No small matter
Unpacking the problem of health and safety in small workplaces

Alf Nachemson Memorial Lecture

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November 25, 2009

The problem

limited **traction**

solutions remain elusive

small workplace agenda still at margins

- inadequate understanding of the problem
- under-appreciation of **standpoint**

Purpose

1. Argue that current approaches to small workplace OHS are characterized by:
- **primacy of managerial standpoint**
- **invisibility of worker standpoint**
- **low recognition of social dimensions**
- **insufficient 'upstream' focus on OHS system**

2. Support and illustrate these claims from my own research

3. Suggest how traction might be gained

4. Give examples of how such research is being used

Standpoint

- a place from where the world is seen and understood
- vantage point of inhabitants of a particular location

- different stakes, interests & meanings at play
- 'standpoint' not the same as 'object of inquiry'

Primacy of managerial standpoint

- defining construct 'small business' centred on organizational entity, equated with employer

- employer standpoint implicit in core wisdom:

  'Small business' …

  ..lacks management skills

  ..lacks knowledge of regulations, responsibilities

  ..prioritizes cost reduction, productivity and profit

  ..needs a 'safety pays' approach

  ..needs simple, cheap tools & programs, aligned with informal management style

Absence of worker standpoint

- "employee" constructs workers in relation to management

- Reasons for primacy of managerial and absence of worker standpoints:

  inaccessibility of workers

  academic orientations

  standpoint mistaken for advocacy

Low recognition of the social dimension

Social relations of work in small workplaces:

- personalised relationships
- 'like a family'
- social relations of family superimposed on the social relations of employment

Insufficient 'upstream' focus on the OHS system

- little known about service provision itself
- misalignment of legislation and policy with realities of the smalls

  assumes conditions that don't exist

  default solution is exemption

  advantages employers over workers

Study of workers in small workplaces

Eakin, J. and MacEachen, E. "Health and the social relations of work: a study of the health-related experiences of employees in small workplaces", Sociology of Health and Illness, 1998 20(6): 896-914

Injury/illness induced blame and conflict by:

- precipitating recognition of differing interests
- undermining the sense of being treated like a person
- " *he [boss] didn't care about me as me, only about his business, that I couldn't do my job....*"
- breakdown in perception of firm as 'family'
- resistance and retaliation, including withholding tacit, non-contractual labour

Study of ESRTW in small workplaces

Eakin, J. MacEachen, E. and Clarke, J. "'Playing it smart' with return to work: Small workplace experience under Ontario's policy of self-reliance and early return", <u>Policy and Practice in Health and Safety</u>, 2003, 01 (2) 20-41.

Workers and employers experienced RTW in very different terms:

- employers - drawn unwillingly into medical matters and into monitoring compliance
- injured workers - modified jobs could induce profound social suffering
- no notion of **social safety** in ESRTW

Discourse of abuse

Discourse of abuse: the institutionalized expectation that workers may misuse the system

"They gave me the impression that I was faking it, that I just wanted basically someone to pay me so I could, you know, sit at home and watch my soap operas"

• necessity to 'perform' integrity
• rupturing of worker-employer relations

Study of frontline work at the WSIB

Eakin, J., MacEachen, E., Clarke, J., and Mansfield, E. The Logic of Practice: An Ethnographic Study of Front-line Service Work with Small Businesses in Ontario's Workplace Safety and Insurance Board. Working Paper # 346, Institute for Work & Health

Nature of service work to small business from standpoint of adjudicators, nurse case managers, customer service representatives

FL work with small workplaces is framed by the broader organizational structure of the WSIB

- FL staff mediate competing institutional objectives of the WSIB
- policies and procedures that do not 'work' for small workplaces

- service attuned more to the standpoint of employers than to that of workers
    - the 'employer pays'
    - contrasting views of employers' and injured workers' motivation

Injured workers and service providers view the world from different places

- adjudicators: eligibility, standardized process, de-personalized practices

- injured workers: moral justice, deservingness, quest for personalization

- colliding definitions of the situation

Conclusions

Current approaches to small workplace research and practice…

- forefront a management-centred standpoint, eclipsing other standpoints, including that of workers
- underestimate the consequences for H&S of the social dimensions of work life
- focus more on the deficits of the workplace and individual actors than on the implications for small workplaces of the service, policy and regulatory aspects of the OHS system.

Conclusions

- intent is not to diminish, displace, or trump, but to enlarge of the field of vision

- value of standpoint-rich research

- used both by injured worker community and WSIB

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