Resilience and whistleblowers: Coping with the consequences

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Resilience and Whistleblowers: Coping with the Consequences

Abstract
Understanding the whistleblower's ability to cope with the repercussions of showing 'ethical resistance' in the workplace is a neglected area of research. Drawing on qualitative data from narrative interviews with whistleblowers in South Africa, this article analyses the ways in which whistleblowers deal with the hostile responses from employers that tend to follow their disclosures. Most of the participants employed successful coping mechanisms showing that they remained hopeful that justice would prevail, even amidst emotions of distress and fear due to organizational reprisal. This study shows that the resilience perspective is an important frame for understanding whistleblowers' responses to the challenging consequences of their actions. Practitioners should consider ways to enhance individual resilience to ensure a positive outcome of disclosures of organizational wrongdoing.

Introduction
Whistleblowing is increasingly being regarded as an important tool in the fight against corporate misconduct. However an ambivalent attitude is often displayed towards whistleblowers; are they heroes or traitors, and what protection, if any, should they have? Employers often victimize whistleblowers as their actions are considered to be disloyal and a betrayal of the organization.

The growing literature on whistleblowing focuses largely on ethical issues (e.g., Alford 2001; Avakian and Roberts 2012; Kaptein 2011), the victimization and protection of whistleblowers (e.g., Carr and Lewis 2010; Rehg et al. 2008) and the understanding of organizational responses to whistleblowing (e.g., Mesmer-Magnus and Viswesvaran 2005; Miceli et al. 2008). Some researchers are interested in what factors would induce an employee to raise concerns about perceived wrongdoing or to remain silent (see Kaptein 2011; Miceli et al. 2012). While literature generally details the retaliation that whistleblowers experience (e.g., Glazer and Glazer 1989; Miceli et al. 2008; Miethe 1999; Rehg et al 2008), there is limited research on how whistleblowers deal with the often harrowing consequences of this retaliation (Alford 2001; Glazer and Glazer 1989; Miethe 1999). .

In this article the experiences of 18 South African whistleblowers are explored with the aim of reaching an understanding of the ways in which whistleblowers deal with the negative responses of their employers. An overview of literature focusing on the definition of whistleblowing, organizational responses to ethical resistance in the workplace, and the consequences for whistleblowers is followed by a description of the coping strategies of the South African whistleblowers. What became clear from an analysis of their experiences, is the extent of the resilience they demonstrated. This required that the concept 'resilience' receives attention. The findings of the study are discussed against the background of the theoretical frame, with specific reference to whistleblowers' sense of coherence (cf. Antonovsky 1979, 1998a).

How do whistleblowers deal with the organization's responses?
Whistleblowing occurs when someone with privileged access to organizational information discloses suspicions about actual or potential organizational wrongdoing to one or more individuals they believe are in a position to take action (see Jubb 1999; Miceli et al. 2008; Miethe 1999; Uys 2008). Organizational wrongdoing refers to illegal, immoral and/or unethical activities

the organization is accountable for and which are under its control. The aim of the disclosure is to prevent, impede or end the wrongdoing (Jubb 1999).

Disclosures could occur internally when the whistleblower communicates the message inside the organization (using prescribed or non-prescribed channels) and/or externally when the whistleblower resorts to an external agency, which could include the media. Regardless of whether the disclosure was internal or external, or both, or whether it was authorized, unauthorized or role-prescribed, organizations typically regard whistleblowing as illegitimate. The disclosure of information about organizational wrongdoing, whether internal or external, is regarded as a form of betrayal and such disclosures usually lead to retaliation by the organization (Uys 2008).

Organizations victimize whistleblowers in a variety of ways. Cortina and Magley (2003) distinguish between work-related retaliation and social retaliation. There may be initial indications that management is taking the issue seriously, while they in fact do nothing (the 'hot air' scenario). Stonewalling could occur where there is no reply to memos. If the whistleblower cannot be fired immediately, processes would be set in motion to terminate his/her employment (such as abruptly downgrading performance evaluations). Blacklisting, constructive dismissal, transfers to another section, personal harassment, character assassination and the implementation of disciplinary proceedings are forms of work-related retaliation used by organizations to discredit and destroy whistleblowers (Glazer and Glazer 1989; Mesmer-Magnus and Viswesvaran 2005).

Retaliation entails practices aimed at moving whistleblowers 'to the margins: not just of the organization but of society' (Alford 2001: 131). Colleagues and/or superiors become progressively less friendly and isolate the whistleblower through closing ranks and identifying the whistleblower as a 'troublemaker' or 'not one of us'. Especially higher-level managers might experience that they are excluded from meetings (Rothschild 2008). Retaliation leads to a deterioration in interpersonal relations in the workplace. The whistleblower's working relationship with his/her supervisor is generally damaged irretrievably (Cortina and Magley 2003; Rehg et al. 2008). Some authors (Bjørkelo et al. 2008:20) even drew comparisons between the typical stages of the workplace bullying process as identified by Leymann and the experiences of whistleblowers.

The retaliation that follows on whistleblowing often results in an extensive decline in the quality of life of the whistleblower and his/her family (Glazer and Glazer 1989; Miceli et al. 2008; Miethe 1999; Rothschild 2008; Uys 2008). Apart from the negative material consequences when they lose their careers, whistleblowers suffer psychosocial effects. The organization's reprisals tend to have a devastating effect on their self-images and confidence and they are inclined to develop feelings of insecurity, depression and anxiety (Glazer and Glazer 1989; Miceli et al. 2008; Miethe 1999; Rothschild 2008; Uys 2008).

Glazer and Glazer (1989: 155) depict the all-encompassing nature of the experience when they say: '[t]he anger that drove them forward threatened to overwhelm their lives, leaving them permanently scarred', while Miethe (1999) views whistleblowing and its consequences as a master status that consumes the whistleblower's life. This master status sometimes result in an obsession to restore his/her reputation, which could harm the whistleblower's relationship with family and friends, especially if the latter do not understand or support his/her commitment to continuing the fight to the 'bitter end' (Uys 2008).

Acting as 'loyal and caring' employees, whistleblowers never expect the severe negative consequences. Limited research has been conducted on how whistleblowers respond to these negative experiences. One exception is the work of C. Fred Alford (2001). In his book *Whistleblowers: Broken Lives and Organizational Power*, Alford (2001: 38) identified four themes that characterize the narratives of whistleblowers. The first he calls 'the choiceless choice', where whistleblowers generally express a compulsion to disclose the wrongdoing that they perceive in

order to remain true to their beliefs. The second entails that the narratives of most whistleblowers remain 'stuck in static time, filled with meaningless motion, an endless sequence of events, because the storyteller cannot bear to bring the story to an end and so finally know its meaning' (p. 48). A third theme is the tendency by some whistleblowers to construct a world in which everything which happens is meaningfully connected to the whistleblower's actions, one where the organization feels so threatened by the individual that 'it will remove him, not just beyond the margins of the organization but all the way to the margins of society' (p. 54). The final theme 'living in the position of the dead' was demonstrated by only a small number of the whistleblowers who liberated themselves through a disconnection or distancing from the consequences of their actions (p. 119).

This picture of whistleblowers leading broken lives contrast strongly with Glazer and Glazer's (1989: 231) view that 'the solutions they have sought and their continuing identification with the whistleblowing cause reveal that they are resilient despite their setbacks'. Glazer and Glazer (1989) devoted a chapter of their book to the aftermath of retaliation and ways in which whistleblowers could re-establish their lives. Most of the discussion is spent on exploring ways in which whistleblowers could recreate their work lives through finding a job, developing a new career or opening a private practice. This speaks to the final stages in Soeken's (1986) model of the whistleblowing process indicating that some whistleblowers may eventually not only find closure after experiencing the strenuous consequences following ethical disclosure, but may even reach the stage of resolution when they are 'able to feel healed, secure and "like themselves again"' (Bjørkelo et al. 2008:20).

This contrast is kept in mind when the experiences of the South African whistleblowers are considered. First, an overview of the method employed to conduct the study, is required.

Method

The research design consisted of narrative interviews with 18 whistleblowers, lasting between one and two hours. They were identified in multiple ways. The majority were contacted upon the appearance of newspaper articles about their experiences. A small number approached the authors following requests in the media. Others contacted one of the authors for advice on how to deal with the consequences of their whistleblowing.

During a narrative interview a person is given an opportunity 'to tell a story about some significant event in the informant's life' (Bauer 1996: 2) with minimal interruption by the interviewer. It therefore was considered a particularly appropriate approach for interviewing whistleblowers as it gave the participants an opportunity to communicate the meaning they have created about their personal experiences (Søderberg 2006). Apart from the chronological dimension or story, each narrative also has a plot dimension that divulges the narrator's perceptions, attitudes and motives with regard to the events, actors and relationships that form part of the story. An episodic narrative interviewing technique was therefore employed, which entails requesting the participants to provide descriptions of their whistleblowing experiences (Bates 2004). Sixteen interviews were conducted at the whistleblowers' homes and the other two at the office of one of the authors. With the permission of the participants the interviews were recorded. The identities of the participants are protected by the use of pseudonyms, except in the case of Vicky Johnson (2004) who published an article on her experiences.

The rich data provided by the narratives formed the basis of the analysis. Using a grounded theory approach, the transcribed interviews were subjected to qualitative content analysis in order to uncover themes (see Graneheim and Lundman 2004; Holton 2010). The data were sorted into conceptual groupings in a number of stages – first using open coding and thereafter refining the

analyses through axial and selective coding. An overview grid was used to identify possible patterns of similarity and difference across cases. For Riessman (2005:2) thematic analysis constitutes one of the models of narrative analysis focusing on how participants make sense of their experiences.

Findings

Blowing the whistle: organizational response and its negative consequences

All 18 respondents reported various forms of victimization by their employers as well as their co-workers. Most of them left their organizations where they blew the whistle, either because their positions were terminated or they resigned and found other employment. Only three of the respondents found other jobs in the same field with one taking a significant cut in salary.

In seven cases the employers instituted procedures to terminate the employment of the whistleblowers. For example, Ken, a Safety and Security Manager at an explosives manufacturer, wrote a report to the board of directors in which he accused a senior employee of misconduct. When the organization called a disciplinary hearing against Ken, he applied for a court interdict in terms of the Protected Disclosures Act (2000). Although his employer was instructed to reinstate Ken, an investigation of his work continued which led to a disciplinary hearing. After he was found guilty of insolence and insubordination, Ken was discharged five months after being reinstated. This resulted in him having to sell his house and accumulating debts in order to pay for legal representation and to start a business in a completely new field.

In six of the cases the employer implemented procedures which eventually resulted in a so-called 'retrenchment' of the whistleblowers, which entailed the payment of a severance package. In South African labour law, a retrenchment is an operational dismissal, and does not carry the negative connotation of dismissal for wrongdoing. Accordingly, an employer who wants to terminate the service of a 'trouble maker' may, in order to induce the employee to sign their proposed termination agreement, offer to label the termination as a retrenchment. When George, an investigator at a financial regulator and a qualified attorney, first raised concerns at his initial employer, he was given first an oral, and later a written warning for allegedly not adhering to the communication channels and was transferred to another division where he was overqualified for the post. Eventually he had no alternative but to accept a severance package and sign a secrecy agreement.

The whistleblowers who come through the process the most positively, mostly resign before the employers can take drastic action against them. Five of the respondents fell in this category. As an actuary working for a financial regulator, John felt that he was doing his job as trustee when he objected to his employer's handling of its pension fund. He believed that the employer's actions were detrimental to the interests of the employees. When he decided to support an ex-colleague with regard to his pension fund claims he was increasingly ostracized. After finding a position with another company in a different city, he resigned.

One of the devastating consequences of whistleblowing is the impact it has on the financial resources available to whistleblowers. Apart from their employment and salary, they usually lose their careers and have to start afresh. Prolonged legal battles between the organization and the whistleblowers also erode their financial resources.

The emotional wellbeing and physical health of the whistleblowers were also affected negatively. This is demonstrated by the experiences of Jaco, who disclosed financial irregularities in the South African office of the multinational company where he was employed. His words echo the sentiments of many of the participants when he said:

> The initial reaction was disbelief. I did not want to get out of bed in the morning to go work. I think my motivation to work flew out of the window. In terms of health: [my] ulcer acted up again. In my entire life I have never had a problem sleeping, but this was the first time I lay awake at night thinking about things. Emotionally this was pretty debilitating.

Another consequence of whistleblowing highlighted by many of the participants is the emotional strain put on the family. John considered the tension he experienced subsequent to becoming a whistleblower as the major contributing factor for the failure of his marriage. He believed that his wife did not fully understand what he was going through.

As most of the respondents were under the impression that they were doing what was expected of them, they were not prepared for the retaliation they experienced. So, how did the whistleblowers in our sample cope with the negative consequences of blowing the whistle? During the data analysis a number of themes were identified.

Making sense of and coping with the consequences of whistleblowing

Appropriating intrapersonal resources: Amidst the strenuous context in which the whistleblowers found themselves, they were nonetheless able to identify resources that could aid them in managing and overcoming their stressful circumstances. All the whistleblowers believed that they would be able to appropriate relevant resources to enable them to see the matter through although in some cases it proved to be much more difficult than anticipated.

The whistleblowers relied heavily on intrapersonal resources. Having 'an optimistic outlook on life' and 'being determined to succeed', were key strengths exhibited by 13 of the participants in particular. For instance, Max, who challenged the Minister of Justice about the appointment of liquidators, displayed such a resolute attitude when he said: 'I grew up from a poor background and worked from there – so I know I will survive come what may. I also have my skills to make me survive.' For others, such as Ken, having a generally positive outlook on life was not sufficient to help him get through the ordeal of being isolated, 'financially exhausted', and 'emotionally abused in the workplace'. In order for him to cope with his situation – a situation he likened to 'the Spanish Inquisition' – he had to identify and rely on additional coping resources such as his persistent belief in honesty and justice.

Having strong internalized values was an important intrapersonal resource for 13 of the whistleblowers. Their values were the underlying force that compelled them to disclose the wrongdoing in the first place. Upon reflection, their conviction to 'do the right thing' also reinforced their belief that their resistance was ethical/justified, and reason enough to persist. Cathy, for example, spoke about how her principled outlook on life underscored her belief that she acted in the best interests of all when she blew the whistle

> …I was brought up in a home where being loyal to your employer is paramount, where at [the company I worked for] they killed themselves laughing when I said I was loyal. They said that when they want loyalty, they'll buy dogs, they don't need me. I also just believe that injustice should be stopped. We have so much corruption and inefficiency in this country and it is crippling us and I will not keep quiet when I see what's going on… I believe that by keeping quiet you condone it.

Religious beliefs helped six of the participants to get a perspective on what was happening to them, and aided them in approaching this stressful life event with hope. In contemplating how emotionally taxing the 'whistleblowing affair' was, Max said:

> [T]he [negative] impression people had [of me], caused tremendous stress. But, I survived and… I took this as a challenge. Took it as retribution from the devil or from God – I only say God was preparing me for something bigger. I have done well… I survived.

Making use of external resources: Whistleblowers also relied on external resources such as professional legal advice and trade union support during disciplinary hearings and legal battles with the employer. The expense of legal representation created a burden of its own by diminishing much needed financial resources in times of employment uncertainty.

Social support networks played an invaluable role in coping with the challenging consequences of whistleblowing. Support from close family members were highlighted by all the participants. Although a few received financial assistance from kin, family members mostly gave moral and emotional support. Even though Cathy knew that she could rely on her supportive family network, she clung to her pride and was for a long time reluctant to burden them with her emotional and financial problems. Eventually she took her sisters in her confidence and realised how much her siblings' support meant in making the stressful experience more manageable.

Having a supportive spouse/partner was considered the driving force that propelled eight of the participants to persist during the whistleblowing process. Chris, who raised concerns about the handling of retirement annuities, said the following in this regard:

> What has kept me going is that I had my wife. She gave me emotional support and I must admit that… I've relied on [her] to a huge degree. [Her support] allowed me to have the strength to continue with the fight.

Anthea reported her suspicions of illegal trading to the compliance division of the financial organization where she worked. She viewed her husband as supportive, but said he also pressured her to accept a settlement offer made by her employer and to 'forget about the entire thing'. Rather than alleviating her emotional burden, Anthea felt that her husband, in some ways, added to the stress she was experiencing – highlighting that social support can be both stress relieving and stress inducing. For two male whistleblowers, however, the absence of spousal support was acute. Neither of them received comfort or encouragement from their spouses, and both believed that the strain of the whistleblowing process had a severe negative impact on their marital relationships, which eventually ended in divorce.

Supportive friends and colleagues was an additional source of strength. Three whistleblowers said that they had not received any support from their co-workers; seven mentioned some support – albeit not always publically. Ken experienced strong support from junior colleagues and factory workers. After his initial reinstatement, more than 200 employees on the factory floor gave him a standing ovation, which touched him deeply.

Some whistleblowers also received support from unexpected sources. Vicky, a senior legal advisor employed by a large city council, raised concerns about the mayor's dishonesty in matters pertaining to the renaming of streets. One of Vicky's lifelines was the encouragement given by the general public and co-workers she did not even know, as expressed in a chapter she wrote:

> In the background subtle, and not so subtle, threats were made. For example, in a private discussion regarding the street renaming issue I was reminded by a certain councillor that in this country 'a woman is raped every nine seconds'… But this had to be balanced against the overwhelming support I was shown by members of the public (total strangers who called me at work) and employees of the city who bombarded me with emails and other messages of support (Johnson 2004: 51).

Some of the whistleblowers had an uphill battle to access resources (e.g., finances, legal assistance, and emotional support) and their inability to secure the support of senior colleagues was a source of disappointment and frustration. Most of the respondents were faced with dwindling financial resources. The ways in which they overcame these obstacles is evidence in itself that they were determined to cope with and overcome their stressful situation. For instance, Hettie, a nurse at an assisted living facility for the aged who reported irregularities in the administration and use of prescription medication, was enraged by the incompetence of the legal aid provided by her trade union during her disciplinary hearing. Despite her financial constraints, she left no stone unturned until she got legal counsel who helped her to argue her case successfully. This demonstrates the importance of social capital and particularly both bonding and bridging capital as forms of resilience. Whistleblowers generally took the most strain when this was lacking.

All the whistleblowers showed the ability to identify and appropriate resources to cope with their challenges. These included, for example, financial and 'interpersonal-relational' resources, with specific reference to social support received from significant others (cf. Strümpfer 1995: 83); and intrapersonal resources, such as having an internal locus of control (cf. Rotter 1990). Moreover, where whistleblowers had difficulty in accessing certain resources, they demonstrated innovation, creativity and persistence in finding alternatives.

'Making sense of it all': deconstructing the whistleblowing process: The whistleblowers' attempts at making cognitive sense of their situations emerged as one of the central themes in the study. It is evident from the narratives of all 18 participants that, at the time of reporting the wrongdoing, their decisions and actions made cognitive sense to them. Prior to making the disclosure they not only gathered information about and analysed the facts pertaining to the organizational wrongdoing, but also sought the appropriate avenues to divulge the information. Participants often recounted in detail both the facts central to the whistleblowing event and the evidence they found. They viewed their disclosures as not only morally justified, but also in the best interest of stakeholders. Their conviction that their disclosure was for the greater good and would initiate a process to rectify the wrongdoing, was striking. They also expected that those involved in the wrongdoing would be brought to justice.

After the disclosure, the whistleblowers continued to assess and reassess their situation. The unexpected negative reaction on the part of the organization and the experience of role strain was something the whistleblowers had to mentally process in order to plan their next courses of action. When Karl, a council member in local government, approached the leader of his political party with evidence of financial irregularities within the party, he was at first shocked by the party leader's non-response. He tried to understand why the party leader shunned the matter:

> From a political point of view I understand why she didn't want to become involved – it would have had a damaging effect on the party prior to the election. But I am still convinced that it would have been to the advantage of the party if all of this came to light at that specific time.

After long reflection, Karl decided that it would be in the best interests of his constituents to approach a senior member of the opposition party to assist him in disclosing the irregularities.

Most of the participants spoke to their colleagues in an attempt to gain a better understanding of why the organization reacted with such antagonism, but they had little success. Eight participants mentioned the dismissive and hostile responses of colleagues. This left the whistleblowers to seek information elsewhere. When Cathy was dismissed from her position as public relations officer after disclosing her suspicions about her superior's fraudulent scheme, she turned to the internet:

> I was on the internet all day and all night looking up the labour laws. I [later] knew it inside out. I read every case the CCMA [Council for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration] has ever had on the internet. I looked up every case I could find on wrongful retrenchment due to whistleblowing. I was shocked because nine out of ten of the sites that discussed whistleblowing said: 'if you're thinking about blowing the whistle, think very carefully before you do it, because you will probably lose your job and your reputation and everything else'.

At some point all participants questioned whether blowing the whistle was worth the emotional and financial strain. John recounted that he had to deal with the reality of being branded a 'trouble maker'; that his blowing the whistle was a 'career limiting move' and that he was facing a 'dead end'. Cathy's disclosure of suspicions of fraud in the marketing division of a large international internet company involving $300,000 over a period of three years, led to her dismissal, also labelled a 'retrenchment'. Cathy's emotional ordeal led to feelings of depression. She tried to 'avoid *thinking* about it' and once even contemplated suicide. Cathy recounted a moment of clarity during which she realized that, without denying her emotions, she nonetheless had to look beyond her intense feelings and reflect on and take charge of her situation:

> I was not in the wrong… I was not a bad person – I actually did the right thing at the time. I realised I just got completely engulfed by feelings of uselessness… so I made the conscious decision to be more practical with dealing with it in my own time.

Three of the whistleblowers were troubled by the knowledge that their act of ethical resistance had negative implications for innocent parties. The question 'did I do the right thing' resounded in their minds. Yet, upon reflection they were able to cognitively justify their actions. André, a senior accounting executive at a large company, was such a whistleblower; his disclosure of financial irregularities eventually led to the liquidation of the company. He recounted:

> Seven hundred people lost their jobs and four factories were closed down. That is the sad part of whistleblowing – there are many innocent people that stand to lose so much…In the beginning you doubt yourself and question whether you have done the right thing. But I thought long and hard and was convinced that I was not in the wrong… I was only the messenger.

When Vicky raised her concerns about the mayor's dishonesty in matters pertaining to the renaming of streets in the city, she was exposed to intimidation and became increasingly side-lined in the workplace.

She experienced regret and often contemplated how she could have approached the matter differently. In an article she wrote she described her experiences as follows:

> I feel a deep sense of ambiguity over what I did – whatever one may say about doing the right thing, it does not change the fact that I broke a fundamental social rule by betraying someone I worked closely with and who trusted me (Johnson 2004: 52).

The whistleblowers did not only try to make sense of their past and present experiences, but were also convinced that their life-worlds would continue to make sense. Deep-rooted values emerged as a central element in this belief. This was particularly true for 13 of the 18 participants. Describing how unpredictable the future is and how she never anticipated the negative response when she reported irregularities in research fund appropriation at a university, Yvonne nonetheless clung to the conviction that she would never ignore her principles:

> It was the important thing that carried me through. In the end I have a clear conscience. I can live with myself and I am comfortable with my actions. I will not look back later in life with a guilty conscience.

It was evident that all the whistleblowers actively tried to judge their reality and to make sense of their life-world. Although the participants were taken aback by the organization's reaction to and the outcome of their act of whistleblowing, they continually assessed the broader context and their specific situation in order to retain a rational, structured perspective which was comprehensible to them. In line with the "just world" basic assumptions as described by Janoff-Bulman's (1992), the participants tried to hold on to or rebuild their shattered assumptions that the world is benevolent and meaningful, and that the self is worthy.

Our findings contrast directly with Alford's (2001: 48) conclusion that most whistleblowers are stuck in static time through a refusal to accept that their suffering did not achieve anything. The 18 whistleblowers attempted to construct meaning of what happened to them and actively considered their options in moving beyond their ordeal.

Remaining firm in their convictions: Whistleblowers consider it very important to create meaning from their traumatic experiences. Despite the fact that their disclosure of irregularities brought about unexpected negative personal repercussions, all the participants stood by their conviction that they did 'the honourable thing' when blowing the whistle. Even though they sometimes felt despondent, the whistleblowers remained motivated and committed to continue investing emotional energy in overcoming this highly stressful time. To them, their values and principles left them no alternative but to show ethical resistance. Alford (2001: 65) calls this 'the choiceless choice' of whistleblowing. In explaining why he remained motivated to pursue justice and why he did not yield to the gravity of his situation, Max said:

> A wrong is a wrong regardless of the person or institution that has done it. Let's talk with an intention to prevent it and if we find anybody getting involved [in irregularities] – a clear message must be sent to the public, especially when a person is a public officer, because they have the trust of the people.

Five of the whistleblowers in the study suffered at some time from psychosomatic ailments as a result of stress and they faced difficult family and/or marital-related challenges. Removing doubts from their minds and reassuring themselves of the significance of both the situation and their experiences was no easy task. They nonetheless realised that it was important for them to move beyond this life-changing event. There was no doubt in John's mind that his act of whistleblowing was justified, yet being on the receiving end of organizational retaliation and going through a divorce, brought him to the following conclusion:

> You realise that you are fighting against the odds and that you are fighting a losing battle – so, you lose your zeal, your driving force. Then it becomes a struggle to go to work and a struggle to motivate yourself and remain happy. So, in the end I felt leaving and moving on would be the right thing to do.

When asked whether they would do it all over again, the whistleblowers voiced a sense of ambivalence. This ambivalence, however, did not pertain to the ethical resistance itself. All the whistleblowers said that they would not hesitate to disclose irregularities, but that they, knowing what they know now, would instead approach it differently. A number indicated that they would rather blow the whistle anonymously if again confronted by workplace wrongdoing. This underscores the motivational force behind their ethical resistance.

Although a few participants felt disillusioned, and in the case of Hettie embittered, the whistleblowers realised the importance of seeking meaning in their challenging experiences and doing their best to surmount them with dignity. As a consequence, all the participants felt to a more or lesser extent that they have come to learn more about themselves. Mark, who provided evidence to an investigative journalist that his employers were defrauding mostly poor and often illiterate claimants from the Road Accident Fund, reflected on his ability to persevere and to see the positive elements:

> I think it has made me to set a very high ethical standard for myself in terms of your 'yes' being 'yes' and your 'no', 'no'. There is no shortcut… You know, you set very high standards for yourself, so I think in that regard its good… I believe that you have to do right, you have to be a blessing to receive a blessing.

Discussion
The stress whistleblowers experience as a result of the (unexpected) negative response on the part of organizations has had a profound impact on their psychological wellbeing (see also Miceli et al. 2008; Rothschild 2008; Uys 2008). Not only did some of the participants have to deal with confrontational situations such as disciplinary hearings, but most of them also recounted becoming marginalized figures in their organizations and experiencing isolation. The stressful experience was compounded by financial difficulty as a result of legal expenses and the eventual loss of employment. For some the strain experienced spilled over into their private life, resulting in conflict in the family. These stressful life experiences elicited an array of emotional responses such as feelings of ambiguity, anxiety, anger, and guilt. Yet, the sheer tenacity with which the individuals in the study clung to their moral convictions and belief in justice, even to their own detriment, as well as the way in which they coped with their circumstances is indicative of not only an emotional commitment to their original decision to blow the whistle but also a motivational force to resile. Resilience not only refers to the individual's ability to adapt to and cope with difficult and stressful circumstances, but also to emerge from the situation more resourceful (Walsh 2003).

During the axial and, more specifically, the selective coding stages of the data analysis we realized that the negative consequences suffered by the whistleblowers following the reporting of wrongdoing clearly constituted a disruptive life experience. It was evident that in coping with these consequences some of the participants were more successful than others in reintegrating after this disruptive life event and finding resolution (cf. Soeken 1986). Why then did some whistleblowers cope admirably with their stressful existence, and even seem to flourish in the face of adversity, while others were less successful? In answering this question and gaining a better understanding of the life-worlds of these whistleblowers, we came to realize that the themes emerging from the data speak to two separate, yet related, sets of theories, that being *individual resilience* and *sense of coherence*.

Recognizing that many of the participants did more than just cope with their difficult circumstances - instead, their narratives reflected a resilient inclination. *Resilience* can be defined as '… the capacity for successful adaptation, positive functioning or competence… despite high-risk status [or] chronic stress' (Egeland et al. 1993, cited in Sonn and Fisher 1998: 458). Strümpfer (2001: 36) elaborates by stating that resilience is '… a pattern of psychological activity which consists of a motive to be strong in the face of inordinate demands, which energizes goal-directed behavior to cope and rebound (or resile), as well as accompanying emotions and cognitions.'

In the attempt to understand stress management, Aaron Antonovsky (1979) used the concept Generalized Resistance Resources (GRRs) when referring to coping resources utilized by individuals. Antonovsky (1979 1998a) found that how well individuals mobilize GRRs is linked to their *sense of coherence* (SOC), which in turn contributes significantly to their resilience. SOC is therefore in itself not a coping strategy or a resistance resource, but rather a state of mind or a general approach to life that aids the appropriation of coping and resistance resources (Antonovsky 1998b). More specifically, *'sense of coherence'* can be described as:

> A global orientation that expresses the extent to which one has a pervasive, enduring though dynamic feeling of confidence that (1) the stimuli deriving from one's internal and external environments in the course of living are structured, predictable, and explicable; (2) the resources are available to one to meet the demands posed by these stimuli; and (3) these demands are challenges, worthy of investment and engagement (Antonovsky 1998a: 22).

In the findings section of this paper we highlight four themes with regard to the whistleblowers' coping strategies and mechanisms. When these themes are overlaid by Antonovsky's (1979, 1998b) conceptual framework, it becomes evident that each of these themes speaks to the three components of sense of coherence identified by Antonovsky. The first of the components of a sense of coherence (SOC), is *comprehensibility*, which lies on a cognitive level and refers to the individual's ability to discern stimuli, situations and his/her life-world (Antonovsky 1998b). A pivotal aspect of the whistleblowers' attempt at making sense of the aftermath of their ethical resistance is the ongoing mental process of deconstructing the entire process. Comprehensibility was therefore instrumental in the participants' persistent conviction that blowing the whistle was indeed the appropriate action to take. However, making sense of the situation was no simple task. They had to grapple with conflicting emotions following the organization's negative reaction. Nonetheless, standing their ground on a cognitive level and having a good comprehension of the situation were on their own not sufficient to emerge successfully from the stressful situation.

Manageability - the second component of a sense of coherence – also played a key role. Manageability, in turn, relates to not only having a good apprehension of the situation, but the ability to also identify the necessary resources to cope with and overcome the challenge

Antonovsky 1998b). Despite experiencing emotional turmoil, most of the participants were able to mobilize their intrapersonal resources. Amongst these, having an internal locus of control seemed to be important. Some participants relied heavily on their internalized values and/or religious beliefs. They also assessed and actively attempted to appropriate the extrapersonal resources available to them. Some spoke with concern about the fact that they had to use rapidly depleting financial resources to manage their situation, and showed much appreciation for the support they received from other institutional and social sources. Having a supportive family network and especially a supportive spouse was invaluable to the whistleblowers. In contrast, the five participants who did not have a strong social support base, who felt abandoned by friends and colleagues, and who experienced pressure from significant others to abandon their 'crusade' were also the ones who found it more challenging to mobilize other resources.

Meaningfulness, as the third component of sense of coherence, entails both an emotional and motivational dimension. Whereas comprehensibility implies that life in general and specific events in particular make cognitive sense, meaningfulness refers to the fact that a person views life to be emotionally worthwhile (Antonovsky 1998b). The findings of our study supports Antonovsky's (1987) theoretical conclusion that meaningfulness is the principal component of SOC in the sense that it motivated the whistleblowers to continue to invest emotional energy into managing and overcoming their challenging situation. Although it was important for the whistleblowers to make sense of the situation on a cognitive level (i.e., comprehensibility), it was even more essential for them to make sense of it in emotional terms. Even after experiencing a negative reaction to their ethical resistance, they continued to pursue the matter; they kept to their principles and believed that they were acting in the best interests of others. These whistleblowers showed '…a proactive posture and confrontation of the problem or stressor in contrast to a passive and reactive posture' (Barnard 1994: 141).

The importance of meaningfulness is also apparent when considering the five whistleblowers who reached a point when they started to doubt themselves, questioned the meaningfulness of it all, and felt less confident in being able to rebound from the stressful and disruptive experience. So even though they may have had a clear cognitive comprehension of the situation, when important resources started to wane and emotional motivation began to fade, these whistleblowers started to question the meaningfulness of it all. At this stage they could have been defined as having a weaker SOC and being less resilient than the other thirteen participants. Yet, when considering their active attempts at regaining their motivation and seeking meaning in their experience, it becomes clear that they too mustered the courage to see things through, and rebuild their shattered assumptions in order to recover from their traumatic experiences (Janoff-Bulman (1992). This would, however, have been difficult if they did not already have a sense of comprehensibility and at least some coping resources available to them. We therefore argue that managing a prolonged stressful situation and coping successfully requires all the elements of the SOC triad.

Moreover, by focusing on the ways in which the whistleblowers over time responded to this disruptive life event, we were able to identify a number of sequential (albeit analytical) phases which we relate to resilience (see also Lietz 2006). After the initial shock and disbelief facing retaliation by the organization, the whistleblowers adopted during the first phase a battle stance in an attempt to *subsist* from day to day. Trying to survive in the face of the odds stacked against them, the whistleblowers used multiple avenues to justify their ethical resistance and fought to retain their positions in the organization. In the second phase, the participants saw the need to and took action in *readjusting* their lives after blowing the whistle. Confronted with the reality of being dismissed/retrenched/demoted, the whistleblowers recognized the need to make (creative) changes and to move forward with their lives and careers. During the third phase the whistleblowers started

to acknowledge that they had reached a point of no return and *accepted* their new circumstances. The fourth phase entails the recognition that they have moved beyond mere closure in finding resolution (cf. Soeken 1986) and emerged emotionally *stronger* as a consequence of the challenges experienced. Having found meaning in what happened to them also made it possible to embrace new opportunities. Five of the participants moved into a fifth phase during which they ultimately identified and acted upon the desire to help others. These whistleblowers developed seminars and produced publications in which they shared their experiences, provided information about the rights and protection of whistleblowers and promoted the culture of ethical resistance. All three of the components of a sense of coherence seem to be important throughout all five of these phases. Having a strong sense of coherence may therefore not only be instrumental in achieving a successful level of reorganization after the period of crisis, but the qualities of resilience may also be a contributing factor in these whistleblowers becoming active political agents.

Conclusion

To a greater or lesser extent, all the participants manifested resilience and a conviction that, despite negative consequences, blowing the whistle was the appropriate action. Their ability to mobilize intrapersonal and extrapersonal resources resulted in them being resourceful and optimistic, believing that they can make a difference and that justice will prevail. This demonstrates how negative emotions may in fact trigger positive processes such as reaffirmation of one's identity and moral strength. Instead of being an individual character trait one either has or not, like Buzzanell (2010), we view resilience as a dynamic quality that can develop over time through self-reflection, social interaction and appropriation of resources.

Practitioners such as psychologists, clinical sociologists and lawyers, who advise and counsel whistleblowers, should consider ways in which the resilience of whistleblowers can be enhanced. This may include highlighting the strengths whistleblowers already exhibit in terms of the sense of coherence framework. Furthermore, practitioners can assist whistleblowers in identifying available resources (such as access to legal advice, support groups, mentors and job search strategies) that may aid whistleblowers in managing this stressful life event. They could also play a role in movements to put a new legal framework in place. Moreover, practitioners can help whistleblowers to reflect on the meaningfulness of the entire whistleblowing process so as to facilitate successful adaptation and positive functioning following the (prolonged) stressful event.

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