



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# TOGETHER WE STAND, DIVIDED WE FALL: EXPLORING COLLECTIVE WHISTLEBLOWING INTENTIONS

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### ABSTRACT

Whistleblowing became the center of attention since the 1980s and is still understudy until today. In this paper the author introduces whistleblowing on the group level with the concept of collective whistleblowing intention. Combining the findings of Gao, Greenberg and Wong-On-Wing (2015) whistleblowing intentions of lower-level employees with Henningsen and Henningsen (2014) preliminary examination of perception of social influences. The paper model combining the two findings, proposes similar results to the individual model with some modification. Some possible uses of this paper findings are presented lastly.

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## INTRODUCTION

Organizational well being is the one of the primary goals of organizations which includes its reputation and image (Lange, Lee and Dai, 2011; Sutton and Callahan, 1987). Whistleblowing is a double-edged sword in this matter which makes it an important area for research in organizational theory (Bowyer (1990). Research on whistleblowing has been in interest of organizational scholars since the 1980s (Near and Miceli, 1985). Most of the research was concentrated on the person to create a psychological or sociological profile of the whistleblower (Miceli *et al.*, 2013), or identify the organizational conditions that lead to external reporting (Keenan 1995; Rothschild and Miethe 1999). Cross-cultural research has mainly analyzed stated intentions to report wrongdoing (Keenan 2007; MacNab *et al.* 2007). However, whistleblowing can be practiced by not an individual but a group of organizational members. This leads to a new concept can be addressed as *group whistleblowing*. Group whistleblowing and its characteristics hasn't been addressed in literature yet according to Kaplan (2015) which makes it a great opportunity to investigate this side of whistleblowing.

How does it differ than individual whistleblowing? What factors driving it? What factors influence it? How will these findings be tested? And how can these findings be of use to theoretical and practical fields? Answering these concerns are what the author is going to unveil with this research.

### Whistleblowing intention and group decision making

Whistleblowing is encouraged by many authors whom considered its many benefits to society and the environment, and organization's reputation and image as a result (Ewing, 1983; Near, Dworkin, and Miceli, 1993). However, there might be some negative effects of whistleblowing to managers, organizations, even society and the environment such as false accusation (Near and Miceli, 1995). Near and Miceli (1985) defined whistleblowing as "the disclosure by organization members (former or current) of illegal, immoral, or illegitimate practices under the control of their employers, to persons or organizations that may be able to effect action".

### Whistleblowing Intention

Whistleblowers behaviors and intentions were studied by scholars whom came up with different theories and approaches such as (1) justice approach, (2) power perspective, (3) prosocial approach, (4) ethical decision-making models, (5)

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bystander intervention model - diffusion of responsibility due to having many bystanders during the committing of wrongdoing- (Latane and Darley, 1970; Fritzsche, Finkelstein and Penner 2000), and (6) ethical climate theory – moral climate of the organization- (Cullen, Parboteeah, and Victor 2003; Cullen, Victor and Stephens 1989).

**Injustice approach:** Researchers have used the Justice theory approach in an attempt to explain whistleblowing behavior and address employees’ perceptions of injustice within the workplace which motivate whistleblowing events (Near, Dworkin, and Miceli, 1993). This concept further explain employees' motivation to blow the whistle through what has been described as the attribution theory which helps researchers to understand situations in which employees perceive injustice in their workplace (Greenberg, 1990; Greenberg and Alge, 1998). It proposes that employee perceptions of fairness within an organization are based on the causal factors that the offending behavior is attributed to.

**Power perspective approach:** This perspective seeks to explore how the whistleblowers are viewed by the organization where the wrongdoing occurs. The organization can either view the whistleblower as a friend or an adversary (Miceli and Near, 1992; Near and Miceli, 1995). The organization is likely to view the whistleblower as a friend if it accepts that the whistleblowing event will bring about positive organizational change. This is most unlikely when organizations directly benefit from the wrongdoing, and the whistleblowing event threatens its authority, viability and structure. In such cases, the likelihood of retaliation high and the event is less likely to be reported (Dozier and Miceli, 1985; Miceli and Near, 1992; Miceli and Near, 1994; Janet P. Near and Miceli, 1995). Literature in this field shows that whistleblowing intentions are higher when the reporting channel is administered externally than when it is administered internally (Miceli and Near, 1992, 2002; Janet P. Near and Miceli, 1995).

**Prosocial approach:** Seeks to examine the influence of an individual’s sense of social duty versus reporting a whistleblowing event. In other words, the individual’s sense of social duty drives him to report organizational wrongdoing so the behavior is viewed as prosocial (Dozier and Miceli, 1985; Near and Miceli, 1985; Miceli and Near, 1992).

**Ethical decision-making model:** The basis of this approach is to compare the whistleblowing process to ethical decision-making model within organizations (Logsdon and Yuthas, 1997; Jones and Ryan, 1998).

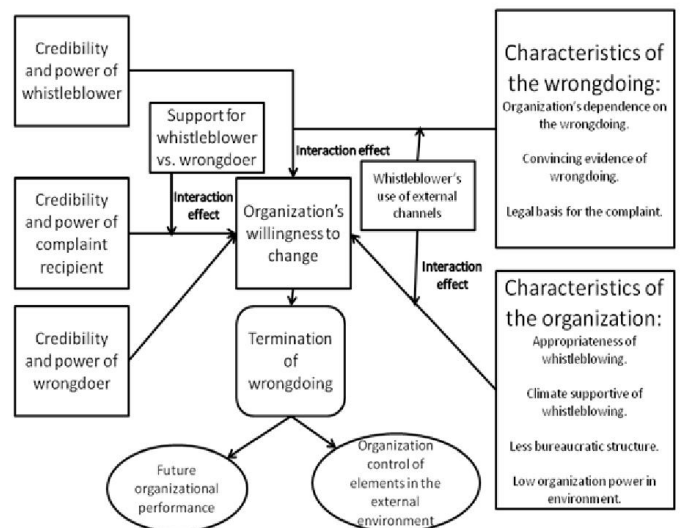
**Bystander intervention model:** This model arose out of a study conducted by Latane and Darley (1970) as a result of a murder that was committed in 1964 which some 38 people witnessed but chose not to either intervene or report the matter. The study gave rise to the theory that the greater the number of people who witness an emergency incident, the greater the diffusion of responsibility and the less likely it will be that someone will intervene. Additional studies suggested that the larger the size of the group the further the accountability was dispersed reducing the individual cost of someone not acting (Fritzsche, Finkelstein, and Penner, 2000). In short, the theory

suggests that the more people contained in an organization, the less likely they are to blow the whistle due to the diffusion of responsibility.

**Ethical climate theory approach:** This approach has been described as a component of an organization’s ethical culture which helps to determine which issues or moral dilemmas organization members consider to be ethically significant or relevant and what criteria they should use to resolve them (Cullen, Parboteeah and Victor, 2003; Cullen, Victor and Stephens, 1989). The Ethical Climate model assists employees to identify moral issues which require attention and resolution (Latane *et al.*, 1970; Cullen, Victor and Stephens, 1989; Miceli and Near, 1992).

**Effective Whistleblowing**

Near and Miceli (1995), introduced this concept by insisting on the ultimate goal of whistleblowing which is the extent to which the questionable or wrongful practice (or omission) is terminated at least partly because of whistleblowing and within a reasonable time frame. They developed a model containing two sets of variables related to whistleblowing (1) individual variables associated with the characteristics of the (whistleblower, complaint repentant, and wrongdoer) and (2) situational variables related to the characteristics of the (wrongdoing, and organization). (Figure 1) combined the two sets of variables.



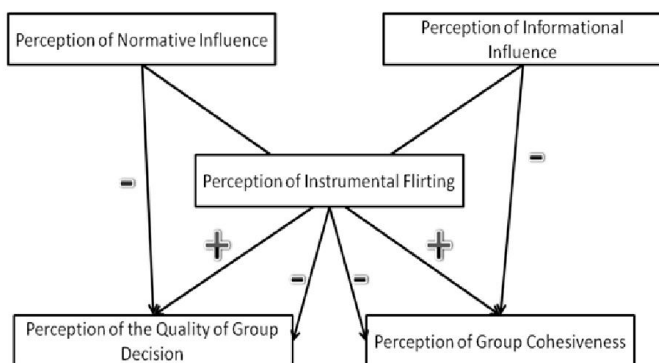
Source: Combined from Near and Miceli (1995) through Gao, J., Greenberg, R., and Wong-On-Wing, B. (2015).

**Figure 1. Effective Whistleblowing Model**

**Group Decision Making**

Henningsen and Henningsen (2014), examined the social influence processes in organizational and business settings focusing on (1) informational influence and (2) normative influence (Kaplan, 1998), its effects on (1) group quality of decision and (2) group cohesiveness, and introducing a new factor -that can't be assigned as either informational or normative influence- named instrumental flirting (Figure 2). Informational influence represents an attempt to change the

attitudes or behaviors of other group members based on their desire to make the best decision possible by implementing logical argument, facts and evidence indicating why some various alternatives are stronger or weaker than others relying on data and evidence to support a high-quality decision alternative (Kaplan, 1998). Normative influence on the other hand, reflects an attempt to change the attitudes or behaviors of other group members based on these members' desire to belong to the group by indicating what behavior or attitude is desired by a majority of the group members and illustrating that resistance to those desires may lead to social disapproval or ostracism while compliance with them will lead to acceptance and belonging relying on indicating what group preferences are and the advantages of going along (Kaplan, 1998). Quality of group decision relates to the group effectiveness in achieving its goals. Group cohesiveness relates to the commitment of group members to their group. The use of informational influence was proven to have a positive effect on group-decision quality while the use of normative influence negatively affects it (Kelly, Jackson and Hutson-Comeaux, 1997; Kaplan and Miller, 1987; Reid, Ball, Morley and Evans, 1997). Group cohesiveness defined by Cartwright (1968) as "the result of all forces acting on all the members to remain in the group". This includes the feeling of belonging that a member has for his/her position in the group (Limon and Boster, 2003). The normative influence here is based on the group member's desire to belong to the group (Kaplan, 1989) while informational influence is based on asserting the superiority of a member's position over another's damaging cohesiveness which will negatively affect group cohesiveness (Henningesen, Henningesen, Cruz and Morrill, 2003) but no other studies addressed this issue or supported it. Instrumental flirting is performed to get another person to do a task for the performer rather than for sexual motivation, which is more common in workplace than in social settings (Henningesen, Braz and Davies, 2008).



Source: inferred from Henningesen and Henningesen (2014).

Figure 2. Group Decision Making Influences

### Whistleblowing as a Group Decision

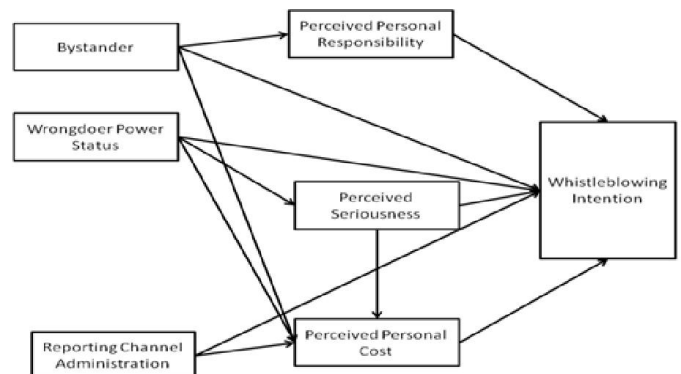
It is the goal of the author to merge the findings of the previous two titles to investigate whistleblowing as a group activity. Being an undiscovered area (Kaplan, 2015), this study could be the first port to explore group whistleblowing and attract the attention of different scholars towards this new area. It may open the path for more discoveries on the group level. From practical perspective, it will help organizations to better

understand a new level of whistleblowing to deal with it as it see appropriate. Whistleblowing isn't the result of an individual decision only anymore, it can also be the result of a group decision. This is possible if applying the influencing characteristics of group decision making on the elements of whistleblowing intention borrowed from Gao, Greenberg and Wong-On-Wing (2015) for lower-level employees. In the following part, the author will propose a model of whistleblowing intentions from a group perspective making it no more a mere whistleblowing intention but a "Collective Whistleblowing Intention". The model will include all the possible constructs, the hypotheses relating them together, and the issues related to measurement and implementation.

### A Model of whistleblowing intention as a result of a group decision

#### Individual Whistleblowing Intention Model

Gao, Greenberg and Wong-On-Wing (2015) developed a hypothetical model illustrating the process for whistleblowing intention to lower-level employees (Figure 3). From the previously discussed approaches and models of Whistleblowing intentions, this model is focusing mainly on *bystander* intervention model by assigning the bystander presence as a whole independent variable along with prosocial and ethical climate perspectives and ethical decision model associated with it, power approach by addressing the power of the wrongdoer as an independent variable of the model along with the administration of the whistleblowing channel, and the justice approach by focusing on the intention as a dependent variable.



Source: Gao, Greenberg and Wong-On-Wing (2015).

Figure 3. Lower-Level Whistleblowing Intention

Applying the power approach of whistleblowing intentions, wrongdoer power and administration of reporting channels were independent variables. It was concluded that whistleblowing intention will increase if the reporting channel was externally administered to assure personal and psychological safety from retaliation (perceived personal cost). Wrongdoer power status on the other hand was proven to decrease the intention of whistleblowing unless the reporting channel was externally administered with some consideration of perceived seriousness and personal cost. The presence of bystanders can directly affect whistleblowing intention or be mediated by the perceived personal responsibility (prosocial

and ethical approach) or personal cost. It was stated earlier that the responsibility and feeling of guilt will be less as it will be shared among the bystanders, but a recent study by Robinson, Robertson and Curtis (2012), concluded the opposite effect and that the intention of whistleblowing will increase. All in all, the model concluded that whistleblowing intentions are higher when the reporting channel is administered externally than internally and that the externally-administered reporting channel cover the negative effect of bystanders on whistleblowing intentions. Since whistleblowing intention is understudied in this paper from a group perspective, it will be treated as a group decision and studied through the lenses of group decision-making including the social influences affecting it.

## The Major Independent Variables

### Bystander vs. Group Member

A witness of a wrongdoing along some others, is a bystander unless he bear the intention of blowing the whistle together with other witnesses. This will make them a group and turn them into group members with a whistleblowing intention. This constitute the first hypothesis

**H1:** witnesses of a wrongdoing are bystanders unless they harbor the intention of whistleblowing.

### Wrongdoer Power Status

Based on the whistleblowing intention model by Gao, Greenberg and Wong-On-Wing (2015), power status of the wrongdoer must be included as a main independent variable affecting the collective whistleblowing intention of the group negatively. This make the second hypothesis be

**H2:** the higher is the power status of the wrongdoer, the lower will be the collective whistleblowing intention.

### Reporting Channel Administration

Externally administered reporting channel was associated with higher individual whistleblowing intention compared to internally administered channels. No evidence were found to prevent the assumption that collective whistleblowing intention will be also associated with externally administered reporting channels. This make the third hypothesis be

**H3:** externally administered reporting channels will encourage the collective whistleblowing intention.

## The Influential Variables

### Perception Of Whistleblowing Group Cohesiveness

With collective whistleblowing intention as the decision and based on the arguments presented by Henningsen and Henningsen (2014) about the perception of social influence in group decision making in workplace, group cohesiveness should be considered in this study of collective whistleblowing intention along with the other constructs. The more cohesive is

the group, the higher will be the unity of decision to blow the whistle. So, the fourth hypothesis can be stated as:

**H4:** the group's perception of its cohesiveness will increase its intention of collective whistleblowing.

### Perception of The Quality Of Whistleblowing Group Decision

Taking into the group's consideration the different odds related to group's collective whistleblowing intention, it is possible to conclude that higher quality of group decision will be positively related to the collective whistleblowing intention since it considered the many possibilities relative to the decision. So, the fifth hypothesis can be stated as:

**H5:** the group's perception of the quality of its collective decision will increase its intention of collective whistleblowing.

### Perception of The Normative Influence On The Collective Whistleblowing Intention

Since normative influence is negatively related to the group's quality of decision. It should also be assumed that the results of the collective whistleblowing intention will be negatively related to the normative influence especially when the possibility of retaliation against the group is high. However, the normative influence can be positively related to the collective whistleblowing intention decision when the perceived group cost is low (lower power of wrongdoer and/or externally administrated reporting channel). Thus, the sixth hypothesis can be stated as:

**H6:** the group's perception of the normative influence on it will increase its intention of collective whistleblowing, unless the perceived group cost is low.

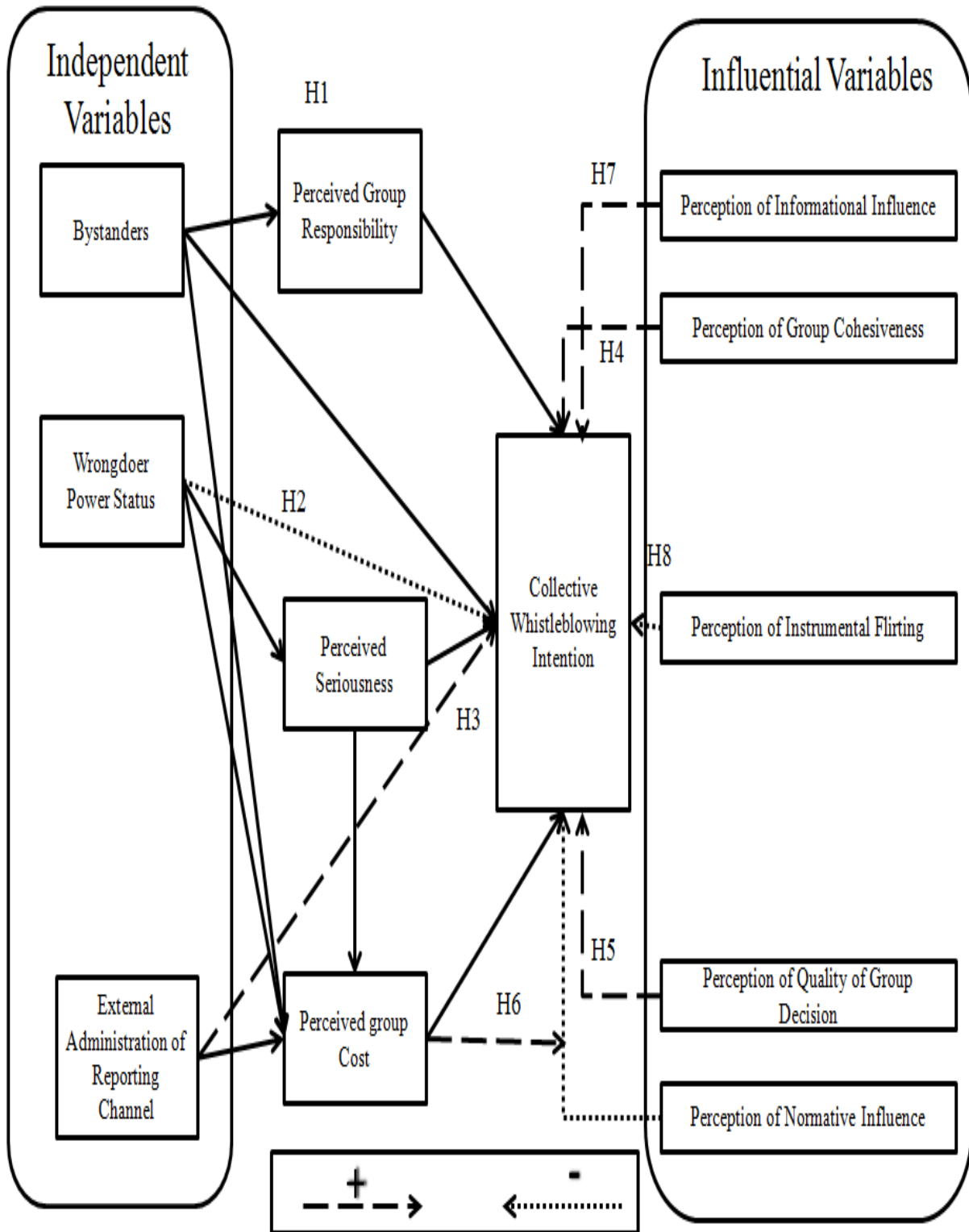
### Perception of The Informational Influence Of The Collective Whistleblowing Intention

Collective whistleblowing intention will be positively related to the informational influence even if the possibility of retaliation is high. In most cases, individuals are willing to accept any punishment as long as he/she won't betray its group. So, the seventh hypothesis can be stated as:

**H7:** informational influence on the group will be positively related to the collective whistleblowing intention of the group especially when the ethical moral is high.

### Perception of Instrumental Flirting During Collective Whistleblowing Decision

Since instrumental flirting is negatively related to both group cohesiveness and group's decision quality, as it causes many distractions to the members and their unity. It is only natural to assume that it will be negatively related to collective whistleblowing intention. Thus, the final hypothesis can be stated as:



Source: Combined from: Near & Miceli (1995), Henningsen & Henningsen (2014), and Gao, Greenberg & Wong-On-Wing (2015).

Figure 4. A Model of Whistle blowing Intention As A Result Of A Group Decision

**H8:** instrumental flirting during the decision making process will be negatively related to the group's collective whistle blowing intention.

**Conclusion**

People and organizations involvement in an illegal act often occurred either intended or not.

However, individuals inherently feel the desire to report wrongdoing especially if it harms the human welfare. Interesting topics such as whistleblowing can't stop being the subject of exploration to the business field. In this paper, whistleblowing was approached for the first time –probably- through the lenses of a group. Externally administered operating channels increases the intention of the collective

whistleblowing in the organization and the same goes with lower power status of the wrongdoer and the absence of bystanders. Collective whistleblowing intention increases in cohesive groups. The use of informational influence increases possibility of collective whistleblowing intention while the use of normative and instrumental flirting influences will decrease it. The findings of this paper are of significant importance to the organizational behavior and theories. It moved the concept "whistleblowing" to a new level (group level) making it worthy of further investigation. It also paved the path for moving other previously individual level concepts to higher levels (group or organizational levels). Future works may apply the same group decision making model by Henningsen and Henningsen (2014) on other individual forms of actions such as information leakage, complains, or other forms of decision based actions. Findings also support the possibility of investigating collective whistleblowing decision on an organizational level. Future works may theorize a model of collective organizational whistleblowing decision to expose the hidden facts about its industries.

This may also catch the attention of scholars in the organizational ethics and CSR. The proposed model may focus the attention on bystanders to place them under study organizationally. Future works may focus the attention on a method to transform bystanders into whistleblowers. These many opportunities are not without limitations however. The proposed hypotheses need empirical testing in real life context to ascertain the propositions. It is possible theoretically to assess the collective whistleblowing decision but how can this be applied practically. To fully approve the proposed model, practical implication is required. Future works may depend on the method followed by (Gao, *et al.*, 2015) in their effective whistleblowing model and include measurements of the group decision model factors to achieve this goal. Similar approach maybe followed on organizational level as well. Regardless of the many limitations this paper may help practitioners to pay more attention to whistleblowers and their CSR. It encourages them to direct efforts towards bystanders and encourage a positive whistleblowing environment. Practitioners are advised to pay attention to third party reporting channels for whistleblowers. It is recommended for them to pay more attention to groups within their organizations by enhancing the factors that encourage the unity of the collective whistleblowing decision within groups or discourage it if it is not in the favor of the organization. Collective whistleblowing -though hard to occur- is actually possible. This notion is a considerable contribution to the literature of organizational behavior, business ethics, and corporate social responsibility.

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