

Acquiescent Non-whistleblowing: Exploring the causal mechanisms

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Abstract

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Summary:

As the organisations move towards a more competitive world, remaining ethical in the face of challenges is becoming more difficult. Despite the detrimental impact of non-reporting of wrongdoings in organisations, the identification of reasons for non-whistleblowing other than fear of retaliation remains scant. In this study, we explore resignation based non-whistleblowing termed as acquiescent non-whistleblowing. Using 34 in-depth interviews of working professionals and a grounded theory approach, we propose a framework to understand why employees do not report wrongdoings out of a sense of resignation and disengagement. The study unpacks the interaction between organisational systems and supervisors, and the cognitive processes of the employees that result in the failure in reporting wrongdoings, despite existence of formal mechanisms in organisation for whistleblowing. The study identifies the combined effect of compliance or commitment based organisation systems and the influence of leadership style in shaping the cognition of employees resulting in acquiescent non-whistleblowing.

Keywords: Learned Helplessness, Moral Disengagement, Leadership, Organisation system, Acquiescent non-whistleblowing

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Introduction

While research on whistleblowing, its antecedents and outcomes has been of growing interest to the scholars (Valentine and Godkin, 2019), lesser attention has been paid to the phenomenon of non-whistleblowing and the different barriers that prevent employees from reporting wrongdoings in their organisations. The focus of the research area has been on identifying the different factors that encourage and motivate whistleblowing. Culiberg and Mihelic (2017) give the two central focus of this stream of research: the whistleblower themselves and the action of whistleblowing as a decision-making process. The task of whistleblowing is not easy, it involves a consideration of the positives and the negative impacts that are caused and involves a complex process of ethical decision making (Latan, Chiappetta Jabour, and Lopes de Sousa Jabbour, 2019). More often, people choose not to blow the whistle and not be involved. Despite being detrimental to the organisation, non-whistleblowing remains understudied. We study non-whistleblowing using the employee silence literature.

Borrowing from the literature of employee silence (Morrison and Milliken, 2000; Pinder and Harlos, 2001; Kiranne et al. 2017), when a person has relevant information on an organisational wrongdoing of illegal, immoral or illegitimate nature, but chooses not to disclose the same to relevant authorities, that is not blow the whistle, it is a form of employee silence. Given the ethical nature of the information withheld, this silence of the employee can be also understood as ethical silence. Whistleblowing is tied to ethical decision-making (Valentine and Godkin, 2019) and from that perspective as well, non-whistleblowing is a failure to take ethical decision.

Studies on organisational silence have highlighted how employees keep silent in instances when their voice is required (Kish-Gephart, Detert, Trevino and Edmondson, 2009) in the organisation. Starting from the work by Pinder and Harlos (2001) focusing on employee-level silence, developing in the past two decades by the work of various scholars (Milliken, Morrison and Hewlin, 2003; Van Dyne, Ang and Botero, 2003; Tangirala and Ramanujam, 2008; Brinsfield, 2013; Whiteside and Barclay, 2013; Xu Loi and Lam, 2015; Kiewitz et al., 2016; Guo et al. 2018), research in this field has focused on different factors associated with silence, its antecedents and outcomes. The studies have also attempted to classify silence as a multidimensional construct, based on the underlying motives of silence (Pinder and Harlos, 2001; van Dyne et al. 2003; Brinsfield, 2012; Knoll and van Dick, 2013). When the underlying motive of silence is fear, this form of silence is called quiescent silence or defensive silence. This form of silence is active and is guided by the fear that the employees speaking up will result in negative consequences for them. This is similar to the fear of retaliation in the whistleblowing literature which has been studied as a factor that prevents whistleblowing (Mesmer-Magnus and Visweswaran, 2005). Another motive of silence is passive withholding of information by the employees, acquiescent silence (Pinder and Harlos, 2001). The motive is guided by resignation and submission, and low self-efficacy in making a difference. The employee believes that speaking up will be futile and not lead to any actual outcome.

Iwai et al. (2021) highlight the question of what leads some individuals to blow the whistle and others do not. Borrowing from the literature of silence, we can understand that fear of negative consequence is but one motive of silence. Morrison and Milliken (2000) suggested that employees are more likely to voice concerns if they feel that doing so will lead to some actual result and remedy (Milliken et al., 2003). If organisation silence reinforces the belief that speaking up will be futile, employees develop a state of learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975, Miller and Seligman, 1975), which may lead to apathy and withdrawal. This form of silence is called acquiescent silence. Prior research has focused more on the conditions and factors that help the employees whistleblow, but not on why people suppress the information and are unwilling to report organisational wrongdoings. When it comes to non-whistleblowing, the primary reason that has been studied is fear of retaliation, which comes under quiescent non-

whistleblowing. Much work has been done on fear of retaliation (Bergemann and Aven, 2023; Lagios, Restubog, Garcia, He and Caesens, 2023; Mayer, Nurmohamed, Trevino, Shapiro and Schminke, 2013; Mesmer-Magnus and Viswesvaran, 2005). Focus on other motives of non-whistleblowing, especially acquiescent non-whistleblowing is absent, to the best of our knowledge. The scope of the current study is limited to non-fear based motives for non-whistleblowing. This study fills in this gap by trying to understand the reasons, factors and other associated characters with Acquiescent Non-whistleblowing. This is done from the lens of Social Cognitive Theory, which explains psychological functioning in terms of triadic reciprocation causation (Bandura, 1986). In this model, internal personal factors like cognition, emotion, etc., behaviour and environmental events all operate by interacting and influencing each other bidirectionally (Bandura, 1999). Individuals learn and gather knowledge from their environment through observation and extract rules by using their cognitive capabilities which dictate their behavioural patterns. The environmental signals in an organisation and the cognitive processes of an employee may generate a sense of 'learned helplessness,' which is also represented in acquiescent silence (Whiteside and Barclay, 2013; Knoll et al. 2021). Hence, the lens of social cognitive theory is suitable for understanding the behaviour of acquiescent non-whistleblowing where the decision to not blow the whistle is influenced by the belief that there will be no effective outcome or change in the situation. According to SCT (1999), individuals learn by observing the positive and negative outcomes of their as well as other's actions, especially role models like their leaders or supervisors. When performing an activity, they form ideas about what leads to what, predict occurrences, judge from the results and change their course of action accordingly. When they see their reporting of wrongdoings or drawing attention of the relevant authorities towards something is not resulting in the desired positive outcomes, they may judge it to be ineffective and hence, choose to not whistleblow in the future.

Several environmental factors that affect silence have been studied. Some of the factors include leader aggressive humor (Wei, Shan, Wang, and Zhu, 2022), leader narcissism and trustworthiness (Hamstra et al. 2021), job control and organisational identification (Hassan, DeHart-Davis, and Jiang, 2019), abusive supervision and LMX (Xu, Loi and Lam, 2015). In their study, Wang and Hsieh (2014) found that perceived ethical climate of an organisation moderated the influence of psychological contract breach on acquiescent silence. Similarly, Whiteside and Barclay (2013) that organisation justice is a significant predictor of acquiescent and quiescent silence. However, a deeper and singular focus on acquiescent non-whistleblowing is missing, majorly fear has been the primary focus of research. The current study contributes towards this gap, and we try to understand acquiescent silence more deeply. The study tries to find out the reasons that contribute towards resignation and acquiescence, the various emotions and cognitions associated with the same. We study acquiescence silence from the lens of social cognitive theory and try to understand how moral disengagement and learned helplessness maybe a mechanism of acquiescent non-whistleblowing. Understanding the same helps us in tackling the issue at its root.

This study makes a key contribution by studying non-whistleblowing as an outcome of resignation and/or disillusionment instead of fear. Organisational silence literature identifies fear (quiescent) and resignation (acquiescent) based silence as two types of silence (Pinder and Harlos, 2001; Dyne, Ang and Botero, 2003; Whiteside and Barclay, 2013; Brinsfield, 2012; Knoll and van Dick, 2013). Most of the studies on (non) whistleblowing have focused on fear as the major force against whistleblowing, which indeed it is. However, non-whistleblowing resulting from acquiescent (resignation based) silence has not been studied, to the best of our knowledge, we study non-whistleblowing as acquiescent based silence and the factors responsible for it.

Theoretical Underpinnings: Acquiescent Non-whistleblowing

Social Cognitive Theory by Bandura (1986) indicated that human behaviour can be understood by reciprocal systems of causality of behaviours, environmental factors and personal characteristics, and cognition. The interactional model of causation states that “environmental events, personal factors, and behaviour all operate as interacting determinants of each other. Reciprocal causation provides people with opportunities to exercise control over their destinies as well as set limits of self-direction (Bandura, 1986, p. xi; Heffernan, 1988). Because of bidirectionality, people are both the product and the producer of their environment. Three aspects of social cognitive theory are especially relevant to organisational context (Bandura, 1988d, Wood and Bandura, 1989). These are the development of people’s cognitive, social and behavioural competencies through mastery modeling, the cultivation of people’s beliefs in their capabilities and the enhancement of people’s motivation through goal systems. People can expand their knowledge and skills, not only through direct learning, but also vicarious learning. People learn through observing other people’s behaviours and the consequences of their actions. They are more likely to adopt strategies that result in valued outcomes, rather than unrewarding or punishing effects. Employees should be more encouraged by the successes of others, while they can get discouraged from pursuing behaviour that they have seen being punished or those that have had adverse consequences. Modeling influences convey rules for generative and innovative behaviour. This is abstract modeling through which observers extract rules governing the specific judgments or actions exhibited by others (Wood and Bandura, 1989). People learn about the appropriateness, usefulness, and consequences of behaviours through their observations and interactions with others (Schunk and Usher, 2012). By interacting with others in the organisation, the employees pick up which behaviours are appropriate and are rewarded, and which behaviours are taken in a negative manner and can be target of negative consequences or punishments.

Bandura (1999) extended the Social cognitive theory to develop moral disengagement. According to this, moral reasoning translates into actions through self-regulatory mechanisms. These mechanisms include an internal moral standard and self-monitoring which guide individual’s good behaviour and prevent bad behaviour. People anticipate, monitor and judge their own actions based on this internal moral standard. Hence the moral self is a part of the broader, socio-cognitive self-theory involving self-organizing, proactive, self-reflective and self-regulative mechanism. Individuals usually behave in a way which is consistent with their internal standards. However, according to Bandura (1999), this self-regulatory mechanism can be activated or deactivated selectively, and moral disengagement is the key process for this deactivation. It frees the individuals from their self-sanctions and the guilt associated with violations of internal standard. This leaves the individuals free to make unethical decisions. Some moral disengagement techniques include diffusing responsibility, displacing responsibility, blaming the victim, or justification (Trevino, Nieuwenboer, and Kish-Gephart, 2014).

Whistleblowing has been tied to ethical decision making (Valentine and Godkin, 2019). Non-whistleblowing is a failure to take an ethical decision. The same lens of social cognition is applicable on non-reporting of wrongdoings by employees. Employees can morally disengage from the decision and hence fail to make the ethical decision. In the employees’ minds, whistleblowing may lead to negative appraisal, jeopardizing career, loss of job or even persecution (Cheng, Bai and Yang, 2019). Because of these possible adverse outcomes, potential whistleblowers may choose to remain silent. However, in the study of silence in organisation, Pinder and Harlos (2001) found two major reasons for employees keeping silent. The form of silence stemming out of fear is quiescent silence. But another form of silence is acquiescent, where employees passively withhold relevant information because of resignation

and submission. Because they feel low self-efficacy in making a difference, they choose to remain silent.

Moral disengagement has been found to predict unethical decision-making and is itself predicted by factors like empathy, trait cynicism, chance locus of control and moral identity of an individual (Detert, Trevino and Sweitzer, 2008). Moore et al. (2012) found that moral disengagement is positively related to unethical behaviours including self-reported and reporting of others' behaviour. Shu, Gino and Bazerman (2011) found that when given a chance to cheat or act unethically, they justified their dishonest deeds through moral disengagement and exhibited motivated forgetting. Moore et al. (2012) found in their studies that the propensity to morally disengage is a significant predictor of organisationally unethical behaviour. Chen, Chen and Sheldon (2016) identified that employees engage in unethical pro-organisational behaviour through the mediation of moral disengagement. Contrarily, Liu, Lam and Loi (2012) found that ethical leadership leads to reduced unethical decision-making by reducing the exercise of moral disengagement amongst employees. These studies suggest that moral disengagement is related to unethical decision-making such that people engage in unethical decision-making by disengaging morally from the situation.

While research focus on whistleblowing have garnered much attention (Near and Miceli, 1985; Cassematis and Wortley, 2013; Mesmer-Magnus and Viswesvaran, 2005; Dalton and Radtke (2013), Bhal and Dadich, 2011), it can be noted that studies on non-whistleblowing have been less. It should be focused on more like silence that has only recently gained attention as separate from voice behaviour (Sherf et al. 2021). Additionally, the major reason for non-whistleblowing has been considered fear of retaliation and the other negative consequences associated with it. Amongst the reasons that have been studied so far, fear of retaliation is the primary negative consequence for whistleblowing and reason for non-reporting of wrongdoings (Mesmer-Magnus and Viswesvaran, 2005; Zhang, Chiu, and Wei. 2009; Cheng, Bai and Yang, 2019; Lagios, Restubog, Garcia, He and Caesens, 2023; Mayer, Nurmohamed, Trevino, Shapiro and Schminke, 2013). According to the literature, whistleblowers are brave individuals who stand up for norms against the power of faceless organisations, risking personal sacrifice (Iliffe, 2002; Srivastava et al. 2023). When people do not whistleblow out of fear of retaliation, it is a form of quiescent non-whistleblowing.

When employees don't whistleblow because of resignation and submission, it can be understood as acquiescent non-whistleblowing. Focus on acquiescent non-whistleblowing is scant compared to fear of retaliation which takes a primary role because of the nature and risk involved in whistleblowing decision. Resignation, submission and low self-efficacy in making an actual difference prevents people from whistleblowing and not reporting the wrongdoings in their organisation. Acquiescent non-whistleblowing may also be a behavioural representation of learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975). Bandura (1977) extended his model of self-efficacy to learned helplessness (Maier and Seligman, 1976) in which it is assumed that being subjected to uncontrollable aversive events, organisms form the expectation that action don't lead to outcomes, and hence do not initiate behaviours. He proposed that people can give up trying because their actions do not translate to positive result or can be constantly punished.

When employees don't blow the whistle because of resignation and disillusionment, it can be understood as acquiescent non-whistleblowing. Focus on acquiescent non-whistleblowing is scant compared to fear of retaliation which takes a primary role because of the nature and risk involved in whistleblowing decision (Mesmer-Magnus and Viswesvaran, 2005). Resignation, submission and low self-efficacy in making an actual difference also prevents people from not reporting the wrongdoings in their organisation. Acquiescent non-whistleblowing may also be a behavioural representation of learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975). Bandura (1977) extended his model of self-efficacy to learned helplessness (Maier and Seligman, 1976) in which it is assumed that being subjected to uncontrollable aversive events,

people can give up trying because their actions do not translate to positive result or can be constantly punished.

Further, whistleblowing has its roots in individual reason and ethicality, and hence Valentine and Godkin (2019) posit that it is likely motivated by ethical decision-making which is similar to whistleblowing in its rational approach initiated by people's sensitivity to ethical issues and problems. As individuals become more aware of the ethical concerns (i.e., the unethical issues/behaviours experienced and/or the negative consequences associated with the same), they make ethical judgment, set an intention to respond accordingly, and take actions to alleviate the potential negative outcomes (Rest, 1986). The definition of whistleblowing has been broadened to include "moral whistleblowing" implying a moral aspect as employees report the wrongdoings out of a sense of moral duty (Watts and Buckley, 2017). Failure to whistleblow is an unethical decision-making.

Conjoining these two, when looked at acquiescent non-whistleblowing as an unethical decision-making, and through the lens of social cognitive theory, it is plausible that moral disengagement and learned helplessness may work as mechanisms for acquiescent non-whistleblowing. Social Cognitive Theory explains psychological functioning in terms of triadic reciprocation causation (Bandura, 1986, Wood and Bandura, 1989). When individuals learn from their environment that their actions will not lead to the desired outcome, they may resign to the situation and morally disengage resulting in non-reporting of wrongdoings. Using the two aspects of social cognitive theory, these two mechanisms can work together to make the employees of an organisation choose non-whistleblowing. Conceptually, this seems tenable. However, to the best of our knowledge, no work has been done for understanding acquiescent non-whistleblowing and its causal mechanisms. This study is an attempt to fill this research gap and understand acquiescent non-whistleblowing by the employees.

Methodology

This study aims to understand non-whistleblowing in organizations, focusing on acquiescence as the driving factor for non-reporting of wrongdoings by the employees. As mentioned earlier, the literature on acquiescence as a reason has drawn lesser attention than retaliation and fear-based reasons more often associated with whistleblowing. Towards this, this study uses a qualitative approach to understand the phenomenon. This method of inquiry is focused on capturing the experience of the individuals, expressed and captured in their own words and thoughts (Gioia et al., 2013). This approach assumes that the participants of the study are the experts and doesn't impose on them any prior construct.

Sample size and socio-demographic details of the participants

A total of 34 individuals participated in the in-depth interviews lasting 40-70 minutes. The respondents included professionals working in structured or bureaucratic organizations from various sectors like banking and finance, FMCG, Pharmaceuticals etc. (Table 1). The respondents were not in upper management of the organisation and hence, would not be able to bring policy level changes. They are all dependent on reaching out to their line managers, supervisors or an organisation reporting system for reporting wrongdoings. The interviews were conducted till saturation was reached, that is, till there was no valued addition to the subject.

Of the 34 participants, 21 were male while 13 were female. Although over 25 women were approached for the interview, only 13 consented. After getting consent from the participants, the researcher interviewed them according to their availability. Given the sensitive nature of subject, the participants were clearly communicated about freedom to withdraw from the interview or omit any information that they did not want to share.

The age of the participants ranged from 24 years to 36 years, while the average work experience of the participants was 4.3 years. Most of them have observed some form of wrongdoing happening around them in their career, whether driven from top-down or bottom-up. We tried to understand the reasons that drive them to report or not report the wrongdoings in their organisations. The interviews were conducted online, with full consent from the participants, and the average length of the interviews was 40-45 min. The interviews were semi-structured, consisting of open-ended questions, were conducted over a period of 6 months, audio recorded and simultaneously transcribed for data analysis.

TABLE 1 Interviewees' Profile

Interviewee code	Age	Gender	Experience (in years)	Sector	Job role
I1	30	M	6	Banking	Deputy Manager
I2	28	M	3.5	Consultancy	Senior Associate
I3	27	M	3.5	Multi-sector	Retail Vendor manager
I4	24	F	1	Multi-sector	Associate Product Manager
I5	30	M	6	Banking	Relationship manager
I6	27	M	3	FMCG	Engineer
I7	27	F	1	IT	Pre sales consultant
I8	27	M	1	Oceanery	Mechanical Engineer
I9	27	M	3	IT	Product marketing
I10	31	M	8	IT	Principal Consultant
I11	30	M	5	IT	Pre sales d.manager
I12	30	M	5	Banking	Deputy Manager
I13	26	M	2.5	Multi-sector	Strategy
I14	31	M	8	IT Services	Consultant
I15	27	M	3	Consultancy	Senior Associate
I16	25	F	3	Finance	Applied Analyst
I17	27	F	5	Multi-sector	Developer
I18	31	M	6	IT	Data Engineer
I19	26	M	3.5	Consultancy	Associate
I20	29	F	5	Research	Research analyst
I21	32	F	8	Real Estate	Strategy
I22	25	F	3	Plastic	Sales
I23	27	M	3	Consultancy	Product manager

I24	28	M	5	Consultancy	Product manager
I25	29	M	6	Pharmaceuticals	Sales
I26	26	F	3.5	Mining	Engineer
I27	27	M	4	Manufacturing	Sales
I28	29	F	4	Consultancy	Language head
I29	26	F	2	Consultancy	Analyst
I30	29	M	7	IT	Software developer
I31	31	M	6	Consultancy	Consultant
I32	30	F	4	Mental health	Researcher/counsellor
I33	36	F	9	Pharmaceuticals	Senior consultant
I34	27	F	4	Media and advertisement	Media Planner

Data Analysis and Results

The data was analyzed using a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006). To maintain the creditability of the data, it was managed and stored on MAXQDA. The first-order coding was also done using the same, to make data more manageable. In the grounded theory approach, first there is open coding with the interview data to understand the respondents' perception around wrongdoing and reasons responsible for acquiescent non-whistleblowing. This was done parallelly as the data was being collected. Along with the coding, we referred back to the literature to make sense of the data and refocus the coding. As themes emerged, going back to the literature helped us make sense of the data. As we did the second-order coding, the following five themes emerged from the analysis of the data as shown in Table 1.

TABLE 2 Representative Quotes Underlying Second-Order Themes

First Order Categories	Second Order themes	Aggregate dimension
Feeling effort is worthless	<u>Unable to change the circumstance</u> I1: After a certain point the feeling comes that is it even worth doing? Do I need, even need to take it up? Yes it bothers me personally, but will it even work even if I don't like it and even if there is a complaint about it, will it be even worth it.	Learned Helplessness
Feeling of not making a difference	<u>Unable to control the outcome</u> I5: "If something doesn't happen, then I have made no difference, right? My effort is in vain."	
	<u>Dissociation from the situation</u>	

Separating self from the wrongdoing	I3: Whatever happens, if this is not affecting you, then why to get into something which can complicate your life in the company.	Moral Disengagement
Feeling of indifference	<u>Apathy</u> I5: In the recent organisation, the transgressions are of similar nature and the reason for not reporting them now is mostly out of apathy. It makes no difference for me. I do not feel it is worth the effort to go to that length, to report it	
No external motivation for reporting wrongdoing	<u>Lack of support from management</u> I3: See, it's all about the work environment as well. So the foreign companies, they encourage their employees. So there is no encouragement here. When you get encouragement from your management. Something like this also gives you sort of a hope that if I do the right thing, management would be okay in the end, but if there is no encouragement you would not really assume that the management will be backing you on what you are doing, right? So that's why I feel like the environment and the encouragement from our employer are also important.	Compliance based organisation system
Employees not taking training seriously	<u>Rigid rules on training on whistleblowing</u> I26: No, even if the training was there, people were like they just start the training and leave it and whenever it is completed... yeah	
Presence of responsible authority to handle reports of wrongdoings	<u>Efficient management of whistleblowing</u> I21: I'm glad that there is a, there is this process in place where right tomorrow I see something, I don't have to think that whether I'm doing right or wrong or whether, I'm wasting my time, I can just go and have a conversation about it. And there is a qualified person sitting at the other end who kind of determines whether it needs to be taken further action. I mean there is a, there is a whole authority given to that person to take that judgment call, right. My conscience stays clear. Their conscience stays clear. Company knows what is happening inside. I think it's.. it's the perfect whatever.. (gestures) <u>Going extra mile to encourage</u>	Compliance and Commitment based organisation system

Repeated communication and measures for reporting wrongdoings	I21: What do I say.. strict when it comes to all of this. So we go through like.. we have like 5 to 6 employee resource groups through which all of these things are dealt with. Everything has a different agenda. All the resource groups are kind of different. I know exactly who's the owner of the resource group. Who can I reach out to? Who are the escalation 1, 2, 3, 4. The channels, you can reach out in person, you can reach out through Google meet, you can reach out through intercompany portals, everything, right. It is and it is spoken about, it is addressed in town halls. It's.. it's over communication, right? So you know that people will look down on you if you do something like this. (smiles) So it's.. it's fed that way, which I kind of appreciate. So here, it's exactly the opposite of what it was. Here they care too much to afford.	
Supervisor dismissing on basis of seniority/junior position Reporting to the supervisor as first point of contact	<u>Lack of consideration from the supervisor</u> I22: As I told you, my initial manager was not very like.. not very accommodating. So he used to tell me like, do you have so much experience as I was the young.. youngest one in the organisation. So he thought that if I am saying something, it doesn't matter much to the organisation as compared to if a more experienced person is saying something. <u>Trust on the supervisor</u> I5: If it is within my team or even outside my team, my first point of contact would be my immediate superior. Unless he's the point of concern. (laughs) So the first point of contact would be my immediate boss or reporting manager. Because over the past few years, two years, I'm grown to grow familiar with him, trust him.	Ethicality of the leader

Findings

The study provides valuable insights into how non-whistleblowing decision unfolds in employees. From these interviews, we learnt about the role of organisation culture and the big role it was playing – not only by giving an opportunity to report wrongdoing, but by also informally deciding what counts as wrongdoing and what doesn't. Most participants shared that as they started their career or job in their organizations with no apprehension of raising voice or reporting any wrongdoing that they come to observe. However, the response they received from their immediate supervisor played a major role in shaping their cognition. Respondent I6 mentions:

"So what happened that like whenever I confronted my manager about why we need to do it, is it really essential or something, he always kind of persuaded me in this understanding that it is essential for survival, for the company to work actually. "

As they point out, the supervisor persuaded the respondent that following a wrong practice was essential for the business and hence reporting wrongdoings is not essential. Similarly, respondent I22 recalls:

"I did report it to my manager. As I told you, my initial manager was not very like.. not very accommodating. So he used to tell me like, do you have so much experience as I was the young.. youngest one in the organization. So he thought that if I am saying something, it doesn't matter much to the organisation as compared to if a more experienced person is saying something"

This response from the supervisor resulted in them getting discouraged to report any wrongdoing and made them feel like they are not considered important because of their age and position, while those higher up in age and seniority were given more importance. As they add:

"So he used to, you know, overpower me over with the other, with the other colleagues. So that is why, like I tried to report it once or twice and then since it was not being listened, so I thought that let's go with the flow, since like it wasn't hampering my bonus (laughs)."

Response from the immediate supervisor plays a huge role in reporting of wrongdoings by the employees. While employees would choose not to speak up on getting discouraged by their supervisor even in organizations where formal mechanisms were present, organizations where supervisor were receptive of even the smallest feedback and wrong happening, employees felt more confident in reaching out to them. Respondent I30 mentions:

"And personally, for me, like for speaking terms of manager, personally for me what has been what the team has been feeling. I need to improve. So he set up that session and he posted the questions that okay, do come up with the points. Please speak up. If you don't speak up, I won't be able to read your mind. So I feel like there are faults in the people but they are trying to rectify. They are willing."

In the absence of a proper formal mechanism for reporting the wrongdoing, a supportive informal culture with supervisor helps the employees in speaking up and trying to correct the wrong. Respondent I23 noted how employees in the organization preferred speaking up informally more than following a formal reporting mechanism:

"In fact, the culture that we have here is rather than raise it up with the formal channel, we tend to point it point blank on the face of that person. That listen to me, this is wrong. This is what I feel and this is my stand on it. And people will take it very acceptingly."

Consistent rebuttal from organization and supervisor leads the employees to believe that reporting wrongdoings is useless as nothing will come out of it. Absence of any formal channel made it more difficult. Respondent I32 noted down how they gave up on trying to report:

“But over time we found that the director already knew about her. So we found it kind of futile that we were reporting it to her because if somebody's already knowing about the kind of conduct that person is displaying and yet they are OK with it, then that signal is a much larger problem. So we tried to do it a few times, but then that was also creating that expectation that we will be heard and then there would be some kind of change or action or some change like even if very small would happen was creating a lot of tension. So over time, we decided to like mind our own business.”

As they mention about the culture of the organisation:

“There have been no hurdles in talking to your manager or even the manager beyond. We work with circle leads across the globe and it's been very, very open. So that's one good thing about this organization. We don't have to hesitate before speaking about anything, holding anyone accountable for any action. However senior that person might.”

As analysis progressed, themes of learned helplessness and moral disengagement from the situation emerged depending on the different types of leadership and the organisation system in place. Respondent 1 mentions:

“Because at this point of time, it is unfortunate but I have stopped caring. I have stopped looking at these issues because if I start to think too much about them, then I will not be able to do my work.”

This comes from an organisation culture that was not effective in addressing the wrongdoings that were brought into the notice. As they also recall:

“There's too much interpersonal politics involved, so you have to speak to someone in a certain manner. You have to try to appease them and then only the work would get done”

A compliance based system in the organisation where there was no effective reporting channel that the employees were aware of and even the leaders were not listening, created a sense of helplessness in the employee. Respondent I21 recount their frustration:

“It just kind of felt that if nobody, if number one no channel, second nobody's going to going to take me seriously. Why am I wasting my time doing all of this. It just did not feel like.. OK, I'm just gonna do it and it will go somewhere and hit a dead end and come back.”

However, this scenario changed when they moved to an organisation committed towards ethicality in their actions and the leaders followed the same principals:

“It's.. it's over communication, right? So you know that people will look down on you if you do something like this. (smiles) So it's.. it's fed that way, which I

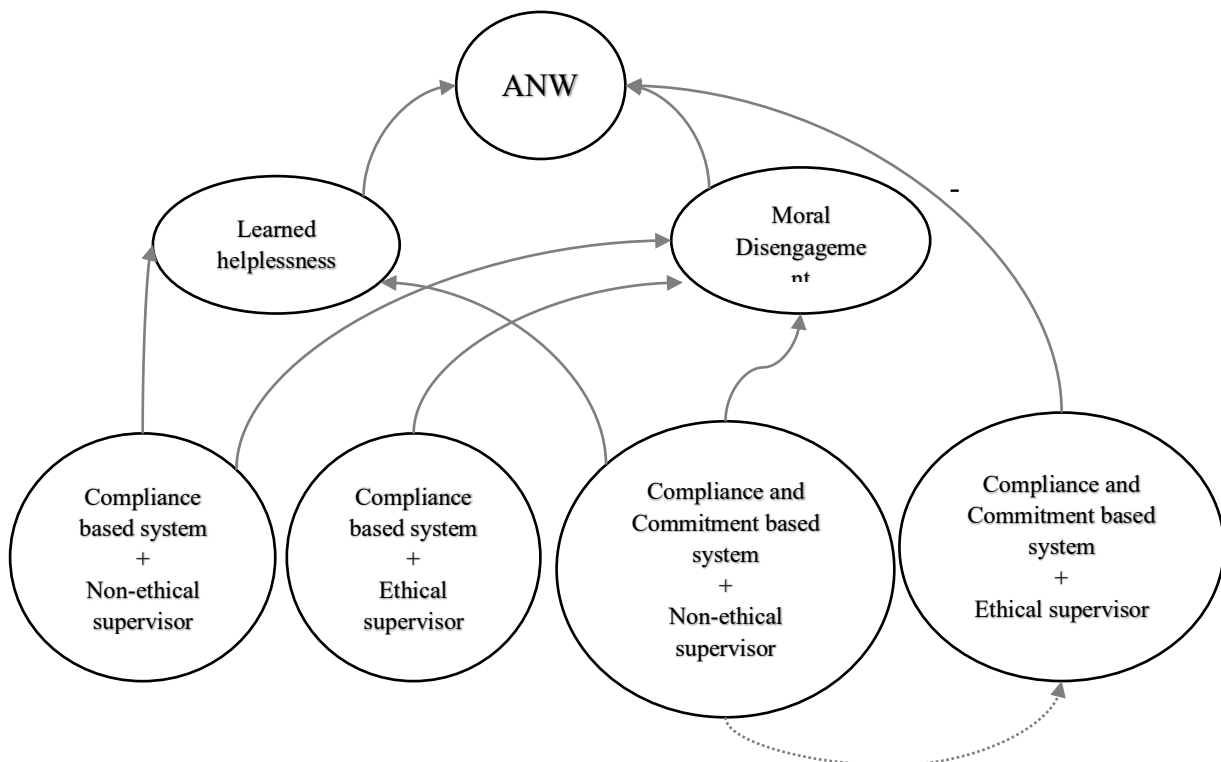
kind of appreciate. So here, it's exactly the opposite of what it was. Here they care too much to afford.”

This showed how the helplessness learned in one organisation changed on moving to a commitment based organisation system. This highlights how cognition was more externally driven than based on internal motivation.

Discussion and Conclusion

While Table 1 gives the main themes from the data, Figure 1 displays the relationship amongst these dimensions. Acquiescent non-whistleblowing can be understood as a failure to take ethical decision because of learned helplessness and moral disengagement from the situation, which are affected by the organisational and supervisor response to whistleblowing. Indeed, Social Cognitive Theory by Bandura (1986) indicated that human behaviour can be understood by reciprocal systems of causality of behaviours, environmental factors and personal characteristics, and cognition where all operate as interacting determinants of each other. Bandura (1999) extended the SCT to include moral disengagement. Acquiescent silence has also been seen as a behavioural representation of learned helplessness (Whiteside and Barclay, 2013; Knoll et al. 2021). The behaviour can be explained by the interaction of the organisation system and the leadership of the immediate supervisor.

FIGURE 1
A framework for Acquiescent non-whistleblowing (ANW)



Previous research has demonstrated the important role of organisation in whistleblowing (Rothwell and Baldwin, 2007; Miceli et al. 2012). In only compliance-based organisation system where the whistleblowing is based of compliance, rules and rigidity, the employees lack the push to blow the whistle, which is a difficult task in itself. When the

wrongdoing is justified as a part of the job, when all the other co-workers are compliant with the same, or most importantly, there is no real outcome of the reporting or importance given to the reporting, the mechanism of reporting in the organisation, all these lead the employee to believe that their effort to blow the whistle will be inconsequential and there will be no impact despite them having brought to the notice of the authority about the wrongdoing. The system along with the ethicality of leadership results in learned helplessness in the employees and they believe whatever they do, there won't be any point in whistleblowing. In case of non-ethical leadership when the supervisor neither supports nor directly discourages reporting, it also leads to moral disengagement in employees. On the other hand, if the supervisor is ethical, but the system is inefficient, it leads to only learned helplessness. The employees still reach out to their supervisor, even if they can't resort to formal mechanism. Liu, Lam and Loi (2012) found that ethical leadership leads to reduced unethical decision-making by reducing the exercise of moral disengagement amongst employees.

However, in commitment-based system, the organisation goes the extra mile from its end to ensure the employees are encouraged to report wrongdoings, by taking steps like presence of efficient channel, appropriate response to whistleblowing and ethical culture in organisation. Additionally, the data shows that even when the system is commitment-based, the support of the immediate supervisor in whistleblowing is crucial for the employee to go ahead with the reporting of the wrongdoing. If the supervisor's support is low, the employee feels demotivated to use the formal mechanism of reporting. But when both supervisor and organisation support is high, this leads to low ANW. In short, employees feel motivated to report wrongdoings. This is supported by literature as ethical leadership plays a crucial role in whistleblowing (Bhal and Dadhich, 2011; Cheng, Bai and Yang, 2019).

The present study helps us in unfolding the dynamics between organisational systems and leadership, as well as their relation with the personal factors, the individuals' cognition together resulting in acquiescent non-whistleblowing. Often overlooked, acquiescence is an important reason for non-whistleblowing. Understanding the same will help in fostering of approaches that eliminate the barriers to whistleblowing in organisations and failure to take ethical decisions. This helps in bringing about more ethicality in the organisations today which are moving towards more dynamic cultures and systems. Remaining true to business ethics helps the organisation in the long run, even as changes come in the organisation as workplace transforms in more competitive, more political and challenging times.

Theoretical and Practical implication

This study makes significant contribution to the existing literature of whistleblowing, by identifying the reasons that prevent the employees from reporting wrongdoings in the organization, particularly focusing on acquiescence as a form of non-whistleblowing. The study identified how the leadership of the manager and the system of the organization around whistleblowing can impact the decision. The salient contribution of this study is the framework that highlights the role of leadership of the supervisor and the organization system in establishing non-whistleblowing behaviour in the organization or encouraging reporting of wrongdoings. The interaction of the two factors plays a crucial role in giving signal to the employee whether it is acceptable to report wrongdoings and blow the whistle. The framework highlights the contribution of the literature on employee silence and ethical decision-making to non-whistleblowing behaviour of the employees. The findings put focus on employee moral disengagement and learned helplessness which ultimately results in acquiescence.

The study has implications for HR, management and leaders. It helps in understanding the triggers that lead to resignation amongst the employees and consequently, non-whistleblowing behaviour. The cost of non-reporting of wrongdoings can be very high for the organisations,

especially if the nature of the wrongdoing is grave in nature. The line managers should be open to listening to their employees and willing to extend support to the employees when they reach out with reports of wrongdoings. The management should be creating systems and channels for the employees, separate from their direct line of reporting, to reach out anonymously to report any misconduct or transgression that they might have observed around them. Encouraging reporting and taking actions on the said report, however small, signals the employees that whistleblowing is an acceptable behaviour. HR professionals can support the organization in forming policies and systems that are more conducive to whistleblowing behaviour.

Limitations and Future directions

Most of the participants were in their early or mid-career, with the average work experience being 4.3 years, data from senior professionals might show different results as it's possible that cynicism sets in with age and experience (the core of acquiescent non whistleblowing). Second, like all qualitative studies, this, too, is based on a smaller sample, which is appropriate for the study objectives but for generalizability, data from larger samples across different contexts needs to be collected. Finally, the study participants were limited to a single country, data from different cultures may be useful in establishing the cross-cultural validity of the results.

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