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Socially constructing safety

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ABSTRACT

Social scientific perspectives on occupational safety largely characterize it as a disembodied, tangible, and easily quantifiable phenomenon. Recent research efforts have focused on exploring organizational conditions that predict occupational safety outcomes, resulting in top-down, often de-contextualized prescriptions about how to control safety in the workplace (e.g. 'management should promote a culture of safety'). There is growing interest in how social processes of organizing, wider socio-cultural considerations, and the situated production of safety can contribute to the appreciation of the 'lived experience' of life and death at work. This Special Issue focuses on the socially constructed nature of occupational safety and the insight it provides in understanding broader social and organizational processes. In this article, we first describe how various social scientific disciplines share an interest in occupational safety and organizational behavior, yet rarely speak to another. We provide an overview of the five articles that comprise the Special Issue, and briefly highlight some ways forward for studying safety in organizations.

KEYWORDS

accidents ▪ culture ▪ organizational behaviour ▪ safety ▪ social constructionism

The social scientific study of safety in organizations traditionally treats the probability of risk, the prevention of harm, and the occurrence of 'accidents' as deterministic properties that are largely separable from their social context. This approach is consistent with practical attempts to improve what would be collectively termed 'safety' by mitigating risk through technology,

de-selecting 'accident prone' workers, and reducing the 'human error' component in work systems (Nichols, 1997).

In contrast to this classically individualistic approach, a social constructionist perspective on safety would take a collective view of knowledge that accommodates finer themes that are pervasive variables in the fabric of workplace safety (Burr, 1997). Through the social constructionist lens, the meaning of safety is viewed as situated, negotiated, generated, and transplanted in the historical, socio-material, and cultural contexts in which interaction occurs (Gergen, 1999). The practice of safety serves as both the genesis and the enactment of this knowing and meaning (Gherardi, 2006). Appreciation of the social construction of safety in organizations represents a distinctive shift in the mainstream approach and, while examples of this approach have existed for some time (e.g. Gouldner, 1954), it continues to spark new lines of inquiry in various disciplines (Rochlin, 1999; Simpson, 1996; Taylor, 1981; Tierney, 1999). Examining how social processes and broader socio-cultural considerations contribute to understanding organizational safety serves to provide insights into organizational behaviour more generally.

Constructing safety across the disciplines

A range of social science disciplines have investigated safety in organizations using a social constructionist lens. These have variously included communications researchers interested in how safety-related discourse and rhetoric serve to structure social identity (e.g. Sauer, 1999; Zoller, 2003) and organizational theorists who work to understand the social dynamics of organizations (e.g. aircraft carriers, nuclear power plants) and organizational events (e.g. training novices in the construction trade, launching space craft) for whom failures can have disastrous consequences (e.g. Carroll et al., 2002; Gherardi & Nicolini, 2002; Weick & Roberts, 1993).

Attempts to understand the importance of social interaction in safety also include sociologists looking at the embodied nature of safety in organizations (e.g. Bellaby, 1999; Fitzpatrick, 1980; Gray, 2002; Haas, 1977; Hall, 1996; Leger & Monthibeli, 1988), socio-legal scholars exploring safety rights, violations, contested injuries, and individual responsibility discourses in health and safety (Bittle & Snider, 2006; Gray, 2006, 2009; Hopkins, 1989; Mascini, 2005; Snider, 2004; Turner & Tennant, in press; Vaughan, 1998), and historians exploring how gendered, regulatory, and technological regimes concerning safety have motivated working-class consciousness and orchestrated solidarity in organizations and local communities (e.g. Bloor, 2002; Doran, 1996; McKenna, 1997; Reid, 1981). Lastly, applied

psychologists (e.g. Goodman & Garber, 1988; Zohar & Luria, 2003) have explored the collective interpersonal mechanisms by which occupational safety is socially constructed.

Collectively, and by no means exhaustively, this featured research provides significant insight into how organizational dynamics are constructed using safety as a starting point. A constructionist perspective is a useful framework for understanding many aspects of safety and organizations. These aspects include the 'social negotiation of safety' (e.g. how safety is created during the inspection process and institutional routines for explaining accidents), the 'normalization of unsafe work' (e.g. dangers faced by sub-contracted, temporary, and other less visible workers), and the 'politics of accounting for safety' (e.g. the role of surveillance systems in promoting, deflecting, and interpreting safe work practices and statistics). The constructionist perspective also provides a useful starting point for examining the emotional aspects of safety, such as how families in communities that repeatedly face workplace fatalities cope with these continual events.

In keeping with the interdisciplinary imperative of *Human Relations*, we came to collaborate on this Special Issue from two disciplinary perspectives – as an applied psychologist interested in occupational health (Turner) and a sociologist/criminologist interested in work and health (Gray). We conceived of creating a forum that would bring together researchers from different disciplines that share an interest in common phenomena, but rarely speak of or reference each other's work. Although we sparked this collaboration at an Academy of Management symposium over six years ago, it took a few good academic tries and the completion of two doctoral theses before making it concrete.

Featured articles

In this Special Issue, we challenge the conceptualization of workplace safety as a disembodied, tangible, and easily quantifiable phenomenon. We do so by bringing together papers that focus on the socially constructed nature of safety and the various contested meanings of safety. The articles also show ways in which studying safety is helpful and relevant to understanding broader social and organizational processes.

In the first article, 'Overcoming dysfunctional momentum: Organizational safety as a social achievement', Michelle Barton and Kathleen Sutcliffe (2009) explore at the micro-level of analysis the system-level frameworks of High Reliability Theory and Normal Accidents Theory. The authors interviewed firefighters to examine the social processes of enacting organizational safety within the context of wildland fire management. Barton

and Sutcliffe illustrate that the inability of individuals to redirect ongoing firefighting action, once it is underway, serves as a deterrent to organizational safety. The issue, according to the authors, is that there is a problem of sense-making in organizational firefighting decision-making. Barton and Sutcliffe demonstrate that recognizing early warning signs is not always sufficient to create positive changes in firefighting outcomes. The reason is that the key drivers of re-evaluation that occur during the practice of firefighting, such as giving voice to safety concerns and actively seeking out other perspectives (*social processes*), are moderated by institutional pressures and self-interest (*social factors*).

The second article, 'Leveraging functionality in safety routines', by Hille Bruns (2009), explores organizational safety within the context of a university laboratory setting. At a time when health and safety regulatory agencies are beginning to focus more closely on health and safety in academic science, this paper is timely as the methodology consists of six months of field research in a molecular biology laboratory at a leading university in the USA. Bruns examines the performance of safety routines by research scientists and places it within the growing trend towards workers becoming individually responsible for their own safety. While safety rules are neglected for many reasons, Bruns shows that in the social construction of safety in the university laboratory setting, university staff are much less inclined to worry about their own personal safety and instead are concerned with the safety of the research experiment.

Edward Powley (2009) provides the third article, entitled 'Reclaiming resilience and safety: Resilience activation in the critical period of crisis', in which he studies the narratives of people involved in a standoff and shooting at an American business school. Powley derives the social processes by which resilience is activated and engaged, and describes how psychological and physical safety are regained during and after this traumatic incident. The alteration and emergence of relational patterns among members of the business school and university communities (*liminal suspension*), the extent to which members of these communities are mindful and heedful to the needs of others (*compassionate witnessing*), and the availability of overlapping social and informational resources often from beyond the boundaries of the business school (*relational redundancy*) are suggested as the mechanisms by which resilience is activated. Drawing on a range of social scientific research, this study substantiates how a violent fissure in organizational life motivates the collective to heal and thrive in the face of adversity.

In the fourth article, 'If human errors are assumed as crimes in a safety culture: A lifeworld analysis of a rail crash', Nobuyuki Chikudate (2009) draws on Foucault's concept of disciplinary punishment to understand a

dramatic railway crash that took place in Japan in 2005, killing 107 workers and passengers and injuring another 562 passengers. While official reports on the cause of the disaster focused on human errors, such as the driver excessively speeding, Chikudate argues that situational factors, such as a fear of discipline, played a key role in the safety culture of this work environment. The article documents the unintended consequences of learning practices within a Japanese railway company, in which concepts of shame and embarrassment shape the identities of workers.

In the fifth article, 'Normal accident theory versus high reliability theory: A resolution and call for an open systems view of accidents', Samir Shrivastava, Karan Sonpar, and Federica Pazzaglia assemble two venerable models of organizational safety side-by-side to reconcile them through the lens of time (Shrivastava et al., 2009a). Normal Accidents Theory (Perrow, 1984) and High Reliability Theory (e.g. Roberts et al., 1994), they argue, are commensurate because they look at the same phenomena at different points in time. These authors engage open systems theory to broaden what they describe as an enduring debate between these two frameworks, and offer a way forward by exploring the falsifiability of these frameworks for understanding safe (or unsafe) systems.

We asked Charles Perrow, the architect of Normal Accident Theory, to comment on Shrivastava et al.'s (2009a) paper. In his rebuttal entitled 'What's necessary is application, not reconciliation: A response to Shrivastava, Sonpar, and Pazzaglia (2009)', Perrow (2009) argues that appropriate application of these models is what is crucial, and claims that reconciliation through the lens of time is both unnecessary and immaterial. Samir, Sonpar, and Pazzaglia (2009b) offer a counter-reply – 'Reconciliation can lead to better application: A rejoinder to Perrow (2009)' – arguing that their 'bigger picture' perspective on Normal Accidents and High Reliability Theory provides the opportunity to refine theory and demonstrate its boundary conditions. We leave it to readers to pick up these debates-within-debates, ideally tempered by empirical compromise and the enduring joy of stylistic theorizing (Van Maanen, 1995).

Moving forward in safety studies

In reflecting on the papers that make up this Special Issue, we are reminded of a number of points that we believe serve to make better research on the social construction of safety. First, we encourage researchers to read and cite beyond their own disciplines. The community of safety scholars is not confined within narrow disciplines, as both the mandate of this journal and

the nature of this Special Issue attest. Second, we must continue to make the case that safety is a topic worthy of the mainstream. The danger of trapping work on safety into journals that specialize in health and safety is that they do themselves a potential disservice insofar as the perspective they contain on broader organizational phenomena and processes is restricted to the focus of the journal, framed for a specialist audience, and not necessarily on the horizon of readers interested in organizational behaviour and theory. Third, an interpretative, often more ethnographic, approach to method provides valuable insight into nuances of safety in organizations that positivist, often quantitative, methodologies gloss over. A greater appreciation of mixed methodology is useful in future studies that seek to describe the socially constructed nature of safety.

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