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Whistle-Blowing and the Code of Silence in Police Agencies

Policy and Structural Predictors

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This article reports the findings from a study that investigates predictors of police willingness to blow the whistle and police frequency of blowing the whistle on seven forms of misconduct. It specifically investigates the capacity of nine policy and structural variables to predict whistle-blowing. The results indicate that two variables, a policy mandating the reporting of misconduct and supervisory status, surface as the most consistent predictors of whistle-blowing. Contrary to popular belief, the results also show that police are slightly less inclined than civilian public employees to subscribe to a code of silence.

Keywords: *whistle-blowing; code of silence; police; procedural justice theory; structural functionalism*

Contemporary news stories and academic literature are saturated with anecdotal, descriptive, and theoretical references to a code of silence in law enforcement, a normative term that describes police reluctance to inform one another even in the midst of serious criminal wrongdoing (Crank, 1998; Kleinig, 1996; Skolnick, 2000; Skolnick & Fyfe, 1993). Weisburd, Greenspan, Hamilton, Williams, and Bryant's (2000) nationwide study reveals that 52.4% of police officers either agree or agree strongly that "It is not unusual for a police officer to turn a blind eye to improper conduct by other officers" (p. 5). Moreover, 61.0% either disagree or disagree strongly that "police officers always report serious criminal violations involving abuse of authority by fellow officers" (Weisburd et al., 2000, p. 5). Various studies and reports indicate that police are reluctant to inform one another

(Chemerinsky, 2001; Christopher, 1991; Punch, 1985; Ward & McCormack, 1987) and that many are willing to commit perjury to protect each other (Chin & Wells, 1998; Mollen Commission Report, 1994). Much of this research, though, tends to focus on publicly exposed, intentional corruption and conscious cover-ups of criminal acts rather than the more passive concept of mere silence in the presence of officer misconduct. None offers a comparison of police officers with employees in other occupations.

This article investigates the willingness and actions of police officers in the State of Georgia to report peer misconduct—in other words, their propensity to blow the whistle. It presents the results of a study that predicts police whistle-blowing from the perspective of nine contextual variables primarily reflecting different law enforcement policies and structures. It specifically investigates the capacity of organization size, number of officers, supervisory status, agency tenure, work group assignment, existence of a policy manual, a policy mandating the reporting of misconduct, presence of an internal affairs unit, use of polygraphs, and police status to affect whistle-blowing. Six of these variables investigated have never been empirically tested as explanations for whistle-blowing. This is also the first study of whistle-blowing attitudes and behaviors of police and the first study to investigate whether a code of silence is more common in police or civilian public agencies.

Police cultures that condone and exercise silence codes are said to place “loyalty over integrity” (O’Malley, 1997, p. 21). Any manifestation of this “blue wall” (Kleinig, 1996, p. 69) is detrimental to the public interest, as it undermines the respect and effectiveness of those sworn to protect citizens from lawless behavior. In an effort to protect one another, officers practicing a code of silence frequently damage innocent third parties, as well as the overall integrity of the justice system (Skolnick, 2002).

For police, citizen confidence is paramount because officers cannot function properly without input from a willing public (Stoutland, 2001). When trust is lost, law enforcement agencies can become ineffective and dysfunctional (Decker, 1981). Moreover, adherence to a code of silence is difficult to conceal and often reveals itself in scandal (e.g., Mollen Commission, 1994), making cooperative witnesses reluctant, receptive jurors wary, understanding judges suspicious, and the citizenry disillusioned.

Previous Research

Miceli and Near (1990) and Miethe and Rothschild (1999) assert that the profiles of whistle-blowers and silent employees are suspect because they

are based on research that fails to include an adequate number of whistle-blowers and nonwhistle-blowers. Moreover, the body of whistle-blowing research is based on case studies, individual agencies, and specific occupations. As a consequence, Miethe and Rothschild (1999) conducted a study involving interviews of employees from 292 workplaces nationwide, a survey of employees from six different organizations, and a reanalysis of U.S. Merit System Protection Board data from 13,000 federal employees across the country. Their study found that almost no sociodemographic characteristics distinguish whistle-blowers from nonwhistle-blowers. Near and Miceli (1996), in turn, conducted a review of the empirical research on the causes of whistle-blowing in organizations ranging from fast food restaurants to federal agencies to *Fortune* 1000 service and manufacturing firms. The findings from the 28 studies that they accessed indicate that both individual and situational/contextual variables explain whistle-blowing. However, situational variables explain more variation in whistle-blowing than do individual variables. They also found an absence of evidence indicating that whistle-blowers are different from individuals who observe wrongdoing but choose to remain silent. In light of these findings, three situational variables that explained whistle-blowing in previous studies—specifically, organization size, supervisory status, and tenure—are investigated here instead of sociodemographic and personality factors.

Organization Size

As organizations increase in size, they are more likely to have procedures that protect whistle-blowers from being treated unfairly (Miceli & Near, 1992). Available, known channels for reporting misconduct encourage employees to blow the whistle (Miceli & Near, 1984). Whistle-blowing also increases as organization size increases because maintaining a wide breadth of relationships in large organizations is more difficult. Whistle-blowing is less likely to threaten important work or personal relationships in large organizations. The empirical research also generally suggests that organization size is positively related to whistle-blowing (for reviews see Hooks, Kaplan, Schultz, & Poneman, 1994; Miceli & Near, 1992; and Near & Miceli, 1996).

Supervisory Status

Regulating employee behavior and enforcing standards are common responsibilities of supervisors. Moreover, given that role prescriptions

frequently require supervisors to report misconduct and supervisors are often held responsible for the misconduct of their subordinates, blowing the whistle is consistent with their role. Except for Dworkin and Baucus's (1998) and Miethe and Rothschild's (1999) research, studies (Jos, Tompkins, & Hays, 1989; Miceli & Near, 1984; Wenger, Korenman, Berk, & Liu, 1999) generally reveal positive associations between whistle-blowing and supervisory status.

Tenure

Employees with greater tenure are more likely to blow the whistle because they are usually more familiar with whistle-blowing procedures (Miceli & Near, 1992). More senior employees may also choose to blow the whistle instead of leaving an agency because they are closer to vesting or retirement (Miceli & Near, 1992). And, they may attempt to correct organizational problems through whistle-blowing because they possess high levels of organization commitment (Miceli & Near, 1992). Although studies reveal inconsistent support for an association between whistle-blowing and tenure (Jos, Tompkins, & Hays, 1989; Miceli & Near, 1988; Sims & Keenan, 1998; Singer, Mitchell, & Turner, 1998), tenure is included in this study because of the law enforcement–civilian distinction that it addresses and the strength of the contention that socialization into police culture that occurs over time contributes to the emergence of silence codes (Chin & Wells, 1998; Donahue & Felts, 1993; Skolnick & Fyfe, 1993).

Procedural Justice and Structural Functional Theory

A majority of the policy and structural predictors in this research reflect organization justice theory and more specifically *procedural* justice theory (Near, Dworkin, & Miceli, 1993; Victor, Trevino, & Shapiro, 1993). Although procedural justice theory has explained reactions to layoffs, pay inequities, performance appraisals, and nonmonetary rewards (Greenberg, 1990), Near, Dworkin, and Miceli (1993) suggest that organizations can also enhance whistle-blowing through creating mechanisms that increase perceptions of procedural justice. Lind and Tyler (1988) further assert that the self-interest model and the group-value model underlie procedural justice theory. Concerns about procedures reflect concerns about desired results that enhance self-interest. However, individuals also demonstrate concerns about procedural justice because fairness is in the interest of the

broader group good. Ultimately, four of the new variables investigated here—policy manual, mandatory reporting policy, polygraphs, and internal affairs units—should encourage whistle-blowing because they are mechanisms that enhance procedural due process.

Policy Manuals and Mandatory Reporting Policies

Policy manuals facilitate whistle-blowing by delineating types of misconduct and providing a readily accessible reference for clarifying rules, procedures, rights, and expectations. Because they help employees determine whether they are expected to report misconduct, how to report it, and the consequences of failing to report it, policy manuals are hypothesized to be positively associated with whistle-blowing. Mandatory reporting policies in turn lessen ambiguities about whether wrongdoing should be disclosed and create the sense that whistle-blowing is a duty and responsibility (Miceli & Near, 1992).

Use of Polygraph Examinations

Internal investigations can result in the discipline of both perpetrators and employees who fail to report misconduct. Knowing that a polygraph test might reveal their proclivities for silence, police officers are inclined to blow the whistle. When polygraphs are accessible, officers are also more likely to blow the whistle because they know that a polygraph test can reinforce the credibility of their allegations.

Existence of an Internal Affairs Unit

Near, Baucus, and Miceli (1993) assert that the enforcement of rules, correction of wrongdoing, and knowledge of channels to report misconduct facilitate blowing the whistle. In police agencies, these enforcement and correction responsibilities usually reside in internal affairs units. Consequently, the existence of an entity to investigate complaints—an internal affairs unit—should have a positive effect on whistle-blowing.

The existence of an internal affairs unit also reflects a structural–functional approach to explaining whistle-blowing, as do two other new variables investigated—work group assignment and police status (Hassard, 1993). Structural functionalism asserts that the structural elements of organizations, such as the functional division of labor, have functional and dysfunctional consequences that affect the operation of broader organization systems

(Thompkins, 2005). King (1999) specifically asserts that the characteristics of five of the most common organization structures—centralized, matrix, horizontal, hybrid, and divisional—affect the propensity of employees to either blow the whistle or remain silent. At the subsystem level of analysis, work group assignment and the presence or absence of an internal affairs unit reflect a division of labor that can affect one's propensity for silence. At the systems level, police agencies are structures that perform one of four functional imperatives identified by structural functionalism for the survival of social systems (Parsons & Smelser, 1956). This imperative is integration, or maintaining control. Maintaining control through taking criminals off the streets includes controlling rogue police officers through blowing the whistle. More tailored explanations for the impact of work group assignment and police status on whistle-blowing follow.

Work Group Assignment

“The occupational culture of integrity can vary substantially between precincts, task forces, and work groups” (Klockars, Ivkovich, Harver, & Haberfield, 2000, p. 2). Because patrol and investigative units are more likely to have unpredictable encounters with criminals and the public, encounters often result in actions that seem necessary at the time but are difficult to defend after the fact. Street-oriented patrol and investigative work groups are consequently more likely to maintain silence codes to ensure self-protection. Because officers involved in administrative or professional standards functions are charged with the enforcement of rules within an agency, they are more likely to report misconduct.

Police Status, the Code of Silence, and Whistle-Blowing

Working in a culture that often involves dangerous missions, a hostile public, a contemptuous media, and relentless scrutiny when they err, police possess an unparalleled need for loyalty, solidarity, and protection (Chin & Wells, 1998; Crank, 1998; Kingshott, Bailey, & Wolfe, 2004; Skolnick, 2002; Skolnick & Fyfe, 1993). Silence essentially is a means of “internal cohesion” necessary for solidarity and protection (Kappeler, Sluder, & Alpert, 1999; Manning 1997, p. 125). When “everyday events conspire against [police],” the code of silence ensures that other officers will act in accordance with their collective well-being rather than their personal self-interest (Crank, 1998, p. 226). Secrecy ultimately “protects line officers from oversight [and] it insulates them from the citizens who will not understand

police situational use of violence, treatment of assholes, and frequent violation of procedural guidelines” (Crank, 1998, p. 224). Whistle-blowing is rare because it threatens the solidarity and sense of oneness of police who feel victimized by a critical media, an intolerant general public, and a demanding police administration (Heck, 1992).

The need for loyalty and solidarity is exacerbated by situational uncertainty and unpredictable encounters sometimes involving violence and deadly force (Crank, 1998; Skolnick, 2000). Reciprocal silence is valued because in the heat of the moment, street cops must make immediate, personal decisions that they may later regret and want to keep quiet (Skolnick, 2000). Silence helps agencies avoid publicly embarrassing disclosures about “mistakes, misguided policies, [and] coverups” (Van Maanen, 1978, p. 319).

Many officers also feel that silence codes are necessary to perform their jobs efficiently and effectively. Silence allows police to overcome unrealistic requirements of judicial due process and excessive public accountability in performing their jobs (Crank, 1998). To catch a criminal, solve a case, resolve a dispute, or quickly control a threatening situation, cops cannot “rat” on each other every time a rule is compromised.

Similar to the military, fire departments, and Foreign Service, police departments are also career civil services that are closed systems in that they are self-governing with respect to personnel policies and decisions and, most notably, closed to outsiders except at the entry levels (i.e., lateral entry is restricted; Beigel, 1977; Mosher, 1982). Through the progressive planned development of officers, formal and informal norms of conformity, leaders who come from within the system, and the paternal nature of career services, these closed systems typically develop an esprit de corps; heightened loyalty; oneness; close identity with the department, unit, and colleagues; and a desire to protect the team and institution (Huberts, Lamboo, & Punch, 2003; Mosher, 1982; Skolnick, 2002; Skolnick & Fyfe, 1993, p. 112). Breaking silence is infrequent because doing so potentially challenges long-standing traditions and threatens the brotherhood and family-like institution that has made a special commitment to the careers of its employees (Chin & Wells, 1998).

The closed, silent culture of policing is also exacerbated by the tendencies of police officers to socially isolate themselves (Kingshott, Bailey, & Wolfe, 2004; Paoline, 2003, p. 203). Cops, like other swing-shift employees, often isolate themselves because working irregular hours insulates them from the 9-to-5 crowd, thus encouraging socializing with fellow cops (Crank, 1998; Kingshott et al., 2004). More importantly, the hostile and dangerous work environment, the prescription to be suspicious, the need to

maintain an edge, the coercive authority of police, the interdependence of police, and the professionalization of policing all contribute to a closed culture where cops remain loyal to and protective of one another through maintaining a code of silence (Chin & Wells, 1998; Paoline, 2003; Skolnick, 2000, 2002; Skolnick & Fyfe, 1993).

Silence is also observed out of fear of the consequences of violating the code. Consequences include being shunned, losing friends, having no one to work with, losing backup support, harassment, physical threats, permanent stigmatization, and exposure of one's own misconduct (Chin & Wells, 1998; Skolnick, 2000; Skolnick & Fyfe, 1993).

A variety of forces and incentives, however, work against the pressures to maintain the code of silence and even suggest that whistle-blowing may be more common in police agencies than in civilian agencies. Skolnick and Fyfe (1993) assert that the literature may exaggerate the code of silence as a result of high ethical expectations and intense media scrutiny of police. Silence codes may be just as prevalent in civilian agencies and other occupational areas that fly under the radar of the media and concerned citizens because they do not deal with such significant concerns as the use of deadly force, incarceration, the death penalty, and society's most deviant behaviors. Moreover, many pursue careers in policing because they desire to protect the public from criminals and to make a difference in society. Doing what is right and helping others are also fundamental needs of many police. Although civilian public employees may too have strong needs to help others, police are often attracted to law enforcement because of their respect for the law. Such desires and respects are antithetical to unethical behavior such as maintaining a code of silence.

Police also commonly experience role prescriptions that obligate them to report wrongdoing or face criminal prosecution and severe internal discipline. Near and Miceli's (1996) review of the empirical research concludes that employees are more likely to blow the whistle when it is a role responsibility. Victor, Trevino, and Shapiro (1993) specifically found that employees in a fast food restaurant were more inclined to blow the whistle when it was a role responsibility, and Miceli, Near, and Schwenk (1991) found that directors of internal auditing were less likely to report wrongdoing when it was not role prescribed. Miethé and Rothschild's (1999) nationwide interviews, in turn, revealed that individuals at times were motivated to blow the whistle because reporting wrongdoing was a job requirement. Moreover, Wren (1985) contends that whistle-blowing in police agencies would be even greater if it were role prescribed in the Law Enforcement Code of Ethics. In contrast to police, civilian employees typically experience fewer temptations to abscond with recovered money, to accept bribes

for turning a blind eye to crime, and to administer seemingly deserved street justice. Most civilian employees are consequently less likely to have prescriptions in their job descriptions that require them to blow the whistle.

Heck (1992, p. 256-263) asserts that police are inclined to “snitch” for less noble motives including retaliation for mistreatment by colleagues, the desire for administrative recognition, to prove one’s loyalty to the department, compensation for feelings of inadequacy, concerns about civil liabilities, and because they were recruited by the administration to snitch. Punch (1985, p. 156) reinforces that police can blow the whistle as a personal vendetta for being lied to, betrayed, hung out to dry, or “carrying the can” for another group. Whistle-blowing may also be part of a deal to avoid being fired or to receive immunity from prosecution. Punch (1985) further reports that given the public’s appetite for intriguing police stories, police have been known to break the code of silence to sell a story to the media.

Admission to a police academy approved by the Georgia Peace Officers Standards and Training Council (POST) depends on passing a criminal background investigation (Georgia POST Rules, 2002). Selection methods of police departments also often include additional background investigations, polygraph tests, and psychological evaluations. Through disqualifying applicants with records of misconduct, police departments in Georgia are able to select individuals who are less inclined to condone wrongdoing.

In basic training, police are also exposed to a mandatory curriculum that includes instruction on ethical behavior (Georgia POST, 2002). Ethics instruction is also incorporated into annual training required by POST and supervision courses certified by POST. Georgia police further swear an oath that they will enforce state laws and protect the state and federal constitutions, while learning that failing to blow the whistle on criminal behavior is a felony (Official Code of Georgia, 2002). Without such statutes, failure to report misconduct in the civilian sector is often punishable at worst through internal disciplinary actions. Ultimately, the ethics training and severe consequences for concealing misconduct are additional forces that should help counterbalance, if not exceed, the forces that encourage silence codes in police agencies.

Methods

Samples and Data Collection

A random sample of 300 police officers drawn from a list provided by POST of all 19,699 certified police officers in Georgia was surveyed.

The list was formatted in a Microsoft Excel file that allowed the sample of officers to be generated using the application's random number function. Once the names were secured, each selected officer's employing agency was contacted to obtain a correct work mailing address. This contact revealed that a few officers were no longer employed in law enforcement. These officers were replaced with randomly selected officers from the POST list. Three hundred civilian public employees in Georgia were also surveyed. This sample consisted of an equal number of employees from Georgia's state, county, and city governments.

One hundred state employees were randomly selected from the Georgia Merit System's telephone directory made public on its Internet site. Because lists of county and city employees for the entire state of Georgia do not exist, sampling frames from individual counties and cities were necessarily secured. To do so, all 159 counties and 535 incorporated cities in Georgia were first categorized into eight population ranges for counties and seven population ranges for cities. With the aid of a random number table, two cities and two counties from each population range were selected. The proportions of the Georgia population living in counties and cities in each range were also determined. The number of employees sampled from each selected county and city were then calculated on the basis of these proportions, after which sampling frames from the selected counties and cities were secured and employees were randomly selected with the aid of random number tables.

To ensure a high return rate, nonrespondents were sent a second copy of the survey, followed by a postcard reminder. Personal phone calls were then made to individuals still not responding. From the telephone calls it was determined that 40 persons no longer fit the parameters of the sample population because they had either died or were no longer Georgia public employees. Eleven respondents were also removed from the civilian sample because they identified themselves as sworn police officers. Of the remaining 547 individuals surveyed, 365 (66.7%), including 197 police officers and 168 civilian employees, returned surveys.

Measures

Dependent Variables

Willingness to blow the whistle and frequency of blowing the whistle were both measured. Willingness to blow the whistle was measured because some sample members may not have observed various forms of misconduct and

thus had limited opportunities to blow the whistle. Frequency of blowing the whistle was measured because of concerns about willingness to blow the whistle possibly not translating into actual whistle-blowing.

Moral intensity theory and empirical research generally suggest that the magnitude of the consequence of an offense is associated with whistle-blowing (Jones, 1991; Klockars, Ivkovich, Harver, & Haberfield, 2000; Miceli & Near, 1992; Near, Rehg, Van Scotter, & Miceli, 2004; Singer, Mitchell, & Turner, 1998). Consequently, to determine whether whistle-blowing varied according to the seriousness of the offense, willingness to blow and frequency of blowing the whistle on minor violations of policy, major violations of policy, misdemeanors, and felonies were measured. It was assumed that major violations and felonies have greater consequences and therefore a greater likelihood of being reported.

The measures of willingness to report minor violations, major violations, felonies, and misdemeanors involved four items soliciting inclinations to report this misconduct based on the response scale used in Klockars, Ivkovich, Harver, and Haberfield's (2000) Police Integrity Survey (see appendix, question I1). These items measure willingness to report misconduct on scales from 1 to 5, with 1 indicating low willingness and 5 indicating high willingness.

Willingness to report violations in 11 vignettes emulating those found in Klockars, Ivkovich, Harver, and Haberfield's (2000) Police Integrity Survey was also measured. The language of the vignettes in Klockars et al. (2000) was modified so that it applied to both police and civilian public employees. To conserve survey space, the excess verbiage in a majority of the vignettes was also removed (see appendix, questions I2, I3, and I4 for examples of the modified and original language). The vignettes place respondents in hypothetical situations in which they witness various acts of misconduct and are asked to indicate the degree to which they would report the illicit activities. Item responses were summed and averaged to obtain index scores for the vignettes.

To measure frequency of blowing the whistle, four questions that asked respondents to self-report how many times they have *witnessed* a coworker commit a minor violation, major violation, misdemeanor, and felony were administered (e.g., appendix, question I5). Four additional questions asked the respondents to report how many times they had *reported* minor violations, major violations, misdemeanors, and felonies (e.g., appendix, question I6). For cases where misconduct was observed, the number of times a respondent had reported each type of misconduct divided by the number of times they had observed that type of misconduct constituted each measure

of whistle-blowing frequency. However, regressions with frequency of reporting misdemeanors and felonies were not conducted because of insufficient observations of these violations.

Independent Variables

Respondents were asked if their agencies had a policy manual, a mandatory reporting policy, and an internal affairs unit. They were also asked if their agency used polygraphs and if they were supervisors (see survey questions in appendix, section II). The survey response categories for these questions were yes and no. Yes responses were coded as 1 and no responses as 0. To ensure that responses from individuals listed in the police sampling frame who may have retired or recently moved to the civilian sector were not analyzed, respondents were asked, "Are you employed now as a sworn law enforcement officer?" A yes response was coded as 1 and a no response was coded as 0 and excluded from the data analysis.

Tenure was measured as years as a police officer and years in one's agency of employment. To ensure interval-level data, open-ended questions requesting the number of years that respondents had been a sworn law enforcement officer and the number of years they had been employed by their current agency were asked (e.g., appendix, question II6). Agency size was measured as number of employees and number of sworn officers. The sample was also asked to respond to open-ended questions requesting the number of employees and number of sworn officers in their agency (e.g., appendix, question II7). To measure work group assignment, officers were asked to circle one of the following response options—patrol, investigative, administrative, or professional standards. Each of these selections was then turned into dummy independent variables. The work assignment that a respondent identified was therefore coded as a 1 and the other assignments were coded as 0.

To permit comparisons of respondents and nonrespondents, information in addresses was used to ascertain whether sample members were employees of police or sheriff's departments; city, county, state, or other government levels; and departments located in Atlanta. The authors also exercised personal judgments in determining by first name the gender of a majority of the individuals surveyed and contacted employers by telephone to determine the sex of individuals with gender-neutral names. Addresses and U.S. Census Bureau (2000a, 2000b) data were used to determine the populations of the cities and counties in which the sample members worked.

Findings

Table 1 indicates that, although a majority of the police respondents are non-supervisory, a substantial percentage of police with supervisory status responded to the survey. It also indicates that the police sample is comprised of a majority of officers from patrol units, followed by officers assigned to investigative, administrative, and professional standards units. Officers working in county government, in turn, are the plurality of respondents, but officers working in city and state government are also well represented. In contrast to the civilian respondents, the police respondents also have significantly ($p < .001$) shorter tenure at their current agencies, are significantly ($p < .01$) more likely to be county employees, and are significantly ($p < .01$) less likely to be state employees. In contrast to the police respondents, the civilian respondents are more evenly distributed between municipal, county, and state employment.

Table 1 further indicates that the police work in moderately large departments that overwhelmingly use polygraphs and have policy manuals, mandatory reporting policies, and internal affairs units. Moreover, the police are substantially more inclined than the civilians to work in agencies that utilize polygraphs and have policy manuals, reporting policies, and internal affairs units. Although more than 90% of the civilian respondents work in agencies that have policy manuals, only 23.2% work in agencies that utilize polygraphs. The civilians also work in agencies that are fairly evenly distributed between those with and without mandatory reporting policies and those with and without internal affairs units.

Finally, Table 1 indicates that police are more willing to report major violations than minor violations and more willing to report felonies than misdemeanors. Police report less than half of the minor violations that they witness; however, they report a majority of the major violations that they witness and are twice as likely to report major violations versus minor violations. Table 1 further indicates that police means for five of the seven measures of whistle-blowing are larger than civilian means for whistle-blowing. Police means for willingness to report misdemeanors and felonies are also significantly larger ($p < .01$) than the civilian means.

Table 2 indicates that a higher percentage of male officers failed to respond to the survey, as did a higher percentage of officers working in counties and departments located in Atlanta. However, statistical comparisons (chi-square tests) of respondents and nonrespondents indicate that only police officers employed by the counties were significantly ($p < .05$) less

Table 1
Respondent, Agency, and Dependent Variable Descriptives

| Variable | Police Sample | Civilian Sample | Combined Sample |
|---|------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Respondent descriptives | | | |
| % supervisors | 38.1 | 41.7 | 39.7 |
| Mean years at current agency | 8.3*** | 12.1 | 10.1 |
| Mean years as officer | 10.2 | - | - |
| % patrol | 57.9 | - | - |
| % investigation | 21.3 | - | - |
| % administration | 16.9 | - | - |
| % professional standards | 3.8 | - | - |
| % municipal employees | 33.5 | 27.2 | 30.6 |
| % county employees | 44.2** | 29.6 | 37.4 |
| % state employees | 18.8** | 34.9 | 26.2 |
| % other employees | 3.6 | 5.9 | 4.6 |
| Agency descriptives | | | |
| Mean number of employees | 428.6 | 622.3 | 514.4 |
| Mean number of sworn officers | 241.2 | - | - |
| % with policy manual | 96.9* | 90.5 | 94.0 |
| % with reporting policy | 82.8*** | 57.8 | 71.4 |
| % with internal affairs unit | 76.5*** | 53.1 | 65.9 |
| % using polygraph tests | 78.6*** | 23.5 | 54.5 |
| Dependent variable descriptives | | | |
| Mean willingness to report minor violations | 3.12 | 3.28 | 3.19 |
| Mean willingness to report major violations | 4.35 | 4.37 | 4.36 |
| Mean willingness to report misdemeanors | 4.35** | 4.06 | 4.22 |
| Mean willingness to report felonies | 4.89*** | 4.66 | 4.79 |
| Mean willingness to report vignette violations | 4.03 | 3.93 | 3.98 |
| Frequency of reporting minor violations | .39 | .29 | .35 |
| Frequency of reporting major violations | .83 | .70 | .79 |

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

likely to respond to the survey and only officers employed by the state were significantly more likely to respond to the survey. In turn, t tests indicate that the mean population of counties in which nonrespondent officers work

Table 2
Respondent Versus Nonrespondent Descriptives

| Variable | Police Sample | | Civilian Sample | | Combined Sample | |
|------------------------------------|---------------|---------------|-----------------|---------------|-----------------|---------------|
| | Respondent | Nonrespondent | Respondent | Nonrespondent | Respondent | Nonrespondent |
| % men | 64.0 | 36.0 | 57.3 | 42.7 | 61.2 | 38.8 |
| % women | 75.6 | 24.4 | 58.2 | 41.8 | 62.3 | 37.7 |
| % employees of police departments | 65.6 | 34.4 | - | - | 65.6 | 34.4 |
| % employees of sheriff's offices | 65.4 | 34.6 | - | - | 65.4 | 34.6 |
| % municipal employees | 66.3 | 37.7 | 50.6 | 49.4 | 58.9 | 41.1 |
| % county employees | 58.9 | 41.1* | 56.4 | 43.6 | 57.9 | 42.1 |
| % state employees | 82.2 | 17.8* | 60.0 | 40.0 | 67.1 | 32.9 |
| % other government-level employees | 87.5 | 12.5 | 100.0 | 00.0* | 94.1 | 5.9* |
| % Atlanta location | 51.2 | 48.8 | 69.2 | 30.8 | 58.2 | 41.8 |
| % non-Atlanta location | 68.0 | 32.0 | 56.3 | 43.7 | 62.1 | 37.9 |
| Mean city population | 76,457.1 | 105,598.1 | 86,903.2 | 78,654.4 | 81,273.9 | 90,934.1 |
| Mean county population | 252,876.2 | 342,381.6* | 261,758.0 | 227,989.6 | 256,937.8 | 280,124.0 |

* $p < .05$.

is significantly ($p < .05$) larger than the mean population of counties in which respondents work. Chi-square tests of the civilian data and the police and civilian data combined further indicate that respondents employed by municipal, county, and state government were less likely to respond to the survey than individuals employed by the level of government labeled “other” on the survey.¹

Because the model tested involves individual- and organization-level predictors, a determination was first made as to whether a multilevel modeling procedure—hierarchical linear modeling (HLM)—was necessary. Examination of sampling procedures and response patterns revealed that the methodology generated data from 121 police departments. Moreover, data on 87 (72%) of these departments came from one police officer in each department. The observations per department were consequently not large enough to produce adequate statistical power for multilevel modeling (Kreft, 1996).²

To reduce possible multicollinearity, correlations between the independent variables were also determined. Because years as an officer has a strong association ($r = .73$) with years at one’s current agency and because it does not have a civilian sector equivalent for the regressions involving police and civilian public employees, it is not presented in the tables that follow. However, regression results including years as an officer for the police sample are presented below.³ Moreover, although analysis of variance confirms an expected relationship between years as an officer and supervisory status, the association is not strong enough to exclude either variable from the regression analyses.⁴ The association is also not strong enough to conclude that the relationship between whistle-blowing and supervisory status is driven by the relationship between years of service and whistle-blowing.

The regressions in Table 3 indicate that a mandatory reporting policy is related ($p < .01$) to all measures of willingness to blow the whistle except willingness to blow the whistle on felonies. The number of sworn officers and working in an administrative capacity are also significantly ($p < .05$) related to willingness to report minor violations. Supervisory status is related ($p < .05$) to willingness to blow the whistle on the violations in the vignettes, and none of the independent variables predict willingness to report felonies. The significant standardized beta coefficients for mandatory reporting policy are also large, whereas the significant coefficients for number of sworn officers, administrative position, and supervisory status are only somewhat substantial. The regressions also generally explain a minor to moderate amount of variation ($R^2 = .024$ to $.191$) in the measures of willingness to blow the whistle.

Table 3
Multiple Regressions Predicting Willingness to Blow the Whistle

| Independent Variables | Dependent Variables—Willingness to Report | | | | |
|--------------------------|---|-----------------------|------------------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| | Minor Violations Beta (SE) | Major Violations (SE) | Misdemeanors Beta (SE) | Felonies Beta (SE) | Vignettes Beta (SE) |
| Number of sworn officers | -.202* (.000) | -.078 (.000) | .062 (.000) | .048 (.000) | .052 (.000) |
| Number of employees | -.055 (.000) | -.022 (.000) | .047 (.000) | .012 (.000) | -.138 (.000) |
| Supervisor | .060 (.171) | .153 (.139) | .144 (.150) | .039 (.075) | .161* (.109) |
| Years at current agency | -.012 (.015) | -.019 (.012) | -.050 (.013) | -.085 (.007) | -.057 (.010) |
| Investigative | .067 (.203) | .066 (.166) | .085 (.179) | .059 (.090) | .155 (.130) |
| Administrative | .170* (.218) | .038 (.179) | .047 (.192) | -.060 (.096) | .154 (.140) |
| Professional standards | .003 (.391) | -.077 (.320) | .128 (.343) | -.004 (.172) | -.065 (.251) |
| Policy manual | -.146 (.459) | -.035 (.375) | -.057 (.403) | -.037 (.202) | .109 (.295) |
| Reporting policy | .321*** (.208) | .245*** (.170) | .290*** (.183) | .064 (.092) | .206*** (.134) |
| Internal affairs unit | -.003 (.206) | .018 (.169) | .012 (.181) | -.034 (.091) | -.085 (.133) |
| Polygraph use | .019 (.200) | -.016 (.164) | .056 (.176) | -.031 (.088) | -.090 (.128) |
| R ² | .191 | .114 | .132 | .024 | .170 |

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Table 4
Multiple Regressions Predicting Whistle-Blowing Frequency

| Independent Variables | Dependent Variables—Willingness to Report | | | |
|--------------------------|---|------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|
| | Minor Violations Beta | Major Violations SE | Major Violations Beta | Major Violations SE |
| Number of sworn officers | -.069 | .000 | -.190 | .000 |
| Number of employees | .046 | .000 | .054 | .000 |
| Supervisor | .219* | .077 | -.022 | .110 |
| Years at current agency | .067 | .007 | -.125 | .010 |
| Investigative | -.046 | .096 | .140 | .129 |
| Administrative | .075 | .093 | .140 | .131 |
| Professional standards | -.010 | .209 | .107 | .379 |
| Policy manual | .024 | .223 | .129 | .292 |
| Reporting policy | .171 | .091 | .073 | .132 |
| Internal affairs unit | -.078 | .099 | .187 | .141 |
| Polygraph use | -.111 | .104 | -.011 | .129 |
| R^2 | .139 | | .132 | |

* $p < .01$.

Table 4 demonstrates that supervisory status is the only hypothesized predictor to be significantly ($p < .05$) related to frequency of reporting minor violations. This regression also explains a moderate amount of variation ($R^2 = .139$) in frequency of reporting minor violations. None of the independent variables are related to frequency of reporting major violations.

To test for the effects of police status (versus civilian status) while controlling for other independent variables, the regressions were rerun on the combined data from the police and civilian samples. The regressions indicate that police status and a mandatory reporting policy are significantly ($p < .01$) related to willingness to report felonies (see Table 5). Supervisory status and a mandatory reporting policy are significantly ($p < .05$) related to willingness to report minor violations, major violations, misdemeanors, and the violations in the vignettes. Moreover, most of the significant coefficients are substantial, and the regressions explain a small to modest amount of variance ($R^2 = .059$ to $.120$) in willingness to blow the whistle.

Table 5
Multiple Regressions Predicting Civilian and Police Willingness to Report

| Independent Variables | Dependent Variables—Willingness to Report | | | | |
|-------------------------|---|--|------------------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| | Minor Violations Beta (<i>SE</i>) | Major Violations Beta (<i>SE</i>) | Misdemeanors Beta (<i>SE</i>) | Felonies Beta (<i>SE</i>) | Vignettes Beta (<i>SE</i>) |
| Number of employees | -.076 (.000) | -.014 (.000) | .029 (.000) | .037 (.000) | -.021 (.000) |
| Supervisor | .163*** (.119) | .177*** (.095) | .128* (.109) | .058 (.071) | .215*** (.082) |
| Years at current agency | -.013 (.008) | .043 (.007) | .013 (.007) | .026 (.005) | .028 (.006) |
| Policy manual | -.076 (.241) | .043 (.192) | -.042 (.220) | -.020 (.144) | .022 (.166) |
| Reporting policy | .298*** (.136) | .250*** (.108) | .254*** (.124) | .136* (.081) | .190*** (.094) |
| Internal affairs unit | .002 (.134) | -.023 (.107) | .015 (.123) | -.004 (.080) | .012 (.093) |
| Polygraph use | .011 (.144) | -.054 (.115) | .022 (.132) | -.004 (.086) | -.041 (.100) |
| Police status | -.135 (.143) | -.039 (.114) | .115 (.131) | .165* (.086) | .063 (.099) |
| <i>R</i> ² | .112 | .106 | .120 | .059 | .100 |

p* < .05; *p* < .01; ****p* < .001.

Table 6
Multiple Regressions Predicting Civilian
and Police Whistle-Blowing Frequency

| Independent Variables | Dependent Variables—Frequency of Reporting | | | |
|-------------------------|--|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| | Minor Violations | Major Violations | Major Violations | Major Violations |
| | Beta | SE | Beta | SE |
| Number of employees | -.024 | .000 | .016 | .000 |
| Supervisor | .283** | .056 | .042 | .079 |
| Years at current agency | -.018 | .004 | .048 | .006 |
| Policy manual | .020 | .123 | .088 | .177 |
| Reporting policy | .119 | .065 | .114 | .095 |
| Internal affairs unit | .017 | .066 | .057 | .091 |
| Polygraph use | -.149 | .072 | .103 | .090 |
| Police status | .209* | .071 | -.075 | .098 |
| R^2 | .129 | | .062 | |

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .001$.

Regressions involving the combined data further indicate that police status and supervisory status are the only independent variables significantly ($p < .05$) related to frequency of reporting minor violations (see Table 6). These variables possess fairly sizeable standardized coefficients, and the regression explains a modest to moderate amount of variance ($R^2 = .129$) in frequency of reporting minor violations. None of the independent variables explain frequency of reporting major violations.

Policy Implications

In sum, keeping in mind the limitations of survey research, self-report measures (e.g., retrospective bias), and the nature of the respondents, the data analysis reveals that a mandatory reporting policy and supervisory status demonstrate the greatest consistency in predicting whistle-blowing intentions and behavior. Moreover, police status demonstrates two significant relationships with whistle-blowing in the regressions, and the means in Table 1 generally indicate that police are marginally more inclined to blow the whistle than civilian public employees in the state of Georgia.

The findings also generally indicate that more predictors explain more variation in minor violations than major violations and more variation in misdemeanors than felonies. Beyond model misspecification, these findings may partially reflect respondents answering more honestly about what they would do and have done in reaction to less serious misconduct. In contrast to honesty about failing to blow the whistle on major misconduct, honesty about failing to report minor misconduct would probably yield less serious self-judgments. More importantly, for those not trusting the confidentiality of the survey, honesty about reporting minor violations and misdemeanors may have been perceived as being less likely to warrant further investigation and negative consequences. The finding may also partially reflect a statistical artifact that is a function of respondents observing fewer major violations than minor violations. Either way, this finding reinforces the unpredictability of more serious violations, the difficulty of identifying highly ethical persons for selection or promotion, and the need for new models to test, as well as new methods for testing them. Short on whistle-blowing models with stronger predictive capacities, agencies might turn to the vast body of research on selection and promotion that predicts employee performance. For example, through applying the findings from the meta-analytic research of Schmidt and Hunter (1998), more departments might adopt general mental ability tests paired with integrity tests to enhance the quality of employees selected and the cost efficiency of selection processes.

The findings also reveal that a mandatory reporting policy is related to almost all of the measures of willingness to blow the whistle but none of the measures of frequency of whistle-blowing. This finding might indicate that whistle-blowing is an easier action to take in the abstract than in reality—willingness is one thing; actual whistle-blowing is another. For the typical employee, the negative repercussions associated with whistle-blowing reported earlier may simply be too strong for a mandatory reporting policy to sustain a relationship with frequency of whistle-blowing. Perceived as being petty, the reporting of minor violations may be especially susceptible to deterrence through informal sanctions such as ostracism. However, with supervisors, the enforcement of policy, periodically manifested in the actual reporting of violations, is often an important element of a job description, especially in police work. As such, failure to blow the whistle has more serious consequences for supervisors, and whistle-blowing is an expected and *accepted* behavior for supervisors. This finding might also be a partial function of the statistics. Whereas the 365 respondents answered almost all of the questions on willingness to blow the whistle, 225 respondents observed minor violations, and only 99 observed major violations.

Finally, as a more valid measure of whistle-blowing, whistle-blowing frequency may in fact be predicted by fewer variables than willingness to blow the whistle or by different variables than investigated here, thus reinforcing the need for whistle-blowing research to focus on behaviors rather than intentions.

A policy mandating the reporting of misconduct surfaces as a solution that could be easily implemented to enhance *willingness* to combat silence codes. However, this research suggests that organizations might enhance actual whistle-blowing *behavior* through identifying and applying aspects of supervisory status that are central to an individual's motivation to blow the whistle. For example, supervisors are generally well-versed in agency policies and frequently receive advanced training in ethical decision-making. Similarly, the training of Georgia police officers stresses ethical conduct and understanding of criminal law and agency rules. Through further identification of the aspects of supervisory instruction that encourage whistle-blowing, officials might integrate them into educational programs for nonsupervisors. Agencies might also implement policies or structures that allow employees to regulate their own behavior, enforce standards, and be held accountable for the misconduct of others—responsibilities and accountabilities associated with supervisory positions that might impact whistle-blowing.

Finally, although our data indicate that a code of silence still exists, especially with respect to lower-level offenses, it also presents some evidence indicating that police are less likely than civilian employees to maintain a code of silence. In doing so, it suggests that the silent employee may actually be a slightly more accurate stereotype of civilian public employees. Through integrating this finding into their public relations efforts, police departments could help restore some trust and confidence in law enforcement that has been eroded through widely publicized tragedies and fiascos over the last 10 years (e.g., the Rodney King beating, corruption in the Rampart Division of LAPD, and the torture of Abner Louima).

Conclusion

To determine the external validity of the results found here, future studies might investigate whistle-blowing behavior in other states, federal agencies, and private organizations. Research involving multiple states would permit the investigation and comparison of the impact on whistle-blowing of inspector general offices, offices of special counsel, and internal affairs units. Public sector research might also explore the effects on whistle-blowing of

various forms of local governments and effects of elected versus appointed agency heads.

Future studies might address the effects on whistle-blowing of statutory protections against retaliation for whistle-blowing. Future research might also utilize interviews or experimental designs to reduce the biasing effects of socially desirable responses. In failing to support past research addressing the positive impact of organization size on whistle-blowing, this study also points to the need for additional research to resolve or clarify this inconsistency. Finally, given the amounts of variances found here, this study generally indicates a need to explore new theories that might provide more complete explanations for whistle-blowing.

In conclusion, this study extends the external validity of the whistle-blowing and code of silence research by being the first to investigate the attitudes and behaviors of law enforcement officers. The research reveals that a mandatory reporting policy, a variable investigated for the first time, is consistently related to willingness to blow the whistle, and supervisory status is related to various measures of both willingness to blow the whistle and frequency of blowing the whistle. Qualifying descriptive literature and common beliefs that police collude to protect one another through observing a code of silence, the research also found that police are slightly *less likely* to subscribe to a code of silence than civilian public employees.

Appendix

Survey Items

I. Examples of items measuring the dependent variables

1. You are certain a coworker committed a minor violation of agency policy.
2. A coworker routinely accepts free meals, cigarettes, and other items of small value from merchants that may use the services of your agency. (Original language: A police officer routinely accepts free meals, cigarettes, and other items of small value from merchants on his beat . . .)
3. A coworker is well liked in the community and receives free food and liquor during the holiday season from potential clients of the agency as tokens of their appreciation. (Original language: A police officer is widely liked in the community, and on holidays local merchants and restaurant and bar owners show their appreciation for his attention by giving him gifts of food and liquor.)
4. A coworker who is a very good mechanic is scheduled to work during coming holidays but is given the holidays off by a supervisor in return

for repairing the supervisor's personal automobile. (Original language: A police officer, who happens to be a very good auto mechanic, is scheduled to work during coming holidays. A supervisor offers to give him these days off, if he agrees to tune up his supervisor's personal car.)

5. How many times have you witnessed a coworker violate a minor agency policy?
6. How many times have you reported a coworker for minor violations of agency policy?

II. Measures of the contextual independent variables

1. Does your agency maintain a written policy manual?
2. Does your agency have a specific policy requiring you to report misconduct by other employees?
3. Does your agency have a unit of personnel assigned specifically to investigate complaints of misconduct by employees?
4. Does your agency utilize polygraph examinations in investigations of employee misconduct?
5. Are you a supervisor?
6. How many years have you worked for your current agency?
7. How many persons are employed by your current agency?

Notes

1. Logistic regression reveals that, when controlling for the effects of the variables in Table 2, county employees (the referent variable) were significantly ($p < .01$) less likely to respond to the survey than state employees. In turn, a regression indicates that none of the variables in Table 2 are significantly related to civilian failure to respond to the survey. When the police and civilian samples are combined, a logistic regression indicates that county employees are significantly ($p < .05$) less likely to respond to the survey than state employees and individuals working in the "other" category of government. Individuals identifying with the "other" category are primarily employees of city-county consolidated governments or private university police departments.

2. Kreft (1996) found adequate statistical power for multilevel modeling when 30 groups had 30 observations each, 60 groups had 25 observations each, and 150 groups had five observations each—much larger observations per group than what our sampling procedure generated.

3. When years as an officer is substituted for years in one's current agency in the regressions, the change in R^2 ranges from .001 to .022. Moreover, several independent variables that were marginally significant became significant at a probability level of .05. Supervisory status is significantly related to willingness to blow the whistle on major violations, misdemeanors, and the violations in the vignettes. Years as an officer has negative relationships with willingness to blow the whistle on misdemeanors and felonies. Police assigned to investigative units are significantly more willing than police assigned to patrol to blow the whistle on the violations in the vignettes. And, police assigned to professional standards units are significantly more willing to blow the whistle on major violations than police assigned to patrol. The substitution made no difference in the variables significantly related to frequency of whistle-blowing. Although the negative relationships between years as an officer and willingness to blow the whistle are

noteworthy, the strongest pattern of predictors from the regressions including years as an officer replicates the importance of a reporting policy and augments the importance of supervisory status for predicting whistle-blowing.

4. For example, if one treats supervisory status as though it is an interval-level variable with a response range of 1 to 2, it is significantly ($p < .001$) correlated with years as an officer with an r of .29. This association is substantially weaker than the common standard ($r > \text{mid } .7\text{s}$) for exclusion from further multivariate analysis because of collinearity problems (Meyers, Gamst, & Guarino, 2006).

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