Safety work versus the safety of work

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A B S T R A C T

'Safety work' consists of activities, conducted within organisations, that have the primary purpose of managing safety. Safety work is distinct from operational work, which directly achieves the primary objectives of the organisation. Safety work is also distinct from the 'safety of work', which is the prevention of injury.

In this paper, we argue that safety work is primarily a performance rather than goal-directed behavior. It may contribute to the safety of work, but this is only part of its purpose. Our argument is presented in the form of a model for organisational safety activity that represents safety as a special case of 'institutional work'. Evidence of the 'safety work' takes the place of evidence of the 'safety of work', which is extremely difficult to measure or demonstrate in its own right.

Even where it does not contribute to the safety of work, safety work may be necessary for organisations to make sense of safety in an uncertain world. If organisations did not perform safety work, they would be unable to convince stakeholders that they were doing enough for safety, which would in turn prevent them from pursuing their core business.

1. Introduction

Managers and workers in modern organisations are asked to participate in many safety activities. They take part in "safety moments" and "toolbox talks". They prepare or sign "Safe Work Method Statements" and "Job Safety Analysis". They complete pre-task risk assessments such as "Take-5", "STAR" or "HYDRA". They perform observations, audits and "safety conversations". They may also be asked to co-ordinate or contribute to larger scale analysis activities such as "HAZOP", "Fault Tree Analysis" or accident and incident investigation.

Why do people participate in, or ask others to perform, these activities? The simple yet manifestly inadequate answer is "to keep people safe". Gilbert (2018) describes activities that can be separated from everyday work as 'extraordinary safety', distinguished from the 'ordinary safety' that the activities ultimately try to create. Yet 'extraordinary safety' is at best two steps removed from the safety of work. Even in an ideal world, managers and safety professionals perform safety work that controls and directs frontline staff in the performance of safety work, that in turn shapes the way operational work is performed. This raises serious doubts about whether safety work is necessary or helpful for the safety of operational work.

The practice of safety is a complex social phenomenon, where actions within organisations serve both instrumental functions (achieving goals) and expressive functions (revealing attitudes) (Islam and Zyphur, 2009). This dual purpose might be called "ensurance" and "assurance" (Rae and Alexander, 2017), "being safe" and "feeling safe" (How to shift from reactive to proactive OHS, 2015), or, as in the title of this paper, "the safety of work" and "safety work."

People who perform safety activities describe their own actions as instrumental – they are trying to improve safety outcomes, and are selecting actions that they think will meet that goal (Provan et al., 2017). The academic study of safety also usually interprets actions as instruments; even sub-disciplines such as safety culture, which recognise the importance of symbolism and expression, seek legitimacy through their ability to drive or predict safer outcomes (Cooper, 2000).

As Hollnagel puts it ("How to shift from reactive to proactive OHS," 2015):

"The efforts to prevent future accidents actually serve a dual purpose - to be safe and to feel safe. But sometimes the latter stands in the way of the former"

Hollnagel's words reflect a common understanding that safety research is primarily about improving safety outcomes, and that the expressive functions of safety action are uninteresting except as a driver or distraction from "actual" safety. We disagree.

Very few organisational "safety" activities – ranging from personal take-5 risk assessments to safety programs costing hundreds of thousands of dollars – have proven capability to measure or reduce the likelihood of accidents (Rae et al., 2010; Shannon et al., 1999). And yet there is constant growth in the number, size, and complexity of safety activities, safety programs, safety departments, and safety regulations. It is often hard to believe that this activity is competent, goal-directed behavior by benevolent actors. We suggest that in order to explain the activities it is necessary to expand our understanding of the purposes they fulfil.

In this paper, our central argument is that safety management is a form of 'institutional work' and that safety activity is as much ritual,

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routine, and dramatic performance as it is goal-directed. Actions are socially legitimised through their purported positive effects on safety outcomes, but cannot be explained as strategic or tactical choices in pursuit of well-articulated goals. Safety performances are intentional, but their value comes primarily from the structures they maintain, and the beliefs and feelings that they reinforce, rather than from their ability to prevent accidents.

To understand this better, we divide safety work into four aspects, without suggesting that any one of these is automatically more "legitimate" or "real" than the others.

1. Social safety – affirming that safety is valued and achieved
2. Demonstrated safety – proving safety to external stakeholders
3. Administrative safety – establishing and following clear rules and requirements for safety
4. Physical safety – changing the work environment for safety

This safety work may contribute to, but is not the same as, the 'safety of work'. The safety of work relates to the likelihood and consequences of accidents arising from the way operational work is performed. For readability, we will from here on refer to the 'safety of work' as 'operational safety'

Of course, most organisations and most safety practitioners profess operational safety to be their primary concern (Provan et al., 2017). We do not doubt this claim. In fact, we think the preponderance of evidence supports an even stronger claim, that when organisations seek to address uncertainties due to shortfalls in safety work, they believe that they are actually addressing operational safety.

This confusion is similar to what Rae and Alexander refer to as "probative blindness" - safety activities that improve confidence in safety without revealing or changing the underlying operational safety (Rae and Alexander, 2017). However, in this paper we suggest that it is unhelpful to consider demonstrated, social and administrative safety as distractions from "actual" or "real" operational safety. All types of safety work are important, but for different reasons. In order to understand demonstrated, social, administrative and physical safety performances, it is important for researchers to understand why the practices have legitimacy for those who perform them, and refrain from assuming that operational safety is the only legitimate purpose of safety activity.

The different aspects of safety are interrelated in several ways. Firstly, they are not perceived as different within the organisation that performs them. Events that challenge faith in one of the performances will create a response across the other types of safety work. Secondly, the performances compete for attention and resources within the organisation. Thirdly, demonstrated, social and administrative performances derive legitimacy from purported causal connections with the other performances, in particular with operational safety. This legitimacy is reinforced through academic discourse that encourages readers to focus on the 'organisational causes' of accidents instead of the proximate physical causes - see in particular the 'Swiss Cheese' model (Reason, 2000) and Hopkins' analysis of the accidents such as the Esso Gas Explosion at Longford (Hopkins, 2000). The lack of differentiation between types of safety creates defensive responses when the legitimacy of any safety activity is challenged. "Why are you saying take-5 s are a waste of time. Don't you care about safety?"

It is possible to argue about whether organisations should or should not be concerned with demonstrated, social and administrative safety. As researcher-practitioners, we are ourselves frustrated that within most organisations safety work has importance disproportionate to its proven influence on operational safety. However, it is necessary to understand why safety is managed the way it is if we are to improve it.

Our paper is structured as the presentation of a new model that extends existing organizational theory. The model represents how and why safety activities are conducted. It is not intended to analyse or explain the causes of accidents – it complements other models that focus on how organisational structures and behaviors contribute to accidents. In the final section of the paper we discuss the broader implications of our ideas, and provide some avenues to test and refine the model.

2. Bureaucracy, institutions, and work

The term "bureaucracy" has a rhetorical repugnance in safety literature. Representative titles include: "Safety learning and imagination versus safety bureaucracy in design of the traffic sector" (Jagtman and Hale, 2007); "The safety anarchist: relying on human expertise and innovation, reducing bureaucracy and compliance" (Dekker, 2017); and "Bureaucracy, safety and software: a potentially lethal cocktail" (Hatton, 2010). In each case, bureaucracy in opposition to a positive attribute such as learning, expertise, or adaptability.

The text is often less provocative than the titles, but still describes bureaucracy as at best a necessary evil, or as an initially positive phenomenon that has grown beyond control. In both the rhetoric and the content, safety theorists draw heavily on the work of Max Weber (2015). Writing in post-Bismarck Germany, Weber viewed bureaucracy as necessary for the efficient exercise of power in a modern democracy. He also cautioned that once power was acquired by a democracy, it was virtually impossible to remove. Weber saw bureaucracy as secretive, impersonal, indispensable and indestructible.

Weber's bureaucracy was inflexible. It changed only by growing and by consolidating power. Even a military conquest only replaced who was at the head of the bureaucracy – not the nature or power of the bureaucracy itself. It is understandable that safety theorists – particularly those who place emphasis on transparency and local autonomy as sources of resilience – would be skeptical of this type of bureaucracy.

There is, however, an under-appreciated and under-studied relationship between "bureaucratic" safety work and "real" operational safety. A promising direction to explore this relationship is to consider safety work as a type of "institutional work" (Lawrence et al., 2011). Institutional work theory suggests that institutions are grown, sustained, and transformed by the continuing work of those who operate within the institution (Lawrence et al., 2011). An 'institution' is "those (more or less) enduring elements of social life that affect the behavior and beliefs of individuals by providing templates for action, cognition, and emotion". 'Work' is intentional activity. Transforming the institution, responding to day-to-day demands, or even just working by habit are all considered 'work'.

Lawrence et al. (2011) write:

> "The study of institutional work takes as its point of departure an interest in work—the efforts of individuals and collective actors to cope with, keep up with, shore up, tear down, tinker with, transform, or create anew the institutional structures within which they live, work, and play, and which give them their roles, relation-ships, resources, and routines."

Similar passages could be lifted straight from texts on Safety-II (Hollnagel, 2014), Safety Differently (Dekker, 2014) or resilience engineering (Woods and Branlat, 2011). Institutional work brings the same curious respect to the investigation of management work that modern safety science brings to the study of front-line work.

Cloutier (2016) represents institutional work in four categories. 'Conceptual work' creates, maintains or disrupts the normative ideals of the institution – it provides the collective understanding of what needs to be done, and why it is important. 'Structural work' organises roles, rules, systems and resources – it provides certainty and predictability. 'Operational work' is made up of concrete actions that influence the day-to-day lives of frontline workers. 'Relationship work' is the building of inter-personal trust, alliance, and collaboration – it allows individuals to co-operate in performing the other types of institutional work.