DECIDING TO SPEAK UP OR TO REMAIN SILENT FOLLOWING OBSERVED WRONGDOING: THE ROLE OF DISCRETE EMOTIONS AND CLIMATE OF SILENCE

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Abstract

Employees who observe wrongdoing in the workplace must decide whether to speak up or remain silent. Despite the prevalence of wrongdoing in organizations, little is known about the decision-making of employees in this context and, in particular, the role of emotions in this process. We fill this void by proposing a model that specifies how discrete emotions influence employees’ decisions to engage in silence and whistle-blowing. Drawing on theoretical models of emotion and decision-making, we argue that employees’ emotional reactions to perceived wrongdoing involve a complex decision-making process involving experienced emotions, anticipatory emotions, and anticipated emotions. Specifically, we analyze the potential role of five discrete emotions in this process, arguing that anger and guilt predict whistle-blowing, whereas anticipatory fear and shame predict decisions to remain silent. We also discuss the role of anticipated regret in driving silence and whistle-blowing. Further, we suggest that an organizational climate of silence moderates the way employees respond emotionally and behaviorally following an episode of perceived wrongdoing. Finally, we conclude by discussing limitations, future directions, and implications for research.
A wealth of research indicates that employee wrongdoing is prevalent in the contemporary workplace (for a review, see Kidwell & Martin, 2005). Examples include interpersonal mistreatment such as bullying, incivility, sexual harassment, and physical violence, as well as episodes of employee fraud, theft, and sabotage. Although these types of behaviors and their consequences for individuals and organizations have been well-documented (e.g., Fox & Spector, 2005; Giacalone & Greenberg, 1997), we know relatively less about the experiences of employees who observe these acts of deviance, and how they decide how to respond to these events. Specifically, why do some observers of wrongdoing speak up to their employers about wrongdoing, whereas others choose to remain silent? Although empirical studies on whistle-blowing have provided rich information about the organizational and individual variables that influence reporting behavior (for a review, see Miceli & Near, 2005), little is known about how employees’ emotions influence their choices. We address this shortcoming in this chapter.

Recent theoretical work suggests that how people evaluate and respond emotionally to episodes of wrongdoing play an important role in determining whether they choose to engage in whistle-blowing. In their model of observers’ responses to sexual harassment, for example, Bowes-Sperry and O’Leary-Kelly (2005) suggested that observers’ decisions about whether or not to take action immediately or after some delay is influenced by their emotional reactions to the event. Specifically, they proposed that the more negatively observers react to an episode of harassment, the less likely they will be to wait before taking action. As we discuss later, both Henik (2007) and Gundlach, Douglas, and Martinko (2003) have proposed that appraisals and attributions, respectively, influence employees’ affective responses to wrongdoing, and that their discrete emotions, in turn, determine whether they engage in whistle-blowing. In a related area, Sekerka and Bagozzi (2007) have suggested that emotions influence employees’ desires to act with moral courage following an ethical challenge in the
workplace, and also affect the decision itself. Overall, there is a strong conceptual basis for examining the role of emotion in the context of wrongdoing in organizational settings.

The purpose of this chapter is to contribute to the growing literature on the psychological processes underlying whistle-blowing (e.g., Gundlach et al., 2003; Henik, 2007) and employee silence (e.g., Milliken, Morrison, & Hewlin, 2003), and to discuss the role of emotions in employee decision-making following wrongdoing. In line with Brief and Weiss’s (2002) call to investigate the effects of discrete emotions on employee behavior rather than simply positive and negative affect, we consider specifically the role of five discrete emotions as predictors of silence and whistle-blowing. Additionally, based on Morrison and Milliken’s (2000) conceptualization of a climate of silence, we consider how organizational climate influences employees’ emotional reactions to events and their subsequent behaviors. Our approach builds on previous work by specifying the antecedents of emotion following an episode of wrongdoing, extending the range of discrete emotions involved in decision-making, and considers how emotions and climate may interact in this context. In keeping with the theme of this book, however, we limit our discussion to the emotions associated with the decision to remain silent or to engage in whistleblowing, rather than other potential responses to wrongdoing (e.g., confrontation).

We begin our analysis by defining our major constructs and reviewing selected studies that have implicated emotion in people’s decisions to speak up or remain silent about workplace issues. Following this, we summarize the theoretical frameworks underlying our approach. Specifically, we consider the decision-making process in the context of Affective Events Theory (AET; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) and Baumeister, Vohs, DeWall, and Zhang’s (2007) feedback theory of emotion.

Here, we argue that emotions can arise from at least three sources following observed
wrongdoing: (1) observation of the event itself (and its effects on others), (2) retrospective appraisal of one’s response to the situation and its outcome(s), and (3) anticipation of the emotions associated with certain behaviors and their consequences (e.g., silence or whistle-blowing).

In particular, we offer a comprehensive model of decision-making and develop a set of five pairs of propositions regarding the effect of two basic emotions (anger and fear), two self-conscious emotions (guilt and shame), and anticipated regret on employees’ propensities to engage in silence or whistle-blowing. We argue further that organizational climate moderates how employees respond behaviorally following wrongdoing. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of the limitations and implications of our approach and offer some potentially fruitful directions for future research.

DEFINITIONS OF KEY CONSTRUCTS

Prior to introducing our theoretical approach, we define each of our key constructs: employee wrongdoing, employee silence, and whistle-blowing. Since employee silence and whistle-blowing are defined in several other chapters in this volume, we describe them only briefly here.

Employee Wrongdoing

A wide range of deviant behaviors can occur in organizational settings, including acts of aggression, violence, employee theft, bullying, and organizational sabotage (for a review, see Robinson & Greenberg, 1998). Consistent with this broad scope, a variety of constructs and definitions have been advanced by researchers to classify such actions, making it difficult to identify exactly what constitutes employee wrongdoing. Griffin and Lopez (2005) note this lack of conceptual clarity in their review of ‘bad behavior’ in organizations, commenting that many different terms have been used to describe inappropriate conduct in the workplace,
including workplace deviance, counterproductive work behavior (Fox & Spector, 2005), antisocial behavior (Giacalone & Greenberg, 1997), incivility (Andersson & Pearson, 1999), and organizational misbehavior (Vardi & Wiener, 1996). Griffin and Lopez (2005) posit further that, “In many cases, however, the distinctions between these constructs are ambiguous or unspecified… [this] may result in contradictory and/or incongruent theoretical arguments and empirical conclusions” (p. 989).

For the purposes of this chapter, we define employee wrongdoing as *employee behavior that is perceived to be illegal, immoral, or illegitimate in an organization*. This definition is consistent with Near and Miceli’s (1985) definition of whistle-blowing. It is also necessary to state here that we are interested in the decision-making of employees who are not implicated in the employee wrongdoing — that is, individuals who have not participated in the wrongdoing themselves. Further, we are concerned primarily with those behaviors that are so sufficiently severe that, upon discovery, some type of punitive response from management would be expected, ranging from a reprimand to dismissal.

Following an episode of wrongdoing, an observer must decide how to respond. Specifically, employees are faced with behavioral options that include remaining in the organization and staying silent, discussing the matter with colleagues, confronting the perpetrator(s), engaging in internal and/or external whistle-blowing, or exiting the organization (Edwards, Ashkanasy, & Gardner, 2006). Frequently, employees may engage in more than one of these behaviors over a period of time. In the following section, we discuss the role of emotion in employee decision-making following observed wrongdoing. In particular, we focus on the decision-making process preceding two potential responses to wrongdoing, namely employee silence and whistle-blowing.
**Employee Silence**

Milliken, Morrison, and Hewlin (2003) drew attention to the fact that employees frequently choose not to speak up about problems and concerns in the workplace. They describe this as *employee silence* (see also Morrison & Milliken, 2003; Pinder & Harlos, 2001). Despite its prevalence, little theoretical and empirical research has been conducted into employee silence, largely because of the conceptual and methodological challenges inherent in studying this behavior (Pinder & Harlos, 2001). More recently, however, employee silence has gained recognition as an important area of study, especially in view of its (mostly negative) implications for organizational learning, decision-making, error detection, and misconduct (Milliken et al., 2003; Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2005).

**Whistle-Blowing**

As detailed in the opening chapter of this volume, *whistle-blowing* — defined as the reporting of illegal, immoral, or illegitimate behavior by employers to individuals considered able to engage in reparative action (Near & Miceli, 1985) — began to attract the attention of researchers during the mid-1980s. In a recent review of the field, Miceli and Near (2005) reported that the best predictors of whether an individual will engage in whistle-blowing are the severity of the deviant behavior and the belief that speaking up will initiate effective change. As we will discuss later, however, few researchers have examined the psychological processes underlying whistle-blowing. We contend that this represents a gap in our understanding of this behavior and argue that it also is important to understand why people choose not to speak up. Next, we review the limited work that has been conducted to date on the role of emotions in employees’ decision-making after having observed instances of deviant or unethical behavior in the workplace.
EMOTIONS AND DECISION-MAKING FOLLOWING WRONGDOING

Because most of the research conducted on employees’ responses to wrongdoing has focused on whistle-blowing, and these studies have concentrated on individual and organizational predictors, we know relatively little about the perceptions, appraisals, and emotions that shape employees’ decisions after observing wrongdoing. Early theoretical models (e.g., Dozier & Miceli, 1985) seeking to explain why employees choose to blow the whistle or not to do so drew on bystander intervention research.

In this respect, Dozier and Miceli conceptualized the decision-making process as a series of rational steps, involving assessments of personal responsibility for speaking up, alternative courses of action, and an evaluation of the costs and benefits of engaging in the behavior. Although it constituted a reasonable first step, this approach does not tell the whole story. More recently, and consistent with the so-called “affective revolution” in the organizational sciences (Barsade, Brief, & Spataro, 2003, p. 3), researchers began considering how emotions influence decisions about how to respond to wrongdoing.

For example, Gundlach et al.’s (2003) social information processing model of whistle-blowing suggests that the emotions of fear, anger, and resentment will affect the decision-making of potential whistle-blowers. In particular, Gundlach et al. contend that individuals’ attributions about the causes of perceived wrongdoing (e.g., perpetrators’ intentions to commit the behavior) and the degree to which they believe perpetrators are responsible for the behavior will drive their emotional reactions and influence their decisions to speak up. Further, Henik (2007) has proposed that anger predicts whistle-blowing and fear of retaliation predicts inactive observation. In line with cognitive appraisal theory (Lazarus, 1982, 1984) she postulates that individuals’ cognitive appraisals of events influence their subsequent emotional reactions. Henik also proposed that value conflict and the associated integrative complexity of potential whistle-blowers’ thinking will influence the extent to which these
emotions predict each behavior. With respect to employee silence, Milliken et al. (2003) concluded that fear plays a key role in employees’ decisions not to speak up about problems and concerns in organizations. Additionally, Pinder and Harlos (2001) have argued that at least two types of silence exist in organizations — quiescence silence and acquiescent silence — and that each type of silence involves different emotions. Specifically, they suggest that while quiescent silence is characterized by emotions such as anger, fear, cynicism, and despair, acquiescent silence is characterized by feelings of resignation. To date, however, none of their claims have been tested empirically.

The work of these authors has added theoretical depth to our understanding of the emotions that may underlie employees’ decision-making following a wrongdoing, but we suggest that there is much more to be considered. In particular, researchers to date have not included the effect of discrete emotions other than anger, resentment, and fear in their theoretical models. And nor have any researchers looked at how anticipated emotions may influence employee behavior. Finally, current models have failed to incorporate the effect of organizational climate on people’s emotional reactions to wrongdoing and their subsequent behavior. However, there is good reason to believe that these considerations are important, prompting us to examine them here.

**Relevant Theoretical Frameworks**

Before introducing the theoretical frameworks bearing on our model, we note that our conceptualization of the role of emotions in decision-making following wrongdoing differs from previous approaches to this topic. Specifically, rather than considering only how emotions might affect employees’ decisions immediately after one distinct episode of wrongdoing, we consider how emotions may arise and influence decision-making over an extended period of time. In addition to affective responses that arise from observing an episode of deviance, we claim that the majority of employees engage in processes of
reflection and appraisal of the situation and consider their own behavioral responses to it, and that these evaluations, in turn, trigger emotions. With this approach in mind, we suggest that the emotions that shape observers’ decision-making can arise from three sources: (1) their observations of the event itself (and its effects on others); (2) the outcome of their initial responses to the situation (i.e., silence or speaking up), and their retrospective evaluations of their behavior; and (3) their anticipation of the emotions and consequences associated with certain behaviors (e.g., in this case, silence or whistle-blowing).

In the sections that follow, we use AET (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) and Baumeister et al.’s (2007) theory of emotion as a feedback system to explain how emotions arise and shape decision-making following observed wrongdoing in the workplace. First, AET provides a rationale for how employees’ emotions arising from observing the event itself will affect decision-making. Second, feedback theory explains how employees’ retrospective appraisals of their own behavior, as well as anticipated emotions about the outcomes of silence or whistle-blowing, will affect how employees decide how to respond to wrongdoings.

Affective Events Theory (AET)

AET is arguably the most influential theory to date regarding the effects of affect, emotion, and mood on employees’ attitudes and behavior (Ashton-James & Ashkanasy, 2005; Weiss & Beal, 2005), and has received support in empirical studies (e.g., Judge, Scott, & Ilies, 2006; Wegge, van Dick, Fisher, West, & Dawson, 2006). According to Weiss and Cropanzano (1996), stable characteristics of the work environment (e.g., job stress, role expectations) determine the occurrence of discrete affective events that lead to affective states such as emotions and moods (see also Ashkanasy, Ashton-James, & Jordan, 2004). Over time, the cumulative effects of workplace events and their corresponding affective states can influence work-related attitudes (e.g., job satisfaction) and behaviors related to them, such as turnover. In line with cognitive appraisal theorists (e.g., Frijda, 1986), Weiss and Cropanzano
(1996) suggest that individuals evaluate situations using a two-stage appraisal process involving primary appraisal and secondary appraisal. Primary appraisal involves assessing an event with respect to its relevance to personal wellbeing (harm vs. benefits), whereas secondary appraisal is more complex and involves making attributions about the event and the individual’s capacity to cope with it. It is these secondary appraisals that elicit discrete emotions, which lead ultimately to affect-driven behavior or judgment-driven behavior.

At the next stage of AET, affect-driven behaviors are influenced primarily by instantaneous emotional reactions to an event. Judgment-driven behaviors, however, occur following a cognitive evaluation of the situation, and are driven by enduring attitudes about the job or organization. These involve both cognition and emotion (see also Weiss & Beal, 2005). In the current context, we propose that observing an episode of wrongdoing constitutes an affective event that, following appraisal, elicits a negative emotional reaction in an employee (e.g., sadness, anger, fear, surprise, disgust). In turn, these negative emotions arising from the event influence decision-making about how to respond behaviorally to the wrongdoing.

Currently, however, and despite some interesting preliminary studies that have implicated emotion in the decision-making process (e.g., Milliken et al., 2003), it is unclear to what extent silence and whistle-blowing are driven by affect or judgments. Although we are unaware of any research to date that has examined the nature of employees’ decision-making in the context of wrongdoing, it seems likely (as we noted earlier) that most people evaluate such situations for at least some time before deciding how to respond. For example, Edwards and Gardner (2007) found in an interview study that virtually all employees who had observed or experienced serious wrongdoings had deliberated for days or weeks about how to respond. Furthermore, respondents’ deliberations included emotional content and took into account issues such as their job security, job responsibilities, and job satisfaction. Based on
this, it seems reasonable to consider silence and whistle-blowing as examples of judgment-driven behavior. We note, however, that our discussion in this chapter concerns prosocial whistle-blowing (i.e., genuine cases of whistle-blowing designed to bring about positive change). In this respect, we acknowledge that instances of antisocial whistle-blowing (e.g., false accusations of wrongdoing, or whistle-blowing as a means of revenge; Miceli & Near, 1997), for example, might be almost entirely affect-driven.

*Feedback Theory*

In addition to AET, we posit that Baumeister et al.’s (2007) theory of emotion as a feedback system provides a relevant framework for understanding the role of emotions in employees’ decision-making following observed wrongdoing (see also Blenkinsopp & Edwards, 2008). In their initial discussion, Baumeister et al. distinguish between automatic affect and conscious emotion. In contrast to traditional theories of emotion as an immediate antecedent of behavior, they propose that conscious emotions motivate cognitive processing and encourage careful contemplation of one’s behavior following an event. Specifically, Baumeister and his associates argue that emotions facilitate learning, adaptation, and retrospective assessments of one’s behavioral response(s) to a situation and identify lessons to guide future decision-making. The authors note that automatic affective reactions also influence behavior by maintaining these lessons from past events.

Additionally, Baumeister et al. (2007) suggest that anticipation of the emotional outcomes of behavior can influence people’s choices about whether to engage in certain behaviors. Indeed, a great deal of evidence suggests that people anticipate how they are likely to feel about future events and use these emotional reactions to guide their decisions (see also Bagozzi, Baumgartner, Pieters, & Zeelenberg, 2000; Mellers & McGraw, 2001). As Bagozzi, Dholakia, and BasuRoy (2003) observe, “Anticipated emotions represent an important way in which emotions determine what decision makers choose, and how they choose it” (p. 278).
Anderson (2003) has proposed in addition that anticipated regret influences people’s tendencies to avoid making decisions, and March and Shapira (1987) found that expectations of both positive and negative emotions affected managers’ willingness to take risks. Research by Milliken et al. (2003) and by Edwards and Gardner (2007) revealed that, when faced with the decision to speak up or to remain silent about organizational problems, people contemplated how they could respond, anticipating the events (e.g., retaliation vs. support from management) and the emotional outcomes associated with each response.

As well as anticipated emotions (emotions that people expect to experience at some point in the future), we suggest that anticipatory emotions are likely to influence employees’ decisions about whether to engage in silence or whistle-blowing. Lowenstein, Weber, Hsee, and Welch (2001) define anticipatory emotions as “immediate visceral reactions (e.g., fear, anxiety, dread) to risks and uncertainties” (p. 267), and note that they are emotions about future events that are experienced in real-time (see also Lowenstein & Lerner, 2003). In the current context, we suggest that anticipatory fear will influence employees’ decisions about whether to engage in reporting behavior.

Putting this into the context of observed wrongdoing, imagine that an employee observes a co-worker being bullied by a senior manager for the first time. The observer may recognize the behavior as bullying and feel upset that it has happened, but she or he may decide, for a variety of reasons, that it is inappropriate to report the wrongdoing at this time. For example, the individual may decide to wait for confirmation in the future (e.g., “If this happens again, then I will tell someone about it.”). If she or he witnesses further incidents, the individual may experience negative emotional reactions that increase in intensity and frequency, may begin to evaluate the utility of their current behavior (i.e., silence), and feel guilty and ashamed, signaling that some type of action is required to alleviate the negative emotions.
These conscious emotions and the affective residue from previous episodes indicate to the observer that remaining silent (their current course of action) will not only fail to solve the problem, but may indeed make the situation worse. We contend that these negative emotions will lead employees to begin cognitively to evaluate their potential responses to the situation (e.g., silence, confronting the perpetrator, whistle-blowing, quitting), which then should lead to a behavioral response.

This approach is consistent with Baumeister et al.’s (2007) contention that people are often motivated to engage in behavior designed to alleviate their own distressing affective states. We note that this decision-making process will be shaped by individual and contextual factors as well (see Harvey, Martinko, & Douglas, Chapter 3, this volume). This example is consistent with the pathway to judgment-driven behavior specified in AET, which involves both cognition and emotion as precursors of behavior. It also is consistent with previous research suggesting that individual and situational factors, such as personal power and perceptions about the safety and utility of speaking up influence decisions about how to respond to wrongdoing (Miceli & Near, 2005; Morrison & Milliken, 2000). Integrating the perspectives of AET and feedback theory, we contend that observers’ experienced emotions and anticipated emotions play important roles in their decisions to remain silent or to engage in whistleblowing. Having established this background, we now introduce our model of employee decision-making and discuss the discrete emotions that are likely to be relevant to whistle-blowing and silence.

A CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DISCRETE EMOTIONS, SILENCE, AND WHISTLE-BLOWING

In their recent discussion of the role of emotions in decision-making, Zeelenberg, Nelissen, Breugelmans, and Pieters (2008) observe that researchers have proposed that discrete emotions can influence behavior in at least two ways. First, emotions prioritize goals
and motivate people to behave in ways that will help achieve them, termed the “feeling-is-for-doing” approach. Second, information-based perspectives suggest that emotions provide feedback about goal progress and emphasize how emotions influence the way people appraise and make inferences about situations. Although we already have argued strongly for the importance of recognizing emotional feedback in the context of observed wrongdoing, we recognize that the “feeling-is-for-doing” approach is also highly relevant in this context. Since the nature of observers’ decision-making and indeed the role of emotions is yet to be examined empirically, we draw on evidence from both perspectives to argue for why certain discrete emotions are likely to be associated with silence and whistle-blowing.

Our comprehensive model linking discrete emotions, silence, and whistle-blowing is presented in Figure 1. In line with our previous argument, we distinguish between three sources of emotions: (1) emotions arising from observing the wrongdoing itself, as experienced in real-time (labeled experienced emotions); (2) emotions generated from retrospective appraisals of previous events and outcomes, also experienced in real-time; and (3) emotions about future outcomes (divided into anticipated emotions and anticipatory emotions).

**Basic Emotions**

Many researchers, most notably Ekman (1992, 1994), have argued for the existence of what they describe as “basic emotions.” Ekman has proposed that at least five basic emotions exist: anger, fear, surprise, sadness, and disgust. He argues that these can be distinguished on the basis of several key characteristics, including presence in other primates, characteristic physiology, rapid onset, and brief duration. Here, we discuss the relevancy of two basic emotions — anger and fear — to employees’ decision-making following observed wrongdoing.
Anger

According to Rozin, Lowery, Imada, and Haidt (1999), the emotion of anger has been conceptualized in a variety of ways, ranging from a primordial reaction to frustration and goal obstruction, to a physiologically powerful motivator of behavior, and a principally moral emotion elicited in response to ethical transgressions and violations of appropriate conduct. In a study of anger-eliciting events in the workplace, Fitness (2000), for example, found that many different events gave rise to anger among employees, with the most commonly reported cause being unjust treatment (44%), followed by morally reprehensible behavior (23%), job incompetence (15%), disrespect (11%), and public humiliation (7%). In close interpersonal relationships, individuals cite issues such as betrayal of trust, unwarranted criticism, and lack of consideration as precursors of anger (Fehr, Baldwin, Collins, Patterson, & Benditt, 1999). On the basis of this work and others linking anger with specific events involving injustice and ethical violations (e.g., Mikula, Scherer, & Athenstaedt, 1998; Skarlicki & Kulik, 2005), we propose that observing wrongdoing itself will elicit anger. We note, of course, that retrospective appraisals of one’s own behavior also can give rise to feelings of anger (i.e., self-directed anger), which in turn can influence employees’ decisions about how to respond to the anger-inducing episode.

But how and why might the experience of anger be associated with whistleblowing? As noted previously, anger has not been examined specifically as a predictor of whistleblowing in any empirical studies to date. Furthermore, we note that researchers have found that anger can shape behavior in different ways depending on the situational context (e.g., Kuppens, Van Mechelen, & Meulders, 2004).
FIGURE 1. A model of the relationship between emotions, silence and whistle-blowing.
research by Haidt (2003) has found that anger can motivate behavior and often encourages individuals to retaliate against an offender or to redress injustice, as suggested by equity theory (Adams, 1963). The social information processing model of whistle-blowing proposed by Gundlach et al. (2003) also identifies anger as an emotion that will influence the decision to speak up or not. Likewise, Henik (2007) has also implicated anger as an antecedent of speaking-up behavior, suggesting that this emotion will predict whistle-blowing rather than inactive observation.

We also draw on Lerner and Tiedens’ (2006) argument that anger can be a positive and potentially rewarding experience when people are contemplating how they might respond to a situation. They point to studies showing that anger is associated with optimistic judgments about future events as well as increased feelings of control over situations and to the ability to influence outcomes. We suggest that these appraisals are particularly relevant to potential whistle-blowers and that anger will influence individuals’ perceptions to the extent that they are more likely to engage in whistleblowing than silence. On the basis of this work, we propose as follows:

*Proposition 1a.* Observed employee wrongdoing followed by a process of appraisal is likely to result in the experience of anger.

*Proposition 1b.* Anger is more likely to lead to whistle-blowing than to silence.

**Fear**

Fear is one of the most primal human emotions (Ortony & Turner, 1990). It is an aversive emotional state characterized by a high level of arousal, and is induced by a stimulus that is perceived to be significant in magnitude and personally threatening. Although extreme fear can be debilitating (e.g., in the case of panic attacks), and in certain situations can lead to temporary paralysis or freezing known as “tonic immobility” (see Marx, Forsyth, Gallup,
researchers have proposed that less intense fear can serve a motivational purpose by helping people make choices quickly under time pressure (Pfister & Bohm, 2008). Fear also influences how people interpret events and evaluate future outcomes. In three separate studies investigating how discrete emotions affect perceptions of risk, Lerner and Keltner (2001) found that angry people and fearful people made very different judgments about risks and positive and negative events. Specifically, they observed that whereas angry people were optimistic in their judgments of risky situations, fearful people made pessimistic judgments, and these evaluations were consistent across a range of situations.

Two empirical studies indicate that fear plays an important role in many employees’ decisions to withhold information or concerns from their employers. In their interview study, Milliken et al. (2003) found that four anticipated fears increased the likelihood that employees will remain silent about important work issues: (1) fear of being labeled or viewed negatively, (2) fear of damaging a relationship, (3) fear of retaliation or punishment, and (4) fear that speaking up will have a negative impact on others. Similarly, in their qualitative study of upward communication in organizations, Detert and Edmondson (2006) reported that fear was clearly the most prevalent emotion employees expressed when discussing episodes in which they felt unable to express information, opinions, or concerns. Specifically, informants feared that if they spoke up they would lose the acceptance or support of superiors and colleagues along with opportunities to progress in their careers or their jobs.

We contend that following an episode(s) of wrongdoing, employees will engage in a decision-making process in which they consider various ways of responding to the event (e.g., confronting the perpetrator, whistle-blowing, remaining silent, etc.), and the costs and benefits of engaging in each option (see Gundlach et al., 2003). As we have noted already, negative emotions arising from observing the wrongdoing and retrospective appraisals help elicit this decision-making. We suggest that this decision-making process is likely to result in
anticipatory fear, and that this fear is more likely to lead to silence than to whistle-blowing. Note, in particular, that unlike anger, it is fear of the consequences of speaking up experienced in real-time that is the operative emotion here. Although anger also is experienced in real-time, it arises as a consequence of observed wrongdoing. In contrast, we suggest that observers do not necessarily feel fearful following the episode of wrongdoing, but rather, that they are likely to experience this emotion as they are contemplating their responses to the situation. This leads to our next pair of propositions:

**Proposition 2a.** Observed employee wrongdoing and the subsequent decisionmaking process is likely to result in anticipatory fear of retaliation or of being labeled or viewed negatively by others.

**Proposition 2b.** Anticipatory fear of retaliation or of being labeled or viewed negatively by others is more likely to lead to silence than to whistle-blowing.

**Self-Conscious Emotions**

Tracy and Robins (2004) note that self-conscious emotions differ from basic emotions in that the former require self-awareness and self-representations whereas the latter do not (see also Fischer & Tangney, 1995). To experience a self-conscious emotion, therefore, an individual must be able to form stable self-representations, to engage in self-reflection based on that representation, and to collate the information required to engage in self-evaluation. Tracy and Robins (2004) note further that self-conscious emotions also differ from basic emotions in that they appear to fulfill different goals. Specifically, whereas basic emotions are associated with “survival goals” (i.e., fear is associated with goals pertaining to survival and reproduction), self-conscious emotions generally are associated with “social goals” (i.e., behaving in accordance with social norms and expectations and maintaining interpersonal relationships). Thus, self-conscious emotions motivate individuals to behave in socially
valued ways (i.e., in an ethical manner, helping others in need), which are internalized as actual and ideal self-representations.

Based on the literature we have reviewed here, it would seem that self-conscious emotions are particularly germane to the study of decision-making following wrongdoing. Although rarely identified in the organizational behavior literature, these emotions should also play a role in silence and speaking-up behavior. For instance, outside of organizations, researchers have found that victims of violent interpersonal behavior, such as sexual assault or domestic violence, frequently remain silent because of shame and embarrassment (e.g., Sable, Danis, Mauzy, & Gallagher, 2006). Simultaneously, victims may feel guilty about not speaking up, particularly if others are exposed to harm as well. As such, the emotions become self-reinforcing. With this in mind, we propose that although guilt is likely to be associated with whistle-blowing, shame is likely to be associated with silence. We introduce these propositions in more detail later.

Guilt

According to Tangney, Stuewig, and Mashek (2007), shame and guilt, although conceptualized similarly, differ in terms of the focus of their negative evaluative cognitions. Specifically, whereas the cognitions underlying shame tend to be self-directed (“I am responsible for this terrible event”), the primary concern when experiencing guilt is the behavior itself (“I have done a terrible thing”). Tangney and her associates report that shame and guilt have different motivational properties, and therefore they also have different consequences for interpersonal relationships. Rather than focusing on the self, guilt elicits an other-oriented perspective, thereby leading to feelings of empathy that motivate individuals to behave in caring and socially responsible ways. Indeed, Barrett (1995) argues that guilt “often moves the individual to tell others about the wrongdoing” (p. 41), whereas shame encourages withdrawal and silence. Furthermore, in a study of interpersonal relationships, Baumeister,
Stillwell, and Heatherton (1995) reported that feelings of guilt were associated with high rates of learning lessons, changing subsequent behavior, apologizing, and confessing transgressions.

More recent work by Amodio, Devine, and Harmon-Jones (2007) has revealed that the behavioral effects of guilt following an individual transgression appear to unfold across two stages. First, people generally try to avoid the distressing situation and display increased attention to transgression-related cues. Second, following the opportunity for reparation, people tend to engage in behavior aimed at repairing the damage caused by their actions. The authors argue that the initial experience of guilt may disrupt current behavior “in order to halt a transgression, survey the damage, and learn from mistakes. The function of guilt then transforms to promote approach responses toward reparatory behaviors, aimed at making up for past transgressions and behaving more appropriately in future situations” (p. 525). In other words, guilty people tend to withdraw from a situation in the initial stage following a mistake or indiscretion, but guilt also motivates people to resolve a situation if they feel that they will be able to make amends for their behavior.

In the case of employees who initially elected to remain silent after observing wrongdoing on the job, we suggest that feelings of guilt will prompt them to evaluate their silence and to consider whether it is the best course of action. We note that this response is particularly likely when the perceived wrongdoing is believed to be detrimental for other individuals or the organization in question. Again, we note that the event itself will not elicit feelings of guilt directly. Rather, it is during the resulting process of reflection and appraisal of one’s response to the situation and the associated outcome that employees will experience guilt. Additionally, we note that if employees consider the possibility of not reporting the behavior in the future and imagine the associated adverse consequences of doing so, this can give rise to anticipated guilt. This idea is consistent with Baumeister et al.’s (2007) contention...
that emotions help individuals evaluate the effectiveness of their previous behavioral responses to events and assess the viability of future responses. We therefore propose as follows:

*Proposition 3a.* Observed employee wrongdoing and the subsequent appraisal of one’s decision to remain silent is likely to lead to guilt.

*Proposition 3b.* Guilt about remaining silent is more likely to lead to whistleblowing than silence.

*Shame*

Although researchers have not explicitly examined shame in the context of speaking-up, recent conceptualizations suggest that shame may predict employee silence. Shame is negatively valenced, associated with feelings of worthlessness and powerlessness, and characterized by negative scrutiny about oneself as a person (Tangney & Salovey, 1999). Indeed, Tangney and Dearing (2002) argue that the self-focused cognitions associated with shame are so strong that they can “short-circuit” any feelings of empathy and concern for others, leading ashamed individuals to engage in behavior that conceals their past transgressions and actively circumvent future situations that may induce further shame.

Nathanson (1992), furthermore, has proposed that people cope with the experience of shame in different ways, which in turn, influences how this emotion affects their behavior. These responses include withdrawal, self-directed anger and criticism, externalized anger, and avoidance. Although empirical evidence for the effects of shame is limited, a recent study by De Hooge, Zeelenberg, and Breugelmans (2007) revealed that guilt motivated cooperative behavior in everyday social situations, whereas shame had no effect on cooperation. The authors argued that these results support the idea that shame is associated with withdrawal and avoidance behavior rather than reparation and prosocial behavior.
In the context of observed wrongdoing, we argue that an employee who decides to remain silent about an issue initially may be comfortable with that choice, but may become increasingly ashamed of this decision as time progresses. For employees who are strongly committed to challenging unethical behavior but feel unable to do so because of the potential costs of speaking up, their shame may be immediate and devastating. In one study of the effects of silence in the context of prejudice, women who failed to confront the perpetrators who treated them prejudicially reported experiencing such self-directed negative emotions such as shame, guilt, and high levels of distress (Shelton, Richeson, Salvatore, & Hill, 2006). We argue that the shame associated with people’s decisions to remain silent will be particularly strong if negative consequences (e.g., harm to others or their organizations) arise as a result of their failures to speak up.

Additionally, we contend that the longer one remains silent, the harder it is to speak up because the consequences of doing so are greater and rationalizations to remain silent are stronger. This represents a process of escalating commitment to the decision to remain silent (see Brockner, 1992). We note that other emotions will be relevant here too, particularly guilt, and we suggest that the potential effects of experiencing multiple emotions is an important area for future study. In the case of shame, however, we suggest that people experiencing this emotion after reflecting on their behavior will have their negative cognitions about themselves reinforced along with their decision to remain silent. This, in turn, will reduce the likelihood that they will speak up in the future. As such, we propose as follows:

*Proposition 4a.* Observed employee wrongdoing and the subsequent appraisal of one’s decision to remain silent is likely to lead to experienced shame.

*Proposition 4b.* Shame is more likely to lead to silence than to whistle-blowing.

**Anticipated Regret**
The emotion of regret arises when “realizing or imagining that our present situation would have been better, had we decided differently” (Zeelenberg, 1999, p. 94) and is often experienced following losses, transgressions, mistakes, and failures. Based on research demonstrating that this emotion is pivotal to decision-making, we contend that anticipated regret is likely to play an important role in how observers respond to wrongdoing in their workplace. As we have noted already, anticipated emotions involve imagining the future emotional outcomes of decisions and these can have powerful effects on decision-making. Indeed, studies have shown that anticipated emotions increase people’s intentions, expectations, and desires to engage in action, even when taking into account other variables that influence their behavior (e.g., attitudes, norms, and behavioral control) (Baumgartner, Pieters, & Bagozzi, 2008). From a motivational perspective, Sheeran and Orbell (1999) argue that since regret is such an unpleasant and pervasive emotion, anticipated regret should lead people to engage in behavior designed to circumvent or minimize this emotional experience. In keeping with this, Zeelenberg (1999) notes that people are generally regret-averse, and thus tend to engage in what he describes as “regret-minimizing choices.”

Based on a review of the literature, Zeelenberg (1999) argued that several factors influence the extent to which people will anticipate experiencing regret following a decision. Specifically, he suggests that regret will be anticipated and will have a greater effect on decisions in situations in which: (1) the most preferred alternative is not necessarily better than another behavioral option, (2) the potential negative outcomes of a decision have an immediate impact as opposed to a delayed impact, (3) significant members of the decision-maker’s social networks view the decision as important and expect the decision-maker to adhere to it, (4) new information concerning potential gains and losses can be obtained, and (5) significant members of the decision-maker’s social networks encourage the decision-maker to evaluate his or her options carefully and postpone making a decision until all options
have been considered. Zeelenberg argued further that the greater the importance and irreversibility of a decision, the more people will take into account the potential for regret.

In the case of employees who have observed wrongdoing, we suggest that anticipated regret will influence employees’ decision-making because they are considering the behavioral options available to them once an episode of wrongdoing has occurred. In this sense, it will emerge in the decision-making process at a similar stage as anticipatory fear rather than as a consequence of observing the wrongdoing (resulting in anger) or reappraisal of their own behavior (resulting in guilt and shame). With respect to this emotion, we recognize that employees can anticipate experiencing regret when they contemplate engaging in whistle-blowing and when they consider remaining silent. This paradox captures neatly the cognitive dissonance and conflict faced by those who observe wrongdoing in the workplace as they ask themselves if it is worth taking the risk of engaging in whistle-blowing even if doing so threatens to damage their career and reputation, or if it is better to remain silent and live with the consequences of not reporting the behavior. Ultimately, we contend that the relative anticipated regret associated with each potential response will help determine how people respond to the situation. Thus, we propose as follows:

*Proposition 5a.* Observed employee wrongdoing and the subsequent decision-making process will lead employees to anticipate the regret associated with silence as opposed to whistle-blowing.

*Proposition 5b.* When employees anticipate experiencing greater regret if they remain silent than if they speak up, anticipated regret is more likely to lead to whistle-blowing than to silence.

*Proposition 5c.* When employees anticipate experiencing greater regret by blowing the whistle than by remaining silent, anticipated regret is more likely to lead to silence than to whistle-blowing.
To summarize, we have drawn on both conceptual and empirical work to suggest that anger and guilt will predict whistle-blowing more strongly than silence, and that anticipatory fear and shame will predict silence more strongly than whistleblowing. We have also argued that anticipated regret — depending on the focus of the emotion — can lead employees to engage in silence or whistle-blowing.

We now consider how one contextual variable — organizational climate — may influence employees’ emotional reactions to observed wrongdoing and their subsequent behavior. Organizational climate refers to collective and stable perceptions of psychologically important elements of an organizational environment (Ashforth, 1985). So far as we can ascertain, no empirical research to date has examined the relationship between emotion and climate specifically. Nonetheless, we contend that climate is an important variable to consider in future studies of silence and whistle-blowing. We now endeavor to explain its relevance in this connection.

The Moderating Effect of Organizational Climate

Before explaining how climate is likely to affect how employees respond to wrongdoing, we seek to avoid confusion by distinguishing between organizational climate and culture. Denison (1996) defines organizational culture as “the deep structure of organizations, which is rooted in the values, beliefs, and assumptions held by organizational members” (p. 624). In contrast, he suggests that climate is “relatively temporary, subject to direct control, and largely limited to those aspects of the social environment that are consciously perceived by organizational members” (p. 624). Research suggests that multiple sources contribute to the development of organizational climate, including organizational events, processes, and communication (Schneider & Reichers, 1983). The shared perceptions and meanings that arise from employees’ interactions with one another, in particular, are a key element of climate. With respect to emotion, Ashkanasy and Nicholson (2003) proposed
that emotional displays in organizations can lead to shared perceptions of emotion among employees, or an “emotional climate.” While we recognize that both culture and climate shape how people respond to wrongdoing, previous research has demonstrated that employees’ perceptions about the safety and utility of speaking up are important influences on decision-making (Detert & Edmondson, 2006), and we focus on climate as a moderating variable in this context.

Miceli and Near (1985) were the first to examine specifically the potential influence of organizational climate on whistle-blowing. They suggested that if there is a high level of dubious activity in an organization and evidence that dissent will attract punishment, then employees are likely to develop perceptions that the organization is tolerant of wrongdoing, making it risky to speak up about it. Miceli and Near argued that these perceptions could lead to the development of a climate in which internal whistle-blowing is discouraged. In accordance with their predictions, they found in a survey of over 8,000 employees that when employees perceived that their organization was tolerant of the wrongdoing and that they would experience retaliation for speaking up, they were unlikely to report wrongdoing to management but likely to approach outside authorities with their concerns.

In a seminal paper, Morrison and Milliken (2000) proposed the concept of organizational silence, a collective-level phenomenon characterized by the widespread withholding of information by employees about organizational problems or concerns. They argue that a climate of silence helps to facilitate the development of organizational silence, and that it is characterized by two key perceptions: (1) that speaking up about problems in the organization is not worth the effort and (2) that voicing opinions and concerns is dangerous. Morrison and Milliken proposed that such a climate develops through a process of collective sensemaking, through which employees gain shared understandings about their workplaces (Weick, 1995). Interestingly, Morrison and Milliken’s concept of a climate of silence shares
similarities with Ashkanasy and Nicholson’s (2003) climate of fear, defined as a generalized experience of apprehension in the workplace. Although Morrison and Milliken’s model seeks to explain why employees will choose to remain silent en masse, we are interested here in the effects of such a climate on individual-level behavior.

**Effect of a Climate of Silence on Emotional Reactions and Behavioral Outcomes**

We believe it is important to acknowledge that organizational climate can affect the decision-making process at multiple points. For example, climate may shape employees’ initial appraisals of events in ways that influence their subsequent emotional reactions. For example, in climates in which wrongdoing is normative and acceptable, employees may feel less self-responsibility for speaking up and may even fail to recognize instances of deviant behavior. Given our interest in the link between emotions and behavior, however, we ask: How might climate affect the relationship between anger, guilt, and whistle-blowing?

We argue that, in a strong climate of silence, the decision-making process still will involve feelings of guilt and anger, but the effects of these emotions will be reduced. We believe that employees’ rationalizations and emotion-regulation processes may play a key role here. After all, why should you get angry about the injustice of a situation if you are powerless to change it? What is the point of feeling guilty about not reporting a wrongdoing when you know that no action will be taken against the perpetrator? Indeed, rather than feeling guilty, it is likely that employees will be more concerned about protecting themselves and minimizing the possibility of becoming a target of retaliation, thereby reducing their capacities for empathy. Thus, we propose that a climate of silence — specifically, the perceptions that characterize such a climate — will suppress the effect of anger and guilt on speaking-up behavior such that employees will be more likely to remain silent about wrongdoing than risk retaliation by blowing the whistle.
Additionally, we argue that climate will exert an important effect on the extent to which employees will anticipate experiencing regret if they speak up as opposed to if they remain silent. In a climate in which employees are encouraged to report adverse incidents and whistle-blowers are protected from retaliation, it is likely that observers will anticipate experiencing greater regret and self-blame if they remain silent than if they speak up. In contrast, in an organization in which employees perceive that it is dangerous to speak up and that voicing their concerns is unlikely to lead to reparative action, we suggest that employees will believe that the potential for regret is greater if they take the risk and blow the whistle than if they withhold their concerns. Although the introduction of whistle-blower protection laws in many countries (e.g., the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom) has led to increased legal protection for workers who choose to report adverse events, it is clear that whistle-blowing is still an extremely risky activity in many organizations (Earle & Madek, 2007). Overall, we argue that perceptions about the safety and utility of speaking up will affect observers’ anticipated regret about the options available to them and this, in turn, will influence their behavioral responses to wrongdoing. As such, we propose the following:

*Proposition 6.* A climate of silence will attenuate the effects of anger, guilt and anticipated regret about remaining silent on employees’ propensities to engage in whistle-blowing.

In summary, we have used AET (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) and the feedback theory (Baumeister et al., 2007) to describe how observers may make decisions about how to act following an observed wrongdoing. Specifically, we have argued that at least five discrete emotions — anger, anticipatory fear, guilt, shame, and anticipated regret — influence people’s decisions to engage in silence or whistle-blowing. To date, little empirical research has been conducted to determine the role of discrete emotions in decision-making in this
context. However, we hope that our conceptualization will help to facilitate future research in this area.

LIMITATIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

We acknowledge that our conceptual model of decision-making and emotion has several limitations. First, we have not addressed all possible responses in which an employee may engage following the observation of wrongdoing. For example, instead of remaining silent or engaging in whistle-blowing, employees may confront the perpetrator(s) themselves, they may exit the organization, or they may speak to friends, family, and colleagues about the wrongdoing. Indeed these behaviors may occur independently of or in conjunction with the ones on which we are focused.

Second, we focused primarily on the role of emotion in the decision-making process, while paying little attention to other potential influences. This should not be taken as an indication of their insignificance, however. Instead, considering researchers’ traditional focus on the organizational and individual predictors of whistle-blowing, we contend that examining the nature of the decision-making process and the associated emotions is an important way of advancing the field. We acknowledge also that discrete emotions can arise at several stages during the decision-making process, and that some of the stages and emotions specified in our model are not mutually exclusive. For example, although we have included anger as an emotion arising directly from observing wrongdoing, anger also can arise following a reappraisal of one’s own behavior and as an anticipatory emotion (e.g., if people imagine that they will be treated poorly if they speak up). In this respect, we hope that our research will stimulate empirical investigation of both the discrete emotions involved in silence and whistle-blowing, as well as their antecedents and consequences at various stages of the decision process.
As we have noted already, our model is limited to the influence of only one contextual variable — organizational climate. However, researchers have demonstrated that many other contextual factors influence the decision to engage in whistleblowing (for a review, see Miceli & Near, 2005). For example, national culture is likely to affect how people respond to instances of wrongdoing in the workplace. In this connection, Tavakoli, Keenan, and Crnjak-Karanovic (2003) suggested that Hofstede’s (2001) cultural dimensions of individualism, power-distance, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity may shape how people perceive ethical events and the likelihood of whistle-blowing. In their survey of American and Croatian managers’ propensities to report wrongdoing, results generally supported their hypotheses, suggesting that national culture exerts an influence on individual behavior in this context.

Despite these limitations, we believe that our model has important implications for researchers. Theoretically, our work integrates some of the most recent research in the area of employee silence (e.g., Morrison & Milliken, 2003), whistle-blowing (Henik, 2007), and self-conscious emotions (Tracy & Robins, 2004) to consider how emotions may influence decision-making by employees following observed wrongdoing in the workplace. Further, we have suggested that, in accordance with AET (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) and the feedback theory (Baumeister et al., 2007), emotions represent a crucial component of employee decision-making, and offered specific propositions considering the relationship between discrete emotions and behavioral outcomes, as well as the moderating effect of climate. In doing so, we have emphasized that decisions about how to respond to wrongdoing are shaped by both affect and cognition, in addition to various individual and contextual factors. Overall, we contend that understanding how emotions operate in this context can provide us with a deeper comprehension of what it means to speak up or to remain silent, and why people engage in these behaviors.
Our chapter shares some similarities with previous work (e.g., Gundlach et al., 2003; Henik, 2007), but differs from it and extends previous research in three important ways. First, in line with AET (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) and Baumeister et al.’s (2007) theory of emotion as a feedback system, we suggest that the emotions arise from at least three sources following wrongdoing: (1) observing the event itself; (2) retrospective evaluations of one’s responses to previous episodes of wrongdoing, and the outcome of these behaviors; and (3) emotions that employees expect to experience in the future if they engage in silence or engage in whistle-blowing. Thus, compared to early models of whistle-blowing, we argue that emotion plays a far more important role in the decision-making process than initially theorized. Second, we have extended the list of discrete emotions that may be involved in decision-making to include self-conscious emotions and anticipated regret. We believe that this represents a crucial area for further study. Third, we have adopted Morrison and Milliken’s (2000) proposed concept of a “climate of silence” to consider how climate may moderate employees’ emotional reactions and their subsequent responses. Again, we feel that this is an area deserving of further exploration. Currently, the most pressing need is to conduct empirical tests of our comprehensive model in order to assess the validity of the proposed relationships and processes. Doing so, we believe, will require using both qualitative and quantitative techniques.

Also, and as we have mentioned already, the effect of emotion on decision-making following wrongdoing has not been explored comprehensively by organizational researchers. As such, the field is rich with opportunities for future research. For example, future studies could build on the preliminary findings established about the potential discrete emotions involved in the decision-making process. Here, we suggest that diary studies (e.g., Grandey, Tam, & Brauburger, 2002) and even experimental approaches could be used to obtain real-time measures of employees’ emotions. Field studies could allow researchers to examine
multiple episodes of wrongdoing that unfold over days or weeks, and the extent to which individuals’ appraisals and emotions change over time. Another interesting question concerns how individuals decide how to respond when they experience multiple negative emotions with different appraisal tendencies, such as anger (characterized by increased certainty and confidence) and fear (characterized by apprehension and uncertainty). Finally, we suggest that it would be useful to investigate the role of positive emotions in this process, given that researchers have found that positive emotions facilitate successful coping behavior (for a review, see Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000). In this respect, the role of anticipated relief, pride, and hope appear to be especially worthy of exploration.

CONCLUSION

Given the prevalence of wrongdoing in the contemporary workplace along with increasing recognition of whistle-blowing as an important prosocial behavior (Miceli & Near, 2005), we contend that understanding the process through which employees go through in deciding whether or not to speak up — and particularly the role of emotions as predictors of their decisions — is an important departure from more traditional research in the field of whistle-blowing. Overall, we submit that our work contributes to the growing literature recognizing the emotional experiences of observers of deviant behavior (e.g., Gundlach et al., 2003), and makes an important contribution to understanding the psychological processes underlying employee decision-making in the workplace. We hope that the propositions offered in this chapter will provide a starting point for empirical studies in this area, particularly those focusing on the effects of discrete emotions and how emotions interact with contextual factors to shape employees’ behavior.
References


