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The power of silence: silencing as a method of preventing whistleblowing

Hiljaisuuden voima: vaientaminen epäkohtien paljastamisen esteenä

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ABSTRACT
The article discusses silencing as an obstacle to whistleblowing in the field of social work. Silencing seeks to prevent reporting or discussion of wrongdoing at work, including illegal and unethical practices. The empirical material comprises interviews ($N = 17$) and email exchanges with Finnish social workers, in which they describe their experiences and perceptions of silencing at their workplace. The article describes forms of silencing and uses content analysis to analyse these from the perspective of power. The results characterise silencing as the hidden exercise of power, using institutional mechanisms, communication hierarchies and informal rules to control channels of communication and information flows. By distracting from or delaying redress of malpractice and undermining employees' right to recognise and report wrongdoing by minimising, wrongdoing is normalised and responsibility to take action is avoided. These silencing mechanisms must be understood if they are to be challenged and properly addressed.

TIIVISTELMÄ
Artikkeli käsittelee vaientamista sosiaalialan työn epäkohtien raportoinnin esteenä. Vaientamisella pyritään estämään työn epäkohdista, kuten laittomista ja epäeettisistä toiminnoista, keskusteleminen ja niistä raportointi. Artikkelin empiirinen aineisto koostuu haastatteluista (N17) ja sähköpostiviesteistä suomalaisten sosiaalialan työntekijöiden kanssa, joissa he kuvailevat kokemuksiaan sekä havaintojaan vaientamisesta työyhteisössä. Artikkeli kuvailee vaientamisen muotoja ja analysoi niitä vallan näkökulmasta, sisällönanalyysin avulla. Tulokset osoittavat vaientamisen olevan piiloutuvaa vallankäyttöä, joka muodostuu institutionaalisista mekanismeista, kommunikaatiohierarkioista ja epävirallisista säännöistä. Vaientaminen tapahtuu kontrolloimalla tiedonkulkua ja keskustelukanavia, harhauttamalla ja viivästyttämällä epäkohtien ratkaisemista. Organisaatioissa normalisoidaan epäkohtia vähättelemällä niitä ja epäkohtien korjaamisvastuuta väistellään. Ongelmien poistamista edistävien työntekijöiden osaamista väheksytään organisaatioissa ja heitä syyllistetään ongelmista. Vaientamisen ymmärtäminen on tärkeää, mikäli halutaan edistää sosiaalialan epäkohtien poistamista ja palveluiden laadun kehittämistä.

KEYWORDS
Whistleblowing; silencing; social work; forms of power; institutional ethnography

AVAINSANAT
Epäkohtien paljastaminen; epäkohtien raportointi; ilmianto; vaientaminen; sosiaalityö; vallan muodot; institutionaalinen etnografia

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Introduction

To enhance understanding of what makes whistleblowing difficult, this exploratory qualitative study focuses on silencing as one of the major barriers to whistleblowing in the area of social welfare. Whistleblowing can be defined as 'the disclosure by organisation members (former or current) of illegal, immoral, or illegitimate practices under the control of their employers, to persons or organisations that may able to effect action' (Miceli & Near, 1985, p. 4). The goal of whistleblowing is to correct or stop wrongdoing, a process that begins with observation of wrongdoing, after which workers must assess the situation and make ethical decisions in choosing between action, inaction or exit from the situation (Hedin & Månsson, 2012).

The present study adopts the everyday perspective of social workers who observe actions that are unethical, illegal, dangerous or somehow contradictory to their organisation's aims. Social workers everywhere must follow professional ethical codes and have a legal right to whistleblow. By doing nothing to stop harmful conduct or policy, '… social workers may violate their basic professional commitment to promote and protect the welfare of their clients and, in fact, undermine the very raison d'etre of the profession and their work in it' (Mansbach & Bachner, 2009, p. 19). When social workers suspect wrongdoing at work, they are obliged by the Statement of Ethical Principles (International Federation of Social Workers, 2004) to make a disclosure in the public interest.

Those who decide to take action must first gather information and evidence of possible wrongdoing. They must also choose a reporting path from a wide range of possible recipients (Donkin, Smith, & Brown, 2008, p. 86). In Finnish social welfare organisations, whistleblowing begins internally through the managerial chain. If initial reports are not addressed, one can move on to external whistleblowing, reporting to authorities outside the organisation, such as investigative commissions, the media, ombudspersons or congresspersons. Where authorities within the organisation ignore complaints, the informant is obliged to notify outsiders. Following an instance of whistleblowing, the organisation is expected to react, and the process ends with an evaluation of success or failure. In some cases, there is a need to improve and repeat the process. Researchers generally agree that whistleblowing can be a difficult and hazardous activity (Brown, Mazurski, & Olsen, 2008; Hedin & Månsson, 2012; Miceli, Rehg, Near, & Ryan, 1999; Raymond, Beddoe, & Staniforth, 2017), as employers may try to influence the process, but few studies have explored how potential whistleblowers are compelled to remain silent.

This analysis characterises silencing as preventing or suppressing discourse about possible wrongdoing within an organisation to prevent whistleblowing or related internal discourse. Silencing can occur before and during actual whistleblowing by denying access to arenas where concerns can be expressed and by hindering evidence collection, information sharing and planning of whistleblowing actions. Silencing is achieved through different power mechanisms, techniques and relationships, mainly within the organisation. As this process has not been previously analysed, *this article seeks to explain silencing as part of the whistleblowing process and to explicate how it is implemented through institutional processes*.

The first section draws on the international literature to describe the whistleblowing process in Finland in terms of reporting barriers, negative consequences and employees' rights to report misconduct. The second section describes the empirical data, as well as data collection and analysis. Based on these empirical findings, the third section analyses silencing as a form of power. In conclusion, the discussion summarises the main findings.

Whistleblowing: a statutory right with negative consequences?

While most whistleblowing is internal (Donkin et al., 2008, p. 86; Vandekerckhove, James, & West, 2013) several factors influence the decision to use internal or external channels. One key factor is the communication culture in the employer organisation (Kaptein, 2011, pp. 516–520; United States Merit Systems Protection Board [MSPB], 2011.) If that culture does not accommodate a

discourse of possible wrongdoing, workers are unlikely to use internal reporting mechanisms. The use of external reporting channels such as media or union representation is rare; it is also strategic, as external whistleblowing is more efficient but may also have more negative consequences for the whistleblower (Ash, 2016, p. 16; Dworkin & Baucus, 1998, p. 1281).

Among social workers, whistleblowing is a relatively unknown form of advocacy and ethical resistance (Greene & Latting, 2004; van Wormer, Kaplan, & Juby, 2012, pp. 394–395). Although little explored (Raymond et al., 2017), a number of the following public sector whistleblowing studies have encompassed social services. Despite stereotypes of whistleblowing as a relatively rare phenomenon, there is evidence that it is far more frequent in reality (Brown et al., 2008). For example, one large Australian study found that at least 61% of public sector workers have witnessed serious wrongdoing, and 28% reported that wrongdoing (Brown et al., 2008, pp. 26–27). In a survey of more than 40,000 U.S. federal employees (MSPB, 2011), about 11% had witnessed illegal or wasteful activities involving their agency in the previous 12 months, and 34% told no one about what they had seen (MSPB, 2011). Research has consistently shown that most employees who observe wrongdoing in their organisation do not report it (e.g. Brown, 2008; Miceli & Near, 1992). As a notable exception, a Norwegian study (Skivenes & Trygstad, 2010) found that 76% of those who observed wrongdoing reported the misconduct.

A Finnish survey (Tiitinen & Silén, 2016) found that 88% of social welfare workers ($N = 183$) had observed illegal or unethical practices within the last year. Almost all respondents (97%) had whistleblown at least once, while 87% had on occasion declined to report wrongdoing. This was most often for fear of retaliation, as 41% had seen some form of retaliation or punishment against whistleblowers at work (Tiitinen & Silén, 2016). Uncertainty, lack of proof of wrongdoing, fear of reprisals or other negative reactions and disbelief about actual changes were the main reasons for not blowing the whistle (Lonne, McDonald, & Fox, 2004; MSPB, 2011; Preston-Shoot, 2011).

Several studies have shown that whistleblowers are often reacting to serious problems (Brown, 2008; Hedin & Månsson, 2012; Raymond et al., 2017), usually including criticism of current policies and practices. In the public sector (including social and healthcare services), whistleblowing most often related to cutbacks in vital services, unethical working methods, abuse of clients and illegal service policies (Hedin & Månsson, 2012). In one New Zealand study (Raymond et al., 2017), social workers blew the whistle on colleagues' unsafe social work practices and organisational practices or policies that were seen to contribute to such practices. Whistleblowing and misconduct are strongly contextual phenomena, varying for example by time, place, culture, society and legislation (Skivenes & Trygstad, 2010).

Most international studies depict whistleblowing as difficult, risky and rarely effective (Ash, 2016; Miceli et al., 1999; Skivenes & Trygstad, 2010), as it involves ethical dilemmas and may exact a high personal price (De Maria, 1996, 1997; Mansbach & Bachner, 2009). The process of retaliation begins with coercion and attempts to persuade the whistleblower to withdraw or mitigate the complaint (Hedin & Månsson, 2012), with a range of negative consequences designed to disgrace and silence the whistleblower. These include isolation, withholding of information needed to do one's job and defamation or undermining of one's professional reputation. The whistleblower may be transferred to a different job and may face suspension, demotion, verbal harassment or intimidation (Ash, 2016, pp. 47–54; MSPB, 2011; Raymond et al., 2017).

Negative consequences for whistleblowers vary across studies and countries. One Norwegian study (Skivenes & Trygstad, 2010) found that in 83% of cases, employees' reporting activities were received positively. In a UK study, 40% of 1000 whistleblowers referred to negative management responses on raising a concern (Vandekerckhove et al., 2013).

In a US survey of federal employees (including Health and Human Services), 36% had experienced some form of reprisal or threat of reprisal by management after reporting wrongdoing (MSPB, 2011). In an Australian study (Brown, 2008), a minority of whistleblowers (20%–30%) reported bad treatment from management or co-workers, but this was enough to impact directly on the willingness of others to report possible wrongdoing (Brown & Olsen, 2008, p. 137). Poor or negligent treatment of

whistleblowers has no direct impact on whether other members of staff are prepared to report perceived wrongdoing or take some other action (Brown & Wheeler, 2008, p. 299). One small Finnish survey found that 37% of social welfare workers have experienced retaliation for whistleblowing (Tiitinen & Silén, 2016).

Although Finland is ranked as having one of the lowest corruption rates in the world (Transparency International, 2016), there is no law in force to protect whistleblowers. Additionally, there are no specific official channels for whistleblowers, no specific means of compensation for retribution and no penalties for those who retaliate (Transparency International, 2013).

While the concept of whistleblowing is overlooked in Finnish research, culture and legislation (Salminen & Heiskanen, 2013), Finnish whistleblowers are protected by various pieces of legislation, including the constitutional right to freedom of speech. The Constitution of Finland (§ 12) gives Finnish citizens (including employees) rights in relation to freedom of expression and access to information. If there is a need for external whistleblowing, Finnish workers commonly report to their unions, supervisory authorities or the media (Salminen & Heiskanen, 2013; Tiitinen & Silén, 2016).

The Finnish system is based mainly on passive whistleblowing, which means that workers are not generally obliged to report wrongdoing. However, in some areas, workers are so obliged; this includes workers in the social welfare sector, under the Social Welfare Act (§ 48). Initially, whistleblowing is internal, but if the complaint is ignored, the worker is then obliged to report the issue to the supervising authorities. The Act also prohibits any negative action against the whistleblower for reporting the misconduct (Social Welfare Act, § 48).

The data

The main theory and method used in this study is institutional ethnography (IE), which explores the everyday experiences of people (Smith, 2006). The decision not to report wrongdoing is not made solely by the individual who witnesses wrongdoing but involves silencing by institutional processes. In attempting to make visible those social processes and power structures, the study focuses on experiences of being silenced from the social worker's perspective.

As IE research, the analysis followed a specific sequence (Smith, 2006, p. 20): (1) identifying an experience – in this case, silencing; (2) identifying institutional processes that shape that experience – here, the set of techniques, power mechanisms and relationships that deliver silencing; and (3) investigating those processes to analyse and describe how they operate as a form of power. IE provides concepts and tools for analysing powerful ruling practices and relationships and discovering 'how things are actually put together' (Smith, 2006, p. 1). In the present case, that means finding out how silencing is delivered. To that end, the research draws on two data sources: (1) interviews with Finnish social workers who have experienced or acknowledged silencing at work and (2) email and Facebook exchanges with the same group.

Interviews: The main data comprise 17 semi-structured interviews with social workers who have used media and other forms of public communication for work-related purposes. The 17 informants (14 women and 3 men) were recruited through newspaper and social media posts and other social networks. In total, the transcribed interviews yielded 171 pages of text.

The informants worked in public sector social work agencies in Finland, mainly in municipal social welfare offices. (Finnish social services are generally organised by city and smaller municipalities.) Most of the informants were employed as social workers; only a few performed other social welfare roles. Located throughout Finland (other than northern Lapland), most worked in a city, with only a few from rural municipalities. Nine of the 17 interviewees had used the media as a whistleblowing channel, and seven had experienced some kind negative reaction to their whistleblowing or intended whistleblowing. The rest had observed silencing and referred to a fear of retaliation.

Textual data: The textual data consisted of email and Facebook exchanges between social workers and the author. In IE, 'talking with people' is a broad term, encompassing formal and informal research formats and data (Smith, 2006, pp. 22–23). While talking about whistleblowing with social

workers, I constantly noted instances of silencing and used the 'talking with people' technique to deepen my knowledge and to test my understanding of silencing.

Emails: These data comprised email exchanges with two social workers in relation to their ongoing whistleblowing actions and the consequences they faced within their organisation. These messages provided in-depth information about silencing practices.

Facebook messages: My previous article about silencing received media coverage in Finland and was shared on social media, igniting discussions about experiences of silencing on social media sites. I collected Facebook communications about the practices of silencing from two sites for use in this article. The first was a semi-open discussion site, where the discussants were social welfare workers. The second site was a closed online Facebook course for social work students on which I was an instructor.

All informants participated voluntarily in the study, and permission was sought to use their messages for research purposes. Interviews and email exchanges occurred mostly during their free time, and no research permit was requested from their employer organisations.

How can invisible silencing be analysed?

Before commencing this study, I knew nothing about whistleblowing or silencing. When I began collecting data on motives for using media in social work, informants told me about their fear of reprisals if they talked about wrongdoing or expressed any criticism of their employer. They also told me about informal communication rules that prohibited them from talking about work-related topics in public. However, when describing their experiences, they did not use the concepts of silencing or whistleblowing but simply described how people reacted to their whistleblowing or whistleblowing intentions.

Following Yin (2011), I used content analysis to identify and organise the practices of silencing contained in the data, seeking to answer the following questions. How do people react to discussions about possible wrongdoing? What kinds of actions, messages and rules affected or prevented whistleblowing? What methods and techniques were used to silence them? Finally, I classified the practices of silencing in terms of four forms of power (Table 1). The data were insufficient to analyse age or gender issues.

Silencing takes place before or during whistleblowing, with the aim of preventing employees from sharing information about possible wrongdoing, collecting evidence, or planning actual whistleblowing. In the present case, most informants had discussed instances of wrongdoing and sought their colleagues' support for whistleblowing. However, some whistleblowers act without revealing their plans to anyone. Table 1 analyses silencing messages and acts as reactions against employees' efforts to develop a discourse on wrongdoing or to plan whistleblowing. These are signals to employees about behaviours that are expected, rewarded or punished.

Silencing may reflect a pervasive culture or it may be a rare and singular event. While it occurs in a communal context (here, a the working community), silencing is an individual and subjective experience, and some people are more sensitive to silencing messages. Ranging from silent ignorance to

Table 1. Forms of silencing power.

FORM OF SILENCING POWER	EXPLANATION	
Culture of silencing	Informal and formal communication rules, norms and hierarchies within the organisation prohibiting discussion of wrongdoing	Before whistle blowing
Resource power	Silencing discussion of wrongdoing by controlling employees' use of time, space and communication channels	
Playing powerless and normalising power	Ignoring messages about wrongdoing and postponing handling of such issues; denying the wrongdoing and explaining it as part of normal practice; minimising the significance of the wrongdoing.	After whistle-blowing
Professional undermining and disempowerment	Denial of employees' right or capacity to observe wrongdoing or to resolve or report it.	

open denial, the different forms of silencing are not necessarily separate actions but are in reality clustered and linked. Relationships play an important role in silencing acts, which are more effective if the person delivering the silencing message has some power over the targeted individual (see also Rehg, Miceli, Near, & Van Scotter, 2008). The act of silencing occurs mostly in hierarchical contexts, where senior colleagues may maintain the culture of silence (see also Raymond et al., 2017).

In the present study, wrongdoing related mainly to shortcomings in social services and benefits, service resources or service structure and policy. Social workers reported poor service quality, inadequate working conditions, systematic discrimination against certain client groups, poorly delivered organisational changes and illegal policies and practices. Most whistleblowing topics related to local political and structural problems rather than to individual misconduct such as abuse or theft. In the following sections, I discuss empirical examples of each form of silencing.

Culture of silencing

A culture of silencing consists of a range of formal and informal communication rules, norms and hierarchies within the organisation, which become visible when someone challenges the culture of silence. These organisational provisions are used to silence discourse about problematic issues and wrongdoing, sometimes beginning during work orientation. Several of the participating social workers described how all contacts with the media or local political leaders were prohibited unless authorised by a manager. Use of media channels for whistleblowing is tactical, when whistleblowers want journalistic protection to ensure their anonymity as the information source.

> *When I started in social work, it was made clear that "one's own nest should not be fouled". We were sent a letter which prohibited workers from talking with journalists.* (Social worker)

This prohibition meant that social workers had to communicate secretly with journalists. Informal rules prohibiting media contact or requiring a supervisor's permission to exercise one's freedom of speech are barriers to whistleblowing and to freedom of speech in the wider community. Where employees ask for a supervisor's permission to contact the media for this purpose, they risk losing their anonymity and may become the target of retaliation. While organisations clearly have the right to control official media reports and to maintain their reputation, this can lead to control and censorship of all outgoing messages. When workers must ask permission before initiating any work-related media contact, their freedom of speech may be violated. The culture of silence commonly involves norms and rules that are informal or unwritten. When an employee breaks the rules, she becomes the target of silencing through tactics such as reprimands by managers: 'The whistleblower's "crime" is their acting against the code of silence' (Ash, 2016, p. 18).

Communication hierarchies also form part of the culture of silencing. Some organisations have strong social norms that govern communication between agents and structures. In silencing hierarchies, these are used to censor messages from the lowest organisational level to top management or to others who play an important role in addressing wrongdoing. A social worker described the strict communication rules in a large social welfare organisation. According to the rules, all messages must follow the hierarchical chain, and people along that chain have the right to change the message. Direct contact with decision-makers and organisation managers was prohibited.

> *The services manager told workers that all issues should be reported to the immediate supervisor, who will take the message to her immediate manager, who will take the message to his manager, until finally the message is delivered to the director. … the chief further said that the managers can edit the contents of the message along the way.* (Social worker)

Another social worker said that they had sent several messages through the official information structure but received no response.

In some cases, employees are led to believe that all public discussion of work-related topics is abnormal, dangerous or even illegal. In this way, the culture of silence can lead to self-censorship,

and silencing norms are followed partly because of a lack of knowledge. Social workers do not challenge silencing norms because they lack sufficient knowledge about their rights and the limits of public expression, professional confidentiality, whistleblowing and loyalty to the organisation. Workers are also uncertain about the extent to which they are bound by the organisation's formal communication procedures and may not want to test the limits of their right to communicate as they are unsure of the level of risk to them.

Resource power

Resource power silences discussion by controlling employee use of time, space and communication channels. The organisation controls channels of communication and discussion forums such as work-group meetings, email, Facebook and other social media, which can be seen as resources. The employing organisation has the power and the right to define what modes of communication are used at work, how they are used and who has the right to use them.

When social workers notice possible wrongdoing, they aim to share information and knowledge about the problematic issue. To silence them, the organisation can strive to prevent meetings and discussion of wrongdoing both at work and after work.

> *Social workers were prohibited from meeting and talking about resource cuts and work structures during the working day. They were also forbidden to meet outside of work and talk about work issues without the presence of their manager*. (Social worker)

Where discussion of wrongdoing was prohibited during meetings at work, workers used email or other forms of communication. Some whistleblowers gathered on social media, as in the following example.

> *Social workers set up a secret Facebook group where they talked about problems, wrongdoing and planned actions. At first, they founded a large group, where most workers were invited. Soon, they found that someone had leaked information from the secret Facebook group to the organisation's managers. After this, a certain "inner circle" founded a smaller Facebook group, where only trusted people were invited. Whistleblowing efforts continued within the smaller group*. (Social worker)

Social media offer many opportunities for counter-discourse and whistleblowing but do not eliminate all risk of retaliation. As Foucault suggests (O'Farrell, 2005), the exercise of power can be resisted in a number of ways. Resistance is co-extensive with power; as soon as there is a power relation, there is the possibility of resistance. One social worker described how the workers changed their strategy whenever the employer tried to silence them. Silencing and whistleblowing can be likened to a game, during which players change their strategy and tactics. When an employer denies access to some discussion arena, the employees seek out new arenas to continue playing. In this context, the game is a battle between revealing and silencing truth about wrongdoing. In this game, the 'ball' is knowledge or truth as delivered by counter-discourse. The game continues until someone wins or until the game is forgotten.

Playing powerless and normalising wrongdoing

Organisation leaders may play powerless when workers demand change, evading their responsibility by saying that they have no power to do anything. Inaction is also promoted by arguing that the problem cannot be solved. Repeating 'we have no choice' is a strategy designed to make whistleblowers cease their actions and demands.

As a silencing technique, *postponing* means that the employer admits the existence of certain problems and emphasises the need to resolve wrongdoing. However, after expressing concern by means of rhetoric, no visible action is taken. Rhetoric is used to distract people who are demanding change. In the hectic environment of social work, with heavy workloads, ongoing resource cuts and new policies, there is always a new crisis around the corner, and workers do not have the time or energy to

fight multiple battles at once. Postponing the handling of wrongdoing is an attempt to make people forget the issue and abandon the whistleblowing process.

Hedin and Månsson (2012) found that the whistleblowing process sometimes stops at internal whistleblowing.

> *People who presented the complaint did not want to go outside the organisation with it. Upon discussion with supervisors, management promised to correct the wrongdoing or in another way deal with the problem. The whistleblowers allowed themselves to be content with this.* (Social worker)

Following internal whistleblowing, workers usually await dialogue and action or attention from management (see also Hedin & Månsson, 2012). One group of Finnish social workers reported that they waited almost ten years before moving on to external whistleblowing after making various internal inquiries and sending emails to management about the problems.

One of the most common methods of silencing is *ignorance*, where discussion topics considered unfavourable from the organisation's point of view are totally ignored. If ignorance is used in this way as a hierarchical power technique, any stated need to discuss possible wrongdoing remains unanswered, as in the case of pleas and emailed questions sent to leaders.

> *I tried to initiate a discussion about the correctness of the policy in my own work team, but I got no response. I contacted the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health to clarify instructions, and they said that the policy was illegal. The Unemployment Security Ombudsman also said that it shouldńt be this way. Nevertheless, they stuck to the illegal policy. Nothing changed. Everyone around us told that the policy was illegal, but there was no response from our organisation.* (Social Worker)

Several studies (Brown, 2008; Hedin & Månsson, 2012; Vandekerckhove et al., 2013) have shown that internal whistleblowing is frequently met with silence from supervisors and directors, and there is some evidence of extensive institutional silencing. One UK study (Vandekerckhove et al., 2013) analysed the cases of 1000 whistleblowers and found that 60% received no response from management and 74% said that nothing was done about the wrongdoing. A Finnish survey (Tiitinen & Silén, 2016) found that whistleblowing did not lead to change in 56% of cases. In contrast, a Norwegian study (Skivenes & Trygstad, 2010) found that the majority (83%) of employees who blow the whistle receive a positive reaction, and the conduct that led them to blow the whistle is improved. These results can be explained by the participative and open communication culture that characterises most Norwegian workplaces (Skivenes & Trygstad, 2010).

In the silencing process, wrongdoing such as illegal or unethical policies and practices may be *normalised*, where the organisation denies the wrongdoing and explains it as part of everyday action. The significance of the wrongdoing is minimised by arguing that there are other more important issues or that someone else faces more difficult problems. This relativising of problems is also done internally by claiming 'we have bigger problems than this'. Inevitably, there will always be greater problems somewhere, and if social workers complain about the unbearable workload, it may simply be compared to a place where workloads are even heavier. Equally, wrongdoing and service failures may be explained by the failure of individual workers, lack of resources or the economic crisis. These arguments may be valid, but in the context of silencing, they are used to conceal the real issues.

Professional undermining

Professional undermining denies an employee's abilities as a problem-solver. Workers who report a grievance have knowledge of wrongdoing and often have ideas for resolving it. In the context of silencing, workers' knowledge and expertise in this regard is not appreciated. Instead, their efforts to resolve the issue are seen as problematic, and the wrongdoing may be *individualised* by advising the whistleblower not to think about the problem. This is a strong message, as it implies that whistleblowers are thinking about the wrong thing and that the problem is in their head. This 'mind control' is used to distract from the idea that the organisation is responsible for the wrongdoing,

and for making efforts to change. If social workers are told not to think about illegal or unethical practices or other wrongdoing, they are essentially being told to ignore the ethical codes of social work.

> *They called this [discourse of wrongdoing] a hobby, which should take place outside work. Then the supervising social workers were invited to hearings with their managers. They were forbidden to discuss about the problematic issues with outsiders. One manager said that social workers who make efforts to solve grievances have personal problems, which should not be handled at work.* (Social Worker)

Participating social workers said that employers praised passive workers who express no criticism. Workers who remain silent about wrongdoing are seen as loyal, winning the 'popularity contest' in the eyes of their employers. This method is used to normalise self-censorship and to punish whistleblowers socially.

Social workers from big organisations described a lack of structures or tradition of involving workers in problem-solving processes. Instead, practical everyday work was organised from the top down, and workers simply followed the instructions of someone higher in the organisation hierarchy. In other words, the power to define important topics for discussion was given to someone other than the social workers.

> *During child protection professional development days, workers wanted to talk about the problems of the work and developmental needs. But these professional development days were organised by managers and so-called "special experts" (consultants), who talked about something other than our work. … We had no other opportunities to meet workers from other teams elsewhere to talk about work.* (Social worker)

Many of the reported instances of wrongdoing related to the structures of social work, such as illegal policies, rules or insufficient resources. Any effort to work on larger structural problems is likely to be seen as beyond social workers' ordinary tasks. Social work is usually delivered as one-to-one relationships with the client, so when a social worker suddenly raises questions about structures, they are seen as deviating from their role and therefore confused. The organisation then tries to restore the power balance using counter-actions like silencing.

Discussion: forms of silencing

Table 2 is a compendium of silencing messages and acts, representing different reactions and arguments when an employee attempts to initiate discussion of wrongdoing or to plan whistleblowing. These silencing techniques are analysed here as forms of power.

Table 2 identifies silencing actions that often reflect informal and invisible power. In addition to acts of silencing, whistleblowers may become the target of more formal retaliation, including official warnings, other disciplinary actions or dismissal. Silencing dismisses whistleblowing as an option for action, and the organisation usually has no functioning whistleblowing procedures. The elimination of any opportunity for whistleblowing prevents discourse on wrongdoing, making the worker feel hopeless and powerless to initiate change. When whistleblowing channels are non-existent, workers have to create their own routes.

Institutional and cultural structures that deliver silencing prevent discourse on wrongdoing in order to make the whistleblowing process as difficult as possible and ultimately to prevent it. Both whistleblowing and silencing reflect forms of power. Whistleblowing uses power to reveal hidden truths while silencing seeks to hide the truth. These opposing goals co-exist inside the organisation, forming a power game in which some organisational 'players' try to prevent whistleblowing while others look for ways of generating discourse on possible wrongdoing and blowing the whistle.

In the present study, the subjects of silencing were the participating social workers. However, as wrongdoing usually concerns the rights of social workers' clients and other citizens, the ultimate victims are usually social service users. In many cases, social workers resort to whistleblowing to represent the voices of marginalised people. Individual workers (including social workers) 'are especially important because they make the linkages between clients and ruling discourses' (Smith, 2006, p. 27).

Table 2. Silencing strategies as forms of power.

FORM OF POWER	ORGANISATIONAL SILENCING REACTIONS AND MESSAGES Reactions and arguments against discussion when workers mention wrongdoing or plan whistleblowing	
Culture of silencing	**Informal and formal communication rules, norms and hierarchies that prohibit discussion of wrongdoing**	Before whistle blowing
- *Own nest should not be fouled.* - Maintaining good relationships with everyone is more important than dealing with wrongdoing. - Personnel can only discuss problems with their immediate superior. - Only the head of department has the right to discuss wrongdoing with external agents.		
Resource power	**Controlling professional communication** **Silencing discussion of wrongdoing by controlling employee use of time, space and communication channels**	
- Personnel are afforded no opportunities to discuss wrongdoing. - Talking about wrongdoing is prohibited during the workday and in meetings after work. - Use of email lists and other communication channels for wrongdoing-related discussions is forbidden.		
Playing powerless and normalising the problem	**Ignoring messages concerning wrongdoing and postponing redress.** **The organisation denies the existence of wrongdoing and explains it as part of normal action.**	During or after whistle blowing
- Management ignores reports of wrongdoing or postpones handling them. - Responsibility to act is denied by claiming '*we cannot do anything'* or '*we have no choice'*. - Management promises to address the problem, but nothing is done. - Wrongdoing is normalised by comparing it to bigger problems in another organisation. - The problem is normalised by arguing that '*not all problems can be solved'* or *'it is not a problem'*.		
Professional and personal undermining	**Controlling the professional ethical decision-making process** **Denial of employee observations of wrongdoing and ability to solve and report of wrongdoing**	
- Solving or discussing wrongdoing is not considered part of the employee's role. - Employees are told not to think or talk about wrongdoing. - The problem is characterised as the worker's personal issue. - Management ignores the problem by saying '*social workers always whine about something'*. - Management and special experts decide on the important issues at work.		
Retaliation	**Consistent negative consequence of speaking out**	
- Raising concerns about the whistleblower's mental health or motives. - Undermining the whistleblower and spreading negative rumours about them. - Inviting whistleblowers to hearings with their managers. - Warning whistleblowers of formal or informal reprisals if they continue their actions.		

During the silencing process, clients' experiences of injustice are ignored if the organisation denies the existence of wrongdoing.

In a public social work organisation, many instances of structural wrongdoing are simultaneously a matter of social policy and therefore relate directly to the public interest. By silencing wrongdoing, social policy outcomes are defined as private (i.e. non-public) discourses, which is problematic for democracy. When social workers are silenced, they cannot report social problems like poverty and oppression or the capacity of current services to handle problems. As social service users are commonly the most vulnerable members of society and have no resources for whistleblowing, social workers must be able to recognise and report any broad or repeated systematic failures in public service structures.

When social workers observe wrongdoing and their efforts to resolve it are repeatedly dismissed, their professional ethics are being disregarded (see also Preston-Shoot, 2011). This disregard may in itself demand external whistleblowing where the challenge to professional ethics becomes unbearable. If properly addressed internally, wrongdoing is rarely leaked to outsiders. In contrast, silencing is no more than a bandaid to conceal problems that instead need to be analysed and eliminated.

As most whistleblowing is done through the management chain, silencing is necessarily conducted within that same managerial chain. Employees observe how others are treated during whistleblowing and make judgments about management and the risks of whistleblowing on that basis (see also Raymond et al., 2017). Organisations have the power to influence employees' decisions in this regard by creating a culture that supports openness and active problem solving rather than silencing workers who try to address those problems.

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