



Safety voice among young workers facing dangerous work: A policy-capturing approach

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ABSTRACT

Does dangerous work encourage young workers to speak up about their safety concerns? We conducted two experimental studies to test this question, with Hirschman's (1970) theory of behavioral responses to decline as a theoretical rationale. Study 1 ($n = 159$) manipulated two indicators of dangerous work – hazardous working conditions and experiencing injuries – to predict *safety voice intentions*, or willingness to speak up about safety concerns. Women had overall higher safety voice intentions than men, and in particular greater intentions to speak up about safety concerns under safe working conditions. Study 2 ($n = 78$) extended this model, showing that the relationship between experiencing an injury and safety voice intentions was moderated by psychological safety (i.e., belief that speaking up about safety concerns would be received without hostility), such that being injury-free in a psychologically unsafe environment yielded the lowest safety voice intentions. The results suggest that the extent to which young workers speak up about safety concerns may differ by gender and psychological safety when work is not particularly hazardous. We discuss implications for voice theory and safety in organizations.

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1. Introduction

Concern over the high rate and potential negative long-term consequences of workplace injuries among young workers (aged 15–24 years) has focused greater attention on injury prevention strategies for this vulnerable cohort (Koehoorn et al., 2008). This paper investigates how young workers intend to respond physically dangerous work. Specifically, we used experimental scenarios to test how two forms of decline in occupational safety, namely exposure to hazardous working conditions and the experience of a work-related injuries, influence young workers' intentions to speak up about safety concerns to supervisors and co-workers. Speaking up about safety concerns – or *safety voice* (Hofmann et al., 2003; Tucker et al., 2008) – is a proactive response that may reduce future injuries by alerting others who have the chance to change or be heedful of dangerous work.

This paper contributes to research on young worker safety research in four ways. First, much of the existing research has focused on the causes and consequences of young worker injuries (Loughlin and Frone, 2004) with little attention paid to the preventative behaviors that young workers, particularly those who are newcomers to their jobs, use when facing dangerous work. Second, while young workers continue to face a greater risk than adult

workers of workplace injury (Breslin and Smith, 2005; Salminen, 2004), young males in particular experience proportionally more injuries than young females (McCall et al., 2007). This paper considers differences in the extent to which young males and young females who are exposed to identical workplace dangers are willing to speak up about safety concerns. Third, this set of studies uses a policy-capturing approach (Karren and Barringer, 2002). Most research on young worker safety is cross-sectional and field-based (Breslin et al., 2007). With a few exceptions (e.g., Probst, 2002), workplace safety research rarely uses experiments for establishing causal relationships. Fourth, this research is grounded in Hirschman's (1970) ideas about declining states and voice, both of which have been widely applied to employee behavior (e.g., Rusbult et al., 1988; Withey and Cooper, 1989), and serve to inform knowledge about workplace safety behaviors.

2. Workers' responses to declining conditions

Hirschman (1970) explored why people leave ("exit") or try to change ("voice") the state of affairs in their group, organization, or country in response to mounting concerns about decline. Hirschman defined voice "as any attempt at all to change, rather than to escape from, an objectionable state of affairs" (p. 30). In the context of workplace safety, voice relates to efforts aimed at reducing the potential for injury (e.g., raising a safety concern with a supervisor or co-worker; Tucker et al., 2008; Tucker and Turner, 2011)

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and, more generally, attempts to make the workplace safer (e.g., by unionizing the unsafe workplace; Barling et al., 2003). Voice can have “an attention-focusing effect” (Hirschman, 1970, p. 45) because it can alert management about problems and solutions to these problems, and similarly can attune others in the organization, such as co-workers, about potential decline in work-related safety conditions.

2.1. Decline in work-related safety conditions

Given the central role of decline in Hirschman's (1970) theorizing, the notion of “decline” warrants, but rarely receives, the attention that other core concepts in his model receive. Hirschman noted that “organizations are conceived to be permanently and randomly subject to decline and decay, that is, to a gradual loss of rationality, efficiency, and surplus-producing energy, no matter how well the institutional framework within which they function is designed” (p. 15). The vast majority of organizational research drawing on Hirschman's ideas has investigated generalized forms of deterioration (e.g., low levels of job satisfaction or high levels of workplace injustice). Some evidence suggests that satisfaction with certain aspects of one's employment may predict general voice behaviors. For example, Leck and Saunders (1992) found that satisfaction with working conditions was significantly related to voice, while controlling for other facets of employment satisfaction (e.g., pay, supervision). Such findings suggest that treating organizational decline in general terms can mask facet-specific factors and potentially confound understanding how experiencing specific forms of decline influence voice behavior.

In the current research, we consider decline in relation to workplace safety as dangerous work, which we argue workers can experience in at least two ways. First, workers may perceive a relative change in safety, or an increase in physically hazardous working conditions. The second way that workers may perceive decline in safety is by experiencing a workplace injury, punctuating their sense of how safe their workplace is by personally getting hurt at work. Therefore, perceptions of both of these forms of decline may be a product of generalized information or vicarious experience about safety (e.g., the degree to which the organization seems to adhere to safety policies and practices¹), as well as direct experience (i.e., injuries to one's self).

Decline may be especially salient to newcomers as their experience in the organizational context is both novel and short-lived to that point. Breslin and Smith (2006) found that workers of all ages are four times more likely to have a lost-time injury claim in the first month on the job than twelve months later. Further, when new to a work environment, employees will make sense of their work setting by the changes and events that occur there over a short period of time. We focus in this paper on newcomers' experience of two forms of safety decline: hazardous work conditions and injuries to one's self.

2.2. Decline in safety and safety voice intentions

Hirschman (1970) predicted that heightened dissatisfaction with working conditions motivates employee voice. In terms of job-related safety, we predict that employees who work in hazardous conditions may be motivated to act on their dissatisfaction, even if they have not been personally injured. Direct experience of dangerous work, such as an injury, may also serve as a salient motivator, and cross-sectional applications of Hirschman's model using adult samples show that experiencing workplace injuries is

positively related to employee voice. For example, Barling et al. (2003) found that experiencing a workplace injury was a distal predictor of voice (defined as perceived trade union instrumentality), while other research has examined how safety experiences affect workers' willingness to support unionizing as a form of collective voice (Robinson, 1988). Given Hirschman's proposition, we propose that hazardous work conditions or experiencing an injury will be associated with higher safety voice intentions.

Hypothesis 1. Experiencing an injury (as opposed to not experiencing an injury) is related to higher safety voice intentions.

Hypothesis 2. Exposure to hazardous work conditions (as opposed to exposure to safe conditions) is related to higher safety voice intentions.

2.3. Gender and safety voice intentions

Hirschman (1970) did not consider how demographic differences, such as gender, influence the prevalence of voice. However, there is reason to believe that young worker gender may be a relevant factor in safety voice given the different experiences young males and young females have of workplace safety. Injury claim records show that young males are more likely than young females to be injured on the job (e.g., McCall et al., 2007), and that males of all ages are at greater risk of experiencing an injury even when controlling for occupational differences such as type of job or risk exposure (Breslin and Smith, 2006).

The search for an explanation for the differences in injury rate by gender has led researchers to compare safety behaviors of young male and young female workers. A qualitative study by Breslin et al. (2007) found that young females were more likely than young males to report speaking up about safety concerns.² While there is yet no dominant theoretical explanation for gender differences in safety-related voice behavior, there is a practical imperative for studying this relationship if one believes speaking up about safety may keep employees safer in the future. Based on existing qualitative evidence, we anticipate that young females compared to young males are more likely to speak up about safety. We treat as an exploratory research question the extent to which exposure to dangerous work (either hazardous work conditions or injury experience) interacts with gender to explain additional variance in safety voice intentions.

Hypothesis 3. Young females compared to young males will report higher safety voice intentions.

Research Question: is there an interaction between dangerous work (either hazardous work conditions or injury experience) and young worker gender that explains additional variance in safety voice intentions?

3. Study 1

To test these three hypotheses and research question, we experimentally manipulated dangerous work (i.e., hazardous work conditions and experienced injury) using realistic job scenarios in

¹ More generally, at the collective level of analysis, declining safety is a reflection of a worsening safety climate, which is defined as shared perceptions that work is being performed safely (Zohar, 1980).

² Findings from research on gender and voice responses are mixed. For example, in non-work settings, Birditt and Fingerman (2005) found no gender differences in voice behavior; however, they noted that in romantic relationships, women are more likely than males to use voice.

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