

OHRM Seminar

Term:	Spring 2015
Speaker:	Dr Kate Kenny, Queen's University Management School and Fellow at JE Safra Centre for Ethics, Harvard University
Title:	Hero or Villian? Whistleblowing in Banking and the Role of Identity
Date:	Wednesday 11 th February 2015
Venue:	B2.13 Meeting Room, WBS Scarman Road
Time:	13.00 – 14.00 hours
Abstract:	<p>How do whistleblowers cope with the ambivalence with which they are often perceived? In this paper I draw on recent empirical data gathered from whistleblowers in the banking industry, and argue that a focus on identity is key. Whistleblowers occupy something of a position of ambivalence in society. They are often seen as 'traitorous violators' of a code of fidelity to their organization, suspicious figures who reject their obligations of loyalty to the employer, and dangerous tellers of secrets. Others view whistleblowers as heroes: martyrs to the cause of transparency and openness; on this view, whistleblowers are brave strugglers who battle with the pressure of social norms of conformity to uphold the truth for the betterment of society beyond the boundaries of the organization. In a world in which wrongdoing is rife within public and private organizations, they have exposed financial fraud, public health threats, and dangerous working conditions. Whistleblowers are the 'saints' according to Grant (2002), of today's secular culture. Contrasting these dominant perspectives, it appears as though whistleblowers exist in the abyss between two sets of stereotypes.</p> <p>The question remains as to how such resisters experience life in the abyss- how does the truth-telling affect one's sense of self? While there has been much research into the suffering experienced by whistleblowers, particularly those who have been the target of retaliation by their organization, what we don't know is how people experience the ambivalence with which they are perceived. We know about the difficulties, but not much about how whistleblowers persevere and survive in this conflicting morass. In this paper, I argue that a focus on self-identity can shed light on the survival strategies of whistleblowers. I illustrate this with data from a recent empirical study of whistleblowing in banking organizations, and show how a conflicted, fractured identity emerges as people come to embody the schism of doubt and confusion that often accompanies the whistleblower identity. Unusually, it is a recognition of this very conflict, an acceptance of their liminal place on the outside of accepted norms in society, that appears to offer these resisters some sense of comfort and support- there is, paradoxically, a sense of self to be gained from the very absence of available identifications. As a second observation, finding the humour in this stressful experience seems to offer a strong source of support. Building on these observations, a theoretical framing is developed with the help of Jacques Lacan's account of how people engage with the symbolic order that structures language, at times identifying with it, at others laughing at it. This analysis helps us to understand resistant identities more fully, and to gain an appreciation of survival strategies in such struggles. In this way, this paper furthers debates on identity in organizations, on whistleblowing and on resistance more generally.</p>
Biography:	<p>Kate Kenny is Reader at Queen's University Belfast Management School, Northern Ireland and a research fellow at Cambridge University's Judge Business School. During 2013–2015, Kate holds an Edmond J. Safra Lab Fellowship at Harvard University. As part of this fellowship, she will draw on empirical data to examine the perspectives of whistleblowers in banking organizations in relation to their decisions to speak up about perceived problems.</p> <p>Her work focuses on culture and identity in organizations, particularly theories of affect, power and psychoanalysis, and she has been published in <i>Organization</i>, <i>Organization Studies</i>, <i>Gender Work and Organization</i>, and <i>Human Relations</i>, among other journals. She is an editorial board member of <i>Organization</i>, <i>Journal of Organizational Ethnography</i> and <i>Ephemera: Theory and Politics of Organization</i>. She recently published <i>Understanding Identity and Organizations</i> (with A. Whittle and H. Willmott, Sage 2011).</p>
Contact	<p>This seminar has been organised by the OHRM Group.</p> <p>Ruth Penny, OHRM Group oboffice@wbs.ac.uk or 024 7652 4962</p> <p>http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/wbs/subjects/ohrm/events/seminar/</p>