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Injunctive safety norms, young worker risk-taking behaviors, and workplace injuries



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ABSTRACT

Injunctive safety norms (ISNs) refer to perceptions of others' expectations of one's safety-related conduct. Drawing on a sample of Canadian young workers ($n = 11,986$; M age = 17.90 years; 55% males), we study the relationships among four sources of non-work-related (i.e., parents, siblings, friends, teachers), two sources of work-related (i.e., supervisors, co-workers) ISNs, young workers' self-reported work-related risk-taking behaviors, and workplace injuries. Structural equation modeling suggests that ISNs from parents, supervisors, and co-workers were related to less frequent work-related risk-taking behaviors, and with fewer workplace injuries via less frequent work-related risk-taking behaviors. In addition, ISNs from supervisors were directly associated with fewer workplace injuries. In contrast, ISNs from teachers and siblings were not associated with work-related risk-taking behaviors, but ISNs from siblings were associated with fewer work injuries. Finally, ISNs from friends were associated with more frequent work-related risk-taking and more frequent work injuries via more frequent work-related risk-taking. This study draws attention to the relative roles of non-work sources of social influence and provides some evidence of how ISNs might be related to young workers' work-related risk-taking behaviors and their workplace injuries. It also contributes to practice by suggesting specific interventions that parents, supervisors, and co-workers could undertake to reduce young workers' work-related risk-taking and workplace injuries, namely encouraging youth to be safe at work.

1. Introduction

Reducing the high incidence of workplace injuries among young workers (i.e., workers 15 years and older but younger than 25 (Breslin et al., 2007; Salminen, 2004)) is an important issue for researchers, policymakers, and managers alike (Runyan et al., 2013). Young workers, particularly young males, have a significantly elevated risk of work injury (Breslin and Smith, 2005). The effects of a workplace injury can have long-lasting negative health, social, and financial effects. For example, in a U.S. sample, Dong et al. (2016) found that those who experienced a lost-time work injury reported an average \$3715 USD (in 2000 dollars) reduction in annual earnings growth over a ten-year follow-up period relative to those who had not been injured, and Galizzi and Tempesti (2015) have noted that costs of injuries have been growing over time. A growing body of research has investigated factors that predict work-related injuries among young workers, including job and workplace characteristics such as work overload and physical

hazards (e.g. Breslin et al., 2007; Frone, 1998; Runyan et al., 2008), jurisdictional variation (Breslin et al., 2006), socio-demographic factors (Smith and DeJoy, 2012), and safety climate (Barling et al., 2002), which refers to “employees’ perceptions about the relative importance of safe conduct in their occupational behavior” (Zohar, 1980). Yet, we still have a limited understanding of the potential relationships among a range of social influences on young workers’ work-related risk-taking behaviors and injuries.

1.1. Injunctive safety norms

Drawing on Deutsch and Gerard’s (1955) distinction among alternate forms of social influence, Cialdini et al. (1990, p. 1015) distinguished between injunctive and descriptive norms: “the injunctive meaning of norms refers to rules or beliefs as to what constitutes morally approved and disapproved conduct. In contrast to descriptive norms, which specify what is done, injunctive norms specify what ought

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to be done.” Injunctive norms represent the moral rules of a group and motivate behavior through the promise of social sanction (Cialdini et al., 1991). This motivation stems from both the perceived benefits and the perceived losses of conforming to social expectations (Rimal and Real, 2003). Injunctive norms are closely related to and often included as a component of the broader construct of the subjective norm (Armitage and Conner, 2001; O’Callaghan and Nausbaum, 2006), which has been conceptualized as “the perceived social pressure to perform or not to perform [a] behavior” (Ajzen, 1991; p. 188). Numerous studies have shown that injunctive and subjective norms are associated with a wide variety of non-work-related safety behaviors such as pedestrian road crossing (Evans and Norman, 1998), bicycle helmet use (O’Callaghan and Nausbaum, 2006), and intentions to initiate alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana use (Olds et al., 2005).

Injunctive safety norms refer to the extent to which individuals perceive others’ approval and expectations of safety-related behavior (Fugas et al., 2011). In the context of work-related safety behavior, examples of injunctive safety norms are a supervisor’s communication of expectations of safety behavior (Zohar and Luria, 2003) or encouragement by one co-worker to another to comply with specific safety rules (Tucker et al., 2008). In contrast, an example of a descriptive safety norm is a parent modeling safety behaviors such as wearing protective equipment (Westaby and Lowe, 2005). Research into the predictive power of social influence in general, and injunctive safety norms in particular, on young worker risk-taking behavior and workplace injuries is scarce. The only existing study on the topic that we are aware of (Westaby and Lowe, 2005) investigated the relationships among perceived supervisory influence (an injunctive norm), parental risk-taking (a descriptive norm), and co-worker risk-taking (a descriptive norm) on young workers’ risk-taking orientation, finding that all three of those social influences were related to lower work-related risk-taking. Given the benefits of studying multiple sources of injunctive norms for understanding why individuals engage in specific behaviors (Neighbors et al., 2008), our study builds on this work by exploring the relationships among a wider range of sources of injunctive safety norms on young workers’ risk-taking behavior and workplace injuries.

1.2. Sources of injunctive safety norms and work-related risk-taking behavior

1.2.1. Parents

Parents can influence adolescents’ work (Westaby and Lowe, 2005) and non-work (Steinberg, 2001) risk-taking behavior. Not surprisingly, many parents are involved with and concerned about their children’s employment (Howe and Strauss, 2007) and job-related safety (Runyan et al., 2009), act as source for information about workplace safety (Breslin et al., 2011), and provide advice when their children express concerns about work hazards (Runyan et al., 2011). A study of child safety on family farms found that parents said they use both descriptive and injunctive norms to shape their children’s safety behaviors (Neufeld et al., 2002). Research conducted in non-work contexts (e.g., home, school) shows that parental expectations are related to a range of adolescent risk-taking behaviors (Elek et al., 2006; Morrongiello et al., 2008; Simons-Morton et al., 2011; Voisine et al., 2008). For instance, Gray and Steinberg (1999) found that a parenting style characterized by the consistent establishment and enforcement of guidelines, limits, and developmentally-appropriate expectations is an important deterrent against problem behaviors such as delinquency. Based on this prior research, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1. Parents’ injunctive safety norms will be inversely related to young workers’ work-related risk-taking behaviors.

1.2.2. Siblings

Siblings have also been found to influence adolescent behavior in

general (Lamb and Sutton-Smith, 2014) and non-work risk-taking in particular (Leonardi-Bee et al., 2011). Morrongiello and Bradley (1997) studied older siblings’ influences on children’s evaluations of behaving in ways that pose risks to their physical safety. These authors found that in three hypothetical play situations, older siblings influenced the safety-related behaviors of their younger siblings in both positive and negative ways: some siblings who initially made less risky choices were persuaded to make riskier choices, while others switched from risky to less risky choices. We are aware of no research that has examined the extent to which siblings influence such behaviors in work settings. Prior research thus points to both the positive and negative relationships that siblings can have with adolescents’ risk-taking behaviors. This suggests that siblings’ encouragement to behave safely at work could persuade adolescents to behave safely at work. We therefore hypothesize:

Hypothesis 2. Siblings’ injunctive safety norms will be inversely related to young workers’ work-related risk-taking behaviors.

1.2.3. Friends

Friends are an important influence on the development and behavior of adolescents (Savin-Williams and Berndt, 1990), and in many cases have more influence on adolescents than adolescents’ parents do (Harris, 1995). For example, Urberg et al. (1997) found that influence from close friends and members of friendship groups predicted adolescents’ transitions into alcohol and cigarette use. Brown et al. (1986) found that youth reporting higher levels of explicit peer pressure from their friends were more likely to engage in behaviors such as substance abuse and theft. Similarly, Raffaelli and Crockett (2003) found that adolescents’ reports of peer pressure from friends were associated with increased sexual risk-taking years later. Finally, Christensen and Morrongiello (1997) studied peer influences on children’s evaluations of threats to physical safety and found that significant numbers of participating children were persuaded by their friends to make riskier choices in two out of three hypothetical play scenarios. Prior work thus suggests that friends’ encouragement to act in an unsafe manner may be related to youth behaving in an unsafe manner. While there is less direct evidence to date, the opposite relationship is also possible: that encouragement to behave in a safe manner may be related to youth acting in a safe manner. Given the potential influence of friends on risk-taking, Miller et al. (2007) identify peer groups as an effective mechanism for increasing adolescents’ awareness of workplace safety. We therefore hypothesize:

Hypothesis 3. Friends’ injunctive safety norms will be inversely related to young workers’ work-related risk-taking behaviors.

1.2.4. Teachers

Teachers have an important role in adolescent socialization (Ryan et al., 1994). Some work-related safety educational programs delivered by teachers, which involve prescribing ways of behaving in a workplace, show increases in student knowledge and critical thinking skills about safety (Linker et al., 2005). Further, in a program focusing on farm-related safety behavior involving students who worked on farms, Reed et al. (2003) found that three-quarters of students who participated in the program made positive changes to work-related behavior as a result of the teacher-driven program. The influence of teachers extends to risky behaviors beyond the workplace. For instance, Tyler et al. (2006) found that, in a sample of 16-to-18 year-olds, the more teachers helped these students with personal problems and insisted on students performing to the best of their abilities, the lower the risk of alcohol misuse. Although limited, this body of work leads us to hypothesize:

Hypothesis 4. Teachers’ injunctive safety norms will be inversely related to young workers’ work-related risk-taking behaviors.

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