Perceptions of Intentional Wrongdoing and Peer Reporting Behavior Among Registered Nurses

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ABSTRACT. How a person perceives a wrongdoing being committed by a coworker will affect whether the incident is reported within the organization. A significant factor that may influence the decision to report a wrongdoing is the perceived intentionality of the wrongdoer. This study sought to examine if differences in perceptions of a wrongdoing could affect the disclosure of unethical behavior. Three hundred seventy-two registered nurses (N = 372) responded to a survey consisting of both intentional and unintentional wrongdoings that could occur by a nurse. Results of a paired t-test were as predicted. More wide ranging revelations found that respondents were more likely to discuss the unintentional wrongdoings with the wrongdoer in lieu of officially reporting to an immediate supervisor, or a member of upper management. Discussion, limitations, and suggestions for future research are provided.

KEY WORDS: behavior, intentional, organizational, peer reporting, perception, wrongdoing

Media reports of unethical behavior by corporations are growing at an alarming rate. Hardly a week passes when the media does not report a case of wrongdoing or unethical conduct being committed by an employee or the organization (Miceli et al., 1991). Employees who either observe or perceive questionable behavior being committed by the organization or its members often make these reports public.

Research investigating reports of unethical behavior are growing within the literature. Currently, whistle-blowing researchers have addressed a variety of topics including relational closeness (King, 1994), situational correlates (Miceli and Near, 1992), retaliation (Miceli and Near, 1994; Near and Miceli, 1986; Near and Jensen, 1983; Parmerlee et al., 1982), effectiveness (Near and Miceli, 1990), characteristics of a whistle-blower (Miceli and Near, 1988; Near and Miceli, 1987), and ethics (Brabeck, 1984) as factors that determine whether or not an incident is reported.

Closely related to whistle-blowing is employee peer reporting. Although whistle-blowing has received considerable attention, scholars within the field have only scantily examined peer reporting. Currently, scholars have investigated individual, situational, and organizational issues of peer reporting (King and Hermodezman, 2000), social factors (Trevino and Victor, 1992), justice evaluation (Bart et al., 1993), and religion and ethical ideology (Barnett et al., 1996) as factors that may affect disclosure of an employee’s wrongdoing. In order to gain a better understanding of the peer reporting process, and to advance the literature in this area, researchers must investigate other issues that may impede or encourage the decision to peer report.

Although communication scholars have largely ignored peer reporting, disclosing a wrongdoing is a communication process. Stewart (1980), for
example, has focused upon the importance of maintaining clear and proper channels for the disclosure of illegal and unethical behavior. Along those same lines, King (1997) found interpersonal closeness among coworkers would affect the disclosure of unethical behavior.

Other studies have focused upon perception as a significant factor that underscores the decision to report a wrongdoing. For example, Miceli et al. (1991) found internal auditors were more likely to report incidents of wrongdoing external to the organization if they (i.e., auditors) perceived public or employee injury caused by the wrongdoing, “when the wrongdoing involved theft, when it involved relatively low-level employees, and there were few observers” (p. 127). In a similar vein, Miceli and Nair (1985) found that employees who observed organizational wrongdoings were more likely to report the incident if they perceived the activity as serious, the observer had convincing evidence, and if the wrongdoing affected the observer.

Closely related to the issue of severity is the observer’s perception of the intentions of the wrongdoer. It would be reasonable to assume that the perceived intentions of a wrongdoer would have some effect on an observer’s decision to report a wrongdoing. For instance, an individual who deliberately sabotages computer disk information in order to create a huge financial loss for a company may be perceived as performing an intentional act of wrongdoing against the corporation insofar as the behavior is perceived as deliberate, planned, and premeditated. On the other hand, a physician who accidentally omits charting a patient’s adverse reactions to a drug may be perceived as committing an unintentional wrongdoing because the act was not premeditated.

Researchers who have studied unethical behavior by employees have investigated federal workers (Near and Miceli, 1986) and various business settings (i.e., manufacturing firms), but many types of employment context have not yet been adequately examined. One such type of employment is the health care industry.

Nurses often perceive incompetence or negligence on the part of colleagues and physicians. Providing quality patient care is of utmost importance in the nursing profession. Various normative essays have been written encouraging nurses who observe unethical conduct to report such behavior. Levine and Groh (1990a, b), for example, addressed the responsibility of nurses to report unsafe practices. Levine and Groh focused not only on how to assess a wrongdoing, but also on how to overcome obstacles to reporting it, and the role of the nurse manager. Along those same lines, Kiely and Kiely (1990) focused upon the issue of nurse accountability, patient safety, loyalty, and retaliation. Finally, other researchers have expanded the literature in this area by examining other health related fields such as dentistry (Baab and Ozar, 1994) and physician practice (Lammers, 1991; Page, 1992; Tammelleo, 1993).

Within the nursing literature, the perception of the wrongdoer’s intentions has not been specifically examined as an issue that may affect reports of wrongdoing. While some nurses might perceive a specific incident of wrongdoing as being clearly intentional and would report it to a nurse manager or other higher officials within the organization, other nurses may perceive the same incident as unintentional and decide not to report it. That is, what one nurse may perceive as intentional, another nurse may perceive as a result of poor judgment or carelessness on the part of the wrongdoer. According to Hyland and Frapwell (1986), some nurses engage in what is called “perceptual distortion” (p. 50). Hyland and Frapwell report that a nurse will often provide reasons on why she or he did not report a wrongdoing, even under conditions when the incident was clearly wrong. The purpose of this study is to examine how nurses perceive wrongdoings committed by their colleagues, to determine if there are certain wrongdoings that may go unreported if observed by a nurse, and if so, why?

**Review of literature**

*Peer reporting defined*

Peer reporting has been defined as occurring “when group members go outside their group to report a member’s misconduct” (Trevino and...