



Social Psychological Bulletin

Personality Effects on Two Types of Whistleblowing Decisions

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Social Psychological Bulletin, 2025, Vol. 20, Article e12243, <https://doi.org/10.32872/spb.12243>

Received: 2023-06-22 • Accepted: 2024-11-21 • Published (VoR): 2025-07-31



Handling Editor: Katarzyna Byrka, SWPS University, Wrocław, Poland

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Supplementary Materials: Code, Data, Materials, Preregistration [see [Index of Supplementary Materials](#)]



Abstract

When employees observe an immoral practice under the control of their employer, they face a decision on whether to act against it. If they do want to act, they need to decide how to report their concerns, that is, whether they want to use internal (i.e., to other members of the organization) or external reporting channels (e.g., to the media). In the present contribution, we investigate which personality traits relate to these two types of whistleblowing decisions. In a two-wave scenario study ($N = 724$), we tested whether HEXACO Honesty-Humility is associated with a decision for whistleblowing (vs. inaction) and whether HEXACO Agreeableness is associated with a decision for internal (vs. external) whistleblowing. Our predictions were not confirmed, and all in all, the six HEXACO dimensions jointly explained only a small amount of variance in these two whistleblowing decisions. There was, however, evidence from exploratory analyses showing that higher levels of Honesty-Humility were positively associated with a decision for internal (vs. external) whistleblowing.

Keywords

whistleblowing, personality, HEXACO, honesty-humility, agreeableness



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Highlights

- Previous theoretical contributions have suggested that different personality traits are related to whistleblowing decisions.
- We tested the effects of the six HEXACO personality dimensions on whistleblowing in a two-wave scenario study.
- The six HEXACO dimensions jointly explained only a small amount of variance in whistleblowing.
- Honesty-Humility was positively associated with a decision for internal (vs. external) whistleblowing.

Imagine Claire, an employee at a company that operates hospitals and nursing homes. Recently, the local management of the hospital in which Claire works has decided to reduce operating costs and particularly cuts back on staff. These cost-cutting measures have drastically increased workloads for all employees, including Claire. Owing to the fact that fewer employees are now responsible for delivering medical treatments and care, Claire fears deficits in the quality of their services. As she is not capable of stopping the company's cost-cutting measures on her own, she decides to disclose them to a local newspaper in order to raise public awareness of the situation.

Does Claire's behavior—known as whistleblowing (Near & Miceli, 1985)—represent a form of prosocial behavior? Today, there is no single agreed-upon definition of prosocial behavior (see Pfattheicher et al., 2022), but one influential definition describes prosocial behavior as a “broad range of actions intended to benefit one or more people other than oneself [...]” (Batson & Powell, 2003, p. 463). Applying this definition to the given whistleblowing case, we can indeed understand her action as prosocial if we assume that Claire's dominant intention is to benefit other people—for example, to achieve better medical conditions for her patients or better work conditions for her colleagues. It is important to note that Claire might also personally benefit from disclosing the cost-cutting measures to the newspaper (e.g., through better working conditions for herself). Yet, this does not necessary imply that her action is *not* prosocial: Prosociality is, according to the definition cited above, characterized by the intentions of the actor and not by the consequences that an action has.

Claire's decision to publicly disclose the cost-cutting measures by the local management may also yield (perhaps unintended) negative consequences for other members of the company. For instance, the company's public reputation might be damaged after an accusatory newspaper report, and consequently, fewer patients might choose a hospital or nursing home run by this company in the future. This effect, in turn, might result in financial or career disadvantages for some of the company's employees. These consequences could have been avoided if Claire had decided to not go the public media (which is a case of “external whistleblowing”), but rather use the company's internal reporting

system to bring the local management's decision to the attention of the company's leadership (which would have been a case of "internal whistleblowing").

This exemplary case illustrates that whistleblowing can be conceptualized as a prosocial behavior, but that external whistleblowing may imply negative consequences for the organization and its members. Thus, whistleblowing may be rooted in prosocial intentions, but may, at the same time, harm others. This implies a decision dilemma for people like Claire: Do they decide to remain silent about the issue? Do they decide to choose an internal reporting procedure, or do they decide to make the case public (external whistleblowing)? And what predicts these decisions? The research reported here has been designed to provide answers to the latter question.

More precisely, we conceptualize the whistleblowing decision-making process as a sequence of (1) the decision to blow the whistle vs. remaining silent (henceforth: "inaction"), and (2) the decision to blow the whistle via an internal (vs. external) reporting channel, and investigate how basic prosocial tendencies as conceptualized in the HEXACO model of personality (Ashton & Lee, 2007) relate to these two types of whistleblowing decisions. Our theoretical predictions regarding the HEXACO personality traits as predictors for the decisions that (potential) whistleblowers make are based on conceptual arguments that have been laid out in detail by Fischer et al. (2024).

Whistleblowing as a Prosocial Behavior

By definition, whistleblowing represents "the disclosure by organization members (former or current) of illegal, immoral, or illegitimate practices under the control of their employers, to persons or organizations that may be able to effect action" (Near & Miceli, 1985, p. 4). Applying this definition to the real-life example at the beginning of our manuscript suggests that Claire's behavior can indeed be viewed as whistleblowing because (1) she discloses information to an organization that may be able to effect action (i.e., to a newspaper) and (2) because she is an employee of the organization in which the immoral practice occurred (i.e., the hospital).

It is interesting to note that, according to this definition, a prosocial motive pursued by the whistleblower is *not* a defining feature of whistleblowing. As such, most researchers would also consider it whistleblowing if a disclosure about organizational misconduct was pursued with selfish motives or even with the intention to harm other people. Empirical evidence from real-life whistleblowing cases, however, show that whistleblowing usually aims at stopping organizational wrongdoing that harms people, groups, or organizations other than the whistleblower: A survey among 1,000 whistleblowers, for example, found that the organizational wrongdoing that the whistleblower intended to rectify harmed other people in 81% of the reported cases (Vandekerckhove et al., 2013). The assumption that whistleblowing represents a form of prosocial behavior is also reflected in various theoretical accounts (e.g., Dozier & Miceli, 1985). In the following,

we will refer to the decision to blow the whistle or remain silent as *whistleblowing* (vs. *inaction*) decision.

In a recently published theoretical framework on personality effects in whistleblowing decisions, it was hypothesized that whistleblowing situations typically entail a morally ambiguous organizational activity and that individuals need to evaluate how morally wrong an organizational activity is (Fischer et al., 2024). In the scenario we used at the beginning of this manuscript, Claire thus needs to evaluate how morally (or legally) wrong she perceives the cost-saving measures at the hospital to be. In the theoretical framework, it was further hypothesized that moral wrongfulness judgments hinge on the observer's personality in the sense that prosocial personality dimensions (e.g., HEXACO Honesty-Humility) should be positively associated with judgements about how morally wrong an ambiguous organizational activity is. HEXACO Honesty-Humility has been defined as the "tendency to be fair and genuine in dealing with others, in the sense of cooperating with others even when one might exploit them without suffering retaliation" (Ashton & Lee, 2007, p. 156). As high values on this dimension reflect traits such as being fair and genuine, we assume that HEXACO Honesty-Humility should relate to harsher judgements of morally wrong or morally dubious activities. Higher moral wrongfulness judgments should, in turn, make a whistleblowing (vs. inaction) decision more likely. Therefore, we predicted that HEXACO Honesty-Humility is positively associated with a decision for whistleblowing (versus inaction; Hypothesis 1).¹

Whistleblowing Reporting Channels

Reporting concerns about misconduct within one's own organization to internal (e.g., to the company's management) or external (e.g., the media, authorities) recipients are known as internal and external whistleblowing, respectively (e.g., Dworkin & Baucus, 1998; Miceli et al., 2008). A robust finding in whistleblowing research is that the vast majority of whistleblowers first voice their concerns internally before they choose to make the issue public (Bjørkelo et al., 2011; Vandekerckhove et al., 2013). Correspondingly, researchers have argued that external whistleblowing is often seen as a breach of loyalty with one's organization. External whistleblowing entails a moral dilemma of being loyal to one's organization versus being fair to people outside of that organization who might suffer from the organizational wrongdoing (e.g., Waytz et al., 2013). This so-called "whistleblower's dilemma" is not equally present in internal whistleblowing because addressing one's concerns internally does not necessarily communicate a lack of loyalty or disengagement from the organization, but rather that one highly identifies with the organization and therefore wants to change its norms and practices (see Anvari et al., 2019).

1) We did not pre-register the mediation hypothesis for this main effect via moral wrongfulness judgements, but our data allows this idea to be tested as well.

Referring back to Claire's case from the beginning of our article, one could argue that Claire would have avoided negative consequences and a breach of loyalty with her company if she had raised her concerns internally (e.g., to the company's management) before disclosing it through external reporting channels (e.g., to the media). In the following, we will refer to the decision to engage in external or internal whistleblowing as the *internal (vs. external) whistleblowing decision*.

In the recent theoretical framework on personality effects in whistleblowing decisions (Fischer et al., 2024), it was proposed that prosocial tendencies shape this decision as well, in the sense that prosocial personality dimensions should increase the likelihood of internal (vs. external) reporting because they are typically not seen as a breach of loyalty towards one's organization. More specifically, in an earlier, unpublished version of the framework (Fischer, 2022), it was hypothesized that HEXACO Agreeableness should be positively associated with the internal (vs. external) whistleblowing decision. HEXACO Agreeableness has been defined as "the tendency to be forgiving and tolerant of others, in the sense of cooperating with others even when one might be suffering exploitation by them" (Ashton & Lee, 2007, p. 156). Building on the idea that internal (vs. external) whistleblowing can be seen as continued cooperation with others who acted unfairly, we predicted that HEXACO Agreeableness is positively associated with a decision for internal (versus external) whistleblowing (Hypothesis 2).²

The Present Research

To test our hypotheses, we conducted an online study in which we measured HEXACO Honesty-Humility and Agreeableness and subsequently confronted participants with a whistleblowing scenario. We assessed (1) whether they would decide to blow the whistle, and (2)—if so—whether they would use internal (vs. external) reporting channels. In order to reduce demand characteristics of our materials and instructions, we implemented a two-wave design by measuring the personality dimensions one week before assessing the whistleblowing decisions.

Our study was pre-registered (see Fischer, 2022a). Study materials, dataset, and analysis script can be found on the Open Science Framework (OSF; see Fischer, 2022b). We report how we determined our sample size, all data exclusions, and all measures (Simmons et al., 2012). To reduce the risk of false-positive discoveries, we followed the

2) For full disclosure, we should add that only the unpublished version (Fischer, 2022) but not the published version of the paper (Fischer et al., 2024) includes the hypothesis that HEXACO Agreeableness predicts the decision for internal (vs. external) whistleblowing. Instead, the published version of the manuscript argues that HEXACO Honesty-Humility is most relevant for this decision. This hypothesis was included into the paper after revising the paper in accordance with reviewer feedback. At that point, the pre-registration for the present study had already been published. For that reason, we did not include any hypothesis regarding HEXACO Honesty-Humility here. We will test whether Honesty-Humility predicts the internal vs. external whistleblowing decision nonetheless, as an exploratory analysis in the Results section.

recommendation by Benjamin et al. (2018) and interpret effects as “significant” if the p -value is $< .005$. We describe effects with p -values $.05 \leq p \leq .005$ as “suggestive evidence.”

Our study was conducted in accordance with the Ethical Guidelines of the German Psychological Society. We obtained ethics approval from our local ethics committee.

Method

Materials and Procedure

In the first wave of this online survey, participants completed the English version of the HEXACO-60 (for internal consistencies, see Table S1) which included an instructed attention check item. Participants also provided basic demographic information (i.e., age and gender) and were explicitly asked whether they participated attentively (a so-called use-me item; see Meade & Craig, 2012). This part of our survey took approx. 8 minutes to complete and was compensated with £0.80.

One week later, participants were invited to the second survey part, which took approximately 3 minutes and was compensated with an additional £0.50. In this part, participants read a scenario which was inspired by a real-life whistleblowing case and closely resembles the case we described at the beginning of this manuscript:

You work as a doctor in a hospital in a large city. During the course of your work for this hospital, you observe that resources are increasingly being saved and that the hospital is drastically overcrowded. In addition, from your medical perspective, patients are discharged very early in order to be able to admit new patients more quickly. You are now thinking about whether you want to do something about this organizational practice—the cost savings, overcrowding, and early patient discharges in the hospital you work for.

We assessed the decision for whistleblowing (vs. inaction) and internal (vs. external) whistleblowing with one self-developed dichotomous item each. The whistleblowing (vs. inaction) decision was assessed using the following item: “You now consider whether to disclose information about this organizational practice to a person or institution that would be able to effect action. How do you decide?” with “I decide to disclose information about this organizational practice.” (whistleblowing) and “I decide NOT to disclose information about this organizational practice.” (inaction) as response options. Participants who opted for the whistleblowing option were then presented with the internal (vs. external) whistleblowing decision, which was measured using the following item: “You now consider how you want to disclose information about this organizational practice. Specifically, you consider disclosing information about this organizational prac-

tice through internal or external reporting channels. Internal reporting channels describe the disclosure of information to recipients within the same organization. These recipients could, for example, be the management or the compliance department. By contrast, external reporting channels describe the disclosure of information to recipients outside of the organization. These recipients could, for example, be the media or the authorities. How do you decide?” with “I decide to disclose information through internal reporting channels (internal whistleblowing) and “I decide to disclose information through external reporting channels.” (external whistleblowing). At this item, participants could also indicate that they had changed their mind and did not want to disclose information about the organizational practice any longer.

For exploratory purposes, we also assessed a moral “wrongfulness” judgment of the organizational practice using four items. Specifically, participants rated the following items: “To what extent do you think this organizational practice is morally wrong/unfair/unproblematic/no big deal?” The latter two items were reverse-coded ($\alpha = .63$). Our survey also included a single-choice comprehension check item and a use-me item (see study materials).

Participants

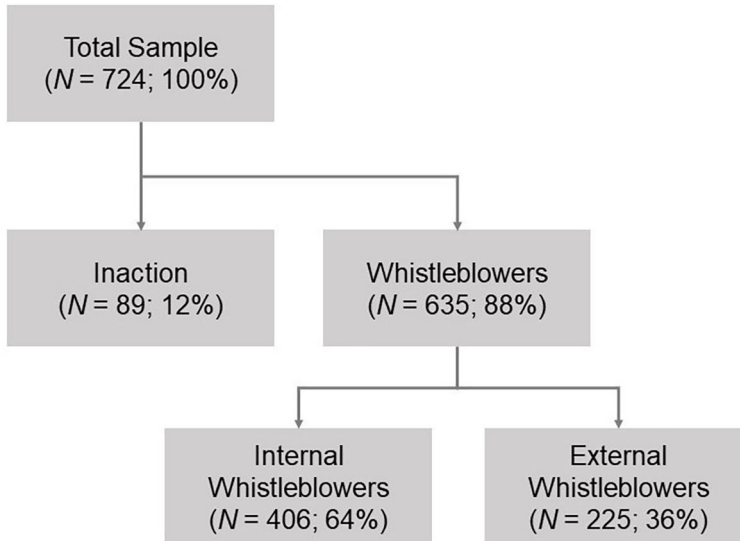
Based on two *a-priori* power analyses, we aimed for a sample of $N = 696$ after drop-outs and exclusions (see Supplementary Materials for details of these power analyses). Participants were recruited via the professional panel provider *Prolific*. After applying multiple pre-registered excision criteria (see Supplementary Material), our final sample consisted of 724 participants ($M_{\text{Age}} = 29.56$; $SD_{\text{Age}} = 9.09$; 324 females, 392 males, 8 other).

Results

Means, standard deviations, and correlations among all HEXACO dimensions can be found in Table S1 in the Supplementary Materials. Participants judged the organizational practice as rather immoral, $M = 4.98$; $SD = 0.85$, on a rating scale ranging from 1 to 6. Absolute and relative frequencies of both whistleblowing decisions are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Absolute and Relative Frequencies of Both Whistleblowing Decisions



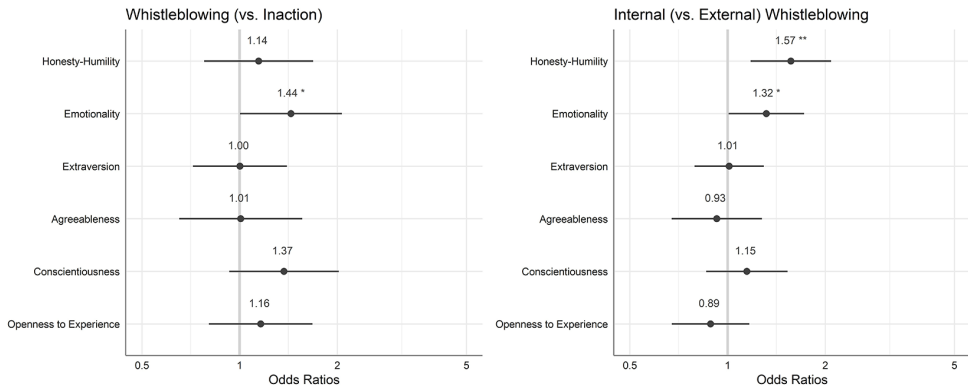
Note. At the internal (vs. external) whistleblowing decision, participants could also indicate that they changed their mind and did not want to blow the whistle. Therefore, absolute frequencies of the *internal whistleblowing* and *external whistleblowing* categories do not exactly match the absolute frequency in the *whistleblowing* category.

Hypothesis Testing

We tested our hypotheses with logistic regression analyses and entered all personality predictors as mean-centered variables. To test Hypothesis 1, which posits a positive effect of Honesty-Humility on the whistleblowing (vs. inaction) decision, we regressed the decision for whistleblowing (coded as 0 = *inaction* and 1 = *whistleblowing*) onto Honesty-Humility. This analysis revealed a non-significant relationship, $OR = 1.30$, 95% CI for $OR [0.90, 1.88]$, $p = .161$, $R^2_{Nagelkerke} = .01$. We then conducted a second logistic regression analysis testing this hypothesis by entering all six HEXACO dimensions as simultaneous predictors of the whistleblowing (vs. inaction) decision. The results of this model are shown in [Figure 2](#) and [Table S2](#). All predictors including Honesty-Humility were non-significantly associated with whistleblowing (vs. inaction). We found “suggestive evidence” for a positive effect of Emotionality, $OR = 1.44$, $p = .048$, on this decision. Descriptively, the six HEXACO dimensions jointly explained 3% of the variance in the whistleblowing (vs. inaction) decision.

Figure 2

Multiple Logistic Regression Analyses Predicting Whistleblowing (vs. Inaction) and Internal (vs. External) Whistleblowing.



Note. The model on the left side shows the prediction of the whistleblowing (vs. inaction) decision, coded as 0 = *inaction* and 1 = *whistleblowing*. The model on the right side shows the prediction of the decision for internal whistleblowing (vs. external) whistleblowing, coded as 0 = *external whistleblowing* and 1 = *internal whistleblowing*. Whiskers represent 95% confidence intervals of the point estimates. All personality dimensions are mean-centered. The intercepts are omitted.

To test Hypothesis 2, which posits a positive effect of Agreeableness on the internal (vs. external) whistleblowing decision, we regressed this decision (coded as 0 = *external whistleblowing* and 1 = *internal whistleblowing*) onto Agreeableness. Agreeableness did not significantly predict internal (vs. external) whistleblowing, $OR = 0.96$, 95% CI for $OR [0.71, 1.31]$, $p = .818$, $R^2_{Nagelkerke} < .01$. Moreover, this effect remained non-significant when we controlled for shared variance with the other five HEXACO dimensions (see Figure 2 and Table S3). In this analysis, however, Honesty-Humility was a significant positive predictor of internal (vs. external) whistleblowing, $OR = 1.57$, $p = .002$. In addition, there was “suggestive evidence” for a positive effect of Emotionality, $OR = 1.32$, $p = .044$. In sum, the six HEXACO dimensions accounted for 4% of the variance in the internal (vs. external) whistleblowing decision.

Exploratory Analyses

To further illuminate the psychological mechanisms of the two whistleblowing decisions, we explored the role of moral wrongfulness judgements. Moral wrongfulness judgements were positively associated with the whistleblowing (vs. inaction) decision, $r = .20$, $p < .001$, and negatively associated with the internal (vs. external) whistleblowing decision, $r = -.08$, $p = .033$.

Secondly, we explored whether HEXACO Honesty-Humility may have an indirect effect on whistleblowing (vs. inaction) via moral wrongfulness judgements (as suggested by Fischer et al., 2024). Indeed, a mediation analysis revealed “suggestive evidence” for this indirect effect via moral wrongfulness judgements, $b = 0.01$, $SE(b) = .01$, $p = .005$.

We also ran the equivalent analysis for the internal (vs. external) whistleblowing decision. Neither HEXACO Honesty-Humility, $b = -0.01$, $SE(b) = 0.00$, $p = .082$, nor HEXACO Agreeableness, $b = -0.00$, $SE(b) = 0.00$, $p = .252$, predicted this decision indirectly via moral wrongfulness judgements.

Discussion

The present research looked at personality traits underlying the decisions for whistleblowing (vs. inaction) and for internal (vs. external) whistleblowing. Our predictions were that HEXACO Honesty-Humility would predict the whistleblowing (vs. inaction) decision and that HEXACO Agreeableness would predict the internal (vs. external) whistleblowing decision.

We found no evidence for the notion that HEXACO Agreeableness is relevant for either of the two whistleblowing decisions. HEXACO Honesty-Humility, however, was relevant for whistleblowing decisions in two different ways: First, although we did not find a main effect of HEXACO Honesty-Humility on whistleblowing (vs. inaction), we found suggestive evidence for an indirect effect via moral wrongfulness judgements. Second, we found a main effect of HEXACO Honesty-Humility on the internal (vs. external) whistleblowing decision: Higher levels of HEXACO Honesty-Humility were associated with an increased likelihood of internal (vs. external) whistleblowing. Both of these findings are in line with theoretical arguments that Fischer et al. (2024) made. Our results thereby also speak to the proposition that HEXACO Honesty-Humility is a particularly relevant personality dimensions that motivates moral courage (Baumert et al., 2013), because whistleblowing can be seen as a form of moral courage (Fischer et al., 2024).

Another interesting, yet unexpected finding was that HEXACO Emotionality played a role for both types of whistleblowing decisions: Emotionality was positively related to the decision to blow the whistle (vs. inaction) and to the decision for internal (vs. external) whistleblowing. We do not want to overemphasize these effects because they were not hypothesized and they reflect “suggestive evidence” only. However, one explanation is that the scenario in our study described an organizational wrongdoing in the health sector and Emotionality as conceptualized in the HEXACO model also encompasses fearfulness concerning physical danger (Ashton et al., 2014). Thus, the specific context of our scenario may have afforded Emotionality. It is plausible that Emotionality is only relevant for health-related wrongdoings but not, for instance, for financial malpractices. Future research should use different scenarios within the same study to scrutinize which

personality effects generalize across different cases of wrongdoing and different whistleblowing situations (see Judd et al., 2012). Another line of future research could identify theoretically-relevant context characteristics (such as the specific type of wrongdoing) and test whether and how they interact with personality in the prediction of whistleblowing.

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Research Directions

Our study had several strengths. First, our study scenario succeeded in describing an organizational practice that was perceived as immoral but without creating ceiling effects with regard to the whistleblowing decisions. Second, our results are based on a large sample and an alpha level of 0.5% which decreases the risk of false-positive discoveries (Benjamin et al., 2018). Third, we measured the HEXACO dimensions and the two whistleblowing decisions with a time lag of one week, thereby minimizing demand characteristics of our materials and instructions.

Nonetheless, some limitations of the current research are worth noting. First, our study was correlational and does not allow for causal inference. More specifically, we cannot rule out that variables other than the ones we measured may have influenced our results. Second, we used a scenario design in which our outcome variables were non-consequential for participants. This analytic decision was implied by the fact we could have hardly reached our sample size in lab-based whistleblowing paradigms that allows actual whistleblowing behavior to be measured (Fischer & Gollwitzer, 2023). We do not know whether our results generalize to actual whistleblowing behavior in which the negative consequences for whistleblowing are truly immersive (e.g., negative reactions from co-workers, organizational retaliation, legal repercussions, or career disadvantages). Third, the internal (vs. external) whistleblowing decision only contrasted these two options, whereas in real-life, the majority of external whistleblowers had raised their concerns internally before going public (Bjørkelo et al., 2011; Vandekerckhove et al., 2013). Future research will benefit from modelling whistleblowing as an iterative process with the possibility of reporting wrongdoing multiple times.

Conclusion

Our study demonstrates that HEXACO Honesty-Humility plays a role in whistleblowing decisions: It was positively related to the decision to blow the whistle (vs. inaction), but only indirectly via judgments of wrongfulness of the organizational activity. In addition, HEXACO Honesty-Humility was positively related to the decision to blow the whistle internally (vs. externally). That being said, the effects of the HEXACO dimensions including Honesty-Humility on the two types of whistleblowing decisions were rather small.

Funding: The authors have no funding to report.

Acknowledgments: The authors have no additional (i.e., non-financial) support to report.

Competing Interests: The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

Author Contributions: *Moritz Fischer*—Conceptualization | Methodology | Software | Validation | Data curation | Visualization | Formal analysis | Writing – original draft. *Mario Gollwitzer*—Supervision | Writing – review & editing.

Ethics Statement: Our study was conducted in accordance with the Ethical Guidelines of the German Psychological Society. All participants provided informed consent before starting the study. Official ethics approval from an institutional review board was not mandatory for survey-based research in Germany when this research was conducted. Nonetheless, we voluntarily obtained ethics approval from our local ethics committee.

Author Note: Please note that this article is based on the dissertation of the first author. A link to the dissertation can be found in the reference list.

Data Availability: Data set, study materials, as well as the analysis scripts have been made available on the Open Science Framework (see [Fischer, 2022b](#)).

Supplementary Materials

For this article, the following Supplementary Materials are available:

- Pre-registration (see [Fischer, 2022a](#))
- Data set, study materials, as well as the analysis scripts (see [Fischer, 2022b](#))

Index of Supplementary Materials

Fischer, M. (2022a). *Are there differential effects of HEXACO Honesty-Humility and Agreeableness on two types of whistleblowing decisions?* [Pre-registration]. OSF Registries. <https://osf.io/g7h64>

Fischer, M. (2022b). *Personality effects on two types of whistleblowing decisions* [Data, materials, scripts]. OSF. <https://osf.io/28h5c>

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is an official journal of the Polish
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