



A gender perspective on work-related accidents



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ABSTRACT

The key argument in the article is that a perspective on gender and masculinity could be beneficial to safety research. The aim is to outline a theoretical framework for combining gender research and safety research. In the first part of the article four strands of gender and masculinity theory relevant to safety researchers are introduced: The first position outlined is the theory of hegemonic masculinity which highlights the privileged position of men who represent dominant and legitimate form of masculinity. The next two positions outlined represent a classic distinction in gender theory between an approach conceptualizing gender as a relatively stable category and an approach underlining that gender is constantly produced and reproduced. Finally the notion of intersectionality which emphasizes the mutual interaction between different categories such as gender, class, age, and ethnicity is outlined. The second part of the article re-interprets two examples of existing outstanding safety research which have all been published in Safety Science. The two contributions are re-interpreted through a gender lens illustrating how gender and masculinity perspectives can be crucial for understandings of safety and the practices that lead to work-related accidents. The article concludes that the gender perspective is useful to expand the knowledge about safety and work-accidents in relation to for instance pride and bodily strength as well as the struggles between different masculinities.

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1. Introduction

Over the last 30 years, a promising ‘cultural turn’ in safety research¹ has brought social context, interaction and practice to the fore (Gherardi et al., 1998a,b; Gherardi, 2006; Gherardi and Nicolini, 2000a,b; Baarts, 2009; Haukelid, 2008; Knudsen, 2009; Richter and Koch, 2004). Yet some aspects of culture seem to be under theorized. Gender is one such aspect. This article suggests that gender and in particular masculinity could be considered central concerns for the further development of safety research.

The relevance of gender in this research field is illustrated by the fact that more men than women die or are severely injured in work-related accidents. For instance, in the period 2006–2011, men accounted for 93% of all fatal occupational accidents in Denmark even though men only make up 52% of the work force. In addition, the incidence rate ratio of serious accidents at work was 1.72 in disfavor of men (Arbejdstilsynet, 2012). The same tendency is found on the average European level where ‘men ac-

count for 95% of fatal accidents and 76% of non-fatal accidents in the workplace’ (Oortwijn et al., 2011). Admittedly there are problems in comparisons of men’s and women’s accident ratios: Gender-segregated labor markets rarely allow for all-other-things-being-equal type comparisons and some official statistics only allow for comparison on a crude aggregate level (Taiwo et al., 2009). However, the statistics do indicate (taking the segregation of the labor market into account) a relation between being a man and an increased risk of a work-related accidents (Smith and Mustard, 2004).

Still, theoretical reflections on gender and masculinity are rare in safety research.² To the extent they occur they are often limited to regarding being a man as a risk factor, and gender is only analyzed as a binary dichotomous variable (i.e. man and woman). The absence

² A search for the term “masculinity” in two flagship journals on safety research, *Safety Science* and *Journal of Safety Research*, in August 2011 turned up 8 articles in *Safety Science* and 3 in *Journal of Safety Research*. In most articles the notion is only used once, and neither contemporary gender nor masculinity literature is mentioned. In only one case (Granié, 2009) is masculinity understood by employing Hofstede’s (1991) somewhat crude version of the notion. The notion of “gender” is admittedly employed more often. It prompts 219 hits in *Safety Science* and 368 hits in *Journal of Safety Research*. A screening implied, however, that most studies simply controlled for gender through the variable biological sex (male/female) but without including a theoretical gender perspective in the analysis.

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¹ This development which begun in the 1980s has been called ‘the third age of safety’ (Hale and Hovden, 1998).

of theoretical reflections on masculinity is somewhat paradoxical; the most risky and dangerous occupations most often studied by safety researchers are inherently male, and most safety studies are conducted in workplaces where men are either highly over-represented or completely dominant numerically. In other words, most safety research is and has always been about men, and masculinity seems to be implicitly in play in several ethnographic studies that have appeared in *Safety Science* (e.g. Holmes et al., 1998; Atak and Kingma, 2011) and elsewhere (Gherardi et al., 1998a,b; Rooke and Clark, 2005; Baarts, 2009; Bruns, 2009). Yet, few studies reflect how masculinity is central to the safety cultures and practices studied. To borrow a term from Collinson and Hearn (2001), men are not named as men, nor are reflections on differences between masculinities within and between workplaces common. Our discussion thus coincides with the common and everyday observation that there can be quite substantial differences between men and masculinities within and between organizations. These differences within the group of men are, however, rarely conceptualized or named in safety research. We suggest that safety research might gain from taking such different and competing masculinities into account. By different and competing masculinities we thus mean that in any given organization or workplace there are different ways of being a man and these may sometimes compete for the position as the most legitimate masculinity. Furthermore these different and competing masculinities may have different safety implications. For instance some men might base their masculinity on the mastering of technology (which would allow them to use lifting equipment without their masculinity being questioned) whereas others might gain masculinity from bodily strength (making the introduction of lifting equipment difficult). These masculinities then have different safety implications when it comes to accidents related to lifting – and understanding which of these two masculinities is more commonly considered to be legitimate among workers in an organization might be central for predicting the incidence of such accidents. This is of course only a somewhat simplified example as we will develop the argument below (primarily Section 2.1).

Concurrently, a large field on gender in organizations has been developed. It conceptualizes gender as built into the assumingly gender-neutral practices, symbols and identities in organizations, and researchers seek to capture and analyze the meanings and impacts of gender in work-life (e.g. Acker, 1990, 2012; Kvande, 1995, 2007; Martin, 2003, 2006; Gherardi, 1994, 1995; Gherardi and Poggio, 2001; Poggio, 2006; Bruni et al., 2005). Within this research tradition a specific field on masculinity and work has been developed. One of the few scholars who has made an explicit attempt to construct a theoretical model that grasps how gender and safety are practiced in on-going work situations is Silvia Gherardi (2006, 72f). Another important example from masculinity research which combines gender (masculinity) and safety is Maier and Messerschmidt (1998), who analyzed the Challenger accident and demonstrated how competing masculinities led to disastrous decisions. They argue that ‘a deeper understanding of the way in which men attempt to “do” and “preserve” their masculinity has profound implications for the creation – and prevention – of organizational crises’ (1998, p. 339) – one such crisis being work related accidents. However, insights about risk and safety practice are seldom combined with insights from gender and masculinity with rare exceptions, such as the highly recommendable work by Ely and Meyerson (2010).

In this article we outline a theoretical framework for applying a gender perspective on safety research. We emphasize that we understand gender as a social and socio-cultural phenomenon, and that the article focuses on gender as a social category, i.e. not as biological sex. Thus, we do not discuss whether differences in average height, strength, weight etc. between biological women and men could be important parameters for understanding differences in

the prevalence of work-related accidents among men. We consider these biological differences to fall outside the purpose of this article. The social approach to gender also means that we are interested in gender as a dimension of identity – sometimes in interplay with other dimensions – and in the gendered perceptions and norms which at least in part form and shape actors’ behavior. It furthermore means that we understand gender as socially defined and contested and therefore we do not assume that masculinity (or femininity) are a set of stable traits, although it is perhaps possible to pinpoint traits that are *considered* masculine in many contemporary social contexts (dominance, physical strength, courage, persistence, steadfastness, stoicism, aggressiveness etc.). We also emphasize that our focus is on work-related accidents *as a human practice gone wrong*. We thus argue that interventions that take gender and masculinity into account will have a better chance of altering practices and thereby reducing the number of work-related accidents.

In addition to filling an important theoretical gap in safety research, we suggest that strengthening gender as a theoretical aspect can inform two somewhat overlapping current debates in safety studies. (1) Theoretical considerations about masculinity and gender can inform the current trend towards focusing on power in safety research. A focus on power implies understanding how power and sometimes counter-power is intertwined with attempts to change safety culture (cf. Antonsen, 2009a). As we will argue below, different forms of masculinities are enacted in power relations, just as masculinity can be at stake in practices of counter-power. (2) Some strands of theories about gender and masculinity resonate well with critiques of an understanding of organizational culture (e.g. Smircich, 1983; Fitzgerald, 1988; Ackroyd and Crowdy, 1990; Martin, 2002) or safety culture as an easily managed variable (Haukelid, 2008; Antonsen, 2009b; Hale and Hovden, 1998; Hale, 2000; Richter and Koch, 2004). In accordance with such perspectives organizational cultures can sometimes be understood as gendered in a way that reflects gender perceptions and gender normativities of overall society, which makes them relatively difficult to manipulate. Furthermore, one reason that safety culture can be difficult to alter is that actors throughout their life trajectories have been socialized into a gender identity with a certain *inertia*. Existing research suggests that successful change towards safer work must take gender into consideration (Abrahamsson and Somerville, 2007).³

As argued above there are several reasons why gender and masculinity could be considered central to safety research. The aim of this article is to introduce theories of gender and masculinity to safety researchers and to outline how these analytical categories can improve and enrich future analysis. The article is structured as follows: In the first part we introduce four relevant strands of gender and masculinity theory. In the second part we illustrate the analytical potential of this theoretical framework by reinterpreting two existing ethnographic studies which have been published in *Safety Science*. Finally, in the conclusion, we discuss the potentials of adding a gender perspective to safety research.

2. Theories of gender and masculinities

In this section we outline four strands of gender and masculinity theory relevant to studies of safety. The first position is selected

³ Ely and Meyerson (2010) found an association in the opposite direction, i.e. that changes in safety culture lead to changes in masculinity. This finding points towards a dialectic relationship which we acknowledge, although this article is primarily interested in gender and masculinity as independent variables. However, it is important to take into account the ramifications of attempts to change the safety culture at work places. Because of the gendered nature of the safety culture the opposition towards change exhibited by the employees may have their origin in the perceived consequences of the safety changes for their gender identity and notions of masculinity even if the changes do not have this as an explicit goal.

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