

Listening Closer : Speaking Out Against the Whistleblowing Metaphor of Speaking Up





Of course one cannot think without metaphors. But that does not mean there aren't some metaphors we might well abstain from or try to retire

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- Whistleblowing institutionalisation →

legislation, regulation and organisational practice
e.g. WB hotlines; tiered recipients

Includes measures to protect vs retaliation



NUTS and SLUTS →

Those who raise ethical issues within the organisation are treated as disturbed or morally suspect

(Alford 2001: 61).



Central claim

Metaphor plays into WB retaliation strategies which stigmatise & discredit the WB

Everyday usage, 'speak up' = 'speak louder'

Implication → The one speaking is blameworthy – 'if *you* spoke louder, then I would be able to hear you'

Speaking UP vs Speaking O U T



Speaking UP →

Organisational hierarchies which circumscribe the path/obstacle of a disclosure *so that* it is heard and acted upon.

Speaking O U T →

Disclosure to recipient 'outside' of the organisation



Contents

- 1. Fearless Speech : Parrhesia and the courage to listen**
- 2. Fearful Whistleblowers : weaponising mental health discourse**
- 3. Misguided metaphors : terminological slippage**

1. Fearless speech

Parrhesia = 'fearless' or 'frank speech'

Parrhesiastes = 'truth-teller'

= interactional organisational practice →

1. Courage of the speaker

dismissal, blacklisting, demotion, &

'NORMATIVE VIOLENCE' of an organisation

weaponising mental health against the WB



1. Fearless speech

2 . Courage of the listener

Uncomfortable truth that an org plan, procedure, strategy
'off-track'

→ Total overhaul org = time, money, loss reputation

Organizing courage (instituting speak-up arrangements)
requires "*the courage to disorganize*" BUT,

any re-organization risks becoming deaf to parrhesiastic
events, so the org not only listen to the WB but must
continue listening.



2. Fearful Whistleblowers

WB literature = ‘**resource-based**’ approach to power
retaliation is proportional to the balance of power
between WB & wrongdoer

Judith Butler → ‘performative subjectivity’

Power circulates between WB & ‘retaliator’
enacted by both, owned by neither, WB both engage
in power activity while also resisting it

WB = protracted process, rather than once-off



2. Fearful Whistleblowers

“We sometimes cling to the terms that pain us because at a minimum, they offer us some form of social and discursive existence”

“I am led to embrace the terms that injure me because they constitute me socially”

Butler (1997b; 26)



Weaponising Mental Health Discourse

WB retaliation lit → mental health impacts depression, PTSD-like symptoms, anxiety, suicidal feelings

Mental illness = social stigmata(still!)

The retaliatory org exploits this stigma → discredits & isolates the WB

WB “forced to accept the position of wronged subject suffering mental health problems if they do not want to position themselves on the outside of the org”

WB must accept the injurious term of ‘mentally-ill’ as only way can gain recognition as an org subject



Weaponising Mental Health Discourse

Many try to deny & hide their recourse to mental health discourse even as they draw on it

WB learn to suppress anger at the org response to as any 'outburst' → 'madness'

Damages credibility & weakens claims



Weaponising Mental Health Discourse

'double jeopardy'

Retaliation harms WB mental health =
unreliable & untrustworthy; but

WB also relies on mental health discourse to draw
attention to their plight

Suffering "cannot be voiced" = internalized, silenced
and ongoing →

impact of WB on mental health and org retaliation
made invisible



Misguided Metaphors

If raising your voice = unacceptable emotional display **then,**

Urging WB to 'speak up' = risks double jeopardy

If speaking-up = speaking louder & this volume is misconstrued as anger & hence indicating mental illness, **then,**

there is the very real risk that the WB not be heard

'speak-up' culture' inadvertently places the WB's courage (or lack thereof)
front and centre again,

So the courage required by the organisation to hear downplayed

Misguided Metaphors

‘if you spoke louder, then I would be able to hear you’ = blame

∴ raised voice ≠ mental illness, speaking-up must = WB must speak more *clearly*

Within speak-up system = using designated channels system mandates

Outside designated procedures/outside of the speak-up system →

Org = deaf to issues raised & if Deaf no level of volume can make one hear!

‘speaking up’ vs. ‘speaking out’

Speak-up system indicates path of concern however softly concern is voiced: **up**

Speak-up system tracks disclosures onto org hierarchy, & WB can't go outside of speak-up system, outside of the org

Conflation ‘speaking up’ & ‘speaking out’ elides weaknesses of speak-up systems

“Most people had spoken out internally at first, alerting bosses, board members or human resource departments, about the problems they perceive. In each case, after a period of time passed it became clear that they were not being addressed and so the WB felt compelled to go outside of their org, disclosing to a regulator, a journalist or the police. Upon doing so, individuals became known for having spoken up; they became identified within their org and in some cases by journalists as whistleblowers” (Kenny (2018; 12) (emphases added).

‘speaking up’ vs. ‘speaking out’

Despite study participants declarations that they risked everything by speaking out, “it is not clear that this construction involve[d] making a clear and fully conscious decision to do so, at any specific point”,

Participants came to understand losing their jobs & friends as “unforeseen side effects, rather than premeditated risks”

→

remain “passionately attached” to org even when org retaliates against them

Professional/loyal employee accepts term ‘whistleblower’ even as it distances them from the org, as this only way that they can still claim an attachment to org

‘speaking up’ vs. ‘speaking out’

“ To conceive of the whistleblower-parrhesiastes as fearless and self-driven is to promote the idea that supports to assist people in speaking out, such as legal protections and organizational speak-up systems, are unnecessary, as if parrhesia will simply emerge spontaneously” (Vandekerchove et al. 2018)

BUT

conflation ‘speaking up’ & ‘speaking out’ undermines those protections ∴
reduces the opportunities for parrhesia to emerge

‘speaking up’ vs. ‘speaking out’

If WB requires *listening* & this takes courage, then rather than employees
speaking up

those with (org) power should *listen closer*

∴ Term for a new WB system →

incl. corresponding listen-closer arrangement within its metaphor

Welcome to Speak Up



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Metaphors circumscribe how we think about
and act upon certain ideas.

WB is too important

to be framed by misguided metaphors unable
to withstand critical scrutiny