



Review

Examining theoretical approaches to men and masculinity in the context of high-risk work: Applications, benefits and challenges



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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we argue that it is important to understand how gender can influence men's occupational health and safety (OH&S). In doing so, we examine how a number of theoretical approaches and perspectives (i.e. a gender differences approach, hegemonic masculinity theory, embodiment theory, and intersectional approaches) have been applied to understanding men's OH&S in high risk work contexts. We discuss the conceptual underpinnings of each approach while examining how they have been applied to understanding men's OH&S. We then consider both the benefits and the challenges associated with each approach. We conclude with recommendations for how these approaches and perspectives might best be used within the context of OH&S research and highlight the key questions that each theoretical approach appears to be best suited to address. A gender differences approach may be most beneficial when we wish to understand the factors that lead to similarities and differences between men and women's work experiences. Hegemonic masculinities theory may be best suited to studying how workplace cultures become gendered and can influence power relations in the workplace, and embodiment theory to understand how gender is enacted and experienced at a bodily level and influence men's OH&S practices. Intersectional approaches can shed light on the ways in which race/ethnicity, class, and social inequalities may intersect with gender to influence OH&S.

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1. Introduction

Over the course of recent years, scholars in the field of occupational health and safety (OH&S) have paid more attention to gender in the context of high risk work (Jensen et al., 2014). While there is an existing scientific literature on gender in this field, most of it tends to adopt what is known as a “gender differences” approach. The pervasiveness of the gender differences approach can be seen, for instance, in the way that rates of injury and fatality are presented dichotomously for men and women. The gender differences approach relies on the assumption that the categories of man and woman are oppositional in nature and, by extension, that more can be learned by examining their differences than their similarities. For example, a review of the OH&S literature indicates that, in Canada, 97% of the victims of workplace fatalities between 1993 and 2005 were men (Bilsker et al., 2010). In 2012, 92% of all injured workers in the US and 96% in Australia were men (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013; Safe Work Australia, 2012).

Scholars in the field have proposed a variety of different explanations to account for the OH&S risks to which many men are exposed. For example, men may be exposed to risks due to the gendered segregation of occupations and, more specifically, the gendered division of labour within specific occupations (Messing et al., 2003; Courtenay, 2000; Du Plessis et al., 2013; Ibanez and Narocki, 2011). Gendered segregation is especially evident in high risk occupations, such as construction, electrical work, farming, firefighting, fishing, forestry and protective services (Messing et al., 2003; Ibanez and Narocki, 2011; Arcury et al., 2014; Breslin and Polzer, 2007; Desmond, 2006; Lawson, 2010; Phakathi, 2013; Power and Baqee, 2010). These occupations are characterized by a relatively high incidence of exposure to both the mental and physical risks associated with workplace hazards. What is more, many scholars have suggested that men may be expected to display prototypical masculine traits that include physical toughness and fearlessness in the face of danger and, as a result, may put themselves at greater risk in the workplace (Safe Work Australia, 2012; Ely and Meyerson, 2010; Power, 2008; Verdonk et al., 2010; Ness, 2012).

While the statistics presented above indicate that men may be the victims of a disproportionately large number of workplace accidents, a gender differences approach to OH&S may not be enough to help us understand the complex interplay of contextual factors that influence men’s exposure to risk. OH&S risks can be further exacerbated by the under-reporting of hazards, accidents and injuries (Breslin and Polzer, 2007; Lawson, 2010; Power, 2008), poor adherence to the use of protective equipment (Ibanez and Narocki, 2011; Arcury et al., 2014), and a tendency to sacrifice

health and safety to “get the job done” (Desmond, 2006; Phakathi, 2013; Arcury et al., 2014; Power and Baqee, 2010; Theberge, 2008). Furthermore, high-risk work is frequently characterized by economic incentives such as piecework, high wages for physically demanding and dangerous work, competitive tendering processes, and an institutional focus on profits before safety (Desmond, 2006; Phakathi, 2013; Power, 2008). Paap (2006) argues that the precarious position of construction workers in the current labour market encourages competition among workers, compromises adherence to health and safety policies and practices, and produces situations where workers perform “masculinities” in ways that privilege productivity over safety in order to gain the approval of employers. Thus, a more in-depth understanding of men’s OH&S may require that we go beyond a gender differences approach in order to consider other contextual factors that influence risk exposures and safety practices.

Our paper emerges out of a previously published article over the course of which we presented a critical review of the scientific literature that focuses on the intersection between men’s health, gender and OH&S. To ensure that a breadth of disciplinary perspectives were included, relevant articles were identified through exhaustive searches of nine data bases and included research from the health and medical sciences, psychology, sociology, gender studies and, of course, OH&S studies. For more details on the methodological approach used in the initial review, as well as its key findings, please see Stergiou-Kita et al., 2015. This initial review included evidence from 96 papers (75 qualitative, 18 quantitative, and 3 mixed methods published between 1986 and 2013), and focused predominately on high risk male-dominated occupations such as agriculture, farming, construction, mining, fish harvesting, oil refinery, firefighting, protective services, policing, security work, the military and professional sports. We found that while some OH&S studies have documented gender differences in relation to risk, few explicitly draw on contemporary theoretical approaches in order to better understand gender-related issues, the similarities between and amongst gender categories, as well as the key differences between them.

We agree with Jensen et al.’s (2014) claim that theorizing gender is important to improving OH&S in the workplace. More specifically, we suggest that using a gendered theoretical approach in the development, implementation, and interpretation of scholarly research can lead to a richer understanding of the complex factors that influence men’s OH&S. For example, how might the application of hegemonic masculinity theory help researchers to understand how gendered power relations in the workplace influence men’s OH&S? Similarly, how might the application of an intersectional approach assist us in better understanding the interplay of gender

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