Making workplaces safer: The influence of organisational climate and individual differences on safety behaviour

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Abstract

Current work health and safety practices focus predominately on fostering a safety climate to promote safety behaviours and reduce workplace accidents. Despite the importance of safety climates in accident prevention, recent research has demonstrated that individual factors can also predict work safety behaviour. This study considered the importance of organisational climate together with individual characteristics including differences in personality, impulsiveness, and perceptions of safety within the workplace on safety behaviour. 203 participants consisting of 67 males and 136 females aged 18 to 71 years, completed an online questionnaire. Results revealed that safety behaviour was directly related to safety climate, and conscientiousness. In contrast, neuroticism, and impulsiveness were not significantly related to safety behaviour. The present study findings support previous findings in the literature regarding the importance of safety climate as well as the personality trait of conscientiousness in applying safety behaviours. However, the present study findings did not support previous research in relation to the personality trait of high neuroticism resulting in decreased safety behaviour, nor did not confirm an inverse relationship between high impulsivity and low safety behaviour as theoretical models would suggest. This new finding may warrant further research into the precursors for safety behaviour.
Keywords: Psychology, Sociology, Industry

1. Introduction

Paramount to workplace safety is the principle of accident or incident prevention. Therefore, any factors that can be identified before an actual incident occurs are of great value. The majority of safety incidents are behavioural, in that they are not the result of environmental or system factors, yet dominant work health and safety practices focus on group level factors. Whilst this is important in establishing a safety culture within an organisation, such practices do not consider the individual factors that may contribute to safety behaviour. This paper examines safety behaviour at an individual level, an area of growing research interest. As organisations seek to refine their safety management systems, they are considering the many variables that contribute to the safety behaviour of the individuals within the group. Such understandings are inherently useful as they can create safer work places that will foster stronger communities.

Presently, work health and safety practices focus predominately on fostering a safety climate, in which employees and management work together to create a safe work environment (Zohar et al., 2014). The concept of safety climate first introduced by Zohar (1980) 36 years ago, remains central in creating and maintaining safe work environments, and has been shown to be a good predictor of safety behaviour and workplace accidents across industries and cultures (Beus et al., 2016; Christian et al., 2009; Clarke, 2006; Nahrgang et al., 2011).

Safety climate can be defined as the perceptions of the priority and value ascribed to safety within the workplace as reflected in organisational policies and procedures (Seibokaite and Endriulaitiene, 2012; Zohar and Luria, 2005). Perceptions of safety climate are influenced by explicit factors such as a) leadership statements and management actions regarding the importance of safety (Neal and Griffin, 2004), b) leadership responses to identified safety issues, c) the amount of safety training provided relevant to the individual’s role, and d) how actively safety behaviours are promoted within the organisation (Clarke, 2010). Perceptions of safety climate are also influenced by implicit factors, such as the importance ascribed to safety over other competing factors like productivity, and work pace (Neal and Griffin, 2004). However, recent research has also emphasised the influence of individual factors such as personality, attitudes, and beliefs in predicting safe working behaviour and workplace accidents (Beus et al., 2015; Henning et al., 2009; Hogan and Foster, 2013).

Human error has been estimated to be the main factor in 80–90% of workplace accidents and incidents (Postlethwaite et al., 2009). Organisations seek to reduce the occurrence of workplace injuries driven by the associated costs, including lost wages, loss in productivity, property and equipment damage, and legal costs.
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