RESILIENCE AND WHISTLEBLOWING: COPING WITH THE CONSEQUENCES

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ABSTRACT

The growing literature on whistleblowing focuses largely on ethical issues related to whistleblowing, the victimization and protection of whistleblowers and developing an understanding of organizational responses to whistleblowing. Whistleblowing (or ethical resistance as it is often referred to) is defined as the unauthorised disclosure of organisational wrongdoing to those who are perceived to be in a position to take action. Whistleblowers are often victimized by their employers as their actions are considered to be disloyal and a betrayal of organizational culture. An issue that is receiving very little, if any, attention is the role of individual resilience in the whistleblower’s ability to deal effectively with the consequences of whistleblowing. Resilience not only refers to the individual’s ability to adapt to and cope with difficult and stressful circumstances, but also the extent to which he/she emerge from the situation more resourceful. In this paper a number of South African cases of whistleblowers are considered in terms of the available literature on individual resilience.

KEYWORDS

Whistleblowing
Victimization
Resilience
Introduction

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Data was collected by means of narrative interviews conducted with 18 South African whistleblowers. This interview technique is particularly appropriate for interviewing whistleblowers as it ‘envisages a setting which encourages and stimulates interviewees to tell a story about some significant event in the informants’ life’ (Bauer 1996: 2).

The interviews lasted between one and two hours. The informants included 12 men and six women of whom eight worked in the private sector and ten in the public sector. Fifteen were in middle management or senior professional positions when they blew the whistle. The narratives provided by the respondents were expanded on through a documentary study of related newspaper articles, court documents, reported judgments and articles written by the whistleblowers themselves.

Resilience: More than Just Coping

It is striking that, despite the high odds stacked against most individuals living in a changing society (such as South Africa), some individuals not only cope admirably with their stressful existence but seem to flourish in the face of adversity (Jones, 1991; Barnard, 1994). This has led to the emergence of a strong scientific interest in the nature and dynamics of psychological well-being. A distinction can be made between research conducted from a so-called strengths paradigm, often also described as a salutogenic or fortigenic perspective (Strümpfer, 1995), and the dominant pathogenic orientation. The focus of research is diverted away from addressing the causes of pathology and treatment towards discovering the origins
of strengths and well-being. Research fields often cited in this regard are salutogenesis (Antonovksy, 1987), positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Snyder & Lopez, 2002), psychofortology (Strümpfer, 1995; Wissing & Van Eeden, 2002) and fortitude (Pretorius, 1997). The Latin origin of the word fortigenesis refers to the origin of strength and similarly salutogenesis refers to the origins of health.

A strengths perspective, therefore, encompasses a view of life that considers difficulties to be challenges rather than insurmountable problems. As a result, the concept of resilience has become more salient in the research community of late (Frydenberg, 1999; Kumpfer, 1999; Rolf, 1999; Shiner, 2000; Strümpfer, 2006; Brown-Baatjies et al, 2008). Resilience can be defined as “…the capacity for successful adaptation, positive functioning or competence … despite high-risk status, chronic stress, or following prolonged or severe trauma” (Egeland, Carlson & Sroufe, 1993, cited in Sonn & 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 behaviour to cope and rebound (or resile), as well as accompanying emotions and cognitions.” Resilient individuals are therefore often described as being more “flexible than vulnerable people” and endure and rebound from disruptive life events and stressors by appropriating coping resources (Friborg et al, 2003: 65).

These resources can be divided into two analytical clusters, i.e. intrapersonal and extrapersonal resources (Wickens & Greeff, 2005: 429). The former comprise resources such as an optimistic attitude, an internal locus of control, hardiness, a proactive stance towards stressors, pro-social behaviour, and internalised values and religious beliefs. Extrapersonal resources include, for example, financial means, structural and institutional support (such as legal counsel) and social support networks. Although the support of friends and colleagues can act as an important coping resource, the social support of a person’s family and broader kinship network may be of significant value (Antonovsky, 1979; Barnard, 1994: 139-141; Friborg et al, 2003: 65-66; Wickens & Greeff, 2005: 429). More so, having a supportive spouse/life partner seems to be an invaluable resource (Roothman et al., 2003).

In the attempt to understand stress management, Aaron Antonovsky (1979: 189), one of the first sociologists to adopt a salutogenic approach, used the concept Generalised Resistance Resources
(GRRs) to refer to coping resources utilised by individuals. Upon further investigation, Antonovsky (1979: 123; 1998b) found that how well individuals mobilise 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, 1998a). 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, 1987: 19; 1998b: 22).

Three components of sense of coherence come to the fore, namely comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness. Comprehensibility lies on a cognitive level and refers to the individual’s ability to make sense of stimuli, situations and his/her life-world (Antonovsky, 1998a: 7). “It also implies that, although one may undergo great difficulties, challenges and complex situations, there is a fundamental conviction that these situations will make sense” (Van Breda, 2001: 22).

Manageability relates to the fact that when a person is confronted with a challenging life event or stressor, he/she does not only have a good apprehension of the situation, but can also identify the necessary resources to cope with and overcome the challenge. Moreover, the person has the belief that these resources can be appropriated in order to cope with the challenge successfully (Antonovsky, 1998a: 7). These resources include both the resources that are under the control of the person as well as the resources controlled by others such as a godlike entity, significant others and official structures (Antonovsky, 1984: 119; Wickens & Greeff, 2005: 428). The mere perception that resources are available and support is accessible may be sufficient to enhance resilience even though the person has neither accessed the resources nor received any definite support (Strümpfer, 1990: 269).

Meaningfulness 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. This motivates the individual on the one hand to define a difficult life event or stressor as a manageable challenge and on the other hand to invest emotive energy in managing the challenge – even to the extent of emerging from the situation strengthened (Antonovsky, 1998a; Wickens & Greeff, 2005: 428).

There is a rich body of literature on studies using different research populations in the attempt to gain a better understanding of individual resiliency and sense of coherence. These include, for example,
studies which focused on the chronically ill (Coe et al, 1998: 267; McCubbin et al., 2002), single parents with disabled children (Gottlieb, 1998), and post-divorced families (cf. Walsh, 2003; Greeff & Van der Merwe, 2004). Despite the plethora of research on individual resilience and sense of coherence, it is, however, striking, when reviewing both the international and South African literature, very little, if any, attention has been given to the role resilience plays in whistleblowers’ attempt to cope with the consequences of showing ethical resistance.

**Whistleblowing: A Brief Theoretical Overview**

*The definition of whistleblowing*

Whistleblowing (or ethical resistance as it is often referred to) is generally viewed as the disclosure of organisational wrongdoing to those who are perceived to be in a position to take action (Glazer & Glazer 1989: 4; Jubb 1999: 83; Miceli & Near 1992: 15; Miethe 1999: 17-18; Wilmot 2000: 1051). Organisational wrongdoing could entail a wide variety of behaviours, such as criminal activity, the misuse of public funds, a miscarriage of justice, the abuse of power, maladministration and endangering the health or safety of any individual (Kloppers 1997: 240-241). Organisational wrongdoing therefore consists of any illegal and/or immoral behaviour within the workplace.

The definition also entails that an employee or former employee of the organisation should be making the disclosure of organisational wrongdoing (Calland & Dehn 2004: 3; Glazer & Glazer 1989: 4; Miethe 1999: 13; Singer et al 1998: 528; Wilmot 2000: 1051). Several authors (Johnson 2003: 4; Miceli & Near 1992: 16-17) broaden this requirement to a member or former member of an organisation, while Jubb (1999: 83) refers to ‘a person who has or had privileged access to data or information of an organisation’. A reporter or politician who reveals examples of illegal, immoral or illegitimate acts happening outside of their particular work sphere is therefore not considered to be a whistleblower. The fact that the whistleblower is an insider is an essential element of the perception of betrayal. Only an insider can betray, or to put it differently, can violate loyalty and trust (Ben-Yehuda 2001: 37).

Whistleblowing could occur internally when the whistleblower bypasses the prescribed internal channels of communication or externally when the whistleblower resorts to an external agency, which could include the media. Whistleblowers are generally expected to exhaust the internal route, before turning to
ways of exposing the wrongdoing externally. Nine of the whistleblowers in the study only disclosed information internally, two only externally and seven both internally and externally. In all 18 cases the response of the organisation to the disclosure of information about wrongdoing was very negative.

Response by the organisation

Regardless of whether the disclosure was internal or external or both, or whether it was authorised, unauthorised or role-prescribed, organisations typically regard whistleblowing as illegitimate. They believe that whistleblowing is a deviant act, which threatens the profitability of the organisation and tarnishes its reputation. Organisations consider whistleblowing to be a form of betrayal and therefore tend to deal with whistleblowers as traitors by punishing those who engage in this kind of activity.

Organisations victimise whistleblowers in a variety of ways. These include ‘hot air’ where there are initial indications that management is taking the issue seriously, while in fact doing nothing. Colleagues and/or superiors become progressively less friendly and isolate the whistleblower through closing ranks while identifying the whistleblower as a ‘troublemaker’. Stonewalling could occur where memos are not replied to and letters are unanswered. The whistleblower is often immediately fired or if this is not possible, processes would be set in motion, which would justify the termination of employment such as abruptly downgrading evaluations of their job performance. Blacklisting, dismissal, transfer, personal harassment, character assassination, the introduction of disciplinary proceedings and sexual exploitation are ways used by organisations to discredit and destroy whistleblowers (Glazer & Glazer 1989: 133-166; Gummer 1985: 97; Hunt 1995: 155-156; Rothschild & Miethe 1994: 265). Fred Alford (2001: 18) argues that in practice whistleblowers are defined as such as a result of the retaliation they experience.

All 18 respondents reported various forms of victimisation. All of them lost their jobs: the employment of seven of the whistleblowers was terminated, six were retrenched, and five resigned and took up other employment. Only three of the informants are still working in the same field and one of those at a lower salary than before.

In seven cases the employers instituted procedures which led to the termination of their employment. Keith is one example. He was employed as a Safety and Security Manager at a company manufacturing explosives. Together with a group of employees he submitted a report to his employer’s board of
directors alleging misconduct on the part of a senior employee. Despite an interdict being granted stopping disciplinary action in terms of the Protected Disclosures Act (2000) and re-instating him, Keith’s work was investigated by the employer and he was found guilty of insolence and insubordination. The Chairman of the disciplinary hearing concluded that there was an irretrievable breakdown of trust and he was discharged.

One of Mike’s responsibilities as managing director of a business unit in the Department of Justice was to oversee the appointment of liquidators. When he refused to approve the appointment of a friend of the Minister, he was removed from his position. After unsuccessfully raising his concerns with the Public Protector and the Auditor-General, amongst others, he turned to the media. This led to his suspension and a disciplinary hearing which found in his favour. However, the Director-General refused to reinstate him, claiming an irretrievable breakdown of trust. After years of negotiation a settlement was reached resulting in the termination of his employment.

As financial manager of a large pharmaceuticals and cosmetics company André considered it his duty to report irregularities that he found in the results of the company first to the board’s chairman, then to the company auditors and then to South Africa’s regulatory authorities. He was suspended because he disclosed confidential information to third parties. This was followed by a threatened disciplinary enquiry which did not take place, followed by several CCMA hearing at which the company representatives did not appear. Eventually André came to an agreement with the company through his lawyers as the process had become too painful for him.

In six of the cases the employer implemented procedures which eventually resulted in retrenchment of the whistleblowers. When George, an investigator at a financial regulator and a qualified attorney, first raised concerns at his initial employer, he was given an oral and later a written warning for allegedly not adhering to the communication channels. After speaking to the Director of Public Prosecutions he was constructively dismissed by transfer to another section where he was overqualified for the post. He lost his private office and was moved to an open-plan environment. He had no more contact with investigators or lawyers in the department. Eventually he had no alternative but to accept a “redundancy” package and sign a secrecy undertaking.
As a compliance officer working at a financial institution responsible for monitoring the statutory, regulatory and supervisory compliance of her employer with regard to its financial trading business, Allison was compelled by law to disclose any concerns she had about irregular trading. This is an example of ‘role-prescribed’ whistleblowing (Miceli & Near 1992: 21-25). When she discovered that certain members of staff, some of them senior managers, were involved in irregular trading of shares she reported the matter to her immediate supervisor as well as to other persons in the group’s compliance structures. A little over a month later she was told to re-apply for her position which had now become a full-time post. After four months of negotiations about possible restructuring of her position or redeployment in another position she was retrenched.

Pieter’s anonymous participation in a Carte Blanche programme demonstrating the lack of care taken by Iscor with regard to environmental issues, as well as reports that he submitted to his immediate superior with regard to the negative impact of Iscor’s activities on water quality in Vanderbijl Park region eventually culminated in a retrenchment.

When Cathy reported suspicions of fraud to the tune of approximately a million rand a year for the previous three years in the marketing division to the financial director and chief executive officer of a large international internet company she set in motion a process that eventually led to her retrenchment.

The whistleblowers who come through the process the most positively are probably those who resign before the employers could take action against them. Five of the respondents fell in this category. John felt that ‘I was just doing what is expected of me as a trustee’. He was an actuary employed at a financial regulator, who objected to his employer’s handling of its pension fund, which he regarded to be 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 sidelined. He resigned and took up a position with another financial institution.

Mark’s investigation of the third-party work performed by the senior partners of his firm of attorneys revealed that the clients were being defrauded he contacted Martin Welz of Noseweek. Before the court proceedings took place he resigned and established his own legal practice.
As a senior legal advisor working for a City Council in South Africa, Vicky was responsible for monitoring the public response to a proposal by the mayor that some street names in the city should be changed. She was instructed to treat the matter as very confidential. When she realised that the mayor was misrepresenting the extent and nature of the public response and that her immediate boss was generating fake letters of support for the name changes, she raised her concerns with the deputy mayor. A public investigation followed after which her boss was re-assigned to another post. She was increasingly ostracized by her colleagues and eventually decided to resign in order to look after her baby fulltime.

In spite of the fact that many companies may have explicit company values that include honesty, respect among employees and integrity, the very same company may react to whistleblowers in a way that clearly contradict their stated values. This, in addition to the experience of victimization and an increasing sense of becoming isolated, contribute to the strain and stress experienced by the whistleblower. The question thus arises as to how whistleblowers cope with the consequences of whistleblowing. One possible set of coping strengths may be related to individual resilience.

**Whistleblowing as a disruptive life event**

Ironically, the management response is the main determining factor whether the whistleblower would develop into an active political agent. As loyal employees, whistleblowers expect a constructive response from management with regard to their disclosures. If management responds in a harsh fashion in order to silence the whistleblower and discourage others who might be similarly inclined, it generally tends to have the opposite effect. This can especially be seen if the whistleblower in question is a professional person, who has to abide by a code of professional ethics. In the eyes of the whistleblower management’s response undermines their legitimacy and tends to confirm that the organisation is morally bankrupt and lacking in integrity (Rothschild & Miethe 1999: 125-128). Their harsh reaction to the whistleblower’s concerns often leaves the whistleblower with limited opportunities to save face or retract. Whistleblowers are forced into a position where they have to defend themselves in order to retain their dignity and integrity. In this context employers and whistleblowers have one essential thing in common: their reputation.

The literature has shown that the resilience of those who have experienced a stressful event is largely due
to their sense of coherence. This sense of coherence is firstly related to comprehensibility that is the extent to which they can understand what is happening to them.

**Comprehensibility**

A central theme of the interviews was related to the whistleblowers’ descriptions of their attempts to make sense of their situation. George described his initial experiences at the first regulator as follows:

> When I initially started commenting to management on what I perceived to be a lack of care in the administration of exchange control I felt (in retrospect rather naïvely) that my opinion would be taken seriously especially as the findings of the Harms Commission supported my views. I realised at a very early stage that I was being sidelined and that I was not considered to be part of the ‘team’. The fact that management was not talking to me made me anxious. My initial reaction was shock and disbelief as I could not understand how such a reputable organisation could feel so threatened by my comments. When I realised that I was pitted against a very powerful system, plain fear set in. This happened for the first time towards the end of 1989 when my supervisor gave me a very low performance appraisal and suggested that I look for other employment.

Vicky expressed her feelings of anger:

> I remember at the time this incredible anger at the fact that they were pushing this thing through and doing something lasting against the wishes of the public and that overwhelmed every other feeling: this anger of the unfairness of injustice.

Cathy shared Vicky’s feeling of resentment:

> I don’t feel it anymore, but I deeply resented at the time having no control over my own future and the dishonesty on other people that placed me in this terribly position.

On the other hand organisations often tend to be quite successful in convincing employees that absolute loyalty to the organisation is the highest good. They achieve this by employing concepts such as ‘corporate culture’, ‘family’ and ‘team’ (Casey 1999: 175).
Despite the malicious treatment that Vicky experienced at the hands of her employer and colleagues, she still felt remorseful about the way in which she handled the situation. She concluded an article she wrote about her experiences with the following:

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. No matter which way I think about it, or try to rationalise it, that fact will never go away and so my memory of the time is always tinged with an underlying sense of discomfort and shame (Johnson 2004: 52).

Some of the whistleblowers also described their attempts at gaining information that would enable them to understand what is happening to them. Cathy turned to the internet:

I was on the internet all day and all night looking up the labour laws I knew it inside outside, every case CCMA had every had ever had on the internet I read, I looked up every case I could find on wrong full retrenchment on whistle blowing, and that’s when I realized that the for the first time I just thought that whistle blowing, I did not expect any praise, but expected that they would think: now that’s a good employee that’s got the interest of the company at heart, that basically was the only reaction that I thought that I will get. I was shocked because 9 out of 10 of the sites that discussed whistle blowing 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. But certainly the override message the internet is not in your own interest to blow the whistle.

**Manageability**

When it comes to manageability a distinction can be made between the intrapersonal and the extrapersonal resources that the individual has at his/her disposal. While intrapersonal resources are related to the individual’s personal strength and values extrapersonal resources refer to the material and social means available as a coping resource.

*Intrapersonal resources*
Cathy’s description of her struggle with depression clearly demonstrates the intrapersonal resources that she was able to tap into.

During this time I actually, I know that I was mentally completely ill, I went to my brother’s house who lives near me, and stole the hose from his creepy crawly, taped it up to the exhaust of my car, I put my two little dogs, who I dearly love, put them in the car, why would I want to kill them? and I turned on the engine and I was going to gas us all, and I just thought I’m out of my mind, I know that I am very sick. And I turned off and went to see a doctor immediately, but I could not afford the anti-depressants which is what I knew I needed, so I did not really get much relief, but I realized for the first time that I was mentally unstable after all of this and I was not thinking rationally, so I made the conscious decision to be more practical with dealing with it in my own time.

I’m getting over this deep depression now, but up to now, I know I won’t do it, because I thought it out at that time, but the thought of suicide is in my head all the time and I know, because two of my friends in the last couple of years had committed suicide and I’ve seen the devastating effects on their families, and I could not do that to my family. Not to my daughter or husband, so that stops me and it is just not the answer, it would solve my problem but not anything else.

Mark expressed his belief that he has a moral obligation as follows:

I just felt I need to do it and maybe go to the police at that point in time what I wanted to happened was that people must know about it and you would be the best person to expose them so that they can stop doing it. I did not know about all the consequences in terms of the court cases and things like that. So when it came out and I saw the newspapers the first time the whole front page was taken with the fraud case. You walk and you suddenly look around, you know that feeling, I can’t explain to you, but it was a weird feeling, driving home and looking into your car mirror and when you hear noises. So just that period of time that I went through was very traumatic.
Extrapersonal resources

The most important consequence of whistleblowing is probably related to the impact that it has on the financial resources available to whistleblowers. They do not only lose their employment and a salary, they usually lose a career and have to start afresh. Although Keith was initially reinstated, he lost his job five months later. This resulted in him having to sell his house and accumulating debts in order to start a business in a completely new field.

Allison’s judgement by the Labour Court came at a stage when she had been without a job for two years and two months. The reimbursement with regard to her legal costs was on a party to party basis as prescribed by the court rules, but this does not cover the attorney and client costs for which she was still liable.

Cathy explains the financial consequences of her whistleblowing very explicitly:

I tried working from home because I’ve got very strong computer skill, but I was so depressed I just could not go out and look for work and I just got into a worse and worse state I had to surrender 5 of my policies that I put towards retirement, so retirement is now non-existent. After 15 years with the company my pension money including the R80,000 they put towards it, is R480.00 per month. So I will have to work till the day I die. I had made provision towards my old age, but I had to let those policies go because I needed the money so badly and I could not afford to pay them off.

In a few cases the financial consequences were not so negative. For Pieter initially it was difficult financially. He had to start his own business and the first two years was very difficult.

My whole nest-egg was used up, but I put up a brave face and went on. I am very independent and very determined and I made a lot of contacts while I was at ERWAT and Iscor. I participated in these water forums and relevant meetings and got to know lots of people who know that I have credibility.
Structural and institutional support also plays an important role in how manageable the whistleblowing process is. The feelings of conflicting loyalties and betrayal engendered by the act of whistleblowing tend to have a detrimental effect on interpersonal relations between the whistleblowers and their co-workers. Some colleagues might become enemies, others might avoid the whistleblower in order not to become tainted and others might start looking at the whistleblower ‘as they would someone dying of cancer’ (Davis 1989: 8).

In George’s case, his supervisor abused the rigid communication channels in the organisation to ensure that George did not get into personal contact with senior management. He could therefore not convince them of his competence, or that his actions were an expression of his loyalty to the public good. His supervisor also discredited George in private conversations and even in a staff meeting after George had been transferred to another section. Those of his colleagues who agreed with George were therefore hesitant to voice this in public. The Deputy General Manager of the department admitted to George in a private conversation that he agreed with George’s views, but was also not prepared to support him openly. The fact that George enjoyed the backing of the Director of Public Prosecutions was used as evidence by the management that he could not be trusted and should be treated with suspicion. He therefore became completely isolated. This kind of response obviously contributes to a situation where whistleblowers feel that they have no choice but to continue with their political resistance.

Vicky received a similar response from her colleagues at the City Council. From being a valuable employee, she became viewed as a disloyal traitor to the organisation. When returning to work after various public hearings and ‘an embarrassing game of “musical chairs” in Western Cape politics’ she found it a great struggle to settle down. 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”. I was also told a number of times of apparent plans to sue me for “millions”. 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).
Mike expressed his disillusionment in unequivocal terms:

It’s a good thing that when you are having difficulties you start to see who your real friends are. In the office I don’t remember anyone of my senior colleagues calling me to offer support. But when you meet with them in the street they say we are with you. Some support, but are afraid. They worry, will I be kicked out and so on and so forth if I show sympathy. There was word that anybody who showed sympathy will be dealt with.

John’s position was slightly better. He received some support from his subordinates as they felt he was fighting for their pension benefits, but his superiors treated him more and more like an outcast until he eventually resigned.

Keith experienced very strong support from the factory workers. With his initial reinstatement, management postponed his starting date to foil the factory staff’s plans of welcoming him back at the gate with banners. They could however not prevent 200 black employees at the ammunition factory from giving him a standing ovation, which affected him very deeply.

The social support networks available to whistleblowers are very important in helping them cope with the situation. George expressed it as follows:

I think that what pulled me through psychologically and emotionally at the [first regulator], was on the one hand the fact that I could openly speak to the prosecuting authorities and on the other hand the support of my wife. The fact that she understood what was happening and could talk me through my experiences certainly helped a lot. Friends and relatives were supportive, but they could of course never fully understand what was going on.

John attributed the failure of his marriage directly to the tensions he experienced at work. He feels that he relied too heavily on the consideration of his wife who could not identify or sympathise with the problems he was experiencing. When she asked for a divorce he viewed this as a definite sign that he should make a new beginning. Soon after the divorce was granted he not only changed his job but also
moved to a different city in a different province. The lack of support from his wife provides some explanation why he was not prepared to follow through and continue to the end.

Alison felt that the experience put her marriage and family life under strain.

My husband would have liked me to stop. We love each other but at one stage he wanted to divorce me. Your whole life goes on hold. Am I doing the right thing? Is my husband going to forgive me for this? I am short-tempered with my son. I have been a bad mom. I am consumed by what has happened.

Despite these strong guilt feelings, and ongoing debates between her and her husband about how to proceed, his resolute support enabled her to see her Labour Court case through to the end.

In Mike’s case even his wife experienced some victimization at work, but was prepared to stand by him. He expressed it as follows:

Emotionally it was stressful. And again back to our belief and the support of Christians. It helped a lot. But we as human beings, when you don’t know how will this end as a result of the inquiry that can go either way, you have to prepare for a result. It was stressful and in most cases families break down. My wife stood by me although she received an indication that she must leave her post in the Ministry of Agriculture. She was telling me that she was expected to look for another position. It was subtle pressure.

Vicky received strong support from her family:

Well, my father was very, very supportive because he worked closely at a provincial level with the top politicians and knew about the pressures and what happened and stuff. He was very supportive and very kind and my husband was totally supportive. I mean I only had one child then she was about a year and a half and there was no problem there. I mean my husband was extremely angry at what was going on and he was saying do this, do that, and I was saying no, no. He is a very principal person, so I
had no problems there and he did not have the same sense of loyalty because he did not work with my boss, he just thought he was a total bastard.

In some instances whistleblowers might be reluctant to avail them of the support of family or friends even if they know it is available.

They’re very supportive all of them and they’re all very successful in what they do, they’ve all got degrees which I don’t but I could not take money from them I could not, we’re all quite proud people and although we’re a close knit family, they will never say so what is your troubles, they would expect me to ask for help if I needed it and it would have been forthcoming straight away but they would not presume themselves to be interfering in my business, so they really did not know much until finally when I lock myself up in the car with the dog. I realized there was something wrong, and I phoned my sister Liz. She and I are really close and I said to her I’m in a terrible state. None of them knew, none of them noticed this, and she took me to her doctor. It came to a shock to all of them that I was in that state because I’m usually a very positive strong person, and I did not tell them that I was not shaping and working from home. I ran through all the money I had saved, I’m selling stuff that I had to keep going and I did not tell them, so they did not really know, they just thought everything’s okay.

*Meaningfulness*

When talking to whistleblowers it quickly becomes clear that they consider it very important to create meaning from their harrowing experiences. Alford (20001: 65) calls it ‘the choiceless choice’ of whistleblowing.

Cathy explained it as follows:

I also just believe that injustice should be stopped, we have so much corruption and inefficiently in this country and its crippling us and I will not keep quiet when I see what’s going on because it’s like staring ourselves in the wild. I believe that by keeping quiet you condone it, and I do not want to come across as a saint or anything like that at all, I really do believe by being quiet, you say that you agree with it.
I realized afterwards, after the dust had settled, that I handled the whole thing very badly, but the pain was such a shock and so unexpected that I did not handled it very well, I should have immediately gone to a psychologist and sorted it out that I was not in the wrong, that I was not failing in my job, that I was not a bad person, and that I actually did the right thing at the time.

My father died a long time ago, but he was a very honourable man and I said I could not live with myself knowing that he is looking down from somewhere on me, saying you’re not doing the honourable thing.

For Yvonne the meaning of the experience lies in the fact that she has done the right thing and will not have to cope with a guilty conscience later in life.

People just have ideas about what is right and wrong and I felt that what is happening with the project is wrong and I tried to correct it. I think my reaction is part of who I am. It is a normal reaction as a result of my values and what I believe is right and wrong.

It is a disappointment as one does not think at the beginning that things would work out this way. One cannot predict it. It is only when you are in the situation, and when you open your mouth about something about which you are concerned that you are confronted by their response. It could have had a positive outcome if people had responded differently. One does not know before you are in the situation. I will perhaps think twice in future before I open my mouth. This was a hard lesson, but I think I will do it again, but also with the general attitude of what battles do you fight and which do you leave. An important thing that carried me is that at the end I have a clear conscience, that I can live with myself, that I am comfortable with my behaviour, that I will not look back later in life and sit with a guilty conscience.

And the choiceless choice is also evident from Mark’s reflection on the effect that his whistleblowing had on his life:
I think it’s made me to set a very high ethical standard for me in terms of your yes being yes and your no, no. There is no shortcut and thinking can I lie to the client, even a simple thing where you’ve written a letter, but you have not done it yet. You know you set very high standards for yourself, so I think in that regard it’s good, I don’t see the negative because these people when your colleagues when you speak to them or your meet socially or whatever, they tend to, the discussion would take a different trend, because they’re a bit scared of speaking to me. Like don’t trust him, he’s a whistle blower that type of thing.

I’m happy as I am, just carrying on because happiness is about every day, you cannot go back to tomorrow. Whatever happens today is OK, that is my life. I’m not a greedy person, I must have this and I must have that, I’m quite content as it is. And it is amazing it is not that you look forward to things, it sort of just happens because on the positive side morally it’s right and things sort of happens to you, and I’m probably getting a bit spiritually as well, but that is the basis were it all happens. I believe that you have to do right, you have to be a blessing to receive a blessing.

**Conclusion**

Undoubtedly, the stress whistleblowers experience as a result of the (unexpected) negative response on the part of the organisation has a profound impact on their psychological well-being. Not only did some of the respondents have to deal with confrontational situations such as disciplinary hearings, but most of them also recounted becoming marginalised figures in the organisation and experiencing a sense of isolation. This shook the foundation of their job security. The stressful experience was compounded by other stressors such as the fact that all the respondents, to a more or lesser extent, faced economic difficulty as a result of, for example, eventually losing their employment. For some of the whistleblowers the strain experienced as a consequence of the organisational retaliation spilled over into the private sphere 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 sample stuck to their moral convictions and belief in justice, even to the extent of being to their own detriment, can be indicative of a sense of individual resilience.
Using Antonovsky’s (1979; 1998a) conceptual framework as a tool of analysis, it became evident, based on the accounts of the whistleblowers, that their sense of coherence contributed to how successful they were in appropriating coping resources and exhibiting resiliency. The first of the components of a sense of coherence, i.e. comprehensibility, was instrumental in the respondents’ conviction that despite the negative consequences of their ethical resistance, blowing the whistle was indeed the appropriate action to take. This said, however, making sense of the situation was by no means a simple task for them. Respondents had to grapple with conflicting emotions especially since they were taken aback by the organisation’s reaction to that which the respondents defined as ‘the ethical and right thing to do’. Nonetheless, standing their ground on a cognitive level and having a good comprehension of the situation alone was not sufficient for them to emerge successfully from the stressful situation. Manageability - the second component of a sense of coherence – played a key role.

Despite experiencing emotional turmoil, most of the respondents were able to mobilise their intrapersonal resources. Amongst these having an internal locus of control seemed to be very important. Some respondents also relied on their internalised values and religious beliefs. Moreover, respondents assessed and appropriated the extrapersonal resources to their availability. Although some respondents spoke with concern about the fact that they had to use rapidly depleting financial resources to manage their situation, they could not emphasise enough their appreciation for the support they received from other institutional and social sources. Having a supportive family network and, more so, a supportive spouse was invaluable to the respondents. This in turn contributed to the meaningfulness respondents attached to their lives in general and the stressful situation in particular. This third component of a sense of coherence is imperative to the extent that it motivates the individual to continue to invest emotional energy into managing - and even overcoming - the challenging situation.

It thus seems that, despite experiencing severe negative consequences as a result of blowing the whistle, most of the respondents had a strong sense of coherence which contributed to their resilient inclination. All the respondents in this study, therefore, manifested to a more or lesser extent the qualities associated with a resilient individual. In the respondents’ accounts of their pursuit of justice and trying to uphold that which they believed to be ethical principles, it became evident that these individuals viewed themselves to be resourceful and efficacious. In addition, it seems that they remained optimistic – believing that justice will prevail – even amidst emotions of anxiety and fear due to organisational retaliation. Their belief in their own judgments and that they can make a difference, which will also enhance the meaningfulness of their own
lives, point in the direction of elements of psychological resilience (cf. Frydenberg, 1999; Kumpfer, 1999; Rolf, 1999; Shiner, 2000; Strümpfer, 2006). One can therefore ask the question whether the qualities of resilience may not have been a contributing factor in these whistleblowers developing into active political agents.
LIST OF REFERENCES


