

Personal Trust, Public Accountability, and the Justification of Whistleblowing

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Whistleblowing is the practice of reporting wrongdoings by someone who has or had privileged access to information within a legitimate organization. From a broad democratic perspective, a common critique of whistleblowing concerns the risks this practice implies for the quality of interpersonal relations. Notably, especially when it concerns wrongdoing in public institutions, whistleblowing has been criticized in view of its supposed unpalatable consequence of generating a climate of mutual diffidence due to the anxiety that may derive from the feeling of being constantly under scrutiny. Moreover, it has been accused of weakening public trust in institutions by diminishing their credibility. Therefore, whistleblowing has often been presented as an *extrema ratio* resort to which must be made sparingly and with a grain of salt. This critique has undercut the justification of a duty of whistleblowing, which is seen as belonging, rather, to the domain of the supererogatory. We argue that this critique has the problem of conflating two dimensions of the interpersonal relations that whistleblowing involves, a public and a personal one. While the critique is sound in underscoring that whistleblowing might undermine bonds of trust at the personal level (e.g., relations of friendship), this practice has in fact the capacity of enhancing the quality of public relations of accountability and, as a consequence, of vertical bonds of trust between citizens and institutions. In this sense, from an appropriately qualified relational perspective, we suggest viewing whistleblowing as one of the best practices that ought to be implemented to counteract such serious forms of wrongdoing as corruption especially when it occurs in the public sector and, therefore, sees the involvement of public officials.