

# The Influence of Confucian Ethics and Collectivism on Whistleblowing Intentions: A Study of South Korean Public Employees<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT.** The current study presents the findings of an empirical inquiry into the effects of Confucian ethics and collectivism, on individual whistleblowing intentions. Confucian Ethics and Individualism–Collectivism were measured in a questionnaire completed by 343 public officials in South Korea. This study found that Confucian ethics had significant but mixed effects on whistleblowing intentions. The affection between father and son had a negative effect on internal and external whistleblowing intentions, while the distinction between the roles of husband and wife had a positive effect on those intentions. The effects of collectivism were also different depending on the specific types of collectivism. Horizontal collectivism had a positive effect on both types of whistleblowing intentions, whereas vertical collectivism did not show any significant effects on whistleblowing intentions. These results indicate that cultural traits such as Confucian ethics and collectivism may affect an indi-

vidual's whistleblowing intentions in degree and direction, making blanket predictions about cultural effects on whistleblowing difficult.

**KEY WORDS:** confucian ethics, cultural attitudes, individualism–collectivism, korea, whistleblowing intentions

## Introduction

Some of the largest accounting scandals in history have been reported since the year 2000, principally in US-based corporations. Many of these scandals came to light because of the actions of employees in those companies who believed that wrongdoing by corporations should be corrected and reported to the authorities (Pulliam and Solomon, 2002). The actions of these employees in US corporations are courageous, and they have greatly prompted Asian countries to embrace the positive effects of whistleblowing. Compared with western cultures, however little has been reported about the actions taken by employees in non-western cultures when they observe wrongdoing in their organizations. Although the effect of national culture on an employee's willingness to report wrongdoing is starting to appear in the business literature (e.g., Keenan, 2002; King, 2000; Sims and Keenan, 1999; Tavakoli et al., 2003), previous whistleblowing studies have been critically deficient in taking cultural factors into consideration. Applying an intercultural view to the study of whistleblowing would be especially valuable in today's global economy, as more and more firms

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set up operations in cultures outside of their home country.

Two cultural dimensions that could affect whistleblowing intentions are Confucian ethics and collectivism, the typical cultural and psychological traits in Asian society. For example, when the anti-corruption law of 2001 was passed in South Korea, providing legal support for employees who disclosed misconduct in their organizations, it touched off a series of serious controversies. One of the strongest opposing arguments held that the law went against the ideals of Confucian ethics as well as collectivism, which are deeply rooted in South Korean society. Critics argued that such “radicalism” was compatible only with more individual-centered societies of Western culture, not in Asian societies based on Confucianism and collectivism. They argued that in a Confucian and collectivist society, like South Korea, suddenly embracing whistleblowing would have rather negative results, with dire consequences for the harmony of organizations.

#### *The unresolved debate*

In Asian ethical behavior studies, the cultural effects on whistleblowing, although an important issue, have rarely been empirically explored, especially in the philosophical and psychological debates on behavior. In Hong Kong, a few studies discussing cultural influence on whistleblowing have been found. One study, citing the book, *Analects of Confucius*, analyzed the case of a Hong Kong government pharmacist who disclosed misconduct within the organization, evaluating Confucian ethics as philosophical norms of conduct that encouraged whistleblowing (Chua and Gould, 1995). Confucianism is based on the teachings of Confucius (552–479 B.C.), a central figure of Confucianism who suggested moral obligations or practical ethics in human relations for daily life. His teachings have been a core part of the ethical text for guiding people’s good behavior in the East Asian countries (Hofstede, 1991: 40, 164). Chua and Gould (1995) found Confucian ethics as a means to justify their argument concerning whistleblowing. According to them, in the *Analects of Confucius* (Li, 1999), Chapter XVII: 23 states: “A gentleman values righteousness the highest”; in IV: 16: “A gentleman pursues righteousness; a common man, personal gain.”

Furthermore, *Analects* II.24 states: “To do nothing when righteous actions are called for is cowardly;” and in VII: 15: “Fortune and fame, when secured without righteousness, are like floating clouds to me.” In the *Analects* VIII: 2 and XIV: 5, Confucian ethics teach that a noble man is one with virtue and courage, a man who speaks up for righteousness. Throughout history, *Analects* has been a source of Confucian ethics teachings, and respect for it is still rooted in Asian countries, providing an important criterion of ethical role expectations and obligations in daily life.

Vinten (1999), however, disagreed with Chua and Gould’s (1995) position that Confucian ethics has a positive effect on whistleblowing. According to Vinten (1999), righteousness and courage are core virtues in Confucian ethics, and they enable an individual to challenge an organization. He argued that statements in the Confucian texts are not clear-cut in support for the position that Chua and Gould (1995) took toward whistleblowing. To reinforce his argument, Vinten (1999) cited specific phrases in the *Analects of Confucius*,<sup>2</sup> including the passage in I: 2 (Li, 1999) which states: “Rare is a person who, while filial to his parents and deferential to his elder siblings, harbors designs to challenge the authorities... . Filiality and deference are the foundation of nobleness.” Although his argument is convincing, it is also possible that some teachings in the *Analects* could still be interpreted as supportive of whistleblowing. What this debate points out is that different teachings of Confucius could lead to support or non-support for whistleblowing. This gives rise to ambiguity in predicting the effects of Confucian ethics on employees’ willingness to report wrongdoing in cultures that embrace the teachings of Confucius.

In fact, Confucian ethics has been used as an umbrella concept regarded as an important criterion of ethical judgments of behaviors and social relationships. However, the debate ended without additional research that would explore the effects of Confucian ethics.

The arguments on whether collectivism has a negative relationship to whistleblowing have also heretofore lacked sufficient empirical analysis. Past research has found individual differences in thinking and feeling about the individualism–collectivism dimension (e.g., Bochner, 1994; Kibum and Uichol, 1997; King, 2000). However, the effects of individualistic or collectivistic behavior on the intention to

report wrongdoing in the workplace have been poorly studied. Specifically, early whistleblowing research has shown a disregard for differences in individual behavior in diverse cultures. Recently, however the rapid spread of whistleblowing legislation in Western countries like the United States, Britain, Australia, Canada, etc. (Kaplan, 2001) suggests that whistleblowing may be more compatible with the individual-based cultural characteristics of Western society than the collectivistic culture of Asian society. If so, are the effects of the individualism–collectivism dimension significant on whistleblowing at the individual level? In some sense, the above debate and unresolved questions provide a fresh opportunity to test the effects of cultural traits on whistleblowing at the individual level.

#### *The aim of this paper*

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationships between whistleblowing intentions and culture, specifically the cultural traits of Confucian ethics and collectivism. Given the existing debate on this issue, it is possible that the cultural effects on whistleblowing could vary, depending on the specific traits or type of whistleblowing. King (2000, p. 14) argues that differences in cultural attitudes and communication styles “may affect internal disclosure of perceived wrongdoing within the workplace.” According to him, differences in communication and cultural attitudes affect a person’s reluctance to complain and ask for corrections of the wrongdoing in a direct way. In this respect, Confucian ethics and collectivist attitudes might have significant consequences for an employee’s decision to take action on wrongdoing, as well as how to carry out a decision to report wrongdoing.

#### **Literature review**

##### *Whistleblowing typology and perceptions*

“Blowing the whistle” – “the disclosure by organization members (former or current) of illegal, immoral or illegitimate practices under the control of their employers, to persons or organizations that may be able to effect action” (Near and Miceli,

1985, p. 4) – has largely been divided into external or internal whistleblowing, based on the channels by means of which the wrongdoing is reported. Gorta and Forell (1995) classified an employee’s possible responses to wrongdoing into four areas (pp. 336–337): do nothing, talk to other employees, report internally, or report outside of the organization. Although talking to other employees is an action available to observing wrongdoing, it has not been included as a whistleblowing action in the Miceli and Near definition. Rothschild and Miethe (1999) explored the personal and organizational attributes that affected an individual’s willingness to blow the whistle, using three types of employees’ response: report wrongdoing externally or internally, or choose to remain silent. In this study, the authors integrated three possible types of action taken in response to wrongdoing: reporting externally, reporting internally, or not reporting. Thus, the two forms of non-reporting mentioned by Gorta and Forell (1995) in their study, and the “choosing to remain silent” that Rothschild and Miethe (1999) employed in their study are grouped here into a “non-action” response concerning the wrongdoing. Other reactions are possible, but given past research (Dworkin and Callahan, 1991; King, 2000; Miceli and Near, 1992), the current study considered these reactions to be the most representative of the behaviors that employees took after witnessing wrongdoing. External whistleblowing refers to an act whereby an employee discloses wrongdoing committed in the organization to someone outside of that organization, either anonymously or by identifying, whereas internal whistleblowing refers to an act of reporting wrongdoing to someone at an upper level within the organization (Dworkin and Callahan, 1991). Both internal and external whistleblowing may be done anonymously to higher-ups within the organization, or to outside authorities, such as when a hotline is established (Elliston, 1982; Near and Miceli, 1985). External and internal whistleblowing are not mutually exclusive – in fact, in a majority of cases, past research has found that whistleblowers who used external channels had used internal channels first (Baker, 1983; Miceli and Near, 1984).

Co-workers’ attitudes toward the reporting of peers’ misconduct are frequently negative or even

hostile, because an organization is based on an “in-group” culture and the allegations of whistleblowers often cause seemingly intolerable inconveniences and disadvantages to coworkers in the organization. These attitudes are commonly found, regardless of the nations concerned. In American society, whistleblowers are often called “rats” or “moles,” indicating “a mean person who furtively sneaks into an organization and takes a dig at another’s secret or fault” (Miethe, 1999, p. 21). The attitudes of the members of an organization towards whistleblowers in Asian society may be even more negative than American attitudes. South Koreans tend to view whistleblowing as outright betrayal, breaching the faith of other coworkers in the organization, an unwelcome action not nearly tolerated in collective societies. More importantly, these negative attitudes might vary according to the kind of whistleblowing in question, due to the inherent differences in whistleblowing types mentioned above. For example, due to the characteristics of the channels employed in reporting, external disclosure may hurt coworkers as well as the organization more seriously than internal whistleblowing, increasing a sense of disloyalty or betrayal in the external reporting of wrongdoing. On the other hand, internal reporting tends to rather provide a chance for “preventing negative publicity, investigations, and administrative and legal actions,” and also for correcting corrupt practices without incurring the more serious, externally-based consequences of continued wrongdoing (Dworkin and Near, 1987).

To date, factors contributing to whistleblowing have been studied in only three areas: personal, situational, and environmental (Miceli and Near, 1992, p. 93–178). When an intercultural perspective is introduced into a discussion of whistleblowing, a whole new interpretation of the factors that may affect the reporting of wrongdoing in the workplace might be needed. In this study, the effects of Confucianism and collectivism on various types of whistleblowing were studied.

#### *Confucian ethical beliefs*

The moral thinking in Confucianism is the socio-cultural infrastructure that guides individual behavior in far-east Asian countries, including South Korea,

Japan, China, Taiwan, and Singapore (Ma and Smith, 1992, p. 655). For this reason, Confucian ethics is a broad set of ethical roles and expectations regarding daily life. Thus, it needs to be clarified before analyzing its effects on whistleblowing intentions.

Confucius, a central figure of Confucianism, suggested moral obligations or ethics by the *wu lun*, the five basic relationships: ruler–subject, father–son, husband–wife, brothers, and friends, and presented various moral disciplines and virtues for each of the above relationships (Hofstede, 1991: 171). These teachings of Confucius, referring to “values as the desired,” and “expected social behavior,” have for a long time been a core part of the ethical text for guiding people’s good behavior in the East Asian countries (Hofstede, 1991: 40, 164). The core of Confucian ethics is summarized into the five practical moral precepts, which govern the five most important human relationships: affection between father and son (FS), loyalty between sovereign and subject (SS), the distinction between the roles of husband and wife (HW), courtesy of the young for the old (OY), and trust between friends (FR).<sup>3</sup> These moral principles of Confucianism, which work as the rules of conduct for political, social, and family relations, have been dominant in Korean society for thousands of years. The most important ethical component among them is loyalty based on righteousness between sovereign and subject, reinterpreted today as loyalty to an organization. In Confucian ethics, true loyalty in which a subject traditionally had to speak up without reserve even when his speaking pointed to the sovereign’s wrongdoing, was highly encouraged.

The Confucian ethical philosophy also stresses a strict hierarchical order for human relationships based on age and sex, which ties into the FS, OY and HW dimensions. For family and social relations, Confucius and his disciples ask that a child show affection for his or her parents, whether living or deceased, and that the younger generation show courtesy to its elders (Ma and Smith, 1992, p. 11). “Filial piety” is “the honoring of ancestors and obedience to, respect for, and financial support of parents” (Hofstede, 1991: 162). In a parent–son relationship, the son must be submissive to his father and must care for his aged parents. Confucian ethics emphasizes courtesy shown by the young to the old,

for example in a fashion in which the wishes of elders, especially, are always honored and respected. Regarding the HW dimension, in Confucian ethics, women are not equal to men. Confucian tradition idealizes a woman who stays home and obeys her husband. In addition, according to Confucius teachings, confidence between friends should never be neglected, by efforts to keep one's words to each other, to help a friend in need, to be honest in speech, and not forget old friends despite one's success.

One of the ethical attributes stressed in Confucianism is dedication to family. The concept of a family has been extended today to the relationship between supervisors and their subordinates in an organization (Ma and Smith, 1992, p. 655; Yum, 1991). Thus, Choi (1999, p. 68) argues that a corporation is a family-dominated system that extends strong patriarchal authority to organizational behavior. According to him, members of organizations are never free from the Confucian moral obligations of obedience and control of children by parents.

#### *Confucian ethics and whistleblowing*

The present study predicted that at the individual level, the effects of Confucian ethics on the individual's intention to report wrongdoing will differ according to which of the five components of Confucian ethics apply across types of whistleblowing. Reporting peers' wrongdoing may be considered an act that undermines authority, or an act that could destroy the relationships between coworkers and the group harmony in an organization. Therefore, this would suggest a negative relationship between FS, OY, and FR and whistleblowing intentions. On the other hand, such Confucian ethics as fidelity between sovereign and subject, and the distinction between the roles of husband and wife have long been considered moral qualities for a noble man who intends to be righteous and who believes that subjects should speak up when wrongdoing is observed and come forward to correct it. Thus, one would expect the attributes of SS and HW to demonstrate a positive relationship with whistleblowing intentions. Therefore:

*Hypothesis one:* The Confucian Ethics traits of Father–Son, Old–Young, and Trust between Friends will be negatively related to whistleblowing intentions.

*Hypothesis two:* The Confucian Ethics traits of Sovereign–Subject and Husband–Wife will be positively related to whistleblowing intentions.

#### *Individualism and collectivism*

Collectivism is also one of the cultural traits of Asian society. Englehart (2000, p. 549) posits that, "Asian cultures are characterized by a set of values that includes obedience to authority, intense allegiance to groups, and a submergence of individual identity in collective identity." For many years, the traits of individualism and collectivism have dominated research efforts aimed at explaining the development and expression of personal behavior and motives in a culture (Hofstede, 1980, 1991). According to this theory, collectivism emphasizes group-based values such as loyalty, harmony, cooperation, unity, conformity, and the unquestioning acceptance of norms, attitudes, and values in an organization as its most important values. In Collectivism, an organization is more important than an employee, who is required to make his or her personal needs and desires accord with organizational goals. For collectivists, the prosperity or prestige of the organization is considered above that of the individual. These employees believe that organizational goals should have priority over their personal goals and that the organization must in turn repay its employees' loyalty by affording a certain amount of protection and a sense of identity. These characteristics of collectivism in part seem to overlap with familism of Confucian ethics in an organization. Due to this organizational culture, employees are more obedient or sensitive to the demands and the assumed needs of their organizations, avoiding the expression of any opinions that may disrupt harmony. They are less insistent on pursuing personal goals that might jeopardize their relationships with other employees or the organization (Bochner, 1994, p. 274). They are rather trained to be more loyal, dependent, and cohesive, in contrast to people in more individual-centered cultures who are more likely to have characteristics like detachment, distance, and self-reliance (Hofstede,

1980, 1991). In this respect, the attitudes of people in collectivist societies are considerably different from those of people in individualist societies, in which conflicts between employees are regarded as acceptable. Confrontation and conflict with others in organizations in a collective society are undesirable and thus they should be avoided (Hofstede, 1991). For most collectivist individuals, direct confrontation with an organization might be considered a betrayal, or at least rude; or it might be seen as voicing one's opinions in a way that deviates from the organization and seems to be defiant and disobedient. In contrast, people with individualistic attitudes more easily accept a clash of opinions as a part of social interaction. Self-reliance as a personal trait tends to be more important for the individualist than it is for the collectivist. The theory of individualism and collectivism, then, might be applied to an individual's intention to report wrongdoing in an organization.

Existing studies have limited their approach to a dichotomy of cultural attitudes – an individualist one and a collectivist one. However, Triandis (1995, 1996) has added an alternative approach to individualism–collectivism theory, arguing that the two types of cultural attitudes should be divided into four. In further defining individualism and collectivism, Triandis and Gelfand (1998) suggested that “both individualism and collectivism might be horizontal (emphasizing equality) or vertical (emphasizing hierarchy)” (p. 118). According to them, “the collectivism of the Israeli Kibbutz is different from Korean collectivism” (p. 119). Individualism also may have the attributes of both horizontal and vertical relationships, indicating that even in an individualist society, cultural attitude may be divided into horizontal or vertical. They also state that an individual with horizontal attitudes tends to perceive his or her self as more or less equal to others. On the contrary, an individual with vertical attitudes pays primary attention to evaluating one's self in hierarchical relationships before making decisions and forming judgments. Based on this belief, they identified four patterns of cultural attitudes: horizontal individualism (HI); vertical individualism (VI); horizontal collectivism (HC) and vertical collectivism (VC). In their typology, the traits of each pattern are as follows (p. 119):

HI: self-reliance, seeking to be unique, and being distinct from groups.

VI: competition and hedonism, and seeking to become distinguished and acquire status in individual competition with others.

HC: interdependence, seeing oneself as being similar to others, emphasizing common goals with others, and not submitting easily to authorities.

VC: family integrity, a willingness to sacrifice their personal goals for the goal of their organization, and submitting to authorities.

#### *Individualism–collectivism and whistleblowing intentions*

Each of the four types of cultural attitudes might affect whistleblowing intentions in both direction and degree. Overall, past research leads us to assume that individualists will tend to be more positive toward whistleblowing than collectivists. However, in the typology of horizontal and vertical attitudes of individualism–collectivism, horizontal individualism would favor whistleblowing intentions, since a horizontal individualist tends to seek self-reliance or be distinct from groups. Conversely, a vertical individualist may find it harder to report wrongdoing out of a self-interest that sees the personal benefits which come from being quiet as more important than whistleblowing. Employees who possess more horizontal collectivism traits, although they are collectivists, do not submit easily to authority when expressing their own intentions, which implies that horizontal collectivism might encourage whistleblowing. Oishi et al. (1998), hypothesized that vertical collectivists stress the value of conformity more than horizontal collectivists, which would mean that the traits of vertical collectivism would negatively affect whistleblowing intentions. These complex assumptions prompt us to explore what effects the four patterns of individualism–collectivism have on whistleblowing intentions. Therefore:

*Hypothesis three:* Horizontal Individualism will be more significantly positively related to whistleblowing intentions than Vertical Individualism.

*Hypothesis four:* Horizontal Collectivism will be more significantly positively related to whistleblowing intentions than Vertical Collectivism.

### Other factors

Favorable attitudes toward whistleblowing and fear of organizational retaliation are among the most important variables, which might be different from those in Western organizations. Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behavior explains human behavior as the outcome of intention and three types of beliefs: an individual's attitude toward a certain kind of behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control attributed to the organization. According to this theory, intention is determined by the interaction of the above three beliefs. For example, employees who have a positive attitude toward whistleblowing will more willingly report wrongdoing in the workplace, especially if the organization encourages whistleblowing. The intervention of retaliation, however, one of the most important forms of perceived behavioral control, might discourage an employee from reporting the wrongdoing. Thus:

*Hypothesis five:* A positive attitude towards whistleblowing will be positively related to whistleblowing intentions.

*Hypothesis six:* Fear of retaliation will be negatively related to whistleblowing intentions.

## Method

### Respondents and procedure

Data for this study were collected in August 2003 in the Republic of Korea. The respondents were local governmental officials who worked in five provincial city halls located in three different areas: Kyongsang, Cholla Provinces, and Seoul. Less than 100 city employees were assigned in each city. Two out of seven departments in each city were randomly selected for the survey. After receiving permission from the head of the department, all employees of the selected departments were asked to answer a questionnaire. Five investigators trained to understand the purpose and contents of this research distributed and collected the questionnaire by visiting the respondent's workplaces, and giving them a cover letter entitled "A Whistleblowing Behavior Survey" with the questionnaire attached. By avoiding the use of any

words or expressions that could have influenced respondents' attitudes toward whistleblowing, the questionnaire instructions informed the respondents of the purpose of the study and the anonymity of their responses – no identifying information was collected beyond respondents' gender, age, education and tenure. The questionnaires were collected immediately after completion. A total of 343 public administrators completed the questionnaire.

### Measurement

*The whistleblowing variables.* In the present paper, three possible types of employees' responses to wrongdoing – reporting externally, reporting internally, and non-action – were measured by asking the question: "If you found wrongdoing in your workplace, what would you do about it?" External reporting was measured by three items, internal reporting by four items, and the non-action response to wrongdoing by two items respectively, shown in Table I. Positive attitudes toward whistleblowing were measured by three statements, and the scores for the statements were summed and averaged. On all the whistleblowing questions, the respondents were asked to evaluate how strongly they agreed or disagreed with each of the given statements about whistleblowing on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). As regards fear of retaliation, the respondents were asked to evaluate five statements. The scale items, descriptive statistics, and alpha reliability coefficients are reported in Table I.

*Confucian ethics.* There is no widely accepted scale to assess Confucian ethics. Ma and Smith (1992) studied the extent of support for Confucian ethical beliefs in Taiwan by using 13 items from the Basic Survey of Social Change. Since those items were drawn from secondary data, it was judged that they did not sufficiently capture Confucian Ethics. The present study thus developed a Confucian Ethics Scale (CES), which is based on the five moral rules of Confucian ethics governing family and social relations:<sup>4</sup> father–son (FS), sovereign–subject (SS), husband–wife (HW), old–young (OY), and friends (FR). To measure Confucian ethics a two-staged approach was adopted. First, the authors collected

TABLE I  
Scale items and descriptive statistics for whistleblowing measures and demographic variables ( $N = 343$ )

Scale/Item	Mean (SD)	Scale Alpha
If you found wrongdoing in your workplace, what would you do about it?		
<i>External whistleblowing (EW)</i>	2.42 (1.07)	0.85
I would report it through channels outside of the organization.		
I would report it to the appropriate authorities outside of the organization.		
I would disclose it by going public.		
<i>Internal whistleblowing (IW)</i>	3.01 (0.97)	0.78
I would report it to my immediate supervisor.		
I would report it to an upper level of management in the organization.		
I would use the official reporting channels inside of the organization.		
I would report it by using internal procedures.		
<i>Non-action (NA)</i>	2.41 (1.13)	0.72
I would remain silent about the wrongdoing.		
I would pretend not to see it.		
How strongly do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?		
<i>Positive Attitudes toward Whistleblowing (PA)</i>	3.82 (0.89)	0.80
Blowing the whistle is helpful in enhancing the public interest.		
Whistleblowing is helpful to prevent wrongdoing.		
Blowing the whistle would help prevent serious harm to the organization.		
If I were to report wrongdoing in the workplace,		
<i>Fear of retaliation (RT)</i>	3.67 (0.90)	0.89
I would suffer as a result of my complaints.		
I would be thwarted in my reporting every step of the way.		
I would be subjected to disadvantages.		
I wouldn't be praised by my organization.		
My job might be jeopardized.		
<i>Demographic variables</i>		
Gender (GN)	1.34 (0.47)	–
Level of Education (ED)	2.88 (0.75)	–
Length of Employment in years (EM)	12.6 (8.0)	–

20–30 items of Confucian ethics teachings, based on previous ethics studies as well as social educational materials relevant to traditional ethics. Seventeen items of Confucian ethics were finally selected based on in-depth interviews with Korean culture psychologists who have explored similar subjects. Secondly, to confirm the criterion-related validity of the five scale components of Confucian ethics, the variable Acceptance of Confucian ethics (AC) was created by using two statements concerned with: (1) Confucian ethics as a standard of conduct, and (2) the perceived importance of Confucian ethics. Four of the five subscales were correlated with AC above 0.460 (FR correlation was 0.234, but all correlations

were at the  $p < 0.001$  level). Additionally, the scale items were used in a pretest of 344 South Korean middle and upper level public officials with similar results. Confucian ethics are still widely accepted in Korean society, but some Confucian moral teachings are no longer appropriate for modern life, such as loyalty to a sovereign. Accordingly, this study has slightly modified the wording of the items that have to do with sovereign–subject in order to measure the traditional teachings of Confucian ethics in a way that reflects the current lifestyle. Confucian ethics items were assessed on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree). The response-averaging method was used. The scale



TABLE II  
Scale items and descriptive statistics for confucian ethics subscales ( $N = 343$ )

Scale/Item	Mean (SD)	Scale Alpha
<i>Affection between father and son (FS)</i> Worshiping deceased ancestors is important. The best room in the house should be given to the parents. The special delicacies at meals should be first given to the parents.	3.93 (0.73)	0.52
<i>Loyalty between sovereign and subject (SS)</i> Loyalty to the nation is important. One should be obedient to decisions of the organization. National authority should be respected no matter what. Obedience to the ruler is one of the people's basic duties.	3.30 (0.79)	0.65
<i>Distinction between the roles of husband and wife (HW)</i> It is desirable if men should work outside the home, women inside. It is not honorable for men to work in the kitchen. It is not good for women to be outdoors for most of their time.	2.68 (10.6)	0.80
<i>Courtesy of the young for the old (OY)</i> The thoughts of elderly people should be respected regardless of whether it's right or wrong. The young should offer one's seat to the elderly. A youngster should not begin to eat at the table before elders do. Contradicting elders is not good for any reason.	3.44 (0.75)	0.65
<i>Trust between friends (FR)</i> Friends must keep their words to each other. One should help a friend in need. The confidence between friends should never be neglected.	4.23 (0.70)	0.72
<i>Acceptance of Confucian ethics (AC)</i> I accept Confucian ethics as standards of conduct. Confucian virtues are important to me.	3.42 (0.95)	0.65

items, descriptive statistics, and alpha coefficients for the Confucian ethics subscales are reported in Table II.

*Individualism and collectivism.* To measure the horizontal and vertical attitudes of individualism and collectivism, the current study employed a total of 24 items. All but one of the items came from Singelis et al. (1995) who developed eight for each subscale with the following reliabilities: HI ( $\alpha = 0.67$ ), VI ( $\alpha = 0.74$ ), HC ( $\alpha = 0.74$ ), and VC ( $\alpha = 0.68$ ). An additional item was taken from Kibum and Uichol (1997). Twelve of the items in our study were also among the 16 items that Triandis and Gelfand (1998) obtained the highest loadings in their factor analysis. In a study of interpersonal conflicts, Kibum and Uichol (1997) translated the Individualism–Collectivism Scale (ICS) of Singelis et al. (1995) into

Korean, and their translation was used here. The respondents were asked to express whether their feelings were positive or not about the statements in the study, using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = never or definitely no and 5 = always or definitely yes). The means for the individualism/collectivism attitudes varied from a high of 3.72 (VC) to a low of 3.47 (VI). Table III shows the individualism–collectivism scale items, descriptive statistics, and alpha coefficients.

*Background characteristics.* The questionnaire included items that measured the demographic variables of sex, age, educational level, and length of employment. Gender was a dichotomous variable (1 = male, 2 = female). About 67% of respondents were male, and 16% being the age of 30, 34% between 30–39, and 41% between 40–49. Education

TABLE III  
Scale items and descriptive statistics for individualism and collectivism subscales ( $N = 343$ )

Scale/Item	Mean (SD)	Scale Alpha
<i>Horizontal individualism (HI)</i>	3.61 (0.69)	0.76
My personal identity, independent of others, is very important to me.		
For me, it is important that I am a person of independent character.		
I am a unique individual.		
I enjoy being unique and different from others in many ways.		
I am proud of my unique personality.		
<i>Vertical individualism (VI)</i>	3.47(0.59)	0.73
It annoys me when other people perform better than I do.		
Competition is the law of nature.		
Winning is everything.		
I enjoy working in situations involving competition with others.		
It is important that I do my job better than others.		
Without competition, it is not possible to have a good society.		
When another person does better than I do, I get tense and aroused.		
<i>Horizontal collectivism (HC)</i>	3.59 (0.58)	0.69
The well-being of my coworkers is important to me.		
I feel good when I cooperate with others.		
My happiness depends very much on the happiness of those around me.		
I like sharing little things with my neighbors.		
If a coworker gets a prize, I would feel proud.		
To me, pleasure is spending time with others.		
<i>Vertical collectivism (VC)</i>	3.72 (0.65)	0.72
Parents and children must stay together as much as possible.		
Before making a decision, I consult with most members of my family and many friends.		
It is important to me that I respect the decision made by my group.		
Family members should stick together, no matter what sacrifices are required.		
I respect the opinion reached by the majority of my group.		

levels were coded as a four-level variable (1 = less than high school degree/high school degree, or equivalent; 2 = junior college degree; 3 = 4-year university degree; 4 = post graduate degree). Respondents with an education higher than 4-year university degree constituted 78% of the total number of subjects. Length of employment in an organization was measured in years, and the respondents averaged 12.6 years of employment.

## Results and discussion

Correlations of all variables are listed in Table IV. The correlations do not entirely support previous assumptions about the relationship between Confucian Ethics, individualism–collectivism, and employee's intentions to report wrongdoing. This

shows that the effect of cultural attitudes on whistleblowing is a complex one, and demonstrates how researchers can come to different conclusions about the effect of a cultural construct on whistleblowing intentions, and possibly even whistleblowing actions.

General acceptance of Confucian ethics (AC) provides a criterion for evaluating the significance of the five components of Confucian ethics. The correlation between AC and OY was the highest ( $r = 0.575$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and FR ( $r = 0.234$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) was the lowest. These correlations provide evidence that the five components have a significant criterion-related validity for assessing attitudes toward Confucian ethics. Note that general acceptance of Confucian ethics also had positive correlations with both individualism and collectivism. The correlates of collectivism with AC

TABLE IV  
Correlation of whistleblowing measures to Confucian ethics and individualism-collectivism (N = 343)

	EW	IW	NA	PA	RT	FS	SS	HW	OY	FR	AC	HI	VI	HC	VC	GN	ED	EM
EW	1																	
IW	0.268***	1																
NA	0.039	-0.074	1															
PA	0.257***	0.201***	-0.154**	1														
RT	-0.026	0.017	0.231***	0.011	1													
FS	-0.126	-0.033	0.058	0.024	-0.006	1												
SS	0.059	0.290	0.208	0.000	0.218	0.315	1											
HW	0.175	0.212	0.344	-0.076	0.159	0.231	0.412	1										
OY	0.040	0.188	0.191	0.020	0.188	0.464	0.651***	0.401***	1									
FR	-0.078	0.009	-0.110*	0.185**	0.141**	0.392***	0.248***	-0.051	0.298	1								
AC	0.060	0.120	0.182	0.009	0.144	0.485	0.503	0.460	0.575	0.234	1							
HI	0.097	0.098	-0.007	0.332	0.145	0.133	0.116	-0.059	0.156	0.285	0.191	1						
VI	0.159**	0.253**	0.190	0.167**	0.173	0.226	0.423	0.202	0.373	0.239	0.302	0.450	1					
HC	0.194***	0.262**	0.056	0.191***	0.171**	0.294***	0.404	0.100	0.390	0.436	0.355	0.460	0.581***	1				
VC	0.099	0.191**	0.071	0.223	0.234	0.283	0.362	0.134	0.294	0.461	0.360	0.497	0.432	0.651***	1			
GN	-0.109*	-0.087	0.026	0.067	0.079	-0.171*	-0.066	0.233	-0.086	-0.017	-0.211	0.027	0.038	-0.022	-0.107*	1		
ED	0.009	-0.004	-0.056	-0.032	0.127*	-0.046	-0.091	-0.041	0.004	0.084	0.008	0.116*	0.054	-0.020	0.060	-0.109*	1	
EM	-0.232	0.128*	0.092	-0.046	0.002	0.180	0.248	0.287	0.147*	0.094	0.200	-0.164**	-0.035	-0.018	0.078	-0.411***	-0.077	1

\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ ; two tailed tests. See Tables I-III for abbreviations.

TABLE V  
Results of multiple regressions of five components of Confucian ethics on three types of whistleblowing intentions (N = 343)

Predictors	Dependent Variables					
	EW		IW		NA	
Affection between Father–Son (FS)	-0.244**	(-.166)	-0.255**	(-0.193)	0.032	(0.020)
Loyalty between Sovereign–Subject (SS)	0.135	(0.099)	0.353***	(0.288)	-0.053	(0.037)
Distinction between Husband–Wife (HW)	0.299***	(0.296)	0.109*	(0.120)	0.282***	(0.264)
Courtesy between Old–Young (OY)	0.002	(0.002)	-0.065	(-0.050)	0.094	(0.062)
Trust between Friends (FR)	-0.054	(-0.035)	-0.049	(-0.035)	-0.218*	(-0.134)
Positive Attitudes to Whistleblowing (PA)	0.332***	(0.277)	0.247***	(0.228)	-0.152*	(-0.120)
Fear of Retaliation (RT)	-0.119	(-0.100)	-0.078	(-0.073)	0.235***	(0.187)
Gender (GN)	0.076	(0.034)	-0.118	(-0.058)	0.242	(0.101)
Levels of Education (ED)	0.041	(0.029)	0.045	(0.035)	-0.066	(-0.044)
Length of Employment (EM)	-0.037***	(-0.279)	0.005	(0.042)	0.006	(0.039)
Constant	1.77**		1.85***		1.47*	
Adjusted R-squared	0.200		0.155		0.173	
F-value	9.57***		7.26***		8.13***	

Notes: \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ ; two tailed tests. The figures in parentheses are standardized regression coefficients. See Table I and II for abbreviations.

( $r = 0.355$  and  $r = 0.360$  for HC and VC, respectively) were higher than those of individualism ( $r = 0.191$  and  $r = 0.302$  for HI and VI, respectively). These correlations could indicate that Confucian ethics traits are more collectivist than individualistic in nature.

*Confucian ethics*

Table V reports the results of the three regressions that were used to explore how Confucian ethics affects individual intentions for reporting wrongdoing in the workplace. All three regressions were significant, and the variance explained on external and internal whistleblowing and non-action were 0.200 ( $F = 9.57$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), 0.155 ( $F = 7.26$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and 0.173 ( $F = 8.13$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), respectively.

The effects of Confucian ethics appear to be mixed, and some of the five moral rules of Confucianism had contradictory but significant effects on whistleblowing intentions. Hypothesis one predicted a negative relationship between FS, OY and FR and whistleblowing intentions. This hypothesis was partially supported. The affection

between father and son (FS) had significantly negative effects for both external ( $b = -0.244$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and internal whistleblowing ( $b = -0.255$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Thus, the FS aspect of Confucian ethics, which emphasizes obedience to authority and respect for elders' wishes, is a strong suppressor of whistleblowing intentions, and reinforces the theory that organizations are an extension of the family in South Korea, thus influencing how employees intend to behave. Trust between Friends (FR) was not related to whistleblowing intentions, but was significantly negatively related to non-action ( $b = -0.218$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). The negative relationship to non-action may seem counter-intuitive, but it is important to note that non-action is not the opposite of the whistleblowing actions in this study. It is possible that individuals who witnessed the wrongdoing would try to correct it later by him or herself, by privately asking the wrongdoer to stop his or her unethical behavior, or by speaking to their friends about it, but would not go so far as to report it up the organizational channels. The whistleblowing measures did not mention actions dealing with co-workers. Further study of the types of actions that South Korean employees can take is needed in this area. Old–Young had no significant relationship with any of the whistleblowing

intentions. Although OY was significantly correlated with IW and NA, it is possible that the high correlations between OY and other Confucian ethics measures (0.651 with SS) resulted in OY not explaining additional variance in the regression. This does not negate the possible effect of OY on whistleblowing intentions, only that it mirrors the effect that other subscales of Confucian ethics has on those intentions, but to a weaker degree.

Hypothesis two predicted significant positive relationships for HW and SS and whistleblowing. Both were significant positive predictors of internal whistleblowing, while results for other actions were mixed. The effects of the distinction between the roles of husband and wife were significantly positive for IW ( $b = 0.109, p < 0.05$ ) and EW ( $b = 0.299, p < 0.001$ ), indicating that an employee who more strongly believes in the distinction between the roles of husband and wife and who focuses on male-dominated values is more inclined to blow the whistle. At a glance, this finding seems to be contradicted by the positive effect of HW on non-action, ( $b = 0.282, p < 0.001$ ). However, keeping in mind the idea that non-action is not the opposite of whistleblowing, one explanation could be that South Korean employees might remain silent, or pretend not to see the wrongdoing when they observed it (perhaps to save face), but would intend to respond

later in some fashion. For example, they might prefer to personally ask the wrongdoer to take responsibility for his or her wrongdoing so that he or she could save one's face. This finding should not be ignored, as it could indicate a different whistleblowing process that South Korean employees use in their organizations. More qualitative research may be needed to fully understand the dynamics taking place.

Loyalty between sovereign and subject had a positive effect only for internal whistleblowing ( $b = 0.353, p < 0.001$ ). This finding supports the Confucian ethics belief that subjects should be loyal to their rulers (or supervisors) by speaking up to them about wrongdoing they observe. Reporting externally, however, may be seen as a betrayal of that loyalty, as the wrongdoing would then be in the public eye, although it was not significantly related to EW.

Overall, these results show that Confucian ethics has varying effects on whistleblowing intentions. Therefore, it would be unwise to assume that the Confucian ethics system has a blanket effect either way on whistleblowing intentions.

*Individualism–collectivism*

Table VI provides the results of the regression analyses that tested the effects of collectivism on individual intentions of whistleblowing. All of the

TABLE VI

Results of multiple regressions of individualism and collectivism on three types of whistleblowing intentions ( $N = 343$ )

Predictors	Dependent Variables					
	EW		IW		NA	
Horizontal Individualism (HI)	-0.197	(-0.127)	-0.143	(-0.102)	-0.068	(-0.041)
Vertical Individualism (VI)	0.145	(0.080)	0.286**	(0.175)	0.473***	(0.247)
Horizontal Collectivism (HC)	0.310*	(0.169)	0.292*	(0.176)	-0.189	(-0.097)
Vertical Collectivism (VC)	-0.009	(-0.006)	0.006	(0.004)	0.072	(0.041)
Positive Attitudes to Whistleblowing (PA)	0.294***	(0.245)	0.195**	(0.180)	-0.224**	(-0.176)
Fear of Retaliation (RT)	-0.065	(-0.055)	-0.032	(-0.030)	0.265***	(0.211)
Gender (GN)	0.019	(0.009)	-0.102	(-0.050)	0.102	(0.043)
Levels of Education (ED)	0.030	(0.021)	0.019	(0.014)	-0.136	(-0.090)
Length of Employment (EM)	-0.003***	(-0.230)	0.011	(0.109)	-0.001	(-0.091)
Constant	0.94	0.76	1.40*			
Adjusted R-squared	0.128	0.112	0.112			
F-value		6.58***	5.79**	5.77***		

Notes: \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ ; two tailed tests. The figures in parentheses are standardized regression coefficients. See Table I, III for abbreviations.

models of the employees' responses to wrongdoing were significant.

Hypothesis three predicted that horizontal individualism would be more significantly positively related to whistleblowing intentions than vertical individualism. This hypothesis was not supported. Horizontal individualism was not found to be a significant predictor of any of the three types of actions. Vertical individualism, was a significant predictor of internal whistleblowing ( $b = 0.286$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), allowing a possible interpretation that the competitive nature, and status-seeking predisposition of individuals with this trait may be leading them to be more willing to report their co-workers' wrongdoing. However, vertical individualism was also significantly related to non-action ( $b = 0.473$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Again, this finding could indicate that these actions are not mutually exclusive for South Korean employees who observe wrongdoing.

Hypothesis four predicted that employees with more vertical collectivist attitudes would be less likely to blow the whistle than employees more horizontally collective in nature, because they would put more value on loyalty, togetherness, obedience, and self-sacrifice in an organization. The regression analyses, however, revealed that only horizontal collectivism had a significant positive relationship to both internal ( $b = 0.292$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and external ( $b = 0.310$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) whistleblowing, while vertical collectivism was not significant for any type of employee response. As expected, employees' responses differed depending on whether collectivism was horizontal or vertical, casting doubt on the general belief that the more collectivistic an employee is, the more negative his or her intentions for whistleblowing will be. This finding supports Triandis and Gelfand, (1998) and Oishi et al. (1998) in proposing that collectivism can be both horizontal and vertical.

Hypothesis five predicted that a positive attitude towards whistleblowing would be a predictor of whistleblowing intentions. This hypothesis was supported. The effects of PA were significantly positive ( $p < 0.001$  or  $p < 0.01$ ) in all regressions on whistleblowing, but negative for non-action ( $p < 0.05$  and  $p < 0.01$  respectively). Fear of retaliation, predicted in hypothesis six to be negatively related to whistleblowing intention, surprisingly had no statistically significant effect on either internal or

external whistleblowing, but was significantly positive for non-action ( $p < 0.001$ ), showing that a person with a great fear of retaliation is more likely to take no action. In addition, the length of employment of the respondents was negative and significant only for external whistleblowing ( $p < 0.001$ ), suggesting that public officials with a longer employment history were less likely to take external action when they observed wrongdoing in the workplace. Other demographic variables made no significant difference in whistleblowing intentions.

### Summary

Recent efforts to legally protect whistleblowers have faced cultural resistance in Asian societies, triggering a controversy. Confucianism and collectivism, which are considered core philosophical and psychological characteristics in the far-east Asian tradition, have been invoked as a basis for denying legal protection to those who report wrongdoing, haunting the debate on whistleblower protection. Assuming that the attitudes of Confucianism and collectivism are different at the individual level, the present study examined their effects on intentions to blow the whistle, hoping that it would be helpful in understanding the continuing debate mentioned at the beginning of this study as well as related controversies. Confucian ethics and collectivism appeared to have significant effects, but were not consistent in their direction and degree as has been commonly thought. The results showed that the effects of the attitudes of Confucian ethics and collectivism varied according to their specific traits or patterns as well as the type of an employee's response to wrongdoing. This study contributes to the body of cross-cultural research on whistleblowing with the following important findings:

(1) Overall, this study found that Confucian ethics had significant and strong influences on whistleblowing intentions. The effect of the distinction between the roles of husband and wife appeared to be positive on both internal and external whistleblowing, but that of father-son affection was negative. For the non-action response, the effect of husband-wife ethics was significantly positive, but the trust between friends was closer to the reverse. These findings might suggest that the effects of

Confucian ethics are not entirely positive or negative, implying that it is not fully acceptable to assume a blanket effect, either way, on whistleblowing intentions as a result of Confucian ethics.

(2) The effects of collectivism were significantly positive in part, but overall were inconsistent in the matter of whistleblowing intentions. Unlike conventional thought about the relationship between collectivism and whistleblowing, horizontal collectivism had positive effects on the two types of whistleblowing, indicating that people who have a more horizontally collectivistic attitude are more likely to blow the whistle. This fact indicates that although an employee is higher in collectivism, he or she is less likely to just sit back and keep quiet about his or her boss's or peer's wrongdoing. However, vertical collectivism had no significant effect. These results don't support the assumption that collectivism tends to suppress the individual's intentions to blow the whistle.

Confucian ethics as a philosophical or religious system and collectivism as a psychological pattern seem to be fairly effective in encouraging or discouraging whistleblowing. However, their effects are mixed and different in direction and degree. Furthermore, it should be noted that the relationship between whistleblowing intentions and cultural characteristics could possibly be moderated by other variables not considered in the study. For instance, Weaver and Agle (2002) studied the relation between individual religiosity and ethical behavior in organizations and suggested that religion can influence ethical behavior, but this relation is also moderated by religious characteristics such as identity, identity salience, and motivational orientation. This relation might also be pertinent to the relationship between whistleblowing intentions and Confucian ethics and collectivism. In addition, scales for measuring attitudes toward Confucian ethics might not fully reflect an employee's commitment to such ethics. Specifically they might not satisfactorily include such philosophical principles as righteousness and courage, which are so important in Confucian values.

The present study has focused on the effects of cultural attitudes toward whistleblowing intentions at the individual level. In future research and discussion, it is hoped that a cross-cultural study will test the effects of cultural traits on whistleblowing at a national level. Such a study will be greatly helpful

in extending our understanding of the controversy over the cultural effects of blowing the whistle.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not reflect the official policy of the United States Air Force, Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

<sup>2</sup> To argue that Confucian ethics does not necessarily have positive effects on whistleblowing, Gerald Vinten (1999) cited Analects of Confucius I:2, III:7, VIII:2, XIII:20, XIV:3, XVII:8, and XVII:23. For instance, he indicates that the precepts of Confucianism teach that without rites, which perhaps themselves hinder whistleblowing, courage might be unruly.

<sup>3</sup> The wording in the descriptions of the five moralities in Confucian ethics has frequently been adopted from the existing literature on the subject (e.g. Hofstede, 1991: 171; Yum, 1991). In the order of the five human relations, Hofstede (1991) puts ruler-subject before father-son, but the order is opposite in South Korea, as shown in textbooks used to teach Confucian virtues.

<sup>4</sup> The five moral disciplines in human relations, which are the core of Confucian ethics, have long been accepted as practical rules of conduct based on Confucian philosophy. The teachings of Analects have sometimes given rise to confusion or self-contradiction, but these are unequivocal and far more measurable.

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