a hypothetical Black coworker than a White coworker.

Hypothesis 2. Participants would be more likely to blow the whistle when the moral intensity of the issue is high versus when it is low.

Hypothesis 3. Participants would recommend a harsher punishment for a hypothetical Black coworker than a White coworker.

Hypothesis 4. Participants would recommend a harsher punishment when the moral intensity of the issue is high versus when it is low.

Hypothesis 5. Participants would be more likely to blow the whistle on a hypothetical Black coworker than a White coworker when moral intensity of the issue is low, but equally and highly likely to blow the whistle on a Black coworker than a White coworker when moral intensity of the issue is higher.

Hypothesis 6. Participants would recommend a harsher punishment for a hypothetical Black coworker than a White coworker when moral intensity of the issue is low, but equally and highly likely to recommend a harsher punishment for a Black coworker than a White coworker when moral intensity of the issue is high.

The above predictions were made primarily for non-Black participants, due to the potential impact of group-serving biases. However, as noted earlier, Black participants may still stereotype a fellow Black employee. Thus, I first analyze the data with all participants, and then compare the results obtained after excluding Black participants, who were expected to represent only a small proportion of the sample.

Method

Participants

There were 178 students in an introductory psychology course at a Northwestern university included in the data analyses: 72 (40.4%) identified as male and 101 (56.7%) identified as female. The mean age of the participants was 19.43 years old ($SD = 3.33$). There were 119 (66.9%) participants who identified as White or Caucasian. Of the remaining participants, 7 (3.9%) identified as Black or African American, 11 (6.2%) identified as Asian, 17 (9.6%) identified as Latino/a, 2 (1.1%) identified as Native

American, and 12 (6.7%) identified as mixed race. The mean years of work experience indicated by participants was 2.93 years ($SD = 3.73$).

A total of 191 participants completed a paper-and-pencil study, and thirteen participants were removed from analyses for various reasons. One participant was removed due to their use of hostile language in answering a number of questions; one was removed because it was evident that they copied off of someone who was in a different race condition; two were removed because they failed two or more manipulation checks; and three were removed because they identified the true purpose of the study. Three participants were removed because they did not respond to key questions in the correct manner, and three were removed due to incomplete data.

Participants were recruited from two introductory psychology classes whose professor offered extra credit for in-class participation in research studies. Participants were granted an opportunity to complete the study during one of their scheduled class times.

Design

In this study, a 2 × 2 between-subjects design was used. The first independent variable was perceived race of the wrongdoer, which consists of two levels: Black and White. The second independent variable was the moral intensity of the issue: low moral intensity versus high moral intensity. The dependent variables analyzed were (1) likelihood of reporting the person committing the wrongdoing and (2) the level of punishment that the participant believed the wrongdoer deserved.

Procedure

All procedures were reviewed and approved by the university's Institutional Review Board. After being read the recruitment information and informed consent information, the four versions were passed out to students in an alternating order. Participants remained in the classroom in their chosen seats to complete the study. Responses were anonymous. Participants read a specific scenario about a doctor ordering unneeded tests for his patient, and then responded to a number of questions regarding their opinions about the behavior. They participated in passive role playing, as their responses were based on their speculations about how they would act in that situation if they were an employee at the hospital. Lastly, participants completed manipulation checks and demographics items.

Materials

    Scenarios and Manipulations. The scenarios placed the participant in the role of a hospital employee. This setting was chosen because past research on whistleblowing has focused greatly on nurses and health care staff whose errors (e.g., breaking confidentiality, mishandling patient files, giving the wrong medication, or completing unnecessary tests, procedures, or surgeries) may have grave consequences (e.g., de Cássia Pires Coli, dos Anjos, & Pereira, 2010; King & Scudder, 2013). Consequences may include stigmatizing or embarrassing the patient, inflicting pain or causing the patient to develop an illness, causing the patient to experience financial hardships, and (in the worst circumstances) death.

    Participants read the following scenario, along with information which was adapted from segments of the Sample Whistleblower Protection Policy released by the

National Council of Nonprofits (2010) in order to make the presenter's quote more realistic to an organizational setting.

> Imagine you are a medical assistant. You are at a professional conference and a presenter is speaking about your hospital's stance on whistleblowing, which is when people report a wrongdoing in the workplace.
>
> The presenter says, "Our hospital requires all employees to observe high standards of business and personal ethics. It is the responsibility of all employees and volunteers to report concerns about violations of our hospital's code of ethics or suspected violations of law or regulations that govern our operations. Such reports would be kept confidential to the extent possible. Thus, for the benefit of our patients and our staff, we at the hospital urge you to come forward and report any wrongdoings you may witness while working."
>
> A few weeks after attending the conference, you discover something while you are working in the hospital. You learn that a fellow physician, [Dr. Tyrell Jones / Dr. Patrick Jones], recently performed a number of tests on a patient. Based on your familiarity with the patient's most up-to-date chart, you are virtually certain that the tests were unnecessary, [and you believe the tests will likely put the patient into over $1,000 of debt / though you believe the low cost of the tests will not likely put the patient into debt].

The two names used to manipulate perceived race of the wrongdoer were sourced from Carpusor and Loges' (2006) study on rental discrimination.

Dependent Measures. After reading the scenario specific to their condition, participants responded to various items. The first item was "Indicate on a scale of 1

(*definitely would not*) to 9 (*definitely would*), how likely you would be to do the following after learning about his behavior of ordering unnecessary tests for the patient." This item required participants to provide a value for four statements: 1) Report the behavior to a supervisor or the human resources department (blow the whistle); 2) Talk about the behavior with your peers; 3) Talk to [Tyrell / Patrick] about his wrongdoing; and 4) Not mention the behavior to anyone at work. Responses to the first statement were used in analyzing the first dependent variable, likelihood of reporting the person who committed the wrongdoing ($M = 6.62$, $SD = 1.90$). Statements two through four were used as filler items and were not included in the analyses.

To measure the second dependent variable (the level of punishment the participant believes the wrongdoer deserves), participants were asked to "Indicate on a scale of 1 to 7 how harsh of a punishment you believe [Tyrell / Patrick] deserves for his actions." The participants were asked to note whether they believed he should receive: 1) no punishment; 2) a verbal warning; 3) a formal write-up; 4) suspension from employment; 5) termination of employment; 6) termination of employment and payment of financial penalties; *or* 7) termination of employment, prosecution, and possible imprisonment ($M = 3.41$, $SD = 1.20$). The two dependent variables were positively correlated, $r(173) = .50$, $p < .001$.

Manipulation Check and Demographics. At the end, participants were asked what they believed was the purpose of the study, and were asked to describe anything they may have found to be unusual, suspicious, or confusing. These items were included primarily to determine whether any participants figured out the true purpose of the study.

Participants were also asked to answer questions that were meant to determine how well they were paying attention, and whether the manipulations worked the way they were intended to work. The manipulation-check questions included: "What race/ethnicity do you think your coworker was?", "What was the potential effect of the wrongdoing on the patient?", and "On a scale of 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*completely*), how negatively affected do you think the patient will be due to the wrongdoing?" Participants indicated their demographics, including age, race and ethnicity, year in college, years of work experience, and whether they have ever worked somewhere where they learned about whistleblowing.

Results

It was predicted that there would be a main effect of perceived race on both the likelihood to report (Hypothesis 1) and the severity of punishment recommended (Hypothesis 3), with higher reporting and more severe punishment recommendations being present in Black name condition than in the white name condition. It was also predicted that there would be main effects of moral intensity of the issue on the likelihood to report (Hypothesis 2) and severity of the suggested punishment (Hypothesis 4), with participants being more likely to report their coworker and recommend harsher punishments when the moral intensity of the issue is high, compared to when it is low. In terms of predicted interactions, it was hypothesized that both the likelihood of reporting (Hypothesis 5) and severity of recommended punishment (Hypothesis 6) would be higher for those in the Black name condition than in the White name condition only when moral intensity of the issue was low; and equal to those in the White name condition when moral intensity of the issue was high. The sample was not restricted to non-Black

participants because the inclusion of data from Black participants (including those who identified as Black, African-American, mixed race Black, and those whose race was unknown) did not significantly affect the results.

The results were analyzed using analysis of variance (ANOVAs). Estimated marginal means were reported for all significant effects. Assumption of homogeneity of variance was met for both dependent measures based on Hartley's F_{max} variance ratio guidelines for the current sample size. Although the data were negatively skewed for one dependent measure (reporting the behavior), the robustness of ANOVA to this assumption violation with the present sample size rendered this issue unconcerning.

A 2 (perceived race: white versus black) × 2 (moral intensity of the issue: high versus low) ANOVA was performed on likelihood to report, or 'blow the whistle' on a coworker. Contrary to Hypothesis 1, the main effect of perceived race was not significant, $F(1, 172) = 0.04$, $p = .834$, $\eta^2 = .00$. Consistent with Hypothesis 2, there was a significant main effect of moral intensity of the issue, $F(1, 172) = 28.35$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .14$. Specifically, those in the low moral intensity condition were less likely to report their coworker ($M = 5.89$, $SE = 0.19$) than those in the high moral intensity condition ($M = 7.30$, $SE = 0.18$). No significant perceived race × moral intensity interaction was shown, $F(1, 172) = 2.07$, $p = .152$, $\eta^2 = .01$; therefore, Hypothesis 5 was not supported.

The same ANOVA was also performed on the recommended level of punishment. The main effect of perceived race was not significant, $F(1, 173) = .89$, $p = .356$, $\eta^2 = .01$, contrary to Hypothesis 3. However, consistent with Hypothesis 4, there was a significant main effect of moral intensity of the issue, $F(1, 173) = 11.85$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .06$. When moral intensity of the issue was low, a lower level of punishment was recommended ($M =$

3.10, SE = 0.13), than when moral intensity of the issue was high (M = 3.70, SE = 0.12).

No significant perceived race × moral intensity interaction was shown, $F(1, 173)$ = .93, p

= .337, η^2 = .01; therefore, Hypothesis 6 was not supported.

When participants who failed the race check (i.e., those who incorrectly identified

the race/ethnicity of the coworker in their scenario) were excluded from the analysis, 147

participants remained. A 2 (perceived race: white versus black) × 2 (moral intensity of

the issue: high versus low) ANOVA on whistleblowing likelihood demonstrated results

similar to those delineated above for the main effect of perceived race (not significant),

$F(1, 143)$ = 0.19, p = .732, η^2 = .00, and moral intensity of the issue (significant), $F(1,$

$143)$ = 26.74, p < .001, η^2 = .16. The perceived race × moral intensity interaction was not

significant, $F(1, 143)$ = 12.23, p = .058, η^2 = .03. However, there was a marginally

significant pattern which was inconsistent with Hypothesis 5. Specifically, participants

tended to be less likely to report their Black coworker (M = 5.38, SE = 0.34) than their

White coworker (M = 6.08, SE = 0.29) when the moral intensity of the issue was low;

whereas when the moral intensity of the issue was high, participants tended to be less

likely to report their White coworker (M = 7.08, SE = .27) than their Black coworker (M

= 7.57, SE = 0.34).

The same ANOVA was performed on the recommended level of punishment. The

results mirrored those shown when participants who failed the race check were included.

Specifically, contrary to Hypothesis 3, the main effect of perceived race was not

significant, $F(1, 144)$ = 2.30, p = .131, η^2 = .02. Consistent with Hypothesis 4, the main

effect of moral intensity of the issue was significant, $F(1, 144)$ = 15.04, p < .001, η^2 =

.095. Lastly, no significant perceived race × moral intensity interaction was shown, $F(1,$ 144$) = 2.34$, $p = .129$, $\eta^2 = .016$.

Discussion

I hypothesized that participants would be more likely to report a coworker for a wrongdoing and suggest harsher punishment when the moral intensity of the issue—or the level of harm done to another—was high. Both predictions were supported, reflecting the idea that people may be more likely to report a wrongdoing when perceived level of harm to another is higher, as this more extreme behavior is more likely to elicit morally-correct behavior (i.e., reporting and punishing the wrongdoing). When the level of harm to others is greater, the situation is less ambiguous and is more likely to be interpreted as a threat to an individual's own moral or ethical code.

Although past research examined whistleblowing, it did not specifically examine suggested punishments. Therefore, the present study builds on past work by finding that harsher punishments were recommended when the moral intensity of the issue was high. This finding may be attributed to individuals' beliefs that when a wrongdoing causes more severe harm to others, a more severe punishment is necessary to deter such behavior in the future; it may also be related to individuals' sense of justice and a desire for revenge. Another potential explanation for harsher punishment recommendations when moral intensity of the issue is high is the theory of correspondent bias, as mentioned previously. Gawronski (2004) stated that people may believe an immoral disposition is a precursor for immoral behavior, whereas a moral disposition may not be necessary for moral behavior. This theory highlights the idea that harmful behaviors are more likely to be attributed to personality factors, and not situational factors when

compared to more neutral or good behavior. If an individual is personally blamed for the harmful results of their behavior, they may be viewed as more deserving of punishment. Future research could examine these possible underlying mechanisms. While coworkers typically cannot make punishment-related decisions, their experience as employees and their perception of the organization may be affected by how fairly they believe they and their coworkers are being treated by the organization. For example, an employee may become disgruntled if it seems that wrongdoings are not being punished fairly (e.g., that the punishment is too lenient or too severe).

While the dependent variable of punishment recommendations appeared to be normally distrusted, whistleblowing responses were negatively skewed. This may be related to the prime participants read at the start of the scenario, which reminded them of the importance of whistleblowing. If a ceiling effect was present for whistleblowing responses, the results could have been weakened.

Contrary to the race predictions, the Black coworker was equally as likely to be reported as the White coworker, and there was no difference in the level of punishment recommended based on the perceived race of the coworker. Whether the moral intensity of the issue was high or low, there was no difference between the likelihood of reporting a Black versus a White coworker, and no difference in the severity of the recommended punishment for a Black versus a White coworker. Essentially, I found no significant race effects. These findings may potentially be related to the United States' current social climate, such that racism, oppression, and privilege are very prominent topics. Due to an increased societal focus on social justice and equality, participants may have been more

aware of their own biases and been able to correct for them and make more conscious decisions when evaluating the scenario.

Another possible explanation for these findings is that whistleblowing is not strongly impacted by confirmation biases that are associated with racial stereotypes. For example, the confirmation biases impacting an individual's decision to report a wrongdoing may be more related to the relationship they have with that individual, which could impact how they interpret the behavior. This is potentially highlighted by King and Scudder's (2013) finding that even after making a serious, potentially life-threatening error, registered nurses who were viewed as a close peer and judged to be more competent were less likely to be reported. Therefore, a variety of relationship factors may exist between the witness and the wrongdoer which have the potential to impact whether or not the wrongdoing is reported, and perhaps outweigh any potential race effects. For example, the behavior of a peer who is viewed as trustworthy and friendly may be interpreted as more benign than the same behavior conducted by a peer who is not trusted or who does not have a friendship with the witness, regardless of that peer's race. Further research is needed to examine the impact of varying levels of relational closeness on whistleblowing behavior.

An unexpected pattern emerged when data from only participants who properly identified the race of their coworker were analyzed. Although marginally significant, the findings demonstrated a trend, such that when the harm to others was low, participants tended to report the Black coworker less than the White coworker. The opposite was seen when level of harm was high, as participants tended to report the Black coworker more than the White coworker. A potential rationale for this unexpected finding is the concept

of evaluative amplification, whereby people "are said to *amplify* both positive and negative evaluations of members of stigmatized groups" (Evans, Hart, & Hicks, 2003, p. 97). In other words, people may be more likely to evaluate Black individuals more critically and negatively than White individuals if their behavior is perceived to be more incompetent or socially undesirable (e.g., causing more harm to others). Alternatively, it could be the case that confirmation biases do not significantly impact reporting behavior unless the level of harm is high enough. The more harmful a behavior is, the more closely it may match up with consciously or unconsciously held negative racial stereotypes. It is noteworthy that a total of 31 participants were unable to correctly identify the race of their coworker. The high number of participants who failed the race check may be associated with reluctance to make assumptions about race, which may also be impacted by the current social climate.

Due to the sample used in this study, a key limitation includes constraint on generalizability. Whereas the sample consisted of college students who had an average of about three years of work experience, the true population of individuals who may witness and report wrongdoings is likely to have had more work experience. This general lack of exposure to situations where whistleblowing may occur may make it more difficult for participants to place themselves in the context of the scenario.

Another limitation to consider is that the scenario used may be difficult for the participants to relate to. Specifically, in a study that is sampling from a student population, it may be necessary to have the scenario's setting share more characteristics with typical locations where students may find themselves working, rather than the hospital setting that was utilized in this study. For example, one might wish to focus on a

restaurant or customer service setting where it is still possible to manipulate level of harm (e.g., seeing a fellow employee drop food on the floor and still serve it to a customer, versus the fellow employee serving uncooked food to a customer). A last limitation to note is the fact that the scenario was hypothetical. Because we wanted to actively manipulate perceived race and level of harm, we did not ask participants to reflect on past experiences of reporting a coworker's wrongdoing. Having read a hypothetical scenario, participants' responses may have been impacted by assumptions made during the interpretation of both the scenario and the questions themselves. Due to the participants' unfamiliarity with the scenario's content and setting, there may have also been issues related to role-taking (i.e., placing themselves in the role of a medical assistant).

Future researchers may be interested in determining whether the unexpected pattern that emerged in the findings was by chance, or a possible representation of the evaluation amplification effect at work. A potential line of study, then, would include examining how the likelihood of reporting wrongdoings is impacted by how socially desirable or undesirable the participant deems the behavior to be. To manipulate this, it may be necessary to state the motivation or reasoning of the person who is committing the wrongdoing. For example, a person could be told that the wrongdoer acted out of spite, that their actions were accidental, or that the error resulted from incompetence. Other paths for future research include asking participants why and how their whistleblowing decisions were made, asking about similar personal experiences they may have had in the past, and using multiple names for each race to ensure that race affected the results more than specific name choices. Lastly, the potential impact of rule-following tendencies that may cause rigidity in moral reasoning decisions could be assessed given

that strict rule-followers may not be affected by situational nuances, such as differences in the perpetrator demographics or the level of harm to the victim.

Although this study did not show a significant effect of race on whistleblowing behavior or recommended punishment, it is important to continue examining whether a wrongdoer's perceived race impacts a witness's likelihood of reporting the wrongdoing. If a disparity is shown to exist, such that Black individuals are more likely to be reported than White individuals (whether in general or in relation to the level of harm being caused), there may be wrongdoings that are going unreported and unpunished. To address this potential disparity, specific trainings can be utilized to educate employees about the impact of their own biases. Employees can also be assisted in learning to recognize and identify the stereotypes they believe to be true about different groups. This may be useful, as Dasgupta (2004) found that the more aware people are of their biases, the more control they have over whether they are manifested, which would allow employees to more consciously examine their motivations to report or not report a coworker's wrongdoing in relation to the race of the coworker. Not only would this education help employees pay closer attention to the way they perpetuate negative stereotypes, but it may also open up a dialogue amongst organizational staff on the topic of workplace discrimination, as well as the importance of blowing the whistle.

The wrongdoing's level of harm was shown to impact both reporting behavior and punishment recommendations. If the disparity in reporting based on level of harm is viewed as problematic by an organization, it may be necessary for them to reiterate to their employees that wrongdoings must be reported regardless of the harm that results from them. This may be highlighted to ensure that all wrongdoings in the workplace

receive attention, because a person committing less harmful wrongdoings may later cause more harm in the future if his or her behavior is not addressed and corrected. If research continues to demonstrate a difference in punishment severity based on the level of harm caused by the behavior, and not merely on the behavior itself, it would be necessary to question whether this method is preferred by the organization. If their regulations indicate that punishments should be based on the specific behavior regardless of the behavior's consequences, it may be the case that they are unequally applying punishment, and thereby disregarding their own regulations. To ensure that behaviors labeled as wrong or against ethical or organizational guidelines are being reported and punished equally across the board, further training about which behaviors to report and how to deal with them, regardless of the behaviors' consequences, may be needed for employees at every level of the organization.

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