



Setting culture apart: Distinguishing culture from behavior and social structure in safety and injury research



Douglas J. Myers^{a,*}, James M. Nyce^b, Sidney W.A. Dekker^c

^a School of Public Health, Department of Occupational and Environmental Health Sciences, Injury Control Research Center, West Virginia University, PO Box 9190, Morgantown, WV 26506, United States

^b Department of Anthropology, Burkhardt Building (BB), Room 315, Ball State University, Muncie, IN 47306, United States

^c School of Psychology, The University of Queensland, School of Humanities, Griffith University, N16–2.18, Nathan Campus 4111, QLD, Australia

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 19 March 2013

Received in revised form

21 November 2013

Accepted 13 December 2013

Available online 19 December 2013

Keywords:

Culture

Hierarchy

Causation

Sociology

Anthropology

ABSTRACT

The concept of culture is now widely used by those who conduct research on safety and work-related injury outcomes. We argue that as the term has been applied by an increasingly diverse set of disciplines, its scope has broadened beyond how it was defined and intended for use by sociologists and anthropologists. As a result, this more inclusive concept has lost some of its precision and analytic power. We suggest that the utility of this “new” understanding of culture could be improved if researchers more clearly delineated the ideological – the socially constructed abstract systems of meaning, norms, beliefs and values (which we refer to as culture) – from concrete behaviors, social relations and other properties of workplaces (e.g., organizational structures) and of society itself. This may help researchers investigate how culture and social structures can affect safety and injury outcomes with increased analytic rigor. In addition, maintaining an analytical distinction between culture and other social factors can help intervention efforts better understand the target of the intervention and therefore may improve chances of both scientific and instrumental success.

© 2013 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

The concept of culture has become widely used in studies of safety and work-related injury (Wiegmann et al., 2002; Ferguson and Fakelmann, 2005; Hopkins, 2006; Mearns and Yule, 2009; Hale et al., 2010). As part of considering the wider “system” surrounding the production of both safety and risk in workplaces, culture is seen by many as having an enormously important role to play. Many disciplines engaging in these areas of research have adopted the concept, sometimes using it to explain and predict safety and injury outcomes, other times targeting it as something to change in order to improve these outcomes (Weick, 1987; Marx, 2001; Norbjerg, 2003; Dejoy, 2005; Thaden et al., 2006). As it has been applied in a variety of safety research disciplines, we suggest the concept of culture has been amended such that it has gone astray from how it was conceptualized in its “home” disciplines of sociology and anthropology. In particular, we argue that, as its definition has been broadened, its conceptual clarity has lessened to the point where its utility as an analytical tool has been much diminished. We suggest that a reconsideration of how culture is conceived in

sociology and anthropology may return some conceptual clarity to what we mean by culture which then can improve its usefulness in safety and injury research. Even when the topic or context may be entirely appropriate, narrowing of the scope of culture to that pertaining to safety exclusively (i.e., “safety culture”) risks losing the analytic rigor the concept can offer investigators (Guldenmund, 2000; Antonsen, 2009a; Silbey, 2009). Thus, greater precision of the concept of culture could be beneficial both for research and practice.

Perhaps the most important and most commonly made error in defining culture is that it often includes, in addition to culture, any combination or number of behaviors, relationships, and organizational and social structures. It is important to note that the social sciences have spent at least the last century and a half attempting to delineate what relationships all of these elements of the social world have to each other (Durkheim, 1901; Weber et al., 1978). The reduction of culture as, for example, “the way we do things around here” (Deal and Kennedy, 1982; Schein, 1992) oversimplifies and risks leading researchers astray, i.e., away from perhaps a more informed analysis of just what they wish to study and understand. Such a definition of culture might include properties of the workplace including its hierarchical form(s); its division of labor by organizational locations, departments, units, etc.; the sets of roles and jobs, job tasks and even technologies used. In short, such a view is so broad that it seems hard to understand what might be

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 304 581 1152; fax: +1 304 293 6685.

E-mail addresses: djmyers@hsc.wvu.edu (D.J. Myers), jnyce@bsu.edu (J.M. Nyce), s.dekker@griffith.edu.au (S.W.A. Dekker).

considered *not* culture. Therefore, we suggest that the utility of this “new” understanding of culture could be improved if researchers more clearly delineated the ideological – the socially constructed abstract systems of meaning, norms, beliefs and values (which we refer to as culture) – from concrete behaviors, social relations and other properties of workplaces (e.g., organizational structures) and of society itself. The second issue is a reification of culture which links the term directly to forms of causality.

This expansion of the concept has likely diminished its usefulness in safety research (Antonsen, 2009b). The result has been that it has become difficult to distinguish culture as an independent variable from the outcomes it is believed to cause. If, for example, hierarchical relations are a problem for safety (Lauer, 1993; Helmreich, 2000a; Hutchins et al., 2002; Walton, 2006), it would be beneficial to examine their independent effects. Mixing social or organizational structures and behaviors into a definition of culture impedes not only the study of culture but of these other factors as well (Vaughan, 1996). In addition, the often very complex manners in which culture and organizational or social structures interact to produce conditions that may affect safety and injury (and many other outcomes) cannot be identified when these two very different elements of the social world are combined into a single definition (Goh et al., 2010). And regardless of how culture has been treated in the safety literature, it is not self-evident that culture can be linked to cause in any direct way or ways (Rochlin, 1999; Guldenmund, 2000). The reasons for this have much to do with best practice definitions of culture which suggest causality and culture exist in separate analytic realms altogether. In short, one risks much without the chance of any direct payoff when one confuses the empirical or analytic realms culture and causality belong to. In this paper, we explore the conflation of culture and other aspects of social and organizational structures and how their separation can benefit analysis of safety in the workplace. Then we take up the problem of seeing culture as a mechanism; as cause or effect.

1.1. Separating culture from social and organizational structures and behaviors

A challenge to safety researchers is to understand how social and organizational structures may interact with culture in a given organizational (or societal) setting (Weick, 1987; Feldman, 2004). To do this, there must be an analytical separation between culture and these other features of the organization, e.g., the organization's structures. An “analytical separation” is of course an artificial distinction – culture and social structures always coexist and intermingle. But understanding culture and social structures as fundamentally different analytic things (Parsons and Shils, 1951; White, 1975; Kane, 1991) is not only useful but necessary in order to understand how, in social life, they might interact. That is, to analyze how cultural issues such as belief and meaning systems might interact with other aspects of social life (e.g., hierarchical relationships, the division of labor, size and composition of work teams, technology, etc.), this conceptual analytic distinction must be made first. While culture may point to all of social reality, there are other factors – structural features of organizations – which also have considerable influence on social life and need to be studied as such. Still, culture in the safety literature is often reduced to an organization, to what the organization “is” or to what is characteristic of it (Starbuck and Farjoun, 2005; Weick and Sutcliffe, 2007).

For example, the existence of designated safety officials in an organization may be informed by cultural beliefs held by the organizational leaders who initiated these positions. However, this may also be due to structural issues. That is, safety officers may be an organization's attempt to reduce costs, a means of managing relations with regulatory agencies or an effort to improve working conditions in order to improve employee retention or increase the

number of applicants, etc. Perhaps more importantly, we view the existence of designated safety officials as an aspect of the division of labor in the organization (a structural feature of the organization) rather than as any direct aspect of culture itself. The belief systems such officials might use to understand safety (personal responsibility, a blame-free culture, etc.) must be recognized as separate analytic categories so that the cultural and structural realities can be examined as independent factors which may also interact with one another to affect safety.

1.2. Confusing culture and structure

The conflation of culture with organizational structures and behaviors has appeared in several studies conducted in a variety of industries such as nuclear power (ACSNI, 1993; Lee and Harrison, 2000), the offshore oil industry (Cox and Cheyne, 2000), construction (Fang and Wu, 2013), aviation (Helmreich, 2000a), and healthcare (Pronovost and Sexton, 2005) and sometimes across multiple industries in a single study (Fernandez-Muniz et al., 2007; Frazier et al., 2013). To give but one example, this section provides an instance from healthcare where structure and culture can be confused.

In order to improve communication among surgical team members, with the goal of improving patient safety, some hospitals are implementing programs which attempt to “level the playing field” among surgical team members (Helmreich and Foushee, 1993; Helmreich, 2000b). The goal is to make all members of team (in particular those lower in the hierarchy) feel safe to question the activities of the attending surgeon and to convince these surgeons that such questioning is acceptable behavior (Sexton et al., 2000; Flin and Mitchell, 2009; Guimond et al., 2009; Pronovost and Vohr, 2010). Such interventions intend to educate and instruct individuals “to talk truth to power”. However, in these programs the structure (and role) of power and authority have not been altered, challenged nor changed. Surgical residents, for example, still have to ask for letters of recommendation from senior surgeons to move up or anywhere through the system. This and other taken for granted behavior, can actually reinforce rather than diminish the role that hierarchy and elites play in such “restorative” enterprises. Any attempt to change hierarchical relations via training, teaching, and encouraging different behaviors often ignores role inequality and power plays in such workplace environments (Dekker, 2008). Assuming, for example, that changes in communication necessarily can lead to re-structurization, i.e., new relationships of power and control, is at best naïve. If assertiveness from below is a constant theme in this literature, what it has taken for granted in these seemingly emancipatory strategies is who defines “below” and “above” and who sets up the game and establishes its rules as well as who largely “wins”. Consultancy on “just cultures” in hospitals (e.g. Marx, 2001) has been seen as a restoration of management control over staff after precisely such emancipatory practices and policies that tended to blame the system, not the worker, for failures and adverse performance outcomes have been established (Reason, 1997; Dekker, 2009). No questions have been asked in the safety literature about the considerable resources elites have to co-opt or derail these empowerment initiatives. This is because most work in this area tends to mystify where power and authority reside in culture and society and ignores how it provides, for those who live within these structures and meanings, the “natural order of things”. To “mute” the analysis of central social mechanisms like power and social differentiation in the workplace weakens the kinds of analysis one can carry out in such workplaces (Antonsen, 2009a). It also limits the effectiveness of one's attempt to change and intervene in these workplaces.

Does culture differ between groups, or with a different group leader? The issue here is not simply one of “size” but a confusion

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/6965943>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/6965943>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)