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Censored: Whistleblowers and impossible speech

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‘Censored’: Impossible speech and financial services whistleblowers

Abstract

What happens to a person who speaks out about corruption in their organization, and finds themselves excluded from their profession? In this article I argue that whistleblowers experience exclusions because they have engaged in ‘impossible speech’, that is, a speech act considered to be unacceptable or illegitimate. Drawing on Butler’s theories of recognition and censorship, I show how norms of acceptable speech working through recruitment practices, alongside the actions of colleagues, can regulate subject positions and ultimately ‘un-do’ whistleblowers. In turn, they construct boundaries against ‘unethical’ others who have not spoken out. Based on in-depth empirical research on financial sector whistleblowers, the article departs from existing literature that depicts the excluded whistleblower as a passive victim: a hollow stereotype. It contributes to organization studies in a number of ways. To debates on Butler’s recognition-based critique of subjectivity in organizations, it yields a performative ontology of excluded whistleblower subjects, in which they are both ‘derealized’ by powerful norms, and compelled into ongoing and ambivalent negotiations with self and other. These insights contribute to a theory of subjective derealization in instances of ‘impossible speech’, which provides a more nuanced conception of excluded organizational subjects, including blacklisted whistleblowers, than previously available.

Keywords: Butler, exclusion, financial sector, subjectivity, whistleblower

Introduction

Organizational whistleblowers can be excluded from their professions for speaking truth to power, but how does this impact upon one's sense of self? Butler's notion of censorship as a form of discursive power that produces particular kinds of subjects by instating a boundary separating legitimate from invalid utterances, provides theoretical richness to our understanding of whistleblowing in organizations. Specifically, it shows how subjects are produced through regimes of censorship, how boundaries are created and illegitimate subjects excluded, and how people who speak out can find themselves actively contributing to this process.

This article is based upon in-depth empirical research into the experiences of financial sector whistleblowers, which focused on the dynamics of selfhood resulting from being blacklisted after speaking up about systemic corruption in one's organization. Findings show the chaotic dismantling and reconstruction of subject positions in the face of shifting boundaries that define valid subjecthood. This leads to the suggestion that excluded and blacklisted whistleblowers are akin to 'derealized' organizational subjects, that is, they are unrecognizable in the terms of dominant discourses (Butler, 2009; Varman and Al-Amoudi, 2016). Derealization occurs through the workings of normative power, where power is understood as a matrix of control that operates by effectively producing and regulating the intelligibility of certain concepts, including subject positions (Butler, 1990: 41). Derealized subjects are not simply excluded but are unintelligible, beyond recognition. This article addresses a specific area within scholarship on power and subjectivity in organizations – studies focusing on organizational matrices of control (Riach et al., 2014; Thanem and Wallenberg 2014; Tyler and Cohen, 2008), which are productive in that they yield new employee subject positions and identities (Harding, 2003). Specifically it argues that norms

differentiating legitimate from impossible speech are used as a measure of control and a means to exercise power over organizational subjects.

Instances of ‘blowing the whistle’ on abuses of power are vital to study; whistleblowers have helped reveal wrongdoing in governments, healthcare and financial services (O’Brien, 2007) among other settings. While the topic has received much attention within organization studies, theories to help us understand the experiences of those people who speak out and are excluded from their professions as a result, are rare. Research is often empirical rather than theoretically rich, and what remains unclear is how these exclusions relate to one’s act of speaking out, how power is implicated in this, and how this impacts upon people’s subjective experiences. The result is that the excluded whistleblower is frequently depicted as a hollow stereotype, either a passive victim or a deserving traitor: not a full and complex human. Such a misunderstanding ‘dehumanizes’ whistleblowers, it hampers empathy and contributes to a current absence of support both financial and otherwise for this important group. This is problematic because of the harsh treatment that whistleblowers can face in the aftermath of speaking up (Alford, 2001). In this article, I explore these questions through engaging with conceptual and theoretical insights from Butler’s performative ontology of subject formation (1990; 1993) and work on forms of legitimate speech (1997a) in order to propose a theory of subjective derealization that enriches our understanding of whistleblowing.

The article proceeds as follows. First, Butler’s politically-engaged theory of performativity is described; it has been valuably used within organization studies to show how individuals can be ‘undone’ by organizational matrices of control that instantiate boundaries by which definitions of valid subjects, and excluded ones, come into being. Her work on impossible speech is then introduced, in which subjecthood is denied or granted based on the kinds of speech acts engaged in by individuals. While not yet used in

organization studies, it appears a fruitful approach for the study of whistleblowing. A review of relevant literature on whistleblowing in organizations follows, in which a tendency to simplify the excluded subject as passive and somewhat ‘hollowed out’, is noted. A detailed description of the method used for conducting empirical research into 15 cases of blacklisted and excluded whistleblowers in the financial sector is then presented. The study’s findings highlight how certain kinds of speech in this industry were governed by subtle matrices of control, such that a boundary was set up delineating ‘impossible’ subjects from valid ones. The dynamics of selfhood emerging from resulting exclusions are described in detail, including how a previously-held subject position of ‘valid’ employee can fall apart, and how it involves the paradoxical construction of a further boundary between excluded subjects and those deemed to be less ethical. Implications for whistleblowing research and for organization studies, are discussed along with the limitations of the article. The article concludes by outlining its practical relevance. Contributions include extending the growing literature on the relevance of Butler’s insights for organization studies (Harding et al., 2013; Kenny, 2010, 2012; Roberts, 2005; Tyler & Cohen, 2008). Specifically, the article proposes and develops a theory of the derealized subject of censorship, showing: first how normative frameworks that specify valid and invalid speech can operate through networks of exclusion in particular organizational settings, second, the individual’s active role in this and third, implications for understandings of the financial sector contexts studied.

Norms of recognition and derealized subjects

Matrices of power and control in organizations can lead to people being cast out of frames of recognition, and Butler’s account of subjectivity has been influential within organization studies. Seen as a valuable way to understand how power operates in organizations, it forms part of a nascent but growing body of work that draws on poststructural psychoanalysis (Fotaki et al., 2012).

Inspired by Hegel's account of the master-slave relation, Butler argues that "to persist in one's own being is only possible on the condition that we are engaged in receiving and offering recognition" (Butler, 2004: 31), but she utilizes both Foucault and Lacan to consider how the subject is constituted through engagement with norms that offer this. One comes into being as a subject only through achieving recognition in the terms of dominant discourses, albeit that recognition can never fully be attained because of the inescapable instability within the normative structures that produce us as subjects (Butler, 1993). Even so, we strive to attain a sense of self in this way, to avoid existential crisis: "if there are no norms of recognition by which we are recognizable, then it is not possible to persist in one's own being, and we are not possible beings; we have been foreclosed from possibility" (Butler, 2004: 31). Subjectivity is thus always embedded in power (Cabantous et al., 2015), in the 'matrix of normative control' that emerges in certain situations. Here, control is understood to operate via the 'drama of the Symbolic, of desire' as it plays out via discursive frameworks akin to 'self-supporting signifying econom(ies) that wield(s) power in the marking off of what can and cannot be thought within the terms of cultural intelligibility' (Butler, 1990: 99-100). We are 'undone' by such processes; we can be compelled into painful and difficult subject positions because of our need to exist in the eyes of others; 'called by an injurious name, I come into social being... I am led to embrace the terms that injure me because they constitute me socially' (Butler, 1997: 104, see also Butler, 2004). In organizations, for example, a 'heterosexual matrix of control' inscribes gender and sexuality (Linstead and Pullen 2006; Riach et al., 2014; Thanem and Wallenberg 2014, Tyler, 2012), thus limiting the kinds of subjectivities available to individuals because the 'heterosexual imperative enables certain sexed identifications and forecloses and/ or disavows other identifications' (Butler, 1993: 3). This kind of undermining, or 'organizational undoing' (Riach et al., 2016) of one's

complex self is paradoxically fuelled by an inescapable desire for recognition on the part of individuals (Butler, 2004; see also Tyler and Cohen, 2008).

Overall, this approach provides a valuable way to understand how norms proliferate in organizations. Butler's account of the ways in which people perform their subject positions in relation to discourses of power, is usefully described as 'politically-engaged theory of performativity' (Riach et al., 2016: 3). It highlights both micro-level processes of subjectification but also how these relate to wider flows of power that pervade organizations. While studies of gender and sexuality have dominated its use in organizational research (Borgerson, 2005; Harding et al., 2013), the approach has shed light on other kinds of matrices of control relating to for example norms of ageing (Riach et al., 2014), professional management (Harding 2003; Roberts, 2005), and ethical practice (Kenny, 2010). Studies show how a variety of 'signifying economies' can operate, in which subjects are signified through norms that fix differences between people and categories of person (Riach et al 2016: 4). This effectively forces people into positions that may be harmful or painful for them because 'subjective viability and organizational recognition depends on the capacity to maintain a performatively credible conformity to (certain) processes rules and procedures' (Riach et al 2016: 4). Riach et al. (2014) show how norms of ageing intersect with gender and sexuality to shape and control the experiences of organizational actors.

A key issue involves the experiences of those left outside of these processes, whose very subjectivity has been foreclosed. This is inevitable in the constitution of the subject in which inherent tendencies towards othering and aggression persist; '...this exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed... requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet "subjects", but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject' (Butler, 1993: 3). These individuals are un-real, denied subjectivity. Derealized subjects are not recognized by dominant discursive frameworks and therefore

their existence is not seen as valid; they are ‘not-quite’ lives (Butler, 2009). They differ from subordinate identities in that they are excluded on a deeper level; they do not fit any categories of signification and thus cannot lay claim to their rights or needs (Varman and Al-Amoudi, 2016). These lives are therefore ‘ungrievable’ because they are fundamentally unrecognizable. Varman and Al-Amoudi (2016) describe how subaltern groups in an Indian village are effectively derealized through various practices of the Coca-Cola corporation including its influencing of official reports, threatening redundancies and disempowering village council representatives (2016: 11). The result is legitimated, unchecked violence against these groups of derealized, ungrievable subjects.

Overall, Butler’s ‘recognition-based critique of the conditions governing viable subjectivity’ (Riach et al., 2014: 1679) has been influential within organization studies. It offers a rich understanding of the ways in which powerful discourses permeate the organizations we inhabit, and our vulnerability to these as subjects of recognition. It is upon this body of work that the current article aims to build. Specifically, while there have been many studies that detail processes of ‘organizational undoing’ on the part of subjects unable to achieve recognition even at the cost of their own complexity, little work exists on the experiences of these derealized organizational subjects, as articulated from their perspective. As recent scholars of this theory have noted, it is important to explore these (Varman and Al-Amoudi, 2016; Riach et al., 2016: 4). It is to this specific issue that the current article aims to contribute, in part through drawing on Butler’s ideas on censorship, described next.

Impossible speech

Speech and its censorship can represent powerful mechanisms of recognition-based control, defining boundaries and excluding subjects as a result. In certain cases, subjects are cast out, or derealized, because of acts of speaking, an issue Butler develops in her chapter *Implicit Censorship and Discursive Agency* in *Excitable Speech* (1997). Here, she discusses

censorship as a matrix of control that not only constrains, through prohibiting people from speaking in a certain way, but also produces, in that it produces certain kinds of subjects. This production of subjects takes place in accordance with norms that are both implicit and tacit, as well as explicit and conscious, and that govern the kinds of speech considered to be ‘legible as the speech of a subject’ (Butler, 1997a: 133) in a given situation. Censorship thus produces boundaries that circumscribe viable ‘candidate(s) for subjecthood’ (1997a: 133) on the one hand, and excludes those whose speech is not recognized, on the other. Those engaging in ‘impossible speech’ that is not granted recognition amid existing ‘norms of speakability’ can find themselves outside of valid subjecthood. Their speech is devalued and ignored, considered to be ‘precisely the ramblings of the asocial, the rantings of the “psychotic”’, albeit that these categories of asocial and psychotic persons are produced by the very ‘rules that govern the domain of speakability’ (Butler, 1997a: 133). The outcome of engaging in impossible speech can be severe: ‘the consequences of such an irruption of the unspeakable may range from a sense that one is “falling apart”, to the intervention of the state to secure criminal or psychiatric incarceration’ (Butler, 1997a: 136). Structures of censorship thus regulate speech by regulating subjecthood: ‘censorship produces the parameters of the subject’, and in turn subjects come into being in accordance with ‘the social domain of speakable discourse’: the implicit rules that govern speakability. These rules come to ‘inhabit the bodily life of the subject’ in various ways (Butler, 1997a: 141).

These valuable ideas have been used to understand the relationship between censorship and the proliferation of hate speech (Butler, 1997a), and how sex and belonging are intertwined in law and popular culture (Cossman, 2007). They have not yet been widely used in the context of organization studies (exceptions include Fotaki and Harding 2017), despite clear relevance for understanding the ways in which certain statements are sanctioned and others forbidden, in such contexts. In this article, I argue that they help shed light on the

experiences of whistleblowers who have been excluded from their professions as a result of their act of speaking up. Drawing on empirical data I illustrate how forces of censorship can instantiate a boundary around viable speech, and viable subjecthood, and explore how this is experienced by organizational whistleblowers who find themselves effectively ‘de-realized’. This leads to the development of a performative ontology of the excluded whistleblower subject. Before doing so, I introduce the empirical context of the study.

Excluded whistleblowers: Passive subjects?

This study focuses on whistleblowers who ‘went public’ with revelations about corruption in their organizations, and who were excluded from their professions as a result. To date, the subjective experiences of this group tend to be overlooked in the literature. The excluded whistleblower is somewhat simplified as a passive, empty victim.

Since its first use in the 1970s, whistleblowing has been the subject of much research within organization studies; topics range from predicting the likelihood of whistleblowing occurring in a given organizational setting, to examining the kinds of retaliations that organizational whistleblowers can experience as a result of their speaking up (for a useful overview, see Lewis and Vandekerckhove, 2015). A whistleblower is understood as someone who speaks out about illegal or unethical behaviour within his or her organization, and who comes to occupy this subject position through experiences of retaliation (Alford, 2007). We know that retaliation is stronger where the person has disclosed information about systemic and deep-seated wrongdoing as opposed to isolated incidents (Mesmer-Magnus and Viswesvaran, 2005; Near et al., 1993), and retaliation also increases where the whistleblower has gone outside of the organization to report, for example to an external regulator or journalist (Mesmer-Magnus and Viswesvaran, 2005; Rothschild, 2013). Whistleblowers struggle to find work in their industry (Rothschild and Miethe, 1999) and this can exacerbate the impacts of the whistleblowing process, which include financial ruin, and problems with

physical and mental health (Bjørkelo; 2012; Rothschild, 2013: 653). Rather than a one-off act, whistleblowing is a dynamic process that takes time to unfold and the impact of retaliation typically worsens as time goes on (Alford, 2001; Rothschild and Miethe, 1999). Beyond these insights into the problems of being excluded from one's profession as a result of speaking out, there are few studies on the subjective experiences of the whistleblower who finds herself in this situation. This is likely due to the positivist, quantitative approach typically adopted by whistleblowing research and also because of difficulties in accessing individuals to take part in in-depth studies. A number of recent studies have drawn on Foucault's notion of parrhesia, or 'fearless speech', to theorize the whistleblower as a political actor who performs an act of resistance by 'speaking truth to power' (see for example Vandekerckhove and Langenberg, 2012; Weiskopf and Tobias-Miersch, 2016). The parrhesiast is seen as a 'subject-in-process', in that their constitution of self is bound up with their act of speaking truth (Contu, 2014). This work represents a nascent attempt to examine subjectivity in relation to whistleblowing but is to date largely theoretical. Moreover it tends to focus on the earlier stages of whistleblowing, ignoring its aftermath.

Perhaps linked to this general lacuna in understanding the experiences of excluded whistleblowers, societal discourses surrounding this group tend to paint them in simplified and stereotypical ways; whistleblowers are variously seen as heroic individuals possessing extraordinary levels of bravery, as devious and self-serving traitors to their organizations (Alford, 2001; Hersch, 2002), or in the case of those who have borne the brunt of retaliation and exclusion, as unfortunate victims: the passive recipients of suffering. There is little in-depth understanding of what it is to have been excluded from one's industry: of how this might impact upon the subjectivity of the person speaking out, and of how it relates to wider flows of power.

Drawing on an in-depth empirical study of excluded whistleblowers in the financial sector, this article responds to these issues by developing a performative ontology of the excluded whistleblower-subject that builds upon existing work on Butler's 'recognition-based critique' of normative power in organizational settings. This provides a deeper understanding of the dynamics by which this group experience their status as 'derealized subjects', excluded for engaging in impossible speech.

Method

This article discusses an aspect of a larger project¹ that explored the experiences of people who spoke up about systemic, embedded corruption within the financial sector, and who were forced to go public with this information such that they were labelled 'whistleblower'. The individuals (see Table 1) each experienced retaliation as a result, were isolated from former colleagues and were excluded from recruitment processes after speaking up.

Data collection

Seeking a richer sense of people's self-understandings amid these experiences, I gathered case material on 15 such incidents in the UK, Ireland, Switzerland and the U.S, with the aim of interpreting the qualitative data to build theory (Charmaz, 2006). Initial cases were chosen with the help of people at whistleblower support and advocacy organizationsⁱ, and after this a 'snowball' process emerged as whistleblowers put me in touch with others in similar situations². Support organizations were helpful in guiding me towards cases in which the person's story had been verified by a number of sources, which is important in whistleblowing research. I gathered as much secondary information as possible, prior to

¹ Carried out between 2011 and 2015, this project examined processes of identity and subjectivity on the part of financial services whistleblowers, and how these played out over the course of their struggle. The current data set focuses only on the aftermath of speaking out.

² It is difficult to gain access to participants in whistleblowing research and so it is frequently necessary to draw on industry contacts and snowball samples despite the relative limitations of these methods.

approaching people and requesting an interview. This included online transcripts of interviews, newspaper articles, transcripts of government meetings and public hearings at which the individuals spoke or were discussed, and testimony from industry experts. Keenly aware of the sensitive nature of the topic, I met or spoke with each person sometimes on a number of occasions, prior to carrying out an interview. These took place in private areas in restaurants, advocacy group offices, and over Skype. I took advice from my university's ethics protocol and was ready with information on sources of support, should participants become upsetⁱⁱ. During interviews, I was surprised to find that many were quite 'reflexively disposed'; they had spent a lot of time making sense of the fact that they occupy positions outside of prevailing norms (see also Riach et al., 2014: 1683) and were prepared to discuss their experiences. In many cases, follow-up interviews and email conversations took place. I adopted a semi-structured, broadly reflective approach to the interviews (Miles and Huberman, 1994), in each case beginning with questions about the whistleblowing incident and events that followed, and during the conversation that ensued, attempting to encourage reflection on the person's experience, and their understanding of their own self in this process. These interviews were conducted between April 2011 and December 2013. Each lasted between 1 and 2 hours and was recorded, transcribed verbatim and checked for accuracy. During the period of research I attended advocacy group meetings, industry events and assisted journalists writing about whistleblowing in order to familiarize myself with the setting and to help gain the trust of participants.

Data Analysis

I was interested in people's processes of identification as a result of their experiences of exclusion from the financial sector after speaking out, specifically the effects of this on their sense of self. Data analysis followed an interpretive process, iterating back and forth between data and theory (Charmaz, 2006), and was also informed by scholars who have similarly

drawn upon Butler's concept of performative identification in the study of organizational settings (Riach et al., 2014; Harding, 2008). I remained sensitive to expressions of "I", and how these related to discursive forms of power through the securing, albeit temporarily, of particular subject positions (Parker, 2005; Pavon-Cuellar, 2010). Such discursive events are significant (Harding, 2008) because the voice and positioning adopted by the "I" as we attempt to secure our identifications and account for ourselves, can tell us something of the matrix of control that compels various expressions of subjecthood; we see the ways in which 'discourses/objects become absorbed into the idiom of the self' (Harding, 2008: 46).

I first read through the data a number of times without making notes, examining emerging commonalities. For the sake of managing the vast dataset, it was necessary to develop codes to denote emergent themes, albeit that this involved an unfortunate reduction of the rich and complex data (Harding et al., 2016). Given the complexity of the topic many themes emerged (Charmaz, 2006), including for example people's reference to their previously-held position of respected employee, prior to disclosure. Next, I drew on examples from the data in order to clarify each theme, and categorise further into sub-themes. These emergent categories notwithstanding, people's accounts were laden with contradiction and paradox, for example, even as they expressed empathy for former colleagues who had remained silent in the face of wrongdoing, whistleblowers frequently disparaged them in the same account. Wishing to avoid the common strategy of artificially creating coherence among themes for the sake of research presentation (Butler, 1993), I enabled this complexity to remain as this can lead to deeper insights (Parker, 2005, see also Hook, 2007); in the case of this paper it led to the juxtaposition of contradictory subject positions as presented in the Findings.

A 70,000 word document summarizing the data was prepared based on these emergent themes and shared with all interview participants in the form of a printed book.

Their responses were gathered and the data categories adjusted in some cases. Themes relevant to the research questions posed above included a sense of having been shunned, an internalization of this rejection by others, and a constructing of a boundary between the ethical self and the unethical other. While somewhat contradictory, these appeared both pertinent and interesting as they have not generally appeared in previous theorizations of whistleblowing.

Earlier versions of this article were reviewed by academic colleagues, forcing a further reconsideration of how the data were described and analyzed, and this led to a third analytic step involving abductive analysis in which literature on the ‘recognition-based’ approach from Judith Butler was revisited, allowing movement between data and theory. Each stage involved a further interpretation of both the data but also the theory itself (Alvesson and Sköldbäck, 2009; Harding et al., 2016), along with reconsidering my own involvement in the study. This led me to Butler’s lesser-known work on censorship (1997a), which appeared particularly helpful in analyzing the ways in which subjects had been excluded as a result of ‘speaking truth to power’.

It is important to consider the appropriateness of drawing on Butler’s insights into derealization and subjective undoing, to analyze a white-collar, ‘elite’ profession like financial services. After all, she develops these ideas in relation to victims of severe marginalization including detainees at Abu Ghraib prison (Butler, 2009), and sufferers of homophobic violence (Butler, 1993), groups that have little in common with white-collar workers. Organizations can however inflict severe consequences on those whose identities fall outside sanctioned norms (Varman and Al-Amoudi, 2016). For example whistleblowers including those described here can and do suffer violent repercussions in the form of mental health problems (Bjørkelo, 2013; Lennane, 1996), physical stress and financial ruin (Alford,

2001; Rothschild and Miethe, 1999). Differences in empirical settings notwithstanding, it appears that Butler's insights can usefully shed light on this new context.

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Researcher and participant selves

It would be disingenuous to imply that as a researcher, I was somehow immune to the dynamics of recognition-seeking amid matrices of control, described above. The often-adopted 'neutral gaze' of the researcher, which 'passes its own perspective off as the omniscient... as if it were no perspective at all' is a fallacy (Butler, 1993: 136). Rather, I was caught up in relations of power and their attendant subject positions (Fotaki and Harding, 2013; Pullen, 2006). One such involved academia; I desired to see myself, and have others see me, as a competent academic (Cunliffe, 2003; Fotaki and Harding, 2013), and this led me in certain directions that may not have been followed otherwise (Gilmore and Kenny, 2015). I often encountered important and shocking cases of whistleblowing outside of the financial sector, but keenly aware of the importance of 'topic focus' in subsequent academic publications, I opted not to follow these up. I resisted the strong temptation to engage in activist work around people's whistleblowing cases, prioritizing my desire for scholarly work, and to meet my institution's demands for publications. These desires for recognition are ambivalent; even drafting this article I am torn between an impulse to write in an authoritative voice, so that it will be taken seriously by the editors of a serious journal, and to acknowledge the futility of imaginary notions of authority when one is discussing other people's life-worlds (Lapping, 2010; Parker, 2005). All that can be done in response is to paint a somewhat rich and engaging picture of those worlds (Grey and Sinclair, 2006), to show my position within them, and to try to militate against the inevitable 'fixing' of subjects

of inquiry (Riach et al., 2016: 4) for example by involving them in the co-construction of resulting analytic themes as described above (see also Ellis, 2007).

Researchers and respondents rather than being separate entities are engaged in the co-constitution of subjectivity through a process of mutual engagement (Cunliffe, 2003; Gilmore and Kenny, 2015; Harding, 2008) and this was certainly the case here. In seeking out participants I effectively reinforced subject positions of ‘whistleblower’, and further interpellated people into various categories in the process of data analysis, the production of the initial ‘book’ of findings, and subsequent formulations. In turn, the people I interviewed frequently positioned me as a somewhat authoritative ‘I’, a position I tried to resist. I began to realize however that they saw it as a place of responsibility, believing that I ought to use my academic position to speak out as a voice for whistleblowers. This influenced my subsequent writing for a general audience and engaging with journalists who were preparing articles. Fuelled by desires for recognition, I found myself iterating back and forth across the boundary circumscribing academic practice.

Findings

All informants³ had been senior decision-makers in well-known financial sector organizations in the period prior to the Global Financial Crisis of 2008 (see Table 1 for an overview). All had witnessed ‘systemic’ corruption, that is, wrongdoing that was deeply embedded within the organization such that it had become part of the way things were being done. Examples ranged from regularly mis-selling financial insurance products in order to boost profits, to systematically overcharging business clients and facilitating money laundering by overseas drug dealers. Most informants had occupied a senior risk, compliance or audit role⁴. This meant that their position in relation to the law was clear; they were

³ Informants are anonymized

obliged to report any irregularities to their industry's regulator by virtue of the role itself (Author, 2014). The official penalty for not doing so varied across countries but generally involved a fine or time in prison. Most people had spoken out internally at first, alerting bosses, board members or human resource departments, about the problems they perceived. In each case, after a period of time passed it became clear that they were not being addressed and so the whistleblower felt compelled to go outside of their organization, disclosing to a regulator, a journalist or the police. Upon doing so, individuals became known for having spoken up; they became identified as whistleblowers within their organization and in some cases by journalists, a label that some resisted because they felt that they had merely carried out the responsibilities of their job.

In each case, respondents had experienced retaliation within their organizations for speaking out, ranging from ostracization by colleagues, demotion or being assigned menial work, experiencing bullying or, sometimes, outright dismissal. Retaliation of this nature is common among people who whistleblow 'externally' (Devine and Maassarani, 2011; Rothschild and Miethe, 1999), while retaliation against those who are forced to leave their organization as a result of speaking out can be harsher still (Casal and Zalkind, 1995; Miceli et al., 1999). Each participant in the study had either resigned or was fired as a result of this. Informants then found that they were excluded from working in the financial sector again, despite in many cases having stellar credentials and years of positive evaluations. Such 'blacklisting' is a widely-known impact of speaking out (Devine and Maassarani, 2011; Rothschild and Miethe, 1999). Once they became known as whistleblowers, respondents often found themselves being shunned by former colleagues and in some cases friends. They were no longer welcome in the professional and social circles within financial services, in which they had once thrived.

What kinds of dynamics of selfhood ensued as a result of being blacklisted in this way? How did the “I”s involved, experience such exclusions, and how did this relate to wider forms of power? The details of people’s individual experiences were vastly different. Even so, some similarities emerged in how people articulated their sense of self as they struggled with these changes. Analytic insights are woven alongside empirical findings in what follows, to show how concepts build upon each other.

Confusion and self-doubt

In many cases, people found themselves internalizing the exclusions they were experiencing and doubting themselves as a result. Andreas had been headhunted to the position of senior Risk Manager at Italtbank Plc’s Ireland’s operation. He describes witnessing repeated, illegal, liquidity breaches at his bank, and was told on reporting these internally that ‘this was they way things were done in Ireland’. When his superiors refused to address the issue, he followed protocol and reported to the Irish regulator, resigning his position from the firm. His disclosures were not followed up. He describes how former colleagues and friends treated him after he left the bank.

I have been shunned by a good number of people: friends, colleagues, acquaintances.

People whom I wined and dined in this city, in the good old days when I was a respectable banker, not the one who broke ranks.

He was suddenly perceived as someone to ignore and avoid. Discussing why this might be the case, he felt that he now represented something new to his former friends and colleagues, something repulsive:

They don’t want to know how calamitous the global banking system is. [I represent] an unpleasant truth. In so far as they were complacent and party to the collapse of this country’s economy, and they would have had the same responsibilities towards probity and diligence that I had, but yet they still have jobs, and I don’t.

Andreas felt that he represented something ‘unpleasant’ and somewhat unthinkable, not least because he took action that these former colleagues could have, but opted not to. For some time after, he struggled to understand this and to understand why his complaints continued to be ignored by the authorities and his former employers.

I was saying, “This is unreal”... I mean all I did was obey the law: it does say five years in prison for breaching the law [i.e. not reporting]. In the meantime – you know- surely if I have done the right thing here, how come I am the only one taking the brunt?

He had begun to question himself. If he had been so correct in his actions, why was he alone?

John spoke out about corruption in his bank’s regional branches, where business clients were being overcharged because of pressures placed on local managers to meet impossible income targets. Having seen his complaints to senior management come to nothing, he went directly to the regulator. After this, he felt cut off from colleagues:

From an organizational point of view, there’s a lot of ostracization [that] goes on. I think that is a common thing; you are made to feel isolated, you are made to feel outside. There's an in-group in the organization and somehow you're outside that and therefore... You lose all your credibility by being outside the organization.

Having gone to the Regulator, a long process ensued during which he was the subject of smear campaigns by his bank through the Irish media, which linked him erroneously to a U.S. financial scandal and disparaged his name. He was painted as a disgruntled former employee, out for revenge. He noted that:

I certainly wasn’t prepared for [being scapegoated]. But I found that you have to deal with it. And certainly it is very difficult to deal with because... You know at some points, it does feel very personal, it does [make you think], 'Is it actually true? Am I the one with the problem?’ And “Have I totally misread this whole situation?”

Individuals began to doubt themselves, who they were and what they had witnessed, and began to internalize the rejections they experienced as a result of speaking out.

Peter had been Head of Group Regulatory Risk at a leading UK bank for a number of years before he realized that the culture in the sales department was becoming dangerous. Employees were primarily focused on selling mortgages, regardless of the impact on prudence and ethics. Peter raised the issue internally and was fired. When he challenged this decision through the courts, a formal investigation into his unfair dismissal claim was commissioned, although it used the firm's own auditors to carry out this apparently independent investigation. The report was based on interviews with former colleagues and bosses. The result was a document that disparaged Peter in no uncertain terms, concluding that he had been fired because of personality issues, rather than his disclosures of wrongdoing inside the bank.

I got a call from the editor of the *Financial Times*. He said, “We have got the [audit firm] report. It says you are a lunatic, you are extraordinary, you ranted, you're prickly... What have you got to say about that?”

Peter describes his reaction to receiving his copy of the report; he left it unopened for days after receiving it. When he finally did:

It seemed like a disaster – it made me introvert on myself and question myself.

Struggling to reconcile his former position, Head of Risk for the entire banking group, to this new way of being perceived by both his current and former employersⁱⁱⁱ, he began to doubt himself.

It was devastating. Can you imagine being described like that...? When you set out to do your job to the best of your ability?

Peter finally prevailed in his mission to make public his claims against his former employer, with a Parliamentary select committee accepting his evidence as a valuable account of the

role played by banks in the global financial crisis. This led to a fuller investigation of what had happened. Politicians on the committee interviewed the bosses who sacked him, asking them why they wanted to fire a Risk Manager that had been doing such a good job. Peter has since challenged the veracity of the ‘independent’ report on his case. Despite all of this, his reputation for truth-telling remained a part of how he was perceived in the years that followed. He describes the attitude towards him today within British banking: ‘I am still toxic waste now for having spoken out all those years ago!’; Peter understands that he is seen as dangerous and untouchable.

Yvonne spoke up about wrongdoing at a leading Irish bank and building society when she appeared in court to defend a colleague who was being scapegoated for unethical loans that had been granted by a manager. For her, months of ostracization by co-workers followed her decision to speak publicly about the corruption she had witnessed, along with bullying by senior managers and intimidation. Against a backdrop of so much opposition from people who had been friends or at least amicable co-workers, she notes:

It’s certainly very hard to prove how badly you have been treated and how it’s affecting you mentally, physically... You know, just your whole being. It’s like: being bullied is very, very hard to prove.

As had many others, Yvonne describes the insidious self-doubt that emerges when one acts alone and is severely criticized for doing so.

Because it’s so difficult to prove you are the innocent party, you actually almost feel guilty. And then you start doubting yourself. Once you start doubting yourself, you start asking, “Am I right in having taken this case; should I have taken this case?”

Alongside other participants in the study, Yvonne internalized these exclusions, doubting herself. As noted above, most participants worked in risk or audit roles and thus were

responsible for internal regulation. This can lead to a feeling of being ‘outside’ the bank even before speaking out, as has been described elsewhere (Author, 2014).

‘Falling apart’: Consequences of self-doubt Each individual had engaged in a similar kind of speech act, speaking up about systemic corruption in his or her financial services organization. As a result of this, each found themselves, to varying degrees, outside of the particular ‘conditions of intelligibility’ that governed their professional milieu. Having spoken up, they were no longer seen as valid subjects deserving of basic respect, and so became targets of various kinds of retaliations from colleagues and bosses. Nor were they seen as sufficiently valid to hire, and hence they were excluded from recruitment processes. Finally, they were denied subjectivity on the level of social interactions in many cases, shunned by former friends. A subtle boundary appeared to have emerged, and these subjects found themselves on the outside, denied subjectivity as a result of having engaged in ‘impossible speech’. They had been effectively derealized because of their speech acts. What impacts did this have on people’s sense of self?

Respondents found themselves ‘undone’ (Butler, 2004) in a number of ways. First, they appeared to be confused and dismayed by the reactions that they had received. Their previously-held subject positions of reliable professional were suddenly thrown into chaos as a result of speaking out. People were confused because it was their very truth-telling, which stemmed from adherence to the rules and regulations of banking itself, that seemed to mark their speech as unacceptable, and to lead to them being actively rejected by their profession. Andreas found it somewhat ‘unreal’, that he had done what he considered to be the right thing, and yet found himself alone in this. Confusion was heightened by the fact that most individuals occupied ‘watchdog’ roles as senior auditor, risk or compliance personnel; they were merely fulfilling their professional obligations by highlighting the problems they

witnessed. Peter could not understand why he had been vilified, when he had merely ‘set out to do (his) job to the best of (his) ability’, just as Andreas pointed out that ‘all I did was obey the law’. People felt the retaliations and exclusions keenly; ‘it was devastating’, as Peter notes.

In addition to being confused and hurt however, we see how they began to question themselves on a more fundamental level. John describes how he started to wonder whether he had actually witnessed the wrongdoing that he had seen (and had ample documentary evidence of). This questioning led to an internalization of the exclusions they were experiencing as people took the retaliations coming from the ‘outside’ into themselves. As Yvonne notes, ‘you feel almost guilty... and then you start doubting yourself’, while John began to wonder whether he was ‘the one with the problem’. Each person was growing unsure of their position, what they had witnessed but also, who they ‘were’ as a subject. This resonates with Butler’s insights into the possible impacts for subjects who engage in impossible speech, which can include a sense ‘that one is “falling apart”’, as one struggles to be heard despite having placed one’s existence as a valid subject at risk (1997a: 133). What appears to be falling apart, here, is the previously held subject position of valid financial services employee, the more-or-less stable and secure sense of an “I” that has now been thrown into chaos. Time plays an important role here; where people’s struggles are long and protracted, this sense of confusion and self-doubt is exacerbated (see also Kenny, 2015). Before discussing the wider implications of this idea, a second dominant theme is introduced.

The (more) Ethical “I”

For some, coping with the confusion described above involved the construction of the “I” as a brave truth-teller, different to those others who had been afraid to speak out. Peter discussed the colleagues at his former bank that had remained silent:

To mix a few well-known metaphors..., the current financial crisis is a bit like the story of the Emperor's new clothes. Anyone whose eyes were not blinded by money, power and pride — hubris—, who really looked carefully, knew there was something [wrong].

He felt that these former colleagues had been aware of the wrongdoing, just as he had:

But sadly, no-one wanted or felt able to speak up for fear of stepping out of line with the rest of the lemmings who were busy organizing themselves to run over the edge of the cliff behind the pied piper CEOs and executive teams that were being paid so much to play that tune and take them in that direction.

Here, he constructs himself as someone who has his 'eyes open', who can really see what is happening, in contrast to the lemmings that simply accepted what the 'pied piper' managers were telling them.

Michael was a senior Anti Money-Laundering officer who blew the whistle on billions of dollars of Mexican drug money that was being laundered through his bank. He was joined by the U.S. Department of Justice in secret in order to build a case, which led to the largest charge ever brought against a bank under the Bank Secrecy Act of 1970. He had set up something of a boundary between himself and former colleagues, feeling that they were disparaging him.

They'll look at me and say... a part of their protection, defence mechanism, is to accuse me of being flash, and cocky and arrogant and full of himself because then that means that protects them and says, they are ordinary, [while] Michael Winters is flash.

Michael discusses those who don't 'blow the whistle' as he had done. They include other anti-money laundering officers in banks such as his, who witness the kinds of transactions that clearly point to illegal funds being deposited, and yet do nothing:

Banks are pure commercial organizations. And I don't condemn people who don't blow the whistle. I'm not one of those people [but] I don't judge people for not doing it.

He goes on to note the difference between how he perceives this group, and his own position:

Some people say, you know, "Michael, well done you. But, by the way, I let the money-laundering go on at my bank because I want to keep my job, and therefore I'm not bothered about fifty thousand dead people in Mexico. It's nothing to do with me." And I think, "Well, you are not an anti-money laundering officer, you are a salary collector. All you do is you go to work every month and collect your salary. That's what you do."

For Peter, and for Michael, despite the pervasive self-doubt and confusion, they appeared secure in knowing what they were *not*: the lemmings and the salary-collectors at their former banks — those others that had hidden from the truth and their responsibilities.

Andreas discusses how he sees a binary distinction between him and others who did not speak out:

We are reaching a point where we cannot all be right... At this stage, reality has corroborated my story, in that there was no regulation being enforced – otherwise why were all our banks nationalized? So either I did my job and other risk managers and other board members and risk managers didn't... We can't *all* be right. The fact that our [Ireland's] entire banking system has collapsed probably testifies to a certain conclusion.

Here we see echoes of the 'othering' by which Michael and Peter constructed their moral selves above; Andreas positions himself against those who did not speak up, and so were simply 'not right'.

'Re-doing' the self as true professional In addition to 'being undone' at the mercy of dominant norms of speakability, as described above, we see how individuals appeared to, paradoxically, construct a second boundary defining themselves against others, this time disparaging former colleagues for not engaging in an ethical speech act as they had done. Peter dubbed them mere 'lemmings' whose eyes were 'blinded by money, power and pride', while for Michael they are just 'salary collectors', unconcerned about the fact that there might be 'fifty thousand dead people in Mexico' as an indirect result of their organization's facilitation of drug money laundering in the United States. We see here attempts to reclaim the "I" from its chaotic undoing, and to construct a stable and valid subject position. Doing so necessarily involves positioning oneself against an abject other (Butler, 2004: 2; 1993) in order to circumscribe the boundary of the self, defining it in relation to what it is not. In this case the boundary separates the enlightened whistleblower whose motives are pure, from the cowardly and debased former colleague who is now on the outside, excluded from this emergent subject position.

This insight resonates with findings from other studies of whistleblowers that show, first, how people who have spoken out can tend to exaggerate the moral nature of their actions in the interview setting, constructing and reinforcing an 'ethical self' (McLain and Keenan, 1999), and also that the construction of a self-position as 'exceedingly moral', distanced from the corruption of their former employer and colleagues, is a common phenomenon among those who have suffered traumatic whistleblowing experiences (Rothschild and Miethe, 1999: 121). In this case, the performative 're-doing' of the self involves excluding others and reinstating a new boundary. Moreover these particular struggles appear to involve contestations over professionalism; many excluded whistleblowers respond by constructing themselves as the 'true' defenders of the banking

profession, the very industry that had cast them out. The others who have excluded them are fakes: they are not ‘real’ professionals and so must in turn be excluded.

Implications and Contributions

The findings illustrate subjective derealization in instances of financial sector whistleblowing. Complex dynamics of derealization marked these subjects’ exclusions from their professions, as a result of engaging in impossible speech. These dynamics involved chaotic reconstructions of subject positions in relation to shifting boundaries that delineated valid subjecthood, along with an active reproduction of these boundaries. These insights lead to a number of contributions for organization studies, both relating to whistleblowing and to Butler’s theory of politically-engaged performativity.

The first contribution is to debates on power in organizations, specifically around ‘recognition-based critique(s)’ of the role played by organizations in influencing ‘the conditions governing viable subjectivity’ (Riach et al., 2014: 1679). Identification is performative; people construct subject positions for themselves amid various discursive influences that circumscribe the kinds of selves that emerge, all the while desiring to be recognized as valid subjects in the term offered by dominant norms. Extant organizational research shows how matrices of control operate in organizations via mechanisms that deny recognition to certain subjects (Roberts, 2005), with some scholars extending this work beyond gender and sexuality (Borgerson, 2005). Contributing to this, these findings provide insights into how the performativity of subject positions can also be influenced by censorship; we see how norms of speakability can work through such matrices of control in the treatment of excluded whistleblowers in the financial sector. Employees in this sector are less likely than others to speak out in the face of wrongdoing (PCAW, 2013; Vandekerckhove et al., 2013), indicating the strength of these norms.

This study sheds light on the causes of these normative effects. Here we return to Butler, who is predominantly concerned with questions of power (Cabantous et al., 2015). In studies of censorship, for example, it is vital to interrogate the implicit forces that govern the ‘conditions of intelligibility’ of speech in a given situation (Butler, 1997a: 134); ‘the question is not what it is I will be able to say, but what will constitute the domain of the sayable within which I begin to speak at all’ (1997a: 133). These instances of power are rarely acknowledged as such, not least because to do so would be to speak outside of the terms circumscribing legible speech. In the cases presented here, questions remain around who or what was causing the exclusions described; if these subjects were produced as a result of powerful norms of censorship; what was driving them? It appears that a complex matrix of control operated within the financial services sector, dictating what could and what could not be spoken about. Financial services is well-known for being a somewhat opaque industry (O’Brien, 2007: 7). Struggling to fully understand the practices of firms within it, state regulators depend upon organizations to effectively self-regulate. Even while the aftermath of the 2008 crisis saw calls for greater transparency, the industry has repeatedly lobbied against this (O’Brien, 2007; 2009; Salter, 2012). This persistent opacity and lack of transparency gives rise to a wall of silence in relation to practices within the sector, including corrupt ones. Strong norms persist that implicitly discourage people from speaking up (Author, 2014). The whistleblowers featured here had transgressed these norms of silence and the related ‘matrix of control’ that pervaded the sector, because they uttered statements that fell outside the boundary of what was acceptable. Through processes of censorship, this matrix of control constituted an implicit, normative ‘domain of the sayable’. This operation of power was productive in that it produced certain kinds of subjects: those operating within the boundary of what could be deemed acceptable speech, and those unspeakable, impossible others whose statements must be discounted because the subjects were not valid. The impossible subjects

participating in this study are foreclosed from recognition in the realm of financial services and are punished as a result of their transgressions.

In making this claim, it is important to return to Foucault and clarify the nature of ‘causality’ in this understanding of power. Rather than intentionally deployed by some agent, power works through discourse forming coherent, ‘comprehensive system(s)’. These are diffuse; ‘it is often the case that no one is there to have invented them and few who can be said to have formulated them’ (Foucault, 1976: 94). Thus while the ‘sayable’ may be tightly circumscribed within financial services, this work cannot be attributed. The findings illustrate this; no ‘singular locus of power’ drove the exclusions detailed here, but rather the effects emerged through a complex nexus of ostracizations from recruitment practitioners, colleagues and friends. This leads to a second insight in relation to the multiple nature of force in this case; financial services is a broad and complex setting, and censorship operates in widely differing ways. What is sayable in one context is prohibited in another even within this sector. This is best illustrated by the many situations in which an individual whistleblower is lauded in one country for speaking out about, for example, tax evasion, while they are considered traitors in another⁵. Finally it is important to avoid characterizing all whistleblowers in similar ways; the insights presented here derive from the specific cases presented. The dramatic implications for people’s sense of self were nonetheless exacerbated by their whistleblowing actions.

A second contribution to existing studies of ‘regulation by recognition’ in organizations is to propose a theory of subjective derealization in instances of impossible speech. Organization scholars have frequently pointed to the fact that subjects can be undone by the matrices of control operating in different professional contexts. Apart from insights into how such subjects might engage in resistance (Varman and Al-Amoudi, 2016),

⁵ See for example the cases of Bradley Birkenfeld and Rudolf Elmer (Author, forthcoming 2018).

theorization of how this might be experienced by subjects are rare, despite calls that it is important to examine the ‘consequences of mis-recognition for those who don't fit in’ to organizationally-prescribed norms (Riach et al., 2016: 4). The findings presented here highlight aspects of the ‘dynamics of derealization’ as they play out where subjects have been excluded as a result of whistleblowing; the denial of recognition that results from engaging in impossible speech can lead to an un-doing of the subject, as previously held and stable subject positions are thrown into disarray, leading to an unraveling of one’s sense of self. We also see how subjects responded by constructing themselves as the ‘true professionals’ for speaking out in contrast to those depraved others who said nothing. Thus the experience of derealization prompted a ‘re-doing’ of the self: setting up and reinforcing new boundaries that differentiate ethical self from unethical other. The performative process is not merely an individual phenomenon but is embedded in flows of power within the wider sector.

This offers important insights into studies of derealization within Butlerian ‘recognition-based critiques’ of organizations, specifically because it acknowledges and foregrounds the ‘humanness’ of those left outside through highlighting their aggressive and exclusionary impulses. Derealized subjects are shown to possess the same attachments and ambivalences towards others (Butler, 1997; 2004; Kenny and Fotaki, 2014), as subjects that exist ‘within the norm’ including a desire to see oneself as the only ‘true professional’ in the industry. This has important repercussions for blacklisted and excluded whistleblowers, for example, who are frequently characterized in both theoretical analyses and popular discourse as devious outcasts deserving of their punishment or else as tragic, heroic victims. These depictions paint the excluded whistleblower as a hollowed out subject: an empty stereotype, and therefore do little to encourage empathy for this group, or understanding for the suffering they experience. Such characterizations are unhelpful because they set this group apart from ‘ordinary people’. A lack of understanding of the process of derealization contributes to the

current situation in which supports, both financial and emotional, for excluded whistleblowers are practically non-existent.

This article therefore adds to studies of whistleblowing by enriching understandings of the excluded whistleblower subject, through the theoretical framing described above. Within this literature the question of how those who ‘speak truth to power’ construct themselves as subjects has emerged as important of late (Weiskopf and Tobias-Miersch, 2016), although existing theories are somewhat anaemic. Contributing to this nascent work, the theoretical perspective developed here allows us to move beyond the notion that the position of excluded whistleblower subject is somewhat fixed and empty. Rather than a ‘purely categorical... phenomenon’ (Riach et al., 2014: 1693) we see how occupying the position of excluded whistleblower-subject is something of a performative praxis involving ongoing and ambivalent negotiation with self, other and norms governing acceptable speech. This ‘performative ontology’ of the excluded whistleblower subject understands their experiences to construct a valid sense of self as both driven by desires for recognition but also susceptible to forms of control.

Concluding reflections

From a practical perspective, enriching our theoretical understanding of the experiences of derealization by excluded subjects may help to prompt better supports from society for people who find themselves in such situations. At present there is little or no understanding of how blacklisted whistleblowers, for example, survive once the media and public attention their disclosures attract is over. Further research into this area is therefore important.

This study was limited in producing a mere temporal ‘snapshot’ of engaging in impossible speech, and future work might usefully adopt a longitudinal approach following the experiences of whistleblowers as they unfold. Further research taking a longer-term perspective might usefully draw on the idea that while censorship produces subjects in certain

ways, this is neither fixed nor intractable (Butler, 1990). While the subject who speaks, or who doesn't, is an effect of foreclosures instated by discursive forms of power, they are neither 'fully (nor) exhaustively reduced to such an effect' (Butler, 1997: 139). In the case of whistleblowing, it is not a one-off act but an ongoing process, often taking years (Martin and Rifkin, 2004). As they struggle to reclaim viable subjecthood, to be listened to, individuals such as those described above necessarily speak 'at the border of the speakable', oscillating at times between excluded statements and legible speech (for example as they defend their actions by appealing to norms of professional standards and the importance of transparency and rule-following within these). Those who move back and forth across the boundary put themselves at risk both ontologically and practically, as we see here, but it is this movement that may enable a redrawing of the distinction between what is and what is not speakable. This possibility merits further research because it suggests the potential for new whistleblower-subjects to emerge in the future, through expanding the 'domain of the sayable'.

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Table 1: Please refer to online data supplemental Author_online_supp

ⁱ These include *Whistleblowers UK*, the U.S. *Government Accountability Project* and *Transparency International Ireland*

ⁱⁱ This only occurred once, when a potential interviewee told me on the phone that he was too stressed to continue, and so his account was not part of the final study

ⁱⁱⁱ Marshall had worked for this audit firm before joining the bank