The social construction of safety: Comparing three realities

Hortense Blazsin [a,*], Frank Guldenmund [b]

[a] MINES ParisTech – Research Center on Risks and Crisis (CRC), France
[b] Delft University of Technology – Safety Science Group, Netherlands

ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the (development of) safety culture of a big gas distribution company. Using a social constructionist framework, we explore the discourses constructed by three of the organization's sub-groups in relation to safety. Those groups, which are all situated at field level from a single working site, and therefore share a similar proximity to safety issues, occupy different hierarchical and functional positions. We assumed that each group may be considered as a specific social world, within which a specific perception of, and relationship with, safety is constructed, and that discourse analysis offers access to this construction. Individual semi-structured interviews were carried out to gather the discourses and analyzed in an ethno-methodological and conversation analysis perspective. Our discourse analysis allowed us to confirm our assumption by identifying that from one shared 'root' perception, three different constructions of safety stem. They appear to depend on both the group's specific jobs, and group positioning within the organization. Building on Berger and Luckmann's development cycle and on Weick's theory of sensemaking, we interpret those results as ensuing from a hiatus in the organization's rules enactment process and culture development cycle.

1. Introduction

The study presented in this article stems from the willingness of a major French gas distribution company to obtain a better understanding of its safety culture. This understanding might also help resolve a contradiction that seems to permeate various safety practices. It appears that despite explicit engagement and a significant investment in safety by top-management, also recognized as such at all levels of the organization, a certain aloofness can be observed at local levels, with appropriation of the safety policy in some cases still pending. This study therefore also aims at uncovering the reasons for this gap, examining separately recognition of the company's safety policy and its appropriation by its members. Our purpose is therefore not to evaluate the 'objective' safety performance of the organization, i.e. the ability to manage safety, prevent accidents, etc., which would require an altogether different approach and research design. From a traditional social science perspective, our aim is to understand what the perceptions pertaining to safety are, the factors that contribute to determining these perceptions, and how, ultimately, these individual and group perceptions are constructed as larger discourses and, possibly also, cultures.

Building on the empirical assessment of a contradiction identifiable within the organization's safety culture, we formulated a research question: Do field-level world(s) and associated local culture(s) lead employees to recognize but not appropriate the organization's safety policy and if so, why? Using a social constructionist perspective, we designed a study to analyze how field level employees make sense of safety. Instead of focusing on the obvious top vs. down, or headquarters vs. field level opposition, we selected three subgroups from one single working site, which are all situated at field level, but occupy different hierarchical and functional positions. Firstly, we outline the organizational context within which the study took place. Thereupon, we will present the reasons why we chose the social constructionist perspective to look at the three groups' sensemaking. We will then introduce our research question and hypothesis, and the study we have designed to address it before proceeding with presenting our results and discussing them, after what we will conclude and open some perspectives for further research.

2. Organizational context: a paradoxical perception of organizational safety engagement

The company at the heart of our study is responsible for the delivery of natural gas from the transport network to the end-user, i.e. households or companies. This involves monitoring the status

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +33 620730288.
E-mail addresses: hortense.blazsin@mines-paristech.fr (H. Blazsin), f.w.guldenmund@tudelft.nl (F. Guldenmund).

of the network and carrying out any maintenance operations that are necessary to avoid leaks; connecting new customers; disconnecting parts of the network; modernising the network; managing leaks/emergencies; and finally, coordinating with other companies whose activities may have an impact on gas installations, which includes pipelines and associated equipment, regulating devices, individual or collective connections, storage cabinets, etc.

Although its gas distribution activity has existed since the half of the 20th century, the corporation as it exists today is only six years old. It was created as a result of a 1998 European legislation which made it compulsory for energy distributors to become full entities, separate from energy producers and vendors. As an organization it is therefore at once old and quite new, a blend of historic professional expertise and a more recently founded organizational identity, impacting its organizational and safety culture. Its birth as a legal entity was surrounded by three important gas-related accidents, which happened within weeks of each other. Not only did these events transform the industry's regulatory environment, they subsequently decided to put safety as the company's first priority and restructure its safety policy around this new primacy. If safety had always been part of the job, it then became the job itself. In short, the company's safety policy and organizational culture from which it is derived are hardly six years old, and it is nevertheless developing from the foundations of a previous professional culture.

In the past six years, considerable financial and human means have been invested in order to develop tools and methods which could help implement the desired safety culture where safety takes precedence over any other aspect of an activity. Among other things, those investments have led to activities such as a Structured Post-incident and Post-accident Feedback Process and a Human and Organizational Factors Process (Desmorat et al., 2013), that aim to favour transparent upward feedback on 'real' work practices and enhance organizational learning. It was in this context that two years ago, the research project from which the present article stems was initiated.

3. A social constructionist perspective on (safety) culture

3.1. Conceptual framework

Considered from a theoretical perspective, the empirical question pertaining to the organization's safety culture and underlying contradiction points to a number of issues with regards to safety culture and more broadly, to organizational culture, of which safety culture is an aspect (see Guldenmund, 2010). Following Schein, organizational culture may be considered as 'a dynamic phenomenon that surrounds us at all times, being constantly enacted and created by our interactions with others and shaped by leadership behaviour, and a set of structures, routines, rules, and norms that guide and constrain behaviour' (Schein, 2004, p. 1). Our aim is therefore to develop a better understanding of the 'dynamic phenomenon' specific to the organization we are focusing on. In line with many current theories of organizational culture, we particularly take the differentiated viewpoint, which states that organizations divide into subgroups along such lines as geography, departments, and hierarchical levels (Martin, 2002). This is consistent with what Gergen, a prominent representative of the social constructionist paradigm, writes about what he calls 'The ethical challenge of global organization'. According to Gergen, "As the organization expands, a strong tendency toward specialization occurs. Most importantly, what is obvious, rational and valuable in one part of the organization is seldom duplicated in others. In effect, a multiplication of realities is generated, reducing the intelligibility and the rhetorical efficacy of the singular 'voice from the top'" (Gergen, 2001, p. 142). An equivalent proposition of this statement, considered from the perspective of the individuals, can be found in Weick's work (Weick, 2010, p. 10), and states that social relations such as power are the only way to stabilize the shared meaning of reality.

Gergen's and Weick's analyzes of multiple realities coexisting within one organization seems to reflect the empirical assessment of a gap separating the perception from the appropriation of the company's safety policy by field level people. This gap suggests that the 'safety reality' experienced at field level differs from the one experienced at headquarters level.[1] The current study is therefore fully embedded within the social constructionist paradigm, which will be defined as follows: 'Social constructionism denies that our knowledge is a direct perception of reality. In fact it might be said that as a culture or society we construct our own versions of reality between us. [...] All knowledge is derived from looking at the world from such perspective or other, and is in the service of some interests rather than others' (Burr, 2003, p. 6). Considering the world as being a pure social construction denies it an objective reality, the essence of which would be directly (and neutrally) accessible to people, who may only access it through the mediation of artefacts that they, individually and as a group, have constructed. As such, social constructionism aims to expose the specific political, social, and historical conditions which orient and construct a specific perception of reality and which sediment into symbolic and material artefacts. Organizational culture being precisely a blend of symbolic and material artefacts (for instance, see Hofstede, 2010), social constructionism appears as particularly adequate to analyze culture under any of its forms – in our case, safety culture.

In particular, the social constructionist paradigm seems useful to explore the gap empirically observed in the organization's safety culture: does it stem from a willingness from field-level people to distance themselves from headquarters and from a felt top-down imposition of knowledge and rules, a phenomenon already broadly documented by research in safety science and sociology (see for instance Terssac (de), 2003). Or, consistent with the social constructionist perspective, may this gap be attributed to a deeper phenomenon, namely the coexistence of subgroups, which have developed separately their own specific culture, and subsequently their specific perception of and relationship with safety? In other words, may this gap between recognition and appropriation of the organization's safety policy result from the coexistence of local 'realities' alternate (and possibly unrelated) to that proposed by the organization's headquarters? As organizations are composed of individuals who experience and subsequently construct their sense of reality, considering the micro-level of individual sensemaking appears as a necessary first step to question the macro-level of sensemaking at the heart of organizational culture. In this perspective, we will be using Weick's work to address the microlevel, before turning to Berger and Luckmann to reflect on the macrolevel.

3.2. Weick's theory of sensemaking to analyze how safety and safety policy are enacted locally

By saying that 'What sensemaking does is address how the text that is constructed as well as how it is read. Sensemaking is about authoring as well as reading' (Weick, 1995, p. 7), Weick asserts the role played by the individual in the construction of the environment (s)he experiences and the context (s)he evolves in. It is due to this 'presupposed pattern' that people are able to literally make sense of situations and subsequently act, hence confirming and strengthening the pattern. This retroactive process of sensemak-

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[1] HQ level designates the national corporate HQ; it should be mentioned that there are also regional HQs which relay information between national HQ and field level).