Speaking of Safety: Young Workers' Experiences

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Abstract

Ten young workers participated in qualitative interviews focused on their experiences of safety

in the workplace. The most striking observation is how little health and safety intruded into the

work experiences of young workers. Although participants reported experiencing injuries and

near-miss incidents, they minimized these occurrences and attributed such events to carelessness.

Supervisors and coworkers also viewed injuries as a normal and expected part of the job. The

challenge for marketing safety is making the message of safety relevant to young workers.

Speaking of Safety: Young Workers' Experiences

Youth employment is normative, formative and – all too often – dangerous. It is a

normative experience in that young workers (i.e., those aged 15 – 24 years) are now participating

in the paid labor force at an unprecedented rate (Loughlin & Barling, 1999; 2001) with

employment being the modal pattern for high school students and beyond.   These early

employment experiences have substantial formative and developmental implications for

individuals (for a review see Frone, 1999), their employing organizations and society at large

(Kelloway & Barling, 1999).

However, youth employment is also dangerous. Society (including both parents and

children) continues to value and encourage youth employment (see Furnham & Thomas, 1984;

Green, 1990; Greenberger & Steinberg, 1986; Mortimer, Finch, Dennehy, Lee & Beebe, 1994;

Phillips & Sandstrom, 1990), seeing early employment experiences as a means of economic

socialization (Kelloway & Harvey, 1999) that leads to the development of desirable personal

qualities (e.g., responsibility, maturity, etc.; see Goodnow, 1988). However, empirical data

suggest that through such employment experiences young people are also exposed to the hazards

of adult employment, including issues of: work stress (Loughlin & Lang, 2005); substance use

(Kelloway & Barling, 2007; Wu, Schlenger & Galvin, 2003); workplace aggression, violence

and bullying (Vaez, Ekberg & LaFlamme, 2004; Tucker & Loughlin, 2006); and occupational

health and safety (Castillo, 1999; Frone, 1999; White & O'Donnell, 2001).

With regard to the latter, a consistent finding in the research literature is that young

workers experience more injuries, but fewer fatal injuries, than do their older counterparts

(Castillo, 1999; Centre for Disease Control, 2001; Dupre, 2000; Human Resources Development

Canada, 2000; Kraus, 1985; National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health, 1995; 1997;

Salminen, 2004). There are also data suggesting that younger workers tend to experience more

serious injuries, with a greater likelihood for need of surgical intervention, than do older workers

(Ehrich, McClellan, Hemkamp, Islam & Ducatman, 2004). As Loughlin and Frone (2004) point

out, these statistics are particularly surprising because young people are primarily employed in

occupations traditionally considered to be safe. More than 50% of youth injuries, for example,

occur in restaurants and grocery stores (Institute of Medicine, 1998; NIOSH, 1998).

Risk Factors

Why do young people experience a higher rate of workplace injuries? Various sets of

risk factors have been identified in the literature, including demographic characteristics,

attitudinal and knowledge factors, and employment characteristics.

Demographic Factors

Several authors have posited that age is, in itself, a risk factor. For example, in his

review of the literature on workplace violence, Kelloway (2007) notes that age is the only

consistent demographic predictor of victimization, with young workers experiencing more

violent assaults than older workers. In discussing injuries among young workers, Castillo (1999)

notes that children are not simply "little adults;" by definition young workers may not have

reached physical or psychological maturity and their developmental phase may place them at

higher risk. Parker, Carl, French and Martin (1994), for example, found that smaller adolescent

workers were at greater risk for lifting-related injuries than were larger adolescents.

Within the population of young workers, adolescent males are consistently identified as

the high-risk group (Belville, Pollack, Godbold & Landrigan, 1993; Brooks, Davis & Gallagher,

1993; Frone, 1998; NIOSH, 1997; Schober, Handke, Halperin, Moll & Thun, 1988), perhaps

because they engage in riskier behaviors (e.g., substance use) at a greater rate than females or perhaps because they are more likely to work in hazardous work environments.

Attitudinal and Knowledge Factors

Although empirical research is limited, there is a growing tendency to identify the young workers' attitudes and safety knowledge as risk factors. Most individuals have a perception of their own invulnerability – both adolescents and adults underestimate their risk of injury relative to their peers (Harre, 2000; Quadrel, Fischoff & Davis, 1993) and this tendency may be particularly pronounced among younger males (Harre, 2000).

Consistent with this suggestion is the observation that inexperienced drivers are poorer at identifying hazards than are more experienced drivers (Harre, 2000) – they scan the environment less frequently and are not as quick to recognize and respond to hazards. This may be related to a tendency to over-estimate one's skill level (Deery, 1999). Loughlin and Frone (2004) suggest a similar process may be at play in the workplace.

When risks are detected, adolescents generally have a higher acceptance of risk or risk threshold (Deery, 1999). Young drivers, for example, may accept a higher level of risk in order to achieve other ends (e.g., a speedy arrival [Harre, 2000]). Based on their series of focus groups with young workers, Breslin, Polzer, MacEachen, Morrongiello and Shannon (2007) reported that most young workers accepted a high rate of minor injuries as being "part of the job" or necessary in order to complete tasks in a timely fashion.

Employment Characteristics

Several features of young workers' jobs may place them at greater risk for workplace injury. First and foremost, young workers tend to be exposed to more physical hazards in the workplace than are older workers (Hayes-Lundy, Ward, Saffle, Reddy, Warden &

Schnebly,1991; Frone, 1999). Higher injury rates are, therefore, a consequence of higher levels

of hazardous exposure and exposure to more strenuous or risky tasks (Parker et al., 1994).

Work load is also consistently identified as a risk factor for young workers. Frone (1999)

found that heavy workloads were associated with higher levels of injury. Barling, Loughlin and

Kelloway (2002) also found a relationship between role overload (i.e., the amount of work

expected) and health and safety outcomes in their study of young workers.

Organizational leadership may also play a critical role in shaping the employment

experiences of young workers – particularly with regard to health and safety outcomes.   In two

samples of young workers, Barling et al. (2002) found that young workers' awareness of safety

and perceptions of safety climate were associated with their ratings of supervisors'

transformational leadership and, in turn, predicted their experience of safety-related events and

injuries. In an extension of this study, Kelloway, Mullen and Francis (2005) found that young

workers' perceptions of supervisors' transformational leadership enhanced, but perceptions of

passive leadership detracted from, young workers' perceptions of safety climate in their

organization. Again, safety climate predicted both safety events and injuries.

In the most recent extension of this line of research, Teed, Kelloway and Mullen (2008)

found that inconsistent supervisory behavior had an adverse effect on health and safety outcomes

among a sample of young workers. That is, supervisors who either ignored safety issues or dealt

with safety issues only sporadically resulted in young workers' perceptions that safety was not

important to their jobs.

These findings are consistent with the importance of safety climate (Zohar, 2002) in

predicting safety outcomes among young workers (Barling et al., 2002). One visible

manifestation of safety climate (i.e., the importance with which managers view safety in the

workplace) is the extent of safety training. Although the available data suggest that young workers want safety training they also suggest that only a minority receive such training – this is true even for forms of training that are mandated by legislation such as WHMIS training (Kelloway, Francis, Schat & Iverson, 2007).

Interactive Effects

Although a variety of situational and individual risk factors have been advanced as explanations for higher injury rates among young workers, it is clear that these factors do not act in isolation. Consistent with most models of accident causation (for a review see Kelloway & Francis, 2007), accidents among young workers result from a perfect storm of workplace risk factors and individual vulnerabilities.

The Current Study

Although there are many large surveys of safety outcomes among young workers, comparatively few studies have asked young workers about their experiences of safety in the workplace. One recent study that did so (Breslin et al., 2007) suggested two predominant conclusions. First, young workers accepted and tolerated workplace hazards and injuries as being just part of the job. Second, young workers reported that their complaints or concerns about safety conditions were routinely dismissed. Individuals who did complain were routinely denigrated, told to "suck it up," or, in the case of young male workers, had their masculinity questioned.

The purpose of this study was to extend these findings by exploring young workers' experiences of workplace safety and their perceptions of safety messages in the workplace and the media.

Method

Participants

Participants for the current study were 10 young workers selected according to a system

of purposive sampling for variation (Silverman, 2000). In this method the goal is not to generate

a statistical representation of the population; rather, the focus is on sampling along predefined

sources of variation in order to ensure the inclusion of diverse experiences and perceptions. In

the current case, we explicitly set out to include [a] both male and female workers; [b] employed

both full-time and part-time; [c] in both service and manufacturing/primary industries; [d] from

various areas of Nova Scotia.   Table 1 presents a description of the participants in the current

study.

Procedures

This study was conducted in two phases of collection and analysis. Individual interviews

(see Appendix A) were conducted to gather detailed information concerning workplace safety.

The long interview process (McCracken, 1988) was the primary tool used to establish and record

communicative events with respondents (Briggs, 1986). Grand and mini-tour questions were

used to focus respondents (Spradley, 1979), with a middle-ground interpretative approach

(Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995) used to capture the subjective experiences of emotion, feelings

and reactions elicited during and after the event.

A phenomenological frame was used to interpret the data to capture and identify the personal

experiences and interpretations from the perspective of the respondents themselves (Patton, 1990). This

approach was intended to reflect the respondents' worldview.   The qualitative analysis of interview data

involves listening to each interview in detail and, through constant ongoing comparisons with the

interviews listened to earlier (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Silverman, 2000), the recognition of themes,

patterns and associations both within and across interviews. Broadly termed grounded theorizing, this process requires the analyst to dwell upon the interviews themselves and not attach any presuppositions based upon prior theory, research or biases. In this way new and insightful information is able to be gained from qualitative interview data that might otherwise be missed when conducting research using alternative methods.

This report details the results of such an analysis and has resulted in a number of issues or topics which we have labeled *emergent themes*. These emergent themes arise out of the interviewees' experiences reported during the interviews. To illustrate this, and to provide a "face" to the data, we have also reported some verbatim quotes when appropriate. Please note that names,, gender and any other potentially identifying information has been removed or altered from each quote in order to ethically preserve the anonymity of the participants and the confidential nature of the interviews.

Results

Perhaps the most striking observation is how little health and safety intruded into the work experiences of young workers. For the most part, participants expressed surprise at the high rate of injury among young people, did not identify working safely as part of a successful job performance, reported receiving minimal safety training and did not talk about safety issues at work. Participants recognized some jobs, but not their own, as being risky:

> *"… umm not really, most of my friends just work in places like this [interview takes place in a coffee shop]… can't really get too hurt in here – slip on the wet floor or burn themselves."*
> *-Simon, construction worker*

> *"So did that affect your outlook on safety?" [Interviewer following up regarding the revelation the respondent's stepfather was injured at work] "Again, I think that construction… in an industry like construction it would be, again, a much higher priority. For someone like me, I've never worked in construction and don't ever intend to, so there's a difference there too…"*
> *-Robert, general manager of a community business group*

The lack of recognition of safety issues is particularly important because over half of the participants reported being injured at work. One respondent claimed to have experienced "about 50" injuries in the last three years and respondents could readily recount descriptions of specific incidents and accidents:

> *"I went to transport the tray of hot meat balls [nervous laughter] from the thing and it slipped from one hand and landed on this forearm so I had third degree burns all down the left-hand side of my forearm. [Interviewer: "Wow, so you went to the hospital?"] So I went to the hospital, yup."*
> *-Josh, about a previous food services job*

> *"Well, I almost fell of a roof one time. But it wasn't really a high roof… but I could have gotten injured if I would've fell down the wrong way."*
> *-Simon, construction worker*

In part, this disconnect between actual experience and hazard perception results from a tendency to minimize and deny the experience of being injured. Only injuries that result in lost time from work are seen as "real" injuries and participants explicitly discount more minor incidents:

> *"I never considered telling anyone about it, it wasn't a big deal. I was always taught not to make a big deal over little things."*
> *-Jane, store clerk & bartender*

> *"Not really injured, you know, smashing your thumb with a hammer but nothing serious."*
> *-Simon, construction worker*

Motivators for unsafe behavior

Participants identify several risk factors at work including the work load and the objective (both theirs and others') of completing tasks on time or on schedule:

> *"It can be dangerous, last night there were five in the kitchen and it's a small space and everyone is running around."*

> *"If there weren't like a huge rush I would do it the safe way but once the adrenalin in the kitchen gets going I would work fast to get squared away. When it gets going I would cut corners… I'm new and I want to please."*
> *-Annie, restaurant dishwasher*

> *"A lot of people are just like, 'get it done, get it done, get it done,' and they aren't focused on what they are doing."*
> *-Jane, store clerk & bartender*

Coupled with this sense of time pressure is the notion that competent workers do not have accidents. Individuals who are injured or have accidents are identified as causing the accident because of inattention or clumsiness:

> *"There's these long pizza poles that they use to take them out of the oven and they are made of metal. When one is coming at you they yell 'peel' and you're supposed to duck but last night I turned around instead of ducking and it's like this metal coming right for my head."*
> *-Annie, restaurant dishwasher*

> *"He wasn't watching his feet and the rope caught him and near took him over."*
> *-Simon, construction worker*

Relationships with coworkers and supervisors

Respondents reported generally favorable attitudes toward both supervisors and coworkers. Supervisors were labeled as "good guys," or in one case "my best friends," and several participants identified coworkers as friends or a "good bunch to work with." Although relationships were generally positive it is was also clear that neither supervisors nor coworkers were tolerant of injuries or accidents. Some respondents described supervisors who explicitly minimize injuries and mock individuals who report accidents or injuries:

> **"I told my supervisor about my burn and he was just like 'ohhh Muffin' type of thing [nervous self conscious laughter]; he made fun of me about it."**
> **-Annie, restaurant dishwasher, about her 2nd shift at work**

Only two participants reported receiving safety training from their supervisors – one worked construction and was given training in the use of fall prevention gear and the other was a dock worker who reported more extensive safety training. For the most part, respondents reported learning their jobs through experience:

> **"So you just learned the job by doing it. [Interviewer: "So they showed you and then you just did it?"] No, they didn't really show you there is only one dishwasher, so they just sort of said go to it."**
> **-Annie, restaurant dishwasher**

Although relations with coworkers were usually positive, coworkers were reported as being generally unconcerned with safety matters. For example, coworkers may mock workers who experience injury:

> **"I put a band-aid on it to cover where my glove goes and they made fun of me."**
> **-Annie, restaurant dishwasher**

Coworkers also glorified injuries, presenting them as a sign of experience in their industry:

"Chefs are like, 'Ooh look at my scars,' like battle scars."
-Annie, restaurant dishwasher

Participants also recognized that coworkers may engage in risky activities for their own reasons and accepted that coworkers would violate safety procedures:

"I know, like, I'll tell you one issue. One of our contractors that we work for requires us to wear hard hats but, like, a lot of the planters aren't, don't like them and, like, when there's not a supervisor around you know they'll take them off ,ummm, I guess half of it's that they don't see the point in hard hats…"
-Terry, tree planter

"I'm not going to do this because it's not safe but they're like, 'well I agree with you but I need money so I'm going to.'"
-Mike, waterfront pier worker

Reporting and Refusal

Most respondents reported considerable confusion about who is responsible for workplace safety and what to do when faced with an unsafe condition. Most described never having reported unsafe conditions or injuries:

"No, I usually just keep quiet."
-Mike, waterfront pier worker

Although most knew about the right to refuse unsafe work, they were less clear on how to invoke that right:

"If someone said to you, 'do it or you're fired' and you did it and got hurt, they need to know it's ok to refuse to do something, but I don't know who I would talk to - does the WCB have a 1-800 number or something I should call in that case? I don't know what I would do."
-Jane, store clerk & bartender

Refusing a work assignment was seen as a matter of personal preference – an individual can refuse and it was ok for the employer then to get somebody else to do the work rather than to fix the hazardous condition:

"Umm, yeah, I've said I'm not going to do that, you know I'm 23 years old and I'm not going to die today doing work. It's not worth it for me so I usually just say that it's not worth it; get me the proper safety gear… and they never have anything to say about it, they can't write us up… well they get somebody else to do it that will do it and I won't be penalized at all."

"Like there's a shift today that I'm not going to work because you could get cancer. It says right on the bag – there's a dust and you can get cancer."
-*Mike, waterfront pier worker*

Marketing Safety

Most participants were aware of the current TV ad campaign and saw the ads as effective.

TV advertising was seen as more effective than radio:

"When a [radio] commercial comes on my friends and I usually just change the channel."
-*Jane, store clerk & bartender*

Although participants saw some value in internet advertising they also suggested that Facebook

and other venues were used for non-work reasons and that ads on such sites would just be

ignored.

Face-to-face contact was seen as particularly useful and several respondents mentioned

safety in high school or more formal sessions in the workplace as viable alternatives. The most

effective safety spokespeople were those who had experienced work-related accidents or

injuries:

"If they had representatives that went to different places... that could teach people that you're doing that but you can do it safer."
-*Annie, restaurant dishwasher*

"When I was in high school, this guy did a tour for drugs; he was a former drug addict. He shows a video. It was very powerful and had impact."
-*Jane, store clerk & bartender*

In terms of content, the message "it can happen to you" was seen to be effective, as was making the link to other lifestyle activities that would be adversely affected by an injury or accident.

Discussion

The safety of young workers is an issue of growing concern for policy makers. In our discussions with young workers, it is clear that the same cannot be said for the workers themselves. Although most of the participants had direct experience with accidents and minor injuries, they also did not see safety as being particularly relevant to how they did their jobs. Both they and their coworkers and supervisors discounted minor injuries. Most of the participants had received no safety training with only one respondent reporting that their employer was very conscious of safety issues. Although doing a "good job" was important to the young workers that we interviewed, it is clear that the definition of a good job did not necessarily include working safely or avoiding injury.

To the contrary, injuries were often presented as a normal and acceptable part of the job. The tendency to minimize minor injuries is reinforced by supervisors and coworkers who discount injury, mock those who are injured or glorify their own injuries. In this respect, our findings parallel those of Breslin et al. (2007) who also identified acceptance of risk as a characteristic of young workers. Our findings also suggested that young workers attribute accidents and injuries to carelessness or lack of awareness on the part of the victim. That is, accidents did not emerge as a result of safety hazards or risky environments but occurred because the individual "did something stupid" or "wasn't paying attention."

Young workers are attuned to their role as the newest and youngest employee. In trying to fit in they make explicit attempts to please the boss and to get along with coworkers. In doing so, they quickly learn that it is important to complete the assigned tasks on schedule even if it means risking injury. Even though respondents thought of their supervisors as good people who would act in their best interests, they also expressed the view that getting the job done was the

most important consideration. In discussing her willingness to cut corners in order to keep up with demand, one participant said that she "wants to please."

In the world view of our participants, safety is not a systemic or environmental concern; it is a matter of personal competence and, to some extent, of personal choice. For example, even the one participant who realized that he had the right to refuse unsafe work reported matter-of-factly that the employer simply assigned the task to somebody else – and he did not see any disconnect between his refusal and the assignment of someone else to do the same task. Other individuals reported coworkers explicitly disregard safety procedures in favor of personal comfort. Again, given the desire to fit in or to get along, the most common response to such observations was "I just keep quiet about it."

Young workers who do want to speak up lack awareness of how to do so. Even respondents who were vaguely aware of the right to refuse unsafe work were unsure of how to invoke the right. Perhaps as a result of participating in a discussion about safety, most participants expressed a desire to learn more about safety or to acquire safety training. The response of participants was uniform in the sense that they saw the need to make safety relevant to individuals – preferring face-to-face contact, hearing from individuals who have experienced workplace accidents and learning about potential consequences of a workplace accident on their lives (i.e., their non-work activities). While task-specific and skills training have a clear role in safety programming (Kelloway & Francis, 2007), it is clear from the current data that the greater challenge for young workers is to make the message of safety relevant to their personal experiences.

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Table 1

Participant Demographics

	Total	Antig	Shelbur	Middelton	N Minas	HRM	HRM	HRM	HRM	HRM	Sydney	Sydney	Sydney
Female	5	1		1	1	1			1			1	1
Male	5		1		1		1	1		1		1	1
Full time	5		1	1	1		1		1	1		1	1
Part time	5	1			1	1		1			1	1	
Small Company (<20)	4	1	1				1					1	1
Large Company	6			1	1	1		1	1	1			1
Service Sector	6	1		1	1	1	1		1				1
Other	4		1		1		1		1				1

Appendix A

Interview Schedule

1. Tell me about your job
   a. How long have you been employed there
   b. How many people do you work with
   c. What are the keys to successful performance of your job (what are the most important things in doing your job well)

2. How safe is your job
   a. How you ever been injured, had an accident, nearly been injured (collect details on each one – what led up to the incident, what happened, what the outcome was)
   b. Have you seen or heard of a coworker being injured, in an accident, nearly in an accident (again get details on each)
   c. Have you had any safety training or safety instruction?
   d. Have you ever reported an injury, safety issue or accident – what happened?

3. What's your boss like?
   a. What kind of relationship do you have with your supervisor
   b. Does your boss take health and safety issues seriously – how do you know?, does he/she talk about safety?
   c. Have you ever raised health and safety issues with your supervisor (what happened)
      a. If never raised issues, what do you think would happen if you raised those kind of issues with your supervisor

4. What about your coworkers>
   a. What kind of relationship do you have
   b. Do you ever talk about health and safety issues, would they be willing to raise issues with the boss?
   c. What do you think would happen if you talked about health and safety with your coworkers

5. Have any of your friends had workplace accidents or been injured?
   a. Do any friends talk about safety or seem to care about safety
      Ii   What about family members? – any accidents, do they talk about safety?

6. Who do you think is responsible for workplace safety?
   a. Who is responsible when someone is injured? What should happen (compensation, return to work etc etc) when someone was injured

7. If you were in charge of marketing for the WCB how do you think you would get the message out to workers of your age?
   Where would you run the ads (radio, tv, internet, facebook etc)
   Would you use a spokesperson (sports figure, rock star etc) – if so who
   What would be the most important issue to communicate