

Ethical communication executive summary



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From a short literature review, we gained the insight that the focus of previous research on ethical communication has mainly been on reacting to moral issue through moral silence or whistle-blowing. Hence, alternatives in between have been neglected. In this paper we aim to investigate the extent to which there are alternative ways for responding to ethical issues, other than moral silence and whistle-blowing.

We argue that semi-structured qualitative interviews can reveal underlying constructs and patterns within the field of moral reaction, and provide us with exploratory understanding about alternatives to whistle-blowing.

Further we aim to use a Socratic dialogue in order to facilitate a philosophical discussion about moral reaction, and to gain even more in-depth knowledge about patterns of thinking and choice of alternatives.

By drawing on the results from the qualitative research methods, we argue that qualitative research methods can test whether the results are generalizable. Hence, we aid the measurements on quantitative research by using the in-depth knowledge of social contexts through interviews and Socratic dialogue, and applying them to construct further on a FaFo-survey developed by Trygstad (2010) (Bryman, Bell 2007: 648). We believe that a triangulation of research methods is the suitable approach for further investigation of our research topic. By triangulating, we can refine, broaden and strengthen the conceptual linkages and allow ourselves to perceive various perspectives on the topic of alternatives to whistle-blowing (Berg 2007: 7)

Our research has two main contributions. Firstly, the paper will contribute in filling the gap in the literature about alternatives to moral silence and whistle-blowing. Secondly, the findings may help the organizations implement less extreme and risky alternatives to whistle-blowing and hence lay a foundation for a firm culture that encourages the employees to address and prevent ethical misconduct.

Introduction

Ethical dilemmas can occur in professional settings due to numerous reasons. Due to close relational ties between business actors, addressing moral issues becomes difficult. The choice of either blowing the whistle or keeping silent has been considered as two opposite reaction-mechanisms toward ethical wrongdoings. Although whistle blowing is a well investigated topic (E. g. Miceli et al. 2008, Bird 1996), previous researches have presented a black and white picture, where whistleblowing and moral silence

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are perceived as an either-or choice, and alternatives between the two extremes have been neglected. Such alternatives are challenging to map due to their less public characteristics and unclear labels.

In this paper we investigate the extent to which there are applicable alternatives towards addressing ethical issues in a business setting. We have chosen to focus on the banking sector due to numerous occurrences of morally questionable episodes. We will conduct an exploratory case study of DnB Nor, and draw benefit of our personal relations within the bank, thus ensuring easy access to critical data which otherwise would have been difficult to collect. The case study approach is characterized by a rich, detailed and in-depth data gathering, and is used to systematically investigate a topic with the aim of explaining and describing the field (Berg 2007). As a research design, the case study will allow us to investigate the complexity of the field of ethical communication, with unit of analysis varying from individual level to the overall organizational level.

Yin (1998) provides us with five guidelines when conducting a case study. We as researchers need to have an inquiring mindset, focused on asking questions before, during and after the data collection. We need to listen, observe and sense our surroundings when collecting data and assimilate large amounts of data without bias. Further, we need to be flexible enough to handle unanticipated events and thus rethink our research approach in order to ensure a fit with our research agenda. Also, we need to have a sufficient understanding of the research topic so that data can be interpreted correctly. Lastly, an unbiased interpretation of the data needs to be emphasized.

We believe that a research within the chosen area can contribute in two ways; first, the paper will provide more insight into different responses to ethical wrongdoings in an academic setting. Second, in cooperation with respondents from the banking industry, the findings may help the organizations to implement more suitable alternatives to whistle-blowing and hence lay a foundation for a firm culture that encourages the employees to address and prevent ethical wrongdoings. With our research paper we aim to be one step closer towards filling the gap in the whistle-blowing literature and supplement it, to gain a better understanding of the field.

Literature review

The early literature within ethical issues in professions is in a large extent drawn upon the work of Bowie (1982) and Bok (1980). Both authors examine whistle-blowing as a response to ethical misconduct, claiming that each employee is obliged to be loyal to their working environment. The aspects of loyalty and trust can, however, make it difficult to publicly oppose unethical behavior. Employees blowing the whistle at their own team, without having the appropriate authority to do so, can be claimed of violating such loyalty. However, Bowie (1982) presents some conditions under which the duty to stay loyal can be overridden. If the act of blowing the whistle originates from an appropriate moral motive to prevent harm to others, if the whistle-blower is acting according to his/hers responsibility, if other non-public channels have been used to address the issue without achieving progress on the matter or if the whistle-blower has significant evidence of misconduct, the loyalty towards the company can be set in a different light.

The choice of not addressing unethical behavior in a professional setting is however not only based on aspects of trust and loyalty. Whistle-blowing can in many cases be perceived as an act of moral courage and self-sacrifice in the face of organizational indifference, and therefore not always thought of as an immediate response to difficult issues. Therefore, in many instances the context for socially responsible behavior may facilitate moral silence rather than explicitly addressing issues in the form of whistle blowing (Bird 1996). Hence, an equally extreme option of keeping silent may be chosen – as it might be perceived as the morally right thing to do.

Bird (1996) addresses the challenges of moral muteness and investigates how cultural, individual and organizational factors within the business environment can enhance the practice of moral muteness, blindness and deafness. Micheli et al. (2008) gives a comprehensive summary of the research conducted on the topic since 1992, but simultaneously unveils the lack of understanding regarding the motives for whistle-blowing.

Going through the basic literature in the area of whistle-blowing, we argue that the research is more or less limited to the focus on two opposite, equally extreme, alternatives for responding to ethical issues in a business setting. Although the previous research lays the foundation for further work, the narrowness of the research field might indicate that alternative ways of responding to ethical issues are not easily measured.

Research questions

As shown in the literature review, the majority of research conducted in this area is focused on either explicitly addressing moral issues through whistle-

blowing, or keeping silent whenever ethical wrongdoings are observed.

Hence, in this paper, we wish: “ to investigate the extent to which there are alternatives for addressing moral issues, in between the two extremes of moral silence and whistle-blowing”. If such alternatives are found, “ How are they identified, and to what extent are the respondents prone to applying them in real life settings”.

Departing from overarching research questions as these, we will gather data by using the appropriate research methodologies. By further analyzing the data material, we will be able to refine and narrow down our research questions, and thus gain insight in what kind of conditions foster the choice of reaction towards ethical wrongdoings.

Defining important concepts

In order to sufficiently reveal and measure different alternatives to whistle-blowing and moral silence, we need to define important terms and concepts within the literature on ethical communication and use a consistent conceptual framework. The issue of addressing moral issues in a professional setting arises when a moral wrongdoing occurs. Using the terms of Micheli et al. (2008) a moral wrongdoing can be defined as “ an illegal, immoral or illegitimate practice” (Micheli et. al 2008: 3).

Among the alternative ways of responding to a moral wrongdoing, we find whistle-blowing as an option. Again, drawing on the work of Micheli et. al (2008) we define whistle-blowing as “ the disclosure by organizational members, former or current, of illegal, immoral or illegitimate practices under the control of their employees, to persons or organizations that may

be able to effect action” (Micheli et al. 2008: 4). The extent, to which whistle-blowing is used as a means to address ethical issues, depends largely on individual moral sensitivity. We believe that the more sensitive an individual is towards sensing moral wrongdoings, the more likely he/she will respond to the situation.

In addition to the moral sensitivity of individuals, the moral climate within the organization is vital in determining the likelihood of addressing moral wrongdoings. The term refers to the extent to which moral sensitivity to voice concerns is met with support and encouragement rather than disapproval or avoidance. The term “moral reaction” can be used as a summary term for the range of sensitivity-dependent reactions on wrongdoings, all from whispering to explicit whistle-blowing. All the terms described above are interdependent, and are important factors behind the choice of moral reaction. The relations between the concepts can be illustrated by drawing on a framework developed by Brinkman and Alm (2010), which can be seen in Appendix 1.

Evaluation and choice of methodology:

Researching on alternatives to whistle blowing is a sensitive theme. The question of how to conduct the research with the right measurement tools, in order to collect nonbiased data, is critical. We will evaluate the use of qualitative and quantitative research methods in light of our research questions in order to gain accurate data. Although there are differences in qualitative and quantitative research with regard to epistemological and ontological orientation, the methods are more free-floating than supposed (Bryman & Bell, chapter 24). In the following we will evaluate different

research methods and assess the degree to which they are applicable in our research.

Interviews

When evaluating the appropriate method of collecting data material, we argue that interviews are one of the methods applicable in our context.

Interviews can be quantitative or qualitative (Bryman, Bell 2007: 210). Using quantitative interviews requires a deductive approach with a foundation in the theory surrounding our research area (Bryman, Bell 2007: 154) The results from such interviews would enable the possibility of generalization, through emphasis on testing, verifying, focus on facts and result orientation (Lecture notes: Session 8).

A quantitative structured interview, also called a standardized interview, aims at giving all the interviewees the same context of questioning. Asking the same questions to every respondent enables a reliable aggregation of the replies (Bryman, Bell 2007: 210). However, this can only be achieved if the respondents reply to identical issues. Considering the sensitivity of our research topic, and the natural occurrence of cautiousness and resistance to reply to direct questions in front of an interviewer, it may be difficult to get valid answers.

Thus, since our aim is to uncover alternatives to moral reaction towards ethical wrongdoings, and keeping in mind the sensitivity of our research topic, we argue that qualitative interviews may be more suitable. Conducting a qualitative interview enables us to understand the social world through examining the interpretations of the participants, and thus foster a broader

insight into the prevalent trends in ethical communication (Bryman, Bell 2007: 402). Taking an inductive approach towards the relationship between the theory and research this methods aims to generate the former out of the latter. This is more suitable, due to lack of theoretical fundament within the field.

Semi-structured qualitative interview

By having a semi-structured focus, we can base our questions in a interview guide but still allow the participants to respond freely. The benefit of using semi-structured qualitative interviews is that all the outlined topics are addressed, but in a subjective and personal way (Bryman, Bell 2007: 474). Hence, the answers can be interpreted in the light of personal experience and underlying issues regarding ethical communication can be unveiled. The interview process is flexible in the sense that the interviewer responds to the direction the interviewee takes the interview. Using this method we can gain insight into what the participants view as important patterns, norms and restrictions in communication regarding ethical wrongdoings (Bryman, Bell 2007: 474)

The optimal conduct of semi-structured qualitative interviews is to focus on asking open questions, so that the candidates can reply in their own terms (Bryman, Bell 2007: 259). This way, unusual responses might uncover some underlying contingencies for choosing alternatives to whistle-blowing. The open questions will not suggest a certain kind of answer and therefore the respondent's level of knowledge and understanding of the issue can be tapped. However, it is important that one avoids the use of ambiguous terms

in questions. In addition, too long questions, double-barreled questions, too general or leading question is also considered unfortunate (Bryman, Bell 2007: 267).

Sampling of respondents

As we aim to conduct an exploratory case study of DnB Nor, the respondents for the qualitative semi-structured interviews will be chosen from the employee database of the company. A convenience sampling technique will be used, due to the accessibility and proximity to key-personnel in DnB Nor (Bryman, Bell 2007: 197). When choosing respondents for the interviews, we will focus on selecting employees which, due to the nature of their work or positions, may be exposed to situations involving moral wrongdoings and hence have had a choice of responding to them. Such employees can be financial advisers, decision makers or managers. Further, we can apply the snowball sampling method (Bryman, Bell 2007: 200) which is a form of convenience sampling. This sampling method allows us to depart from a small group of respondents, and use them to establish contact with others. Applying a convenience sampling method does not allow us to generalize the findings, due to the context-specific nature of the responses and the fact that the respondents are not representatives for employees in the banking sector in general. (Bryman, Bell 2007: 198). However, the sampling method does ensure access to accurate and in-depth knowledge of our topic. Due to our wish to gain relevant and context-related information, we will focus on interviewing few respondents in-depth, rather than having too many respondents. The latter will be more relevant when conducting quantitative research methods.

Codification of qualitative data

Following the analysis strategy of analytical induction, we perceive each interview as an individual case. If we encounter inconsistency between the findings and the hypotheses, we will have to conduct further data collection or reformulate the original research questions. Hence, the selection of respondents needs to be diverse so that the theory of alternatives to whistleblowing can be challenged. The diverse data collected through semi-structured interviews is often large and unstructured. Hence the analysis of the data becomes difficult (Bryman, Bell 2007: 579). A feature of the semi-structured interviews is that respondents are encouraged to go into areas not covered in the interview schedule, thus leading to difficulties in the codification process (Bryman, Bell 2007: 580). Hence, the analysis of qualitative data is rather time consuming and does not follow strict rules of codification. The best approach is to record the data during the interviews and make notes of significant remarks and observations. By doing so, specific themes or terms can be given codes or labels from which we can base further research on (Bryman, Bell 2007: 594)

Limitations

However, there are some limitations attached to the use of qualitative interviews. First of all, moral reaction towards ethical wrongdoings is a sensitive topic and many respondents may be reluctant to share work-specific information. Too direct interview questions can be considered threatening, and respondents may give responses which they perceive as accepted and desirable rather than what is true and honest. (Bryman, Bell

2007: 235). In addition, relying only on the verbal behavior of the interviewees, many of the taken-for-granted factors regarding the communication and ethical behavior might not become visible. The subjectivity and personal contexts of the answers can also lead to difficulties when codifying the results. Hence, the result might not be easily generalizable.

Even though it has its limitations, this is overall a useful method to understand the personal aspect of ethical communication – given that there is established an appropriate level of trust between the interviewee and interviewer and discretion is emphasized. One way to avoid some of the most challenging limitations could be to focus attention on a third-party through illustrative cases during the interviews. Presenting different scenarios anchors the answers to specific situations and reduces the possibility of an unreflected reply. Also, using descriptive cases establishes a suitable distance between the questioning and the respondent, thus allowing a discussion around moral reaction without crossing the boundaries of professional secrecy. In their research proposal Brinkman and Alm (2010) present examples of such cases, which we can consider applying in our context (see appendix 2)

Socratic dialogues

Going through the results from the semi-structured interviews, we will find terms and themes that can further be investigated. In order to build on the basic information provided in the interviews, we wish to apply Socratic Dialogues as a method to gather in-depth data material

What is Socratic Dialogue?

The method follows the Socratic way of asking questions, which frequently is referred to as the elenchu. Elenchu is a method where the focus is on asking questions about beliefs and mechanisms like cross-examination and counter-examples are used to uncover latent contradictions (Morrell 2004). The purpose of the Socratic dialogue is to provide philosophical discussion around fundamental and moral questions, and uncover patterns of thinking through systematic reflection of own experience in the field of topic (Axell 2010). The Socratic dialogue is a process for achieving concrete understanding of a subject from an abstract starting point (Axell 2010) and the discussions are facilitated by an overarching general question, which is answered collectively, through rational argumentation (Axell 2010).

Socratic Dialogue in practice

The actual conduct of the dialogs will follow four main guidelines (Brinkman, Alm 2010). The starting point is a well formulated but general opening-question, set by the facilitator to mark the agenda of the dialog. In our context, we could start with a question like “ How would you define an ethical wrongdoing?” Further, the dialogue is based on the participant’s own definitions, perspectives and experiences with ethical wrongdoings. Later on, the different examples of situations involving ethical wrongdoings are investigated, and underlying assumptions and principles are made explicit (Van Rossem 2006). Further, the statements and viewpoints of the participants are written down or recorded so that everybody has an overview of the discourse.

Taking the role of facilitators, we only navigate the discussion in order to stay on track. According to Van Rossem (2006), we as facilitators need to be concrete in our formulations and aim at establishing a common ground for discussion. We should only interfere when we consider it to be contributing the discussion. In the traditional Socratic approach, the facilitators are not supposed to intervene or direct the content of the dialogue. Rather, the facilitator should intensify the discussion, by stimulating and encourage the participants to elaborate their viewpoints (Van Rossem 2006)

Referring to the moral muteness in situations of wrongdoing, Bird (Bird 1996: 191) recommends moral conversation as a means for facilitating moral response. He argues that using a Socratic dialogue could illustrate to the participants how an ideal intraorganizational dialogue could be. Trough focus on moral communication, organizational members can establish agreed-upon understandings, applicable as guides for their ethical and communicative behavior in every-day work (Bird 1996: 195). Bird also argues that interactive communication can help fight moral muteness, deafness and blindness. By establishing grounds for constructive communication which fosters participation, people can overcome their shyness and address ethical wrong-doings easily. (Bird 1996: 205)

Choosing participants for the dialogues

Considering that a Socratic Dialogue can last for a long period of time, there are some conditions necessary to keep in mind when selecting participants for the dialogues. First of all, the participants need to be motivated to facilitate a discussion. Second, they have to be willing to contribute with

stories of personal experience, and lastly be willing to listen to others viewpoints (Brinkman, Alm 2010). The number of participants in a dialogue should be between four and ten (Axell 1999) and constitute of people with experience in reacting to moral wrongdoings. Snowball sampling would be the best choice of sampling method. Communicating with our contact-people in DnBNor, we can gain knowledge of people with experience within the field and approach them directly (Bryman, Bell: 200).

Limitations

As with other research methods, there are some limitations attached to Socratic dialogues. First of all, the facilitator only has a limited degree of control over the dialog. Interfering too often may hamper the flow in the discussion, while interfering too little can lead to an unfocused and unproductive discussion with useless results. Secondly, considering that the results are obtained throughout the process and not in the end of the dialogues, the end results cannot be reduced to answers to the initial questions. Thirdly, since the nature of the discussion is dynamic and evolving, pulling arguments out of their context or codifying the results may cause the loss of the main essence of the discussion. Lastly, the group dynamic needs to be effective in order to produce insights and discussions. Participants hogging the stage may overrun reticent speakers, or the willingness of some participants to contribute can be lacking. In such cases, the facilitator needs to interfere in order to generate more balanced discussions, and in doing so, take the risk of hampering the interactiveness of the discussion (Van Rossem 2006).

However, we do believe the use of Socratic dialogues as a research method is beneficial in our research area. Many of the factors hampering ethical communication, and thus making alternatives to whistle-blowing difficult to uncover, originate from the cognitive maps of the individuals. By investigating personal perspectives on ethical wrongdoings and responses towards them, we gain much insight into the preferred alternatives to whistle-blowing.

Validity and reliability in qualitative research

Validity and reliability are terms usually related with quantitative research. However, it can be beneficial to evaluate these terms in relevance to our proposed methods. Based on LeCompte and Goetz (1982), we can test qualitative methods for external and internal reliability, and external and internal validity (Bryman and Bell 2007: 410).

With regard to the qualitative methods proposed above, external reliability is difficult, both due to the difficulty of re-creating an exact similar situation, and due to the difficulty of getting access to sensitive information (Bryman and Bell 2007: 410). To ensure internal reliability, we as researchers need to share a common ground when conducting the interviews and when facilitating the dialogues. To ensure this, the process and the replies can be recorded and a third-party colleague can cross-check our understanding of the subject and confirm consistency in our works (Ratcliff 1995: 1).

To ensure internal validity, a match between our observations and the theoretical development within the field is needed. To secure external validity we need to test the degree to which our results can be generalized.

Both forms of validity can be ensured through triangulation. Mathison states that “ triangulation has raised an important methodological issue in naturalistic and qualitative approaches to evaluation [in order to] control bias and establishing valid propositions because traditional scientific techniques are incompatible with this alternate epistemology.” (Mathison 1988: 13). Hence, a triangulation will facilitate the testing of the validity of the methods, in order to check if it has satisfying external validity, thus leading to higher trustworthiness of the results of the data analysis (Jick 1979).

Following Ratcliff’s (1995) approach of ensuring validity, we can check for divergence from initial expectations, ensure convergence with other sources of data, include multiple researchers or ask our respondents about the accuracy of our process and hypotheses. The use of third-party cases will also contribute to ensure greater internal validity. By presenting cases on the issue of moral wrongdoings, we can ask questions related to moral reactions, and hence detect alternative ways of addressing such issues. (Bryman, Bell: 410).

Online survey

The use of qualitative methods provides us with significant information on individual perceptions of alternatives to whistle-blowing. However, we recognize the difficulties of generalizing the results from such qualitative methods. In order to uncover any overarching trends in ethical communication in the banking sector, we consider an online survey to be useful.

What characterizes online surveys?

Online Surveys resemble quantitative structured interviews in the sense that they aim to ask standardized questions to all the participants. By providing the respondents a fixed range of answers to choose from, we can easily generalize the findings. However, online surveys have the advantage over structured quantitative interviews that they are cheaper to conduct, quicker to administrate, have no threat of interviewer-effect, and are convenient for the respondents. The disadvantages, however, are the risk of low response rate, risk of missing data, difficulty to ask follow-up questions and the reduced possibility to probe an answer (Bryman, Bell 2007: 242)

In addition, online surveys can also resemble self-completion questionnaires, since there is no interviewer asking the questions (Bryman and Bell 2007: 675). The advantages of online surveys compared to written (postal) self-completion questionnaires is that the mode of administration enables the use of filter questions, which allows a sufficient screening and coding of the results. Also, online surveys enable lower costs, faster response and no geographical constraints. However, a disadvantage is that online surveys require technical capabilities and access to software and other relevant tools (Bryman, Bell 2007: 683).

Online surveys include both email surveys, which are administered over email, and online surveys administered via the web. Sheehan and Hoy (1999) argue that there has been a tendency for e-mail surveys to be employed in smaller, more homogeneous groups, whereas web surveys are used to study larger more heterogeneous groups. Since we are interested in testing the

generalizability of our findings from the qualitative methods, we aim to apply web surveys in order to detect possible patterns of thinking across a heterogeneous large group. By using an online websurvey, we have the ability to customize the appearance and use the Internet as a platform to reach otherwise difficult-to-reach respondents from the banking sector.

A web survey has the advantage over e-mail surveys that it can use a wider variety of embellishments in terms of appearance. The online survey is better structured, providing the opportunity to filter questions, such that respondents can easily be categorized based on their answers. Using data software, allows for less time consuming and efficient coding of answers, in addition to the reduced likelihood of errors in data processing (Bryman, Bell 2007: 676)

For comparability reasons, we will build our online web survey on other surveys, mainly a FaFo survey conducted on the topic of whistle-blowing (Trygstad 2010). Using the same structure as the FaFo-survey, in addition to reusing some of the questions in order to sufficiently categorize the respondents, we aim to create a valid and reliable survey. Using the information gathered through qualitative interviews and the Socratic dialogues; we can produce additional questions for the survey which explicitly addresses individual, organizational and contextual factors influencing the choice of alternatives to whistle-blowing..

Unit of analysis and measurements

The distinction between personal and organizational characteristics influencing the choice moral reaction indicates the levels of analysis. In the <https://assignbuster.com/ethical-communication-executive-summary/>

individual level we can measure moral maturity of the employees in the banking sector on a likert scale with the scales pre-conventional, conventional and post-conventional (Bryman, Bell: 249). We can also map the awareness of risk and responsibility through addressing the contextual factors behind ethical communication. By using the definitions and examples of ethical wrongdoings as put forth in the Socratic dialogues, we can produce fictive cases on the topic of ethical wrongdoings and ask the respondents how they would react in situations like these. Hence, we can measure the loyalty and integrity of the participants to the extent which it is possible to measure such a variable. Also, it would be possible to map the preferences of different styles of ethical communication and the degree of individual ethical sensitivity.

On the organizational level, we can measure the organizational moral climate in general in the banking sector by its degree of power distance. In addition, ECQ-variables can be measures to assess the leadership capabilities of the top management in the context of facilitating communication. The perceived permission of uttering opinions and the presence of a supporting environment are important factors for facilitating communication regarding ethical wrongdoings, and can also be measured through questions in the survey (Brinkman, Alm 2010)

Limitations