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COMMENTARY

Reimagining work safety behaviors in the light of COVID-19

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We concur with Rudolph et al. (2021) that the pandemic has had significant and adverse effects on employees' mental health. We also argue that COVID-19 has reshaped a focal criterion variable in the occupational health and safety domain: employee safety behaviors. In addition to highlighting the pivotal role of workplaces in managing public safety and pushing organizational decision makers to take immediate measures to protect their employees, the pandemic also shed light on the new meaning of workplace safety. In this commentary, we extend Rudolph et al.'s arguments and provide suggestions for research and practice by challenging core assumptions of safety behaviors. We also invite industrial-organizational psychologists to reimagine safety behaviors in the context of the pandemic.

What do work safety behaviors mean?

Work safety behaviors refer to actions taken by organizational members to maintain and improve safety in their organizations (Beus & Taylor, 2018). Researchers traditionally distinguish between two types of safety behaviors: mandatory safety behaviors (i.e., safety compliance) and discretionary safety behaviors (i.e., safety participation; e.g., Griffin & Neal, 2000). Safety compliance reflects the extent to which employees follow safety rules and procedures in the workplace. Some examples include wearing personal protective equipment or not lifting objects above a certain weight. The construct of safety participation captures extra-role behaviors, such as making safety-focused suggestions and speaking up about safety (e.g., Tucker & Turner, 2011). As with many constructs, the specific definitions and operationalization of safety behaviors may vary by researchers but are often based on similar assumptions. We discuss how COVID-19 challenges those assumptions, pushing the boundaries of the established definitions.

Assumption 1: Safety rules and procedures are known and static

Safety compliance is measured by the extent to which employees follow safety procedures. These procedures are generally well documented and communicated to employees via training or written protocols. In contrast, the COVID-19 pandemic is unchartered territory, and it has posed many uncertainties for organizations and their members including the evolution of safety procedures. Debates on the effectiveness of wearing masks, duration of exposure to social contact, and limits to the number of people that can safely work in an office space have resulted in continually evolving safety guidelines. Two factors have contributed to this in particular. First, safety recommendations vary by countries, jurisdictions, and even organizations. For example, when walking into coffee

shops located on the same street, we may see employees wearing masks at one location but not the other. Second, safety recommendations are continually changing. When the pandemic started, washing hands was viewed as the most effective way of preventing the spread of the disease. At the time of this writing, wearing a mask is considered the primary means of protecting people from aerosolized COVID-19.

This dynamic nature of safety guidelines highlights a number of new considerations for safety compliance. Do employees comply only with their company's safety rules and procedures? Oftentimes companies' guidelines are lagging behind the most recent recommendations from health care professionals and governments. This means that employees might need to follow not only companies' safety guidelines but also official pandemic-related rules released by public health experts. In addition, employees need to update continually their knowledge of safety rules to display contemporary safety compliance. During "normal" times, it is often enough to acquire knowledge about safety rules with occasional updates about technical or procedural changes. However, with uncertain threats to safety, employees need to learn and even relearn safety guidelines on a regular basis. Sometimes these changes happen on a daily basis. In the pandemic context, safety compliance requires employees actively seek and acquire information about safety rules and question the rules' assumed efficacy, suggesting an extension to what Hu, Yeo, & Griffin (2020) recently called surface compliance and deep compliance.

Assumption 2: Locus of safety behaviors is organizational insiders

The definitions and operationalizations of safety behaviors focus on organizational members. The role of outsiders to the organization such as customers, vendors, contractors, or business partners is largely ignored. Although this can vary greatly depending on the industry and type of work, many workplaces are vulnerable to safety threats that come from the outsiders. As COVID-19 is a highly infectious disease, employees are not just exposed (and expose others) to greater safety risks; they are also required to behave in a manner that minimizes those risks for themselves and others. Employees' compliance with safety rules has become a very public concern. This issue is exemplified by news reports about organizations such as nail salons that became hot spots for the spread of COVID-19 among employees and customers. Thus, this pandemic has broadened the locus of safety compliance to include organizational outsiders. Similar to food safety or patient safety constructs, safety compliance now involves behaviors that are focused on protecting others. However, unlike food safety or patient safety, the locus of work safety compliance involves behaviors that are directed at protecting *both* employees *and* organizational outsiders.

This "both–and" thinking about safety rules illustrates the potential for paradoxical reasoning in safety for both employees and their organizations (Hu, Casey, & Griffin, 2020). The news and social media are rife with stories about employees refusing to serve a customer or asking a customer to wear a mask. Does this mean that employees are now responsible for managing the safety behaviors of others to protect both their own safety and that of others'? Should employees monitor and enforce safety rules on organizational outsiders? How do organizational members communicate safety guidelines to their customers in a nonthreatening manner? Without organizational outsiders' compliance with organizational safety protocols, it is hard to imagine how safety risks can be minimized in the context of the pandemic. Thus, we suggest broadening the definition of safety behaviors from organizational insiders to include employee–outsider interactions. For example, making a suggestion to a customer to wear a mask signifies safety participation. Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic provides unique opportunities to reimagine the boundaries and dimensions of work safety behaviors.

Assumption 3: Safety outcomes are accidents, injuries, and near misses

Mainstream safety research evaluates the effectiveness of safety behaviors by assessing distal outcomes such as accidents, injuries, or near misses. Although these indicators are valid outcomes of work safety behaviors, we argue that these indicators fall short in extreme and widespread events

such as the pandemic. None of the outcomes listed above would give accurate information about the effects of COVID-19. For example, infection rates (i.e., spreading the virus to both the fellow workers and the public) might be an appropriate distal outcome. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that the consequences of safety behaviors can expand beyond traditional safety outcomes studied by researchers.

Assumption 4: Physical proximity is imperative for promoting work safety behaviors

Work safety behaviors are construed and measured as behaviors enacted in the physical boundaries of the workplace (e.g., Griffin & Neal, 2000). Moreover, previous research (e.g., Luria & Morag, 2012) has shown that physical proximity of supervisors to employees improves employee safety behaviors. The increased prevalence of working from home due to the COVID-19 pandemic raises the question of whether employee safety is limited to the physical premises of organizations. Workers who are working from home are still vulnerable to work-related hazards. Besides COVID-19 being a large threat to employee safety, there are other physical and psychosocial safety risks of working from home. Lower back and neck pain due to nonergonomic office furniture at home is one example of safety concerns that are relevant to organizations with pandemic home working. These risks indicate that employee safety is and should be a concern for organizations even if their employees work from home during the pandemic. Therefore, organizations should still be involved in promoting safety behaviors of the employees working from home. How (and should) organizations promote safety compliance from employees when they work from home? Overall, we argue that the COVID-19 pandemic has pushed the boundaries on work safety behaviors and how organizations can promote them during the pandemic.

Conclusion

In conclusion, because it is a highly infectious and widespread disease, COVID-19 has created an extreme event for occupational health and safety. Organizations have encountered the expanded frontiers that challenge the four main assumptions of research into work safety behaviors. With the new lens presented by the pandemic, we suggest that industrial-organizational psychology researchers reimagine the definitions and the boundaries of work safety behaviors.

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