



Research Article

# Predicting Whistleblowing Intention: The Role of Work Locus of Control, Fear of Retaliation, and Organizational Commitment

Talia Odri<sup>1</sup>, Marija Volarov<sup>1</sup>, Boris Popov<sup>2</sup>, and Jelena Matanović<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Department of Psychology, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Novi Sad, Serbia*

<sup>2</sup>*Department of Psychology, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia*

## ABSTRACT

Whistleblowing is the process by which employees report observed irregularities within the organization. Irregularities can be reported internally using reporting mechanisms within the organization or externally by contacting appropriate authorities or the media. This study explored the role that internal and external work locus of control, fear of retaliation, and organizational commitment play in reporting irregularities in the workplace among employees in Serbia. The Prosocial Organizational Behavior Model was used as the theoretical foundation. The convenience sample of 220 adults ( $M_{age} = 40.77 \pm 12.87$ ; 65.9% women) was recruited from the general population. First, we tested whether employees are more likely to report irregularities internally than externally. Then, we tested whether we could predict internal and external whistleblowing intention based on internal and external work locus of control, fear of retaliation, and organizational commitment after controlling for demographic variables. Our analysis revealed that internal whistleblowing intention is more pronounced than external one. After accounting for the demographic variables, we also found that internal work locus of control and organizational commitment positively predict internal whistleblowing intention, while fear of retaliation negatively predicts it. Finally, we found that fear of retaliation and internal locus of control predict external whistleblowing intention positively after controlling for demographic variables. One possible implication of this study is that increasing organizational commitment, fostering an internal locus of control, and ensuring employee safety may encourage whistleblowing;

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however, the direction of influence may be reversed, or the third variable not included in our study may play a role.

*Keywords:* whistleblowing, locus of control, fear of retaliation, reporting wrongdoing, irregularities in the workplace

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✉ Corresponding author's email: [talia.odri@ff.uns.ac.rs](mailto:talia.odri@ff.uns.ac.rs)

## Introduction

Organizations often face ethical issues such as theft, dishonesty, conflicts of interest, abuse, rule violations, and condoning unethical actions (Jennings, 2015). Whistleblowing is vital in addressing these issues. While rare, with an average of 3.49 reports per 100 employees globally (Penman et al., 2024), some individuals still report irregularities, highlighting the importance of whistleblowing in organizational ethics.

Near and Miceli (1985, p. 4) proposed one of the most accepted definitions of whistleblowing, defining it as "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". By pointing out organizational issues, whistleblowers allow employers to correct actions that could harm other members, consumers, or clients (Dozier & Miceli, 1985). A whistleblower can report observed wrongdoing to someone at a higher hierarchical level within the organization or to an official designated for that purpose. This is known as internal whistleblowing (Dhamija & Rai, 2018). On the other hand, external whistleblowing involves reporting wrongdoing to appropriate authorities (including police, audits, the prosecutor's office, the Ombudsman, anti-corruption agencies, and others), the media, or the public (Dhamija & Rai, 2018; Stojanović et al., 2015; Šabić, 2021). Whistleblowers more commonly choose internal channels first, turning to external ones only if previous attempts have been unsuccessful (Dhamija & Rai, 2018; Soeken & Soeken, 1987; Šabić, 2021). Considering this, the present study aimed to test whether internal whistleblowing intention is more pronounced than external whistleblowing intention among employees (H1).

## Theoretical Background

Some authors proposed the Prosocial Organizational Behavior (POB) Model as a framework for understanding the motivations behind whistleblowing (Dozier & Miceli, 1985; Miceli et al., 2008). POB refers to behavior that extends beyond an individual's formal job responsibilities and involves actions aimed at benefiting another individual, a group, or the organization itself (Brief & Motowidlo, 1986). According to this definition, internal whistleblowing can be seen as a form of POB, as it is expected to

benefit the organization, just like other forms of POB (Dozier & Miceli, 1985). In contrast, external whistleblowing may be perceived as a threat to the organization and is, therefore, less likely to be classified as POB.

Miceli and colleagues (2008) use the POB model to describe three phases preceding whistleblowing. In each phase, an individual considers specific factors to decide whether to whistleblow. First, the person assesses if an ethical violation occurred and whether anyone is responsible for reporting it. If not, they lean toward whistleblowing. Next, they evaluate the impact of the violation on the organization and whether the organization typically responds to irregularities. The person is more likely to whistleblow if the organization fails to act or if they perceive that the misconduct could harm the organization. In the final phase, the individual weighs the potential gains and losses of reporting and considers whether it is their responsibility to act and whether it would lead to change.

Research findings on predictors of whistleblowing are generally inconsistent, making them difficult to compare and integrate (Chen, 2019). Despite this, five groups of factors associated with the intent to whistleblow or whistleblowing itself can be identified: demographic (e.g., gender, age, and education; Nicholls et al., 2021; Sims & Keenan, 1998), individual (e.g., locus of control, self-efficacy, and moral judgement; Chiu, 2003; MacNab & Worthley, 2008; Miceli et al., 2012, Nicholls et al., 2021), organizational (e.g., leadership, organizational commitment, retaliation; Mrowiec, 2022), social (e.g., laws; Chen, 2019; Nicholls et al., 2021; Park et al., 2005) and irregularity characteristics (e.g., seriousness of wrongdoing, frequency, and wrongdoer characteristics; Nicholls et al., 2021)<sup>1</sup>.

This research primarily focused on work locus of control as a personality variable, while organizational commitment and fear of retaliation were considered organizational variables. Specifically, the study examines the roles of fear of retaliation, internal and external work locus of control, and organizational commitment in predicting the intention to report workplace irregularities among employees in Serbia. As such, this study represents a pioneering effort to investigate potential predictors of whistleblowing

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<sup>1</sup> See Mrowiec (2022) and Nicholls et al. (2021) for comprehensive systematic reviews on the subject.

intention in Serbia. The study is unique within the Serbian context, not only due to its thematic focus but also because it provides questionnaires that can support future research in this area.

### Fear of retaliation

An organization may respond to whistleblowing in one of three ways or some combination of these: by correcting the irregularity, ignoring the report, or retaliating against the whistleblower (Near & Miceli, 1986). Since employees' attitudes toward whistleblowing are often negative (Park et al., 2005), it is unsurprising that retaliation is a common organizational response (Dungan et al., 2015). Retaliation is "an undesirable action taken against a whistleblower in direct response to whistleblowing, who reported wrongdoing internally or externally, outside the organization" (Rehg et al., 2008, p. 222). In a study sample of U.S. companies that experienced financial fraud between 1996 and 2004, results showed that in 82% of cases of non-anonymous whistleblowing, whistleblowers reported experiencing retaliation (Dyck et al., 2010). Some forms of retaliation include social isolation, assigning trivial or overly burdensome tasks, and emotional, physical, and sexual violence (Garrick & Buck, 2020), and can lead to serious financial, physical, and mental health issues (Garrick & Buck, 2020; Soeken & Soeken, 1987).

When an individual perceives that the threat of retaliation is probable and/or severe, they may feel fear, apprehension, guilt, or shame (Khan et al., 2022; Ogungbamila et al., 2022). Research has found a negative correlation between the fear of retaliation and the intent to engage in internal whistleblowing (Dhamija & Rai, 2018; Khan et al., 2022) as well as the intent to engage in external whistleblowing (Dhamija & Rai, 2018; Park & Lewis, 2019). On the other hand, one research indicates that fear of retaliation positively predicts the intention to engage in external whistleblowing (Yang & Xu, 2020). In the present study, we tested whether fear of retaliation is negatively related to self-reported internal whistleblowing intention (H2). We expected that, on average, a higher fear of retaliation would be associated with weaker internal whistleblowing intention. Considering the inconsistent findings, we hypothesized that fear of retaliation would be related to external

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whistleblowing intention without specifying the direction of this relationship (H3).

### Locus of control and whistleblowing intention

Rotter (1966) defined the locus of control as a person's general belief about the cause-and-effect relationship between their behavior and the consequences of that behavior. The relationship between the locus of control and whistleblowing intention can be found in the abovementioned POB model. In the third phase described by the model, a person contemplates whether whistleblowing would lead to the desired change, which corresponds to the concept of locus of control (Miceli et al., 2008). Individuals with an internal locus of control—those who believe outcomes depend on their actions—are more likely to engage in whistleblowing (Chiu, 2003; Clyde et al., 2022; Hanjani et al., 2018; Trevino & Youngblood, 1990). In contrast, those with an external locus of control—who attribute outcomes to external forces—are less likely to take such proactive measures. Building on this, we propose that individuals with a higher internal work locus of control will show stronger intentions to report wrongdoing, both internally and externally (H4). Conversely, individuals with a higher external work locus of control are expected to demonstrate weaker whistleblowing intentions (H5). In line with the recommendations of Phares (1976) and Spector (1988), who emphasized the advantages of using domain-specific measures of locus of control over a general one, we opted to assess work locus of control in our study. This decision was further supported by Spector's findings, indicating that the work locus of control scale shows stronger correlations with work-related variables compared to measures of general locus of control (1988).

### Organizational commitment and whistleblowing intention

The dominant approach in organizational commitment research is the one in which organizational commitment is conceptualized as an individual's psychological attachment to the organization (Meyer & Allen, 1984). In this conceptualization, organizational commitment includes three dimensions: affective, normative, and continuance. In short, employees with the strongest affective commitment stay within the organization because they want to, those with the strongest normative commitment stay within the

organization because they feel they should, and those with continuance commitment stay because they feel they have no choice (Meyer & Allen, 1991). Many studies have explored the differences between the three dimensions of organizational commitment (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Johnson & Chang, 2006; McGee & Ford, 1987; Meyer et al., 1990; Shore & Wayne, 1993). Based on the results of those studies, continuance commitment was not included in this study. Unlike affective and normative commitment, it primarily reflects a cost-based attachment to the organization rather than an ethical or emotional bond. Since whistleblowing intentions are more closely linked to employees' sense of moral obligation and identification with the organization, the focus of this study remained on affective and normative commitment.

Research on the relationship between organizational commitment and whistleblowing has produced mixed results. For instance, one study found that organizational commitment significantly predicted the intention to engage in internal whistleblowing but not external whistleblowing (Somers & Casal, 1994). Additionally, the relationship between organizational commitment and internal whistleblowing in this study was curvilinear. Another study showed that individuals with high organizational commitment were more likely to report issues internally, while those with low organizational commitment were more inclined toward external reporting (Alleyne, 2016). These mixed findings may reflect the use of different instruments across studies or indicate that certain moderator(s) should be tracked down in studies investigating the relationship between organizational commitment and whistleblowing.

Studies have established a connection between organizational commitment and POB (Grego-Planer, 2019; LePine et al., 2002), with some arguing that POB results from organizational commitment (O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986). Since internal whistleblowing may be a form of POB, we might expect that internal whistleblowing results from organizational commitment. At the same time, we could assume that those less committed to the organization may be more inclined to blow the whistle externally. Therefore, we hypothesize that organizational commitment is positively related to self-reported internal and negatively related to external whistleblowing intention. We expect that, on average, a higher organizational

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commitment is associated with stronger internal and weaker external whistleblowing intention (H6).

## Method

### Sample and procedure

The sample comprised 220 participants recruited from the general population using the snowball/convenience sampling method. The participants' ages ranged from 19 to 66 years, with a mean age of  $40.77 \pm 12.87$ . The age structure of the sample implies that 29.2% of participants were in the early career stage (18-30 years), 46.1% were in the mid-career stage (31-50 years), and 24.7% were in the late career stage (51+ years). Most participants were women (65.9%). The participants in our sample had different levels of education; 18.20% had a high school education (secondary education diploma), 21.8% had a vocational (professional) degree obtained from colleges of applied studies (tertiary professional education), 55% had completed academic higher education (bachelor's or master's degree), and 5% held a Ph.D. degree. About 12% of participants had less than a year of work experience, 15.5% had up to five years of work experience, 9.5% had between five and ten years of work experience, and 62.3% had over ten years of work experience. The eligibility criterion was that participants had been employed for at least six months at their current workplace at the time of testing. Study data were collected anonymously in Serbia during March and April 2024 via the Google Forms platform. The link to the survey was shared via social media networks (e.g., Instagram and LinkedIn). The study was initiated by the first author. Before starting the survey, participants read an informed consent form that explained the purpose of the study and clarified that it was conducted solely for scientific purposes. Participation was anonymous, and respondents did not receive any compensation for it. Participants were explicitly informed that completing the questionnaire would be considered evidence that they had understood the provided information and agreed to participate. The process of completing the questionnaire required approximately ten minutes.



## Instruments

### *The Whistleblowing Intention Scale (WIS; Park & Blenkinsopp, 2009)*

The WIS is an eight-item scale used to measure internal and external whistleblowing intention. Participants were asked, “*If you found wrongdoing in your workplace, how hard would you try to do the following?*” (Park & Blenkinsopp, 2009, p. 549), and the responses were collected using a five-point Likert scale (1 = very unlikely, 5 = most likely). The scale was translated into Serbian and back-translated for this study. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA; with robust Maximum Likelihood estimator) showed that the original correlated two-factor model had an acceptable fit (CFI = .964, TLI = .948, RMSEA = .095 [ $p = .799$ ], SRMR = .064)<sup>2</sup>. The internal whistleblowing subscale score had excellent reliability (four items;  $\omega = .92$ ;  $\alpha = .92$ ), and the external whistleblowing subscale score had good reliability (four items;  $\omega = .85$ ;  $\alpha = .84$ ). The Serbian version of the scale can be found in Appendix A, and the graphical representation of the model with standardized factor loadings is in the Supplement A.

### *Fear of Retaliation Scale (FRS; Park et al., 2005)*

The FRS was another scale translated into Serbian for this study (using the back-translation procedure; Appendix B). It is a short, five-item scale accompanied by a five-point response scale (1 = completely disagree, 5 = completely agree) typically used to measure fears and negative beliefs related to reporting unethical behavior in the workplace (e.g., *I would suffer as a result of my complaints*). Confirmatory factor analysis (with robust Maximum Likelihood estimator) yielded inflated estimates of the unidimensional model fit (CFI = 1.000, TLI = 1.000, RMSEA = .000 [ $p = .136$ ], SRMR = .015). Some items are likely redundant, considering very high factor loadings (Supplement B). Because the aim of this study was not a detailed psychometric evaluation of the scale but simply checking whether we can

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<sup>2</sup> CFI and TLI are considered acceptable if  $> .90$  (Kline, 2015), RMSEA is acceptable if  $< .08$  (Kline 2015; but Kenny et al., 2015 suggested that RMSEA should not be computed for models with smaller degrees of freedom and small samples because it tends to underestimate the model in those cases), SRMR is acceptable if  $< .10$  (Kline, 2015).

use a total scale score as a measure of fear of retaliation, we did not modify the scale. The fear of retaliation total scale score had excellent reliability in our sample ( $\omega = .91$ ;  $\alpha = .92$ ).

*The Work Locus of Control Scale (WLCS; Spector, 1988)*

The WLCS is a sixteen-item instrument that assesses the locus of control in the workplace on a six-point Likert scale (1 = completely disagree, 6 = completely agree). Originally, it was introduced as a unidimensional measure of general beliefs about control in the workplace (Spector, 1988). However, no factor analytical procedure was applied in Spector's study to test the proposed factor structure of the WLCS (Spector, 1988). In a study conducted by a group of Croatian researchers, the obtained results suggested that the Croatian version of the WLCS has a two-factor structure with one factor labeled as internal work locus of control (e.g., *A job is what you make of it.*) and another labeled as an external work locus of control (e.g., *Getting a job you want is mostly a matter of luck.*; Slišković et al., 2014). We relied on the results from the study conducted in a similar language (i.e., Croatian) context and tested a confirmatory correlated two-factor model for the Serbian translation of the WLCS. Due to a very poor model fit (CFI = .699, TLI = .649, RMSEA = .112 [ $p < .001$ ], SRMR = .100), we proceeded with exploratory factor analysis (EFA) using Principal Axis Factoring as a method of factor extraction. After performing a parallel analysis using minimum rank factor analysis (MRFA<sup>3</sup>), we opted for a two-factor model. We also removed five items with nonsignificant factor loadings (i.e., standardized factors loadings  $< .35$ ). The final version of the scale (Appendix C) contained two correlated factors (Promax oblique rotation method was used) labeled the same way as in Slišković et al.'s study (2014), except in our study the internal locus of control factor had only three items (these three items had the highest factor loadings in Croatian sample as well). The overall model fit was acceptable (CFI = .900, TLI = .837, RMSEA = .095, RMSEA 90%CI [.074 - .117], SRMR = .050). The pattern matrix is provided in Supplement C. The internal locus of control subscale score had acceptable reliability ( $n = 3$ ,  $\omega =$

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<sup>3</sup> MRFA was conducted in R, version 4.4.2 (R Core Team, 2024) using EFA.MRFA package (Navarro-Gonzales & Lorenzo-Seva, 2021).

.76;  $\alpha = .74$ ), and the external locus of control subscale score had good reliability ( $n = 8$ ,  $\omega = .82$ ;  $\alpha = .82$ ).

*The Revised Organizational Commitment Scale (OCS-AN; Meyer & Allen, 1991)*

The OCS-AN represents a shortened and revised scale comprising six items that measure affective commitment (e.g., *I feel a strong sense of belonging to this organization.*) and normative commitment to an organization (e.g., *Even if it were to my advantage, I do not feel it would be right to leave.*). Responses were collected using a five-point Likert scale (1 = completely disagree, 5 = completely agree). Previous studies have shown that the Serbian version of the scale has good psychometric properties and can be used as a unidimensional measure of organizational commitment (e.g., Popov, 2013). The total scale score of commitment obtained in this study had acceptable reliability ( $n = 6$ ,  $\omega = .86$ ;  $\alpha = .85$ ).

*The Demographic Questionnaire*

The Demographic Questionnaire assesses respondents' age, gender, education level, and work experience. Participants were instructed to select one of the following categories for education level: completed secondary school, completed college of applied studies, completed bachelor's/master's degree, or completed doctoral/magister degree. For work experience, the options were: less than one year, one to five years, five to ten years, and more than ten years.

## Results

Statistical analyses were conducted using the open-source program JASP v.0.19.1 (JASP Team, 2024). Before testing the hypotheses, we calculated descriptive statistics for all variables we later included in the models. Table 1 provides the empirical minimum and maximum on all scales, along with the mean, standard deviation, skewness, and kurtosis. The values of skewness and kurtosis fall within the acceptable range for using parametric statistics ( $\pm 1.5$ ; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013).

First, we conducted a paired-sample *t*-test to test the first hypothesis that internal whistleblowing intention is, on average, significantly more

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pronounced than external one. This hypothesis was supported ( $M_{\text{difference}} = 4.14$ ,  $SE = .38$ ,  $t_{(219)} = 10.86$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and medium-to-large effect was found (Cohen’s  $d = 0.73$ , 95%CI [.58, .88]).

Relationship between study variables

Before testing whether internal work locus of control, external work locus of control, fear of retaliation, and organizational commitment were significant predictors of external and internal whistleblowing intention (hypotheses H2-H6), we calculated intercorrelations among these variables<sup>4</sup> (Table 1). As presented in Table 1, internal whistleblowing intention correlated significantly with all supposed predictors (except age) - positively with internal work locus of control, organizational commitment, and gender, and negatively with fear of retaliation and external work locus of control. The values of the correlation coefficients ranged from very weak to weak. On the other hand, external whistleblowing intention correlated significantly only with the fear of retaliation. This correlation was positive and, although significant, very weak.

All correlations between the key predictor variables were significant except for the correlation between external work locus of control and organizational commitment. There was a negative correlation between fear of retaliation, on the one hand, and internal work locus of control (very weak effect) and organizational commitment (weak effect), on the other hand. As expected, a significant negative correlation was found between external and internal work locus of control (very weak effect). A weak but significant positive correlation was found between fear of retaliation and external work locus of control, as well as between organizational commitment and internal work locus of control. Additionally, age correlated significantly only with the external work locus of control, while gender had a significant positive correlation with internal work locus of control and fear of retaliation.

<sup>4</sup> Given the ordinal nature of the education variable, we also calculated the Spearman rank correlation as a supplementary measure to account for potential non-linearities and unequal intervals between education levels. The differences between the Pearson and Spearman correlation coefficients were minor, indicating that both methods captured a similar strength and direction of the relationships. This suggests a stable, albeit very weak, association between education and the other variables (all coefficients were below .20, except for age).

**Table 1***Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Coefficients*

Variables	Min	Max	M	SD	Sk	Ku	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Gender							—							
2. Education							.17*	—						
3. Age	19	66	40.77	12.87	-0.03	-1.13	.20**	.25***	—					
4. Internal work LOC	4	20	14.73	4.74	-0.75	-0.45	.01	.17*	-.01	—				
5. External work LOC	4	20	10.60	4.18	0.05	-0.81	.03	-.11	.14*	-.19**	—			
6. Fear of retaliation	5	25	16.01	5.46	-0.18	-0.82	.16*	-.10	.08	-.14*	.36***	—		
7. Organizational commitment	6	30	16.07	5.91	0.16	-0.70	.09	.12	.05	.27***	-.07	-.24***	—	
8. Internal WI	3	18	11.64	2.94	-0.31	-0.07	.17*	.14*	-.12	.33***	-.17*	-.32***	.31***	—
9. External WI	8	45	24.27	7.07	0.30	-0.07	-.05	-.13	.00	.09	.13	.17*	-.03	.20**

Note. LOC – locus of control; WI – whistleblowing intention.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

## Predicting internal whistleblowing intention

We conducted a hierarchical regression analysis to investigate whether internal and external work locus of control, fear of retaliation, and organizational commitment predict intentions to whistleblow internally, while controlling for age, gender, and education. The first model, which included age, gender, and education as predictors, explained 7.8% of the variance in the criterion and was statistically significant,  $F_{(3, 215)} = 6.09$ ,  $p = .001$ . All three variables significantly predicted internal whistleblowing intentions (women, younger, and more highly educated employees scored higher on internal whistleblowing intentions; Table 2). Adding the remaining variables in the second model accounted for an additional 20.3% of the variance in the criterion,  $\Delta F_{(4, 211)} = 14.93$ ,  $p < .001$ . In the second model, gender and age remained significant predictors, and organizational commitment, fear of retaliation, and internal work locus of control significantly predicted internal whistleblowing intentions after controlling for demographics (Table 2).

**Table 2**

*Predicting Internal and External Whistleblowing Intention – the Hierarchical Regressions*

Model		Internal whistleblowing		External whistleblowing	
	predictor	$\beta$	$p$	$\beta$	$p$
1	(intercept)		.070		<.001
	Gender	.18	.007	-.03	.652
	Age	-.20	.004	.04	.583
	Education	.16	.018	-.14	.054
		$R = .28, R^2 = .08$		$R = .14, R^2 = .02$	
2	(Intercept)		<.001		.001
	Gender	.22	<.001	-.06	.409
	Age	-.17	.007	.02	.782
	Education	.07	.290	-.13	.075
	Internal work LOC	.24	<.001	.15	.034
	External work LOC	.01	.915	.08	.264
	Fear of retaliation	-.27	<.001	.16	.038
	Organizational commitment	.16	.012	-.01	.864
		$R = .53, R^2 = .28,$ $\Delta R^2 = .20$		$R = .27, R^2 = .07,$ $\Delta R^2 = .05$	

*Note.* LOC locus of control. The results remained consistent when gender and education were entered as dummy variables instead of continuous predictors, with no change in the significance of their contributions to the model.

Predicting external whistleblowing intention

We conducted a second hierarchical regression to test whether internal and external work locus of control, fear of retaliation, and organizational commitment predict external whistleblowing intention after controlling for age, gender, and education (H2<sub>b</sub>). In the first step of the model, we entered demographic variables, which explained 1.9% of the criterion’s

variance ( $F_{(3, 215)} = 1.42, p = .239$ ). In the second step (Model 2), adding internal and external work locus of control, fear of retaliation, and organizational commitment increased the percentage of explained variance of the criterion by 5.1%,  $\Delta F_{(4, 211)} = 2.90, p = .023$ . In Model 2, internal work locus of control and fear of retaliation significantly predicted external whistleblowing intention (Table 2). Considering the low and non-significant correlation between internal work locus of control and external whistleblowing intention ( $r = .09$ ), the significant effect of work locus of control in the regression model may be the result of suppression (partial correlation between internal work locus of control and external whistleblowing intention is .15). Finally, according to the values of the variance inflation factor ( $VIF < 10$ ; Bowerman & O'Connell, 1990; Myers, 1990) and Condition Index ( $< 30$ ; Kim, 2019), there was no strong multicollinearity in models.

## Discussion

This is a pioneering study when it comes to investigating whistleblowing intention in Serbia. It aimed to answer whether we could predict whistleblowing intention among Serbian employees based on their levels of internal and external work locus of control, fear of retaliation, and organizational commitment. Our results support the hypothesis (H1) that internal whistleblowing intention is more pronounced than external one. This finding is in line with the results of previous studies (Dhamija & Rai, 2018; Soeken & Soeken, 1987; Šabić, 2021) and suggests that employees are more willing to report wrongdoings to someone within the organization (e.g., a coworker, direct supervisor) than to authorities outside the organization (e.g., police, anti-corruption agencies, or public media). A potential explanation for this finding is that employees expect their work colleagues to perceive them as traitors if they use external reporting channels (Park et al., 2005). Additionally, earlier studies showed that retaliation is more likely in cases of external whistleblowing (Mesmer-Magnus & Viswesvaran, 2005). Besides that, perhaps employees simply act according to the law that states they should report any irregularities internally or to relevant authorities before informing the public (Šabić, 2021).

According to our study, fear of retaliation is, as expected, negatively associated with internal whistleblowing intention (Dhamija & Rai, 2018; Khan

et al., 2022; Ogungbamila et al., 2022), and it predicts internal whistleblowing intention after controlling for demographics such as age, gender, and education (H2). If employees are scared that they will be punished for filing a complaint about unethical actions (for example, afraid of being bullied, micromanaged, demoted, or getting fired), they may decide not to do it (Garrick & Buck, 2020; Soeken & Soeken, 1987), at least not internally. They may opt for external whistleblowing if they expect that their reporting within the organization will be covered up and that they will face detrimental consequences (H3). If an employee is afraid of retaliation within the organization, they may seek help outside of it by contacting the police, a prosecutor, an anti-corruption agency, and the like. Given that our data come from a cross-sectional study, the opposite course of events is also possible. Namely, those employees with a greater intention to whistleblow outside of the organization may be more afraid of retaliation because the organization may face more serious consequences (Dworkin & Near, 1987; Mesmer-Magnus & Viswesvaran, 2005).

Our results imply that internal whistleblowing intention is positively correlated with internal and negatively with external work locus of control, supporting the results of previous studies (Chiu, 2003; Clyde et al., 2022; Hanjani et al., 2018; Trevino & Youngblood, 1990). Employees with a high internal work locus of control may believe they will prevent future unethical behavior if they report misconduct they have observed. On the other hand, employees with a higher external work locus of control may be less likely to do so since they believe they have no control over the organizational dynamic. The relationship between these three variables is illustrated by the third stage of the POB model, in which an employee evaluates whether whistleblowing will lead to the desired change and chooses to act or remain passive based on that assessment. However, it is important to emphasize that although both correlations were statistically significant, the regression analysis revealed that only the internal work locus of control significantly predicted internal whistleblowing intention (H4 and H5).

Contrary to the findings of earlier studies (Chiu, 2003; Clyde et al., 2022; Hanjani et al., 2018; Trevino & Youngblood, 1990), external whistleblowing intention is neither significantly correlated with external work locus of control nor with internal locus of control. One possible interpretation



is that the sense of control that employees might have within the organization is no longer relevant when third parties outside the organization are brought into the equation. It also could be that the subscale we used to measure the external work locus of control has certain psychometric issues (a conclusion we can infer from the information presented in the instruments section about the factor structure of the WLCS). Yet, the regression analyses revealed that the internal work locus of control significantly predicts the external whistleblowing intention (H4 and H5). By considering this result, we could assume that the greater internal work locus of control leads to a greater probability of reporting irregularities to external channels in the same manner as when reporting it internally.

The results of our study showed that organizational commitment is positively correlated with internal whistleblowing intention, as expected. This aligns with previous research (Alleyne, 2016). Additionally, organizational commitment contributes to predicting internal whistleblowing intention after controlling for age, education, and gender (H6). Employees with high organizational commitment identify with their organization, feel connected to it, and wish to contribute to their own and other employees' well-being by pointing out irregularities that could cause harm so these issues can be resolved. They also may believe that reporting irregularities is correct and responsible, as they have a sense of duty toward the organization.

Contrary to previous research (Alleyne, 2016) and our hypothesis (H6), but aligning with the findings of Somers and Casal (1994), the results revealed that organizational commitment does not correlate with the intention to whistleblow externally. This finding suggests that employees will determine their actions based on factors other than their levels of organizational commitment. It is also possible that individuals with higher organizational commitment may be less inclined to whistleblow externally because they understand that doing so could inflict more damage on the organization than reporting irregularities internally. Conversely, those with lower levels of organizational commitment may not report issues either, as they are less concerned about the happenings within the organization.

To summarize, our results showed that internal work locus of control and fear of retaliation are significant predictors of internal and external whistleblowing intention. Additionally, organizational commitment

significantly contributes to explaining internal but not external whistleblowing intention. The first regression model explains approximately 28% of the variance in internal whistleblowing intention, while the second regression model explains about 7% of the external whistleblowing intention. These findings suggest that, when it comes to external whistleblowing intention, the great amount of variance is likely explained by other factors we did not include in our study. Thus, future studies should investigate alternative predictors of external and internal whistleblowing intention (e.g., values and moral intensity). Our findings also suggest that employers and government authorities can encourage employees to engage in internal whistleblowing by reducing the fear of retaliation and increasing organizational commitment.

### Limitations and directions for future research

This study has several limitations. First, the sample size is small, collected using a snowball method, limiting our findings' generalizability. Next, we measured whistleblowing intention, which may not always accurately predict actual behavior and can be influenced by socially desirable responses (Chen, 2019). Thus, we cannot claim that the same variables that predict whistleblowing intention also act as predictors when it comes to the act of whistleblowing. This issue could be addressed by studying whistleblowing that has already occurred (i.e., by asking participants whether they have ever actually reported irregularities). Second, we did not ask participants whether they were familiar with their organization's reporting channels, and perhaps a low score on the internal whistleblowing subscale reflects a lack of awareness or absence of internal reporting procedures rather than a low intention. Therefore, a recommendation for future research would be to examine the extent to which reporting procedures are formally established within organizations. Third, prior research indicates that whistleblowing intention may depend on characteristics of the irregularity, such as its severity, frequency, or the perpetrator's status (Nicholls et al., 2021). Without such contextual details in the questionnaire, respondents may have found it challenging to assess their whistleblowing intention. Therefore, it is recommended that future research include descriptions of specific irregularities. Related to this, a concept not examined in the present study but worth considering in future

research is the intensity of the moral issue. Not all individuals assess the seriousness or harm caused by ethical misconduct in the same way, and such variation may influence their willingness to engage in whistleblowing. Furthermore, our study did not consider social factors (e.g., cultural norms), which may also play a significant role in shaping whistleblowing intentions. Future research could also examine whether fear of retaliation is linked to factors that objectively justify it, for example, past instances where someone who reported irregularities experienced retaliation, as well as organizational culture or leadership characteristics, or whether it is, on the other hand, associated with personality traits such as neuroticism, general lack of trust, and paranoid tendencies. A further limitation of our study is the exclusion of continuance commitment from the measurement of organizational commitment. Therefore, we recommend that future research examine the potential relationship between this dimension and whistleblowing, particularly in contexts where employers emphasize employee loyalty based on continuance commitment. A final limitation we note is that the data were collected at a single point in time. Therefore, although some variables emerged as significant predictors, longitudinal and experimental studies are needed to determine whether these relationships reflect actual causal effects.

## Practical implications

This research suggests that fear of retaliation may discourage internal whistleblowing while somewhat encouraging external reporting, which poses risks such as legal proceedings and reputational damage for organizations (Dworkin & Near, 1987; Mesmer-Magnus & Viswesvaran, 2005). Retaliation can also negatively affect employees' mental and physical health and lead to family and financial difficulties. To address these concerns, organizations should ensure employee safety in whistleblowing cases, promote support from superiors (Mesmer-Magnus & Viswesvaran, 2005), prevent retaliation by colleagues (Bjørkelo, 2013), and enable anonymous reporting mechanisms. Additionally, governments should strengthen whistleblower protection laws and ensure their consistent enforcement.

To increase the intention to report internally, leaders should foster greater organizational commitment among employees, for example, by

balancing employee needs with task demands and recruiting individuals who align with organizational values. Furthermore, employees with an external locus of control may benefit from developing skills that help them more rationally distinguish between situations they can and cannot influence. Such skills of distinction could empower them to act when they encounter misconduct, thereby encouraging a stronger sense of responsibility in reporting irregularities.

### *Conflict of interest*

We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

### *Data availability statement*

Data used in this paper are available upon a reasonable request.

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# Appendix A

## Serbian version of the Whistleblowing Intentions Scale

Molimo Vas da na petostepenoj skali procenite koliko je verovatno da biste preduzeli navedene mere ukoliko biste primetili neregularnost na svom radnom mestu.

### Brojevi na skali znače sledeće:

- 1 - vrlo malo verovatno
- 2 - malo verovatno
- 3 - nisam siguran
- 4 - verovatno
- 5 - vrlo verovatno

1	Prijavio/la bih ga nadležnim organima izvan organizacije.	1 2 3 4 5
2	Koristio/la bih kanale za prijavljivanje izvan organizacije.	1 2 3 4 5
3	Pružio/la bih informacije agencijama van organizacije (npr. Agenciji za sprečavanje korupcije).	1 2 3 4 5
4	Informisao/la bih javnost.	1 2 3 4 5
5	Prijavio/la bih ga nadležnim osobama u organizaciji.	1 2 3 4 5
6	Koristio/la bih kanale za prijavljivanje unutar organizacije.	1 2 3 4 5
7	Obavestio/la bih menadžera višeg nivoa o tome.	1 2 3 4 5
8	Obavestio/la bih svog direktnog nadređenog.	1 2 3 4 5

Ključ za skorovanje:

**Namera za spoljašnjim uzbunjivanjem:** stavke 1, 2, 3 i 4

**Namera za unutrašnjim uzbunjivanjem:** stavke 5, 6, 7 i 8

## Appendix B

### Serbian version of the Fear of Retaliation Scale

Molimo Vas da označite u kojoj meri se slažete sa svakom od navedenih tvrdnji.

#### Brojevi na skali znače sledeće:

- 1 – uopšte se ne slažem
- 2 – donekle se ne slažem
- 3 – nisam siguran/na
- 4 – donekle se slažem
- 5 – u potpunosti se slažem

#### Ukoliko bih prijavio/neregularnost na svom radnom mestu:

1	... bio/la bih izložen/a negativnim posledicama kao rezultat moje žalbe.	1 2 3 4 5
2	... bio/la bih osujećen/a u prijavljivanju na svakom koraku.	1 2 3 4 5
3	... bio/la bih stavljen/a u nepovoljan položaj.	1 2 3 4 5
4	... moja organizacija me ne bi pohvalila.	1 2 3 4 5
5	... posao bi mi možda bio ugrožen.	1 2 3 4 5

## Appendix C

### Serbian version of the Work Locus of Control Scale

Pitanja koja slede tiču se Vaših **uverenja o poslu uopšte**. Ne odnose se isključivo na Vaš sadašnji posao. Molimo Vas da, zaokruživanjem jednog broja na skali od 1 do 6 označite nivo u kom se slažete, odnosno ne slažete, sa svakom navedenom tvrdnjom.

#### Brojevi na skali imaju sledeće značenje:

- 1 – uopšte se ne slažem
- 2 – uglavnom se ne slažem
- 3 – donekle se ne slažem
- 4 – donekle se slažem
- 5 – uglavnom se slažem
- 6 – u potpunosti se slažem

1	Posao je onakav kakvim ga napraviš.	1 2 3 4 5 6
2	U većini poslova ljudi mogu ostvariti gotovo sve što poželeva da ostvare.	1 2 3 4 5 6
3	Kada znaš šta želiš od posla, onda možeš i pronaći posao koji će ti to pružiti.	1 2 3 4 5 6
4	Dobiti posao koji želiš je većinom stvar sreće.	1 2 3 4 5 6
5	Zaraditi novac prvenstveno je stvar sreće.	1 2 3 4 5 6
6	Da bi dobio posao koji želiš, potrebno je da imaš porodicu ili prijatelje na visokim pozicijama.	1 2 3 4 5 6
7	Unapređenja su obično stvar sreće.	1 2 3 4 5 6
8	Kada je u pitanju pronalaženje stvarno dobro posla, važnije je koga znate nego šta znate.	1 2 3 4 5 6
9	Da bi imao dosta novca, potrebno je da poznaješ prave ljude.	1 2 3 4 5 6
10	Potrebno je mnogo sreće da bi bio izvrstan radnik u većini poslova.	1 2 3 4 5 6
11	Osnovna razlika između ljudi koji zarađuju mnogo i malo je sreća.	1 2 3 4 5 6

Ključ za skorovanje:

**Unutrašnji radni lokus kontrole:** stavke 1, 2 i 3

**Spoljašnji radni lokus kontrole:** stavke 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 i 11