Women as Whistleblowers

C. Fred Alford

Over the past year, a number of women whistleblowers have been in the news: Sherron Watkins of Enron, Cynthia Cooper, an auditor at WorldCom, and Coleen Rowley of the FBI are among the most well known. All three made the cover of Time magazine (December 30/January 6, 2003) as "Persons of the Year." Though one might argue that they are not all whistleblowers, I believe that they all are. Certainly they fit the definition of the whistleblowing that I employed in my recent book, Whistleblowers: Broken Lives and Organizational Power, upon which most of my generalizations about whistleblowers are based.1

Though all three women made headlines (almost every whistleblower’s dream) in the months after my book was published, I interviewed a number of women whistleblowers for my book, and I’ve interviewed several since, mostly to see how they react to all the attention women whistleblowers have been receiving. Are they proud? Envious? Both?

Are more women blowing the whistle? Do they differ from men who blow the whistle? About the first question it is hard to be sure, for reasons to be explained. About the second, I can say that women whistleblowers talk differently about their experience than men.2

In her New York Times (June 6, 2002) op-ed piece, Anita Hill, another famous woman whistleblower (she testified against Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas at his Senate confirmation hearings), speculates that more women are blowing the whistle because many have reached high enough positions in the organization to see malfeasance by policy, as it might be called, while still remaining outsiders, not one of the boys. Women work

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at almost the highest levels of many organizations, but they do not yet think like insiders. A friend and colleague of Sherron Watkins put it this way. "Sherron’s a vice president, so she’s obviously not an outsider, but there is a dividing line there. If you’re not part of the boys’ club, maybe that makes it a little easier to take a big risk."

From my experience, there is much to what Ms. Hill says. What is lacking in her account is the quality of the outside that these women whistleblowers come from. It is not just outside the organization; it is inside something else. It is this inside something else that makes women whistleblowers so interesting. Nor is it simply that women have less to lose, as Watkins’ friend suggests. Rather, what they have to lose is different from what men have to lose. Different and the same, for men and women whistleblowers are first of all whistleblowers, which means that most will lose their jobs, and all will suffer.

Not only Anita Hill and The New York Times are wondering if women bring something special to their experience on the job, something that might make them more likely to "commit the truth," as one woman whistleblower put it. Lately I was interviewed by a reporter for Glamour magazine about the possibility that more women are blowing the whistle. A recent study by the Aspen Institute reported in Business Week (March 11, 2002) finds that more women than men (fourteen percent vs. seven percent) judge a company by its ethical standards when considering a job offer, while more men than women (seventy-nine percent vs. sixty-seven percent) see financial returns as a company's primary goal.

Still, it pays to be careful about differences such as these. In his famous studies of Obedience to Authority, Stanley Milgram found that women were more likely than men to object to shocking a mild-mannered middle-aged man with a heart condition. Women, however, obeyed at the same rate as men. Subsequent studies have confirmed this difference. Whistleblowing is interesting in this regard, as the objecting is the doing. To speak out is itself the act. Blowing the whistle is performative speech, as J. L. Austin puts it. The doing is in the saying.

What I take from these complexities is not only that it is impossible to know if women are more likely to blow the whistle than men (whatever that abstract potential would mean exactly), but it is impossible to know if more women than men are actually blowing the whistle. This is so for several reasons.
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First, whistleblowers tend to come from two distinct groups: upper middle-management and front line inspectors. While many of the recent high-profile women whistleblowers come from the fields of law and accounting, in which women are well (if not equally) represented, a large number of whistleblowers have historically come from the engineering and technical professions, fields in which women are still so under-represented that comparing their rates of whistleblowing to those of men in these fields is difficult.

The other area in which whistleblowing is more frequent is in inspection. (Some fields and professions have many more whistleblowers than others. In some, such as environmental protection, self-selection is an obvious explanation; in other areas, the reason is unclear.) FAA inspectors, meat inspectors, environmental inspectors, and nuclear safety and radiation inspectors: a large number of whistleblowers come from these groups, and in most of them women are also vastly underrepresented. If one man in a thousand blows the whistle, how does one establish a comparable rate of whistleblowing for women if there are only a few dozen women in the field? In addition, the small number of women in the field is itself an additional variable: are those who are vastly under-represented more likely to go along, or less? It's still not clear.

It gets more complicated still. For every whistleblower who makes the front pages, a hundred never make the back pages. One whistleblower said that his father-in-law told him that if he had been a real whistleblower, he'd have been on 60 Minutes. It's not true. The provision of medical services paid by Medicare is another area in which there is a lot of whistleblowing (likely because fraud is both easy and evidently common), and it is most often nurses and lower-level health professionals, such as occupational and speech therapists, who blow the whistle. These fields are still dominated by women. It may well be that large numbers of women have been blowing the whistle for a long time, but nobody has noticed because these are not exciting cases. In other words, more women than men may have been blowing the whistle for a long time, and no one bothered to look. Only when women became page-one whistleblowers did anybody care.

My impression, based on listening to about twenty-five men and women whistleblowers, as well as studying the cases of dozens more, is that women blow the whistle about as frequently as men, perhaps a little more frequently. Whether this is the case globally we shall not know for several
years, until there are more women in traditionally male professions, and until more studies are done of fields traditionally dominated by women.

My impression is also that women blow the whistle on about the same type of things as men. It is not, for example, the case that women are more likely to blow the whistle on the systematic mistreatment of clients, men on contract fraud, though even this difficult to know for sure, as more men than women are in a position to report on contract fraud, since so much takes place among military contractors.

There is so much that we don’t know, so much that I don’t know, that the reader may be wondering “what does he know?” I know what men and women whistleblowers told me about their experiences, and I know that they talked differently about their experiences. About this I can be empirical, reporting and summarizing what they said.

Most men talk in terms of terrible regret and fear that they have been disloyal, that they have failed to be team players, that they have let their side down. Much of their time and energy subsequent to blowing the whistle is devoted to explaining and justifying to themselves their lack of loyalty. Most do so in terms of the principle of loyalty itself, invoking a higher loyalty: to the truth, the public, or the principles of the founders of the organization. Concrete versus abstract loyalty is the framework within which this struggle is carried out, and it is almost impossible to over-emphasize the importance of lost loyalty in most men’s accounts of blowing the whistle.6

In Loyalty: An Essay on the Morality of Relationships, George Fletcher argues that it makes no sense to talk about loyalty to abstract principles. What sense does it make, for instance, to charge someone with being disloyal to the Constitution, a set of principles? What could it mean? Certainly not that one disagreed with another about the meaning of a particular clause. That’s not disloyalty, but a difference in interpretation. And if one did not value the Constitution to begin with, the charge of disloyalty would hardly apply in the first place. One may be disloyal to one’s country, a group of people, but not to its abstract principles.7

Fletcher may be correct as a matter of linguistic and conceptual clarification, but for the men I spoke with, loyalty to abstract principles made perfect sense, a way to continue to value loyalty while rejecting the claims of particular loyalties. When I listen to these men talk about the transformation of the meaning of loyalty in their lives, it makes perfect
sense to me too. But while it makes perfect sense, it did not (to this academic observer) always seem worth it. Some people and institutions do not deserve our loyalty, or so it seems to me.

"Why be loyal to a bunch of unethical criminals?" I asked a whistleblower whose former employer and colleagues seemed to be just that.

"You don't understand," he replied. "They weren't just criminals. We worked together for fifteen years. I'd been to their houses for dinner. I saw their kids grow up. We were a team. After a while I couldn't play on that team anymore, but don't tell me they were just crooks."

Bill W. was angry at me for taking what I thought was the salient fact, his colleagues' corruption, out of context.

"So why'd you do it?" I replied. "And why'd you wait so long?"

"I did it when I finally realized there are higher loyalties, loyalty to the truth, to the law, even to God. When I finally figured that out, then I made my decision."8

Most men are not as layered in loyalties as Bill, but his torment and resolution represent the way in which most men think about blowing the whistle. In Bill's case, the torment may have been worthwhile. Though he struggled with divided and conflicting loyalties for years before blowing the whistle, the thought that he had been disloyal did not seem to torment him in the years that followed quite as much as it does many men. Pay now, or pay later, as the saying goes.

Women do not talk about loyalty nearly as much as men. They don't use the term nearly as much, and it seems to me that the concept is similarly lacking, though one might argue that its close relatives are present. Not loyalty, but the problem of caring for others in a world in which no one seems to care for anyone, but only money, is the language that many women whistleblowers use to discuss their experience. Leda R. is exemplary.

When I was home, I was expected to care for my family. Kids, husband, even [my husband's] parents... Did I say 'expected'? Well, they expected it from me, and I expected it from myself. Then I went to work, and I wasn't supposed to care for anybody or anything, unless you call caring about stockholders caring. I
guess it is, but they aren’t the only ones. After a while I just
couldn’t do it any more.

Like Bill, "after a while" meant years.

It's tempting—almost too tempting—to turn to Carol Gilligan’s *In a
Different Voice*, to explain the difference. In her famous study, Gilligan
found that men tend to reason morally by subsuming particular cases under
general principles, such as "thou shall not steal." Women, on the other
hand, invoke general principles less, referring instead to the relationships
involved, and the obligations inherent in these relationships. Gilligan calls
the perspective of women the perspective of care, meaning care for the
people and relationships involved. For example, if asked a question about
whether Heinz, who is penniless, should steal medicine to save his dying
wife, men talk in terms of principles, such as lives over laws. Women want
to know more about the relationships, the alternatives, the history of all
involved.

It is gratifying that Gilligan’s research supports my experience, and
even more gratifying that it doesn’t completely fit. If it fit perfectly, we
should all be worried. The men I spoke with didn’t invoke universal prin-
ciples; instead they extended what might be called a concrete principle,
loyalty to particular people, so as to make it more general, such as loyalty
to the truth, or to the ideal organization, the organization in the whistle-
blower’s mind. Loyalty like this does not readily fit into Fletcher’s categories.

The women I spoke with indeed talked in terms of care, but it wasn’t
primarily in the context of wanting to know the obligations and responsi-
bilities inherent in the situation they found themselves in at work. None talked
in terms of how they might care for their colleagues who had lost their
moral way, for example. Instead, they spoke in terms of deep frustration
that the environment in which they worked did not allow them to practice the
care for others that they practiced at home. Dividing themselves between worlds, often for years, they could no longer practice care in one
world, carelessness in another. There is nothing like this two-world conflict
in Gilligan. It is, I believe, a conflict much more realistic than that of asking
people to talk about isolated moral dilemmas.

Most men who blow the whistle express deep regret that their
subsequent un- or under-employment has meant that they have not been able
to care for their families. One man put it this way. "I have lots of regrets,
but they do not mean anything compared to my one big regret, that I haven’t
been able to take care of my family since I blew the whistle. I don't just
mean I haven't been earning a good living. I mean I haven't been there for
them. I've been wrapped up in myself."

Not a single woman whistleblower talked like this. As far as I can tell,
it had nothing to do with the fact that women's economic contributions were
less than the men's. On the contrary, many women were the primary bread
winners in their families, and in any case the men weren't just talking about
money, but time and attention. Why do women whistleblowers not talk in
terms of not being able to care for their families after blowing the whistle?

Originally I thought that women see whistleblowing itself as an act of
care so similar to that of caring for their families that there can be no
conflict. To care for morality at work is like caring for one's family. Care
is care. Now I think that was wrong. Instead, many women have been so
torn for so long about working in an environment in which caring was
impossible that they feel relieved at being able to care again, almost as if
they had to put the impulse to care for anyone on hold, as they could no
longer manage the splitting involved: care at home, don't care at work.

One might argue that in blowing the whistle, these women finally feel
liberated to care for those they work with and for. The story of Sherron
Watkins could be read this way. But this was not my impression. Rather,
speaking out somehow heals the split between caring and uncaring self, and
it is this that is liberating. I think this is what Sara H. meant when she said
"As the years went by, I stopped caring about anyone or anything. After I
blew the whistle, I could feel again." For Sarah, feeling means caring: for
family, for friends, even for herself.

In her study of Nazi bureaucrats, the so-called desk murderers who
carried out the orders that resulted in the deaths of millions, Hannah Arendt
found that most justified their acts in terms of having to support their
families.11 Or as one man who should have blown the whistle, but didn't,
put it, "I'd have blown the whistle in a minute if I didn't have kids to put
through college." As Arendt points out, that's a dangerous argument. Since
most people have families, it means that one is prepared to do anything to
anyone.

"Everyone has a family," said Jane B. "Lots of my co-workers said
'I'd go along with you, but I have a responsibility to my family.' But where
does it stop? You could justify anything that way. I asked one if he would
commit murder for his family, and he just looked at me as if I were crazy."12
To succor oneself with the thought that one will do anything for one's family is tantamount to saying one will do anything; anything the boss says, to anyone he says to do it to. To think this way is to become completely irresponsible to the world.

In fact, most men but not a single woman whistleblower said that they hesitated to blow the whistle because it would mean that they couldn't care for their families, either financially or emotionally. Nor did a single woman whistleblower regret having blown the whistle because it meant she couldn't care for her family. On the contrary, several women whistleblowers said that they blew the whistle in order to care for their families, though what most seemed to mean is that they blew the whistle in order to be free of the splitting and deadening of their own feelings that working in an uncaring environment required. Among these feelings was care.

In their study of Christian rescuers of the Jews, many of whom were women, Oliner and Oliner point out that most decided within minutes to help when asked, and that almost none consulted their families.\footnote{13} The risk to their families from hiding Jews was enormous, not just loss of a job, but torture and death, not just of oneself, but one's entire family. While hardly a single rescuer consulted his or her family, most bystanders (non-rescuers who were asked to help but refused) invoked their families as the reason.

One does not need to agree that every rescuer did the one right thing in putting his or her family at risk of torture and death to see the more general point: our families are bound up with our fates, so that even though it seems ethically suspect to argue that the sons and daughters must pay not just for the sins, but also the virtues, of the fathers and mothers, it is the case that they do. Nor is there any way around this fact, lest taking care of one's family become an excuse for anything. To be part of a family is to be bound to the moral fate of other family members.

In this regard, it is interesting that women, traditionally more closely associated with the care and comfort of families, are far less likely to invoke caring for family as a reason for not blowing the whistle, or mention family as a source of regret for having done so. On the contrary, blowing the whistle allows many women (not all) to feel free to care for their families for the first time in years. About this I do not want to exaggerate. There are as many broken women whistleblowers as men, shattered by what they have learned about the world from their experience. Nevertheless, women do not talk about their experience as men do. Men talk about divided loyalties;
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women talk about caring. The relationship between blowing the whistle and caring is not antithetical for women as it is for men, and that is my point. If the world of work can find no place for caring, there will likely be more women torn between the values of home and work. This may mean more women whistleblowers. Certainly it will mean more torn women.

Notes

1. A common definition of whistleblowing, that of Myron Peretz Glazer and Penina Migdal Glazer in The Whistleblowers (New York: Basic Books, 1989, p. 4), is that a whistleblower is one who (1) acts to prevent harm to others, not him or herself, (2) trying first to rectify the situation within the framework provided by the organization, (3) while possessing evidence that would convince a reasonable person. Part 2 of this definition must, however, be seen as advice, not definition. Daniel Ellsberg is no less a whistleblower because he did not first go to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and ask to release the Pentagon Papers. My book, Whistleblowers: Broken Lives and Organizational Power (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), pp. 17-19, discusses several problems in defining the act.

2. Most of my generalizations about whistleblowers come from the research I did for Whistleblowers, and much supporting evidence is found there. The research appendix (pp. 139-142) discusses my methodology, which was primarily one of listening to whistleblowers talk among themselves at a whistleblower support group. I also interviewed a number of individual whistleblowers. Several of the whistleblowers quoted here spoke with or wrote me after reading the book. In fact, I spoke with or exchanged correspondence with almost as many whistleblowers after my book’s publication as before. Many whistleblowers read the book and contacted me, sometimes to criticize, often to say that it helped them understand their experience better. All quotations from the book are indicated in these endnotes.


4. Alford, Whistleblowers, pp. 18-20, gives some admittedly soft statistics on the consequences of blowing the whistle.

5. Stanley Milgram, Obedience to Authority (New York: Harper and Row, 1974). The “learner” did not actually receive any shocks, though he
screamed and cried as though he did. Milgram's observation about the negligible difference between the obedience of women and men is borne out in numerous other studies. These are reported in *Obedience to Authority: Current Perspectives on the Milgram Paradigm*, edited by Thomas Blass (Mahwah, New Jersey: Erlbaum, 1999).


8. Compare the story of Martin Edwin Andersen, in *Whistleblowers*, pp. 120-121. Every whistleblower is unique, but their stories are remarkably similar.


